

AMY LANE

TALKER

Dedication

ALL of my work, whether I remember the dedication or not, is somehow dedicated to my husband. “Mate” and I have been together since we were nineteen years old.

We were the ones with the restaurant jobs, taking classes, while living in the shitty apartment. We were the ones with the poor-man’s Christmas tree, and we were the ones who had to choose between heat and light. (We chose light and were grateful for the big camping sleeping bags my parents gave us for Christmas. They were later stolen, because hey—did I mention it was a shitty apartment?)

I write a lot of stories about young love and first-time lovers, and I do it with optimism that the lovers will make it, because Mate and I did. So when you get to the end, don’t worry about Brian and Talker. Have a little faith. Turns out that sometimes, faith and a sense of humor really can be all you need. (And a chance to raid your parents’ garden or eat free restaurant food. That helps too.)

Part I

I Will Follow

Then

Brian Cooper was on the big tour bus, on the way to his first track meet, when he first met Tate Walker. He was sitting by himself, because he didn't know anybody, and he felt like the only person on earth without an iPod or a cell phone that folded itself into origami and took a dump for you to boot. Tate came on late, and brother, was he a sight.

Half his face was taken up with a glorious tribal tattoo, one that extended down to the neck of his long-sleeved shirt and over his half-gloved hand. Later, Tate would get an entire sleeve tattoo there and stop wearing long-sleeved shirts, but the tattoo was not even the most amazing part of his look.

His right ear, the side with the tattoo, was pierced upward of a dozen times, and so was his nose, and his eyebrow, and his lip (although that one was the first to go). His inky dark hair was cut into a Mohawk, and the tattoo extended over half his scalp as well. Although the Mohawk was back in a ponytail for the meet, Brian had seen Tate around school, and very often he wore it in four-inch spikes, courtesy of Elmer's glue and a lot of grooming, Brian assumed.

So he was scary-looking, and Brian was not oblivious to the fact that the kids on the bus talked shit about him—but Brian didn't care. Because today, Tate eyed the spot next to Brian and smiled tentatively before he sat down. He had his earbud in one ear and was halfway dancing to the song playing for him and him alone. He tended to jerk sometimes, when he wasn't out on the track—just twitch right out of his skin, it looked like—but he was looking at Brian like Brian wasn't a freak, and for the first time since he'd started school the month before, something frozen in Brian melted.

Oh, thank God, Brian wasn't alone on the goddamned bus.

He was sitting on the left side of the bus, so he didn't get to see Tate's tattoo, and he had to admit, he was curious. It didn't matter—someone was sitting next to him, someone was talking to him... and brother, was that kid talking.

"Hey—hope you don't mind if I sit. I know, the other kids talk about me being gay and shit." (They did—they weren't nice about it, either.) "But I swear that's not catching or anything. Here—I'm listening to this band called The Doves—you want to listen? "Kingdom of Rust" is such an awesome song—sad, but you know, awesome. But if you're not in the mood for sad, I've got something really rocking—rocking helps for pumping you up for a meet. Although, I don't know...." He hesitated. "You tend to do a lot of throwing. Do you need to Zen out or do you need to get all pumped?"

He finally stopped and looked at Brian as though he expected an answer. Brian blinked and tried to come up with one. "I don't know music," he said, embarrassed. "But I'd love to listen to whatever you've got."

The kid with the tattoo and Mohawk had grinned then, his smile shining and pure (and a little crowded—not a lot of dental work here), and handed Brian his earbud.

"I've seen you throw, right? And you can run too. No wonder you got a scholarship!"

Brian flushed. "I had to sort of audition," he mumbled. "I was homeschooled—it was the only way I could get into college." His shoulder was already giving him twinges. He'd started thinking about how to pay for school when it gave out.

Tate nodded as though this happened every day. "See, I used to be a skater, right? But the second, third, sixth time I broke my wrist, one of the coaches at my school threw me on the track in my running shoes and told me to keep my feet on the ground. He helped get me my scholarship, so we're, like, you know, the same."

Brian looked at that vulnerable expression, a sort of "please, please let us be the same" expression, and wondered that someone who would ink the side of his face and shave his head and wear pipe-cleaning, hip-dropping skinny jeans and sparkly sequined T-shirts would need to be "the same" as anyone. But that was only because he'd just met Tate, and was sitting on his left side.

But the boy seemed to be waiting for an answer, and Brian dredged up the only one he could think of.

"You broke your wrist six times?"

Now

TATE was lacing up his running shoes when he told Brian about his new hobby.

Brian thought very seriously about throwing up. He changed his mind and thought about throwing his fist through the wall. But Tate kept talking, as blind as bacterium to Brian's complete emotional supernova, and by the time he was done, his innocent

question about why Brian looked like he'd swallowed a poisoned rat elicited a three-word answer that had Tate cringing.

Fuck you, asshole.

It rang between them for a stunned moment, and Tate let the façade of “tough-tat-boy” drop. “What’s wrong?” he asked, genuinely hurt. It was hard to see hurt on his face. For one thing, the tattoo tended to mask his emotions, which Brian was pretty sure was what Tate had intended in the first place. It was also difficult to see Tate hurt—so much about Tate was like a crumpled ball of brittle cellophane, transparent and broken.

Brian had learned not to see the tattoos anymore, or the piercings or the hair, and he'd learned to really love the way Tate always bounced on his toes or twitched, even when he was standing still.

That was Tate—always hearing fantastic strains of alien music and succumbing to the urge to dance.

So even though looking at Tate was an exercise in misdirection—the carefully designed hair, body (he'd finally had his sleeve tattoo done), clothes, face—all of it was made to attract attention, to draw it away from the things he didn't want people to see. Brian had made a study of looking beyond that.

Which was why this new “hobby” scared the shit out of him.

Part II

Appearance Lies

THEY were in their second year of track before they got to be really good friends. That was mostly Brian's fault—he'd been orphaned young and raised by his aunt in the hills, and had difficulty reading social cues, so he hadn't known how to take Tate's tentatively extended hand in friendship and run with it.

It didn't help that Tate kept expecting him to be as mean-spirited as the rest of the guys on the track team. Brian ignored those guys—he didn't like mean people, he was starting to really like Tate's music, and he enjoyed track meets for the bus rides only, and that was because of Tate.

Besides, they had to test early and often for drugs, so whatever made Tate move like that had to be something in his own head.

And Tate (or Talker, as the guys called him sometimes) kept sitting next to Brian on the bus or lingering near him to talk during practice, and that was good. The track team alone was bigger than Brian's homeschool cadre, grades K-12.

After that first meeting, he really looked forward to those bus rides with that twitching, chatting person who seemed to seek out his attention. He certainly wasn't going to turn down that offer of companionship because Talker was openly gay. Not even after a

girl in his English class with big, dark eyes started chatting him up and blew him into having a girlfriend.

Talker was different than the other kids on the team, the ones who expected Brian to contribute something witty or sarcastic. Talker would talk about movies or music or Web sites for hours, without pause, without even waiting for an answer or to see if Brian was listening.

Brian was always listening. He learned more about pop culture and living with masses of his fellow human beings on those bus rides than he could ever fully relay to Tate Walker. Tate, however, was always very grateful at the end of the ride.

“Man, thanks for putting up with my mental diarrhea. You’re, like, best listener ever. Next time, I’ll bring you an extra set of buds, and we can hear Placebo in stereo, right?”

Tate always kept his promises, and Placebo became one of Brian’s favorite bands.

So Brian had known Talker for about a year and a half when he suddenly got a glimpse into who Tate Walker really was. It was like a window into a whole other world.

Brian had lingered after practice that day. It was becoming painfully obvious that his shoulder would definitely not last for even three years, and he wanted to baby it for as long as possible to keep his scholarship. He’d listened to the other kids talking about jobs and decided he’d be up to his elbows in a restaurant job soon enough when track was gone, so he might as well stay as healthy as possible for as long as he could.

So there he was in his tighty-whities and a plain gray T-shirt, icing his shoulder, when he heard Talker bawling to Dropkick Murphys at the top of his lungs—and doing a passable job of it, since the band tended toward Irish rap and they sang fast! Tate

must have thought he was completely alone, because as he rounded the corner, toweling his long stripe of hair with one hand and holding a towel wrapped around his waist with another, he was still singing—but he stopped abruptly and fell on his ass when he saw Brian there, stinking of Ben-Gay and rotating his shoulder gingerly.

Brian regarded Tate with quiet surprise, and then he saw the scars.

Talker hadn't gotten the sleeve tattoo done yet, and Brian had long since stopped trying to look at his face tattoo like a gawker at a zoo. He knew that Tate wore long-sleeved shirts year round, in spite of the hundred-plus degree heat in Sacramento in the summer, or the fact that summer often stretched until October. He even knew that the coach let Tate wear long-sleeved track-shirts, when the rest of the world was in a tank top. After a year and half of acquaintanceship, now Brian knew why.

The original tattoo ended at the edge of his neck, and the scar—a mottled combination of old burn scars and skin grafts, extended down the entire right side of his body. Suddenly the random, original tattoo pattern made sense: tattooing over scar tissue was difficult and painful. The artist had simply followed the tissue pattern for the best effect. And since colors would bleed, the stark black made sense too. The entire tattoo was camouflage, hiding Tate's scars in plain sight.

The reason Tate was always the last one off the track and never showered with the rest of the team was obvious as well.

The look in Tate's brown eyes was... heartbreaking. He scowled at Brian as he picked himself up with dignity, and an echoing silence fell over the two of them as Tate dared Brian to say something.

Brian wanted to say a lot. He wanted to say, "Oh, I get it now," because so much about Tate's personality made sense. He also wanted to say, "Look, I don't care about the scars—I'm not going to make fun of them, you don't have to worry about me. I'm a good guy." He really wanted to say "Holy shit, what happened!" but even he knew that was not good form.

What he did say was, "Ouch," and he said it mildly, without a lot of drama. Brian never did really go for drama—he'd been quiet and self-contained, even as a child.

It was apparently the right thing to say. Tate shrugged and flopped the stripe of long hair out of his eyes. Without the ponytail or the spikes or the eyeliner, he looked vulnerable and young. The curve of his lip was sensual and full—a thing Brian hadn't noticed until this particular moment.

"Yeah, it hurt," he said, as though the hurt didn't matter. "I was a kid when it happened, you know?"

Brian nodded. "How little?"

Tate walked to his locker and started rooting around for clothes—camouflage jeans, combat boots, and a long-sleeved T-shirt, even though it was late May. "I was six. My mom fell asleep with a cigarette and a bottle of whiskey. The blanket I was sleeping on was soaked in it."

Ouch indeed.

"Your mom?"

"Didn't live."

"My folks too. Car crash."

Tate made one of those twitches, the ones that seemed to literally yank him from one thought or time or place to the real, physical here and now. "The Newsies were a ragged army, poor orphans and runaways without direction... until one day, all that

changed.” He said it with intonation, as though he was quoting something, and Brian felt thick and slow next to that quickness. He’d always been slow to speak around Talker, but Talker didn’t seem to mind.

This time was no exception.

“I don’t understand,” he apologized, and Tate turned to him, enthusiasm written on his face like crayon on a wall.

“Newsies? You’ve never seen Newsies? It’s, like, the musical, before High School Musical, which was lame... man, you’ve got to see this movie—it’s awesome!”

“Uhm, okay.” Brian was blinking, hard, wondering how their conversation had ended up down such an exotic hallway when he hadn’t seen the turn, but then that’s where Tate took conversation. If something got too close, he would take it in the opposite direction.

“I could bring it by your dorm—if you’ve got a computer, we could see it. You’d like it...” It was the first time in that year and a half of semi-acquaintanceship that they’d progressed into actual friendship. Best moment of Brian’s life.

“Okay.” Brian had a laptop—he and his aunt had put every spare penny they had into it. So far, he’d only used it to type papers and surf YouTube. He felt vaguely ashamed that he had no porn to speak of, but that didn’t seem to interest him right now.

“Uhm, that is, if you don’t mind a fag in your dorm room.” Tate had turned away. He made a show out of using the small mirror in his locker to carefully place brazen blue eyeliner around his eyes.

Brian realized with some shock that Tate was talking about himself. He also realized that he was terrified Brian would agree with him.

"Don't have many friends," he said honestly. "Can't afford to be choosy." He paused and watched as Tate's shoulders straightened a little, the twitchy hunch to them gone with Brian's open acceptance. "But I don't like it when people call them names."

"Them?" Tate turned around with wide-open, decorated eyes, as though daring Brian to deny who he was.

"My friends."

Tate nodded then, and flushed. "Right. Okay." He smiled. Brian had come to know that smile with the prominent canines and crowded bottom bite very well. But Tate's smile was luminous—pure and shining, especially now—and Brian realized with a lump in his throat that, for this moment at least, he was needed. Tate Walker needed him as a friend as no one else had perhaps needed Brian in his life.

It was so easy after that.

