

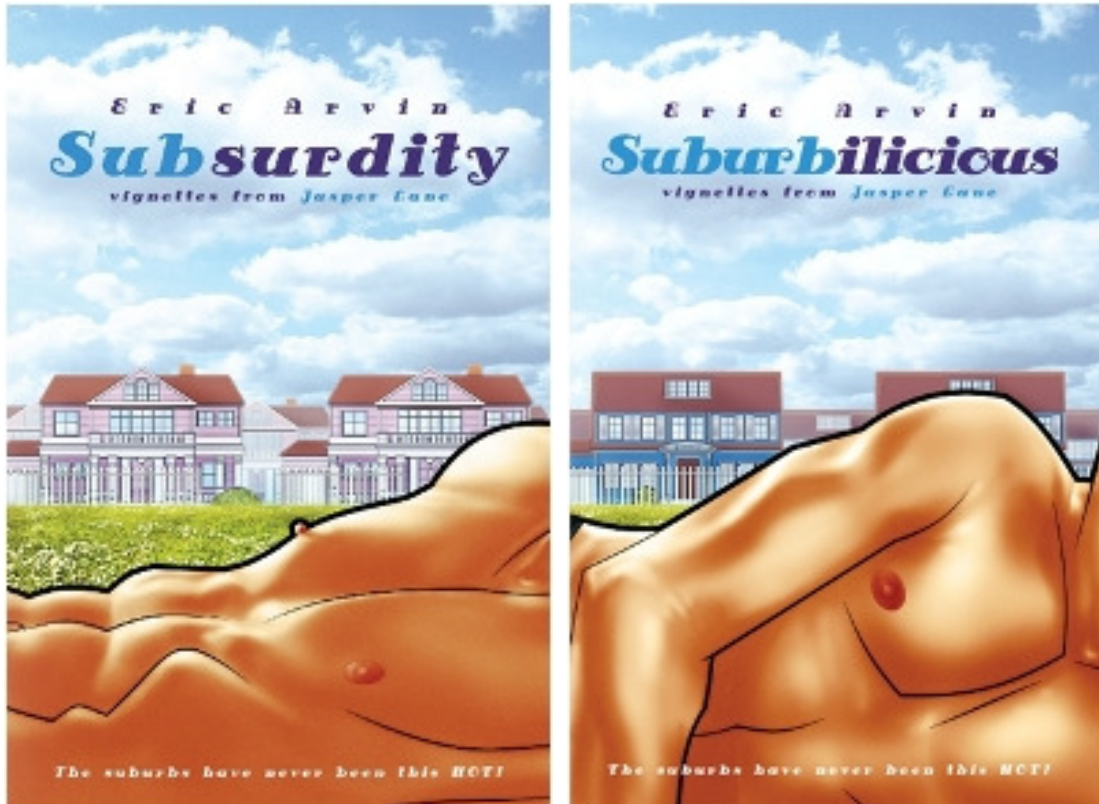


# Simple Men

Eric Arvin

Readers love

## *SubSurdity* and *Suburbilicious*



“(SubSurdity is) a gay Desperate Housewives.” —Josh Aterovis, Bleeding Hearts.

“...it’s light, it’s fun, and it will keep you reading. In fact, I have not had this much fun in a long time... this book should be at the top of your must-read list.” —Amos Lassen, Literary Pride.

“I loved it; plain and simple. *Suburbilicious* is pure fun with a healthy dose of suburban absurdity.” —BookWenches

<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com>

BOOKS BY  
ERIC ARVIN

Slight Details & Random Events  
SubSurdity  
Suburbilicious

EBOOKS BY  
ERIC ARVIN

Kid Christmas Rides Again

# Simple Men

Eric Arvin



*Dreamspinner Press*

Published by  
Dreamspinner Press  
4760 Preston Road  
Suite 244-149  
Frisco, TX 75034  
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Simple Men  
Copyright © 2010 by Eric Arvin

Cover Design by Mara McKennen

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the Publisher, except where permitted by law. To request permission and all other inquiries, contact Dreamspinner Press, 4760 Preston Road, Suite 244-149, Frisco, TX 75034  
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

ISBN: 978-1-61581-427-5

Printed in the United States of America  
First Edition  
March, 2010

eBook edition available  
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-428-2

## Chapter One

*...a little something before everything else...*

CHIP ARNOLD, football coach of the Verona College Growlers, sat at a table in the small bar with his assistant coach, Lenny. To say they were good friends was a stretch, but they were friendly enough. You have to be if you're going to work closely with someone for long stretches of time, coming up with precise strategies and plays for the boys to muck up. There has to be some level of camaraderie and trust. There has to be like-mindedness. And, for the most part, Lenny was a good guy to have around, especially when going to bars. He was not a terribly good-looking guy, which made those with him look even better by proximity. It was a terrible truth, but a truth everyone learned in one way or another. Not that Chip Arnold needed Lenny's help in getting a girl. Chip had always known the exact looks and charms to use when chasing a gal. On this night, he was the stud of the bar, flexing every time he took a drink. If he wanted to—and this thought made him flush with pride—he could have the lady of his choosing right now in the restroom.

# Simple Men

---

These had been Chip's nights for a while now. They drank from cheap plastic cups. A pitcher of beer stood like a fountain at the center of their table. The music was The Eagles. The place smelled like cigarettes and burgers. It was routine.

Lenny looked around for someone—anyone—he could make a play for. The more he drank, the more he resembled a suspicious, seedy character like a deviant in an old Hollywood thriller, all shifty eyes and folded hands. “How are things with Lynn?” he asked. He didn't sound too interested in hearing the answer.

“Things are great,” Chip said. “Things are fine. She's okay.”

“That wasn't too convincing. Feeling a little caged?”

Chip wasn't sure about divulging too much of his life to Lenny, but the guy was shifting in his seat so much, scoping out the ladies, he probably wasn't listening anyway. “Maybe,” Chip said under his breath. When he looked up from the table, Lenny was staring at him, ready for a tale.

“I think,” Chip said, “I think maybe this relationship thing wasn't a good idea for me and Lynn. It was an experiment, and it failed.”

“I thought you said you liked it. You said it makes being here in this little town bearable, having someone to spend your Fridays with.”

“I know what I said. Don't quote back to me. It's just....” He gestured around. The town usually wasn't a Mecca for pretty ladies, but school was starting soon, and a few of the more gorgeous co-eds were back.

“You're bored with her, huh?”

“Lynn’s a great lady. She’s predictable, safe. Exactly the kind of woman I should end up with. I like my routines, and she fits right into them.” He slammed his now-empty cup on the table. “But dammit, I’m virile. I’ve got to explore that virility, you know.”

“I know, brother. I know.” Lenny’s gaze was on a cute little blonde at the Megatouch machine.

“I don’t know. I’m making too much of it. Maybe this is what all guys feel like when they start settling down.” Chip poured more beer from the pitcher into his cup.

“Sometimes I think it would be easier to be gay,” Lenny said. “But I’d make a horrible gay guy. Look at how I dress; I’d get no tail.”

“That’s a cliché. I know some gay guys who dress as bad as you.”

“Fuck you, Coach.” Lenny grinned. “I don’t like gay guys who act like me. I like my gay guys flaming.”

“You’re an idiot. And I can say that because I know you. And trust me; no man would ever be attracted to you.”

“I could get a gay.” Lenny seemed offended. His plan to have the coach assure him of some romantic prowess had not worked.

“No. You really could not.”

“Isn’t Lynn’s friend—the new chaplain—isn’t he a gay?”

“I think so. I haven’t met him yet. She asked me to help him move some new pews into the chapel. I guess I’ll meet him then.” Chip liked to think of himself as a forward-thinking guy. He’d grown up in a small, conservative town, but he liked gay men. He always let them help him out at the clothing stores. He would even



# Simple Men

---

let them feel his biceps. Gay guys appreciated how hard it was to stay in shape.

“You? In a chapel? That’s a weird little nightmare.” Lenny nodded at one of the waitresses behind the bar. She looked more desperate than he was. “You think I could have a chance with her?”

“As good as anyone.” Chip took a swig. “I’m going to head home. Be sure to tell me how things turn out.”

“But I’m not sure if she—”

“Just do it. That’s my motto. Just do it. That way you know right off, and there are no loose ends to tie up. Loose ends cause sleepless nights and ulcers. Those are my parting words of wisdom to you, my friend.” Chip rose and tossed a few dollars on the table to cover his beer. “Get the answer you need now, or get an ulcer later.”

Lenny was still seated when Chip left. Chip never understood people who let things sit without bothering to find the answer. He had always hated loose threads and cliffhangers of all sorts. That’s why he didn’t watch a TV series until he could see the whole thing on *his* time. And film trilogies? Forget about it. Wait until all three films were available on DVD or download. Life was much easier when he was in control of every possible thing he could be in control of. Short questions and simple answers. That’s what it was all about.

*...everything else...*

## VERONA COLLEGE.

The name was as poetic as the look of the place. Foster Lewis was pleased that he had been offered the position of school chaplain here. It was a small school, one of those private institutions where the student body and the professors were on a first-name basis and even hung out with each other on the weekends. There was Georgian architecture, hedges resembling sculpture (topiary, he supposed they were called), and practically a zoo of friendly little wild creatures. One could walk right past a squirrel and the cute little bugger wouldn't even flinch.

Verona College was an even more peaceful place than the seminary. Of course, that *had* been in the middle of a city. No hope for peace there. Yet the air of the seminary had been peaceful. That had to do with the nature of the place, though. The peace at Verona... well, it seemed more inclusive. Here it wasn't just peaceful out of expectation. Verona College was peaceful because it *was*. The students and faculty had found a rhythm with the natural world around them, and it pervaded the place. Not just in the halls of the buildings as with the seminary, but in the walkways and wood paths, on every hill and gully.

Of course, this whole train of thought was due to the intoxicating fresh air and new feel Foster was experiencing. The novelty of the "new" would wear off in time, and Foster knew about novelty. He was a bit of a novelty himself. At least, that's what he had seemed to Barry.

*How naughty! I'm dating a minister! Gasp at my daring.*

# Simple Men

---

Foster's feelings for Barry went deeper than that, but in the end it didn't matter. Barry moved on. He moved on right next door. A hot new neighbor had moved into the apartment complex, someone even more of a novelty than Foster: a nineteen-year-old Amish boy. Foster had moved out of the building as soon as he'd been able to. How could he have competed with Jacob or Jebediah or whatever the boy's name was? The boy was Amish. He made kick-ass furniture and raised barns. Foster couldn't even pick out a matching living room suite.

He had convinced himself it was for the best. Besides, though Barry had his charms, there had been a bit of a selfish streak to him. Foster couldn't remember ever feeling real pleasure when they were intimate. Sure, there had been orgasms, but they were so quickly done and forgotten that Foster had felt a bit used after. A relationship to him meant emotional and spiritual growth. It was only after he was out of it that he realized Barry had only been interested in a very localized area of growth. *Very* localized. Foster's notion of settling down in some Happily Ever After had been shattered. He now carried the broken fragments wherever he went.

That was another good thing about Verona College: there were no men. At least, none that he would be interested in. Of course, he hadn't met the entire faculty yet, but as long as Gerard Butler hadn't taken a position at the school, Foster was pretty certain there would be no distractions. Life had been distracting enough up to this point.

The chapel was near the river. From his office window, Foster could watch the barges and small watercraft pass by the college. It was a nice little chapel, loaned out for weddings in the summer and other celebratory events throughout the year. He imagined he would be asked to perform at a few of those. As he approached, he saw the new pews lined up on the grass outside; the old ones had fallen into

extreme disrepair. Most of those who came to services stood, he had been told, for fear of getting splinters in their bums. But at least then they wouldn't fall asleep.

Students passed him, many of them with friendly smiles, others with guilty, downcast expressions at the sight of him (he got that a lot when he wore the collar). The female college populace was the most pleasant to him. Foster was a "hottie from God-dy," as one not-very-clever girl had said. Their glances, bordering on ogles, made him somewhat uncomfortable, so he touched his black-rimmed glasses as if they were sliding off his nose, brushed his dark hair from his ears, and walked to the columned porch of the small chapel, trying not to make eye contact with any of them. From there, he looked out over the quadrangle lawn, the heart of the school. Students speckled the grass and sidewalks on their ways to class. It was an overcast day; Foster wanted to get the pews into the chapel before it started to rain. Help had been promised and would hopefully be there soon.

Foster Lewis was an optimistic man. This, he thought, would be a good life decision. Yes. One of the few.

FOOTBALL is an outside sport. Jason Jordan hated it when practice was held in the gym just because it *might* rain. All the guys did. Nobody minded getting wet; they were ball players after all. Still, there was one good thing about practice inside: Coach Arnold wore his skin-tight shorts. Any other coach would look like a caricature in them, but Coach Arnold... the man could wear the hell out of those shorts! When they trained outside, the coach wore his usual sweats or pant-suit. But on strength training days, it was the shorts. They

# Simple Men

---

were mesh, shining from the fluorescent lights and hugging tight around the coach's thick legs like a wrapped ham at Christmas.

*Mmm. Ham.* Jason suddenly realized he was hungry.

The team sat on the gym floor in designated rows. They had just finished with their calisthenics, the duller part of strength training, and the coach was going on about something. Jason really wasn't giving it too much thought. He was caught up in Coach Arnold's thighs. He rested back on his hands, his legs spread out, his mouth salivating at naughty fantasies. He was sure he wasn't the only one. The coach had a bulge in his shorts that couldn't be ignored.

Beside him sat his best friend, Brad Park. Brad was a bit of a troublemaker. In fact, they both were, but Brad looked the part more. He had a goofy grin and carried with him an air of mischief. Jason was a more sly sort of troublemaker. It was his looks that let him get away with most things: the sweet eyes, the boyish mop of hair. Brad's eyes were dangerously close to wide-eyed shiftiness, and his hair was shorn. The two had been best friends since starting college, having connected immediately over B-movies and country music. They were not the most popular guys at school, but they were well-liked enough. Coach Arnold seemed to like them anyway, and that's what mattered. *You get in good with the coach and you're set.* Brad's dad and half-dozen brothers had told him this.

Brad had dated a few different girls, but none seemed willing to take his shtick for long. He wasn't surprised or even particularly hurt when a relationship ended. At the end of a lousy date, he still got to go back to his dorm where his best bud, Jason, was waiting, most likely with a copy of some dark, twisted movie filled with bad special effects and a freshly opened package of Chips Ahoy!

Jason was the type of guy who was invited to all the formals. He cleaned up very well, yet he was never too interested in anything more than that. He had plenty of girl friends, but no girlfriends. He hadn't had one his entire time in school, though Brad knew he had been involved with a girl at least once before college. None of that mattered, though. When Jason and Brad were alone in their room, they had a blast watching the movies and pigging out on junk food. (*Enjoy it, they were told. Your metabolism betrays you as you get older. And that's just the first thing.*)

They wrestled some... well, a lot. They were, after all, on the wrestling team when football wasn't in season. But some of the guys in the house—especially those in the floor below them—found their late-night pinnings quite annoying.

Jason's mind shifted to one of those late-night matches as the coach spoke. It was no longer the coach who was making his mouth water as he sat on the gym floor, but Brad. The coach instigated only a momentary salivation; Brad had been filling Jason's thoughts for about a year now. By the feel of Brad's pecker last night as they rubbed against one another in a spontaneous match—frotting, he had heard it was called—Brad felt the same. Nothing was said the next morning, though. Jason was a man of few words anyway; why waste them on embarrassing mutterings?

Jason heard Brad snicker. He leaned over Jason's shoulder and pointed at his happy crotch. "Dude!" he said. "Watch the boner."

Sure enough, Jason's dick stood at alert, stretching his own mesh shorts. He owned the moment, shrugging with a smile. "Jealous?"

"Shit! I got that beat and you know it." He reached to his own shorts as if he were going to pull the thing out. Jason loved that

# Simple Men

---

cocky grin. Brad was a bulldog, but he was a bulldog with a tender heart. He didn't show that aspect of himself to too many people, though.

"Guys!" the coach called from the front. "Something wrong? Am I bothering you?" He had one of those voices that could clear a stadium.

"Jason's got a boner, Coach!" Brad blurted out.

Snickers and guffaws from the assembled players.

"Pay attention, guys," Coach Arnold instructed the two troublemakers.

"I am, sir," Jason said with a grin. He nodded at his penis. It was starting to subside.

Coach gave them a "You two will never grow up" look. "All right, everyone. Hit the showers. Remember, practice tomorrow at four on the field... as long as it doesn't rain."

The gym filled with sighs of relief and the squeaking of shoe rubber. Most of the guys were starving.

"You two," he said, pointing at Jason and Brad with the rolled-up coaching magazine he always seemed to have in his hand. The boys wondered if he ever actually read it. "I need to speak with you."

"Listen, Coach," Jason said. "I'm sorry. Sometimes I just get distracted. You know how it is. It has a life of its own. I'll start wearing a strap if you want."

"I don't want to talk about your pecker, Jason. I have a favor to ask."

"Anything, Coach," Brad said. "What can we do you for?"

“The new chaplain needs some help getting some pews moved into the chapel. I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind heading over there with a couple of the other guys and putting your backs into it.”

“Ah. Is this a favor for the wifey?” Brad winked, nudging at the coach’s ribcage.

Coach Arnold swatted him on the arm playfully. “Lynn is not my wife. The chaplain is a friend of hers. She just asked a favor, is all.”

“Coach, I’m starving,” Jason complained, rubbing his stomach to gain more sympathy. “Can’t it wait until after we eat?”

“Get the hell over there and help out.”

“I thought this was a favor!” Brad said.

“It was. Now it’s an order. Scram, hooligans! I’ll be over there as soon as I lock up the office.”

The boys left, Brad tackling Jason as they went, laughing and joking all the way. Coach Arnold—Chip to his friends—remembered those days. The days when everything was a joke or could be made into one. Jason and Brad were especially good at making situations into jokes. He liked the two of them. They were always there when he needed help with something. In fact, he always went to them first. They could easily talk, bargain, or fool their teammates into pitching in.

They liked Lynn. Coach thought it was possible they liked Lynn more than he did. She was pretty and kind. Very amiable. A literature professor at the school. “Wifey”? No. He could never see himself with her in the long term. This was just a “thing.” This was an experiment, a test. At least it was for him. He suspected she saw it as the same. He was certain he felt the slightest drawback when



# Simple Men

---

they kissed, as if she were wincing. But why would she wince? He was a great kisser. And he was hot... wasn't he? He wasn't so sure anymore. He'd been at Verona College for a few years now, and his nights had been for the most part uneventful. He had gone out with other women besides Lynn, but it had never been anything more than sex. Sometimes not even hot sex. Scratch that: *most* of the time not even hot sex. It was small-town sex, deprived of oxygen. He felt he was in a rut but didn't know why or how to get out of it.

His office was a mess. Coaching didn't give him a lot of time to clean things up. There were books and papers in the chairs, and the desk looked like a cluttered disaster zone. He threw the coaching magazine onto the desk with everything else.

One would think that with the amount of clutter he collected, the sheer mess of his surroundings would mean he lived an eventful, exciting life. One would be wrong. Some days he couldn't differentiate Monday from Friday. Some days everything just sort of blended. He realized his contradiction. He liked order and routine. He was raised to like it. But too much of the same thing, day in and day out, started making him feel old. Only the team made it worth it. With the team, there was focus. He wouldn't notice the hours ticking away from him.

Lynn was fine. But that's all. "Fine" was just another word for "Meh, why not?" There was no passion to their relationship, and they both knew it. What had they done last night? They'd hung out at his off-campus apartment and watched a movie... on opposite ends of the couch. They were like a married couple who had grown bored of each other. Chip had to admit, though, that it wasn't her fault. He bored easily. His whole life he had been bored. It had been a long race to get to the next thing, because the next thing had to be better than this.

“Hey, Coach Hot Ass.” The words came from the doorway where Katie Hammond, the women’s track coach, leaned in. She wore her usual jogging suit. (One of the reasons she liked Chip so much was because he dressed unassumingly. He looked as frumpy as she did some days.) Her blonde hair was tied back in a ponytail a little too tight, a look that didn’t flatter her broad face. Still, she was who she was: a loud, fun-loving former farm gal who really couldn’t give two shits about what anyone thought of her. Chip admired that. She was shorter than most of the track team and resembled more of a wrestler than a track-and-field enthusiast. Chip had pointed this out to her once at a bar when they were both very drunk. She’d nearly broken his nose.

“Hey, Katie. What’s up, Chicken?”

“Want to get something to eat? I’m buying.”

“Sorry to tell you this, but we get our meals for free.”

“Well, then, all the better for me, huh? What do ya say?” She gestured impatiently as if to usher him out the door.

“Can’t. I promised to help put the new pews in the chapel. But you can give me a ride on that golf cart of yours, if you don’t mind.” He was locking his office door even as he spoke.

“It would be my pleasure.” She took hold of his arm. “Finding God, huh?”

“No, just his pews. Someone left them in front of the chapel.”

“Silly bastards.”

Katie’s golf cart was an indulgence out of her own pocket. The school allowed her to drive on the sidewalks and roads of the campus after she had told them her knees were so banged up due to

# Simple Men

---

the years she had led Verona College to victory as a student that she couldn't walk long distances without extreme pain. It wasn't true. She just really wanted a golf cart, and the campus was a place to get some quality use out of it.

Chip held to the roof of the vehicle as they took off down the sidewalk. He had ridden along with her enough to know that to not hang onto something meant a ticket to the infirmary. Katie drove like a person with a golf cart on a small college campus should drive: crazily and dangerously. She thought that if you were smart enough to get into Verona College in the first place, you were smart enough to know to step out of her way when she beeped her horn. She had been chastised by faculty members on many occasions... well, the faculty members she personally targeted, anyway. And boy, did she target! There were a few professors who irritated her so much that when she saw them walking to or from class she went for it, revving the engine until she was right on their heels and they fled cursing. She had even chased a few around the quadrangle to the cheers of the students. Chip would never admit to it aloud, but he had loved witnessing it. Once he had even been a passenger when she had gone after one of her prey. It had been marvelous! The highlight of his week.

"It's the gears," she'd always say. "The damn gears get stuck. It's an old cart. All I could afford. I'll get it fixed some day."

If anyone believed her, they shouldn't have been teaching. But she was a great coach, the winningest in the state. The college couldn't afford to lose her to a competitor. Besides, they were scared of what she would do to them if they ever did fire her.

“Hey,” she said to Chip as they raced past wary professors and students. “Have you met this new chaplain?” There was a note of mystery in her voice, as if she knew something he didn’t.

“No. He’s a friend of Lynn’s from high school.”

“A romantic friend?” She gave him an oblique look of playful caution.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. I mean, he’s a chaplain, right? Aren’t they all married to the church or something?”

“Oh hell, who knows these days.” And then, “Oh!”

“What? What’s wrong?”

“There’s that bitch, Professor Bible-thumper! My brake just went out....”

FOSTER swept the chapel steps as he waited for the promised help to arrive. He had finished sweeping the inside of the chapel, sending the dirt and debris scurrying out the door, though the floor was so stained and old that one could hardly tell the difference. Who knew how long it had been there? He was sweeping away ancient dust. It almost seemed wrong to brush it out into the clear air of the campus.

A few students and faculty had stopped in to say hello and introduce themselves. He had met these with varying degrees of pleasantries or awkwardness. Some people didn’t know how to carry themselves in front of others. Some people were just uncomfortable in their own skin and had to push themselves to make an effort socially. Foster was of the latter, but he did his best.

# Simple Men

---

As Foster swept the last bit of old dust from the steps, the president of Verona College, Wendell Hall, announced his arrival with a hearty “Hello there!” Wendell had a waddle, not a stride. He was a portly man with many quirks. Foster found the most interesting and humorous of these to be the way the man stuttered the word “well” whenever he was nervous or caught off guard. “Well, well, well, well, well, I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” or “Well, well, well, well, well, are we sure we want to invite that particular group to perform at Homecoming?”

“Good day, sir,” Foster answered, resting the broom against a column. “Looks like rain, huh?”

The older man looked to the sky as if he had just noticed this fact. “Well, yes. You may be right. How are you settling in?” He stood in front of the chaplain, balancing on his heels with his hands deep in his pockets. He breathed like a clogged pipe.

“Fine. Just waiting on a few helpers to move the pews inside.”

Wendell seemed surprised at the sight of the pews, as if they had appeared suddenly, out of nowhere. “Yes, yes. Would probably be for the best to get those in.” With a smile, he leaned in and said, “You don’t want those damn trustees on your back about not taking care of the things that they allocated the money to get you.”

Pause.

“I just said ‘damn’ to a man of God. What a damned ass I am!”

Foster couldn’t help but laugh at the sweet man. “It’s all right. There’s not a thing wrong with a few well-placed curse words.”

This made Wendell smile. “Damn right! Good man.”

“I wanted to thank you again for offering me the position. I don’t know where I would have gone if this hadn’t come through.”

“Well, you came highly recommended. Professor Hewes speaks very highly of you.” His eyes drifted to the ground, his brow pressed in thought. “Are you two, uh... I mean.... Well, well, well—”

“No, sir. No, we’re not.”

Wendell grunted and nodded. That was the end of *that* line of questioning.

A voice, not so loud as to lose its elegance, caught both of their attentions. “Foster!” it cried. Professor Lynn Hewes cut across the grass of the quadrangle toward them. She was lucky it hadn’t rained yet, or her heels might have been swallowed up by the earth.

“That used to be illegal,” Wendell said as an aside to the chaplain.

“Excuse me?”

“Cutting across the grass. It wasn’t allowed when the college opened. It was a rule implemented by those damn trustees.”

Lynn was a lovely woman, girlish and grinning. Her eyes were bright and big and reminded Foster of the actresses he had seen in old silent movies. Hers were very expressive eyes. He’d seen them cry buckets before. Her red hair was feathered in a retro chic style. She carried a small briefcase in one hand and her purse over the opposite shoulder. Her heels did sink into the grass as she hurried along. “Foster! Aren’t you excited? Your very first sermon at Verona College this Sunday.” It was a rhetorical question. She looked at the president. “Hello, Wendell.”

# Simple Men

---

23

“Professor Hewes,” he grunted in recognition.

“Wendell was keeping me company until help arrived,” Foster said.

“They should be here soon,” Lynn said. “I asked Coach Arnold for some help. He’s bringing along a few of his players.”

“Well, then, you should have these pews moved in very quickly indeed,” the president said. “I should get back to my office. I’m sure they’ve brought me things to do.” With that, he excused himself courteously and waddled away, hands still deep in his pockets so that he looked like a very large duckling.

Foster and Lynn sat on the steps of the chapel. “Is this the same coach you’re seeing?” Foster asked.

“Dating, yes. Though I can’t say for how much longer.” She clutched the briefcase on her lap like a desk.

“Would you like to talk about it?”

She tilted her head and bit her lip, as if giving the question deep thought. “He’s a nice enough man. Very sweet. But there’s just something missing.”

“Is the sex not hot? Is he not the whore you thought he was?”

Lynn laughed in faux shock and swatted Foster on the forearm. “The sex is great... well, good. Fine. The sex is fine. It might be great if I were another woman. I just don’t think we’re that into one another. He does have legs like steel clamps, though.”

“Well, that’s something! Very hot.”

“Yeah. But it’s not enough. Besides, look at my face.”

Foster could see nothing wrong with her face, except a slight blush around the mouth. Hardly noticeable. “It’s as lovely as ever.”

“It’s a horrible rash. Every time we make out, I break out. He’s bristly and I’m sensitive. There’s symbolism there.”

“Extra moisturizer?”

“I moisturize ten times a day. I’m practically a Dove bar.” She sighed. “What about you? No new man?”

“No. Not for a while now. Not even a date. I almost joined a monastery.”

“Well, maybe we can find you one around here.” The ring of doubt could not be concealed.

“I’m not looking.” Foster wondered if it wasn’t a good idea to be celibate for the rest of his life. Relationships were such trouble. If he joined a monastery somewhere, he could give all his love to making honey or baking bread. He’d be the most passionate bread baker in the world.

“So, where are those ball players anyway?” he said.

LEAVE it to Brad to recommend they start singing hymns on the way to the chapel. Jason thought the idea was hysterical and convinced the other three ball players to sing along. Even Trevor Moore. (Well, not so much convince as threaten.) And sing they did. As robustly as they could. Not a giggler in the lot, they passed by snickering students singing “Hallelujah” in the key of Off. They clapped their hands and shouted the words at every passer-by. This



# Simple Men

---

25

was what Jason adored about Brad: his ability to take any moment and wring every last drop of fun from it.

“Well done, brothers,” Brad said, at last tired of shouting. “I think we’ve changed a few lives here today. Praise Jesus!”

“Praise Jesus!” Jason echoed.

Trevor Moore, not wanting to stop the praising, started in a rendition of “Chapel of Love,” which was summarily squelched by Brad with a look. “Dude, you’re a douche bag,” Brad said.

“What? Not ready to tell the rest of campus about your impending nuptials to Jason?” Trevor was fine in small doses (which was how many thought of Brad as well), but Brad saw him as nothing more than a tagalong most of the time. Tagalongs were okay as long as they knew their place: tagging along. Anything more than that was the height of douche-baggery, to Brad’s way of thinking.

Brad swung and hit Trevor on the shoulder. It was play, but play tinged with warning.

“That fucking hurt!” Trevor yelled. The other guys laughed.

“Ah, sorry, man,” Brad said sarcastically. “Just a love tap, babes.”

“Is that what you get every night, Jason?” Trevor was rubbing his shoulder. “Love taps. I bet he gives it to you hard, huh?”

The statement was meant to be a joke, and everyone smiled and laughed. But Jason gave it some thought. In truth, Brad had never really hurt him. Every other guy on campus had received at least one substantial bruising from him, but not Jason. It was a fleeting thought, probably something insignificant. Still, when he

looked at Brad after Trevor had spoken, there was a twinkle of embarrassment in his eyes like he had just been discovered.

To save his reputation, Brad took off after Trevor, and the latter, being a smaller guy, dodged him with quicker movements.

“Stop, man! Stop! I’m sorry. Jeez!”

That sufficed for the time being, although Brad added another “Douche bag” just to reiterate and establish once and for all that Trevor was indeed a douche bag.

