



**OC Pride: Fundamental Things**  
**By Stephanie Vaughan**

*"... retarded ejaculation... Retrograde ejaculation...? What the...? Ejaculate is forced back into the bladder rather than through the urethra and out the... Jesus. Fuck."*

Ryan was cooking dinner and Jamie was on the internet again, reading God-only-knew what. Talking to himself as he read, Jamie's mumblings floated over to Ryan in bits and pieces during lulls in the Laker game on in the other room.

Trying to stay out of it, Ryan did his best to focus on the basketball game, even going so far as to try to picture the announcers keeping up their current chatter while carrying on a naked three-way sexual encounter.

*"Can be caused by a lack of attraction for a partner, past traumatic events, and psychological factors, including a strict religious background..."*

"Jamie."

No response.

Ryan raised his voice. "Jamie!"

"Huh?" Finally, Jamie looked up.

"Babe, what are you reading?"

"Nothing. Just cat vacuuming." Jamie shrugged, then immediately stiffened, a stricken look freezing his rugged features. "Sorry."

It made Ryan smile to hear Jamie using Ryan's idiosyncratic term for wasting time following link after interesting link on the internet, when Jamie's apology registered with him. "Jamie. Cut it out."

"Jesus. You'd think I'd know by now. I'm sorry." Eyes soft with sympathy, Jamie's face was the picture of regret.

"It's okay. Well, it's not *okay*, but it's not your fault. Sometimes shit happens. There was nothing you could have done. Okay?" Ryan went back to chopping onions, a perfectly valid reason for needing to wipe his eyes.

It was just over two years now that he and Jamie had been together, which meant it was two years and a few weeks since he'd seen his cat Odie. Not really his cat. Mark's cat. But he'd promised himself and Mark's ghost that he'd take care of the passive-aggressive little shit.

After all this time, you'd think he'd be used to Odie's absence. You'd think he wouldn't still occasionally see something out of the corner of his eye and think it was the cat and need to remind himself that -- oh, yeah -- Odie was gone and he wasn't coming back.

Just like Mark.

Life went on, though.

"I'm sorry." Coming up from behind, Jamie wrapped his arms around Ryan's waist and murmured in his ear. "We could get another cat. From the animal shelter, how about that? Do a

good deed."

Ryan shook his head. "That's... No, thanks. It's a good idea, but I'm not ready."

"Okay. Say the word and we'll do it, though. I mean it."

"Thanks." Jamie tightened his arms and Ryan could feel the love, feel it radiating through him as tangible as the rays of the sun on his face. "So what was that you were reading?"

"What? Oh, nothing. Just some men's health site. That was some weird shit."

"You've been doing that a lot lately. Something up?"

"No." Suddenly busy searching in the fridge, Jamie pulled out a jar of green olives. He got a spoon from the silverware drawer and fished out several olives from the briny liquid they floated in and made a closed-eye show of enjoyment out of eating them. "God, I love these things. Is there any wine open?"

Ryan pinned Jamie with a look. "You're dodging."

"So?" Running his tongue across the front of his teeth, Jamie pursed his lips obstinately and said nothing.

"So, you want to tell me why you're suddenly doing your best Surgeon General impression?"

Jamie opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again just as quickly. "No." He took his jar of olives and his spoon and headed for the living room. "I'll be in here making sure everything's ready for my girl."

Ryan couldn't help a little involuntary eye roll, but let Jamie have his way and went back to getting dinner ready. "What time are they getting here?"

"They said six-thirty, but you know Claire and punctuality have never been on more than a nodding acquaintance. And lately, well..."

"Bobby's coming, too, right?"

"Yeah, yeah." A couple of quick strides brought Jamie back to the kitchen, where he set down his beloved olives. "Do you think I should put the knickknacks away? I don't want them to think I think *things* are more important than they are, but--"

"But you're just the tiniest bit OCD when it comes to your tchotchkes, I know." Ryan held up one hand. "Don't even try to argue with me. I know you."

"They're not tchotchkes, damn it. They're art." Snagging Ryan by the waist, Jamie hauled him close for a kiss. "Lucky for you, you're one hot fucking piece of ass or I wouldn't put up with

your shit for two seconds. You know that?"

Ryan draped one arm over Jamie's shoulder and surrendered to the kiss, the saltiness of the olives giving it a little extra bite. "Mr. Tough Guy, listen to you." He rubbed his burgeoning hard-on against Jamie's, letting the friction stoke both their fires.

Jamie just growled and released Ryan, going back to gather his brightly colored collection of Mexican clay figures and put them up on the highest shelf. "So what's for dinner? Something smells good."

"You say that whenever I sauté onions. It's going to be a taco bar. Everybody can have what they like and you and I can take turns holding Zoey while Claire eats."

The grin that broke over Jamie's face was glorious to see. Ryan couldn't begrudge anything that made Jamie so obviously happy and their friends' baby had done that from the first instant Jamie had laid eyes on the little girl.

Premature and correspondingly tiny, Zoey had been a little thing at first and Ryan had expected to see Jamie nervous -- self-conscious about his size in relation -- but it had been a case of love at first sight. Baby Zoey had likewise taken to her doting godfather and it wasn't unusual to see her spend the lion's share of any time they spent together cradled contentedly in his muscular arms.