Brian's shoulder had finally blown while practicing the shot put. He'd lost his scholarship and had to take a job to get through school, and they'd moved in together shortly after that.

Hey, Brian—where you living if you can't live in the dorms?

Don't know—gotta find an apartment.

Here—my friend on X Street just gave up a second-floor dump. It's a shitty neighborhood, but it's got two bedrooms, and it's right behind a Starbucks, so we can pirate their Wi-Fi.

We?

Well... if you don't mind a roommate who likes guys.

No—not at all.

Although Tate never said so, he gave up his dorm because Brian was his best friend, and he didn't want to lose the ability to

just wander down the hall and throw a movie in the laptop while Brian was trying to pound out a paper.

Both of them got restaurant jobs: Tate as a bar-back at Gatsby's Nick, a flamboyant gay bar, and Brian waiting tables at Olive Garden. Tate still had his scholarship, but neither of them had much money. Their apartment was crappy, their furniture was second hand, and when they weren't filching restaurant food, they lived on Top Ramen and fried potatoes.

Brian couldn't remember being happier.

AND now, after two and a half years of friendship, Brian couldn't believe he'd heard right.

This was Tate's new hobby?

"You're doing what?" he asked quietly, when the echo of his unexpected outburst had died down.

Tate shook himself out and danced on his toes. The tile under his feet crackled and broke down into even smaller fragments before he answered.

"It's no big deal."

"It's *not* stamp collecting! What is it you're doing again?"

"You know, I'm... I'm talking."

"Yeah, I heard that," Brian growled. He was running with Tate for company, since he was no longer on the team. He liked running, though. He liked spending time with Tate when he was free from all the stuff that bound him to the earth in the painful way of iron manacles. Right now, though, he wasn't sure he could make the trip down to the riverfront bike trail because he was too damned mad and in too much shock. His shoe dangled from his finger by

the lace, and for a second he thought about using it to bludgeon his roommate until Tate came to his senses.

"You're going into the bathroom stalls after work and talking to guys until they come. You said that. A phone-sex operator, but in person. You said that too. What you didn't say"—he had to pause because his voice made a sound like a gravel driveway underfoot—"was why in *God's name you would put yourself in danger like that!*"

Oh shit. There went his voice—but he couldn't help it. He couldn't. Oh God.... Tate was just so vulnerable.

"It's not that dangerous," Tate maintained earnestly. "Honest, Brian. I don't even have to see them. It's like... I don't know. It's powerful!" He looked up then. He didn't have on his eyeliner yet, and his hair wasn't spiked, so it was just... his eyes. They were ink-dark, and hurt, and he had a clench to his chin, like he was going to power through the pain. That was how Tate met each day.

"Powerful," Brian echoed, his voice a hollow void.

"Yeah, it's like... you know. I can have the sex, but I don't have to... to put anything on the line. People walk away happy, but they can't hurt *me*. Don't you see? It's perfect."

Brian dropped his shoe there on the floor of their entryway, and sank down on the cracked tile after it, pulling his knees to his chest and pushing his longish, wheat-colored hair out of his eyes with a sweaty palm.

"Yeah, it's perfect," he muttered. It made perfect sense. Tate had been so hurt, so many times. His body was literally *twitching* with the need to be loved, but his heart... his heart couldn't take one more wormwood-flavored grind through the mood-processor.

"Come on, Brian," Tate said, crouching down next to him. He put an easy hand on Brian's shoulder because he thought Brian was straight, Brian was no threat to him, Brian couldn't possibly

hurt him *that* way, and Brian met that dark-eyed, clenched-jaw look of trust with a throat so tight he could hardly breathe.

"I mean," Tate said softly, "it's not like you can do this for me, you know? You're the best friend a guy could have, but... I... I really want someone." He stood up and danced away to the industrial-techno-popping rhythm of his heart. "I'm just so lonely," he said nakedly, and Brian was finally able to get the words out.

"But I love you," he rasped, and Tate bent down and patted him on the head like a child or a cat or something.

"Well, yeah, but we both know it's not the way I need." His voice choked at that, and before Brian could contradict him, explain the trope that Tate had locked him into as surely as a girl in a manga book, he said, "Here. I've got to go... I'll just go alone... I'll... I'll shower at work... bye...."

Brian tried hard to scramble after him, but he put all his weight on his bad shoulder and when his vision cleared from the mask of black spots in front of it, Tate was long gone. Brian had been a decathlete. Tate had been a distance sprinter, and they had more than half a dozen different trails to choose from between the city streets and the riverfront bike trail. The odds of actually catching up to him when he was in this mood were as thin as the scar tissue on Tate's healing heart.

Shit. Shit shit shit shit shit shit shit....

Brian found himself on his ass again as scalding tears slid in the salty dust coating his knees.

"But it *is* the way you need," he whispered. *It is, Tate. It's just exactly what you need.* But Tate wouldn't listen to him—not now. Not after all Brian had seen, or the way Tate had laid his heart bare because he thought Brian was "safe." Oh God—now that Tate really needed Brian-the-lover, how could Brian get him to trust Brian-the-friend?

Part III

Old Lovers

BRIAN had a date with Virginia the first night Tate had tried to have sex. He remembered that—the date.

He'd been having sex pretty steadily since his senior year in homeschooling. He was a pretty kid—he knew that in a detached way. Wheat-colored hair, blue eyes, all-American-boy freckles, and a wide, smiling mouth—between that and the body, which was honed because he liked the exercise and not because he liked the muscles—well, girls had been following him into bed with impunity, and he hadn't minded. He liked girls, liked pleasing them, so he was pretty good in bed (when they could find one—often, he was pretty good in his car), but the whole affair seemed... curiously passionless to him. There had been no pounding or sweating or dedication to the act. The whole gimme gimme gimme gotta have it ba-bee thing seemed to be missing, and it hadn't been until he'd lived with Tate that he'd begun to figure out why.

Since moving in with Tate, he'd become obsessed with the crease of Tate's thigh, the one leading from his hip to his groin. Maybe it was because Tate's private parts were always casually hidden when he came out of the shower or was dressing, but that particular place just... captured Brian's attention in the oddest way.

Was Tate's cock long? Thick? Did it hang heavy when he got out of the shower? Were there scars? (Poor baby, let there not be

scars!) Were there piercings? Was the hair the same dark, inky color as the hair on his head?

And that wasn't the only part of Tate's body that seemed to have captured Brian's attention, either. The slope of his back, the indentation of his waist, the subtle placement of small, secret moles on his unscarred shoulder... suddenly, Brian was thinking of these things as he fell asleep at night. He was dreaming of them, and waking up with a hand on his hard cock and sweat-sticky skin, unable to tell the details of the dreams, just that they made his heart pound in his groin and his breath come in strangled pants from his chest.

He began to have some suspicions that he wasn't as straight as he'd thought he was, but it wasn't until Tate came home that night, all excited about an upcoming late-night date with another bar-back, that Brian really knew that his roommate meant more to him than his girlfriend.

Tate hadn't had sex yet. It had been a painful admission to Brian one night after Virginia had left. He'd "fooled around" a little; lots of kissing at parties, some groping or "frotting" as he called it, but no... no skin on skin. No intimacy. No having his body enveloped by another's and feeling cared for. Loved.

Of course those hadn't been his words, but he'd been so transparent—at least to Brian.

Tate's father had called once in the nine or so months since they'd been roommates. Tate was sparing with his family history, but apparently dear ol' dad had been declared incompetent as a parent, and Tate had spent a lot of years in foster care. That was, he admitted candidly, how he got his scholarship—the big pity card, as he called it. Apparently, that didn't stop "Dad" from inflicting as much damage as he could, even long distance.

The call had come on Tate's birthday. Tate had picked up the phone, listened for a moment, and said, "Yes, Dad. Still gay."

Brian had heard the pejorative word on the other end of the phone even from across the room. It echoed from the walls as Tate put the receiver gently back into the charger.

Brian had walked across the room, grabbed Tate's hand, and said, "C'mon."

"Where we going?"

"Dinner. It's your birthday."

"You don't have any money!" Brian was perpetually broke—no scholarship, no cash, just that simple.

"Don't care." Brian had needed to hit his aunt up for Top Ramen money and potatoes from the garden that week, but he didn't care. It was worth it to take Tate to Red Robin and treat him to a hamburger, talk about music that Brian had never heard of, get the waiters to sing to him over a melting ball of ice cream, and make the memory of that word fade forever by lingering for an hour over the bottomless pit of fries.

So he'd thought his obsession might just be compassion, fascination for someone who was so damned tough and so damned hurt both at the same time, until Tate brought home Blaize with a Z, who had a shaved head and sparkly green eye shadow and gauges as big as a quarter in his earlobes.

He also had a full, lush mouth, and sweet, prominent clavicles, and his gangly arms and a long, trim waist. It was easy to see a lot of that because he wore a fishnet tank top with his ripped jeans.

Tate had looked at Blaize like he was a last, best hope, called "Be good to him, Virginia!" down the hall, and then twitched out of the house with a flirty little wave and a hopeful wink, leaving Brian to wander into the bedroom in a daze.

Virginia looked up from the movie she was watching on his laptop and smiled. She was casually dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, and her feet in their little bobby-sox were swinging over her bottom as she lay on her stomach across the bed. Her dark hair spilled from a ponytail—she was as sweet a girl as he had ever met.

“Yo, Brian? Your goldfish die?”

Brian jerked his attention away from the closed door down the hall and his worry for Talker. “Goldfish?”

“Uhm, yeah. You look, you know, a little depressed?”

Brian shrugged, not sure he could put words to his uneasiness. Of course, words weren’t Brian’s thing anyway. “He... he didn’t look strong enough,” was what he said, and Virginia turned to him, surprised.

“Strong enough for what?”

Brian sighed and sat down on the bed next to her. He liked touching her—her skin was soft and she enjoyed the simplicity of a hand on the small of her back. That wasn’t why he cared about her, though. What he really liked was her kind soul, quick wit, and incredible patience when Brian took his time following that quickness with his own methodical brain. Virginia was good people.

“He needs someone strong,” he said after a moment. “Someone he can count on. I don’t think this guy can count on himself to brush his own teeth on a regular basis.” He shook his head. “Talker can do better.”

Virginia had grinned gently. “Well, baby, it’s not like he can clone you, right?”

Brian never knew what was in his smile at that moment, but Virginia’s expression altered subtly, and she reached up to kiss him with hunger. He returned the kiss, and they made love. She started

out starving, voracious, begging him for passion, and he returned with technique. It was what he had.

Somewhere between the two, it turned into good-bye.

In the aftermath, they were lying in bed, facing each other, and Virginia touched his face. "I would have married you," she said softly, her eyes shiny in the light from the streetlamp outside.

He frowned. "Are we breaking up?"

At that moment the front door opened, and they could hear Tate moving around in the hallway. He was trying to be stealthy, but he failed at it—too much pent-up energy for that. Besides—even the racket of his combat boots couldn't stifle the sound of his quiet sniffing.

Brian straightened up in bed and frowned at Virginia. "Oh geez... I wonder what happened."

"We broke up," she said quietly, but he scarcely heard her—and certainly didn't credit her. He started searching for his sleep shorts and a T-shirt, to go deal with Tate, and Virginia sighed and sat up in bed.

"I'll be back in a minute," he mumbled, and one corner of her mouth lifted in a faint smile.

"Won't be here...."

She probably said something else, but he was out the door by then, and Tate was sitting on the ugly plaid couch, watching a Friends rerun on their little living room TV and eating ice cream. Brian sighed and grabbed some tissue—if Talker wasn't careful, he was going to get guyliner in the ice cream, and it was Brian's favorite flavor: green.

"What happened?" he asked softly, handing over the tissue. Tate took the tissue and gave Brian the ice cream. Brian took some makeup-free bites while Talker was cleaning up his face.

"It was a big old clusterfucking fight for the bottom," Tate sniffled. "He wanted me to be all alpha and shit, and I... I can't do that. Someone's got to take charge, someone has to say what goes where, and he kept expecting me to do it and I don't know what I'm doing anymore than he does, and next thing I know we're having this big old bitchy fight and he called me a spazz and I just... just left. All he wanted to do was screw, but we couldn't even get that down. I could have even just watched TV or gone to a movie, but we had to get into a big ol' fight on the pitcher's mound, you know?"

Brian took a bite of ice cream and reflected that he had no idea what his roommate was talking about, and he said so. Somewhere in the middle of Tate's explanation of who "pitched" and who "caught" in man-on-man anal sex, Virginia came down the hallway, completely dressed.

Brian looked up from his ice cream and offered her a bite, and she shook her head with an incredibly sad smile, then bent over the back of the couch and kissed his cheek.

"I'll bring back your shirts tomorrow," she whispered, and he looked at her, surprised.

"We really are breaking up?" he asked from the couch, very confused. Virginia just patted his cheek lightly, gave Tate a long-suffering look, and said, "We'll talk tomorrow."