The familiar (and to some, terrifying) sound of Coach Katie’s golf cart focused everyone’s attention elsewhere. The nasal horn of the cart of menace announced her presence as she sped through the small group of boys, who scattered like hysterical birds.

“Move it or lose it, boys,” she said as she plowed through with Coach Arnold in the passenger seat.

“Get the lead out, fellas!” Coach Arnold said.

“Nice!” Jason called after them. “Where’s our ride?”

COACH ARNOLD thought it strange that his heart leapt as he caught site of Lynn standing outside the chapel. His heart had never leapt at seeing her before, but there was something different this time. Something about her. No, that wasn’t it. There was something else. Something literally around Lynn, in the same line of sight, but not Lynn herself. He realized with some confusion that the closer he and Katie came to the chapel, the more his eyes were being drawn to the new chaplain. He fidgeted a bit in his seat, feeling out of sorts.

# Simple Men

---

“Ants in your jock?” Katie asked. She slowed the cart and allowed him to get out. He thanked her and she sped off, peeling through the grass like she was driving a four-wheeler.

Chip stood motionless for a moment. His stomach was doing all sorts of weird things. Things he hadn’t felt it do since high school when he had fallen for Becky Holcomb. He did manage to steer his gaze away from the chaplain and back to Lynn. At least he had a tiny bit of self-control.

Still, it was odd how Lynn disappeared. How the world froze and everything that wasn’t the chaplain faded to the dullness of a haphazard etching. He felt Lynn’s arms around him and polite kiss on the cheek, but his eyes kept sneaking quick glances at the chaplain. The breeze played with the chaplain’s hair as if it were saying: *Look at this! Something new for you.* Even Lynn’s voice had become mere background noise.

The lightheaded effect he felt dissipated only a little when he heard Lynn introduce him to the chaplain. “This is Foster,” he heard her say. Names were traded, and Chip was sure there was some more conversation, but he wasn’t truly following it.

*Foster. What a nice name....* The thought shocked him to the point that he was able to clear his head of the drugged feeling. *What the hell do I care about this dude’s name? Fuck that shit.* His heart beat as loud and fast as a whole drum line.

Yet as he took the chaplain’s hand for a shake, a shivering tingle shot through his body like a million tiny, lovely pinpricks. He couldn’t help the goofy half-grin that appeared on his face and the dreamy look in his eyes. His palm started to sweat and immediately he pulled it away. The suddenness was not lost on Foster or Lynn.

“So... uh, Foster.... Where are you from?”

Lynn looked at him with confusion and irritation. “Honey, I told you. He’s from my hometown, remember?”

“Oh... uh, yeah.” He looked from Lynn to Foster and wiped his palms on his shorts. “Well, I meant, like, more recently.”

“He just told you that too. Are you feeling okay?”

“What? Yes, I’m fine.” His slanted smile tried to hide his embarrassment. “It’s the football. I’m a football coach....”

“He knows.”

“Too many hits to the ol’ head, I guess.” He laughed at his own attempt at pleading humor. Thankfully, Foster laughed along as well. Chip knew a pity laugh when he heard one, though. He could feel his face flashing red. Why did he care so much what this guy thought of him?

Looking for a distraction from the situation, he was relieved to hear the boys coming near the chapel. Brad’s repeated put-downs of Trevor could not be staved even by the presence of a chaplain. This gave Chip the chance to redeem himself in Foster’s eyes. (*Why do I care?*)

“Brad!” he shouted, all manly voiced and stirring. “Shut it!” He looked back to Foster for his approval. *Look at how much testosterone I have! I’ve turned into a damn dog! This is ridiculous. When’s the last time I felt like this?*

*There’s only been one time before, and that was with Becky.* His heart stopped at the insinuation. *Oh hell no! Get out of here, Chip! Leave right now.*

“Actually,” Chip said, interrupting Lynn in the middle of a very interesting statement on the difference between Upton Sinclair

# Simple Men

---

29

and Sinclair Lewis. “I’m not feeling all that great after all. I better head to... um, it was great meeting you, Foster.”

“You too. I hope you feel better.”

*God! He really looks concerned. Don’t worry your pretty... shut up! Go. Now.*

“Do you want me to come along?” Lynn asked.

“No. I can manage.” The coach quickly drew away and made for the campus center, which lined one whole side of the quad. He tried to walk calmly, with masculine assurance, but all he was thinking of was Foster. Anyone watching would see quite clearly, if they knew where to look, where his thoughts were by the growing bulge in his tight mesh shorts.

“Coach!” Jason called after him. “What do we do?”

“What was that about?” Lynn said. She was staring after him as if he were some random lunatic on the street, the kind her father had shielded her from as a child.

“I... don’t know,” Foster said. “He seems very nice, though.”

“He is. I’ve just never seen him act like this before. He’s not crazy. I swear.”

“Thighs like steel clamps, huh?”

“Professor Hewes,” Jason said. The boys stood like a sweaty Abercrombie & Fitch ad. “You needed us for something?”

“The pews. They need to be moved inside.”

“I’d appreciate it.” Foster smiled.

“For you, beautiful,” Brad said, “anything.”

*WHAT the hell was that? I mean, what the hell was that?*

These were the words Coach Chip Arnold flung at himself as he walked to the campus center. He was at a complete loss. What it felt like was a crush. No, worse than a crush. Like the Empire State Building had been dropped from the top of a stack of one hundred Sears Towers right on top of him. That's what it had felt like. "Crush" wasn't the right word. "Pulverized" didn't even seem the right word. He had felt *liquefied*.

As his thoughts took over and he began giving in to his anxiety, he found himself walking faster until he was nearly jogging into the building, past the few students and faculty in the vicinity. Whatever this was, it was totally wrecking his cool. A guy's got to exert a certain level of cool if he wants to wear shorts and tube socks outside of the gymnasium. Everything in his life had always been in such order....

Okay. That wasn't true. Aside from his office and a few women he had left brokenhearted, *most* everything in his life had always been in such order. It was a trait he had learned from his dad. Most fathers were sticklers for control and function, and Chip's had been no different. In fact, he had been damned near obsessed about how everything had its proper place and how everything needed that proper place to function properly. Chip agreed with that. His office, he supposed, could be a physical manifestation of rebellion against his father, but that was a theory for a psychiatrist he would never meet somewhere out in the world.

This was not order. Running from a chaplain wasn't even close to order. Who runs from a chaplain? And such a nice-looking chaplain, too, with....

# Simple Men

---

*No. See. Here's the thing: I like women. I've always liked women. I love women! Women are super. Women are great. I love how they look, how they smell, how they walk. I love having sex with women!*

Chip had what was referred to as “mad skills with the ladies.” He knew just how to flirt to land a chick in bed. He knew how to keep a woman satisfied, and he enjoyed doing it too. Sure, it came off as cocky, but why shouldn't he be proud of it? He could get any woman he wanted. Lenny had said just that before.

Lately he hadn't been going into the city much, but that was because he was dating Lynn... sort of. Admittedly, it was dull as dishwater sometimes, but it was a familiar boredom. What he had just experienced, though, was so foreign, so alien to him, that it had felt a bit like he was in a dream. Not a nightmare. Just a dream that was oddly disturbing... but kind of nice.

He headed to the bookstore in the basement of the campus center. There he could hunker away in a corner and think on things and get this sorted out without a barrage of students chirping “Hey Coach” or numerous invites to another boring faculty party.

The bookstore was empty but for the cashier. Chip walked past rows of books, scanning the titles but not really reading them. His pulse was slowing again. The pressure in his shorts was subsiding. He'd need to get some action tonight or say hello to blue balls. He was regaining control of the situation. He just needed to think.

He rested his head on his forearm, which lay across a shelf. He knew a few gay men. He had a gay uncle. His dad's brother. He'd even had a same-sex experience in college. Who hadn't? But he had hated it. It had been with his best friend one late Sunday night and

had been hands-down the worst blowjob he'd ever received. The awkwardness between them had taken quite a while to fade.

Chip's stomach growled, and he suddenly realized he hadn't eaten all day. That was it! He was hungry. That's what the lightheadedness and rapid heartbeat were from: he hadn't eaten, and he was probably just having a stroke or something.

*What a relief!*

Convinced of this, he began to see things more clearly. The hotness left his face. The books on the shelves in front of him were readable now, not just skimmable.

*Homosexuality: A History.*

He had wandered into the gay lit section without knowing it. Quickly, he left the store. Coach Arnold had never scurried in his life... until today. Twice.

As he walked up the stairs to the dining hall, he couldn't help but think on what a fool he had been. The poor chaplain must think him insane, all sweaty-palmed and goofy-grinned. All because he hadn't had breakfast. Yet Chip wondered if he hadn't seen a hint of that same goofiness in the chaplain's own eyes. But that would have been impossible, wouldn't it? Because that would mean the chaplain had recognized in him what he was unwilling to recognize in himself. Or something like that.



## Chapter Two

CHIP and Lynn sat on opposite ends of the couch, this time in her campus apartment. At one time, the entire street she and many of the faculty lived on had been town property, but the college, in its grand reasoning, had annexed the land without much argument. Now it was considered part of the campus. The homes looked older. Their architecture was a few decades old, but not as old as the college structures themselves. Every so often the sewage was an issue, but other than that, there were no major complaints.

Lynn's place was dimly lit. This had nothing to do with the power of the light bulbs; the walls absorbed so much of the light that the apartment would seem dim even if it were lit by a thousand of them. It was an old place, at one time a very large house that had since been separated into four units. The furnishing belonged to the college, most of it cheap stuff collected from flea markets and yard sales. The couch had been purchased from a nursing home.

They watched one of the myriad dancing contests on television, where semi-celebrities made spectacles of themselves and lapped up the attention like starving dogs. Chip hated these programs. He didn't watch much TV, but when he did, he preferred *real* TV, not reality TV. His mind was still unsettled by the day's events, so he

wasn't truly paying any attention to the fox trots or waltzes going on before him. He wasn't sure if Lynn was either. Her eyes *always* looked wide and amazed. It was that look of innocence that had drawn him to her in the first place at the faculty barbecue a year ago. But she wasn't as naïve as she looked. Her daddy might have tried to keep his baby girl an innocent thing forever, but Lynn Hewes was a sponge, taking in the world around her astutely and dissecting it with symbolism and meaning. All good literature professors were like that. What was the moment when her father realized he couldn't keep her anymore? Did she see his heart break? Her wide eyes were a betrayal of sorts; there was knowledge behind them her father would never understand or possibly even suspect.

“Are you really watching this?” Chip picked up the remote, his index finger already on the power button.

“Do you want to watch something else?”

He clicked the TV off. “Not really,” he said with a flirtatious smirk. He took the short journey from his end of the couch to hers. Nothing more than a bum-hop really.

*My God! She looks terrified.*

“Um.... Have you shaved today?” She pulled away a tiny bit as he slid his arms around her. She was like a trapped kitten in a dog pound.

“This morning, yeah. But you know me, I'm a beast.” He growled playfully.

Lynn laughed nervously. Before she could say anything else, his lips were on hers. To her, it was like kissing sandpaper.

Chip felt the reluctance, but she wasn't pushing him away yet. That was a good sign, wasn't it? Yes. This was good. This was all he needed. To be with a beautiful woman.

Yet as he thought this, his mind betrayed him. Foster's face appeared. Chip felt his heart quicken and his prick stiffen. He kissed Lynn harder as some sort of means to kiss away the image, but it wasn't working. The harder he tried, the more he thought of the chaplain. His passionate kissing was only making matters worse, bringing to life a new fantasy for him: kissing another man.

He pushed himself away from Lynn just as she pulled herself away from him. The force of both landed him on the floor.

"You're... playful tonight," she said.

"Sorry." The apology seemed out of place, but he saw the look of absolute displeasure on Lynn's face.

"You know, I think I might head to bed early tonight, if that's okay with you." Lynn rose from the couch. Chip was still on the floor. "You can stay here on the couch if you'd like."

He smiled self-consciously as she walked awkwardly to the bedroom, looking back every few steps to see him still positioned on the floor by the couch. Of course, he was not about to get up. Not until she had left the room. He had the hardest erection he'd had since college, and he wasn't about to let Lynn see it. It was the type of erection that was so hard it felt dangerous. It reminded him of commercials for boner meds. *Somebody call a doctor! It's been four hours!* Somehow, and he was certain of this, Lynn would be able to ascertain that his stiffness of member had absolutely nothing to do with her.

AS NIGHTMARES went, it was tame. There was no blood or monsters. There were no severed heads or dismembered corpses. Foster's most disturbing nightmare was not an amalgamation of his mind's ramblings, but rather a distinctly accurate memory of his breakup. In truth, he would have preferred something gorier. It was made worse by the seething underbelly feeling of most nightmares: everyone is in on the joke but you, and *you're* the joke.

*Barry had grown distracted in recent weeks. Foster couldn't place exactly when it had happened, but he felt the thread unraveling. He felt Barry's attraction to him waning. Even the "Have a great day" kiss in the morning was absent-minded. Of course, kisses were always muted in dreams. In remembering the dream later in the day, Foster would recognize the eerie similarities between the dream kiss and the real thing: there had been no feeling in either.*

*Still, Foster left the walk-up apartment on that day thinking all was normal. Just another day of seminary school ahead of him. In the dream, as he left the apartment, the Amish kid next door was standing outside, watching him. Unless he had been hidden somewhere, this had not occurred in real life, but it made the dream even more disturbing for Foster. It seemed a universal aspect of dreams and nightmares that those people you didn't know, those you had never truly met, when starring in your mind's nighttime wanderings, had the vacancy of demons in their eyes.*

It was something like fate that Foster had forgotten his keys. In the dream, it was hardly touched upon, whereas in life it was "*Shoot! I forgot my keys.*" Barry hadn't ever gotten home until late at night—he'd worked for the water company—so Foster had needed

the keys to get back into the apartment when he got home from school. Judging eyes and knowing smirks intruded on him from everywhere as he made the walk back to his home. They knew, but they weren't telling. Dream demons.

*"You can wake up now," he told himself. "You know how this will end."*

But he couldn't wake up when he had this nightmare. It paralyzed him, as if he were in a movie theater and strapped into a seat, forced to watch an unjust and uncomfortable ending. All he wanted to do was look away.

With every step back to the apartment: *"Wake up!"* And also with every step, audible snickers from people who weren't even there on the day it actually happened. Even friends that Foster had known for years were shaking their heads in disappointment or pointing fingers in mockery. In all the wide world, he was alone.

*The look of the street and the apartment took on cardboard attributes, like a Sesame Street set. Entering the apartment, things seemed normal at first. Everything was as he had left it just ten minutes earlier—except for the jeans and belt on the hallway floor. That was confusing, and the implication didn't hit Foster right away. The only thing he thought was that they were too trendy to be Barry's. And then, in an odd moment of displacement, the young Amish kid from next door appeared, coming out of the bathroom naked, his toes clutching at the jeans on the floor as he walked over them and then caught sight of Foster. His penis was hard, and he stared across the room at Foster without saying a word. They were like two dogs who had unexpectedly met on strange turf. There would be a moment of sizing up, and then one of them would be chased off.*

*Barry burst into the hall from the bedroom. "Get in here!" he said, grabbing the kid's arm playfully. Then he saw Foster. There was no plea of forgiveness. Only a look that told Foster maybe it was his fault. Maybe he should have expected this outcome. "Foster. Sorry, man."*

Foster woke up from the dream. Barry's unimpressive apology echoed in his ears. Foster was shaking with anger. He was shaking with grief. He sat on the side of the bed, humiliated yet again, bowed his head into his hands, and cried. The nightmares weren't supposed to follow him here. Verona College was supposed to be a fresh start. But suddenly it felt the same as every place he'd ever been: marred.

FOSTER sat in the empty dining hall, cradling his third cup of coffee and peering out the long window. Morning classes were in session, so there weren't many students on the quad. The school only had about 1,200 in attendance, after all. He only had one class to teach today. The rest of the time would be devoted to his first sermon and getting to know the chapel itself. Maybe even a student or two would stop by and give him the chance to work on his social skills.

As his attention was focused on the quad outside the window, Foster didn't hear Lynn Hewes until she sat down opposite him, jarring the table a bit as she sat her breakfast tray down. It was only September, yet wrapped around her neck was a bright pink scarf that covered her mouth. With her wide eyes, she looked something like a woodland critter peaking out of its burrow. He laughed.

# Simple Men

---

“What’s all this?” He gestured with a sweeping motion around his own neck.

Lynn looked around to make certain no one else was watching and then undraped herself like a mummy. The skin around her mouth was irritated and deep red.

Foster’s mouth dropped. “Our Lord and Savior! What happened to you?”

“Chip! Chip happened to me. Him and his big, manly kisses and his stubborn refusal to shave correctly.” She paused, allowing herself to calm down. “What’s wrong with you this morning? You seem....”

“Just tired. I didn’t get much sleep last night.” He took a sip from his coffee. “Back to you and Chip. You were saying?”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do, Foster. He’s a good man, but how much more can my skin take? Seriously.” She tore open a packet of cream and stirred it into her coffee. “My students look at me, and I know what they’re thinking.”

“What are they thinking?”

“That I’m easy.” She rubbed her face. “I’ve never been easy. If anything, I’ve been too hard. It’s all my father’s fault, you know. He set me up for failure. He was such a decent man—not terribly smart, but decent. No other man can possibly measure up to him.”

“The men from our past... how they haunt our lives, huh?”

The dining hall was mostly vacant. There were patches of students and faculty here and there, but none in groups larger than three.

“I just need to find a way to end it. I mean, it won’t be a heartbreaking turn of events for either of us. It’s not like we’re in love; at least, I’m not. I can see where he might be in love with me. You should have seen the way he came for me last night, all mouth agape like one of those plankton-eating whales. But still....”

“It’s delicate.”

“Yes. Delicate.”

“So why have you stayed together?”

Lynn shrugged, knowing the answer would make her sound desperate. She slid her finger along the rim of the coffee cup. “We’re together because neither of us wants to be alone.” She looked up at him. He nodded in understanding.

“It’s dried up around here, Foster. The man pool is all dried up. Though....”

“What?”

“There is a new science professor. He’s pretty cute.”

Foster smiled and clicked his tongue as he shook his head. “Not even broken up with the poor coach yet and already on the prowl. You *are* easy.”

She balled up a napkin and threw it at him. “Hush,” she said. “I’m observant. That’s all.”

PRACTICE was over. It had gone well. The plays had looked promising. Maybe this year they’d even win a few games; anything was possible. A few of the boys still lounged around on the grass,



letting the sweat dry. Most had gone back to their dorms, preferring a shower and an air-conditioned room. It was always unpredictable weather at Verona College. Summer could hang on until October or leave early in August. Coach Arnold sat on a folding chair, making notes about the plays and a few of the players. He wiped a bead of perspiration from his forehead.

It had been a week since he and Lynn had ended it. The exact wording was that they had decided to “take a break.” Chip knew that that just meant one thing: they were on their way to splitting up for good. It hadn’t really been one of those big messy affairs. She had told him she thought it might be a good idea to take some time apart, and he had agreed. He had been so easy with the idea he thought he might have hurt her feelings, but she’d seemed more relieved than anything.

They had been on her couch again, separated by what seemed yards of cushion and textile, when she had said, “You think maybe we should take a break?” Her voice had held a slight tremble, as if she had been trying to force the words out all evening. Her bare feet had been curled up beneath her; she could have rolled into a ball and gotten away that way if things hadn’t gone right.

Chip had stared at her momentarily, then back at the TV. Some show about bachelors and bachelorettes had been on. “I think that’s a good idea,” he had finally said.

“Good.”

“Good.”

He had stayed another half-hour and then had left without a fuss.

What did a break mean, exactly? Did that mean he could date other women? He needed to get that figured out. A trip into the city might be just what he needed. He could use a night away from thinking. He wished that he had spoken up and said, “Can’t we just split up for real?”

Chip had thought by now things would be back to normal. That he wouldn’t be spending every waking moment with the chaplain’s face still in his head. He was, of course, wrong. He went out of his way to meet the chaplain on the school sidewalk. One smile from Foster would make him grin uncontrollably and his legs would go weak. Nothing had ever made his legs go weak. He squatted over three hundred pounds! Maybe he had a tumor.

He couldn’t put his finger on it exactly, what drew him to the chaplain, but if he didn’t get it figured out soon, it might start affecting his coaching. They might start losing worse than usual. He looked up from his playbook. The remaining boys were tottering up from their rest on the field. Jason Jordan and Brad Park were among them, kidding and jabbing one another. The other guys flinched when Brad came toward them with his big, swatting paws. Jason never flinched, because Brad never gave him reason to. Chip had a feeling Jason knew something the other boys didn’t.

Chip felt an affectionate draw to the teasing of the two ballplayers. There was a connection there deeper than between any of the other players. More than once before, Chip had caught that glint in their eyes as they looked at one another. None of the other players caught on to this. Why would they? They were concerned with parties and girls and getting head from said girls, not the wandering eyes of their male teammates.

# Simple Men

---

It was the newness that appealed to Chip the most. He watched them and wondered if, maybe, when he was younger—perhaps back in college—he would have acted on such an impulse if the situation had presented itself. His burgeoning feelings for the chaplain—if that’s what they were—were proof it was possible. Maybe he had just experimented with the wrong guy. He went through a catalog of friends in his mind. None of them conjured up the slightest bit of arousal. A few even caused him to retch.

*“What am I doing? Trying to get a hard-on from ghosts and memories.”*

He rose, flipping the playbook closed. No. There was only one man who seemed to stir any response. He had tried to pass it off as nothing in the beginning, but that was silly now. People who did things like that went crazy or bitter. Best to get it all sorted out, otherwise it just gets messy. Order was what he needed.

Ahead of him, Brad had an arm wrapped around Jason’s neck, and they were singing some pop song as they walked back to the dorm. By the tone of their singing, it was apparent neither of them truly liked the song. They were singing too high and blaring the most ridiculous lyrics to the students they passed. That same playfulness, that same giddy affection they had for one another, he could feel it in him too. He could feel it every time he thought of Foster. It was newness and excitement and just a little dangerous.

*“Get it figured out. Just get ’er done.”*

THE shower room on the second floor was always the rowdiest in the dorm. This was due, at least in part, to Brad and Jason, who

encouraged pranks and antics wherever they went. Even someone who was not particularly prone to troublemaking could get caught up in the fervor if they hung out on the second floor for too long. There were always drinking games going on and bets being made over everyday things: who did this or that in the World Series, what was the name of that actor in that Vietnam movie, how many times did Blanche make a sex reference on *The Golden Girls*. Anything to make a bit of drinking cash or make someone else squirm.

Bets were even made in the showers. How hot can you take the water? How many guys can we fit into the shower area? And so on. The loser would either buy beer for the winner or be forced to clean the toilets, which were *always* in need of cleaning. That was the worst fate that could befall someone: cleaning the toilets. There was no house mom due to budget cuts, so the deed needed to be done by *someone*. The rest of the house was respectable-looking, but the showers were dingy and forgotten for the most part. The bathroom walls were grey and unscrubbed, the floor was always in need of mopping, and the overhead lights washed the color out of everything.

“I dare you,” said one of the more popular guys after practice, “to kiss each other right where you stand, under the shower and naked.”

Jason and Brad had just stepped in and soaped up by this point. They stood next to each other and looked over their shoulders at their hallmate. “This is in danger of becoming a porno,” Jason joked.

“Take it or leave it,” the hallmate taunted. “You can always clean the toilets.”

“I ain’t cleanin’ nothing where your ass has been!” Brad grabbed Jason by the back of his wet head and, with a wink, pulled him close.

The kiss was meant to be nothing more than a bet, a play at one-upmanship. But Brad and Jason both felt something deeper as their lips met. They felt their hearts pounding over the beat of the shower and the obnoxious catcalls of their showermates. It clogged their ears, like they were under a tidal wave rather than a stream of lukewarm water. Along with this excitement, certain other, more physical things began to happen. In romantic fashion akin to that of an old Hollywood movie, Jason raised his leg, wrapping it around Brad's waist. He did this for two reasons: one, he knew it would get a great response from the crowd; and two, he wanted to hide the advancing wood between him and Brad.

The incessant hooting and laughing from the small group of boys—some of whom might have liked what they saw more than others—brought in the attention of Trevor Moore. He poked his tiny head around the shower wall, inquiring as to what was going on. It was explained to him at once.

“I dared them to kiss, and they did!”

“Easy bet,” Trevor said. “They’re practically married anyway.”

By this point, having quelled the physical manifestations of their urges to a respectable degree, Brad and Jason faced the crowd. “Oh, uh, Trevor, I was supposed to tell you something,” Brad said.

“What’s that, Brad?”

“I was in bed with your mom last night, and she told me to kick your ass!” Brad started pursuing Trevor even before Trevor knew he was being pursued. The whole second floor was rolling in the halls as Brad, still wet, lathered, and naked, chased Trevor past the dorm rooms. The noise that followed could be heard from outside. Students walking past stared into the house to see if they could make out what was happening.

“Keep the fuck away from me, man!” Trevor shouted, jumping over obstacles, be they books or bikes.

“The poor fool,” Jason said, having come out of the shower in a towel. “He does it to himself.”

“Trevor or Brad?” someone asked.

“Both.”

He walked to his room to change while Brad chased Trevor downstairs and through the halls of the dorm. There was a big thud, a few screams for mercy, and then, eventually, the laughter and rowdiness calmed down. Jason had a late afternoon class to get to, though. So did Brad, but he was always less concerned about those things—namely education—than Jason. This struck Jason as a bit strange, because Brad had no real idea what he was going to do after graduation. Jason already had things mapped out: he’d run his father’s lawn business. His father had made certain of that before he had died last year.

Jason thought about the kiss in the shower. He had thought of that same kiss happening many times before but had never imagined details, because it had not happened yet. Not until today. He still felt the tingle on his lips and in his groin down to the soles of his feet. His heart still beat rapidly, and it took all the strength he had to get to his room without falling over. He had to push the kiss off like it meant nothing at all. A lie. A big one. He had wanted to stay wrapped in their shower show for much longer than they had. He wanted to know how the kiss felt for Brad. Adjectives. That’s what he wanted. Jason wasn’t sure he’d be able to concentrate on anything but that kiss for the rest of the night. Grazing his teeth lightly over his bottom lip, he relished the tingle. It was like every pleasurable nerve in his lips—in his body—was at its most awake.

*“I wonder if Brad would come run the business with me.”* It was a fantasy, of course. At least, for right now. They still had two more years of school. But it gave his heart even more reason to race.

He got dressed, shook back his mane of hair, and slid his satchel over his shoulder. The noise in the house had died, and the guys were in their rooms or emptying out of the house to go to class. Jason shut the door behind him and was readying to lock it when Brad’s booming voice woke up the hall again.

“You’re gonna wait for me, aren’t you?” Brad asked as he stood naked in the middle of the hallway. His arms were wide, as if surprised Jason was leaving. He was mostly dry now, and his body was pink with rug burn and fresh scratches.

“Hurry up, dipshit,” Jason said. “I don’t have time to wait around for your sorry ass.”

GOD’S creation is great and awe-inspiring. In fact, Foster found it a bit *too* awe-inspiring on this particular day.

He had intended to write his sermon for Sunday, or at least come up with a theme, while sitting against one of the large trees that overlooked the river at the edge of campus. The crisp air and beautiful scenery should have aided him. Unfortunately, he found himself easily distracted by every slip of sunshine that bounced off of river or tree leaf. Before long, he was resting his head back on the bark of the tree and feeling the last breezes of summer, forgetting all about why he was out there in the first place. When he caught himself watching one of the friendly campus squirrels for an extended period of time as it foraged, gobbled, foraged, and gobbled,

he decided it was time to collect his things and head elsewhere for inspiration. He chose the college fitness center.

The fitness center wasn't the distraction it might have been in Foster's younger days. There was plenty of eye candy if one was into pretty boys and football players, but as Foster had matured, so had his taste in men. Maturity and thoughtfulness were more of a turn-on to him now than a rippling six-pack. Therefore, he was able to get in a nice workout, sectioned off from the rest of those in the fitness center by his music player. People usually left him alone if they saw the earpieces in use. Most knew who he was by now, so he received warm smiles but nothing more, and this allowed him to focus on a theme for his sermon, possibly tying physical fitness in with spiritual fitness. There was an idea.

Foster cut a nice form in his workout gear—not that he was very muscular, it was just that everything fit well—but he didn't notice the admiring glances. He was too immersed in the formulating sermon. The newest Madonna CD was pushing him along. He loved Madonna, even through her Catholic-bashing days. In all honesty, didn't they kind of have it coming anyway? Centuries of religious domination and the pot will boil over at some point.

Foster was doing bicep curls, facing the mirror, when he noticed Coach Arnold at the PT desk. He was thumbing through a folder, taking quick glances up every so often. More than once, he glanced up at Foster. The coach wasn't in his shorts today. He wore plain grey sweatpants and a T-shirt that draped over his shoulders and chest as if it was fitted just for him. When the coach turned slightly to converse with a player, Foster got to check out the ass and "legs like steel clamps" Lynn had spoken of. Foster nearly dropped his dumbbell. He could tell Lynn had been right. God's creation is great and awe-inspiring, indeed.



# Simple Men

---

Coach Arnold—Chip—locked eyes with the chaplain once more and smiled. With the folder at his side, he sauntered (it *was* a saunter, a nervous one) over to the chaplain's area, trying to make it seem as if he were in no real hurry. He even cast a glance or two to his right and left in a display of remedial nonchalance. Foster put down the dumbbell, clicked the music player off, and turned from the mirror to face the coach.

"How's it going"—Chip scoured his brain for the appropriate title—"...er, Father? Brother?"

"Foster." He smiled, adjusted his glasses, and scolded himself that he really needed to get contacts, or even that eye surgery everyone raved about.

"Father Foster."

"No. Just Foster. I don't go by a title. I like to keep things informal, if at all possible."

"In that case, you can call me Chip instead of Coach. Doesn't mean I won't be riding you, though." It was meant to be a joke, but Chip didn't realize until after he said it how stupid it sounded. And because of the image it produced in his brain, he was also thankful for the binding jockstrap he was wearing today.