"I haven't seen her for almost two weeks. I think I've been having withdrawal symptoms."

"The pair of you..." Ryan just smiled and shook his head.

"We love each other. Is that so wrong?" Nothing could dim Jamie's mood when a visit with baby Zoey was imminent and tonight was no different.

"Not at all. I think it's very sweet. Just remember to save a little something for me, huh?"

"You don't have to remind me."

Ryan had been goofing around -- having fun with how into his godfatherness Jamie'd gotten. But something about Jamie's soft-spoken response brought Ryan's head around.

Jamie stood gazing down at a framed photo of the two of them.

In the picture, they were smiling for the camera, Ryan's arms around Jamie's shoulders, an Alaskan glacier rising dramatically behind them. Taken from the deck of a cruise ship on what should have been their honeymoon, they grinned, looking for all the world like what they were: two people in love. Timing was everything, though, and by the day the cruise arrived, marriage wasn't an option for them any more. Not without uprooting their lives and moving to another state, anyway. And so their trip became a vacation -- a terrific getaway and lots of fun, but nothing like what it should have been.

Ryan had been disappointed, but undeterred.

Jamie had been devastated.

"It'll happen, Jamie. I know it. I *know* it."

Jamie's head swung slowly in Ryan's direction. The look on his face was doubtful, but Ryan read hope in Jamie's beautiful hazel eyes. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because I know you and I know me. We're going to make it happen." Setting down the wooden spatula he was using to stir the meat and onion mixture he was cooking, Ryan rounded the cooking island to meet Jamie in the living room. He took Jamie's bearded chin in his hand and brushed a kiss over Jamie's lips. "That's how I know."

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"I don't think what I'm asking for is that unreasonable." Jamie shifted Zoey to his other arm, kissed the tip of her sweet little nose and instantly changed his tone of voice when he talked to her, baby talk coming as naturally to him as mechanic work. "Is it, pumpkin? No it's not. Wouldn't you make just the prettiest flower girl ever? Of course you would."

Next to him, his friend Claire's bemusement was obvious. "Are we waiting for her to learn to walk, or am I towing her down the aisle in a wagon?"

Zoey laughed and waved her arm, slugging Jamie in the nose with one tiny fist. The pain was intense for a moment, his eyes watering, but he shook it off and kept talking. "That's my baby girl. You just store that move away for when some skeezy teenaged boy tries something. Uncle Jamie will teach you some more moves, too."

"So answer the question, James. If you're moving to another state, or country for that matter, I think I deserve to know."

"No, of course not." Rubbing Zoey's back, he encouraged her to rest her head against his shoulder. "The business is here, not to mention Ryan's job and family. You guys. My little ZoZo-girl." He kissed the top of her head as she snuggled close to Jamie's neck, her open-mouthed drool dripping down under the collar of his shirt. "I don't want to have to move to the other side of the country just to get married. I shouldn't have to."

"Hey, don't glare at *me*. You're preaching to the choir here, bub." Claire picked at the remains of Ryan's taco bar while Jamie held the baby. Ryan and Bobby had volunteered to make a run to the grocery store for ice cream while Claire and Jamie cleaned up the kitchen -- that was the working theory, anyway. How it played out in real time was more like Jamie and Claire played with Zoey and caught up on gossip while the boys got the essentials taken care of. "I'm the one who didn't speak to her family for ten months after the election because of the way they voted."

"Yeah, I know. Thanks, honey. I try not to think about it too much. I get all worked up and I

want to hurt somebody. Not very practical."

"No. But understandable." Claire scraped together the last of the grated cheese from the bowl that had been full to overflowing and dropped it into her mouth. She smiled guiltily for using her fingers, then paused to gaze over at Jamie and her baby. "But you guys are thinking about it. Have you and Ryan talked about kids?"

Hitching the baby closer, Jamie focused on a spot just over his friend's shoulder. "Sure. Yeah. Of course we have."

Claire said nothing. Just folded her arms across her chest and pursed her lips a bit.

Jamie shrugged. "A little. You know..."

"You haven't brought it up at all, have you?"

"No." Under the pretense of soothing Zoey, Jamie began rocking the baby, cradling her in his arms as he swayed back and forth. Zoey didn't seem to mind and it helped settle Jamie's thoughts. "How can I? He's young and so damn good-looking. Has his whole life in front of him. You really think he's going to want to stick around with some middle-aged geezer who wants to play Little House on Newport Coast?"

"James MacPherson, I'm going to..." Narrowing her gaze, she glared at Jamie. "So help me. How many times do we have to have this conversation?"

"I don't know." Zoey's little body felt perfect in his arms. Something about holding her close, feeling her little heart beat and hearing her lungs pushing air in and out of her little stuffed-up nose, made him feel like he was her protector against the world and it got to him, big time. It was the first thing since falling for Ryan that had made him feel this way.

It scared the shit out of him.

He felt it so deep down inside, part of him wondered what Ryan's reaction would be if he let Ryan know how much he felt. What if Ry didn't feel the same way? What if Ryan made him choose?

"Jamie. You have to talk about this stuff. And you have to trust Ryan. I know he loves you."

"I know. I'm just not sure." Jamie resumed his pacing. Being in motion helped push down the fear and made him feel like he was doing *something*.