Brian had spent the rest of the night consoling Tate, only a little curious about what had just happened. By morning, he knew what a "fight for the bottom" meant. By the afternoon, he and Virginia had talked and cried and yelled and fought and hugged, and he finally realized why he should care who "pitched" and who "caught" when two men were naked and panting and in the mood to have sex.

VIRGINIA. That was Brian's first thought as he picked himself up off the floor and wobbled into his room. He put his running shoes away and changed into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. That was it. Plain and faded jeans. Gray T-shirt, laundered so soft it was thin in places. Brian liked things plain and simple. Tate was the most complicated thing in his life. Even Virginia was simple—but he was positive that Virginia could help him out with this.

Why not? Virginia had been the one to help him out of the closet—why couldn't she help him with Talker?

Her sister answered when he called her house. Apparently Virginia couldn't help him with Tate because she was away for the weekend with her new boyfriend—her *straight* boyfriend, Alex, who looked a lot like Brian except he wouldn't leave her naked in bed for his distraught male roommate for a million dollars and change.

Oh crap. He closed his eyes and tried to think—he wasn't very good at it. Tate was the one who could think of things. Tate told Brian which days to ask off, so they could see movie premieres together on a matinee price. He helped Brian with his papers—English or History, Talker was there, asking Brian a thousand questions until Brian could write the paper and not feel like a complete idiot. Tate figured out the budget and clipped free coupons, so they could occasionally afford pizza, and so Brian could buy something besides Top Ramen and potatoes at the grocery store.

Tate's light-speed-twitch-o-matic brain could talk a stranger to spattering come across the back wall of a public toilet in a crowded club, and Brian's fly-in-the-oatmeal gray matter couldn't find a way to say "I'm gay and I love you," and make it stick.

Wonderful. Fucking wonderful.

He took a deep breath and sat on his bed and tried to think about Virginia—she was always so kind and had so much common sense. Parts of their discussion the night after Tate had his heart broken (the first time) had been priceless.

Part IV

The Pain of Almost Touching

“VIRGINIA... come on....”

Virginia had rolled her eyes. “You think I’m full of shit?”

“I just care about the guy... he doesn’t have anyone else.”

Virginia sighed and rubbed her red eyes with the heel of her hand. They were both tired: Virginia apparently because she had been up thinking about him, and Brian because he had been up talking to Tate.

“Brian, do you have any porn?” she asked at last, seemingly at random.

He flushed. “No.” He didn’t have any porn. It just seemed... odd... no matter how personal his computer was supposed to be.

“Okay—here. Give me five minutes and your computer—I want you to see a couple of things.”

Was there anything more embarrassing than having your soon-to-be-ex-girlfriend pulling up porn on your computer? Brian wasn’t allowed to watch what she chose, but when he came back in the room, she said, “Let’s call this an experiment in heterosexuality, babe. Here.” She clicked “play” on a small video, and then stood up and moved back to let Brian sit at the desk and watch....

Watch two women, licking each other's pink and swollen vulva with joy, gusto, and a lot of moaning. Brian blushed and looked away, and Virginia's firm hands turned him back to the screen. But it was just so embarrassing. The girls... they were using fingers and tongues, probing glistening, quivering slits of flesh and puckered little anuses—it just seemed too personal to watch.

Brian squirmed with mortification, but—as Virginia's hard hand at the fly of his jeans proved after one of the most uncomfortable moments of his life—he did not get aroused.

"Okay," she said softly, when he wouldn't meet her eyes. "Now, phase two."

Phase two was a similar video—but this time it was two men, neither of whom looked like Tate. Brian glared at her, and she turned him toward the screen, and he found himself fascinated. He could barely look at their equipment—that just seemed so personal, like it did with the girls—but he liked looking at the slope of their shoulders, the creases in their thighs, the taut stomachs and tiny little navels. Eventually one of the men ended up on his hands and knees and the guy behind him dumped lubricant on his fingers and began to penetrate, gently, one finger at a time. The guy receiving (bottoming, that was the term) had his eyes closed and his mouth open, and he was shuddering with the force of his arousal, and the guy behind him reached down and kissed his shoulder, the back of his neck, even as that treacherous hand played and stretched and penetrated. Brian couldn't help but watch as the "top" rolled a condom up his cock, and he watched with fascination, because the cock was longer and slimmer than Brian's. Brian's lips parted, and his breath came a little faster, and he wondered what it would be like to hold another man's cock, what it would feel like in his hands, and whether it would throb in his palm the way that one looked like it was....

Virginia's hand on his crotch was welcome, because his cock was hard and aching, and he groaned a little and pushed up against her. Very gently, she pulled his hand from his side and placed it down his pants.

He didn't even have to make contact with his own skin before he creamed in his jeans, hard and violently. When he was done, he was sitting at his desk as the rest of the scene played out in front of him, and Virginia very quietly closed his computer and forced him to look her in the eyes.

"Yeah," she said, her voice edgy, and he didn't blame her. "Let's have this conversation honestly, okay?"

They did. But first he needed a shower and a change of clothes—and a long, intense bout of soul searching as he was cleaning the come off his skin.

BRIAN remembered that moment—would remember it for his entire life, in vivid color—because Virginia had taught him more than just his own sexuality. She taught him that sometimes, when someone was in emotional denial, they needed proof of how wrong they really were. Sometimes they needed actions instead of words. Sometimes, they needed someone to make the hard decision or to say the painful thing, or they would be lost and locked in their own hearts forever.

With a sigh he flopped backward on his bed, closed his eyes, and began to plan. Okay, so the problem wasn't that Tate didn't believe that Brian loved him, it was that he didn't understand *how* Brian loved him. What was he doing wrong?

Brian *knew* he was gay. After his conversation with Virginia, he'd been reluctant to talk to Tate about it because he wasn't sure if

he was attracted to Tate because he was *male*, or because he was *Tate*. Virginia had helped him out with that too. She'd taken him to a few parties—the kind that nice girls from the suburbs shouldn't know about but did—and he'd ended up in darkened corners of alien rooms, making out with pretty boys who very rarely asked his name.

He had enjoyed them. He'd put his hands on their narrow, tapered waists and felt tight ribs and taut, muscular stomachs under his palms. He'd enjoyed the feel of hard hands on his chest, and strong, rough tweaks to his nipples, and he loved the feel of stubble next to his cheek. Touching his lips to a man's neck actually made him shudder with need, in a way that coming inside a woman had never done, and he'd walked away from every party more and more sure that this was the man he really was.

But the man he was, really, was the man who always stopped these random men from reaching into his jeans and getting more personal than just necking at a party.

The first time someone had tried it, he'd experienced a jolt of actual shame. It had felt disloyal to Tate. The last time he'd gone to a party with Virginia, he was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to even kiss another man—and he'd been right. He and his chosen target had ended up drinking tequila all night long, and Brian's only memory of the night was of spilling out his painful, bleeding love for his roommate on the table in front of a total stranger.

Which was the reason it was his last party, really. And the next morning had been a revelation to itself.

“WHY don't you tell him?” Virginia had asked the next morning as she nursed him through a hangover.

"I did. I told him that I loved him." He'd had to. It had been necessary. Tate had been getting ready for work, absolutely gushing about the cute customer that Tate was absolutely sure was coming in for Tate and Tate alone, and Brian had said, "Why do you need him? I love you!"

"What did he say?" Virginia asked.

"That it was too bad I wasn't gay, because then it could go somewhere." Brian had groaned in mortification. He'd never told a girl he loved her—except Virginia, after that day with the porn on the computer. It had been the one time the words hadn't felt like a lie.

"Uhm, did you mention the gay thing?" she'd asked, giving him a big glass of water and a couple of Tylenol.

"I thought that was implicit in the 'I love you'." Brian scowled at her. Wasn't it?

Virginia had raised her eyebrows and chewed thoughtfully on her lower lip. "Guess not," she said at last. "Maybe you can't really sell the 'I love you' to the guy unless you sell the 'I'm gay' to everyfuckingbody else."

Well, it made sense. Tate was so flamboyant—makeup, glitzy, glittering shirts, rainbow earrings in his pierced lobe—all of it was designed to make people look at his gayness, and not at the vulnerable human underneath all the trappings of it.

"Besides," Virginia said softly, "I'm not sure if it's even real to you yet."

Brian thought about Tate, standing at the counter, doing dishes and singing a song from Repo: The Genetic Opera in his frenetic, tone-deaf way.

"It's real," he said, remembering the way Tate would close his eyes and bob his head as his hands were on autopilot over the cheap plastic plates.

"Yeah?" Virginia's voice was edgy again, and he snapped his attention to her instead of his wayward, wistful memories. "Besides random party-guys, who in your life knows you're gay?"

"There's not that many people in my life, Virginia," he told her honestly. "Just you, Tate, and my Aunt Lyndsey. The people I work with, I guess, but, you know, I'm not tight with them. Why do they need to know?"

Virginia sighed and ruffled his hair. "Omgod, Brian—no wonder you didn't recognize your own closet. You've lived in one all your life."

Brian glared at her. "What does that mean?" God! Virginia, Tate—why did he seem to like people who made him feel stupid?

Another sigh. "Okay. Okay okay okay okay. Here's how I'm reading it. I think that you didn't want to admit you're gay because it would have meant needing more than absolutely necessary. I mean... seriously. Brian—you're used to living on no money, with hardly any family, and just enough college preparation to make you feel totally stupid when you're actually in your classes...."

"I was homeschooled!" he protested, and she rolled her eyes.

"By an artist—and I know your aunt is brilliant, but you weren't ready when you got here. Anyone could see it."

"It's not her fault I'm stupid," he protested, because anything that sounded like a slam on his Aunt Lyndie just had to have another explanation.

Virginia shook her head then and made a horrible, strangled sound. "It's a good thing we're not together anymore," she

muttered, "because you are breaking my goddamned heart. Look, babe. Here's the deal." They were sitting on the ugly plaid couch, and she squared herself to face him, those dark brown eyes serious and unrelenting. "It's like I said: he's not going to buy it unless you can sell it. So, like, how 'bout you selling it, okay? Think about it. Next time a pretty girl flirts with you, tell her straight up you don't swing that way. If it's a guy, tell him you're in love with another guy. If the subject of gay rights comes up in a conversation, actually open your goddamned mouth and talk. You make sure the whole damned world knows who you are, and maybe Tate will see it in you."

Brian looked at her blankly. "Girls flirt with me?" They must, he thought belatedly, because he'd ended up bedding more than his fair share, but he couldn't remember how it had happened. One minute he'd be talking to a girl and enjoying her company, laughing at her jokes, smiling at her happily because he was having a good time, and the next minute, she'd have her tongue down his throat. There hadn't been any rhyme or reason to it, it just was. Come to think about it, the boys that he'd kissed had been the same way.

The look of blank despair on Virginia's face made him feel stupid all over again. "I'm at a loss," she said, almost to herself. "I'm at a complete loss. You and me together? It was like me thinking I was in the kiddie pool when I was really in Loch Ness. Sweartagod, it's just no goddamned fair at all."

Part V

Wherever You Want To

BRIAN still didn't know what she'd meant by him being Loch Ness, but he'd kept it in mind. The problem was, he really didn't talk to anyone but Tate. He'd managed to put one girl off with "I'm sorry, but I'm actually gay," and she had shrugged and said it was too bad, but it didn't feel like an earth-shattering personal moment. Maybe he had to do it until it didn't make his hands clammy, but he wasn't sure that was ever going to happen.

And that wasn't something that was going to be fixed right now. What needed to be fixed right now was *Tate*, and the terrible, stomach-churning fear that every time his roommate went into the bathroom to bring some stranger off, he'd be selling a little piece of his soul that would be nearly impossible to recover.

Brian had never felt so helpless about something so important in his life.

And *that* was what penetrated his confusion. He was helpless. There was one person in his life who could help him when he was like this. It was the person who had arrived at the hospital when he'd been six with a suitcase of his clothes and his favorite toys and said, "C'mon, baby. Let's get out of here, okay? It's you and me, and I hate this place."

Lyndsey Cooper was Brian's only living family. She made a thin living off her paintings, and lived in a small, three-room cabin on a friend's property in Grass Valley. The day she'd come to pick Brian up from the hospital, she'd been wearing a loose, flowered dress and wore her hair in bleached dreadlocks. At home, she wore jeans. In public, it was pure flower child. Although the hair had changed, the clothing had not, and when Brian had asked her about it once, she'd replied with a shrug.

I'm just dressing the part, baby. The world expects certain looks from certain people.

And now, thinking about his Aunt Lyndie, Brian felt the beginnings of a plan knitting with tiny stitches in the pudding of his brain. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed Lyndie's number, hoping she wouldn't worry because he was calling three days after his usual Sunday call.

"Hey, baby, what's shakin'?" Lyndie always sounded happy to hear from him. He should have known better than to worry.

"Lyndie," he said with a swallow, "I... I need to come up today, is that okay?"

"Absolutely. Is anything wrong?"

Brian blinked, and realized that this was what Virginia was talking about when it came to announcing stuff to the world. "Well, I've got something to tell you, and some advice to ask you, and I need some help. But mostly, it's about my roommate, and...."