Sensing that his attempt at starting a conversation with the chaplain was a complete failure, Chip readied himself for retreat. "Well, it was nice to see you in *my* church, Foster. I better get these files to where they belong. I don't want to take you away from your workout."

"It's no bother. Really. I'm just trying to come up with a sermon." He put his hand on Chip's shoulder in what was meant as a

friendly gesture but came off as awkward to them both. “You should come to the chapel this Sunday.”

Chip swallowed. He felt a heat from Foster’s hand melt through the T-shirt and down to his bones. “I’m not a religious man.”

“You don’t need to be.”

“Okay.” Chip felt an excitement like he was being accepted by the most popular kid in school. “I’ll be there.”

“Great.” Foster removed his hand from Chip’s shoulder casually. “I’ll save you a pew. Well, not a whole pew. I’ll save you a seat, though.”

Awkward.

“You should come in here more often too,” Chip said. “I could give you some pointers. We could make you a regular He-Man of God.”

Foster offered a laugh. “I don’t think I could pull off the brawny look as well as you, but I’d love some tips on staying in shape.”

“That’s what I’m here for. Kind of.” Chip slapped the folder against his thigh. “I’ll let you get back to it, then. Just stopped by to say hi and make sure you know that I’m not as flighty as I seemed the other day at the chapel.”

“I didn’t think you were.”

“Good. ’Cause I’m not. Anyway, catch ya later.” Chip smiled and turned around with some hesitation, as if he were hoping Foster might ask him to stick around.

As Chip walked away, Foster couldn’t help but smile. He could see why women went nuts for the guy. Chip had that air of

Peter Pan to him. There was a precocious kid just below the surface of that big exterior. A curious kid. Foster had never been attracted to the muscle boys or bodybuilders; they just weren't his taste. But he had to admit, he recognized the charm of Chip Arnold. For an instant, he allowed himself to ponder a fantasy life with Chip. Foster did this with most guys he was attracted to, which was a very select and small group. Then he shook the thought from his head and picked up the dumbbell again. He had convinced himself that any relationship would only end up in disaster after what happened with Barry. They would all end the same. The nightmares told him this.

CHIP realized soon enough that confronting the issue—that of his inexplicable attraction to the school chaplain—had only made matters worse. There was no real resolution in their fitness center rendezvous; there were only more uncertainties. But what would have been the best way to deal with it? This was a situation he doubted many guys actually went through. He couldn't just go up to Lenny and ask, "Hey, what happened the first time you got a boner for another dude?" God, if it were only that easy!

Chip was losing sleep to his conundrum. Not even sleeping aids helped him. He found that there was no way to think Foster out of his mind, either. There was only more Foster. And then there was Lenny. The phrase "flaming homosexual" echoed through Chip's head. He could only imagine the size of Lenny's stroke if he ever found out that Chip was having attractions to another man.

Then there was every uncomfortable anti-gay remark he himself had ever said to someone in high school. They all snowballed on him like a karmic avalanche. He could almost hear

all of the tortured gay guys he had teased resound a giant *Yes!* But he had only done it to be accepted. When he'd reached college age, he'd realized how juvenile he had acted. *See*, he reasoned. *I can grow.*

But this? This was the most tasteless of all karmic jokes. He was attracted to a chaplain. A chaplain! It would be laughable if he didn't want the chaplain so bad. Someone in the great cosmic expanse was having a hell of a laugh at Chip's expense, and whenever Chip got the chance, he was going to give this cosmic being a good talking-to.

A couple of times in his restlessness, Chip rose and browsed Internet gay porn sites as a test. He wandered through them, sometimes intrigued, sometimes disgusted, and sometimes very confused, but never turned on. None of the guys on the sites did a thing for him. Not even a single stirring, and the guys on these sites were very attractive. Chip was secure enough in his masculinity to admit another man was attractive when he saw one. But it stopped there. He even tried masturbating to a gay porn video, but after fifteen minutes, he realized it just wasn't going to happen. Only when he lay back down was he able to get himself off by thinking about a woman. On Saturday night, before he was to attend the chaplain's sermon, he did something he had been putting off doing out of fear: he thought of Foster as he jacked off and came immediately. He knew he would.

*What a mess....*

## Chapter Three

CHIP was true to his word. He showed up to the chapel on Sunday—albeit late—and spotted a space in the very front row of the pews. He would have been there sooner, but he had fussed over which tie to wear and sweated through his first shirt, so he'd had to change.

He waded past the packed congregation, getting inquisitive glances from those in attendance who had never seen him anywhere near the chapel, and sat down with a smile and a nod up at the chaplain. Foster gave him a grin of acknowledgement. This made Chip's heart spike in excitement.

Lynn had gone to see her father for the weekend. She had promised him she would help him shop for something to read. He was a bored, tired old man, and had decided recently to give up TV for good. Her absence was a relief to Chip. Seeing her would have been awkward, especially since the feelings he was supposed to be feeling for her, he was instead feeling for her friend. This was a fact Chip had accepted in his restless nights, if warily. Confronting the truth. That was his father's motto after all. Chip would not name it, though. He would not call it love. He preferred that new term he had

heard: bromance. Yes. He could get quite bromantic with Foster. Why did it have to be anything but two guys enjoying their masculinity? Why did it have to be named at all?

What was it about Foster that attracted him? He was a nice guy, but Chip knew a million nice guys. And it certainly wasn't his looks. Sure, Foster was an attractive man, but Chip had known many attractive men and had never had fantasies about putting his tongue down their throats. There was something else about Foster. Some essence of Foster's masculinity was like a magnet drawing Chip into place, into the right magnetic lock. His mannerisms, his smile, the glint in his eyes, his voice, the way he moved with such fluidity.

Chip pulled at his tie. The collar was a bit tight. He had no jacket, and the only button-up shirt he had was this short-sleeved number he had chosen. He hadn't actually worn it anywhere before. It had been on the verge of being tossed to Goodwill until today. The sleeves showed off his arms, but maybe that wasn't the right look for a chapel service. Still, he'd never been to church, so what did he know about looking the part?

As he sat there, his mind began to wander, even as he continued to watch and hear Foster speak. The chapel was a cozy little place. There was an antique stove in the corner. The pews were spaced nicely, not too close together. The old floor was a warm honey color. The ceiling was vaulted, but not in that condescending way. All in all, it wasn't as condemning as Chip thought it would be. He thought of all the films he had seen involving little chapels, preachers, or sermons. Most of them had been comedies, because that was the kind of film he liked.

*Cheesemakers. Something about cheesemakers. What was that line? Oh yeah. "What's so special about the cheesemakers? "That*

*was a funny movie.... Jeez, Chip! Get a hold of yourself. If there's a test on this sermon Foster's giving, you'll flunk because you're too busy thinking about cheesemakers. Am I checking him out? Holy shit! I am. I am totally checking out his butt in his preacher pants. Hurry! Look away before he catches you.... Shit. Too late. I'm had. He just caught me checking out his preacher butt and his preacher package. Well, don't keep staring at it! Look away, dumbass!*

Chip shifted so violently in the pew that he elbowed the student, a mousey, bespectacled, blonde girl sitting next to him. She let out a sharp cry of pain, and Chip's humiliation was complete. The entire congregation was suddenly staring at him. Judging him. Foster stopped for a moment. Chip mouthed "Sorry," and Foster nodded and continued. Chip was frozen, scared to move at all until the last prayer had been said.

After the service was over, Chip stayed in his pew as everyone else lined up at the door to congratulate the chaplain on his sermon as they left. When he knew everyone's attention was elsewhere, Chip bolted for the back door, tearing the tie off as he went.

The expression on his face screamed *Don't fuck with me*, and not a soul did as he tore across campus to his office in the fitness center. It was a dumb idea anyway to go to the chapel. Why had he done it? Because he had said he would? He didn't owe Foster anything. He barely knew him.

Still. A month of stills.

The offices were closed on Sundays, but faculty had keys. He flipped on the lights, threw the tie to the floor, and sat at his desk, unsure really of what he meant to do in there. He played with the edges of papers and wondered if Foster was very irritated with him.

*Why do you care? What's he mean to you?*

That was the question he knew he needed to get sorted out. *What's he mean to you?* It seemed impossible to answer. What words could answer it? He needed a new thesaurus.

The coach rose and took off the binding button-up. He had T-shirts piled in the cabinet in case he needed them. Of course, they all fit perfectly. He hadn't the chance to slip one on, however, before he heard a knock at his office door and a woman poked her head around the door frame.

"Excuse me," she said, her eyes taking in his chest and arms. He must have left the doors to the offices unlocked. They were supposed to lock automatically on Sundays after someone used them, but they didn't always work. One of the joys of being employed at a small school.

The woman was pretty in that aging-screen-siren way. She was a bit older than Chip, perhaps in her late 30s or early 40s. She looked a little devious. Her eyes were shaded grey, exactly how Chip imagined she saw the world. She looked to be just what Chip needed at the moment.

Chip pulled the T-shirt over his head. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Trevor Moore's mother." She brought out her hand for him to take and viewed him as if he were something she had purchased on a whim and was now sizing up. "I was just looking around campus. I thought I'd come in and have a look at the offices."

Chip knew that was a lie. She had spotted him and followed him inside. He could see it in her eyes. And what the hell, he was on a break from Lynn, and after the debacle at the chapel... well, he needed some encouragement. He needed to be told he was a man again.



“Allow me to be your guide,” he said, holding out his arm for her to delicately grab onto. They didn’t make it out the door, though. Once she felt his bicep, they hit the floor.

BRAD watched as Jason tried in vain to yell above the crowd of students and the deafening music in the suffocating dorm room. Trevor Moore was at the bar—the best in the house—but he wasn’t paying too much attention to any of the guys. There were too many “hot chicks” around, and Trevor wanted to get lucky. Jason wasn’t much of an extreme vocalist anyway. On mornings after parties like this, his voice would always be raw from the yelling. It just wasn’t an environment conducive to his laid-back demeanor. He relied on Brad at loud gatherings.

“You want a beer, bro?” Brad asked—yelled—in his ear.

Jason answered with a nod.

Brad then let forth a holler that seemed to make the sound system shrink back a few decibels. Everyone around him shrugged over as if his words, “Beer! Here! Now!” had created a wave. He got plenty of dirty looks from the girls, but fuck ’em.

Trevor tossed a couple of beers through the air, and Brad caught them perfectly and handed one to Jason. “What a douche!” Brad said, taking a gulp.

Brad was easily the loudest person Jason had ever known, and there was reason behind his roars. There were six reasons, in fact, in the form of older brothers, each one rowdier and burlier than the next. They were born in auditory contest, it seemed. By the time Brad was born, the doctor wore earplugs, or so Brad was teased. To

survive in that climate, Brad needed to be the loudest of them all. He still couldn't take them in a physical fight, but he could out-holler them any day of the week. It was his rowdiness, his amplitude, that kept him from becoming a secondary character in his own life.

He'd never worried if he was too much for people outside of his family until he'd met Jason. They were a mismatched pair at first glance: Brad, the big mouth, and Jason, the easygoing friend. But their love of pranks had gelled them together. For some reason, they'd just clicked.

Brad was concerned lately, though. He was concerned that maybe his over-the-top nature might be wrong for the new feelings he was developing—or that were coming out of hiding—for Jason. Jason liked things at an steady flow, and if anything happened between them—if that kiss in the shower was an indication of something more—Brad doubted whether he could remain free and easy about it. In fact, he knew he couldn't. People would find out because Brad liked to talk and brag. Most of all, he liked to brag. Some people already thought there was something going on between them, but that was shrugged off as the usual college rumors brought on by jealousy. No need to worry about that.

They went downstairs, away from the party and the noise. Their ears felt the relief at once; they felt unclogged. The lobby was empty, so they collapsed onto one of the larger sofas. The furniture was way past new and had that smell furniture gets from years of overuse by thousands of people. The lobby was decorated much the same as the rest of the campus. Everything had the drabness of a painting that needed a good cleaning.

# Simple Men

---

59

Brad and Jason stared at each other. It had been a few days, but still neither of them were concentrating on very much. The Kiss was ever-present in their minds and on the tips of their tongues.

“We’re both thinking about the same thing,” Brad said. “So, let’s talk about it, bro.”

“It’s all good.” Jason’s eyes spoke volumes more, of excitement and anticipation.

“How did it feel? I mean, I know how it felt for me... kissing you. But... is that normal?”

“I guess it’s normal for us.” Jason leaned in closer. “It felt right. Something that feels like that can’t be bad.”

“Naw. It wasn’t bad. If anyone ever said so, I’d kick their ass. That was the best kiss I think I ever had. No shit.”

Jason hit him on the shoulder. “You just liked it ’cause everyone was watching.”

The muffled music from the party above them gave the moment a strange relaxation, a background noise that allowed them to disperse with much of the awkwardness. The boys leaned toward one another, breath hot and nerves a-tremor. A kiss without expectation.

But Brad blinked. He backed off, and Jason felt the moment die away. They both felt the sting of disappointment.

“I’ll be upstairs,” Jason said as he rose.

Brad could see he was hurt. He wanted to say something, but for once, there was nothing that came to mind. He watched Jason walk away, and then he erupted in self-rage.

“Fuck! Fuck! Mother fuck goddamn piece of shit....” The expletives went on in an acidic stream. Brad threw pillows and chairs and anything else that wasn’t firmly nailed down. When he thought he’d done enough damage to the room, he whaled on himself, hitting his own arm harder than he had ever hit Trevor Moore. A few heads peeked in, but none were courageous enough to confront him about the damage he had caused... was causing.

When finally Brad climbed the stairs back to the party, his clothes torn and his face bloodied and bruised, he had vented much of his frustration. He got quite a few stares as he made his way through the party crowd. He found Jason and stood at his side nonchalantly, sniffing back blood with thumbs in pockets.

“Beer! Here! Now!” Brad shouted.

“What the hell happened to you?” Jason asked.

“I tripped.”

THERE was a coffee shop just off campus, on a side street beside a laundromat. Unlike the big chain coffee shops, this place put on no airs. There were no knick-knacks or books. They didn’t even serve lunch; just coffee beverages and muffins. It was a popular hangout for students and faculty alike. And if you asked Chip Arnold, this little place had the best chocolate muffins anywhere in the state. He treated himself to one whenever he was feeling anxious. He had been treating himself a lot lately. He excused it by noting that he worked all those calories off with the boys in practice.

The line inside was middle of the road: not as long as Chip had seen it before, but there was no way he’d get out of there in less than

ten minutes. He waited like a good customer, giving the obligatory nods to people he half-knew and community folk he only ever saw there. Then, at a far table near the restroom, he saw Foster having a mocha and a chocolate muffin and reading the paper.

Chip looked away quickly. Had Foster seen him yet?

Chip had avoided him all week. Since the Sunday sermon, they hadn't so much as crossed paths. Chip didn't know how long he could keep it up—it was a very small school, after all—but he certainly wasn't prepared to see Foster at the coffee shop on a weekday afternoon. All the old symptoms returned: the shallow breathing, the leaping heart, the sweaty palms. He had been once again transformed into a preteen boy struggling with his feelings of first love.

Should he say something? No. He decided he would get his coffee and muffin and pretend as if he hadn't even seen the chaplain there. That would be best. The table was far enough away that it was plausible... if Chip had bad eyesight.

He bought his coffee (black) and the chocolate-chocolate chip muffin and took a deep breath before he made his escape for the door. One foot in front of the other, and he made a break for it. But wait! He wasn't heading for the door. His feet were betraying him! He was headed straight for Foster.

*Mutiny! Mutiny!*

Foster looked up from the newspaper and smiled as Chip approached. Well, now there was no slipping away. He had been spotted, and Foster's smile was like a line cast. Chip had been snagged and was being drawn in.

*Really?* Chip thought. *A fishing analogy? You've never been fishing in your life.*

"Coach," Foster said. "Have a seat." He gestured to the seat opposite him.

Chip did as he was asked. It was strange for Chip to see Foster outside of the school environment and in casual wear. This was only the second time Chip had seen him in anything but his preacher pants. He found it a bit shocking. Kind of like when he first saw a grade-school teacher outside of class: *they have a life?*

Foster without his preacher pants was the sexiest thing Chip had ever seen.

"Listen," Chip said. "I want to apologize for making a ruckus in church the other day. I didn't mean to... I was distracted."

"Don't worry about it. There was no ruckus made. In fact, I should thank you. I think you woke a few people up who were being lulled to sleep by my sermon."

*How could anyone shut their eyes around you?*

"So you weren't irritated?"

Foster took a bite from his muffin. "Of course not." He studied Chip. Chip liked how Foster studied him. Like there was a realization dawning, in a good way.

"You say that now, because you have a muffin in your hand."

Foster laughed. "What?"

"It's a proven fact that a man cannot be mad with a muffin in hand. It's in some book I read."

"Muffins take the mad away?"

# Simple Men

---

63

“You *cannot* be mad with a muffin.” He took a big bite of his own and watched his charm work on Foster.

Foster took another sizeable bite of his muffin, a playful look cast in his eyes. “You know, you may be right.”

“I know I am. I’m a muffin connoisseur. I love muffins.” His grin acknowledged the innuendo. “All the world’s problems could be solved with a basket full of muffins.”

“But some people don’t like muffins,” the chaplain countered.

Chip stopped chewing. He was confused. “I don’t know where I was headed with that analogy. Sorry.”

Foster laughed for real this time. Chip loved Foster’s real laugh. It was pleasant and light, not like the boisterous bellows of most of the guys he associated with. Not like Lenny, who sounded like a horse choking on an apple.

“Seriously, though.” Chip held up what was left of his muffin. “Muffins are great.”

“I agree. Wholeheartedly,” said Foster. “So are doughnut holes.”

It was at that point, while nearly choking on a chocolate chip, that Chip knew he was in love.

IT HAD been a bit uncomfortable at first. After the kiss that didn’t happen, neither Jason nor Brad seemed to know how to be around each other. There was hardly a word spoken. But at some point while watching *Jeopardy!*—a game show that brought their competitive edges out, even if Jason always won—Jason decided it

was enough and happily shelved the memory away in favor of their friendship. He would only think on what might have been in his bed or when he was alone. He was used to that. He was good at that.

The afternoon sun shone through his dorm window as he lay with his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling in deep thought. He replayed the scene again and again in his head. Why didn't Brad want to kiss him? Brad wasn't worried what people thought of him, not even his older brothers. He had once worn a pink shirt home for Christmas, and Jason had seen him deflect his brother's derision with ease and come out the victor. Jason had initially felt bad about dyeing all of Brad's clothes pink, but seeing how Brad had handled it had been something of a turning point in his estimation of his friend.

If it wasn't other people, if it wasn't what they thought, then it must be Jason himself that caused Brad to refrain from kissing him. There must be something about *him* that Brad did not like. The thought gave Jason stomach flips. He rolled onto his side, adjusting himself back into comfort.

Adjustment. That's what his life came down to in the end. He had learned to adjust at an early age. His mother was an alcoholic, not abusive really to anyone but herself. But still, this required Jason to be an adult at a very young age. He had no childhood. Not like everyone else he knew. At eight, he had been putting his gin-soaked mother to bed. At eighteen, he had been getting her out of jail. He was a sober child in every way. His father had not there to help, dealing with the family business most weekdays and staying away on the weekends. Jason had never really known his father. He had found that, as he grew, he really didn't care to know anything more about the man than he did. It was a mystery to him why he was



# Simple Men

---

65

given the business before his dad died. They'd had no real relationship before that.

When he got to Verona—he had struggled with leaving his mother behind, but it was she who had finally convinced him to go—he had been expecting his life to be very much the same as it had been. Life was a serious deal. Then he'd met Brad, and Brad... well, Brad had let loose the prankster within. Every bit of pent-up mischief had been unlocked, untethered, and unbound. These last couple of years with Brad had been the best Jason had ever known.

So why didn't they kiss?

Maybe it was just infatuation, Jason thought. Maybe he was reading too much into things. But then, that wouldn't explain the look in Brad's eyes or the feeling behind the kiss in the shower. There's a different feel behind a kiss when it's just play and when it's real. Jason knew this because all of his kisses before Brad had been "just play."

The doorknob jiggled, and Brad came into the room, back from class. He threw his books to the floor. "What's up, bro? Getting some shut-eye?"

"Just a bit."

"Mind some company?" And before Jason could respond, Brad jumped into the bed with him. The box springs would someday give out under those jumps.

They lay there together until soon enough they were both asleep. This was the type of comfort Jason wanted for the rest of his life. Like the kiss, a life without expectation but bound for excitement.

AFTER the coffee shop, where they sat and talked for two hours, Foster and Chip each bought a cappuccino and walked back to campus together. There was no discussion as to whether they would. They just got up and went as if it were the plan all along. They both had things they should have been doing, but they shrugged those duties off for a walk about the circumference of the college. The day was beautiful, and a feeling of calmness settled onto them both. They discussed their fields of study and their families, favorite films and music. Chip was aghast that Foster didn't like *Gladiator*. They discussed small, unimportant things just because they wanted to keep walking.

As the afternoon slid into dusk, the campus became quiet. Students went in for dinner or to study, and the late summer bugs began to chirp. They walked near the bluff above the river and stood there, talking and watching the placid water change colors beneath a fading sky. The air was clean and refreshing, and their laughter was easy and honest. They began to talk of weightier issues. Of past relationships and mistakes.

"So you didn't even suspect he was seeing this Amish kid?" Chip was taken aback at first by the upfront way in which Foster spoke. It was completely open. There was no "By the way, I'm gay." He just went right into it as if there was no need for that particular explanation. Assumptions split asunder.

"I guess it was a bit naïve of me. I've always been very trusting." Foster took a sip from his cup, and they continued walking. The last of the lightning bugs flitted about.

"Well, it's not a terrible quality. It's just not a very safe one these days. Were you in love with Whatshisname?"

# Simple Men

---

67

“Barry. Yes, I think so. He was all I knew of it. I’m afraid I was never much of a Lothario; I never dated or went out much. Still, I was knocked on my butt when it happened. You think someone adores you, they tell you as much, and then....”

“You get an Amish kid in the face.”

“Exactly.”

“And you haven’t dated since?”

“No,” Foster said. “Why? Are you asking?” He smiled, making Chip speechless and seeking solace in the last gulp from his cup.

They walked for a bit, quiet around a turn that took them away from the river and back toward the library and science buildings. A few more students were out now, on their ways to this or that. It was a weekday, so parties were rare. The sky gave everything that blue gleam of dreams.

“What about the chaplain thing? Aren’t there rules about dating and... being gay?”

“None that I’d follow. I believe you have to go where your heart leads you, and my heart, for better or worse, was pointing me to Barry.”

They stopped at an old, misshapen tree. It was forked, one fork jutting more or less straight up, and the other bowed to the side and curved as if it were a seat. Chip swung himself behind it and looked at Foster from the other side.

“And you?” Foster said. “Where have your romantic foibles led you?”

“Well, I’ve never been with a man. Not really. I’ve never had a desire to until...” He caught himself and took a drink from his now-empty cup.

“I’m not surprised. You don’t put off a vibe to me.”

“I don’t?” Was this a good thing or a bad thing? Truth be told, Chip was interested in pursuing something with Foster, but if Foster didn’t think there was a vibe there, how could he?

“From what Lynn has told me, you’re quite the ladies’ man.”

Chip swung back around to Foster’s side of the tree. “You know we’re on a break, right? Me and Lynn.”

“She told me. Sorry.”

“I think it’s for the best. I’m not what she needs right now.”

“Is she what you need?”

All Chip could reply was “No.” The sky was dark now, and the lamps flickered on, casting a pleasant glow all around. Foster’s face was shadowed beautifully, and the lights reflected in his eyes. It was somewhat hypnotizing. Chip managed to speak through it, though. “I mean, I love women. I love the way they look, the way they feel, but....”

“No one said you didn’t.” Foster, too, was lost in the way the night sculpted Chip’s face, like a statue of some honored athlete in ancient times. His eyes were deep and focused.

“Said what?”

“You didn’t....” Foster realized the train of thought was lost. Neither of them knew what they were talking about. Foster forgot his need to please, his need to be a good listener. For the first time since childhood, he went for what he desired and kissed Chip. What

# Simple Men

---

surprised him more than anything was that Chip kissed him back just as passionately. The two cappuccino cups dropped to the ground, and the men held tight to one another.

For Chip, this was an experience that forced him to redefine what he thought his life would become. If he could fall in love with this man, this lovely, gorgeous man, then who knew what was possible? Whole new realities opened up before him, and suddenly life didn't seem so monotonous and routine.

“Thank you,” Chip whispered as they pulled apart.

Foster gave an uncertain grin. “You’re welcome?”

“Never mind. I was just.... That was nice. Can we do it again?”

And they did. By this time, however, more of the student body was roaming about and, though the shade of the tree hid them somewhat, they reluctantly stopped their romantic interlude.

“I need to get back,” Foster said. “Things to do.” He was in a bit of shock at what had quite unexpectedly happened today, but a good kind of shock. Like morphine. The chaplain walked away, turning back now and then. Chip waved every time Foster turned back around.

Chip said nothing, though. He was left with the goofiest of grins. His world was now officially upside down, yet he was okay with that. He stayed under the tree for some time after Foster left. Long enough for others to see him and say hello. He knew he looked like a blissed-out frat boy, but this was so much more than that. If he had known this feeling back in his college days, he doubted if he would have ever graduated.

FOSTER'S walk back to his campus apartment was spent staring up at the sky. The stars were out, blanketing the sky in a way he had never seen when he had lived in the city with Barry. Here at the college there was no obstruction, blaring lights, or suffocating smog to impair one's view of the night sky. Everything was clear.

Foster felt unbelievably hopeful and content. Kissing Chip was strange in that he had not given a second thought to the coach before today and had not dared think of a romance with him until tonight. His love life had flatlined, and he had thought it would stay that way for a while. But he had lunged at Chip like a tiger, possessed by some other force, and now things had changed. His heart was pumping again.

*Calm down, he told himself. You felt a similar high with Barry when you first met, remember? Don't get carried away. Just take it slow. Take it glacial.*

But he wanted to tell someone. His heart would burst if he didn't. But who? Who could he tell that would even care? The "go to" person in any other situation would be Lynn. He drew his cell phone from his jeans pocket to dial, but then he remembered: Lynn had just been dating Chip.

What would Lynn say about all of this? Foster's guilt shadowed his night. Whatever high he had just been on slunk away, and he continued walking, now with his head bowed and his hands in his pockets.

CHIP practically skipped away from the tree. He felt as if he had, anyway. His steps were as light as he could remember. If he chose to break into a gallop, not even his bad knee (an old football injury) would bring him down. He planned to call Foster and set up a date. He guessed dates with other men worked the same as those with women. How much difference could there be?

Halfway into the short drive to his apartment in town, excited and unable to wait until the next day, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed Foster—they had exchanged numbers in the course of the evening. It took a couple of rings, but the chaplain answered cheerily.

Chip wasted no more time. “Would you like to go out?”

The lights from the houses and cars that he passed on the short drive felt like anticipating eyes. Like an audience.

There was a slight hesitation in which Chip thought he would burst into tears if he was refused, but then Foster said, “S-sure. I would love that.”

Chip let out an audible sigh of relief. “Great! How about this weekend? Maybe that play the theater troupe is performing. Then maybe dinner... or we can do dinner before. It doesn’t matter.”

He made a mental note: *No garlic!*

“That sounds great,” Foster said.

Roused by his victory, Chip wanted to get off the line as soon as possible so that Foster couldn’t change his mind. They said quick goodbyes and then hung up. Chip felt goose bumps down the length of his neck and arms. The sensation made him laugh.

FOSTER sat down in the used recliner in his apartment and stared at the cell phone. *How strange*, he thought. *For this to be happening here and now, after I'd given up.*

And he thought of Lynn and how he would need to tell her. *But why? What if this goes no further? Besides, they're on a break, right?*



## Chapter Four

BRAD was balancing himself on the hind legs of his chair. The lecture was deathly boring. When he had signed up for England in the Age of Witchcraft, he had been expecting something fun. “Like dragons and shit,” he had explained to Jason. But this was nothing but lectures and history. He couldn’t bullshit his way through a history test. History was bullshit. Done. Decided upon. Thank goodness he was in the back of the class by the window. He could look out onto the quad a story below and let his mind drift. And with the windowsill right there, he even had something to steady himself on if he did lose his balance during his desk chair acrobatics. Trevor Moore, who sat at the front of the class, had tried to balance on his chair legs once and had fallen right over. Brad had thought it was the funniest thing he had ever seen. He’d laughed about it for weeks.

“What a fucking douche!” he had told Jason.

Brad studied the quad. The professor—a boring man with boring hair—spoke in monotone as he marked up the blackboard. Brad spotted Jason down below, one leg up on a bench as he tied his shoelaces. Brad loved Jason’s bend. It was like a tree in a windstorm, one that would never break. Jason would have made a great skateboarder, Brad thought. He had the look for it: the long hair, the

worn T-shirts, the loose and free clothes. Brad wanted to call out to his friend and nearly whistled. Just then, however, something else caught Jason's attention so that he stood up from his lovely bend.

Brad bristled with jealousy when he saw who it was: Brock O'Connell, a theater major who didn't hide his crush on Jason. Even at parties, as Jason stood with Brad, Brock would flagrantly flirt. Underneath, Brad growled, but that's all he could do, right? He couldn't directly say, "*Touch him again and I'll chew your arm off.*" Brock was always touching Jason's arm a bit too long or smiling a bit too delicately at him.

Brad clutched at the end of his desk, wanting to rip it off the frame. He couldn't hear what Brock and Jason were talking about, but Jason was laughing and Brock seemed encouraged by this, all touchy and theatrical.

Brad's leg began to tremble. He had to get down there. He had to bust up that conversation. Who knew what Brock was saying! He could be trying to weasel himself into a date. There was no way Brad was going to let that happen. Every time Brock touched Jason, Brad felt a shudder of rage.

He excused himself from class to head to the bathroom. To all the other students it looked like an emergency; he scattered loose papers in his wake. He bypassed the restroom, however, and ran down the stairs as fast as he could. When he came charging out of the front door of the lecture hall, breathless, Jason was standing there alone looking at him, his books at his side. Brad slowed his pace.

"Don't you have class?" Jason asked. He looked blameless and slightly amused.