Claire straightened, giving him her no-bullshit stare for several long moments. "Do you want me help? I could--"

"Oh, God, no! Please. Don't. That would be horrible."

"Well, 'you're welcome' very much to you, too. Sheesh. Just trying to help here."

"I know and I appreciate it." Zoey began to fuss, tossing her little head back and forth, rooting around and making dissatisfied grunting noises against Jamie's neck. "Uh..."

"Here. Hand her over. I've been expecting this, actually." Already moving in Jamie's direction, Claire unbuttoned her blouse as she moved, going so far as to unhook a flap on her bra, exposing her bare breast.

"Jesus, Claire. I can't see that!" Jamie looked away, averting his eyes as he handed his baby girl back to her milk supply.

"You know..." She took baby Zoey in her arms and moved to a chair, Zoey's head finally obscuring the sight of her mother's breast from Jamie's horrified gaze. "For an ex-Marine, you're kind of a big wuss. You know that?"

"I am not. Ask me to hold some guy's guts together while a corpsman stitches him up -- something normal. Just don't subject me to your bodily functions. *Gah.*"

Zoey's hand now clutched her momma's shirt and, as repulsed as he was by the thought of his friend's nipples spewing milk, he envied the closeness of Claire's bond with the baby -- the total, unquestioning trust Zoey gave her.

"Will you listen to me, please? You're not only short-changing Ryan, what you're doing is guaranteeing that what you want absolutely won't happen." Claire moved to sit on one of the stools pulled up to the cooking island and it amazed Jamie how matter-of-fact she was, holding the little bundle of hungry baby like Zoey was a football or something.

"You don't know that."

"Maybe not. But I don't need a crystal ball to know that your relationship will work better if you tell your partner what's on your mind -- particularly when it comes to the big stuff. Wanting kids would qualify here, in case you're wondering."

"Huh." Folding his arms, Jamie leaned back against the sink as his friend cradled her baby close to her body with one arm, softly rubbing the baby's back with the other. "What if...?"

The front door opened and Ryan bustled in with his arms full of groceries, Claire's husband, Bobby, right behind.

"What if what?" Claire's question couldn't have been more badly timed.

Ryan grinned and looked from Claire's face to Jamie's, his gaze swinging up to meet Jamie's. "Yeah. What if what?"

Setting the groceries down, Ryan put away the few things that weren't involved in dessert and

began assembling ingredients. Jamie waited for someone else to bring up another subject, but for once his friends remained silent. "Just... you know," he finished lamely.

In the midst of slicing a loaf of pound cake, Ryan paused, glancing from Jamie's face to Claire's and ending up looking to Bobby for clues. Eventually, he nodded briefly and bent his head back to the dessert, which seemed to have grown beyond the simple ice cream they'd talked about earlier. As he cut the cake, placing slices artistically on the plates he'd set aside before dinner, a small smile appeared. "You can tell me about it later."

Oh, hell no.

Not if Jamie could help it, he wouldn't.

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"Seems kind of quiet now that they're gone, huh?" Ryan lounged on the sofa while Jamie methodically retrieved his collection of clay animals from the high shelf. Truth to tell, Zoey was barely at the pulling-herself-up stage, so they'd probably been safe in their original location. But Ryan had learned to pick his battles and if it made Jamie feel better to put them up, he wasn't going to say anything.

It was barely ten o'clock, but Claire and Bobby had gathered the amazing amount of gear required for life with a baby, packed it all up, and taken baby Zoey home. The kitchen was cleaned up and Ryan appreciated the sacrifice Jamie had made to handle most of the clean up when he could have been playing with the baby.

"It really does. Funny how quickly you adjust." The clay figures now placed to Jamie's liking, he paused and ran a hand through his hair. "Thanks for putting up with all the fuss. I know it's probably not your idea of a fun night. Not your first choice, anyway. So, thanks."

"Hey, no problem." Ryan held out one hand. "Come sit with me."

Jamie sat, facing Ryan at an angle, taking Ryan's hand. Just the way he linked their fingers and used his thumb to stroke the back of Ryan's hand seemed like such a breakthrough. It had taken months for Jamie to feel even a little bit comfortable with the two of them as a couple and Ryan still put in a lot of work reassuring Jamie.

Like now.

"First of all, they're my friends, too. I like spending time with them; they're smart and funny and we have a good time. If I didn't want to be here, I'd find something else to do, believe me."

"Would you, really?"

"Oh, you bet. Are you kidding? Just ask my parents." Ryan grinned, hoping for an answering smile, a little burst of happiness filling him when he got it.

"That's right. I still remember that wedding she wanted you to go to -- some friend from the old neighborhood or something. I think I may have seen actual steam coming out of her ears on that one."

"Yeah. She was pretty pissed." He slipped his hand out of Jamie's grasp and into Jamie's hair, his gaze wandering over Jamie's blunt features. Ryan scraped his nails along the back of Jamie's head the way he knew Jamie was particularly partial to and watched Jamie's eyes close, right on cue.

Rubbing his head against Ryan's fingers like a cat, Jamie leaned into the caress, a rumble emanating from his chest that made Ryan wonder if lions could purr. "That's nice. You've got great hands."

"So do you. And chest... Have I told you lately how much I like your chest?" Ryan began slipping the buttons of Jamie's shirt out of their respective holes, baring a nice section of deliciously furry chest. Once he had access to bare skin, he couldn't resist licking and biting, knowing the response he'd get.