"And it's a long story. No worries. See you in an hour, okay?" It was at least an hour to Grass Valley.

"Make it two," he said, relieved and happy just to hear her voice, making it sound like there was nothing they couldn't handle together. It was how she'd gotten him through his childhood, how he'd made it through his teen years—every laid-back,

nonjudgmental, quietly optimistic fiber of Brian's being, he owed to his Aunt Lyndie's unconditional love.

"Two?"

"Yeah. I've got some shit to do in the meantime."

The first thing he had to do was get the night off work. He made some calls—one of his coworkers had a new baby and was constantly broke. Brian knew for a fact that Tuesdays were Ray's usual day off, and Ray was grateful for the extra shift.

"What's the deal?" Ray asked over the phone. "Got a hot date?"

"Naw," Brian mumbled, his palms sweating already. "Just boyfriend troubles."

"Bummer," Ray said, his voice unsurprised. "Well, good luck there, buddy." There was a cry in the background—but close enough to the phone to give Brian the image of a baby being rocked by Ray Ruiz, the closest thing he had to a friend at work. "At least you not going to end up with no baby-makes-three!" he said, his voice rising as the noise escalated.

Brian laughed politely and rang off, wishing Ray had been able to talk for a minute. Even though Brian was horrible at small talk, he wasn't looking forward to this next part of his plan.

If you want him to buy it, you need to sell it.

I'm just dressing the part, baby.

Two of the people he cared about most were talking in his ear, and he couldn't shout them down. Besides, he thought miserably as he stood in front of the mirror with the clippers that Tate kept in the bathroom for daily touch-ups, it's only hair.

It was only hair—but it was *his* hair, and he liked it, and he even liked it long, although he usually kept it that way because

haircuts were expensive and it was easier to get it cut short and go a long time between them than it was to keep them up. As he took the clippers, set at three, cleanly along the side of his head from his temple to his nape, and then along the other side, he tried not to whimper. Long swaths of wheat-colored hair fell into the sink, and his face emerged from the fall of it, stark and rectangular, with an angular chin and a lean mouth. Too exposed, he thought, shivering, and he looked dolefully at the hair. As he cleaned it up, he consoled himself with the idea that, when this was over and he'd made his grand romantic gesture, he'd fix it. When Tate was all right, he'd let it grow out on the sides and treat himself to a nice, conservative wedge-cut.

He grabbed some of Tate's small black elastic bands and put the remaining long strip of hair from his forehead to his crown in a punky-looking ponytail, and took stock.

It wasn't enough, he thought dismally. He was definitely going to need Aunt Lyndie's help. But first he had to come clean—and maybe not with his secret alone.

The drive up to Grass Valley was really long without Tate plugging his iPod into the cassette player and talking Brian's ear off. The last few times he'd been up to see Lyndie, Tate had been by his side, excited about getting out of Sacramento, since, short of the colleges they went to on their track meets, it was the only town he'd ever known.

Lyndie was working in her garden, wearing a pair of man's workout shorts and a man's sleeveless tank top, both of which were full of holes and bleach stains, and Brian wondered if Lyndsey hadn't been raiding her neighbor's Goodwill castoffs again. She'd done it when he was a kid, with impunity and no remorse. As Brian had grown, most of his "play clothes" had come from the castoff pile that got put out with the trash three times a year. The neighbors

had seen him in their clothes after a bit and started just leaving the good stuff on Lyndsey's porch. She was grateful enough to paint them a lovely little watercolor of their house in the sunshine, down the red-dirt hill and surrounded by pine trees. The neighbors had been impressed enough to start throwing in some new clothes in an appropriate size for Brian—and he'd managed to make it through his weekly visits with the homeschooling cadre without too much ridicule.

He'd been grateful enough to mow their lawn whenever he mowed his aunt's, and the cycle of being good neighbors and resourceful human beings had continued. It was a part of his upbringing he'd always be grateful for.

As was Lyndsey's enthusiastic, no-holds-barred hug as he stepped out of his twenty-year-old green Toyota.

"Hey there, baby!" she said sweetly. Her hair—which should have been gray right now—was dyed a solid, raven's-wing black, and it hung down her back from a band at her crown. Her face showed her fifty years, but her smile was just as young as that hair. "The haircut's new—you going to keep it?"

Brian shook his head. "It's sort of a statement," he said, quirking his lips. He threw an arm over her shoulder and realized for the first time how fragile she felt. Tiny and small-boned she had always been, but maybe it was Brian's new sensibility to Tate that left him reeling with his aunt's mortality and vulnerability here in the hills alone.

He would definitely visit more often, he told himself firmly. If nothing else, he knew she'd share vegetables from the garden with him, and Tate always liked fresh tomatoes.

Aunt Lyndie took him into the kitchen and poured him some iced tea into one of the jelly jars that were so old, they were actually glass. She was good at tea—had always had at least two dozen

types in her cupboards, and knew the uses for everything from chamomile to rose hips. Today's blend was a mix of both of those, actually, and Brian added a liberal dose of sugar and lemon and sipped appreciatively while Lyndie poured herself a glass and sat patiently at the small, hand-carved wooden table and waited for him to speak. (Much of what was in Lyndie's home was either hand-carved or hand-me-down. The artist community in Placer County was close-knit and believed very firmly in utilizing resources to their fullest.)

"So, baby," she prompted gently after a moment, "what's the matter?"

Brian sighed. *Sell it to the world and maybe he'll buy it.* "I'm gay, Aunt Lyndie—but that's not actually the problem."

Aunt Lyndie blinked and frowned a little, as though trying to put together a puzzle. "So, all those girls you were with, growing up?"

Brian shrugged. "Yeah—I don't know how that happened. They just...." He flushed. "They wanted me, and, you know, they were nice, but they weren't... weren't...."

"Weren't what *you* wanted." Oh God. Aunt Lyndie knew. He should have known she'd get it.

Brian swallowed thickly. "Yeah."

Lyndie smiled and patted his hand. "Well, if it makes you happy, I'm okay with the gay thing—you should know that. I'm happy you found that out for yourself, and I'm really glad it's not a problem," she said sincerely, and took another sip of her tea.

"That's all?"

Lyndie shrugged. "Brian, baby, I've raised you since you were a rug rat. You think something like that is going to matter?" Her

lower lip thrust out and grew pouty. “I thought I taught you better than that.”

Brian smiled shyly at her. “You taught me awesome, Aunt Lyndie.” He shrugged and told her the truth. “Honestly? I’m just glad you believe me—because that’s sort of my problem.”

Ah God, but it felt good to spill out the whole thing to her. It felt good to sit in the kitchen where she’d helped him with his first times tables and helped him write his first words, and set out this newer, trickier problem and ask for her help to unravel it. How could he have done this without her? He thought of Tate and his father’s ugly word ringing through the phone lines, and his heart bled a little. Tate needed this. Tate needed to come here more often and spend time with Lyndie and see more of her pretty, pretty art. He needed to know that Brian wasn’t the only person on the planet who could look out for him. Whether or not Tate loved Brian back, Brian needed to bring him here again, and let him know that unconditional acceptance was not a myth.

He finished the story, and saw that Lyndie’s wide, smiling mouth was pursed and grim.

“Oh, Brian. Baby—poor Tate. This thing he’s doing. That’s a bad thing.”

Brian nodded, relieved. It wasn’t just him and his innocence. “It is for him,” Brian said softly. Tate, who was so vulnerable. There were some guys out there who could probably do this for kicks—but not Tate. Tate was doing this because he needed... needed so badly and so completely that he was willing to give away pieces of himself to get what he needed.

“This....” Lyndsey took a drink of her tea and looked at him again. “This is a self-hating sort of thing—at least if this kid is like you’ve told me. That doesn’t seem like your roommate, you know? I mean....” She sighed and searched for words. “He seemed fragile,

when you came for Christmas. He did—I didn't say anything because I thought you already saw it. But he didn't seem like this. What am I missing here? What did you leave out?"

Brian flushed and looked away. He'd known it might come to this when he first called her up.

"The thing is," he said, swallowing, "that it's not really my story to tell. But... but Tate won't tell it." At least not the way he *should* tell it. "Tate keeps saying that he wanted it to happen, that he was in control... but... you know, I've heard girls talk, and... what happened to him wasn't right. And he won't admit it. He...." Brian's eyes went hot, and his throat swelled tightly, and he could hardly look at Aunt Lyndie. "He keeps saying it was his fault, and it wasn't."

Lyndie took a deep breath and let it out in careful shivers. "Okay, baby. You've got to tell me what happened. You've got to. Even if *he's* okay with it, you're not. This is hurting you—that makes it your story to tell, okay? You go ahead and tell me, okay?"

Brian nodded and wiped his eyes and his aunt gave him a paper napkin and that helped. He hoped he wouldn't have to wear eye makeup like Tate, he thought dismally, because he had a feeling that before this day was over, he'd be crying some more.

Part VI

I Should Have Been Brave

TWO days after that last disastrous party (the one with the hangover that Virginia nursed him through), Brian resolved to tell Tate that he was gay, and it was love, and that Tate could stop playing the teenaged-girl-he-likes-me locker game with the customer who was his latest crush.

Of course, he would come home from school that day and find Tate all excited about his latest date.

Brian watched Tate spiking his hair, choosing the exact right sparkly shirt and ripped jeans, pulling his favorite leather cuffs and studded collar out of his drawer, and thought, I'm right here! Dammit, Tate, you don't need all that shit, I'm right HERE!

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" he'd ended up asking weakly. "You don't really know anything about this guy." Aw, geez... lame much, Brian? "I mean—" he closed his eyes and swallowed,—"maybe you should have him here for dinner, or, you know, go to the movies or something."

Tate looked at him incredulously. "I'm not a girl in the Victorian age, Brian. I want to get laid, remember? I mean, I'm giving it up! It's here! It's free! How bad can this go?"

It's free? "Well, maybe it shouldn't be free!" Brian snapped. "Maybe it's more valuable than that. Maybe you should put a price

on it, dammit, and wait for a relationship instead of some guy you think is going to pop your cherry just be-fucking-cause!"

Tate's body had given a convulsive jerk—yup, things just got too intense for him, no doubt about it. "I'm not into anything serious," he lied. He pulled out face powder—he got his in the shade of ghostly white, and Brian reached out a shaking hand and took it from him.

"Don't," he said gruffly, and Tate looked at him, surprised. "You put that shit on so no one has to see you. I like you. If this guy doesn't like you for you, he doesn't deserve to touch you."

Tate's Adam's apple bobbed up and down several times in quick succession, and the skin around his high cheekbones grew tight. "Look, Granola," he tried to joke, "not everybody can carry off the homegrown look like you do, okay? Some of us need a little help." He reached out to take his face powder back, and Brian found he'd clenched his fingers around it fiercely.

"You spend your food money on this shit, Tate. I may be 'granola,' but I've got a feeling for what's good for you. This date... this idea... these things are not good for you."

Tate sighed and looked down at his hand reaching for the powder. It was the hand with the scars, and although Tate had the entire sleeve tattoo done by this time (thank you, scholarship), the hand was too scarred to take the ink. It was, in fact, disfigured. There had been some muscle damage during the fire and two of his fingers and the side of his palm were only partially functional, as well as withered and twisted. He had a variety of half-fingered gloves in leather, wool, and cotton, most of them black, to cover his right hand, but he wasn't wearing one of those now. Although it was the hand he wrote with, very few people guessed how hard he had to work to make that happen.

"It's sweet of you to worry," he said, looking at his fingers as they touched Brian's. Brian looked, too, and deliberately moved his hand so that it covered Tate's.

"I care about you," he said roughly, and his heart started hammering wildly. This is it! I'm going to tell him! I'm going to tell him and he won't go!

And then there was a different sort of hammering. Tate's shoulders spasmed and he dropped the powder. The case shattered and the little cake inside crumbled on the peeling vinyl of the floor.

"Fuck!" they both said in tandem, except Tate was crouching on the ground, picking up the pieces, and Brian was stepping around him to go get the broom from the kitchen.

"I'll get it!" Tate commanded. "Just get the door."

The hammering continued, and Brian scowled; the guy sounded like an asshole already and Brian hadn't even met him.

"Tate, don't do this," he said quietly, and Tate scowled up at him.

"Brian, man, I'm sorry I called you 'Granola,' but please... just let me have a date. Just let me get this over with, you know? You've had girls like Virginia. I haven't had anyone."

"You've got me!"

Tate rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Jesus, try to be serious with a guy."

AUNT LYNDIE heard this part of the story and shook her head with a smile. "Ouch," she said quietly.

Brian looked at her with wide eyes and nodded. “Yeah! That’s what I’m saying!” Oh thank God—*someone* who thought he was serious.

“So, did you tell him and make it stick?”