“Yeah... I need a break.” Brad fumbled for the right words. “Hey... uh... who was that? I mean, did Brock want anything? What were you talking about?” His nervous inquiries were only exacerbated by his heavy breathing and awkward stance of hands on hips in a failed attempt at carefree.

“Nothing much. I was thinking about trying out for a play. He e-mailed me about it. Said I might be right for the part.”

“Really? Why? I mean, maybe a play... maybe you shouldn’t, you know.”

“Why shouldn’t I? I’ve got the chops. You said so yourself last year when I was in that production of *Candide*.”

“Well, I mean, sure you got the chops. You’re great! Better than those assholes in the theater department. But do you really want to spend all that time with Brock? You’ll break his heart when he discovers you don’t have feelings for him. You’ll break his little theatrical heart!”

Jason laughed. “Since when do you care about Brock O’Connell’s heart, theatrical or not?”

Brad stood stupefied. He had no idea what to say. If it were anybody else, he’d just slug them, and that would be the end of it. They’d do exactly what he wanted them to do.

After a minute, Jason shook his head, an oblique smile appearing. “Go back to class, dude,” he said. “You need the marks.” He turned and started walking away.

“Okay,” Brad called after him, still standing with his hands on his hips. “I’ll talk you out of it later.”

Jason waved him off. Of course, Jason had had no intention of acting in the play. He had no intention of stringing Brock O'Connell along, either. This was a test. An investigatory effort. Jason knew that Brad was in class; he knew Brad would be daydreaming and looking out the window; and he knew that if he timed things just right, he could get an answer to a nagging question. Some kind of assurance. And he had gotten it. Not in words, but in action. He grinned happily as he walked back to the dorm.

FOSTER swept the wood floor of the chapel. Knotty pine, it was called. A bit subversive-sounding for a house of worship. It had been carpeted once, he'd heard, but then one of those freak Midwest thunderstorms had thrown a tree through the roof, and they'd had to replace everything. They'd ripped the carpet up but then had forgotten about replacing it.

There was a family of some type of bird living in the now-unused wood stove. Their fluttering kept Foster company as he swept. He felt a bit like a character in an old film, sweeping up his chapel and giving sage advice to wayward women or mischievous orphans. That's all he needed: a wayward woman or a mischievous orphan. He wouldn't be much help to them. After the previous evening, he was feeling quite wayward and mischievous himself.

"Hey, Foster." Lynn's voice startled him. She stood in the doorway, the light streaming in behind her. At first, he imagined she had come to challenge him about Chip. But that was ridiculous for two reasons: she wouldn't have known about it unless Chip had told her, and she wasn't the confrontational sort. That didn't make Foster feel any better, though.

She came in and collapsed onto a pew as if it were a sofa in a therapist's office. Foster sat down beside her, the broom held between his legs and his head resting on the broomstick. "I tried calling Chip last night," she said. "I don't know why, but I did. He didn't answer."

Foster felt a gnawing in his stomach. He remembered Chip's phone ringing a couple of times, but Chip never answered it. At least one of those times had to be Lynn.

"I assume he was out with some other woman." Foster couldn't tell if there was anger in her voice or not. He was not well-versed in anger. "I'm fine with that, I guess. I mean, I should be, right?" She looked to him for corroboration.

"Well... you said it was okay to date others, didn't you?"

"Yes. I just didn't think he'd be dating so soon. In all honesty, I wanted to be the one to date someone else first."

"So, find someone. It doesn't need to be Mr. Perfect. Just find a guy to take you out for a night on the town." *Is this supposed to make you feel better about things, Foster? She's your friend. You must tell her!*

Instead he asked, "What about that new science professor?"

"Luke." She brightened. "Yes. I introduced myself. He's very sweet. Very quiet, though. But that in itself is sexy, don't you think?"

She sat up as if she had come upon an epiphany, but then, her eyes always had that look of sudden realization. "I'll do it. I'll ask him out. Or I'll try to get him to ask *me* out."

"I think that's a great idea."

“It really is. Why should Chip have all the fun? I’m going to ask Luke out.”

She stood and bent down to give Foster a kiss on the forehead. “Thanks, darling! You always know just what to say.”

With that, she cheerfully left the chapel. Foster remained seated in the very pew that Chip had caused the ruckus in days earlier. He leaned heavily against the broomstick and peered up at the white cross that hung at the front of the chapel. He bit his tongue from saying anything sarcastic.

It was noon. He knew this not because of some divine message from the cross, but because of the bell that rang at the top of the campus center directly across the quad. Foster leaned the broom against the wall so that it rested angled on a pew and crossed the lawn. He wasn’t hungry but thought it was best to put something in his stomach anyway. The school always had fresh fruit. That would do fine.

The dining hall was crowded, as was typical at noon. Not many people headed directly for the fruit bar, though, preferring the unhealthier choices, so Foster was able to get to it quickly. There were bananas and peaches and little cubes of cantaloupe. There were other more exotic choices as well, but Foster picked up one of the bright red apples. A person could nearly see their reflection in the sheen off these apples.

Foster studied it as he waited to pay. Apples made him think of the Garden of Eden, of original sin. All sorts of *tsk tsk*-ing from above. God seemed to like to do that. To offer temptation and then forbid anyone from touching it. Foster remembered as a child hearing his father say that even thinking of a woman with lust in the heart was a sin. He remembered being relieved that he never had an

# Simple Men

---

issue with it. But then, if you listened to the morons who thought they knew best, God had found other ways to chide *him*. God could be a real jerk sometimes.

As he made his way toward the dining hall door, he was called back by a booming voice hidden behind the crowd. Chip stood and waved him over to a table where he sat with Katie Hammond. Foster was nervous and excited by the invitation.

“Have a seat,” Chip said. Katie smiled and kicked out the chair opposite her for his use. She was faithful to her patented look of ponytail and jogging suit.

“I can’t. I have to get back to the chapel. But thanks.”

There was a recognizable awe between Chip and Foster. Katie saw it. They didn’t take their eyes off one another. Not for a second.

Foster ran his fingers over the smooth skin of the apple. “I just saw Lynn,” he said. “She stopped in while I was over there.”

Chip’s face didn’t change. “What did she have to say?”

Foster decided against saying anything more about what Lynn had said. “Nothing really. She just stopped in to say hello.”

“Since Caveman here isn’t going to introduce us properly,” Katie said, “I’m Katie Hammond.”

“This is Katie Hammond,” Chip echoed.

“I hear you’re Katie Hammond.” Foster smiled as he offered his hand.

“I like you,” Katie said as a means of sizing him up. “I like him,” she said to Chip. “I approve.”

This took both of the men off guard, and they looked to one another and back to her in rapid confusion. She pretended not to see their slight hysteria and continued eating her fruit salad.

“Is that all you’re having?” Chip gestured to Foster’s hand. “An apple?”

“I don’t eat a lot. Bad dieting habits. But you....” He looked down at the coach’s full plate. It wasn’t just full; it was piled high with macaroni and cheese, four different types of meat, onion rings, and even more food underneath that.

“I work it off with the guys,” Chip said, somewhat embarrassed.

“I’m not judging. I’m jealous.”

It wasn’t a true compliment, but even still, Chip went beet red. Katie cackled aloud.

“I better be going,” Foster said. “Do you think we could get together again? I really enjoyed our conversation last night.”

Before Foster had even finished the sentence, Chip was answering “Yes.” His big heart went *boom boom boom*.

Chip and Katie sat silently for a bit as Foster left the dining hall. The sound of the masticating student and faculty around them became audible to him again after being muffled by Foster’s voice. Chip practically forgot Katie was even there until she slapped him on the thigh.

“You?” She was laughing.

“What?”

“Go get him, tiger!”



# Simple Men

---

81

“No. I’m not... I don’t think....”

“Bullshit, baby. I never saw such a bad case of twitterpation in my life. Now eat your lunch. Something tells me you’ll need the energy.”

THE team was surprised when Coach Arnold let them out of practice early. They had been playing like crap all year, only winning one game so far. Yet the coach had seemed to be in a great mood. He hadn’t yelled in his eardrum-busting style all afternoon. Even when one of the guys had clearly fucked up, Coach Arnold had just smiled and shaken his head as if he were amused by a small child’s clumsy mistake.

“What’s up with him?” Jason said to Brad.

“I don’t know. But I like it.”

Since they really had nothing to do with their afternoon, and neither Brad nor Jason was the lounging-around type, they decided to head for the fitness center. They had plenty of energy to release, after all. All *types* of caged energy.

A few of the other guys had the same idea. Trevor Moore was there with a couple of the more popular ball players who only suffered his presence because his father was a decently famous football player. Trevor lived off that fame. Without it, he’d be at the bottom of the well.

Jason packed the weights on the bench press for Brad. Brad could always do much more than Jason when it came to weightlifting, so when they worked out together, there was

significant downtime in between sets while changing the plates. Sometimes it was more of a social get-together than an actual workout.

“I was thinking,” Jason said. “Coach Arnold’s been in a great mood lately. It’s very unlike him. Do you think he’s fallen in love or something? I’m not a fan of weddings. I hope he doesn’t ask me to be in his.”

Brad lay on the bench. “Could be. You think him and Professor Hewes are back together?”

“I’ll tell you what I think.” Jason leaned over the bench from behind Brad. “Did you see him and the new chaplain today at lunch?”

Brad sat up immediately and turned to face Jason. “You think him and the coach....”

Jason shrugged. “There was *something* there. And the coach went all goofy and red. It was the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen. Coach Arnold isn’t phased by anything. But he was sure phased in the dining hall.”

“In a good way?”

“It wasn’t bad.”

Of course, Trevor, being at the next station and never missing a chance to up his stock in the eyes of the more popular jocks, couldn’t help but comment on this situation. Trevor did that a lot, wading in on conversations that didn’t concern him. It was one of the things that annoyed Brad most about him. “You’re fucked up,” Trevor said. This, at the very least, enraged Brad. No one was allowed to call Jason “fucked up” but him. “Coach isn’t gay,” Trevor continued. “You guys think everyone is gay. The whole world would be gay if you had your way.”

Trevor did a little dance, some stereotypical fey thing involving jazz hands and swaying hips. It encouraged laughs—not hearty ones, mind you—from the other guys.

Brad rose, his fists already clenched. “I will obliterate you if you say another fucking word.”

“Relax, Meathead,” Trevor said. “You and your gal here can still be together. I’ll vote for your marriage.”

It was at this point that something brand new happened. It was expected that Brad would lose his temper and get both Trevor and himself kicked out of the fitness center for the rest of the day. Brad had an outrageous temper, and Trevor knew what buttons to push. But before that could happen, Jason’s fist connected firmly on Trevor’s face with a loud pop. Trevor cursed as blood spurted from his mouth.

Everyone was shocked by the display of violence from Jason, but none more so than Brad. He was dumbfounded. Blood streamed off Trevor’s face and puddled on the floor around him. After Brad’s initial shock wore off, he felt another sensation arise: pride. Jason had stood up for him as he would have done for Jason. His honor had been defended.

Trevor was sobbing. “Dude!” he screamed as he ran for the locker room. The popular guys, their eyes shrinking from saucers to... smaller saucers, began howling in honest laughter.

“Who knew you had it in ya?” one of them said.

*Indeed*, Jason agreed. He turned to Brad, who was beginning to grin as well, and they all laughed.

Brad was on a wave of giddiness for a while after. He couldn’t sleep through the night and was even more insufferably loud than

usual. Jason had a test the next morning, so he needed the sleep. Brad spent the night in other people's rooms, whoever was awake. He was sloppy drunk by two in the morning, celebrating something he didn't know how to identify. Jason came out into the hall a few times during the night and shook his head in faux irritation. Brad would see him and smile while toasting a beer to him.

Around noon the next day, after the drunken haze had started to wane—which took some time, being that Brad had drunk his last beer around six in the morning—Brad found himself wandering around the quad. His original intent was to head to class, but then an issue began to weigh heavily on him. If things with Jason were headed where he hoped they were, he would have to change. Jason was quiet and reserved for the most part, unless his rowdy inner demon was brought out of hiding. Brad *was* a demon by all accounts; Jason was a softer guy. Brad, having been raised the way he was, knew nothing of soft. He knew loud and rough. He was good at loud and rough. But he knew nothing of soft.

His feelings were all mixed up and confusing. He wanted to be with Jason, but there were so many things saying that might just be a bad idea. There was no longer a question of if Jason felt something for Brad. The kiss Brad had fled from was proof enough. But how long would it be before Brad's own loud monstrosity started to grate on Jason? He had to learn to be softer, gentler. But was that even possible? A suffocating sense of inferiority combined with his strong desire and soon Brad was going in circles, figuratively and literally. He was circling a drain, and this feeling would make his head explode if he didn't talk about it.

Looking up from the sidewalk, he noticed he was directly in front of the chapel. He wasn't Catholic, nor was he a religious man at all, but he shrugged. "What the hell? Talk to God." And he went

in. If Jason was right, the new chaplain would be sympathetic to his plight.

The chapel was empty when he walked in. The floor creaked as all old wood floors do. Everything seemed to carry a small echo: the close of the door, each of his footsteps. He called for the chaplain and soon after, Foster appeared in his office door, to the right of the pulpit. He smiled with such pleasantness that Brad immediately forgot any misgivings he had of confiding in the man.

“I need to confess,” Brad said.

Foster was confused. “To what?”

“Just... confess, you know. Like they do in the movies.” His eyes were blurry and red from no sleep and lots of drinking. He wondered if he was standing up straight.

“Okay. I can do that. Are you Catholic?”

“No. Does that matter?”

“It doesn’t. But there is a school counselor at the campus center. That might be a better route.”

“No.” Brad had never trusted counselors or shrinks. “I want to confess to you. Is there a booth or something?”

“Normally, there would be, but since we cater to all faiths, that would be construed as favoritism.”

“Oh.” Brad looked around somewhat nervously. He was losing courage.

Foster recognized this and offered a solution. “Why don’t you stand just inside my office door, and I’ll stand out here. We’ll leave the door cracked, and then you can confess. It’s around lunch, so it’s

doubtful anyone will be coming in. We don't even have to follow the rules. Just talk to me."

Brad liked this idea and agreed at once, placing his books in a pew and taking his place in the chaplain's office. The chaplain stationed himself on the other side. "So how does this work?"

"Just tell me what's on your mind."

"Well, Father... er, Sir, I think I'm in love."

"That's wonderful!"

"With another dude...."

"Still wonderful."

No judgments. Brad let out a huge sigh of relief. "It's my best bud, Jason. I feel like I'm going to explode if I can't be with him. I mean, I'm with him all the time, but just as friends. I want to be more, you know?"

No response, but Brad felt like he was getting some definite understanding from the chaplain's side of the door. It encouraged him to continue.

"When he brushes my hand, I feel all hot and tingly. I dream about him too. And these are hot dreams, Father. Like, really hot. I wanna... do things to him."

Foster cleared his throat with a tiny bit of apprehension. "What kind of things?"

"Lusty things." His voice grew into a boom that caused Foster to step back. "I wanna fuck him. I wanna fuck him hard! And I want him to fuck me."

"I see." A mousey, frightened response.

Brad tried to rein in his voice. “I’ve always felt different toward him than toward other guys, but I thought that was just because we were such good friends. Then, last year in wrestling practice... well, wrestlers constantly get hard-ons. It just happens. There’s usually nothing to it. All that friction is going to cause some excitement, you know?”

Cough. “Yes.”

“But last year, Jason and me both came right in our practice suits at the same time, right as I pinned him. Like some porno. It was awesome, but it kind of freaked us both out too. Since then, there have been other things that have happened, but you get the gist, right?”

“I do.”

“But it’s not just the physical. There’s something else. Something deeper I can’t put a name on. It draws me to him. I want to be with him in every way you can be with someone. I want to be good enough for him.”

Brad took Foster’s silence as an answer. Like when a shrink would be quiet so as to let the nutter on the couch come to the conclusion for themselves. Brad liked this tactic. It made him feel in control of the situation. Maybe shrinks weren’t so bad after all. “Shew!” Brad said after a moment. “Thanks, Father. I needed to get that off my chest to someone.”

He stepped out of the chaplain’s office and gave Foster a friendly swat on the shoulder. “You’re the best,” he said.

Foster grinned as best he could, given the erotic tale he had just been told, and waited until Brad had left the chapel to sit on a

pew and breathe. “He should write that stuff down. He’d make a small fortune.”

The chapel had suddenly become unbearably warm. Foster pulled at his collar, and he imagined the wrestling scenario, except it was Chip and himself rather than Brad and Jason. “Lustful thoughts,” he chided.

He took another breath and strolled outside. The cool air did him good, taking his mind off desires that were as of yet unattainable. He strolled around the quad and then toward the bluff at the river. It was a beautiful day, and he was able to clear his mind as he stood and looked out onto the water. The cooler autumn weather was just coming in, and a hint of color appeared in the tree line on both sides of the river. There wasn’t a single watercraft in sight.

Since he had arrived at Verona College, it had always surprised Foster that more students didn’t choose to have their lunches on the bluff instead of inside the imposing dining hall, but he hadn’t yet seen one of them out here. He supposed it was all very easy to take for granted. When you get used to a thing, no matter how wonderful, its beauty becomes somewhat camouflaged by the rest of the world.

When Foster first saw Chip jogging toward him as he stood there, sweaty-shirted and short-shorted (with those shorts, how *could* he be heterosexual?), Foster’s first inclination was to reach out for him and feel his embrace again. This was mostly due to the lingering bits of lust still in his system gelling with the soul-cleansing air around him. He refrained from so blatant an act of attraction, however, and simply waved. Chip stumbled a bit but then



# Simple Men

---

regained his footing and smiled broadly as he built up his speed to get to where Foster now stood.

“Out of the chapel, huh?” Chip breathed heavily, placing his hands on his hips. Foster loved the look of him. The old T-shirt clung to him greedily, and Foster could not fault it. Chip wiped his forehead. He was relaxed, or at least, more relaxed than he had yet been around Foster.

“Yes. It was getting a bit stuffy in there.”

“From what I hear, God’s a big fella, and that’s a pretty small church.”

“True. And why aren’t you filling your trough today? It’s lunch time.”

“I ate earlier. Too much, maybe. It’s harder to keep in shape as I get older.” He rubbed his belly as if it were anything but flat and solid. “So, do we eat before or after the play tomorrow evening?”

“How about we meet in front of the theater and then grab something after? Maybe at a small pub?”

“I know a few.” Chip stretched, doing his darnedest to show off his biceps in the process. It was not lost on Foster, who was already feeling flushed and hot again. “I can take you to a good hole in the wall.”

“No glory holes, please?” Foster teased. Chip didn’t get the reference but laughed anyway.

From somewhere above them came a sharp barking noise, like an agitated bird. “What is that?” Foster wondered.

“We must be pissing some squirrel off, standing too near his tree.”

“A squirrel?” Foster had never heard a squirrel make any noise before, let alone a bark. It sounded too angry a thing to come from such a slight creature.

“Yeah. They’re angry little things. I hate squirrels.”

Foster thought the remark humorous. “How can anyone hate squirrels? They’re so cute, so harmless.”

“Get nailed in the head by one, and you’ll hate them too.” Foster looked at him with doubt and confusion. “Oh yeah. They wing their acorns and whatnots right at your head if you piss them off.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Just wait. The squirrels on this campus are way too comfortable around folk. When you piss one off, it’ll club you in the head.” Chip was clearly enjoying imparting this bit of knowledge to Foster. He loved seeing Foster’s eyes light up with amazement at the new revelation. “Honestly. I saw three or four of them gang up on old Wendell once. I had to come to his rescue.”

“Now you’re definitely pulling my leg!”

“Yeah. I was with that last bit. Too far, huh?”

“Just a bit.” Foster winked.

The squirrel barked again, another warning. “I guess we should move,” Chip said. “Bossy!” he hollered up at the tree. “I need to get back to the fitness center and take a shower anyway. I have some drills to run through with a few of the guys in an hour. See you tomorrow at eight?”

“Sounds great.”

# Simple Men

---

“Fantastic,” Chip said as he sped away, giving the chaplain a good spank on the rear in retreat. Foster watched the coach move off even as he cupped his own ass.

The squirrel barked louder than before. Foster was now wary of being conked on the head by a tossed nut. “I’m going! I’m going!”

CHASED off by the barking of an irate squirrel, Foster made his way contentedly back toward the quad and the chapel. Less pleasant thoughts of the secret he was keeping from Lynn threatened certain moments, but he chose not to think on that matter for the time being. He’d think of all of that after the date, after the night had ended. That would be the only fair way to surmise the situation. After tonight, he would know if there was indeed something to bring Lynn’s attention to at all. What if it went no further? Then he was doing all of this worrying for nothing.

Even then, he knew he was just buying his conscience more time.

The president’s house was beside the chapel but situated back from the quad so that it did not seem a direct addition to it. It was a large Georgian house, though not larger than the lecture halls that flanked it. There was a view to the river from the front of the house, and a large topiary that always reminded Foster of his trips to theme parks bushed up from the center of a red brick walkway. The back garden was a lovely place for breakfast, though none ever occurred there anymore. Wendell Hall’s wife had died almost a decade earlier, and his daughter lived a thousand miles away. Wendell did not like to eat alone. Somehow, it felt selfish.

Sometimes Foster would cut across the back garden to get to the chapel. Wendell had no problem with this. He didn't allow everyone that privilege, otherwise the garden would be a mess and he wouldn't be able to host the trustees' luncheons. But he liked Foster, and that was the only reasoning he needed. Wendell did not have many friends. When he found someone he liked, he hoped that they would accept certain privileges and he might find himself a visitor for a few minutes every other day. Such was what happened this afternoon.

As Foster cut through the garden, he saw Wendell at the cast-iron table in the center of the flowers and trees. Wendell was hoping to catch a friend as he sipped his tea. Foster thought it strangely charming and a bit predatory at the same time. *Wendell's Web*. The older man offered Foster a seat, and Foster accepted it graciously.

After studying Foster's face for a moment, Wendell took a sip of tea and then said, "You look like a man in love."

Foster was surprised by this summation. "Do I?"

"It's in the face. I can tell. I had that same face for forty years with my wife, Lucille. I always referred to it as the good side of insanity."

"She still made you crazy, your wife? After forty years?"

"Still does. I wake up every morning and look at her sweet face. There's a photo beside my bed of the two of us on the day I took this job. When you see that photograph, you'll see what I mean. I'm wearing the same 'good side of crazy' look that you've got right now."

# Simple Men

---

“Maybe I am falling in love.” Foster’s eyes floated about the garden for answers. An iron cherub played near a crumbling birdbath.

“Who’s the lucky girl? Is it that Lynn Hewes? She’s a dear thing, huh?”

Foster smiled, his eyes brought back to rest on the older man. “I think I might be falling in love with Coach Arnold.”

Blind confusion from Wendell. “Well, well, well, well.... That’s wonder. Does he feel the same? I thought he was....”

The poor man was practically seizing, but at least he was trying to show some support through his befuddlement. Through his years at the college, he’d most likely seen it all. Or thought he had.

“I believe so.”

Wendell took a deep breath, scowled in thought, and then nodded. “But you’ve been hurt before, right? And you don’t want to be hurt again.”

“I’m a bit scared, yes.”

“Do you know what happened to the chaplain here before you? He was a nice fellow. Nice enough, anyway. But aside from leading things in a religious manner, he kept to himself. He never went to many of the faculty functions. No one ever got to know him. He died on one of the pews in the chapel last spring.”

*No wonder they were replaced,* Foster thought.

“He died alone. His funeral was attended by only a handful of people. When they were cleaning out his office, they found all sorts of travel catalogs and lists of places he’d wanted to go. They even

found a pamphlet for one of those matchmaking cruise lines. He never did any of it. The poor man was stuck.”

“You’re saying I should take heed not to become like him.”

“No. I’m saying you should follow this thing with Coach Arnold through to wherever it goes. Do what you gay fellows do. You have to be willing to try. You have to be willing to face the fear every morning. To face the adventure of life. Are you?” It was a question posed in such a way it seemed genuine, not a teaching moment.

Foster did not want to be found dead on a pew some morning in the distant future. He couldn’t imagine dying alone. He could only see Chip. He realized he *was* ready to try. Even if it meant an eventual failure, he was ready to see where this *thing*, as Wendell had put it, might lead.

Wendell gave a start as if he had sat on a pin. “How rude of me!” he said. “Would you like some tea?”

“I’d love some.” Foster had never been a fan of tea.

THE next night the two nervous men met in front of the Lewis J. Sayers Theater as planned. They both arrived early and waited outside before going in and taking their seats. It wasn’t an awkward wait. There was something comforting about the silent moments between them. There would have been, even without the voices of the other theatergoers. Chip imagined it was something akin to what people who had been married to each other for decades felt.

# Simple Men

---

95

President Wendell Hall saw them and gave a smile of recognition from his seat. That was the only outside stare Chip noticed, though he was certain there were others. And why not? He had the best-looking date in the whole damn place.

The play—something called *The Diviners*—went largely unnoticed by Foster and Chip, although not because of the quality of the piece. Foster had heard it had won many awards, and he was certain it was worthy, but tonight he was paying more attention to the heat building between himself and his date. He wondered if those around them could feel it as well. How hot can a human body get before it bursts into flames or starts melting chairs?

All through the performance, Chip's fingers lightly touched Foster's. Foster dared not move his. He could feel the surge of warmth from Chip. He could feel Chip's fingertips tingling as if they were his own.

*Control your breathing, Foster. You don't want to sound like you're in heat in the middle of a theater performance. Remember the school you're at. These parents and trustees wouldn't hesitate to fire you. God! I'm on a date. I haven't been on a date in years. What do I do? I've forgotten how to act. Don't get yourself flustered. You have to speak to him later tonight. Stumbling over your words would be a sure sign of the screaming, hysterical little girl within.*

Seeing that Foster did not flinch away as he touched his fingers, Chip widened his legs as if stretching so that he might lean one against Foster's own. *Too far? Shit. Did I just go too far? He flinched. Why am I so damn aggressive? He might want to take it slow. Remember what he's been through, dumbass. He's been hurt by a guy just like me.... But he's not pulling away. I think he's even*

*leaning into my leg. Hot! Go for it! Grab his hand. Just hold it. Your palms aren't that sweaty.*

And he did. Slowly, he looked at Foster. The chaplain was staring at the stage but smiling at Chip. Foster gripped back, and Chip sighed happily. He'd try to watch the play now. He'd try, if only his anxious, inner adolescent gay boy would let him.

After the play finished, after Chip and Foster found their way silently out of the crush of the retreating crowd, their hands still warm and imprinted, they stepped out into the evening air. The theater shone white beneath the moonlight. Aside from the campus center, it was the most imposing structure on the quad.

"Where to now?" Foster asked.

"I know a place."

They didn't talk all the way there, but there was enough tension in the car to keep them smiling through the twenty-minute ride to Buck's Bar & Grill, the oldest tavern in the state. Chip decided a low-key hole in the wall was preferable to a trendy nightclub where they couldn't hear each other speak. He even made a joke about the "glory hole" quip Foster had made, having Googled it on his computer.

Buck's was as wide as an alleyway between buildings. To its left was an insurance office. To its right was an antique store that took up half the block. Scattered throughout the dark pub were familiar faces from the college: Katie Hammond was well on her way to hammered, Jason Jordan and Brad Park sat at the bar warding off female admirers, and other athletes made drunken guffaws with beer sloshing in hand. Some of these athletes Chip knew; they were his players. A few of them cast him and Foster curious glances. The pub had shotgun architecture, and Chip found a



# Simple Men

---

cozy nook away from most of the rowdy action and ordered a pitcher of beer from the put-upon waitress.

“You’re going to be getting a lot of those glances if you hang out with me,” Foster said, drawing Chip’s attention to a trio of ball players clustered and whispering in the opposite corner. The dark obscured their faces.

When Chip turned to look, the ball players immediately looked away. “I can handle those kids. I was one of them.”

“They’ll be whispering things. Coming up with rumors of things you’ve never done behind your back.”

“Some of them already do. Who cares? There are the good kids and the spoiled kids. A good coach can tell one from the other the first day of practice.”

The waitress came back with their pitcher, and Foster said, “So you’re telling me that Mr. Football doesn’t care about being labeled as a gay man by his players?”

“I’m telling you there’s nothing to label, because it’s not true. Not really.”

Foster’s heart sank a little. “Wait... you’re not gay?”

“I’ve never been attracted to a man in my life until you.” Chip took a drink. He was very relaxed about the whole thing. “All my life, I’ve never had a thought about being with a guy. Women are so much more attractive to me physically.”

“Thanks.”

Chip quickly fumbled to recover. “But then, I saw you and... I don’t know. It was like I was slapped real hard across the face. And

I liked it. I not only saw you as physically... stunning, but there was this draw. Something spiritual.”

Foster felt comforted and eased by this. “I can appreciate that.”

“I mean, with women—not Lynn, mind you—but with other women, I was kind of a whore. I can’t be that with you.”

Before Foster could say another word, Katie stumbled over to them, embracing Chip with one hand while grasping a beer firmly in the other. “Hey, ya big hunk!” she said. “Gimme a dance.”

“I’m here with Foster,” Chip said, amused.

“Foster, will you let me steal your hottie date away for a dance?”

“He’s all yours.”

“I’ll be right back,” Chip said as he was led to the dance floor, an area of the bar consisting of the four feet around an ancient jukebox playing songs from the 1970s. Katie danced like any heavily intoxicated person would dance: not well and in need of much support. It was clear Chip had danced with her before. He knew just when to catch her so that she wouldn’t—God forbid—spill a drop of her beer.

He was unable, however, to save her from tripping backward onto a table and collapsing the whole thing. The two sauced people at the table didn’t blame Katie for her foible, however, but one another instead. Soon a fight broke out, and the bar was in disarray for a few minutes. Chip shrugged at Foster, and Foster laughed. Chip and Katie snuck back to Foster under flying fists and beer mugs.

# Simple Men

---

99

When the time came to head home, neither of the two men had drunk very much. They had talked quite a bit and were relieved to find that their first conversation back at the coffee shop was not just a fluke. The ride home was filled with questions and personal histories. It was also a little longer than twenty minutes, being that Chip went way under the speed limit in order to stretch out their time together.