Jamie's fingers threaded themselves through Ryan's hair, trying to direct the action, but Ryan eluded him. Moving quickly down Jamie's chest, Ryan flirted with Jamie's belly button, slipping his tongue in and around it, using his teeth to tug at the little whorls of hair surrounding it.

"God damn it, that's it. I'm shaving it."

Ryan unzipped Jamie's pants, revealing the soft, white material of his briefs and the hardening outline of flesh behind it. "Is it a burden being so sexy? Yeah, I guess I can see how that could be. Maybe you should, at that."

Using his nose, Ryan rubbed at Jamie's hard-on, breathing deeply to capture the musky scent that he'd loved from the start and draw it down into his lungs.

"You... *oh*." Now Ryan was mouthing Jamie's cock through the springy cloth of Jamie's briefs, scraping his teeth along the ridge of the head and Jamie about came out of his skin. He shoved his shorts down, freeing his dick, and immediately began arching his hips, aiming for the general area of Ryan's mouth.

"Mmm, Daddy. So sexy." He quit teasing and took Jamie into his mouth, running his tongue along the sides, scraping with his teeth, just enough to make Jamie writhe. Ryan never got tired of this, the taste, the scents, the feeling of going down on Jamie.

Sliding one leg off the couch, Ryan let the other follow as he got comfortable, pushing Jamie's legs wider to give himself room. He wanted to smile at the picture Jamie made, head thrown back, throat working as he gulped for air, and a hand shoved through his hair. Ryan nuzzled close, relaxing his jaw and opening his throat to take Jamie deeper. He'd gotten so used to Jamie's generous size that it almost didn't make his eyes go wide at his first glimpse any more.

Almost.

He had to breathe, though, so after taking as much as he could, Ryan backed off and went back to licking the length of Jamie's shaft. He rubbed the side of his face against it, letting Jamie's drooling cock paint trails on his cheeks; he lapped at the tip where the salty taste was at its most intense. Ryan let it bounce against his tongue as he closed his eyes and reveled in the feeling of closeness. Maybe some people didn't see it that way, but to Ryan, it was inescapable. One look up at Jamie's face was all the evidence he needed.

With that thought, Ryan made a conscious decision to shut off his brain. He closed his eyes and let the *feelings* wash over him as he let instinct take over and he concentrated on feeling, tasting, smelling.

The warm muskiness of Jamie's skin here.

The salty flavor.

The slick hardness of Jamie's skin.

*So good.*

Jamie's grip on Ryan's forearm tightened; the rhythm of his hips gained urgency. Pulling his head back, Ryan tightened his grip and stroked Jamie hard. He was rewarded with Jamie's orgasm, catching a little on his tongue, letting it spray over his hands and hit his shirt and chest.

Still hard as stone himself, Ryan didn't care. He loved watching Jamie's face as he came down: the way his eyes and mouth remained closed as Jamie sucked air in through his nose. It was always the same; Jamie was reassuringly consistent that way.

As he watched Jamie come back to himself, Ryan released Jamie's cock and touched his fingers to the evidence of Jamie's release. Dipping two fingers in it, he painted a couple of stripes on each cheek. He dabbed a bit in the hollow of his throat. Sucked a bit off his fingers. It would wash off, of course, but it was nice to have some outwardly visible sign of their feelings for each other, at least for a little while.

"Hey." Jamie was blinking drowsily, like he was ready to nod off.

Ryan smiled up at the man he loved so much. "'Hey' yourself."

"What about you? Don't we need to take care of something?"

A quick glance down at his crotch confirmed Ryan's interest. "Don't worry, I've got an idea about that."

With Jamie's cooperation, Ryan pulled the man to his feet and together they turned the lights out

and made their way to the bedroom. Evening routines completed, Ryan joined Jamie in bed, spooning the bigger man from behind. His still semi-erect cock now lubricated, he rubbed up against Jamie's back, the groove of Jamie's ass forming a perfect furrow of friction to make him come. The feel of Jamie in his arms was all it took to get Ryan going again. He found a rhythm, sliding easily against Jamie's backside, and a couple of minutes later he came, too.

They lay quietly for a while, Ryan basking in the afterglow of his orgasm and Jamie beginning to ease into sleep. With both of them relaxed and nothing important on the horizon, it seemed like as good a time as any to broach the subject. "Jamie."

"Mmmph?" It was a quiet, questioning grunt, one-hundred-percent Jamie.

"I think it's time for the talk." Beneath Ryan's hand, Jamie's sudden wariness telegraphed itself through noticeably quieter breathing and tensed muscles.

"Yeah? 'Bout what?" Jamie didn't turn, just kept his back to Ryan, hardly breathing.

Stroking Jamie's stomach and chest, Ryan tried to infuse his touch with calm reassurance. Every one of their serious conversations about pretty much anything north of what kind of toothpaste to buy had been initiated by Ryan and he'd learned over time to plan ahead for Jamie's freak-out. He'd learned the hard way that Jamie always expected the worst and Ryan had had to learn not to take it personally.

"Breathe, would you? You're going to pass out if you don't."

Rolling onto his back, Jamie looked up at Ryan from beneath hooded eyes. This was his 'you can't hurt me' look and Ryan had seen it before. "What's on your mind?"