Brian grimaced, embarrassed. “I thought I’d wait until he got back from his date,” he said with a sigh. “It was stupid—I know it was stupid. But the last time he went out just to get laid, it was just such a disaster. I didn’t expect....” Oh Jesus, he really hadn’t. “I really didn’t expect this one to be worse.”

Lyndie put down her iced tea and grabbed Brian’s shaking, clammy hand.

“Okay,” she said, and damn, he thought, she was really wise. “In what way worse?”

THE guy’s name was Trevor: he looked like a calendar pinup and knew it. He cast Brian a smarmy look as Brian opened the door, and Brian returned it with a scowl. Bastard. Expensively cut black hair, designer jeans, pricey button-up shirt, celebrity kicks on the feet. Liked to show off his money like it meant something.

“Hey,” Trevor said as he shook Brian’s hand. “The straight roommate. How you doing, big guy—gonna go get laid tonight?”

“It’s not on the menu,” Brian said tightly. “So what did you say you did again?”

“Not on the menu? Too bad, man, because I’m gonna get me...” Trevor trailed off as Tate dashed from the bathroom to his bedroom, giving an “in-a-minute” wave as he went, “I’m gonna get me some sweet ass tonight. Too bad you don’t know what you’re missing.”

"Too bad you don't know what you're getting," Brian muttered, and Trevor gave him a quick look.

"What's that?"

"He's a good guy. You need to treat him nice."

Trevor smirked. "That kind of kid? He don't want to be treated nice, sweetie—he just wants the treatment, you know what I mean?"

"That's not Tate!" Brian said, feeling a nasty bout of worry congeal in his stomach and start to ferment. Trevor didn't hear him. Tate was trotting down the hall, wearing his leather jacket and a new set of rainbow studs winking from his tattooed ear.

Trevor grabbed his hand with a proprietary air that made Brian a little ill, and hauled him in for a kiss that Brian would have saved for the darkest corner of a crowded hall, if in public at all. Tate looked up from the kiss dreamily and threw Brian an optimistic grin. Brian managed a sick smile back.

"Don't wait up," Tate said, and then he closed his eyes like it was too painful to see what Brian would say to that.

"Don't do anything you don't want to," Brian told him in desperation, and Tate wrinkled his nose in a characteristic attempt to brush off any worry whatsoever.

"Baby, ain't much I don't want to do!" he said, winking, and then Trevor rolled his eyes and practically shoved him out the door.

But Tate was looking over his shoulder as he went. His face was bare of powder, and Brian would always regret that. Of all the nights for Tate to have some extra protection from an indifferent world, this would have been the one.

Brian worked that night. When he got home, the door was open a little, and there was a light on in the bathroom. For a moment, Brian felt a profound sense of relief. Tate was back.

Screw the open door (like they had much to steal—even his laptop was severely out of date), at least he hadn't spent the night with that guy.

Then Brian heard the sounds from the bathroom. He knew the sound of Tate's tears by now. Tate, for all his shields against the world, often wore his heart on his sleeve. This was different. This was tears and pain, and keeping the pain suppressed and keeping the tears tamped down in the chest and....

"Tate? Tate... man, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." The word was whispered.

"Tate, I know your sounds now, okay? You're not all right."

"I'm fine."

"Bullshit." Brian was alarmed—truly alarmed. He didn't sound right. He didn't sound right at all.

"Just go away, okay?"

Brian was strong—even if he didn't throw shot anymore, he still worked out, just to keep his shoulder from locking up on him. He was not aware of how strong he was until he cracked the cheap lock on the doorknob with a vicious twist of his hand and shouldered open the door. Tate was naked, his hair down and limply wet around his shoulders. His skin was red and raw, like he'd been scrubbing himself until the water went cold and beyond. He was standing with his back to the mirror, trying to look at his own backside.

A thin smear of blood mixed with the water from the shower; it pinkened one cheek and ran down the back of his thigh.

Tate glared at Brian and was about to say "Go the fuck away!" or something like that when Brian did his first smart thing in the whole affair.

"Turn around," he said gently. "Turn around and I'll clean you off. Don't worry. I'll be careful."

"Brian...."

"Don't worry," Brian said, keeping his voice soft with a supreme effort. "I'm safe, remember?"

A rape center was out of the question. For one thing, Tate wouldn't admit that he'd been raped. He'd wanted it, remember? But he'd asked the guy to wear a condom, and the guy must have forgotten, and he'd begged the guy for some lube or some spit and had been told that it felt better naked and rough, and when the guy (he no longer had a name) had been done, he'd laughed, smacked Tate on the ass, and told him it was all over, he could find his own way home.

Brian had listened to the story, spilled out as Tate bent over the seat of the toilet, as docile and exposed as a man had ever been. Brian had some antibiotic cream, and that helped stop the bleeding too. Touching Tate like this was not romantic. It wasn't tender. It was not the things he'd dreamed at night for the past few months. It was certainly not what he'd longed for when he'd walked away from the faceless party encounters. It was as gentle and as impersonal as handling an infant with diaper rash, and it was one more little wound he doctored himself that night.

He sat Tate down with a cup of hot chocolate and a pirated video of Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog and ran across the street to an all night drugstore for a doughnut pillow and witch hazel pads. His aunt had hemorrhoids—he remembered her shopping list.

He came back and sat Tate down again, this time on the doughnut pillow, and then sat close to him on the couch until Tate started laughing really hard at the part where Neil Patrick Harris sang commentary over the actual action.

He laughed until he burst into tears, and sobbed into Brian's chest until he fell asleep.

The next day, he wouldn't mention it. Whenever Brian brought up the subject, he'd say, "Yeah, I know. Worst. Date. Ever."

They'd both had the day off of work and school. Usually, when they had the day off, they spent it doing laundry and watching videos or sometimes running together until their legs ached and they looked back and realized they'd done nearly twenty miles together. Once a month or so, Brian would drag Tate to the nearby homeless shelter, and they'd volunteer in the soup kitchen. Tate was always welcome there; he had a way of talking to people that made them feel at ease. Maybe it was the way he could just chatter through the numbness or shyness of the people in the soup kitchen line, or maybe it was the way he would touch their hands gently to make sure they had their bowls. Either way, Brian had seen it that first day he'd invited himself to sit down in an empty seat.

This particular day had been a lazy day, and Tate had spent it twitching himself into the stratosphere. At one point, Brian realized he'd been down in the laundry room for forty-five minutes and found him standing over the washer with his clothes in the basket, staring into space, while an empty washer agitated in front of him.

Brian tried three times to get his attention, and finally resorted to a tentative touch on his shoulder. Tate exploded, sending clothes everywhere before he sank to a whimpering crouch on the floor. Brian calmed him down enough to walk him up to the apartment, then went down and took care of the laundry. When he got back to the apartment, Tate was doing dishes as though nothing had ever happened.

That night they sat on the couch, and Brian made no pretense of being straight, of having "heterosexual space" or boundaries between them. He just pulled the guy's head to rest into his lap and

stroked the limp Mohawk away from his face. When Tate finally started talking, it had nothing at all to do with what happened, with what he wouldn't allow himself to admit had happened.

"You know, Brian, when we first met, I used to go to sleep every night praying you were gay. I thought, 'Please let him be gay, and then he'll be my Prince Charming,' because man, I've never loved another human being on the planet the way I love you."

Oh God. "Tate...."

"Don't say it." Tate's voice started to fracture, to fragment, and Brian did what he always did: he listened. "Don't say it. Because the truth is, I've never been so glad you're not. Man... I don't think I could do this right now, not if I had to look at you and know you were gay and I couldn't have you."

"Who says you couldn't have me?" Brian asked, begging Tate silently not to bring this up, begging him not to mention this right now, not when Tate was so broken. God, he just needed some time to stitch himself back together and fill in the holes in the seams with bathroom caulk and good wishes.

"Why would you want someone as fucked up as I am?" Tate asked, weeping softly again, and Brian blew out a breath.

"Tate Walker, if I was gay, I'd... I'd be mesmerized by you. I'd listen to every word that fell out of your mouth like it was diamonds made of sound waves. I'd memorize the pattern of freckles on your back and spend months taking cooking classes just to find something you'd eat. You are kind, and you are funny, and you are brave, and any man who has you needs to see all that or he just isn't worth the laces in your combat boots, you hear me?"

The biggest speech of his life, the one time in his life that he spoke with passion and power and love, and he'd prefaced it with one little deal-breaking motherfucker of a word. He'd said "if."

But Tate was too distracted to notice that truckload of truth Brian had just run over with a tiny lie. He was still lost in his own black sky, a tiny pinpoint of flickering lamplight, smothered by the vastness of space.

"I'm glad you're not gay," he murmured, and Brian stopped his own mental beat-down and said, "Why?"

"Because I thought I wanted a lover, but... turns out, all I really want is to be safe. You'll keep me safe, Brian. I love you so much because you keep me safe."

Part VII

See Me

LYNDSEY blew out a sigh as Brian finished the story and handed him a tissue so he could stop wiping his eyes on his sleeves like the little boy he'd been when she'd brought him home.

"He loves you because you keep him safe," she echoed very quietly.

"Yeah."

"That's a helluva place to be when you love someone like you love him."

"Yeah."

"Did he ever see a counselor?" she asked, and Brian looked at her with raised eyebrows.

"Should he? I mean, nothing happened, right? No harm, no foul, right? He got an HIV test, because, you know, *he* was the one dumb enough to have unprotected sex, but no... why would the guy want to see a counselor when it was all his fucking fault...." Brian's sarcasm died a painful death, and he used the damn tissue again. He'd always known that shit rolled downhill, but he never knew tears did the same thing. Tate to Brian, Brian to Aunt Lyndie—who did Aunt Lyndie get to cry on?

Someone, he thought, looking around the little house again. She'd always had someone. There were two coffee cups in the

sink, and two oversized parkas hanging on the door because it was April and it still got pretty cold outside at night.

“Are you still seeing Craig Jeffries?” he asked suddenly, remembering the name of the school custodian that Lyndie had dated for the last years before Brian left for school.

“He moved in—January, actually,” Lyndie said with a smile, and Brian looked at her sharply.

“Why didn’t you say anything? Christmas, your birthday—why wouldn’t you want him there?”

Lyndie shrugged. “Well, for the first two years, I didn’t say anything because you were so damned lonely, sweetheart. I didn’t want you to think you couldn’t move back.”

Brian remembered that. College had been as awful for him as Virginia had said—he’d felt out of place and isolated from the other students, even on the track team. Besides Virginia, the only person at Sac State to make him feel welcome had been Tate.

“It got better,” Brian murmured, remembering that first, tentative offering to come to his dorm and watch a movie. Tate had been the first person in two years to talk to him like more than a teammate. The first one Brian had wanted to talk back to, anyway. Brian could admit that it wasn’t just shyness that kept him isolated—some of what drove him was snobbery. He really didn’t like mean people. However he came to be lonely, by the time his shoulder had blown out, not seeing Tate every day had been far more terrifying than not being on the team, or even not finishing his computer science degree. Brian could always scabble for a living, but living without his friend?

“I know it did,” Lyndie said softly. “It got better the minute you met Tate.”

Brian nodded and sighed, resting his chin on his crossed arms on the table. “He needs to get better. He needs to get better, and he needs me... all of me, not just the friend parts, to do it.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked, and he looked up at her hopefully.

“Well, I’ve got a plan, but I need to borrow some of the old clothes you keep borrowing but never use.” He knew exactly where she kept them in the hall closet. “Can I use them?” he asked, a little anxiously. Lyndie had frowned, and he was afraid she would have gotten rid of them when her boyfriend moved in.

She nodded absently. “Of course, baby—they’re still there. Anything in the closet, you know that.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“That guy... the one that hurt Tate—he’s not going to come back, is he? Those types... I mean, I know why you wouldn’t want to try to prosecute him, but he sounds like the type to just rub it in Tate’s face.”

Brian felt his expression go flat and hard. “No worries, Aunt Lyndie. He won’t bother Tate ever again.”

BRIAN had started taking Tate to work after his “date.” Gatsby’s Nick was in bike-riding distance, or even bus-riding distance, and Tate had a car, but he’d just felt so... vulnerable. Brian had started offering the ride and then making it a point to get off before Tate so he could be there in the parking lot, ready to give him a ride home.

Tate.... Tate was grateful. He was grateful and distracted and... empty. Watching him walk into the club was like watching him put in a computer program of who Tate was supposed to be, and that’s who he was when he was around people.

When Tate was home, he was often so silent, Brian would go thundering into his room to see if he was still there—and, frankly, to make sure he hadn't left some way other than the door.

Brian had yet to hear him sing, off-key or otherwise, and he twitched his head almost constantly, since the “worst date ever.”

About two weeks after Trevor Murray had made Tate cry, Brian saw him waiting in line to get into the club as he was pulling away. He shoved his car back into the parking spot and was running for the guy before he even knew what he was going to do.

“Hey, straight roomie!” Trevor called as Brian strode up to him. The smile dropped off his face as Brian twisted his arm around his back and hauled him behind the club. They were halfway there when Brian realized he had company.