Chip walked Foster to the door of his apartment on campus. Like Lynn's, it had once been a single large house but was now separated to house faculty comfortably. Chip had no illusion that he would be invited inside. Chaplains, he realized, were still old-fashioned, no matter how young or progressive. "Do I get a second date?" he asked, standing under the front porch light.

"Yes. Absolutely." And Foster took the initiative to draw him in for a kiss. Chip wrapped him in a tight hold, and only a curious feral cat brought them out of it.

Foster stood at the door and waved as Chip drove off. The cat rubbed against his legs and purred, hoping to get some leftover loving. It had been a good night. But coupled with the delight of the evening, there existed the tiniest of gnawing dreads. A realization. He would now have no choice but to tell Lynn about his relationship—if that's what it was becoming—with Chip.

FROM their stools at the bar, Jason and Brad watched Coach Arnold and the chaplain leave together. Brad's eyebrow was already raised and doing a kooky dance when Jason turned back around to him. Brad popped a piece of popcorn into his mouth from the bowl in

front of them. That was the best thing about Buck's; the liquor was watered down, and they hadn't had a decent bartender in years, but the popcorn was the best in town.

"Do you think they're having The Sex?" Brad said. Another eyebrow nod accented the comment. "They looked like they were getting pretty chummy. I think they're gonna have The Sex."

"I don't know. Maybe." Jason gave it serious thought. "Who would be the bottom if they had The Sex? I mean, I couldn't see the coach taking it up the bum...."

"True. But he's a got a beefier ass than the chaplain. From what I hear, the beefier guys are always the bottoms. That's just what I hear." *Crunch, crunch.* "I wonder if he was hazed like us."

"You mean spanked?"

"Hey, hey, hey," Brad drunk-stuttered. "Remember when you had to spank me? That was weird, huh?"

Jason laughed, rubbing his eyes. "I guess. But everybody else had to do it too. You pissed the seniors off."

"I didn't do anything. What'd I do?"

"You're you. That's enough."

"Hey, man. Fuck you." He dropped a handful of popcorn into Jason's beer. "Still, you were, like, really into it. The spanking, I mean."

"Couldn't help it. It was like teasing JELL-O."

"JELL-O? Dude, I am all muscle."

# Simple Men

---

101

“Now, maybe. But then? You were kind of doughy.” Jason poked at Brad’s belly, like the Pillsbury Doughboy. Brad went along with it, squeaking with faux glee.

“Wanna spank me again?”

“What?”

“Nothing. I burped.” He belched for show.

“How do you not have a gal, Brad? You’re all class.”

“Ah, buddy. I love—” He stopped himself, terror-stricken, and, as if he was an actor in a badly written sitcom, he took a greasy handful of popcorn and shoveled it into his already full mouth. “Popcorn. I love popcorn.”

*You*, Jason thought. *Say: I love you.* It wasn’t that Jason absolutely needed to hear those particular words. The heart knows what it knows without pronunciation. But it felt like Brad was on the cusp of telling a truth for the both of them. Jason realized that, in every way, they were a couple. They were in a relationship. There was romance and trust and friendship and absolute adoration. For some reason, they just couldn’t name it aloud. Every guy around them was in a steady relationship with some girl, and they shouted it from their dorm rooms every night. But Brad and Jason couldn’t. They felt the ridiculous need to keep it all hush-hush. Yet, in all likelihood, they were a more devoted couple than any of the football stars and their sorority girlfriends.

Would it get easier when they got older? Would they be able to talk about it? To name it? Jason thought about the coach and Foster, how they had walked out the door together. Not in some cheesy, fawning way, but in an adult and assured way. *This is my man. I am*

his *man*. Jason wanted that. He knew he could have that if only they could get over this big unnamable hurdle.

The night went on. The pub emptied out until all who were left were the rambling town drunks and a handful of students, all too obliterated to drive their own cars back to campus. On such occasions, pledges came in handy. A call was placed and soon enough a fraternity underclassman showed up ready to ferry the inebriated home. The car was tiny, so there would be piling, and still there would need to be a second trip to get everyone. Brad had come up with the notion of someone riding in the trunk of the car, which, of course, was at once cited as brilliant.

“I’ll do it!” Trevor Moore said.

“No, you won’t,” Brad said. “You’ll have to take the next ride. Your stomach hurts.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

Brad belted him. “It does now.”

So Brad curled into the trunk, delighting in the giggles and laughs he heard from the other passengers in the car on the way back to campus. Every so often, he would hear Jason ask if he was okay.

“I’m a trouper, dude. I’ve slept in tighter places.”

## Chapter Five

FOSTER didn't want to wake up. He was struggling to hold on to the dream, the one where Chip was straddling his hips and, slowly and seductively, bending to kiss his lips. Foster felt the sexual rush as they kissed. This dream kiss was more than he had ever felt with Barry in real life. But the dream had to end. The day called, and he woke, his eyes glassy, his arms wide across the queen-size bed, twisted in the soft white sheets. Unlike many great dreams he had had in his life, he knew that he need not regret this one wasn't true. Because it *could* be true. He smiled at the thought.

He would tell Lynn today about Chip and himself. There was no sense in letting it linger like a bad plot device. She probably wouldn't mind anyway, he thought. Why would she? Chip was her history, not her present.

Or was he wrong? Was he still hers to claim no matter how long a time had passed?

The moment to tell her presented itself at lunch. Foster again ate very little. Lynn had a salad. He had been nervous and fidgety all day, going over possible scenarios, possible outcomes to their conversation. He prayed for guidance over the situation. None of his

mental scripts ended very well. Foster did not want to be the bad guy. How this whole situation twisted him in all directions!

Lynn was in a very good mood. Her skin was no longer irritated, having now had plenty of time to recover from Chip's facial scrubbing. In fact, she looked radiant. This only made Foster's task harder. Before he was able to broach the subject, however, Lynn, no longer able to keep whatever giddy news she had to herself, began speaking in an uninterrupted flow.

"You'll never guess what I did last night! Go on. Guess.... I went out with Luke. Professor Artridge. The cute science guy. Well, it's biochemistry, really. He told me a bit about it, but... well, science has never been my thing. In one ear and out the other, right? But, oh my God! Foster, he's perfect. He's absolutely perfect. And he has this lovely scent about him. I can't place it, but I've smelt it before."

"You went out... on a date?"

"Well, not a date as such. A date thingy. While everyone else was at the play, there were a handful of us who went to a lecture on some science mumbo jumbo. I just went because he told me about it and that he would be there." She pushed a huge forkful of salad into her tiny mouth and kept talking. "I guess it would have been interesting if I wasn't staring at him the whole time. Have you ever been in a situation where you're so distracted by someone that you can't pay attention to what you know you're supposed to?"

"Maybe."

"Well, it's kind of wonderful. It feels dishonest, but in a good way." She stood up quickly, as if she had forgotten something or someone had just told her that her seat was on fire. "Anyway, I need to go. Don't hate me. I'm meeting Luke so he can show me an



experiment he's been working on. I hope it doesn't explode in my face. Wish me luck!"

And she was off.

Of course, she would be dating. That's just the type of story Foster now saw himself a part of. He was in a romantic comedy, and it wasn't even that funny. At least, not to him. This was not a good turn of events at all. Sure, he was momentarily off the hook, but sooner or later he would need to tell her the truth, and then what? What foul, loathsome beast would he transform into in Lynn's eyes? The waiting would only make it worse. Foster's conscience would see to that. Despite his best efforts, he had become a plot device after all.

THE locker room was always a mess after practice. Coach Arnold liked the janitorial staff, so when he finished with his coaching and paperwork, he would always head into the smelly den and pick up what he had time for. Some janky bastard was always leaving his used jockstrap on the floor. That peeved Chip off to no end, but what could he do about it? He couldn't very well stand and watch the guys as they got undressed. He wished all of them would shower back at their dorms and frat houses. He supposed, though, that those facilities were in ill repair. He drew that supposition from his own days as a college ball player when one of the showers at his own fraternity was in such a bad state there was a decorated Christmas tree in it all year.

Jason Jordan was on a bench, pulling on his socks. Trevor Moore was combing his hair in the large mirrored wall. They were

the only two players left in the locker room. Coach Arnold greeted them both, perhaps with a bit more heart to Jason. The coach never cared for Trevor much. He understood he wasn't alone in that. Trevor was a groper, always groping for a way up. You could possibly blame his football hero father for that need. He wanted to be popular so much that it made him ugly. He would make a fantastic Wall Street executive some day.

“Hey, Coach. Can I ask you a question?” the future demoralizer said as he preened himself. He thought he was damned pretty. “How well do you know the new chaplain? Are you guys, like, friends or...?”

Jason was on guard at once. “Jesus, Trevor!”

“I mean, you know he's gay, right?” While still in the throes of self-adoration, Trevor tossed the coach the look of a judgmental parent who had caught their child doing something they shouldn't.

Coach Arnold immediately threw down the jockstrap in his hand and came towards Trevor. Trevor, of course, cowered. “You have something to say, Moore?”

“N-No, sir!”

“Then get the hell out of here.” Chip didn't mind being put down by one of his players. They did it in groups when they got drunk. But Trevor had come very close to being condescending about Foster, and that enraged Chip. If he could have gotten away with it, he would have smashed Trevor's face into its reflection. Trevor packed his stuff and fled out the door.

“He's a dick,” Jason said. “Nobody likes Trevor except Trevor. But he likes himself so much it's overwhelming.”

Chip nodded and picked up the jockstrap again. Jason rose from the bench, somewhat anxiously. As if he had something he wanted to ask but wasn't certain how to go about it. He wanted to ask about Brad. He wanted advice. Should he tell Brad how he felt? Should he be the one to name it?

Yet there existed in him that withdrawn, self-conscious creature that caused all men to barricade their feelings behind years of social normalization. He wanted to be better than that, and he knew the coach wasn't the type of man to throw off a heartfelt query. But still....

Chip saw the expression on Jason's face. He recognized the confusion. "Sometimes," he said, "if you're uncertain about something, it's best to let it sit for a bit."

Chip felt the dishonesty in the statement the moment he said it. He wouldn't have taken his own advice. This was simply what he had been told by other educators and coaches to tell students who confided—or looked ready to confide—in you. Placating, pacifying, complacent bullshit. Chip would never let anything just be like that. He wouldn't be able to sleep if he did. He wanted to say the same to Jason.

*"Whatever it is," he wanted to say, "grab it by the balls until it screams."*

But the old "Let it be" line seemed to work, even if Jason looked a little discomforted from hearing it. But what could he do? This wasn't his area. He was no counselor. He worked on young bodies, not young minds.

Foster would be great with minds. Maybe they would open a practice together someday. Something with a cheesy name: *Heart*

*Goals* or something. Chip smiled. Heart Goals. He and Foster, making the world a better place, one gay ball player at a time.

Jason accepted what Chip said, though, as if the coach knew what he should do better than he did. Something inside Jason was telling him to go for it, but an even louder voice was shouting that idea down. Yet loudest doesn't always mean strongest. Jason was quite sure that eventually everything would be out in the open. Out of the closet, as they say.

FOSTER had been to only a couple of football games in his life. All of these were back in his high school days, and his apathy for the game had not changed. He would never understand the appeal of most sports. They just seemed to make one half of the stadium mad at the other. Where's the point in that? He spent most of his time at these games people watching. The stadiums were always full of interesting people painted or dressed in unusual manners. In colder months, they would tempt pneumonia just to yell across the field bare chested at the opposing team's supporters. Foster shrugged. This was a football school, so he'd need to get used to a rowdier sort of people. That wasn't such a bad thing.

The crowd was loud and opinionated this Saturday afternoon. Without his collar, Foster blended right into the stands. He sat next to President Hall, who was as into the game as everyone else and hoping for a win. Foster didn't know football too well, but he knew enough to say a win was not going to happen. The Growlers were down by a considerable margin. He imagined many of the spectators had turned into people watchers along with him by now.

# Simple Men

---

Foster felt terrible for Chip, who was, after all, the sole reason he had come to the game. The rowdies and name-callers in the stands were being so hateful that it was making Foster very angry. It took everything he had to keep from casting dirty looks at people. Wendell reminded him that this was the way football was played.

“You can be an asshole in the stands as long as it stays there. Some of these assholes are Chip’s best friends.”

Chip had asked Foster to come to the game. “You might start liking it,” he had said. “I’d love to see you there. Maybe we could make it a weekly thing?”

How could Foster say no to that? And while he didn’t expect to care about the game any more than he did, he had certainly expected the Growlers to be doing a little better than they were. Chip had said last year they had won all but two games. Foster was an empathic human being. He could usually tell what someone he cared about was thinking, and by the look of the coach on the field, Chip was feeling humiliated. Foster kept his eyes on the big guy just in case he needed reassurance from the stands. This finally happened near the end of the game. Chip managed to bring his chin up and glance into the crowds. Foster thought it a very courageous act, being that almost everyone else in the stands was an angry mess. But Foster smiled and Chip saw. There was a marked improvement in Chip’s features. They seemed to lighten. He sighed heavily and gave a slight smile in return. When the game ended, he would hang onto that smile.

After the locker room and the coach’s disappointed speech to his players there, Chip found Foster where he had sat during the game. The crowd had dispersed, leaving litter and forgotten jackets.

Chip climbed the stands and sat next to Foster. "I wish you could have seen us win," he said. "We're real good when we win."

"Is there anything I can say? Do you want to go somewhere?"

"Just smile. That's enough. That got me through the game. When I looked up and saw you smiling, it pulled me through."

Foster wanted to lay his head on Chip's shoulder. He wanted to share in the heartbreak. "A smile is all you need from me?"

"As if it's a small thing, watching a game like that." Chip put his arm around Foster. "I'm a simple man, I guess. It's the simple things that mean the most to me."

A breeze blew past them. It had the scent of the coming autumn, relaxing Foster to the point that he gave in and rested his head on Chip's shoulder at last. "I'm sorry you lost," he said.

"At least I still get a prize, right?" Chip gave Foster a tight squeeze. "You're my silver lining, babe."

THAT week, Chip invited Foster over for a date that didn't involve going out first. The implication was that they might not go out at all if the evening progressed in the manner that Chip was hoping. His apartment just a short drive from campus was a nice place with tall ceilings and big windows. The furniture was modern and simple, nothing elaborate and nothing too old. There was a terrace he had first thought about serving dinner on, but he'd thought again when he had been attacked by a small bee.

The date started off nerve-wrackingly for Chip. He had taken the time to find out everything Foster loved, so there should have

# Simple Men

---

been that certainty at least. But what if he said something stupid during the course of the evening? He had made a nice dinner of Foster's favorite Italian dishes (expensive, but necessary for wooing); he had set the mood with unscented candles and Puccini; he had done every romantic trick in the book, and it all looked perfect when he stepped back to take it in. A bottle of wine was chilling. Two more were in the kitchen, just in case (and Chip was really hoping for that "just in case"). He was satisfied with how it all looked. He had done this a hundred times with women, and they had all loved it. "Swooning" was the term he would have used to describe their reactions. But none of them meant as much to him as Foster. This dinner, this night, had to go on without a hitch. It had to be hitchless.

When Foster entered the apartment—Chip had to go and pick him up since Foster didn't drive—Chip could tell by the look on his face that things had at least started off well. Foster seemed surprised. "You don't seem the type who would do this," he said.

"I'm a romantic."

Of course, Chip had been hoping as he drove to get Foster that the candles wouldn't set the house on fire. But they had to be lit when Foster walked in, otherwise the effect would be ruined.

Foster sat and Chip waited on him, pouring the wine and doing everything he could think of to let him know how special he thought Foster was. When Foster said "Thank you" and touched Chip's wrist, Chip nearly dropped the bottle of wine.

It was while they were on the sofa, curled up in a nook and watching Diane Lane get romantic in *Under the Tuscan Sun*, that things began to heat up. Foster lay in Chip's arms, feeling safe and content, the wine working its magic, when he felt Chip's penis

stiffening against his back. He had felt the growing heat of their bodies all evening, but until now, there had been no... movement.

Chip nibbled lightly on Foster's ear, just to get things going. Foster returned the affection by massaging Chip's legs. They were large, muscular things that could have supported a Greek temple. He turned around and kissed Chip lightly at first, like a snack. Then hungrily. Then ferociously.

Suddenly clothing was ripped off, and everything around them disappeared. Foster pressed his hips into Chip, and Chip groaned. This was what they both wanted. They wondered why it took them so long to get here. Their hands traveled over and into places only their lustful mental wanderings had known before.

Chip flipped himself about, almost effortlessly. One moment Foster was on top of Chip, the next he was underneath him. He felt himself being pressed into the cushions. It had been so long since he had been with a man, he wasn't sure he would even know what to do. But his body took over. He didn't need to think. He just reacted to whatever Chip gave him. The movie's music soared behind them like an ad for some expensive cologne.

Chip tore off Foster's jeans with great skill. He had done this many times before, but this time there was a different prize inside. It was all done in a matter of seconds. Foster's legs were bare and in the air quicker than he knew what was happening. Chip had never wanted to have sex with someone more in his life. Yet, with Foster, he sometimes felt like a lumbering buffoon. Foster was all elegance; Chip was not.

Foster was enjoying being tossed about like a rag doll. He was enjoying the inability to breathe due to the rapid and lengthy kisses. If he was going to die, let it be in the midst of passion. When, all of



# Simple Men

---

a sudden, the action stopped, it was as if he had been awakened rudely from a lovely dream. “What’s wrong?” he said breathlessly.

Chip kneeled over him on the sofa, a look of confusion and fear on his face. “I don’t know what to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve never had gay sex. Not even with a woman. I mean, I tried once, but it was... it was a disaster.”

Foster sat up on his elbows. “What are you asking?”

“Do I just... stick it in?”

Foster laughed. “I’d really rather you didn’t. You don’t have any lubricant?”

“I don’t think so. We can look.” And they did. They looked the hell out of that apartment but found nothing that would be safe to use, deciding against butter and Crisco. There was plenty of foreplay during the search, but that was all. In the end, they found themselves in each other’s arms on the sofa once more.

“Maybe it’s better this way,” Chip said. He was upset that he clearly hadn’t planned everything as perfectly as first thought.

Foster climbed down from the sofa and kneeled between his legs. Chip was relieved. He hadn’t wanted to ask the chaplain for a blowjob. The gift Foster gave to Chip was the most astonishing act of fellatio he had ever received, wiping away the memory of the only other blowjob he had gotten from a man back in his college days. It occurred to Chip that this made sense. Men know what other men like, because they have the same equipment. It’s kind of an unfair advantage if you get the right guy.

“You just blew my mind,” Chip said after Foster lay down beside him again. “I’ve been all over the world. I’ve had some crazy sex. But that was the best blowjob I’ve ever had.”

“You’ve traveled a lot?”

“I used to. It’s hard now. When you get older, you’re expected to settle down. To find a life. A life and a wife.”

“I’ve not done much traveling.” Foster had always hated this particular fact about his life. “I’ve just seen walls. I’ve seen all kinds of walls. Seminary walls, my bedroom walls, invisible walls. Walls aren’t terribly interesting.”

Chip swallowed nervously. “Maybe we’ll get to go some place together.” It was more of a hopeful question than a statement.

“That would be fun.” Foster massaged Chip’s chest tenderly.

“Good. I think so too. I’ll take you to Australia. You’d like Sydney, I think. There’s this little resort town called Coogee Beach. We could rent a little place there and waste a whole summer away.”

Foster raised himself to Chip’s face and kissed him. “That sounds perfect.”

“And I’ll be sure to pack the lube. I promise.”

“Australia sounds great, but let’s stay here for the moment. Right here in this moment. I don’t think there’s ever been a better moment.” Foster hugged Chip’s chest tight and closed his eyes to sleep right there on the couch. The future might be filled with moments as wonderful as this, he thought, but one never knows. One never knows.

## Chapter Six

WHEN Chip told Foster that he would be attending services on Sunday, Foster couldn't help but tease him about it. "It's from all the fornicating we're doing, isn't it? You're feeling guilty."

"Hell, no! I just want to check you out in your preacher pants. Besides, you're fornicating right along with me, and you supposedly have the rule book."

"I have extra pull." Foster tugged at his collar and winked. "Man of God, see?"

Chip was dressed in the same ill-fitting short-sleeved shirt and wonky tie he had worn on his first visit to Sunday services. He looked like a big, goofy, beefy nerd. In fact, that's exactly what Foster thought as he looked out upon his congregation and saw the coach, though he put the phrase into a possessive tone: "*My* big, goofy, beefy nerd." Even the slacks Chip wore were adorably high-water. *Too cute*, Foster thought. *The man can't dress himself.*

The congregation was packed. So much so, Chip wondered if Foster had been handing out flyers. Wendell sat next to him. He rumbled a bit, like a sleepy volcano, whenever Foster made a joke, but that was all the movement that could be asked for. In the back

Lynn sat with Luke the Science Guy. She waved at Chip when she saw him. They were maintaining the niceties.

Foster's sermons were always pleasant things. There was no doom and gloom attached to them. He saw good everywhere, as goes the phrase, and tried to convince others of this good as well. Religion, in his opinion, was not about the condemning but the rising up. Chip did his best to pay attention, but he often got swept away in the lilt of Foster's voice.

At times, when Foster's all-encompassing gaze would sweep across Chip, the chaplain noticed the look of a moony schoolboy crush on the handsome man's face. There was a silent give-and-take going on between them: Foster tried not to smile awkwardly on the pulpit; Chip tried to hide the boner in his tight pants with one of the chapel's Bibles.

Things quickly took a strange turn for Chip, however, when he felt a polite fingernail poking on his shoulder, interrupting his lovelorn fantasies. He turned around and his boner shrank immediately. It was Trevor Moore's mom. She waved her slender fingers and gave him a glance that hid more meaning than any Bible. Chip gave a surprised and petrified half smile in return and slowly turned back around.

What was her name? Gail? Glenda? Gabrielle? What did it matter? His stomach was doing somersaults. He had to get out of there. He didn't want to get caught by her after the service was over. He didn't want Foster to have to meet her. Logically, he knew she would never state her (and his) sexual tryst right there in the chapel. But Foster wasn't stupid. He'd be able to pick up on the vibes, and that woman was sending off vibes like Frisbees.

There was only one way out, of course. As the service ended, he gave Foster a quick, apologetic smile and bolted for the back door even as Trevor's mom's blood-red painted nails brushed his shirt. Once outside, he leaned against a tree, loosening his tie. It was a juvenile thing to do, but sometimes, he figured, acting your age was complete bullshit, especially when you were trying to protect something good. And what he had with Foster was real good. He'd wait for the congregation to disperse and then explain himself to Foster. He'd tell him... something. Anything had to be better than, *"Hey! This is the chick I boned the day I couldn't admit I found you attractive."*

As he was standing there, trying to come up with a reason, he felt a willowy hand make its way under his belt loop and down the back of his slacks. He stiffened and jumped away.

"Hey there, stud." Trevor's mom. Trevor's mom had just stuck her hand between his ass cheeks! Chip looked around. The last thing he wanted was one of those scenes where the object of desire—i.e. Foster—was witness to an unwanted flirtation, and then all kinds of misunderstandings and tomfoolery occur. He was not in the mood for that particular plot line. Luckily, Foster was still around the front of the chapel saying farewells and thank yous to his congregants.

"What's wrong?" She gave him a show of puppy dog eyes. Clearly, she thought he was playing. "You want to play later? I'm in town until tonight, but then I have to get back to the asshole."

"Hey... babe. Listen, I—"

She pinned him against the tree. "Let's go in the bushes."

He swallowed hard. But just as she started sliding her hands into his slacks again, Chip heard his salvation. The glorious grumpy motoring of a golf cart. Katie Hammond came racing toward them.

Trevor's mom stepped back, frightened that Katie might forget to brake. The golf cart *eeeked* to a halt in front of them.

"Hop on if you want to get to that meeting in time."

Chip smiled in surprise. *She's fucking brilliant!*

He jumped on the cart almost too quickly, making the carriage bounce due to his frame. "Sorry." He shrugged to Trevor's mom. "Duty calls. It was great to see you, though." *Why did you say that?*

She looked from him to Katie then back to him, coming to a decision that there was nothing going on between them. "That's okay," she said. "I'll be back soon. Trevor can't live too long without his mother. Will the meeting take very long? I could stick around and—"

"All day," Katie said. "It's going to take all damn day."

"Yeah. Not looking forward to it." Chip tried to muster up some displeasure.

"Okay. Well, then—"

"Gotta go!" Katie said as she pressed on the gas and they sped away. The woman was left reaching for her cigarettes in minor disappointment.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," Chip said.

"No problem," Katie answered as she rounded curves on two wheels. "You're lucky I was taking my morning constitutional." Between her thighs was a huge plastic mug of what could only be her hangover cure-all: more alcohol. She kept it held tight so that it didn't spill. Katie was good at not spilling things.

"I just don't want Foster to meet her. The idea of who I am meeting who I was is terrifying."

“He’s changed you that much, huh? Must be love.”

“Must be,” he said below his breath. “Getting with her... that was the last big mistake I ever want to make. I’m a good boy from here on out.”

They headed around the bluff that looked over the river. There were a few people strolling around, taking in the last of the year’s good weather.

“What about Lynn?” Katie asked. “Foster knows Lynn. She’s part of your past.”

“But that’s different. She already knew him. There’s nothing I can do about that. But Trevor’s mom, Whatsername, I can make sure he never hears about her, or at least try.”

Katie shook her head as she took a drink. “I don’t know, darling. Hidden things always get unhid somehow, and usually in uncomfortable ways.”

“I know. It’s messy, and I hate it. But there’s nothing for it.” He looked to her as if she might have an answer for him. “Right?”

She shrugged. The shrug read as *You know what you should do, baby doll.*

They sped quickly up the turn toward the library. Katie had no real idea where she was going; her head was still fogged from whatever drunken haze she had gotten into the night before. Chip didn’t mind. The ride was a needed rest. The wind felt good. They passed the ancient library, the courtyard in front filling with students. Chip noticed Brad and Jason heading inside. They looked mischievous. They always looked mischievous.

Chip had to decide on a reason for darting from the chapel like he did. Whatever it was, whatever lie Chip settled on, Foster would understand. That truth made Chip's heart sink. Foster would understand, because he was Foster and he was trusting and loving and good. His trust in people had gotten him hurt before, and it would most likely get him hurt again. Katie was right. This was no way to start a relationship.

BRAD had made a bet and he intended to keep it, even if he had just made the bet the night before. Being Sunday afternoon, he had all week to get it accomplished, but why procrastinate victory?

A gaggle of guys from the team and the dorm were already seated and waiting when Brad and Jason entered the library. On Sundays the library opened later than other days, so there was always a small crowd ready to get caught up on the studying they hadn't done since Thursday. But this was a slightly larger crowd than usual. Anyone there could clearly see that something was about to happen. There were guys in the library who had rarely set foot in the building since they had started at Verona College, and they were all smiling, trying to look inconspicuous but managing to look a little creepy. It was a ridiculous display that only fooled the librarians. But then, the librarians were the only ones who really needed fooling, weren't they?

None of the ball players or dormmates went up the broad, winding staircase to the second floor. They stayed on the first floor, fanned around the staircase in a semi-circle at the big, wooden tables. The library was deathly quiet, even for a library.



Brad and Jason walked up the stairs. Eyes were on them until they made it to the top. The library stairs were in the middle of the building, circling up. A large glass chandelier hung down from the ceiling. It would have been beautiful if the carpet had been about four decades newer. As it was, the staircase and its surroundings looked like the set of a disaster film from the 1970s.

“Are you ready?” Jason asked as he stood at the top with Brad. He looked down the curving steps. They were steep. Sometimes when using them he could imagine falling backward. It gave him vertigo to think of it.

“Hells, yeah. These douche bags don’t think I’ll do it. Look at their faces.” He flipped one of them off. Snickering ensued from down below.

“You don’t have to do it. You don’t lose very often. You could take this one.”

“Are you trying to get me to chicken out?”

Jason paused. “No. Of course not. Just... just be careful, you know. That’s a long way to fall.”

Brad grew serious. “I’ll be fine,” he said. “You ain’t losing me. Not by my own hands, anyway.”

A cough echoed up from the first floor. A warning to get underway. No one was on the stairs, so now was as good a time as any. Brad gestured a tip of the hat to Jason, let his legs go limp, and tucked and rolled down the stairs, making audible, if exaggerated, sounds of pain and discomfort as he went. “The slobbering masses love sound effects with their show,” he always said.

With every thump, grunt, and moan, Jason cringed, but he stayed put at the top of the staircase. The other guys found the whole

thing uproarious, of course, and, in the end, only the lead librarian seemed to show any compassion at all as the dear old thing ran to the seemingly hurt boy.

Brad got up quickly, however. He dusted himself off as if nothing at all were the matter, as if he had fallen on a patch of ice, thanked the librarian for her concern, and limped out of the building to the laughter of his teammates and buddies. The librarian stood there, dumbfounded and insulted. Brad was hurt; Jason could see that. Something had happened to his ankle on the tumble, but he had been victorious. The victor glanced up and winked at Jason before he turned to leave.

Jason found him outside on the bench, rubbing his ankle and accepting the admiration and cash of those he had bested. Jason sat down beside him once they had all left for other excitements. “You’re a fucking moron sometimes,” he said.

“That’s why I got you. To pull me back.” He grimaced in pain.

“You don’t seem to listen.”

Brad could see the anger under Jason’s pleasant mask. “I know. I’m sorry.”

They sat there for a while longer. Jason called for some help, and Brad was taken to the campus infirmary. Jason stayed with him. He didn’t mind. They’d been in situations like this one too many times to count, and they’d be in them many more to come, with any luck. That is, as long as Brad didn’t kill himself with his pranks.

# Simple Men

---

WHEN Foster returned to his apartment that night, he had a message from Barry waiting. Foster had been careful not to leave his cell phone number anywhere near Barry, but the college directory was public. Apparently, Barry wanted to give it another go. He wanted to see Foster again. He apologized for everything in tears. The Amish kid had left him to be Amish again. Barry, it turned out, was not strong enough to compete with a whole faith for the kid's devotion. Who knew, right?