"Relax. It's nothing serious. No one's canceled your subscription to *Car and Driver*, Dale, Jr." He pushed Jamie's shoulders back until they were flat against the mattress and climbed on top, straddling Jamie's midsection. "So... Don't you think it's time we talked about having a kid?"

Ryan knew Jamie well enough to read the flash of panic in his eyes.

"God damn it. What did Claire tell you?"

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Jamie lay still and tried to control his breathing. His heart was pounding and he was trying like hell to read Ryan's face.

*Fuck.*

He'd only left Claire and Ryan alone for a couple of minutes -- just long enough to help Bobby load up the car with his friends' half a metric ton of baby gear. How much did Ryan know? Shit. He'd had some half-baked notion of bringing up the subject, but every time he thought about it --

tried to talk it through in his head -- the scenario always ended with Ryan saying "*hasta la vista, baby,*" and walking out.

It looked like show time and he still hadn't worked out what he wanted to say. How the hell was he going to present it so that Ryan wouldn't bail on him? "I, uh..."

"Come on, talk to me, big guy. Time to come clean."

"I don't know what she told you, but I never said I--" It was hard to get the words out. Between the dry mouth and Ryan sitting on his chest, it was a miracle anything besides gibberish came out.

"Never said...?" Ryan's pursed lips and raised eyebrow said it all. He wasn't interested. Now what were they supposed to do? Negotiate? "And, for the record, I don't need Claire to tell me what you want. I can see it on your face when you hold Zoey. The way you talk to her. The things you say."

What Jamie was hearing was so different from what he read on Ryan's face, he spent several seconds trying to reconcile the two before giving it up as useless. "Huh?"

"You're not exactly inscrutable, y'know." Ryan smoothed a thumb, first over one of Jamie's eyebrows then across Jamie's beard, eventually cupping Jamie's face in both hands. "It's okay. It's something we need to talk about."

"I..." Jamie tried. God help him, he tried, but nothing came out.

Suddenly chilled, a shiver wracked his body and he tried to reach the covers with his feet, but it didn't do much to help. He shivered again and Ryan wordlessly reached back for the comforter and dragged it up, sliding to the side to pull it up over them both.

"Listen, I didn't mean to freak you out. I was trying to, you know, introduce a little humor." Ryan looked him in the eye and Jamie knew Ry was trying to be reassuring. "We can talk about it later. I just wanted you to know I'm fine with it. I think you'd be an awesome dad and you deserve the chance to prove it."

Ryan reached for the lamp that sat above the headboard and turned it out, dousing the room in darkness. For all that it was Southern California, winters were still generally chillier than summers, but it wasn't the cooler-than-average temperature of the room that had Jamie shaking, so pulling the covers up over them both didn't immediately lessen his body's natural response.

Closing his eyes against the visions in his head, Jamie swallowed down the anxiety. His head told him Ryan wasn't going to leave him -- *just listen to what the man said, for God's sake* -- but repeating Ryan's words in his head couldn't quite drown out the whispers from his unconscious.

"It's, uh... It's no big deal" Jamie attempted a shrug. "It's just something that, you know, crossed my mind. If you're not interested, we don't have to." His guts twisted at the thought of killing that

particular dream, but he'd do it in a second if it meant hanging on to Ryan.

"James Roland MacPherson." Ryan's head shake looked ominous, but the accompanying roll of the eyes softened the effect. "Do I have to bring your mother in on this one? Or how about your dad, huh? I'll call Big Mac on you, I swear."

Jamie's stomach unclenched a bit hearing the old man's hated nickname coming from Ryan's beautiful mouth. Somehow made it easier to handle -- funny, almost -- and he tried to respond in kind. "I'll give you a dollar if you call him up and use that name. It'd be worth it."

Ryan mulled it over for a moment, his mouth twisting up and to one side as he narrowed his gaze at Jamie. "Okay. You're on." Climbing off the bed Ryan fumbled for his phone in the dark.

"Wait, wait! Don't do it. Don't do it, Ryan." Jamie sat up and threw back the covers. "Come back. I'll talk."

Even in the dark, Jamie could read Ryan's skeptical expression. "I don't know. How do I know you're not just saying what I want to hear, to get me back in bed? Huh?"

Unable to suppress a sigh, Jamie lay back, the sheet and comforter settling around his hips. "Okay. Yeah, I've been thinking about it. But I don't want it to interfere with us. If you say no, then it stops right there."

"I wouldn't do that to you." Ryan slid under the covers, tangling his legs with Jamie's and propping himself up on one arm, while the other rested on Jamie's hip. His fingers trailed up Jamie's arm, eventually finding their way to Jamie's face. From there, Ryan let a finger trace lightly down Jamie's nose and lips, as though confirming with touch what he saw with his mind's eye. "It's important to you. I can see that. How about we look into the feasibility of it? Because... I don't know how to tell you this, but... you're not the only one who's been hiding something. Jamie, I'm barren."

Cocking his head to one side, Jamie worked to make Ryan's words make sense. "Huh?"

"I can't have a baby. Promise me you won't leave me because of it?"

Jamie's vision having adjusted to the darkened room, Ryan's downcast expression was wickedly effective. Jamie's gut hurt at the thought, even as his mind rejected the notion. "You think you're pretty damn funny, don't you?"