“Uhm, Brian?” Jed, one of the club's two bouncers, was a six-foot-four-inch black man built like a Panzer tank on steroids. He was one of the few straight men who worked at Nick, but he was very protective of his guys.

“Hey, Jed,” Brian panted.

Trevor said, “Man, you gotta help me... this guy just went... ouuu!”

“Shut up!” Brian snapped, giving Trevor's arm another yank. Possibly for the first time in his life he threw those words at someone and meant it. “Shut the fuck up!” They'd reached the back of the club by now, and Brian shoved Trevor into the wall, giving him a chance to stumble against it and recover.

“Any chance you want to tell me what you're doing?” Jed asked, rubbing his hand over the back of his bald head.

Brian saw Trevor trying to make a run for it, and fainted in that direction. Trevor subsided and stood, panting, waiting for the answer too. His carefully wisped “man-do” was a mess, and he had

a smear of dust across his white clubbing shirt, but the arrogance was still there.

"He hurt Tate." Brian said it and then he glared and settled into a crouch. He'd never looked forward to hurting another human being in his life—but he did now.

"Hurt?" Jed said, carefully neutral.

"Hurt." Brian emphasized the word and made sure the piece of shit responsible for wrecking the guy he loved was making eye contact and on the same page.

One corner of Trevor's mouth curled up. "That sweet little bitch? Man, he liked it..."

Brian's first punch across Trevor's pretty mouth sent him back into the wall of the club, his head making an audible "thunk" on the wooden siding. Trevor rebounded, fists out, and Brian took him down in two punches, and then followed him down, straddling his chest and proceeding to work him over like a boxer doing exercises on a heavy pummeling bag. He'd thought he was terribly dispassionate and reasonable about the whole thing, until Jed wrapped strong, thick arms around his shoulders and hefted him bodily off an unconscious asshole who was missing three teeth and could barely make out a moan.

"Brother, the cops are coming. You'd better go."

Fuck. Cops? "He hurt Tate!" Brian snarled—and until he tasted salt on his mouth, he hadn't been aware of his own tears.

"Well, you paid him back," Jed said reasonably. "And I've got to do some quick talking, and some faster lying, okay? Just get in your car and go."

"He hurt Tate...." Brian's voice trailed off and he went to wipe his face when he saw the blood on his hands. It was thick, and some of it came from his own knuckles, which were ripped and

bleeding, but a lot of it came from the useless sack of shit lying on the sidewalk in back of the club. "Oh God," he said thickly, "I'm going to throw up."

Jed made an exasperated grunt—he was still practically lifting Brian bodily into his car. "If you could go home and do that, I'd be really grateful. And I wouldn't show back up here for a couple of days." He let out an "oomph" here as he fished through Brian's pockets and came up with his keys.

"I need to pick Tate up," Brian said. It was the only thing he could think of as Jed opened his car door and shoved him in.

"Well, how about I drop him off tonight, and you can drop him off tomorrow? I can pick up some of the slack, man, but you've got to get out of here, and I've got to cover your lily-white ass, okay?"

Finally, Jed's sacrifice penetrated Brian's fog. "Why you doing this?" he asked hazily, remembering to turn the key in his ignition and roll down his window while he was waiting for an answer. His adrenaline was pumping big time, and he had a shake in his hands and his knees that he couldn't seem to get rid of.

"Tate's good people," Jed said quietly from the window. "I can't count the number of hysterical kids he's talked out of the bathroom come closing. I'm sorry he got hurt."

Brian sniffed and tried to get control of himself. He had to work tonight, and he had to be there for Tate when he got home, and he couldn't be a sniveling weenie because that's just not how he rolled. "Thanks for helping," he said at last, putting the car in gear. He was about to ease up on the clutch when Jed stopped him with a question.

"Does Tate know?"

Brian couldn't look at him. "Know what?"

"How you feel about him?"

Brian shook his head and shrugged. "It's not like I can tell him now." Then they both heard the sirens, and Jed stepped back from the car so he could drive away.

He'd stopped on the way home to throw up.

That night, when Tate got home, Brian had rewrapped his bleeding knuckles and put on a hand-me-down shirt with the sleeves pulled past his fingertips. It had been late January—he'd been ready to complain about the cold.

But Tate had been dazed, shell-shocked, exhausted from keeping it together in the press of bodies and loud noises from the club, and he didn't notice the knuckles, not even when the bandages went away and there were only scabs left. All he was really capable of in those first days was doing his homework or sitting on the couch watching television anyway.

Brian would sit with him, homework or no homework, and put food in his hands and nag him until he ate. Brian would make sure not to turn the hall light off at night, and to go into Tate's room before he went to bed to see if Tate was sleeping or needed to talk.

A lot of the times he was sure Tate pretended to sleep, but sometimes he would say a few words. Apparently, he saved all his talking for work.

BRIAN had fallen quiet at his aunt's question about consequences for the fucker who'd hurt Tate. At her prompting, he jerked out of his reverie.

"Don't worry, Aunt Lyndie. He... he's not going to come near Tate again."

Lyndie raised her eyebrows then. "O kay, baby. Good for you."

Brian shrugged. “Didn’t help much,” he muttered, and she reached out and covered his hands—battered with scars, but not hurting—and said, “Did it help you?”

A slow smile crossed Brian’s face, and he had to concede that it had.

“Okay,” Lyndie said after a moment. “So, what’s the plan?”

Brian’s smile faded. He had one. Oh, definitely, he had a plan. But he wasn’t really excited about it. He outlined it in its barest points, and Lyndie nodded.

“So, the grand romantic gesture, huh?”

Brian shrugged, and then swallowed, showing exactly how nervous he really was. “I’ve never been good at them,” he admitted. He’d tried once with Virginia, and she’d ended up getting sick and he’d had to take Tate to the restaurant instead. He and Tate had a very good time, and Brian hadn’t minded—even then—that people thought they were a couple, but it was a sad romantic gesture when the intended victim stayed home with the flu and the stand-in wouldn’t recognize that he was the real deal after all.

The look Lyndie sent him over her iced tea was very, very serious. “Baby, I think you’re going to have to commit to this one full-out. I don’t think this kid’s got many more chances in him.”

Part VIII

Sounding Love

BRIAN couldn't look at himself in the rearview mirror on the way back down to Sacramento. It was too distracting.

Lyndie had helped him, even breaking out her own makeup reserves and the Elmer's glue and some henna dye she'd been saving for tinting her own black tresses. The result was someone he didn't recognize in the mirror, and he really hoped he didn't have to break out of the closet ever again. He was fine with being gay, thank you, but he'd never signed on to be a reject from a Ramones cover band.

His hair was dyed red at the ends, and spiked flat on the top of his head. Lyndie had trimmed it more, so that the hennaed ends separated like eyelashes, and the whole thing was so unlikely a part of Brian's appearance that he didn't even see it when he caught himself in the mirror. He had other things to worry about.

His eyes were black. His aunt had used an entire pencil of eyeliner, making it look like he'd closed his eyes and someone had spray-stenciled a raccoon mask over his face. She hadn't used powder to whiten him—his complexion was pretty pale as it was—but she had given him two ibuprofen and an ice cube and pierced his ears. Three times. And his nose. Once—but that was plenty.

She'd been considering safety pins in them, but she'd gone into her old jewelry box instead and come up with six diamond studs—two of them real—and one onyx stud for his nose. She'd also been happy to find some peppermint oil and alcohol to soothe and disinfect the whole works, and he'd held an icepack to his face while she'd done his hair and eyes.

His shirt was blinding.

Neon-pink polyester. He wasn't sure which era it was from—seventies, eighties, sometime in the future, he had no idea. But it had a wide lapel collar and black buttons, and it went really well with the black-checkered golf pants that had come out of the neighbor's stash of hand-me-downs as well. And the golf pants looked much better pegged (thank you again, Aunt Lyndie) and shortened in the crotch and stuffed into combat boots that (unlike the others in the club) had actually seen real combat.

How'm I doing, Virginia? Am I selling it to the world?

More importantly, would he sell it to Talker?

He could only hope.

It was dark by the time he got back to Sacramento, and Gatsby's Nick was hopping—it was crowded enough that Jed almost didn't notice him until he was halfway inside.

"Brian?" There was some shock, some incredulity, but no laughter. Brian put Jed on the short list of people he'd beat someone up for.

"Hey, Jed." Brian smiled weakly, and Jed cocked his head, seeing right through him.

"You're here to stop Talker, aren't you?"

Brian looked away and put his hands in the pockets of the golf pants. They were so tight he was sure Jed could probably look hard

and see that he'd been circumcised, so he was glad Jed didn't swing his way. "Someone has to," he muttered.

Jed nodded. "You're right. He's gonna lose his job if this shit doesn't stop."

Brian looked inside the club—lots of male bodies dancing (a few females, there with friends)—lots of snuggling and pressing together, lots of noise and a swelter of heat and motion and light. He couldn't help himself. He shuddered. Talker would fit right in here, but not Brian.

"You wouldn't know if it's started yet. Tonight, I mean?"

Jed shook his head. "He gets off about an hour before we close down—that's when he's been doing his bathroom thing."

Brian looked at his watch and shuddered. Oh God. That was two hours. He had to sit in there for two hours, with sweaty palms and a real dislike for grunge-metal/techno-pop hybrid music, while strange men tried to grab his ass? (He was not being vain. He'd been groped twice while he'd stopped and talked to Jed.)

"I can wait in the car," he said decisively, turning to walk away, and Jed stopped him with a hard-fingered hand on the arm.

"But if you do that, I can't buy you dinner and tell you when he's going in to the bathroom," Jed said softly, and Brian swallowed.

"I don't need dinner," he lied. He'd left Lyndie's before dinner (after saying hi to her boyfriend, of course, and wishing them both well), and he had maybe five dollars in his pocket. Five dollars might buy him an iced tea—if he flirted nicely with the bartender.

"Sure you do. I've got some comps, take one."

Brian swallowed, swallowed again, finally got his pride down in a lump. "O kay," he muttered. "Thanks."

Jed flashed a hand at the other bouncer to say he'd be back in a minute, then escorted Brian through that press of bodies. Following Jed was actually okay—he was like the ice-breaking prow of a great ship, except the ice was hot and sweaty and dancing in rhythm to the same beat that seemed to jerk Talker away from reality on a daily basis.

Brian was parked in a corner of the bar, back in the shadows, and Jed was back in a minute with a salad and a sandwich—and a pitcher of soda.

“He doesn’t work this section,” Jed hollered into his ear over the noise. “Odds are good he won’t see you. You let Trace here”—a nod at a handsome man with reddish hair, standing behind the bar—“take care of you, and wait. I’ll keep an eye out for him and let you know when his shift is done.”

Brian wanted to just shut up and huddle in the corner, but he had to ask one major favor. “Jed....” He looked at the guy helplessly. “Jed, I’ve *got* to be the first one in there, ’kay?”

Jed nodded with understanding, putting a heavy hand on Brian’s shoulder before he turned to leave. Brian was going to have a hard enough time doing what he needed to without facing the smell of another man’s semen in the damned toilet stall.

He watched the people for a little while, wondering what was wrong with him that he couldn’t participate in the dance. He just liked things simple, he thought, eyeing the crowd dispassionately. He liked his simple apartment (although he wouldn’t have minded a slightly better quality of simple). He liked the routine of going to school and working. He liked that his passions were things that kept him alone or with the one or two people who mattered. In fact, the only thing in his life that was complicated was Tate Walker, and he liked that all this simplicity gave him the strength to be exactly what Talker needed.

With a sigh, he turned from the crowd to his dinner. When he was done with that, he gave the bartender his plates and borrowed a pen, then turned his attention to the stack of napkins in front of him. He spent an hour trying to write out what he wanted to say, but he had never been good with words. All he could manage to scrawl was *I love you*, and he was pretty sure he'd already proven that simple truths were not going to do it.

He'd catch glimpses of Tate, trotting through the crowd. At one point he ran by without his ever-present tub of glasses or stack of dishes in his arms and a number of people sort of shanghaied him onto the dance floor. Tate spent a few moments there, lost in Neutral Milk Hotel and "Song Against Sex." For a time he disappeared, allowing his body to move with theirs, surrounded by other people grinding up against him, and while Brian thought it might have been something he would have enjoyed before the "date," his face was strained when he finally fought himself clear.

Oh, Talker—no wonder you're exhausted.

Brian had thought his friend was fearless from the first time Tate sat down next to him on a bus and started to talk about Placebo and Rufus Wainwright and The Doves. Now he knew the true extent of Talker's bravery, and his own cowardice dug claws in his chest and shrieked.

I'm sorry, Tate. I should have been more like you.

But he was going to make up for that tonight.

He worked in a restaurant—he recognized the rhythm of finishing your shift, filling your condiments, cleaning the nooks and crannies that were expressly the ownership of employee X in station Y. Brian stopped his fruitless rough drafts and watched as Tate performed his closing duties with the efficiency of a Roomba. He zombied from place to place, cleaning what he was supposed to, but... but the music was missing, Brian thought with an ache in

his chest. Tate, who used to hear music in his head in the silence of the shower, now couldn't hear the music pounding through his feet in a club dedicated to music.