Foster had always feared the day Barry ever got hold of him again. He had nightmares about how they would run into each other Christmas shopping one day. The world could be that small, and fate could be that vicious. He was certain that with one plea from Barry he would go running back, no questions asked. What else did he have, after all, but Barry? Up until a few weeks ago, that was what would have happened. Foster was shamefully aware of that. But now, it wasn't true. Now there was Chip, even if he did seem to have some allergic reaction to sermons and chapels. Chip had proven something to Foster. Chip had proven Foster could be loved again, and not simply because he was a novelty or some risqué gay. Foster was tired of being the man Barry had made him feel like.

He erased the blabbering message and grabbed a bottle of blackberry wine from the back of the refrigerator. He would toast to his life, to the way things looked to be swinging upward for once. He poured a glass, slid in some Nina Simone, sat the bottle on the carpet, and lay down beside it, staring up at the ceiling. Barry would not hear back from him. Not even a pleasantry. Foster felt that this one time he had the right to be rude.

Chip showed up about an hour later. He knocked and Foster yelled for him to enter. The sound of Foster's raised voice alarmed Chip, and the sight of Foster on the floor at first gave Chip pause.

Nina Simone's strong, quavering vocals captured a sense of consequence in the moment. Foster's apartment had the dim lighting of all of the college-owned apartments and was decorated in much the same manner. Chip had expected to see a cross on the wall or something to denote Foster's occupation, but there was none. He approached Foster and crouched down.

"What's this about, baby? What are you doing?" He brushed Foster's dark hair from his forehead.

"Celebrating."

"Celebrating what?"

"Transition," said Foster. "Detachment and attachment."

"I can get down with that." Chip lay down on the floor so that he was the mirror image of Foster's position in the opposite direction. "I came here to apologize."

"No need. You're allergic to chapels. I've decided that."

This was as good a reason as any, Chip supposed. He brought his hands up to take hold of Foster's, and their fingers entwined with the music in a delicate dance. Chip didn't know he was capable of this sort of delicacy. This was romance, and not for any ulterior motive. He wasn't trying to worm his way into bed or a quick blowjob. He was simply there, in the moment, with as content a smile as he could remember having.

Foster felt Chip's coarse fingertips run circles in his palms. He gave himself up to the finger ballet, soothed by Chip's movements. Chip touched his wrists, sending nerves into delighted frenzies. The pleasurable sensations lulled Foster's eyes closed. "What are we doing?" he asked.

“We’re hand dancing. Finger waltzing.”

“That’s lovely. Very poetic.” He grabbed Chip’s hand. “I feel like poetry. Would you like to hear some?”

They both rolled over on their stomachs and faced one another. “That would be nice,” Chip said, taking a delicate strand of Foster’s hair and playing with it.

Foster reached over to the coffee table and brought a Bible back with him.

“A Bible?” Chip said. “That’s not what I think of when I hear the word ‘poetry’.”

“Just you wait.” Foster opened the book to a marked page. “This is one of the most erotic books ever written. *The Song of Solomon*.” He began reading, and Chip drew around to him, kissing his neck and the back of his ears as he read. Chip’s hands wandered over Foster’s body. When Foster would lose his place, Chip was there to tell him where to pick up.

“That’s some naughty stuff,” Chip whispered as Foster put down the Bible and gave his full attention to the coach.

“The Bible is full of lovers,” Foster said. “Remind me to tell you about David and Jonathan.”

They lay once more on the floor. Foster was surprised to find finger waltzing was so easy a dance to learn. “I’m going to be so good for you,” Chip said. “You’re going to be so good for me.”

Chapter  
Seven

BRAD sat on a sofa in the dorm lobby, tearing a granola bar to pieces. It wasn't that he was angry at the granola bar. It hadn't done anything... yet. It was just that he felt the need to rend something. He tore at it with his teeth like it was beef jerky. His crutches leaned against the sofa beside him, and his ankle was wrapped up tight and—for the time being—useless. He resisted the urge to scratch the pestering itch. He'd make Trevor do that later.

So the library thing hadn't been a great idea. It wasn't the first time one of his bets or dares had backfired on him. There had been the poodle incident, after all. That had topped everything. But there was a difference between now and then. He had lost that bet. He'd won this one. There was the silver lining.

And there was another layer of lining as well. Something better than silver: Jason was escorting him to and from classes. That was cool, even if they did have to start out way early in order to get to class on time. The dorm was on the opposite side of campus from the lecture halls, and the students at Verona College were not allowed to drive to class. There were precious few campus parking spots.

At the moment, it felt like most people on campus had it in for him. Since his tumble down the outdated steps of the library, Brad had been yelled at by the head librarian, the president of the college, and, worst of all, Coach Arnold. The coach had looked none too pleased that he had had to come to the infirmary.

“How are you going to play for me now? You’re not, that’s how! Of all the bone-headed things to do.” He had given Brad a wave of resignation. “I got some place to be.”

“Sorry, Coach,” Brad had said. He had been uncertain if his apology was even heard.

The president had just stared at him this morning. Jason had walked him over to the old house for a meeting before classes began. That was the deepest shit Brad had ever been in. There had been nothing much said in the way of chiding, only a heavy condemnation by silence. Those were always worse. Brad could deal with words and punches, but silence was a wicked thing. Jason had given him the silent treatment once. That was the longest hour in Brad’s life. After ten awful minutes, the president had said, “We’ll figure out an appropriate punishment later.”

All this for a fall down the stairs. It *could* have been an accident. Would there have been as big a stink then? No. He would have gotten boxes of candy and get-well cards. This? This was just vindictive.

Brad finished the last of the granola bar and stuffed the wrapping in the cushions of the sofa, a gift for somebody else to find.

“You ready to go?” Jason asked. He came down the stairs, both his and Brad’s books in hand.

Brad didn’t so much answer as let out an expansive groan.

“Cheer up,” Jason said, taking a seat by the sidelined ball player. “I just got back from the Pic-N-Pac here in town and managed to get all the cartons of expired eggs they had. We can egg ol’ Wendell’s house this weekend. I’ll keep them downstairs in the freezer until then. How’s that sound?”

“You’re a mean tease, Jase. How am I supposed to go egging? I can’t seek revenge in this condition. I can’t even run.”

Jason smiled. The type of smile that let Brad know that his dear old buddy had already thought of that particular problem and was way ahead of him in finding an answer. He rose from the sofa and disappeared to the back of the lobby for a minute where he retrieved an old, folded wheelchair. He unfolded it with mild showmanship and wheeled it to Brad. He stood behind it with the smirk of a hero who’s saved far too many days.

“You fucking nutball!”

“A nutball I am. I got it from the infirmary. They won’t miss it. I thought it might be useful for us if you can lose that prideful streak and allow yourself to be wheeled around by the likes of me.”

Brad stood and quickly seated himself in the wheel chair. “Are you kidding? I like the likes of you. The likes of you like what *I* like.”

Jason put the books in Brad’s lap. “Shall we to class, sir?”

“Drive on, Hastings. Drive on.”

FOSTER’S voice sounded a tiny bit panicked when he called Chip at two in the morning. There was a very loud and reverberating



chirping in the background. Chip rubbed his eyes and said, “Foster? Where are you?”

“Um... hey, Chip. Could I get your help over at the chapel? I’ve let loose a problem.”

“Now?”

“Now would be perfect, thanks. Now would be just....”

“Foster? Are you still there?”

“Yeah. I just had to duck the bird. It keeps swooping for me. I think I pissed it off.”

Of course, Chip didn’t need an explanation. Not right away. He clumsily dressed in whatever sweats were closest and drove as fast as he could to the chapel, eager to be Foster’s hero. In a few days’ time, he would find this incident humorous, but now his eyes were too hazy and his mind too confused to make sense enough to laugh about it. Something about a bird in a chapel. It might as well have been a part of a dream.

He ran into the chapel, shirtless and wild-eyed, not knowing what to expect. Once there, he stood for a moment at the wide-open door and surveyed the scene. It looked like a battlefield: pews knocked over, papers strewn, Bibles scattered across the floor. *Armageddon*? A screech came from overhead as a small bird flew at Chip’s face.

“Get down!” Foster shouted. He was crouched behind one of the still-standing pews, a broom in hand. Chip crawled toward him as if they were in the trenches together and this was some great war.

“What the hell is all this? Where’d that bird come from?”

“The stove.” Foster pointed to the antique stove that had gone unused for years. The latch was open. “I thought I could trap the squirrel in there and then call Security and have them take the little guy out of here safely. I forgot about the bird being in there.”

“Wait. What’s a squirrel doing in here in the first place?” Chip looked around. “I hate squirrels, Foster. I hate them!”

“Does it matter how it got in?”

“You were trying to feed it, weren’t you?”

“There it is!” Foster said.

Chip picked up a Bible and flung it across the room, narrowly missing the furry creature. “Shit! He’s going to remember that. He’s going to come after me with his nuts.”

“It’s a squirrel.” Foster laughed. “Not the Mafia.”

“You don’t know these squirrels. Verona College squirrels are a breed unlike any other.” He put a hand on Foster’s shoulder. “Stay put. I’ve got an idea.”

Dodging the bird once more, Chip stealthily rolled his way to a water basin used for various religious traditions. It was heavy plastic, so not easily breakable. That was a good thing. He spotted the squirrel mid-aisle. Clearly an intelligent critter, it eyed the goings-on with keen interest. Chip motioned to Foster to circle the opposite direction in order to flush the furry fellow his way. Luckily for him, the college squirrels were not a very nervous lot; humans had tamed them a little. The only thing Chip had to concern himself with would be the bird. He hated birds almost as much as he hated squirrels.

He took off his shoes and stepped as cautiously as he could over and on the pews until he was nearly on top of the squirrel.

Foster was coming up the other side. The incessant squawking of the bird covered the sound of the wood floor creaking a bit, though Chip wondered if that even mattered to a squirrel. They relied on other senses to tell them of approaching predators... such as sight. There was no way any animal could miss Chip's massive, basin-wielding form.

Chip motioned to Foster to charge the squirrel, and Foster did as he was instructed. The squirrel at once reacted, running toward Chip. The coach jumped off the pew he was standing on and captured the prey beneath the basin. He breathed a sigh of success. But just then, just as he thought everything was sewn up, the bird screeched, and Chip felt something wet land on his head. Instinctively, he lifted his hands from the basin to feel his head, turning the bowl over in the process. The escaped squirrel shot off to the open door and outside to freedom. The bird followed suit.

"It was a group effort," Foster said, lowering the broom and standing.

Chip sat against a pew, topless and barefoot. He had a few scratches from his leap from the pew, but nothing more serious.

Foster sat beside him after laying the broom on the floor. "Thank you," he said. "I've never had a fella rassle a squirrel for me." He kissed Chip on the cheek.

"Aw, shucks. It weren't nothin'," Chip teased. "I've rassled plenty of squirrels in my day. Now I just need to *squirrel* a *rassle* from you." *Wink wink.*

Foster laughed and slapped Chip on the knee. "Come on. Let's get you cleaned up and get that bird gunk out of your hair. We can do it at my place." Foster rose and offered Chip his hand.

“Don’t you want to clean this place up first?” Chip said, accepting Foster’s help up. Foster was stronger than he looked; Chip had become aware of this in their first round of lovemaking.

“It can wait until morning. It’s the middle of the week. God’s on holiday.”

THEY left the chapel, closing all the doors and stove latches behind them to keep out uninvited critters. Foster didn’t mind the bird living in the stove so much—he felt bad for disturbing its habitat—but he admitted that the squirrel was a bit obnoxious.

They walked to Foster’s apartment. The night air was getting cooler now that the year was moving on. Winter would be here soon, and with it, both men’s thoughts could not but fall into fantasies of snugglement beneath thick comforters.

“I’ll try to become a bigger football fan,” Foster promised. “I promise. It’s just never been a part of me or of anyone I was ever close to.”

“That’s okay. The fact that you want to try is good enough. You don’t have to like it. Just sit there in the stands so I can see your face. It’ll help matters when we lose.” He put his arm around Foster’s shoulders as they walked. His bare skin was hot.

“Do you think that squirrel’s around here?” Foster asked. “Watching us leave the chapel?”

“Plotting my demise, no doubt. He’ll get me. It’s just a matter of when.”

# Simple Men

---

133

Foster grinned. The night was silent. It seemed even the students most apt to party were in bed, dreaming things wet and anxious. “This is the type of night they write folk songs about,” Foster said.

“Nights like this?”

“Nights just like this.”

FOSTER massaged the shampoo into Chip’s hair with all the care of a trained beautician. Chip closed his eyes and let the warmth from the water and the tenderness of Foster’s touch echo through him. He was still shirtless. Drops of water and lather speckled his chest and shoulders. Foster had already tended to the scratches and bruises from Chip’s heroics in the chapel. Chip even had a bandage for his troubles. “You’ll understand if I never step foot in the chapel again,” he said, his hair still being washed thoroughly. Foster’s proximity felt comforting, somehow protective.

Foster took the towel and tousled Chip’s head good and hard. So much so that Chip began giggling like a little boy, and he grabbed the grinning chaplain, pulling him into his lap. They kissed a long moment before Foster straddled him in the chair. Chip took hold of Foster’s thighs and wrapped them around his waist as he rose. *This is where all that working out really pays off*, he thought.

They headed to the sofa, but Foster said, with a twinkle of mischief in his eye, “The bedroom.”

“You got some love sauce?”

“A brand-new bottle.”

Like a sex-driven robot, Chip turned flawlessly and headed into the bedroom. He flung Foster onto the bed and jumped on him with a playful holler. In a matter of seconds, they were both naked and pressing hands and hearts into one another.

What makes a moment a defining one is that it is so far past words, so much more about the texture of the surroundings that the memory of it hangs like an emboldened stamp in your brain. So this moment was for Foster and Chip. It rang up with an exclamation point, with a hundred of them, as each hand placed and hot breath on flesh felt like a perfect piece of a puzzle fitting firmly and, at last, immovably.

When Foster had been with Barry, it had never been like this. Their routine had been a clumsy dance. There had been limited pleasure for Foster in their fumbling. What was even more dumbfounding about this was that Barry had taken dance lessons all his life. But now, with Chip, with this bulky ball player, there was true elegance. Here was a dance partner who knew how to move, who knew how to make Foster gasp and arch his back. Who made Foster forget there was anything in the world but the two of them on the bed. The only thought from the outside world that snuck in—and it was fleeting—was that Lynn was right: Chip's legs were indeed like steel clamps. Yet they fit quite artistically into the curves of Foster's thighs. A near-perfect match.

Chip had lost himself in the process of lovemaking before, but this was different. Foster made him care about something other than his own pleasure. With every aching groan from Foster's mouth, Chip only wanted to give him more. This eroticism, this newness in sex; it was strange, no doubt. But there was also no doubt that it felt right. When Foster rocked to orgasm, Chip had never seen anything more beautiful.

*This must be what art feels like, he thought. This is how poetry is born.*

The ecstatic moment was over. They fell to their sides but continued decorating necks and chests with kisses and gentle brushings of fingers. Foster whispered gratitude into Chip's ears. There was an invisible haze of contentment over the bed. Lovers knew it well; it's like a satisfied fog after sex.

*I wonder, Chip thought to himself. I wonder, I wonder, I wonder... What will it be like, growing old with him? Will we take care of each other when we're sick? Will we care as much about each other when we're as old as the hills?*

As if reading Chip's mind, Foster thought, *I do.*

CARDBOARD BOX CITY was an annual attempt by Verona College to raise awareness of the homeless problem in the world. It was a noble idea, but the students saw it as very little more than another reason to drink, the added pull being that the city was temporarily located in the middle of the quad. Students were allowed to bring their cardboard box homes there and set them up for a night, enjoying the novelty of being homeless.

In the last few years, the idea had lost steam. Fewer and fewer students participated, and those who did decorated their boxes with paint and markers and set them up as if in some Bizarro World house and garden contest. Some even lay welcome mats in front of the flimsy structures. This, of course, was not what the college had in mind when the administration had first initiated the idea years before.

Since this year saw fewer students than ever sign up for the event, members of the faculty were asked to participate if they could. Foster agreed and sat his box up in front of the chapel. He was the school chaplain, after all, and it only felt right to set some type of example. When Foster told Chip he was volunteering, Chip immediately decided to come along as well. He wanted to spend the night snuggling with Foster. Besides, it might be like camping, thus beginning another fantasy in Chip's mind.

Chip brought his own box and situated it next to Foster's. He also brought a couple of camping chairs for them to sit in. This was against the rules, but Chip wasn't too concerned about that. Cardboard Box City looked to be dying and most likely would not be back next year.

The night was cloudy and cool. There had been scattered sprinkles earlier in the day, but nothing to warrant canceling the event. Chip and Foster drank cappuccinos in their chairs as they kept an eye on things. At the far end of the quad, they heard Brad and Jason making another round. The two had been visiting up and down the city all evening. Jason was pushing Brad in a wheelchair, and Brad was spouting End of the World prophecies as if they were all survivors of an apocalypse. Earlier in the evening, he had begun quoting from *The Grapes of Wrath*, but then he had decided the Apocalypse was scarier than Tom Joad. All of the students rolled their eyes at the pair, but everyone was having a good time.

"There's one at every school, huh?" Chip said.

Foster laughed. "He's not so bad. I have a feeling you and Brad Park are quite similar in how you look at the world."



“I was never as obnoxious. I mean, I like the kid, but he can be a real pain in the ass sometimes. I was never that much of a hell-raiser.”

“Well, at least he keeps people smiling. Maybe I’ll get hold of him for the soup kitchen this Christmas. Do you think he’d do it?”

“Sure he will. I doubt if he or Jason has ever met a real homeless person. Might do them some good.”

“Have you?”

Chip became serious. “Once, when I was a kid. I was with my dad. We were in New York. There was this old man, dirty and ragged. The whole stereotype. He was begging. My dad stepped right over him like he wasn’t even there. I felt sorry for the guy, so I let go of my dad’s hand and gave the poor guy the few pennies I had in my pocket. Dad was furious. He took my hand again and dragged me away. ‘He’s got to earn it!’ he said. ‘He’s got to earn it himself’. That was the only time I can remember being ashamed of my dad.”

Foster’s eyes were wet. “My own father lived on the streets for a bit.”

Chip looked at him in surprise. “Really?”

“He was a good man. Very religious, though, which made him very hard to tolerate at times. One day, he just disappeared. There wasn’t a note or anything to tell us where he went. We had no clue as to where to look. He seemed perfectly happy before he left. Then we got a call from the police. He had been found and arrested for sleeping on a park bench. He had been homeless and wandering all that time. Alzheimer’s, and nobody else in the family knew it. Kind of selfish of him, really, not to tell us.”

“I’m sorry, babe.” Chip reached for Foster’s hand. “Where is he now?”

“He’s in a home. Mom can’t take care of him by herself. I visit him when I can, but it’s hard. He’s not the same person.” The comfort Chip provided with simple handholding fortified Foster against tears.

“Anyway,” Foster continued. “Where do you think that squirrel is?”

“Oh, he’s around. I’m going to put together a workout routine for you so you can defend yourself if he ever tries attacking you with his nuts.” Chip smiled broadly. “Nobody gets to attack you with their nuts but me.”

“You *are* a nut.”

“I love how your eyes twinkle when you call me names.”

Thunder sounded overhead and, without warning, it began to rain. Chip and Foster took their cappuccinos and headed for the chapel. They watched the population of Cardboard Box City dwindle as students screamed and ran from the rain. Jason wheeled Brad back toward their dorm with a quickness that would have made The Flash proud. Soon the cardboard structures were folding in and collapsing.

“How about we go to my place?” Foster said.

“If you hadn’t suggested it, I was going to come anyway.”

IT WAS a simple sprain, but Jason was seeing to it that Brad was as comfortable as he could be. They had gotten out of their wet clothes

and into a couple of terry cloth robes Jason's mom had gotten them for Christmas last year. At the time, it had seemed a strange gift, but they loved them now. Brad was also loving the attention Jason was heaping on him. He was propped up in his favorite torn easy chair in front of the TV, a fluffy pillow behind his head and back, and his leg resting on a milk crate. A freshly opened can of beer sat on the table beside him. He flipped from game shows to sports channels to the latest barrage of reality programs; there was nothing of real interest. Not until Jason returned from downstairs with his dinner and they could compete against the intellectuals on *Jeopardy*.

The sprain was well on its way to healing, but they so wanted to use the wheelchair at the egging of the president's home that they milked the injury a little longer than they really needed to. Besides, it was probably best not to run on it for a while after, and they would definitely need to have a quick getaway once the eggs started flying.

Jason came back with their trays of food: lasagna, lightly burned. He had been sure to get Brad a heaping portion, because he knew Brad liked a bit of scald on his food. He liked the crunch. They both sat, Jason in his chair and Brad in his, and they ate, for the most part silently, as Brad flipped through the channel selection. Brad drank all of his beer and asked for another. Jason complied without a word, and then sat down again as if uninterrupted.

An ad for a movie ran during the commercial break of one of the three channels they were keeping their eyes on. *Jeopardy* wouldn't be on for another ten minutes. Superlatives such as "Oscar-worthy" and "spectacular" were tossed out at them.

"'Spectacular'," Brad quoted. "Every movie out there now has some puffed-up Ebert wannabe calling it 'spectacular'. When's the last time you saw a 'spectacular' movie, Jase?"

Jason shrugged, chewing on the lasagna, hunched over his plate as if it was soon to be stolen from under him.

“Exactly! I haven’t seen a goddamn ‘spectacular’ movie since... well, hell. I don’t know how to finish that sentence. You know what would be awesome? If they came right out and said, ‘Hey, we know this movie sucks, but we spent a lot of money on it to make you dumbasses have eye-gasms for a week’. Yeah. That’s what I’d like to see. A promo that said ‘sucktacular’ or ‘Jesus Christ on a lawn chair, this thing’s awful!’”

“That’d be awesome,” Jason said.

“Somehow, Jase, I doubt your sincerity. But I’m going to write the movie people. I’m going to write them and tell them exactly what I just told you.”

Jason liked Brad’s rants, even if Brad didn’t think so. Brad would emphasize just the right words and pause at what Jason thought were the perfect spots. Brad could have sold snake oil; he had that charm. Of course, it would have gotten him in trouble if he had. Eventually all snake oil salesmen were caught, but until then, Brad would have had fun with it.

Brad had wolfed down his entire hill of lasagna before Jason was halfway through with his. Brad looked over at Jason’s plate, his brows rising and falling in playful plea. “You gonna eat that?”

Jason gave Brad his plate with a headshake and a smile.

“You’re the best, man. Wanna shave my balls after this?”

“Shave your own dirty balls.”

“Just thought I’d ask. I want to get all I can from this predicament I’m in.” He chowed down on the lasagna and flipped

through the channels again. “*The Wizard of Oz*. You like this movie, right? Let’s sing along. What do you say?” Then, “Mmm. This is good. Your lasagna is better than mine.”

IT WAS around three in the morning when Lynn came knocking at Foster’s door, looking for some support. He lay asleep on Chip’s chest, who had stayed for the night once again. At first, Foster confused Lynn’s light knocking for the coach’s heartbeat, but as the haze of sleep wore off, he realized it didn’t have the same comforting rhythm. It was an uneven sound, like shutters being rapped against a house during a storm.

He rose, trying not to wake up Chip (Chip stirred anyway, but Foster told him to go back to sleep,) grabbed a robe, and answered the door. Lynn was a mess, wearing a Halloween mask of eyeliner and smeared lipstick a week before the actual holiday. Her hair resembled stacked hay, and she wore a jogging suit that Foster had never seen her in before.

“Can I come in?” She sobbed and gasped like a broken steam engine.

He fixed them some coffee and made sure they sat in the kitchen, away from the bedroom and the sleeping giant. She cried a bit more, making mostly incoherent statements, until they had sat a good five minutes. Foster helped her wipe the makeup from her face.

“It’s a mistake,” she said. “It’s all been a mistake. I’ve discovered something about myself tonight. I can’t fall for a man. I just can’t.”

“That’s ridiculous. Of course you can.” He felt bad that he couldn’t give her all the attention she needed, but his anxious thoughts went to Chip, the as-yet undiscussed obstacle between them.

“No. It’s true. We were sitting at Luke’s place tonight. Everything was going wonderfully. We were having a lovely time. He’s so courteous and thoughtful. And then I recognized it.”

“It?”

“His scent. Remember I was telling you he had this comforting scent? I was finally able to pinpoint it tonight. When my father gave up smoking when I was a girl, he started cigars for a bit just to wean himself off. The aroma of them permeates everything. It gets into your clothes, in your hair. My father’s since stopped smoking them. A long time ago, in fact. But Luke... Luke smokes the same kind my father smoked. The very same brand. I even recognize the logo.”

“A lot of people smoke cigars, Lynn.”

“Don’t you see?” Her voice rose in exasperation. “I’m in love with my father. I’m just searching for a man who’s exactly like him. That’s all this is. I think I’m falling for Luke, but I’m really not.”

“I think you’re overanalyzing the situation.”

“I don’t know.” She rose to pace around the kitchen. “Maybe I am. But I don’t think I can get past it. I broke things off anyway. I’ve been crying all night. I’ll be a mess in the morning.”

“Call him up. Explain things.”

“Why can’t things be easier? Where’s the book with the rules for all this garbage? Maybe I should get back with Chip. At least with him there wasn’t any weird daddy drama.”

Foster jerked to attention immediately. “Maybe it’s best to leave the past alone. You should be moving on.”

“Maybe.” And as if on cue, a muffled cough came from the bedroom. Lynn looked at Foster in amused surprise. “You’ve got a visitor?”

He had jumped to his feet when Chip had coughed. Why hadn’t he thought of a way to get her out of the apartment? That thought had never even crossed his mind. Any fool would have done that.

“Who is it?” she whispered.

“Just someone I know. Listen, Lynn, there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you for a while now—”

Chip coughed again, and this time it was louder and followed by a few trailing notes of sleep talk. Lynn’s face lit up with recognition and shock. Her eyes peeled back until there were no lids discernible. She headed for the bedroom in a speed walk.

“Now, wait. Let me tell you how it happened.”

But she wasn’t hearing it. She left the kitchen behind and was now standing, gawking in disbelief at the bedroom door. Chip slept sprawled and mouth agape, just as he had done at her place many nights before. She wanted to scream and she wanted to cry, but all that came out was an angry whine.

“I’m in a vortex,” she said. “I’m in a fucking vortex and all around me are men and cigars and stupid... *stupid things!*” She turned to Foster enraged. “You’re all stupid things!”

Foster gave her a look of confusion.

“Never mind! I know it doesn’t make sense. But none of this does either. It’s all stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid!”

She raced out of the apartment a sight worse than when she had entered. Chip was awake now, staring in bewilderment at Foster in the doorway.

“Go back to sleep, babe,” Foster said.

Chip fell back to the pillow and was asleep before Foster could take a second blink.



## Chapter Eight

HALLOWEEN found the president's house hosting the faculty costume party. Not many of the professors had children of the trick-or-treating age, so there was no use for little bite-size candies or cheap decorations. Even at Christmas, Wendell's home had a dark, even funereal tone to it. Dark woods soaked up the light, and the old furniture—much nicer than what the other houses on campus were given—made everyone a bit cautious. Wendell tried to lighten the mood of the place, adding a lamp here or a flower there, but that too was soon absorbed by the house. A rose is a rose is a rose until placed in the president's home. Then it becomes something akin to living-dead vegetation.

The dark holiday brought good tidings for Chip, however. The fall sports were winding down, and soon Chip would have more time to spend with Foster. In his mind, he had a calendar marking off each day until the end of football season. Foster had seemed standoffish of late, though, as if something was weighing on him. Chip had an idea what it was. He vaguely remembered waking to the sight of Lynn in Foster's bedroom doorway two nights before. It was a dream memory, just as probable as it was silly. But when he had asked Foster about it, he hadn't gotten much in the way of an

answer. Something about cigar smoke and apologies. That had made no sense to Chip, so he let it be. If there was something he needed to know, Foster would tell him.

At the party, they were kings of class, though, no matter the secrets beneath their skins. They both wore dark tuxedos, and from a Halloween shop in town, Chip had bought them simple, elegant masks to wear, one white and one black. Chip had decided he would wear the black. Foster's mask had a long crooked nose. He smiled when he saw it. Chip was hoping for more of a response. "You know what they say about men with big noses," he said.

Nothing from Foster. Just a hint of regret in his eyes. Was he regretting something he'd done or something he had yet to do?

"Don't look at me with those eyes," Chip said. "You break my heart when you do."

They arrived together at a respectable time. There were some whispers of surprise from the other faculty when Chip and Foster arrived arm in arm, but these were soon swallowed by the jovial tones of the party. The president's house looked even more ominous than usual. The place simply reveled in the holiday. Wendell greeted them enthusiastically, dressed in all his regal best as King Henry VIII. It had been his Halloween costume for the past six years. He filled it well. The music was a mish-mash of old Halloween tunes and old Top 40. Wendell was never one for trends.

Chip found his coaching assistant, Lenny, and Katie Hammond chatting with some other members of the athletic faculty. It was evident they had been discussing Chip and Foster. Chip had expected this. There was an awkward pause when they joined the group. Chip stood shoulder to shoulder with Foster and even gave him a kiss on the cheek to show his colleagues, most of whom were

of the athletic stereotype, that this was not a prank. Foster was glad for the mask. He felt friendless, but for Chip. Lynn was nowhere to be seen.

“Are you two...?” Lenny was the first to broach the subject. He cleared his throat oddly and made a crisscrossing gesture with two fingers. He had refused to wear a costume to the party.

Chip smiled big and with anxious pride. “Yep.”

More silence. Faculty members from other disciplines, starving for gossip, hushed to whispers and inched closer to the athletic faculty to hear the conversation.

“So, how is God treating the gays these days?” the soccer coach asked. Agnes Brooks. Lifelong member of the *700 Club*. She, too, was not costumed, saying she had nothing against socializing at a party but would not be dressing up for a pagan celebration. Eyes from all around were on Foster, waiting for an explanation.

“Shit, Agnes,” Katie said. A female pirate, eye patch and all. “A sight better than he’s treating your churches, you cranky old bitch! Come on, Foster. Let’s see who’s worth talking to.” Katie took his arm and led him away from the somewhat hostile group.

“I don’t seem to be going over too well,” he said to her.