"Yeah. I kinda do." Ryan snickered at his joke, his lithe frame shaking with his laughter. "Lucky for me I'm a -- what was it again? 'One hot fucking piece of ass'?"

At that, Ryan's snickering degenerated into full-blown giggling hilarity and he fell onto his back, snorting and hiccupping. Every time his laughter began to subside and he tried to speak, it would come back, redoubled. The cycle repeated itself two or three more times before he was finally able to get himself back under control.

"No, but seriously, Jamie. I think we should look into it. We're probably talking about, what, adoption and surrogacy? Did I miss anything?"

"No. Those are the big... well... just kidnapping, cloning, and cutting open strange women's stomachs."

"Please. Don't even joke." Ryan looked up at him. "You *were* joking, weren't you?"

Jamie just frowned.

"Kidding, okay?" Ryan shoved at Jamie's shoulder, but Jamie didn't budge. "How about we talk about it some more later? Don't worry, babe -- we'll figure it out."

Don't worry? Worrying was Jamie's specialty. Telling him not to was like telling a flathead Ford V-8 not to run hot. Might as well save his breath, 'cause it wasn't gonna happen.

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Traffic on the Coast Highway had been murderous. Worse than usual, even, and Ryan had been late to work. Allison, the restaurant's new assistant manager, had scolded him and -- as if that wasn't enough -- three other servers had called in, leaving only Ryan and Philippe to handle the entire restaurant. To add to his annoyance, since he'd been running late, he hadn't had time to pick up his dry cleaning, which meant that tomorrow he'd have to skip one of his other chores or have nothing clean to wear.

He had no one but himself to blame, though.

He'd spent way too much time online, researching his and Jamie's options for a baby -- or kid in general. As far as he was concerned, it didn't have to be a baby; he'd be fine with something a little older. Jamie had looked so happy holding little Zoey, though; Ryan hated to cheat him out of that experience if that was what Jamie had his heart set on.

Still... they were both looking into what the best approach was for them. They'd divided the work with Jamie being responsible for checking into adoption and Ryan investigating whatever else was left. He'd volunteered for the medical side since his mom was a doctor and well-connected in the medical community. Any doctor Meredith Van Alstyn, M.D., didn't know wasn't worth knowing -- or to hear her tell it that's the way it was.

Since Ryan had taken himself off the late shift, he now got home at an almost reasonable hour. He had enough seniority at *Le Louisienne*, the upscale restaurant where he worked, that he could just about name his shifts. It didn't hurt that the restaurant's ownership wanted very badly to be in Jamie's good graces and accommodated Ryan's requests, for the most part.

When Ryan pulled into the garage, he was out of the car and into the house in a hurry. The light in the spare bedroom that doubled as Jamie's home office was on, which meant Jamie was

working on the books. Jamie always claimed it was the never-ending paperwork of being a small business owner that kept him up late, but Ryan figured at least half of it was Jamie waiting up for him. Which, for some reason, Jamie never wanted to cop to.

Sure enough, Jamie was hunched over the computer, peering intently at something on the screen.

"Hey, babe." Ryan crossed the room, resting a hand on Jamie's shoulder as he checked out what Jamie had up on the screen. "How much more do you have to do? Can I talk you into coming to bed soon?"

"Hey, babe. Yeah, sure. Just give me a second." Voice trailing off, Jamie's gaze strayed back to the screen.

From his vantage point at Jamie's shoulder, Ryan made out a text-heavy page, broken up by one lone picture of a smiling toddler. Toothless with a head full of curly black hair, the baby could have been any one of a number of ethnicities. "What's this?"

"Huh? Oh, uh, international adoption." Jamie's expression was soft -- sentimental, even.

"Yeah? What'd you find out?" Jamie's enthusiasm still managed to surprise Ryan. Normally, it took a gathering of really exotic vintage cars to get him that excited.

"Not much. It looks complicated. I think I want to find out more about local options before I go too far down that road."

"Huh. Well, whatever you think." Giving Jamie's shoulder a squeeze, Ryan was turning to leave when a thought occurred. "Oh, hey, Jamie... Do we have plans on Sunday?"

In the midst of putting the computer into hibernation, Jamie looked up, brow furrowing. "I don't think so. What's up?"

"They're asking for volunteers to work it. Reservations are way up over what they'd been expecting and it's looking like a door-buster."

"Do you want to? I mean, I guess. Why not?"

Ryan sighed. "Just that it's Valentine's Day and I know you--"

"Aw, fuck. Is it really?" Eyes closed in disgust, Jamie let his head fall back. When he lifted it, his frown said it all. "You're sure about that? I thought it was--"

"Sunday. Sorry." They gazed at each other silently for a moment. "I meant to talk to you about it. It's just... You're usually driving that bus. And I always let you. I'm sorry, Jamie. I suck."

"No, no." Jamie waved him off. "I've been so wrapped up in all of this baby stuff I let it get away from me. I thought I had more time. Listen, we can still do something. It's not too late."

Ryan took the two short steps necessary to stand between Jamie's outspread thighs. The strength of their physical connection never ceased to thrill him and just getting into Jamie's personal space gave Ryan a jolt. He threaded his fingers in Jamie's thick auburn hair and tilted Jamie's head back. "Don't sweat it. All right?"