He watched Tate disappear behind the bar, watched him come back without his apron, watched him walk into the bathroom. He didn't need to watch Jed as he stepped in front of the swinging door with a "Closed for Cleaning" sign to know that was his cue.

Nobody had noticed him sitting in the corner, and he didn't notice anybody as he crossed the dance floor to the bathrooms like a fletched pink arrow, but apparently there *were* people, because when he got to the bathroom, Jed was glaring at phantoms behind his back and shaking his head.

"Man," Jed muttered as he walked up, "we have got to get you out of here, straight boy—everybody wants a piece of you tonight."

"Jed?" Brian said with a quirk of his lips.

"Yeah?"

"You know I ain't straight."

Jed nodded his head. "Now go prove it," he said, bowing Brian into the bathroom like it was the grand ballroom of the Fantabulous Kingdom of Gay.

It was a bathroom. Bright lights made him blink after the dark strobe rainbow of the club, but other than that? Tiny beige tiles, four stalls, and a long trough: they were men, they'd seen the equipment, hiding it was silly—and made certain aspects of flirting a little more difficult.

Brian looked down and saw Tate's combat boots in the far stall, the one next to the handicapped stall. He parked himself in the stall next door and waited for the farce to begin.

“Hey, brother,” Tate said, next to him. His voice, stripped of the makeup and the tattoos and the attitude, sounded surprisingly naked.

Brian grunted. His voice was usually pretty deep—he figured if he kept to grunts and minimal conversation, Tate wouldn’t recognize him. He hoped, anyway.

“You want to get off?” Tate’s voice shook. Oh fuck. His fucking voice shook. Brian was going to end it right there. *No. No I don’t want to get off. I don’t want to be a faceless stranger to you! I want you to know you’re loved!*

But then Tate started to talk, and the vulnerability and sadness dropped out of his voice, and all that was left was the boy Brian had known—the flirty, sexy one, who craved the touch of skin on skin.

“So, you like to top? I’m a bottom myself. I’ve got this fantasy—you want to hear it?”

Yes. Oh Christ forgive me, yes. His grunt must have conveyed the idea—he hoped so. It was involuntary.

“Now, see, the thing is”—and like that, Tate became Talker, and Talker became dreamy—“the thing is, I like it... I’ll do anything for it. Can you imagine the guy of your dreams, on his knees in front of you, his hands behind his back as he takes your cock into his mouth to the back of his throat? That’s me. I don’t need too much foreplay—but I do like to play with *your* body. Can I move my hands now?”

Brian made another helpless sound. He wondered what it had been like for the others—did this have the same effect on someone who didn’t know that the boy of his dreams was attached to the dreamy, throaty voice on the other side of the stall?

“Good... I’m going to cup your balls. I like the feel of them. They’re soft and furry....” Sudden uncertainty. “Unless... you don’t wax, do you?”

“No.” His first full word—and it was so gruff that Tate wouldn’t have recognized it if they’d been in their apartment together.

“Good.” Talker sounded honest. “I like natural, you know? At least where I can touch. I’ll jiggle them a little, ’til they’re nice and hard and round, and then open my mouth and take them in. How’s that sound?”

“Mmmm.” Brian tried not to let his head thunk too hard when he rested it against the side of the stall.

“So glad you like,” Tate said dryly, and Brian knew Talker was laughing at him. That was okay. He was an idiot. He needed a good laugh at his own expense. “Because once they’re good and hard, I’m going to take your cock deep into my mouth. I practice with bananas, you know”—Brian did know—he hadn’t eaten a banana or a cucumber since they’d moved in together, at least not without suspicion—“and I can take the biggest prick all the way down. How big are you?”

Brian had no idea. “Big enough,” he growled. He certainly felt big enough, hard and aching and trapped in the damned golf pants. With a little desperation he unfastened the hook and eye at the top of his pants, and lowered the zipper, giving a sensual sigh when he had some room.

“Well, you feel pretty big to your dream guy,” Talker said with encouragement, and Brian rolled his eyes. Jesus, couldn’t the guy not be sweet to the stranger getting personal-non-phone-phone-sex in the stall next door? “You feel big enough that I’m going to need two hands to pump you off, how’s that? Or would you rather I snuck one of them between your legs, to your asshole—would you like that?”

Brian whimpered. He honest-to-god whimpered.

Tate's voice got sweeter. "Oh yeah, you *do* like that, don't you? I'm going to do that, then. Lots of spit, so it's good for you, okay? I'll take you so deep in my throat, and I'll pump you so good, and I'll slip right inside you, and stretch and make it burn... you like that burn, right?"

Brian had no idea if he did or not, but he must have made another affirmative sound because there wasn't a force on the planet that could stop Talker now.

"So there I'll be, down on my knees in front of you, your cock so far down the back of my throat I'd better learn to swallow or sneeze come, and my fingers wiggling around in your ass, and my hand pumping you hard and fast and faster and faster and..."

Oh fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck.... Brian groaned and tried to get hold of himself, because Talker was really going to make him come.

"Give in to it, brother," Tate said, his voice so low and whiskey-smooth it sent more shivers up Brian's spine. "Just take it out and stroke it, and imagine me, the boy of your dreams, my face all wet with pre-come, my fist slick and strong on your prick. You gonna come yet? 'Cause if you are, warn me... I wanna swallow..."

"Not yet..." Brian rasped, his eyes closed. He was grinding his crotch—still covered by pants and underwear—into his own hand and trying to keep his harsh breaths to himself.

"What are you waiting for, buddy?" Tate sounded surprised. "Man, I'm right here... gulping in the back of my throat to keep your monster down, adding another finger to the one in your ass, squeezing the base of your dick enough to make my hand cramp..."

“Gwaaaaahhhh....” Brian hadn’t wanted to. He hadn’t. He’d had a whole other agenda planned, and Talker had derailed it with his secret dreams, spilled out into the air between them like Brian’s come had spilled out into his pants.

On the other side of the stall, Tate made a satisfied sound. He hadn’t come—but he sighed and it sounded happy. A small part of himself had obviously been gratified by making an anonymous stranger happy in a way no one had ever done for him.

“How you doing, brother?” Tate asked. “Because, not to rush you, but I’m thinking someone else is going to want to use that stall.”

“We’re not through yet,” Brian managed, his vision still black from his orgasm. He pulled fruitlessly at his shirt—it might be able to cover the front of his pants, but he wasn’t going to want to go anywhere else but his car.

“I don’t need any—”

“No.” He found a part of him was angry—that was good. It kept his voice rough, and Tate hadn’t recognized it yet.

“But I don’t want to—”

“It’s my turn, dammit!” Brian snapped. “I listened to you—now you need to listen to me!”

“Brian?”

Shit. “So my dream boy has just made me come in his mouth, and I’m flying high, right?”

“Seriously, man—is that you?”

“But no one has taken care of him yet, and that’s my job.”

“Jesus, Brian, what the fuck are you doing here?”

“Because he’s my dream boy, and I keep him safe. He’s told me that, right? That I keep him safe? Well, how am I going to keep

him safe if I just leave him there, on his knees like that? So I pull him up, and I wipe his mouth on my sleeve, and I kiss him.”

Tate’s voice suddenly broke a little, like Brian had crushed the last strong part of him. “Brian, this isn’t fucking funny....”

“No, Tate, you’re right. I’m totally fucking serious. Now I’ve been telling you this for months, and you haven’t wanted to listen, but dammit, you’re going to listen to me now, okay? I sat in here and I heard you....” And now Brian’s voice broke. “I heard you tell things to someone you thought was a total stranger, and it was shit I’ve been dying to hear you say to me... to *do* to me, and now you’re going to get that back, you hear me?”

“Brian....”

Oh God. He sounded so lost, so sad. Brian had to make this right. He had to make this right. If he never had the words again in his life, he had to make this right.

“So, I was kissing him,” Brian said, remembering where he left off. “I’m kissing him, and his eyes are open, because he can’t believe how tender I am, how badly I want to kiss him, and my hands are shaking and I put them on his cheeks, frame his face, and I make him stay there and feel my mouth and my tongue, and when he closes his eyes... then I know I’ve got his fucking attention.”

He paused then and took a breath. “Are your eyes closed, Tate?”

“Just go away....”

“Fuck you. No. I’m staying. Because my dream boy’s eyes are closed, and he’s finally fucking listening to me. And oh God... it’s everything I’ve been dreaming of. I’ve kissed other boys, trying to see if I wanted them as much as I wanted my dream boy, and they were nice and all, but they weren’t him. I just want him.”

“Other boys?” Tate sounded faintly indignant, and Brian took a little heart—you couldn’t be broken beyond repair if you were a little bit jealous, right?

“But all I did with them was kiss them,” Brian soothed. “I’ve never gone as far with a boy as I’m going to with my dream boy. You know what I’m going to do with my dream boy?”

“I have no idea.” And Tate didn’t. He was completely in the dark; Brian could tell by his voice. Well, maybe a little light was going on in his brain. That would be nice, after all this trouble, wouldn’t it?

“I’m going to pull away and kiss the corner of his mouth, where his tattoo meets his skin, and I’m going to keep on kissing. I’m going to kiss the line down his chin, and down his neck, down his shoulder, down his chest, down to the crease of his thigh, and if it wasn’t so fucking awkward, I’d kiss all the way back up the other side—as it is, I’m just going to lay him down and roll him over and do it everywhere. I’m going to take that line, where he’s marked the places of himself he doesn’t want anyone to see, and I’m going to erase it completely. You know why?”

“I’m clueless.” And now he just sounded exhausted. Oh God. *C’mon, Tate, let me see you. Let me hold you. Let me bear you up when you can’t take the weight anymore.*

“Because there is no part of my dream boy I don’t want to see. I’ve seen him broken... I’ve seen him strong. I’ve seen him go looking for love time and time again, and always come back with such... such optimism. Such heart. Even this....” Brian tried to keep the irritation out of his voice. Failed. “Even this bullshit—it’s still optimism. It’s giving. My dream boy—he gives everything. He listens to music and it touches him, and he tries to share that with the world. He watches shows and they move him, and he loves that, and he wants the rest of us to feel that way too. He goes to the

soup kitchen with me because he's a good guy—and people love him when he's there, because giving... talking... it's just so natural to him, they can tell that... he's just goodness. They want to be closer to him, just to feel it come off his skin.

“But he's *my* dream boy. Mine. And I want to be the only one close enough to him to feel it up close and personal. So when I'm done kissing that line away, I'm going to wrap my arms up under his and pull him close, kiss the back of his neck, kiss his spine, kiss down the length of his back... right up to the place he doesn't want anybody to touch, and I'm going to kiss that too. I'll lick him down there, I'll suck anything he wants in my mouth, I'll fucking worship him. I keep him safe. I promised. So he's going to be safe. He's going to be so safe in my hands and my mouth... he's going to come, any way he wants to, and I'm going to make him, any way he wants me to, and when I'm done, and he's done, and we're sweating and panting, I'm going to kiss him again. I'm going to tell him that I lo—”

“Don't say it.” Tate's voice grew firm, grew angry, and Brian had had enough. He opened the door to the suddenly claustrophobic blue-walled stall and spoke to the seam of Tate's door, trying with all his will to make out Tate's features. He was huddled back behind the toilet, his arms wrapped around his body.

Even through the seam of the wall, Brian could tell he was shaking.

“I love y—”

“Don't say it!” Tate yelled, and Brian yelled back at him.

“You don't want me to say it, you come out here and stop me, dammit!”

And he'd done it. He'd made Tate mad enough to throw back the bolt on the door.

“Don’t say—”

Oh yeah—Tate was surprised, that was for sure. “Jesus, Brian, what the hell happened to your hair?”

“I cut it,” Brian told him shortly. Tate’s arms dropped to his sides, and he stared at Brian with absolute puzzlement. His guyliner was smeared all over his face, and Brian lifted his hands and used his thumbs to wipe it away. Tears replaced the mess, so Brian wiped his hands on his pants and wiped those away too.

“Why?” Tate asked, his voice choked.

“Because I love you, Talker. I’ve been trying to tell you forever. I love you exactly the way you wanted me to—but I’m too stupid to be Prince Charming. You’re going to have to settle for me.”

And now Brian felt naked. Just bare and exposed and vulnerable. Fair’s fair, he thought painfully. This was how Tate went through life. If he was going to earn Tate Walker, he had to be brave enough to risk being naked and foolish and hurt.

Tate sniffled. “You’re not stupid,” he whispered, and Brian’s heart actually started to beat for the first time since he’d come into this horrid little restroom.

“Then let me be Prince Charming,” Brian whispered back. He was one, maybe two inches taller than Tate—just tall enough for it to mean something when he framed that made-up, decorated face with his sturdy palms and angled Tate’s mouth for a kiss.