“Don’t you worry, baby doll. Chip will set them straight. I can see him seething through his mask.” And it was a good thing Foster had been directed elsewhere. Chip let loose a flurry of expletive-laden insults upon Agnes Brooks that would turn a green frog blue. She never talked to him again after that. Ever. He saw that as a victory. So did most of those around him.

“Damn, Chip,” said Lenny. “You just tore her up. *For a dude.*”

“He’s not just a dude, Len.” He could tell this was going to be a difficult process, this assimilation into a new personal definition. He had overestimated people.

“So, are you going to start marching in parades and shit?” The question was sincere, without a hint of sarcasm. Lenny actually pictured Chip in go-go shorts in San Francisco.

“Maybe. If he wants me to. But I doubt it.” Chip leaned over Lenny’s shoulder. “You know, of course, there are some damn hot lesbians in those parades, right?”

“Lesbians?” Lenny chirped. “Damn, I do love lesbians.”

“Chip.” Katie had come back to the group without Foster.

“Speak of the devil,” Lenny said.

“Where’s Foster?” Chip asked.

“He left. He said he had some things to get done at the chapel.”

Chip gave her his drink and headed quickly to the back garden door. He made his way easily through the crowd and caught the silhouette of Foster as he disappeared onto the college walk. Chip was not averse to running even if his knee hurt, so he gave chase.

“What’s wrong with him?” Lenny asked Katie.

“I think he’s about to get bit.”

JASON and Brad were in the back garden under cover of night. They had decided that egging the president’s house wasn’t quite daring enough, so they would do it while there were people awake and stirring inside it. What better opportunity than a party? This would

have been a perfect dare, but they didn't want to tell anyone else because there was no telling who was a friend or enemy. To tell their plans to anyone might have put the brakes on the whole thing. Brad had a time keeping his mouth shut around the host of braggarts in the dorm.

They had painted themselves in camouflage. This was a fitting look, both for what they had planned and due to the fact that it was, after all, Halloween. Nobody would suspect a thing. They'd blend in with all the other students who let their crazy show on this holiday. Brad had put the cartons of eggs on his lap and had covered them with a thick blanket. Jason had wheeled him down the walkway to the president's home. Students had rolled their eyes with the usual, "There go Brad and Jason." They hadn't gotten too many strange looks considering how they appeared, a blend of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* and *Platoon*.

Once the party got going at the president's house and the evening sky darkened, they'd positioned themselves in the garden. The guests were arriving through the front door. Egging that and not getting caught would be next to impossible, but egging the back of the house could be done. It was all about timing and precision. They just had to watch out for any of the guests who happened to wander out that way. When, on occasion, and before the egging commenced, this had occurred, they had posed as still as statuary. There was no light behind or around them so they had easily pulled it off.

"Cake, Jase," Brad said. "Easy as cake."

Just as Brad was getting ready to lob the first egg and begin the battery of revenge, however, the chaplain came outside. He stood for a moment and rubbed his head. Brad froze, his throwing arm high in the air, the egg nearly crushed by the sudden halt. Foster

looked in their direction and squinted, but then he walked on down the path and out of the garden. Brad, who had been holding his breath, let it out in a long, shaky stream.

With the momentum back once again, Brad readied to fire. But then the coach appeared. Again, Brad and Jason froze. Brad whispered a hushed “Shit!” Chip didn’t stand there for too long, though. The boys thought they had fooled him as he followed Foster’s path out of the back garden. Yet as they readied for a third attempt at wielding the mighty eggs, they heard Chip say, “Don’t even think about it, guys.”

The boys looked at one another, Brad still in the wheelchair. “What do you suppose is going on with those two?” Jason asked.

“Do you think they’re going to have The Sex?”

“It’s worth checking out.”

They set the eggs on the ground, and Jason cautiously wheeled Brad out of the back garden and onto the college path. The wheels of the old chair were a bit of a noisy nuisance, but Jason stayed far enough behind the coach so that he couldn’t hear. When they got onto the walkway, Brad got out of the chair. His ankle was well enough that he could manage the light exercise. They put the wheelchair against the topiary and bushes lining the walkway and crept toward the chapel. Chip and Foster were on the porch, under the light. They were talking, but the boys couldn’t yet hear what they were saying. Whatever it was, neither of them looked too happy.

Brad and Jason found a spot by some shrubbery. There was a bed of mulch, and they hunkered down in it to hear what they could. Brad nearly gave them away when he stepped in a low depression in the grass and came close to squealing in pain. Jason cupped his mouth, and they both sank to the ground in voyeuristic interest.

CHIP and Foster stood facing each other on the chapel steps. The light flickered overhead. *Something else to put on the to-do list*, Foster noted absentmindedly. He was staring into Chip's eyes through the holes in the mask. The emphasis on the eyes would only make what he was about to do harder.

"What's going on?" Chip asked, maybe for the tenth time. He had followed Foster to the chapel like a hungry puppy. "Tell me. You can tell me anything." He lifted the mask onto the top of his head.

Foster preferred to keep his where it was so it could hide something of his emotions. "You don't want me to tell you what I have to say, Chip. It'll hurt you. Can't you just go back to the party? Can't you just walk away?"

Chip's expression stumbled. He swallowed but tried to retain his smile. He understood now why Foster was keeping his mask on, but it was a useless act. Chip could still see Foster's emotion-racked eyes.

"It's infatuation. That's all," Foster said. "I thought it might have been love, but I was wrong. I was just looking for something. I didn't find it."

"Bullshit." It was as harsh an exclamation Chip had ever made to Foster. "You're scared of something. This is about Lynn. About what I woke up to the other night."

Foster walked to the edge of the steps. "It's about not hurting someone we both care for."

“But don’t you care for *me*? Because if you did, you’d see you’re killing me now, Foster.” He grabbed Foster’s arm. “Don’t break us up just to try and mend something that’s not even half as good.”

Foster faced Chip. He lifted the mask, his eyes oceans of tears. “Don’t you see me by now? I’m not that guy. I’m not the one who can hurt other people so easily. I was so hurt when Barry found someone else. I know that pain. I never want to do that to anyone.”

“But you didn’t! Lynn and I were already separated, remember?”

“Not in her eyes.”

“Well, that’s her own stupidity.” It was he who let the first tear fall. “Foster, don’t do this. Please.”

“A relationship should be built on a foundation of honesty. I feel like I’ve already doomed us by not telling Lynn.”

“That doesn’t make sense at all. You want honesty? How about this: the reason I ran out of the chapel the first time was because I found myself so attracted to you I didn’t know how to react. The reason I ran the second time? Because the woman I had slept with after I ran out the *first* time was in the congregation.”

“Well, there you have it,” Foster said, defeated. He leaned in and kissed Chip’s lips gently, wiping away a tear with his thumb. “Goodbye.”

He lowered the mask again and walked into the chapel, closing and locking the door behind him. Chip stood dumbfounded momentarily, then tore the mask off his head and made his way across the quad alone.



## Simple Men

---

153

In the shrubbery, having been witness to the heartbreak and obvious love, Jason and Brad finally found a name for what existed between them. They made love as the party went on in the president's house behind them.

## Chapter Nine

CHIP was desperate for an hour. He tried to call Foster, but the chaplain had turned his phone off. *I guess he'd be expecting me to do that*, Chip thought. *Man, I'm whipped!* He sat on the edge of his bed and rubbed his eyes and forehead raw. He'd stripped off the tuxedo on his way in the house. It lay in pieces from the car to the bedroom. His eyes were red from pain, but he refused to let himself shed another tear. He wasn't that sort of man. Foster was the crying sort, not him.

In the end, he was glad Foster didn't answer. Chip didn't know what he would have said anyway. He was not going to beg. He had done that to death at the chapel. Enough of that. Foster had made him weak. The chase had made him weak. No more chasing. No more men.

He realized his pride was getting in the way, but he had been naïve to think things would be so easy. Everything was going so smoothly that he assumed it would continue. He assumed that his friends and colleagues would automatically warm to the thought of him dating another man. Or at least, he wasn't too concerned if they didn't.

And now the same pride that had caused him to suffer football defeat like a knife to the gut was making him suffer all the more. He couldn't pick up the phone again. He couldn't even pass by the chapel again. Things had changed, and he didn't understand why. He wanted the answer. He wanted order. Simple men do.

The following nights were the worst for Chip. The daytime hours weren't so bad, as far as things went. He had his mind occupied, however briefly, by his career. But at night, when he lay in bed with no warm body to hold to, that's when he hurt the most. He stretched out for Foster, just to feel some phantom image. He was always left wanting. Sleep was not an easy thing to achieve, and when he did, it was filled with nightmares of loss and heartache. Why sleep at all, then? If dreams were indistinguishable from life, why have them?

He could have found distractions. Sleeping pills would knock him out for the night. And there were always women to take his mind off things if he felt too bad. But he found, strangely enough, that he didn't want a woman. He didn't want a man either. He wanted Foster. It was that simple. If he couldn't have Foster, he'd revel in the misery of not having Foster, and hope Foster was doing the same. This form of torture had a comfort to it. Still, Chip would turn the thrash metal to deafeningly loud when he couldn't keep Nina Simone from playing on a ghostly loop in his head.

He began working too hard. He was demanding perhaps more from himself than he could give, working longer hours than even when he was in the height of football season. His players felt the brunt of it. There were no jokes from the coach anymore. He was all seriousness, and he hollered like hell when the tiniest thing didn't go as planned in the last days of practice.

Finally, after nearly injuring himself in the gym, somebody said something. All agreed it was a courageous act, for the coach looked like a cornered pit bull most days. He was walking to his car in the rain. He didn't have an umbrella, so he was soaked. His sweats were dark and heavy. It was a cold autumn rain. The leaves on the trees had turned from brilliant orange and yellow to a dark brown. Chip felt no need to shelter himself from this or any other storm, figurative or literal. Behind him came the motorized purr of Katie's golf cart. The rain was so heavy he didn't hear her until she was nearly on top of him. She edged alongside him as he walked.

"You could have killed yourself in there. Maybe you should go to the infirmary to make sure you're not bleeding somewhere you shouldn't be." She had to talk above the motor and the rain. Katie had seen him pushing the treadmill to the brink, faster and longer; his legs must have been like jelly when he was finally thrown off by a misstep. No one dared to laugh.

"I'm fine." He kept walking, eyes to the ground.

"You're limping."

"I'm fine," he said more forcefully. "It's my injury from when I played. It acts up."

"Liar. Why don't you let me take you to your car?"

"No thanks."

She lay on the horn. "Get in the damn cart, asshole!"

He glared ahead for a moment, stopping still in his tracks, and then glared at Katie. She would not let him alone, so he gave up the idea of arguing and got into the cart. "I'm not going to be good company."

“Would it be too cliché to say you never are?” She drove on, though not as quickly as she usually did. “I was in love once.”

Chip gave her an oblique look. It was a strange subject offering. He had never heard Katie ever talk about her relationships.

“Yes, we’re sharing. Now listen. As I said, I was in love once. It was back in college. The best time of my life. The only romantic relationship I ever had worth anything. We’re freer in college to be who we really are, I think. It’s an in-between place. The rules of the world aren’t as imposing there, for some reason.”

They drove into the parking lot. Even the brightest cars had a murky darkness to them.

“She was scared, the girl I loved, and she broke up with me. Her family, her friends, all that stuff, you know? They didn’t like me. I’ll never understand why. I’m pretty great, if you ask me.” She paused to let him laugh internally. “And I let her go. Can you believe that? I let the best thing in my life get away without fighting for it like I should have. Since then, even my happiest moments have a sort of ugly tinge to them. Like a wormhole or something.”

The cart stopped behind Chip’s car. She turned to him. “Collect yourself, Chip, and if he still loves you, then you pursue him. If you both feel the same, it will turn out right. You’re both great guys. Hell, you’re one of the few straight guys I actually like.”

She made sense, of course. Chip was never one for giving up on things. Especially things he really wanted. Things he *needed*. And Katie almost had him convinced. But this thing with Foster was different. “I’m through chasing,” he said. He got out of the cart. “It was a phase. Just a curious phase. I just went through mine later than most. That’s all.”

FOSTER didn't know quite what to say at a time like this. He sat in a front pew and stared up at the cross. What does one say to the Lord when they don't have the heart God gave them anymore? "*God, please fix everything so I can have my cake—also known as my friendship with Lynn—and eat it too—also known as Chip.*" God wanted all his children to be happy. He had been told that all of his life, but did he truly believe it now? What if God was more hands-off than Foster had ever supposed? What kind of jerk had he been praising all these years?

The sonic landscape around him wasn't much help. He'd ask a question and seem to get an answer of unconcerned thunder from the cross, like a lover turning over in their sleep, trying to avoid your nagging and bothersome interest. The rain outside beat on the roof, steady and disinterested. The bird fluttered in the antique stove again. Not bothered by Chip or Foster at all, it had returned by route of the chimney and was now perfectly content to flit away in the darkness. One of these days Foster would remember to request the chimney be closed off so the bird couldn't nest there again.

*It's autumn, Lord. Shouldn't the bird be in a more southerly location? It seems all of your creation has gone a bit loopy lately.*

Being without Chip was like gasping for air. He felt as if he couldn't take in air quick enough. Yet he had to retain some sense of decorum. His job required it. His job didn't take into account, however, that his world was teetering on collapse around him; his emotional world anyway, his sanity. He couldn't so much as look at Chip. Avoidance was a necessary if childish act, for the time being. And Lynn hadn't talked to him or returned his calls. He'd seen her

# Simple Men

---

159

twice as they crossed paths in the quad, but she had acted as if he were not even there. Why couldn't he shrug it off? Why did he have to worry so much about the happiness of those around him when he himself was miserable? He wished he were more like Barry. The swearing off of a conscience looked rather appealing.

The door of the chapel swung open behind Foster. Not a soul seeking spiritual guidance, but the school president, Wendell, made his way in. He shook off his umbrella, completely involved in the task—his face fixed, his jaw clenched—then he saw Foster sitting at the front of the chapel and waved a fleshy paw. "It's a horrible wet day, dear Chaplain. Horrible and wet and, after the summer we've just had, desperately needed, I suppose."

With heavy strides, he waddled to the front and sat down beside Foster. All the air seemed to escape from him as he sat.

"What can I do for you today?" Foster smiled through his pain.

"Oh no. I'm not here for any spiritual enlightenment. But thank you; I do need it. I've done some things that would...." He laughed self-consciously. "No, I came here to see you."

"Me?"

"I've seen you out and about, and, pardon me for saying so, but you seem distracted of late. I like to make it a point to check in on the faculty from time to time, especially if they seem... saddened? It's my wife's influence, I guess. I wasn't much of a snoop before I met her."

"Thank you, Wendell. I appreciate it. But—"

"It's the coach, isn't it? You've parted affections."

Foster stared at him. What a strange way to phrase it. “Is it obvious? I didn’t realize many people knew we were... um, joining affections.”

“Joint affections are a specialty of mine.” Wendell moved in his seat as if he were to impart some grand advice, resting an arm on the back of the pew and his eyes on the wood floor. “Coach Arnold is distracted too. Whatever was there is still there. It’s like a link, like a chain, you see?”

“Any suggestions on how to break it?”

“No. You’ll get no advice from me on that matter. While it’s true it’s easier to sever something than to mend it, the mending is always more fulfilling, don’t you think? The only advice I can give you is this: don’t take anyone else’s advice on matters of your own heart. What the hell do they know about it? I’ve got no great answers for you.”

Foster grinned. “Your demeanor betrays that statement.”

“Yes. I’m afraid I’ve always rather looked like a wise old person, even when I was a screwy young person. It’s a horrible trick. How do you think I got my wife to marry me?” He patted Foster on the shoulder. “You’ll be okay. You’ve got the Big Man on your side, right?”

“Love and all its troubles—it’s all a mystery. I don’t think even he knows the answers.” Foster leaned back in the pew and raised his arms behind his neck.

“It’s all a mystery. This whole damned life.” Wendell grunted as he rose. “And you know what else is a mystery? How three cartons of rotting eggs got into my back garden. I’m off to dispose



of them. Nothing worse than the smell of rotten eggs.” Again, he touched Foster’s shoulder. “You’ll be alright.”

Foster nodded in appreciation of the offered comfort. He remained seated until Wendell had left. The rain still beat on the roof, and the bird still fluttered in the stove. It felt good to talk a bit about things to someone, even if no answers were offered. Foster rose and walked to the door. It was nearing lunch. He could get an apple from the dining hall, hopefully without seeing Chip. He noticed a scuff on the floor, and he bent to investigate. A nice, nearly perfect semi-circular pattern where the basin had hit stared up at him. He ran his index finger along it.

“I should leave,” he said. “I should leave at the end of the year. What other choice do I have?”

BRAD was stupefied. Either Trevor had totally lost his tiny mind, or he had grown balls as big as a Clydesdales. There he sat in Brad’s chair, in Brad and Jason’s room, flipping through the channels on Brad’s TV. He looked quite comfortable even when he saw Brad enter the room. Jason was still in class. He usually got back later than Brad. Some professors were more eager to get rid of their students than others.

Brad dropped his books to the ground with an angry thud. “What the fuck are you doing, bird turd?” He approached the chair and dumped the interloper to the floor with one shake of the chair.

Trevor got up, not shaken but still looking very content. A dirty sock from the floor that had adhered itself to his face fell off.

“How long did you think you could keep it secret? Your little tryst with Jason, I mean.”

“Dude, I want an answer to my question first.” Brad was serious about kicking some Moore ass. Trevor’s query to him hardly even registered. His ankle had fully recovered now, and he was itching to put it to a good test. Chasing Trevor downstairs and stuffing him in the dryer sounded just the thing.

Trevor unfolded a magazine in front of Brad. A nude male centerfold fell out of it. Brad realized what Trevor meant.

“This was addressed to Jason. Imagine how the other guys are going to feel when they find out who they’ve been showering with. Poor Jason.”

If there was ever a time to kill the little twerp, this would be it. He meant to “out” Jason, if not both of them, to the entire dorm. Brad didn’t know what to do. He stared through Trevor. Stared at him so hard it must have hurt, because Trevor flinched. Brad tried to grab the magazine away, but Trevor was faster. He jumped for the door.

“I got you now, don’t I? I got you now, Big Man.” He cackled with a kind of delight Brad thought only existed in Disney films.

Brad took to the chase after him, but once Trevor disappeared down the stairs, Brad gave up. What was the point? Trevor would tell everyone anyway. Beating him to a bloody pulp wouldn’t do a damn thing but get him in more trouble. By this time tomorrow, it would be all over campus that he and Jason were in some twisted relationship.

Brad went back to his room. He sat down in his chair and thought. There was really only one thing they could do. They needed

# Simple Men

---

163

to take control of the situation. This was the naming of it. This was where they would grow up. This moment. They would need to take the unsavory rumor and untwist it before it even got out. Before it became viral, they would own it themselves.

Jason came in from class five minutes later. Brad was still in his chair. Jason noticed he was being looked at with a strange kindness mixed with pity. It was an unnerving expression, especially coming from Brad. “We have to talk,” Brad said.

JASON and Brad stood outside the theater that night. They looked up at the valiant spire jutting into the air. “Are you sure this is the place?” Brad asked.

“Yep.” Jason had gotten on the phone after he and Brad had had their talk. Brock O’Connell had been excited to hear from him.

“We have a meeting tonight!” he had said in a way that wasn’t as surprised as Jason had felt it should have been.

“Well, let’s go in then.”

In the basement of the theater were rooms for classes and props. Jason and Brad walked past some of these, following the low hum of voices. It sounded more like a small party than a club meeting.

“Why are we doing this again?” Brad asked. “I mean, I know it was my idea, but....”

“Because it’s important to have the right support. We’re not going to get it from the guys in the dorm.”

“New friends. New friends we’ll have nothing in common with.”

They entered a room that looked more like a coffee house. Tattered couches and chairs had been pulled about haphazardly. A coffeemaker in the corner was situated next to mismatched rows of mugs with a sign above them that read PLEASE WASH AFTER USE. The lighting was comfortable and the music was low and inviting: the Indigo Girls. In all, there were about ten people there, including Brock O’Connell, all reading on the couch or doing their homework or talking about music. Jason and Brad were glanced at but not given serious attention until Brock saw them. When he finally saw Jason, he put down the magazine he was reading and ran up to him.

“It was so great to hear from you!” he said, grabbing Jason’s hand. Brad breathed deep. He quickly latched onto Jason’s other hand. “Welcome to the Gay and Straight Alliance.”

“There are straight people here?” Brad asked.

“Well, no. Not yet. But we’re pretty new to campus. There will be.”

Brad looked around the room. “This isn’t so bad,” he said. Then, with a booming voice, he raised his and Jason’s hands and said, “I’m Brad Park, and this is Jason Jordan, and we’re gay.”

Those in the room stared at him humorously.

“Jesus, Brad,” Jason said. “This isn’t Alcoholics Anonymous.”

## Chapter Ten

CHIP stood and watched the last few seconds of the game slip away. They would lose their last game of the year. This whole season had been a lesson in losing. Chip wouldn't be surprised if the athletic department demanded his resignation. He would give it to them without a fight.

The wind was bitterly cold out of the west, and the sky was a canvas of grey. Spectators—those who hadn't left already—were huddled up in the bleachers, wrapped in blankets and coats. They'd drunk their coffees and beers with more interest than they'd paid the entire game. Chip supposed it was his fault. He had been a lackluster coach the past couple of weeks. He had let his personal problems dictate his games.

Midway through the game, he had instinctively looked up to the bleachers for Foster. He had done it the weekend before as well. But of course there had been no sign of the chaplain, no smile of assurance. There had been just strangers and parents, all of them looking slightly irritated. When Chip had seen Trevor's mother in the crowd, he had known they would be sleeping together that night. She had looked at him like many women had looked at him before,

only this time he was not reacting to the flirtation so much as to the need within himself for some type of companionship.

Sex between the two of them was something like a coin-operated washing machine. Put the coin in, have your allotted time; then you're done. There was nothing sensual to it. At least, not for Chip. He had sensed that she had other motives as well, but he didn't care. He used protection. If she wanted a baby, she wasn't going to get one through him. That didn't seem to be what she wanted, though.

He sat beside her in his bed for a long, silent moment after sex. Her hair was fuller than when they had first met. It looked good on her, messed up from sex. She pulled out a cigarette and puffed on the cliché. Chip hated cigarettes. Nobody had ever smoked after sex with him before. He thought that was something out of James Bond movies. He thought she should have been embarrassed to employ that particular plot device. Foster would have laughed.

Chip felt nothing but guilt, as if by sleeping with this woman again, he had betrayed Foster. In a way, he had. He knew they still cared for each other even if they couldn't show it, or rather, even if Foster wouldn't *let* him show it.

He rose, sliding on his boxer shorts. Trevor's mom watched him as he dressed and went to the bathroom. "Am I to take this as a hint for me to leave?" she asked. She had a languid, sultry tone.

Chip looked at himself in the bathroom mirror. *You guilty motherfucker*, he thought. Guilt can turn a person ugly damn quick. He was starting to notice it. "Do what you like," he said.

"Did I ever tell you about my husband?" she asked, still in the bed, leaning against the headboard with her cigarette. "Football stars can be quite a handful. Not always the most attentive men. They're

# Simple Men

---

167

quite selfish, actually. But I do what I want, so I suppose there's something good that comes from it."

Chip washed his face, hearing but not truly listening to a word she was saying.

"He's a hero to millions. Trevor worships him. Of course, that's normal for boys. They all worship their fathers." She blew out a thick stream of smoke. "But being a hero's wife... well, that's not such an easy thing. The world judges you just as much as they judge your husband. Everyone looks at you a bit different. Everyone is waiting for you to fuck up. When you're a hero's wife, you have to learn to take things where you can get them. That's one thing I have learned from being married to a star, to a hero. If I want something, I get it. I get it or I take it. You have to look out for yourself in this world. You have to hide your feelings. You have to be okay with becoming bitter. If you're okay with all that, you can have anything. Any pretty little toy you want."

FOSTER was horrified. Barry—the ex, the betrayer, the cheat—was standing at his door. He hadn't even gone to the chapel; he had come straight to Foster's apartment. He looked much the worse for wear. His hair hadn't been combed, he needed a good shave, and his eyes were allergy-colored red. He was dressed in rumpled clothes, and he held a batch of lilies. "Forgive me?" he said.

*What was he expecting?* Foster wondered. That the sorry shape he was in would automatically convince Foster to take him back? Foster knew Barry better than Barry thought. Foster had seen Barry pull a tactic very close to this to get his job back once. It was

disgusting then, and it was disgusting now. Foster felt ashamed that he had helped Barry on that particular occasion, but he hadn't wanted to lose him. He had been afraid of being alone.

"Give me another chance," Barry said, holding out the lilies.

Foster sighed. "Barry, you need more than that. But I'm not the guy to give it to you." He pushed the flowers back.

"Can't I come in? We can talk about it." He smiled pleadingly. This had always worked for him in the past.

Foster was tempted to let him in. There were Bible stories that ran in parallel to something like this. It would have been nice to feel the touch of someone next to him in bed, even if that someone had lost all attraction to Foster now. There was comfort in complacency, in sameness. Routine poked its sleepy eye at Foster over Barry's slumped shoulder. There was a moment when Foster nearly said yes. But, having been with Chip for a while now, Foster recognized the difference between desperation and devotion.

Without a word, he shook his head and shut the door. Barry stood there for a moment longer. He even called for Foster, but soon, realizing Foster had changed, he left for good.

ON A campus as small as that of Verona College, it was impossible not to run across someone you were trying to avoid. Unless there was care taken to study the other person's daily routine, to know the paths they took, to—in effect—become a stalker, there was no doubt you *would* have a run-in eventually. Physical laws must be obeyed. Lynn Hewes did not intend to ignore or avoid Chip or Foster forever. She just wasn't certain when the comfort index would register back



# Simple Men

---

169

down to normal for her, and she never liked to push such things. Like everything else in her life, anxiety gave her a rash.

She didn't notice Chip until he was standing right beside her in the dining hall, piling his tray with everything offered him. She was so busy choosing between a chocolate éclair and chocolate mousse that she only saw him when his big hand reached in front of her and took one of the chocolate mousse bowls. She thought it very rude but said nothing.

"Sorry to make you wait." She smiled, all bright stars and innocence. "I can be so indecisive."

He said nothing. He didn't even look at her. His handsome scowl was directed at his tray, as if he were unhappy with a choice he made.

"So, how are things?" she tried again.

He looked at her now. She swallowed in nervous anticipation of his answer, keeping the smile and look of innocence. "Things are things," he said. He hopped the line over her and went on foraging through the buffet.

"I guess we won't be patching things up today," she mumbled under her breath.

She felt a small but firm grasp on her elbow. Katie Hammond stood beside her, tray in hand. "We need to talk," she said. She pulled Lynn out of line abruptly.

"But I've not paid!"

"Shut up and listen to me."

Lynn hushed at once. Katie always looked mean, but now she looked absolutely angry. "You want to help Chip?" Katie said.

“Well, then you fix all this shit with Foster. That’s what it all comes down to.”

“I hardly think—”

“They’re in love, dummy. Can’t you see that?”

Lynn felt a bit self-conscious. As if the entire dining hall was listening in on their conversation. “In love? They just met this year. I know love. I know Chip. Chip is as heterosexual a man as they come.”

“You don’t know love at all. What’s sex got to do with love?”

Lynn knew Katie was right, of course. She was just finding it very difficult to be wrong. “Well... what can I do about it? It’s not my fault they’re split up.”

“Chip is miserable without Foster, and vice versa. You need to tell your friend that it’s okay if he sees your *other* friend. This is something you *have* to do. Have you seen the woman Chip is sleeping with?”

Lynn was taken aback. “He’s sleeping with another woman?”

“And she’s a vampire.”

“But what about me?”

“You’re a real piece of work, Pollyanna. Get over it! Get over your little hang-ups, whatever they are, and get back with Luke. He likes you. He likes you a lot. Do that so Chip and Foster can get on with their life together. See how easy that is?”

Lynn suddenly didn’t feel hungry anymore. She looked at her tray as if it were inedible, a collection of fake food, a 3-D collage. “What are you?” she said. “The campus love therapist?”

“Yeah, bitch, I’m their fairy godmother.” Lynn struggled with being called a *bitch*. “I’m just being a friend to Chip. Try doing the same for Foster.”

Katie gave her a sobering look and then walked to a table where some of her runners were sitting. Lynn stood immovable for a moment. She was anchored in a muck of emotions. Love. Relationships. Human responsibility. What a mess. She put the chocolate mousse back where she had gotten it in the buffet and left the dining hall for a walk. That was one thing she really enjoyed about the campus. There was always plenty of space to walk and think.

CHIP buttoned himself against the cool wind that was blowing up the valley and headed back to his office in the fitness center. The rain had stopped. He’d be sure to shut the office door when he got there so no one would bother him.

Running into Lynn Hewes really stuck in Chip’s craw. He hadn’t had a chance to enjoy his mountain of food or even sit down before Lynn decided to speak to him. Lynn had irritated him before when they were dating, but those were all little things. Quirks, they were called. Seeing her in the dining hall sent Chip into an inner rage. It wasn’t anything she had said. Maybe it was the way she had said what she *did* say. Like nothing at all had happened. Like she wasn’t the reason he was in misery and shacking up with a chain-smoking former gold digger just so he could feel some sort of human contact.

No one wants to be alone. There's nothing in the world as bad as Alone. Maybe Trevor's mom was right. Just play with the toys. One breaks, you get a new toy. But that sounded so harsh. And yet, Chip realized that's how he had acted most of his adult life. When one woman had disappointed him or had wanted to get too serious, he had gone on to a brand new toy. It now made his stomach churn. And then he met Foster, and suddenly it became Chip who wanted to get serious. He had never known a connection like the one between him and Foster.

But it had been viciously yanked away. He hadn't seen the chaplain for over a week, though he'd looked for him everywhere. Foster was adept at avoidance. Of course, all Chip had to do was head to the chapel. The uncertainty of what might happen was what stopped him. In his head, every fantasized attempt at resolution would become messy. *Very* messy, very fast. For the time being, he preferred the loose thread he was dangling from to the mire he couldn't see.