Turning his head, Jamie kissed Ryan's arm. "It's not too late. If you can get out of working, I'll set it up. I want to do something."

Ryan had had enough practice at interpreting Jamie-speak to not only pick up the slight hesitation when Jamie spoke the words, but to understand the meaning behind them. If Jamie offered to take care of the arrangements, he didn't have to worry. The guest list could include the Queen of England -- every last detail would be perfect.

"Jamie, I do too, but don't kill yourself. Anything we end up doing is okay. I don't care if it's Taco Bell. It'll be fine. I'll love it."

"I wouldn't take you to Taco Bell." Jamie's gaze searched Ryan's face. "I don't know how in the world you ended up with me."

"Just lucky, I guess." Ryan lowered his head and helped himself to a kiss. Jamie's lips parted for him, their tongues brushing softly against each other. He couldn't define it, but there was a sweetness to Jamie's kiss that got to him every time, as though the man's innate decency came through in even something so simple and basic.

The sweetness turned hot when Jamie put his hands on Ryan -- one on Ryan's ass while the other cupped Ryan's crotch -- and he growled against Ryan's lips. "You got something for me?"

"I thought you'd never ask." Ryan smiled at the heat in Jamie's eyes. "I've been trying to get you in bed since I walked in, practically. I was afraid I was being too subtle."

He tugged at Jamie's shirt, peeling away the barrier of cloth that hid Jamie's famously spectacular chest and tugged at Jamie to stand, the better to ease his progress. Jamie's natural furriness flipped Ryan's switch and he pinched the small pink nipples peeking out from the whorls of auburn hair.

Grunting in response, Jamie took hold of Ryan's hips and yanked him closer. "You're feeling brave tonight. Ready to face the consequences, little man?"

"*Little*? Did you just call me 'little man'? Did I seriously hear that?"

"Got a problem with that?"

"Just-- *unh*." On the word 'problem,' Jamie arched his hips and Ryan got a renewed appreciation of what Jamie was packing. "I prefer 'hot piece of ass,' if you're asking."

"For the record, I'm not. So how's about you get that hot piece ass into the next room so we can take care of some business, little man?"

Ryan wasn't sure if Jamie knew how much his caveman act worked for Ryan and used that, or if it was all a hundred percent natural. Probably a little of both. A real caveman wouldn't have interested him, but the hint of humor in Jamie's eyes kept it real.

"Ooh, Daddy's back." Locking gazes with Jamie, Ryan backed slowly out of the room.

He peeled his shirt off and dropped it where he stood. Skinning out of his black waiter's pants, Ryan kicked them away. He backed up to the bed, climbed on and reached for the lube, all without taking his eyes off Jamie.

Jamie's shirt hung open and while Ryan had been stripping, he'd been unbuttoning his pants, but he'd made no attempt to remove them. "Are you ready?"

Ryan nodded happily, gesturing with the little plastic tub of lube in one hand.

"Give me that. You're not ready." Jamie commandeered the lube, while at the same time handing Ryan a condom. As he scooped two fingers' worth of lube from the tub he spared a glance for Ryan, still holding the as-yet-unopened condom packet. "Make the right decision."

As if.

Ryan tore open the packet and reached for Jamie's erect cock, quickly smoothing it on. He cast an anticipatory glance at Jamie's cock in all its rampant glory before scrambling around to present his ass.

The first touch of cool lube was always a shock, but Jamie worked it in with one thick finger and Ryan was quickly pushing back, stroking himself on Jamie's hand.

"Now you're ready." Heated flesh pressed at Ryan's hole, quickly breaching the entrance and plunging in.

Cold lube might be startling, but the first time Jamie's dick slid into him, it was like a flash of recognition, every time. They were flesh to flesh and everything was the way it was supposed to be. Jamie pulled back with an outward slide that was breathtaking and Ryan sighed at the beauty, the pure pleasure of it.

Then Jamie was shoving back in, stuffing him full, two big hands gripping his waist as Jamie took him. They might be equal partners in life, but Ryan never felt more alive, more engaged, more himself than when he and Jamie were exactly like this. Jamie pulled out and a Ryan groaned: a small sound -- an expression of helpless delight. Pure happiness.

The pace picked up. Jamie thrusting, the power of his hips driving him forward until he was stopped by the limits of Ryan's body, the force of his thrusts sending a shudder up Ryan's spine

with every jolt.

Slide in. Completion. The solid thwack of Jamie's hips slapping Ryan's ass. The sweet drag of Jamie's dick as he pulled back. Again and again.

Ass up, face down in the sheets, the scent of fresh linen filling his lungs, Ryan reached for his own cock. He fisted it, slid from root to tip and back again, over and over, as Jamie thrust and withdrew, thrust and withdrew.

Jamie's urgency was impossible to mistake as his pace increased; his grip on Ryan's waist was harsh, big fingers digging into skin. It all blended together and Ryan couldn't separate the parts as they overwhelmed his senses. He came first, shooting hot ropes of come over his hand, through his fingers and onto the sheets.

Head on his forearm, Ryan was buffeted as Jamie kept going, Jamie's cock pressing on sensitive, post-orgasm skin. And suddenly Jamie's rhythm changed, his hips stuttered and jerked as he came, hands coming down to bracket Ryan's body and support his weight as he slumped over Ryan's back. "Let that be a lesson to you."

"Yes, sir." Ryan hid his smile, burying his face in the crook of his arm.

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It wasn't supposed to be like this.

So wrong. So not how he'd planned things.

Jamie shoved a hand through his hair and tried to think. There had to be a way to salvage things.

He could still fix this.

If he could just... just...

Shit.

There was Ryan's car in the driveway.

Ryan breezed through the front door, a smile on his face, tie and apron wadded up in one hand. "Hey, baby. Give me ten minutes for a quick shower and I can be... You're not dressed. I thought we were going out."

He covered his eyes with his hands and scrubbed at his eyebrows, as if delaying the inevitable made this one bit better, one iota easier. "Ryan."

"Yeah?" Ryan approached slowly, putting one foot deliberately in front of the other until he stood, looking warily up at Jamie. "What's up?"

"I don't know how to do this. Give me a second, okay?" Jamie drew one calming breath, and then another. Resting his hands on Ryan's shoulders, his gaze was drawn to a spot on Ryan's collar. Something from the restaurant, no doubt. Probably something chic and unpronounceably French -- *Le Lou* was too classy for anything as ordinary as ketchup or steak sauce.

"Jamie? Babe? What is it? You're freaking me out here, okay?"

Worried blue eyes gazed up at him, a vertical crease forming between Ryan's brows. Jamie took another deep breath. "I got a call today from Dr. Weaver."

"Who's Dr. Weaver? Do I know this person?"

"He's the vet that Todd takes Odie to."

"Odie?" Ryan drew back, head tilting to one side as he thought about what Jamie had said. "And Todd... Mark's son? That Todd? How could you possibly know that?"

"Listen, don't... I'm not a stalker, okay? But after what happened, I looked into things. Like where Todd lives and whether or not he was taking care of your -- of Mark's -- of the cat."

Now Ryan was backing away, looking at him like he was a criminal. It hadn't been fun, digging into Ryan's life with an old lover, but he'd had to. The cat was important to Ryan, so it was important to him. Ugly, but simple.

"And what'd you find out?"

Fuck. The way Ryan was looking at him -- arms folded, shoulders hunched. It was Valentine's Day, for fuck's sake. It as supposed to be romantic and sexy. God, this was killing him.

"Pretty much what you'd figure. Todd's a selfish, immature little prick who doesn't give two shits about anyone but himself. I found the vet he takes Odie to... when he feels like it. Comprehensive health care is just a dream for a lot of animals, too, as it turns out."

"Yeah? How's he doing? Odie, I mean?"

The concern in Ryan's eyes was tearing him up. Jamie needed to fix this for Ryan and, for the life of him, he didn't know how. "Not so good. He's sick, baby, and Todd didn't want to pay for the tests. You know, to find out what's wrong with him and whether or not it can be fixed."

"Shit." Ryan chewed his lip, one foot tapping furiously. "So, what's next? Did you tell the vet that I'll pay? I don't care what it costs. I'll--"

"I'm right there with you, babe. I told the vet a couple years ago, if there was ever any chance we could get him back -- anything we could do -- for him to call me." He called the vet himself once a month, rain or shine, to make sure his request wasn't forgotten. But Ryan didn't need to know

that. "So when Todd wanted to put the cat down instead of trying to fix him, Doc Weaver got Todd to sign him over."

"Huh? *Sign him over*, like he's a car with a pink slip, or something?" Anger was taking the place of worry in Ryan's eyes and thoughts of what he'd like to do to Todd for putting it there were beginning to fill Jamie's head.

"Yeah. The doc said it was legal, though. He's ours now. Or, yours, I mean. The doc says Odie ought to go to this place in Costa Mesa -- specialists, or something. His place closes in an hour and I guess there's no one there to keep an eye on things over night. But these guys at the clinic are the big guns and if there's anything that can be done, they'll be able to do it."

"So who gets Odie to the specialists?"

"We do. If we leave now, we can probably just make it. Dinner and our big romantic evening plans are on hold, though."

"Oh, God." Ryan looked up and tears spilled out, running down his cheeks. Only good reflexes kept Ryan from knocking him sideways when Ryan threw himself into Jamie's arms, wrapping his arms around Jamie in a bear hug. "God, I love you."

"I'm sorry about dinner, baby, but this seemed more important." He patted Ryan's back as Ryan squeezed the air out of Jamie with his hug.

"Of course. Of course it is. C'mon," Ryan swiped at his eyes with the back of one hand. "Let's go. We'll catch dinner later. Oh, wait."

Half-way to the door, Ryan took a detour to the spare bedroom. He came back holding an envelope in one hand, just a plain white envelope, the kind that usually held a greeting card. "Here." He handed it to Jamie on the way to the door.

Jamie took it. "What's this?"

"It's your present. For Valentine's Day."

They were headed for Ryan's car, but Jamie took the keys. "Better let me drive. So... you were saying. My present?"

"I was going to give it to you at the restaurant, but it's an appointment with the best adoption attorney in Orange County. Two hours, actually. I figured that would get us started."

Jamie bumped into Ryan's car, his vision suddenly gone blurry. "How did you ever end up with me?"

"Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, you walked into mine." Ryan took the keys and unlocked the doors.

OC Pride: Fundamental Things

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