Jason Jordan and Brad Park came out of the gym doors as Chip approached. They didn't see him, most likely busy plotting some teammate's downfall. From what he heard, they were a couple now. An honest-to-God gay couple on the Verona College campus. Not that there hadn't been gay couples before, but Jason and Brad were well-known football players. It had caused a bit of a murmur. *Good for them*, Chip thought.

He wondered if maybe he should try to find another guy to sleep with. Trevor's mom definitely wasn't doing it for him. Maybe a guy would get him out of his funk. But on thinking it, he knew it was ridiculous. The answer came back to him: the guy, whoever it was, wouldn't be Foster. He wanted to rip the door off its hinges as he went inside the fitness center.

His teeth were unclenched, however, as he saw Foster in the foyer, coming out from a noontime workout. They stood still, both of them staring across the foyer as if it were a body of treacherous water, unthinkable to cross. There was a moment when Chip thought everything would be all right. Foster smiled and raised his hand. Chip saluted back, an uncertain gesture. *So what now?* he thought. *What now?*

Nothing. Foster lowered his hand, looked to the floor, and left without a word. Chip stared at where Foster had been standing. He thought of chasing him down, of demanding that they see things through. He imagined it would be a sweeping, romantic speech and Foster would immediately be won back over, fuck the obstacles. But Chip knew he had no such skills. Whatever he said would come out sounding like jock gibberish, like he was desperately trying, which, of course, would be absolutely true. All he could really think to say was *Come back to me! Come back to me!* His gut told him the answer would be a less desperate, if aching: *No*.

## Chapter Eleven

KATIE was right. Lynn resented that fact, but it *was* a fact. She tossed and turned on it all night until she beat her pride back to a manageable size. Chip would have called this situation a mess. He probably *was* calling it a mess. And she could only imagine what he was calling her if Katie was right, if Lynn had come in between a blooming relationship. Still, “relationship” and “Chip” were odd words to be in the same sentence. Leave it to a Man of God to tame God’s Gift to Women.

She called Foster up in the morning, and he answered the phone with notable trepidation—notable to Lynn, anyway. “Can we talk?” she asked.

They met at the library. Foster brought them each a cappuccino from the coffee shop, and they walked around the campus. The rain from the day before had left everything a darker shade of life. The ground was muddy on the sidewalks. The leaves had fallen from their branches and had left the trees bare and sleeping. Foster and Lynn walked at a slow pace, trying to get past the initial awkwardness by taking big drinks from their cups and hugging themselves tight in their coats.

“The thing is,” Lynn finally said, “I overreacted to seeing the two of you together. I mean, don’t get me wrong. It was very shocking. Chip has always been....”

“Such a straight guy?”

“Yes. A big one. To see him in your bed threw me. And it’s not even that I’m in love with him. I’m really not. I never have been. It’s just that... at least when I was with him, I wasn’t alone.” She took a drink and looked into the open cup as if it would present some answers, some augury. “I guess I was jealous. There, I said it. I’m a terrible person for it, I know.”

“No, you’re not. There are very few people who are any good at being alone.”

“You seemed to be good at it.” She was embarrassed by her own abruptness and tried to recover. “I meant, after you and Barry broke up. You seemed to get back on your feet so easily.”

“Did I?” His mind went to the image of Barry showing up at his apartment and the strangeness that followed. “It’s an art of balance, I suppose. You try to find things to keep the fragile smile on your face from dripping off like a watercolor.” He looked to her. “I wasn’t always successful. There were nights when praying wouldn’t do me a bit of good and I’d tear holes in pillows to keep from howling.”

She took his hand. “You’re the better for it now.”

Foster smiled in appreciation. “I’m sorry for not telling you about me and Chip. I meant to. I just could never figure out how.”

“I doubt it would have gone any differently if you had. You know me.” She laughed self-consciously. “Find me a handle and I’ll fly off it.”

They stopped at the river bend and stared out on the water. A large coal barge was making its way downstream. They were selfish ships, allowing hardly any room for the other boats on the river.

“So now you can get back with him. I’m fine with that.” Lynn didn’t sound so sure of herself. “I *will* be fine with that.”

Foster’s glance skimmed off the barge and to the hills beyond. “I’ve decided to leave next year. I’ve tendered my resignation.”

Lynn turned to him, shocked. “Because of me?”

He tried to be comforting. “Because of many things.”

“You can’t leave! Chip will hate me. He’ll absolutely hate me.”

“I think this is for the best. For me. For Chip. For you. I’ve contacted the seminary about scouting a job for me elsewhere.”

“Isn’t there anything I can say? Any amount of apologies?”

He embraced her and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. “No.”

He left her there, stunned and directionless. She looked back to the barge. It was drifting farther away, giving the river back to others that needed it. It might have been true that there was nothing she could say to Foster to get him to change his mind, but Wendell had the final word as far as resignations went. She took a quick drink from her cappuccino and dug her heels into the ground, heading up the slope to Wendell’s office in the administration building. Lynn did not want to be responsible for ruining two people’s lives. She knew what happened to people in literature who did that. They became villains and died in some horrid way involving fire or cannibalism. Or both.

The scene was straight out of Hollywood when Lynn burst past Wendell’s secretary—and the secretary’s vehement protests—and



flung the door of Wendell's office wide. She was proud of herself, encouraged on by a running snippet of the "1812 Overture" in her head. The college president jolted in his chair, papers flying from his desk. "Well, well, well, well...."

"You can't let him go!" Lynn leaned red-faced and breathless over his desk. "You can't allow it. It's all my fault he wants to go anyway. If anyone should go, it should be me. Let them be together. I don't want to be the villain! You can't let him go!"

"Good heavens, Professor Hewes! What are you talking about?"

"Foster. He said he's tendered his resignation. You can't accept it."

Wendell settled back in his chair. "Oh, that. Well, what do you propose I do? The man is clearly uncomfortable being here. I can understand that. It's a small school. It's virtually impossible to avoid someone, and you're most likely aware of what's happened between him and Coach Arnold. If not, then you're the only one on this gossip campus."

"But you like him!" She realized she was pleading, but what choice had she?

"That has nothing to do with it. A person can't run a school like that. If I refused the resignations of everyone I liked... well, things wouldn't be that different, but you understand what I mean."

Lynn fell into a chair, defeated. The office had the college's fingerprints all over it: official-looking furniture, pompous-looking portraits, and a large window in front of which sat Wendell at his desk.

"Have a seat," Wendell said after the fact.

He studied her for a moment. He was relieved she wasn't the crying type. Lynn seemed to be much like his late wife, passionate but able to keep her emotions in check... usually. "I tell you what," he said. "I'll wait to show his resignation to the board. You have a week and a half to get him to change his mind. That's all I can offer."

Lynn was immediately changed. She stood up so quickly that Wendell again started in his seat. "Thank you! Yes. That's all I need. I'll do it. No problem." She leaped around the desk and gave him a hug.

"Well, well, well, well.... That's fine. Okay...."

She nearly skipped to the door when Wendell called to her. "Professor Hewes."

"Yes?"

"I really like this young fellow. If I had had a son... well...."

Lynn nodded and closed the doors behind her. Wendell sat at his desk, thinking on the charming chaplain. "A wedding would be nice next summer," he said aloud. "I wonder which of them would be the bride." He pressed on the intercom. "Grace, find me a gay wedding magazine. They have those, right? And, for God's sake, get in here and help me clean this place up. Why, there are papers all over the damn floor!"

BRAD and Jason were a slovenly pile in the bed, flipping through TV channels. Football season was over, and they could be as lazy or as wild as they wanted. They chose lazy. It was a cold night, and though the dorm was heated just fine, they bundled up in a thick

# Simple Men

---

179

blue comforter and felt each other's hearts try to catch rhythm with one another. They wondered why they hadn't been more honest with each other sooner.

Brad had no reason to be off his ankle as much as he was now, but Jason kept him lazy. Jason liked doing things for the people he loved. Perhaps this was a need he felt from having grown up with his mother, a trait learned through necessity. Every so often Brad would graze a kiss on Jason's forehead in thanks.

The wall shook and loud guffaws broke through, unsettling Brad and Jason. Trevor's ever-present voice could be heard above the laughter. Not that he was any louder than the rest of the guys he was partying with, but because he was the one who had fallen against the wall.

"He's trying to usurp your role as Chief Ruckus Rouser," Jason said.

"That's not a ruckus. That was a trip. He couldn't rouse a ruckus if his name was Ruckus McRuckerson."

There was a sudden quiet from next door. "They're up to something," Jason said.

Then laughter and bellows spilled into the hallway and finally into Brad and Jason's room. Trevor burst open the door, drunk as he had ever been. His face was flushed, and he staggered about in something that was supposed to resemble dancing. The fly on his jeans was down and out of it poked a frankfurter. He shook it about suggestively. His entourage, who were just as drunk as he, went nuts for the moves.

"You like wieners?" Trevor blared. "How about *this* wiener?"

Brad and Jason righted themselves. Brad gave Jason a wink. "That's hot," he said, playing along.

"Yeah, it is," Jason agreed. "Why don't you come over here and show Daddy a good time." More howls from the assembled.

Brad leisurely walked to Trevor, who was the only boy in the vicinity who thought the joke was on Brad. Trevor's drunken face lost a little courage as Brad approached, but he stood his ground as best he could, given his intoxication level.

Brad took hold of the hot dog seductively. Trevor's face suddenly turned to fear as he felt his own dick stir a bit. Brad understood the expression too well. He tore the hot dog from the zipper and tossed it to Jason. Brad held Trevor down and forced open his mouth as Jason fed him the wiener.

Having heard enough of the laughing minions, Jason slammed the door on their faces so that it was just the three of them. "There," he said. "Now you've eaten wiener too."

Brad let Trevor up, who was clearly flustered, coughing up bits of dog. "I hate hot dogs, guys! You guys are jerks."

"You do it to yourself," Jason said.

"Yeah. Well, my mom's getting it on with the coach. I'm going to be his favorite soon. He's not a gay anymore, see? You two can't be his favorites anymore."

Brad rolled his eyes. "What are you, three?"

Jason took the intonation of a teacher. "Trevor, have you ever thought what might happen when your dad—Mr. Studly Football Star—finds out that your mom is messing around on him?"

## Simple Men

---

181

It was apparent by his face that Trevor had not, in fact, thought of that particular situation. “What... no. I—”

Jason opened the door again. “Go sober up and think about it then.”

Trevor left the room quiet and contemplative, disaster sloshing through his inebriated brain. The other guys, having been listening at the door, cleared a path for him as if he were a man condemned. They had stopped laughing and were now simply rubbernecking.

Jason looked at Brad. “What do you think *will* happen to the coach?”

“He’s a big dude. He can take care of himself... right?”

“Right.”

## Chapter Twelve

THE weekend before Thanksgiving Break it was a Verona College tradition that Growler alum would return and play a game of football. Since many of them were still struggling with injuries they had received while at Verona and on the team, the tradition had been changed in recent times to a game of flag football. This demotion met with little resistance and common sense won over bravado.

These games always brought out a good crowd. Students, faculty, and alumni showed up in their coziest clothing, and coffee and cakes were served under a heated tent to the side. The alumni games were played in the practice fields. Easily constructible bleacher stands were set up, but many people chose to be on their feet, milling about and socializing. The games were always examples of good humor and lots of laughter, even when one team was flailing in defeat. The crowds cheered on their aging heroes.

Chip was on the field, trying his best not to get too aggressive. It was a challenge. His season had been rough, and his personal life had been even rougher. Halftime was near, but Chip's sweats were already muddy rags. Still, this was preferable to being in the stands. There he would have to deal with Trevor's mom. Well, he would if Trevor's mom wasn't seated with her son and her football star

husband. Chip did get a good look at Trevor's face, and the boy looked nervous as all hell for some reason. He was completely ignored by his father, which explained a lot.

Chip did not see Foster arrive with Lynn midway through the first half. They sat a few seats behind and to the right of the Moore's. Foster was wrapped in a thick pea coat and a grey scarf. Lynn was a bit more colorful, choosing pink and red. Luke was going to meet them at the game later, though he had work to attend to first.

"I don't know why you dragged me here," Foster said. "I'm trying to move on, remember?"

"Don't be so hasty! Things are never set in stone."

"My resignation is."

She didn't reply but caught sight of Wendell a few seats down. He nodded at her knowingly. She gave a thumbs-up. Lynn could pull off that particular gesture without it looking overdone. She had the face for it.

"What's that about?" Foster asked.

"Nothing. Just saying hello."

Foster thought Lynn was acting very strange, but then maybe it was her adjusting to a new aspect of their friendship. They had never had a disagreement before. Maybe she was overcompensating for it somehow.

He watched his breath dissolve in the air in front of him. He could not keep his eyes off the field once he saw Chip. The man could pull off muddy sweats the way a supermodel could pull off jeans. Clothes loved him. They clung greedily to every muscle. Foster felt that tug in his gut direct from his heart. That breathless

reaction he remembered from when he first realized he might be in love. His eyes watered, and he prayed that Lynn didn't look his way. He prayed she wouldn't say a word. He wouldn't have been able to respond. His throat was closing on him. If anyone's prayers meant anything, surely those of a chaplain carried some weight.

Chip, hot from exertion, ripped off his sweatshirt. There was an audible intake of air from the collected straight women and gay men in the seats. Even a few of the other players seemed a bit distracted. Of course, Chip knew this reaction would occur. He embraced it while trying not to *show* that he was embracing it, pretending he didn't feel the drop in air pressure around him. It was always the simple things that brought the most pleasure, he told himself.

"Who cares?" Trevor's dad shouted. "Put your shirt back on."

Foster glared at the cocky ball player a few seats away, thinking diabolical vengeance. He'd pray for forgiveness later. From directly below him, though, the young football player who had gotten him so flustered in the chapel with his sexual confession cursed back to the star, "Douche!"

There was laughter. Trevor cowered beside his mother, who was far past caring and rapidly approaching drunk.

Trevor's dad made a balled fist. Brad came back with, "Do somethin'!" And that's where it ended. At least for Trevor's dad.

On the field, having been distracted by the insult from the stands, Chip scanned the crowd. His eyes skipped past the football star and found the chaplain. Everyone disappeared but Foster, his face outshining all the others. It was a little moment, but happening in the middle of a game, it was still an odd pause. Brad and Jason followed Chip's gaze up to Foster; Trevor's mom, who at first



# Simple Men

---

185

thought Chip was staring at her, realized the truth and took a hefty drink; and Lynn gave a triumphant gesture to Wendell. The president gave her a wink and a nod.

Halftime, and Chip's team was a bit ahead. He'd played strongly for most of the game, up until he had been distracted. After that, their lead faltered.

The crowd surged for snacks and the beer garden. Chip tried to keep an eye on the whereabouts of Foster. The last he had seen him, he had still been in the stands with Lynn. Chip had planned to get up there and talk to him—just talk to him, that's all. Obstacles in the form of alumni and faculty kept blocking him, though.

"Nice, but you can play better."

"What was going on with you there at the end?"

"Just because you look like *that* doesn't give you the right to throw the game!"

Chip didn't care about any of these comments. He only wanted to find his way up to Foster. He was scared to actually speak to him again, but it would be a weight off his shoulders. He knew it. Just as he thought he had a clear shot to Foster, though, Trevor's mom blocked his path. She stood, drink in hand, her head high and judging. Over her shoulder, Chip could see Trevor staring at them nervously from the stands. Trevor's dad was busy playing the superstar with fans and admirers. Trevor was the invisible boy.

"Your place or my hotel?" she said. She gave him an apathetic stare.

"Listen... Gladys," (What *was* her name?) "I was—"

“Relax. It was a joke.” She took a drink and looked around. “And my name is Gloria.”

He was at once embarrassed and annoyed by her. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, handsome. You’re not breaking any hearts here. I used you; you used me. We were shiny new toys to each other for a moment.”

It wasn’t an analogy he much cared for, but it was true.

“But now that you’ve found something better, treat it better. That tasty chaplain looks like a tender heart.” She tapped him on the chest with long dark fingernails and walked away.

Chip looked up at Foster in the seats. Foster was darting nervous glances at him. Those beautiful eyes glistened and pleaded. Gloria was right about Foster having a tender heart. Chip would need to think of something to say. He couldn’t just march up to him and say, “So, you wanna get back together?” That’s what he wanted to say, though. He wanted to tackle the subject head-on, but he was certain that would be moving too fast. Take it slow. Think.

He turned cautiously and made his way to the coffee and cake tent. What he needed was a walk. Time to think and build up something grand and beautiful. He had half an hour before the rest of the game.

“Coffee, black,” he said to the attendant.

FOSTER felt pathetic as he sat in the stands. Chip had turned for the coffee tent, leaving the chaplain feeling like the lone kid standing against the wall at a high school dance. He was in his thirties, for

# Simple Men

---

187

God's sake. When would he stop needing affirmation from others? A little voice told him "Never." He hated that little voice sometimes.

"Go talk to him," Lynn urged. "Go after him!"

"He was just talking with Mrs. Moore. Clearly he's over me." Saying it was heartbreak. Until then, there remained the possibility that he and Chip might somehow recover. That surprised him, because he thought his mind had been made on the matter. But being at the game, watching Chip on the field, he wasn't so certain he could leave Verona College.

"Bullshit!" People sitting around them gasped at the crazy woman cursing at the chaplain. She quieted down. "And you don't believe it either. That slut walked away in defeat. I saw it, and so did you."

"I'm sure she's a good person."

"Who cares? I don't care if she's Julia Roberts. He loves you."

Foster sat in silence. He brushed his hair back from his forehead and fixed his glasses. Lynn spotted Luke the Science Guy as he made his way with a couple of coffees to where she and Foster sat.

"Sorry I didn't bring you one," he said as he handed Lynn a cup and sat beside her. She accepted it graciously.

"Not a problem," Foster said, giving Lynn a surprised glance. He had no idea they were back together.

"I called him. We talked things out. I told him to meet us here if he had the time." The coffee cup was full, and she spilled some of it on her coat as she took the plastic lid off. Foster's face lit up as he remembered something.

“Lynn, have you seen Katie Hammond anywhere today?”

Lynn was confused. “I think I saw her watching by the IM fields in her cart.”

Foster stood and almost lost his footing.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I just... I think I might—never mind. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” He sprinted down the stands. Lynn and Luke looked at one another, confused and adorable.

CHIP wandered away from the crowd with his cup of mediocre coffee in hand. The annual alumni flag football game was something like homecoming. People actually came back for it year after year. People tailgated at it. This seemed oddly extravagant to him, especially since the game really didn’t mean anything of athletic standing to the school. But people took whatever they could when it was offered to them. Good times seemed rare in the world, and with alcohol on hand, *any* time could be a good time.

Brad and Jason rushed past him, as giddy as kids at a school fair running for the cakewalk. He knew their “up to no good” laugh when he heard it. The boys had bulges and bundles in their jackets. A stream of toilet paper flagged from Brad’s shoe. Not terribly clever. Chip followed them to the parking lot at his own leisure. Whatever they were doing, they’d still be doing it by the time he got there. A prank is only funny when it’s meticulously executed.

The boys were not hard to find. They were decorating Mr. Moore’s expensive car, which, of course, had been parked well

away from all the other vehicles so as not to get scratched. Chip stood back and watched them from beneath a tree. They threw the rolls of toilet paper back and forth in a ballet of grace and glee. The rolls twisted in the air, then came down streaming the car. Jason ran circular around the vehicle as if he were in some ancient mystery orgy, some ritual. In the end, the car looked even better wrapped than it had all bright and shiny. It was as delicate and pretty a toilet papering as probably had ever happened. And at the very end, the boys quickly and lightly kissed over the hood. They did it so spontaneously that it seemed a natural finale to the dance.

Chip knew that, as a faculty member, he should do something. He should chide the boys and send for Wendell immediately. But the kiss stalled him. It charmed him. And besides, Trevor's dad was a complete ass. So, quietly, Chip snuck away and left the boys to their future and their fun.

With the game at halftime, people wandered about like patrons at a state fair. The smell of grilled hot dogs and chili filled the air, and more than once, Chip had to turn down an invite to tailgate at the back of a truck or a station wagon. He was content with his coffee. He kept walking, trying to think up that grand and heartwarming speech for Foster. The one that would convince him of their eternal link. *Eternal link? Was that poetic enough?*

Lynn and Luke came strolling out of the crowd. They were linked arm in arm, each holding a coffee, and walking in such a languid manner that any fool could see they were lost in one another. Their eyes had that hazy, slightly too relaxed look. The look that said they didn't need to be aware of anyone else, because they had each other. It was a look that Chip understood and wished they'd return to its rightful owner—him.

Upon noticing Chip, Lynn whispered something to Luke, who gave a quick nod to the coach and then left her side, strolling back to the stands. She stood before Chip now as if he had called her over.

“Does your boyfriend not like me?”

“I told him that you and I needed to talk.”

“An understanding guy, considering we dated.”

“Yes. And he shaves properly too.”

Chip let the remark slide. “Listen. I need to apologize.”

“For what?” Lynn asked. They began to walk. He slipped his muddy and wet sweatshirt back on. “I was the one who caused the friction between you two.”

“Yes. You were. But I need to apologize for not telling you about us in the first place. And before that, for leading you on. For making you think that a relationship could ever have happened between us.”

“I don’t think I was led on by you. I had a hand in it too. We were co-conspirators in our mutual deception, I guess,” Lynn said.

“Me no likey big words.”

Lynn laughed. “We weren’t good together. How’s that?”

“Me and Foster really didn’t mean to make you feel so bad, Lynn.” Chip looked around. “Where is Foster? Wasn’t he sitting with you?”

“He was.” She paused. “I don’t know where he went.”

Chip thought maybe he’d have to put the grand speech off to another day.

“And I’ll admit, I did feel a bit like January second,” she said.

# Simple Men

---

191

“What?”

“Unnoticed. You know, after January first is over, January second is just sitting there. Nothing special. Nothing ever happens on January second. But I got over it. There is one thing I’ve wondered about, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Did I make you gay? I know it’s a stupid question, and I’ve scoffed at people on talk shows saying stuff just like that before, but I can’t help it. You were always such a....”

“Jerk?” Chip smiled. “No. I guess my feelings for Foster were always there, waiting for Foster to come along. I’m an ex-straight now.” He laughed at his own wit.

“Friends again?” she asked, holding out her hand. Chip stopped walking and shook it. “Good.”

Luke waited at a distance behind them with two fresh cups of coffee. “I’ll tell Foster to find you,” Lynn said. She patted his shoulder and joined Luke. They were a cute couple. Perfectly petite and suited for one another.

Chip turned and continued walking. He wasn’t too concerned if he didn’t play the second half of the game. The older guys always needed more rest time anyway. Halftime often became the length of another game altogether.

He was nearly done with his coffee. Nothing too inspirational was coming to mind. Nothing that would make Foster swoon. But then, Foster liked simple things, didn’t he? That was one of the most refreshing things about him. Perhaps simple words were best. Poetry was fine for fancy wooing, but simple words were best in circumstances described as “desperate.”

Approaching from behind, Chip heard Katie's cart. The horn honked a sickly tune. It sounded the worse for wear; she'd need to get that checked soon. He turned to greet her. Somehow, she always knew just where to find him, as if he had a tracking device on him. As he turned, he saw she had a passenger in the cart with her. He swallowed, and everything he had stored away as possible things to say to Foster fell right out of his head. The sight of the man's face had that effect on Chip.

Katie stopped in front of him, and Foster got out of the cart carrying a small white sack. "Thanks for the ride," he said to Katie.

"Anytime, baby doll." She gave Chip a solid wink and drove off, back to the game. She honked her horn as she went, chasing down those she didn't deem worthy of being near her.

Foster held up the sack. "It's a chocolate muffin." He shook the sack a bit, urging Chip to take it. "Can't be mad with a muffin, right?"

Chip finally smiled and took the sack. He held it at his side. They hadn't been this close to each other since Halloween. The masks were off now. There were no words for a few moments. They could feel one another's breaths even before they touched foreheads and closed their eyes.

"I'm sorry, so sorry, so sorry...." Foster was crying. "Forgive me?"

Chip doused his anger, and they kissed harder and deeper than the college grounds had seen in some time. There were obscenity laws against such kisses. Chip played with the back of Foster's dark hair, and Foster held tight to Chip's arms.

"I'll be angry later," Chip said, and then they kissed again.



# Simple Men

---

193

“I’ll make it up to you. I promise.”

Chip winked. “Yeah, you will.”

Their lone audience was a perturbed little squirrel on a branch in one of the trees above them. Chip felt the acorn in the back of his head as he was kissing Foster, and he yelped. The squirrel barked its approval at the hit.

“What did I tell you?” Chip said to Foster, still clinging to him. “I knew it would get me sooner or later.” Foster started laughing, though more from the elation of having Chip once more than from the actions of a squirrel. “Aren’t you supposed to be hibernating or something?” Chip yelled at the furry hooligan. He turned to Foster. “I’ll be right back. We’re having squirrel this Thanksgiving, baby.” He started up the tree, as limber and agile as a boy, with Foster’s laughter urging him upward.

Halftime was over, but they had a lifetime to play games. Might as well start right away. This could be it, Foster thought. Barry was just a stumble. Chip was for real. They might be mismatched, but it was a good mismatch. Like sweet and sour. Like God and football.

Foster climbed the tree himself once the squirrel had successfully avoided Chip’s grasp. The coach waited, legs dangling from either side of a limb. Foster settled against Chip’s chest and they listened to the game off in the distance, neither one wanting to rejoin the crowd there.

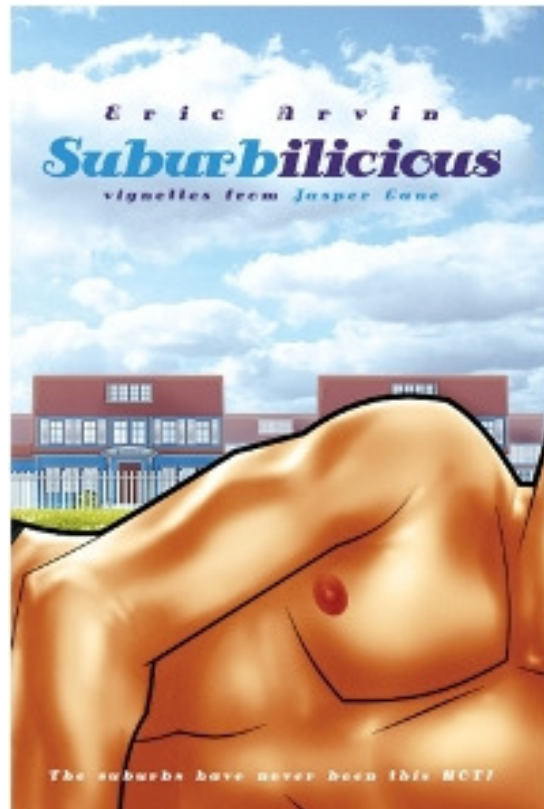
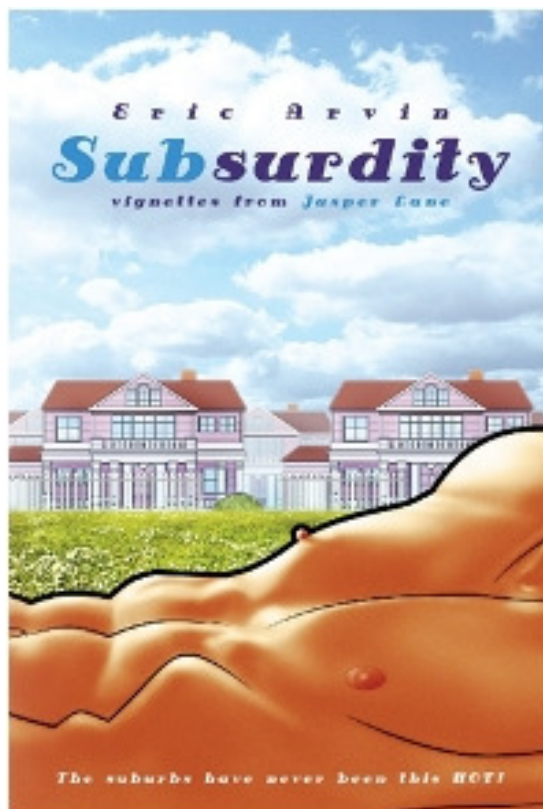
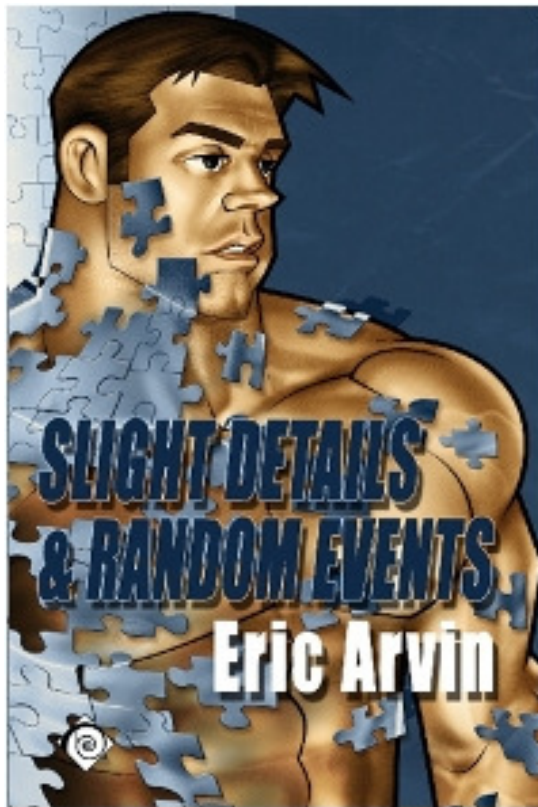
“Grown men in a tree,” Foster said as Chip crossed his arms around him. “Crazy stuff.”

“Yeah,” Chip said. “But a good kind of crazy.”

ERIC ARVIN resides in the same sleepy Indiana river town where he grew up. He graduated from Hanover College with a bachelor's degree in history and has lived, for brief periods, in Italy and Australia. He's survived brain surgery and his own loud-mouthed personal demons.

Visit his blog at <http://daventryblue.blogspot.com/>.

Also by ERIC ARVIN



<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com>



*Dreamspinner*  
Press

For more of the  
best M/M romance,  
visit

*Dreamspinner Press*

[www.dreamspinnerpress.com](http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com)