Tate’s mouth opened up under his, and it was... so sweet. His lips were firm, and male, and Brian could feel the stubble and the angles of Tate’s chin under his palms, and Tate opened that hot mouth, bitter with the taste of tears and makeup, and just let Brian in. Brian invaded, and he was firm, and strong, and tender, and everything he wanted Tate to know was in Brian’s heart, it was right there, like the song said, in his kiss.

He kissed harder and deeper, and Tate whimpered and gave way back to the divider of the bathroom, and then Jed stuck his head in and said, “Are you two about done here? There’s a line of a billion people who got to pee!”

Tate pulled up and said, “Shit!” and Brian flushed.

“Let’s go home, ’kay? We’ve got shit to talk about, and—”

Tate nodded. “And we’ve got to fix your hair,” he said woefully, running his hands up the shaved sides, feeling the buzzcut under his fingertips.

“It’ll grow back,” Brian said softly. “I’d shave myself bald, if that’s what it took to get you to look at me.”

“I am looking at you,” Tate said, and their chests were touching, and Brian felt such a wave of want wash through his body that it was all he could do not to just take Talker into the big bathroom and do everything he fantasized about right there.

But Jed cleared his throat, and Brian remembered that he was good for Talker because he was *safe*, and he wiped Tate’s cheeks one more time with his thumb.

“C’mon, baby. Let’s go home.”

Part IX

Every Heartbeat Screams Your Name

HOME was so normal, echoing loudly of keys and heavy treads under yellow lights and yellowing walls. The only thing different was Brian's hand in the small of Tate's back as they went inside.

"I'm going to take off my boots, and shower," Brian grunted—he was pretty sure he had blisters. "Meet on the couch or meet in your room?"

"Meet in the shower," Tate told him, rolling his eyes. "I need to get that crap out of your hair like *now*."

"That crap out of my hair?" Brian frowned. "You do this shit to your hair all the time."

Tate shrugged. "Yeah—but that's me. It's not you."

"Well, thank God—because if I had to do this every day, I really would shave my head bald." He'd been going to go for the hyperbole and say something about running his car off a cliff, but Tate was too fragile for hyperbole. No exaggerating things until small shit didn't hurt him anymore.

The showerhead was attached to a hose, and after washing (thank God—his come had glued his underwear to his skin) he wrapped a towel around his waist while Tate scrubbed the glue and the henna and the hairspray out.

It was curiously normal doing that—no different than any of the other times they'd shared the bathroom, one of them taking a pee and the other one in the shower, or Tate grooming while Brian either/or. It was almost like that other thing—the talking, the kiss, the emotional nakedness—hadn't happened at all.

Brian had this thought, and then swung his now-limp strip of hair out of his eyes and grasped Tate's wrist as he turned off the shower. "Thanks," he whispered, and Tate looked at that hand on his tattooed wrist and then back up at Brian.

"My pleasure," he said with a small smile.

Brian grinned quickly. "Will be."

"Want me to help you with the studs?"

Brian grimaced, and then blushed. "Only some of them. I, uh, sort of like the idea of having two, you know?" Besides, the bottom two were real, and Lyndie had wanted him to keep them. It had felt like a blessing.

"I like the one in the nose," Tate confessed, and Brian gave another quick grin.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"I'll keep that one, 'kay?"

And Tate smiled shyly. "For me?"

"I'd do anything for you." Their eyes connected, and like that, the moment became intimate. Brian's hand had never left Tate's wrist and he rubbed his thumb over the thick blue veins of Tate's pulse point. Because it *was* his thumb, he couldn't tell whose heart was beating faster.

He swallowed hard, almost completely lost in Tate's oak-gall-dark eyes. Tate blinked, and Brian noticed the vestiges of his

makeup, still smeared over his cheekbones, and he managed to be practical. "But you shower first," he said, his breath coming quickly in his chest. "I'll make you some dinner. Lyndie sent food."

"Lyndie?" With obvious reluctance, Tate straightened and they broke their physical connection.

"Who do you think did the hair and the piercings?"

Tate blinked at that, and Brian stepped out of the shower. His towel was pretty sodden, so, with a blushing glance at Tate, he hung it over the curtain rod and took one of the dry ones from the towel rack.

"Why?" Tate asked, and Brian was glad his back was turned as he wrapped the dry towel around his waist.

"Because I told her I loved you, and I was worried, and I'd told you repeatedly, but you weren't seeing me. I had to find a way to make you see me."

He turned back around and Tate had moved closer. "I see you now."

"Loving you is about all I got in the way of interest," Brian told him, to make sure he'd know. Because being roommates for almost a year might not have clued Tate in to how basically boring his roommate was, right?

Tate nodded, never breaking his gaze, and put out a tentative hand to the middle of Brian's chest. Brian's skin felt like it rippled, shivering, and his groin and nipples tingled, and he was forced to close his eyes.

"I do that to you?" Tate asked, and he held himself very still, like he doubted the answer.

"Oh God, yes," Brian mumbled, and then managed to pull away. "Shower," he begged. "Shower. Get the crap out of your hair. Let me feed you. Let me take care of you. Please, Tate—I...." His

cock gave a vicious throb and he remembered that whimpering sound he'd made in the bathroom at the club and contemplated making it again. "I want you so bad—but I want to talk, too, and I want... oh God." Tate was moving that hand in little circles, and his palm grazed Brian's nipple and Brian reached out a steadying hand to Tate's shoulder.

Tate laughed a little, breathlessly. It was a happy laugh, and Brian could tell he was impressed with his own power. Good. That hand made another pass, and Tate's thumb got brave around Brian's nipple, and then Brian was impressed with Tate's power too.

Which was why he grasped Tate's wrist gently, and brought his scarred palm (Tate had taken off his glove to help Brian get the glue out of his hair) up to his mouth and gently kissed the palm. Tate whimpered, just like Brian had.

"Tate?"

"Yeah?"

"All that shit I said in the club? About taking care of you?"

"Yeah?"

"I meant every word of that. Take a shower, and I'm going to make you some food, and then I'm going to touch you with my whole body. But I'm not going to do that now, okay?"

Tate nodded, a sort of wonder on his face, and Brian lowered his mouth, thinking once again that Tate's lips were surprisingly soft. "I promise. I'm going to take such good care of you."

The kiss was brief, and Brian forced himself to go put on a pair of sleep shorts and a T-shirt. As he walked out of the bathroom, though, he heard Tate start to sing "And our love would have soared, over treetops over rooftops...." to himself, and Brian wanted to turn around and hug him just for that alone.

Oh God, he'd missed hearing Talker sing.

He restrained himself, and got the food from his trunk and made them omelets (which he was really good at), and by the time Tate came down the hall, wearing brightly colored Iron Man boxer shorts (he had a collection—he seemed to favor superheroes and Scooby-Doo) and nothing else, there was food on the table, and the last of their milk in two glasses, and a bunch of pinks and daffodils and buttercups that had been growing up around Lyndie's little cabin that she'd cut and sent with Brian in a wet paper towel.

Brian had put them in a Big Gulp cup, because it was what they had, but they made the kitchen smell good, at least, and they made Tate smile.

Brian smiled back and ducked his head, shyly, and turned around to dry his hands on a kitchen towel that had once been a tapestry calendar. Without warning, he felt Tate's arms creeping around his waist, and Tate's bare chest pressed up around his back.

Brian brought his hand up to touch Tate's hands, and Tate whispered, "Tell me I didn't imagine it."

"You didn't imagine it."

"Tell me it will be true in the morning."

"It's been true for the last nine months—hell, the last two and a half years—I don't know why it would change now."

Talker nodded, and rested his cheek against Brian's shoulder. "Okay. I can eat now."

"Good," Brian said gruffly. "You're getting too thin."

They sat and ate, much like they used to, and Talker told him about work and about the new DJ and about the cooks in the back who kept trying out new shit that tasted exactly *like* shit, and then he stopped.

"This is how it happened," he said, looking at Brian. Brian stopped mid-bite and looked back.

"This is how what happened?"

"This is how I never knew. You just... you sit and listen. You never talk."

"I only talk when I've got something to say," Brian said logically, not sure how to fix this. He was talking as much as he could, now—it had to be enough, right?

Talker nodded, and took a thoughtful bite of Brian's omelet—he'd cleaned his plate, and Brian still had butterflies in his stomach. "You know, I was thinking about Christmas."

Brian flushed. "My gift was pretty lame," he apologized. When they'd moved in, they couldn't afford both the PG&E and the SMUD deposits. As a result, they'd had to make a choice between heat and light. They'd chosen light, and had spent much of their winter wrapped up in blankets. Brian had borrowed Lyndie's sewing machine and a bunch of her old sheets and put together triple layers of old sheet, old fuzzy blanket from a thrift store, and another old sheet, and sewn it together into a sort of a poor man's comforter, since he and Tate hadn't ever seemed to get warm enough.

"It was perfect," Tate said, and Brian doubted it. "I especially liked the list of music you put on the card, the shit you'd buy me when you had the money. That.... Jesus. But that wasn't what I was thinking about."

"Then what?"

"The tree."

"What about it?"

"I mention to you once, in like two years, that I've never been in my own home with my own Christmas tree, and one night I get

back from work and you went out to your aunt's and chopped down a tree. And you decorated it with club fliers and construction paper chains and popcorn and feather boas you got at the dollar store...."

Brian blushed again and Tate shook his head and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

"I'm so stupid," Tate said, and Brian said, "That's not true!" right on top of him.

"No, I am—you're always saying how stupid you are, but...." And now he wiped his face with his palm. "How could I look at that tree, and the blanket you made me, and all the times you cooked me dinner... how could I look at those things and not know you loved me? How could I...." His voice broke. "Oh God, Brian—you *told* me that night, and I had so much noise going on in my head that I didn't even listen!"

Brian couldn't look at him. "I wasn't talking enough," he said, his voice rough and ashamed. "I... I was so used to wanting to be invisible—to liking it that way. I didn't know how to make you see me. It's my fault...."

"Shut up...."

"No, it's my fault!" Brian looked up, and now he was doing a little bit of crying himself. Well, he'd known it was coming. "It was my fault—"

"Shut up!"

"—if I'd been braver, like you—"

"I'm serious!"

And Brian found that he could yell if he needed to. "So am I, dammit!"

"I was an idiot!"

"And I was a coward!"

“That’s not true!”

Brian broke completely. He found himself on his knees before Talker, taking his two hands, the sound and the crippled, and holding them to his cheeks.

“Oh God, Tate. It *is*. I was a coward. I was so afraid I was wrong, so afraid I’d hurt you worse by coming out than I would by being quiet. I keep thinking, I could have saved you... I swear, if I could have shouted it or... or done anything but watch you walk out that door with that guy and hope you would be okay!”

The wave of worry that had swelled in his chest, made violent by silence and the horrible weeks spent watching Tate become someone quiet and alien and far away, that terrible sea-squall of pain, crashed out on them both. Brian found himself sobbing in Tate’s lap, seeking comfort like he never had in his life, not even when he was a child and his parents had died, leaving him bruised and frightened in the back of the car.

Talker was there for him. Tate’s arms came around his shoulders, and there they were, curled up in a little ball on the cheap kitchen chair, crying together for what they had both lost and both found, all in the circle of each other’s arms.

Tate’s hands came to frame Brian’s face, and Brian wasn’t sure what Tate was going to say then, because there was an utterly still heartbeat, a held-breath time-stop between them, as they stared at each other in nakedness and absolution, and then the moment exploded in a kiss.

They left the plates on the table (a thing that didn’t happen often—there were rats as big as possums living in the Dumpster behind their apartment) and kissed, staggered, stumbled, and kissed some more. They ended up in Brian’s bed, because his was closer (and cleaner, but neither of them thought about that), and Tate’s hands were under Brian’s shirt and then the waistband of his

shorts and Tate's shorts were kicked to the floor, and their mouths were meshed and frantic and then....

Tate made a wonderful, terrible sound, and it echoed in Brian's mouth.

They were totally naked, and Brian was touching him, completely, covering Tate with Brian's massier body, enfolding him in bulky shoulders, using all of his skin to simply, humanly, kindly touch the man he loved.

Brian thought his heart was going to burst through his chest. *Gimme gimme gimme gimme gotta have it gotta have it need it need it need you need you need you need you need you need you....*

"Oh, God, Tate, I need you!"

Tate tried to kiss down his jaw then, tried to be the "dream boy" of the bathroom fantasy, but even that wasn't the dream boy Brian wanted. He trapped Tate with an arm under his armpit and kept him up even, face to face.

"Don't leave me," he murmured, grinding up against Tate. Tate swung a leg over his hip and they meshed together, grinding, as much of their skin touching as they could possibly manage.

"Don't leave me," Brian repeated, kissing Tate's chin, his jaw, the corner of his mouth, his neck. "Don't leave me, Tate... God, I love you... don't leave me...."

Tate was puzzled, Brian knew, but he couldn't help it. That fear... that terrible fear. All those nights of checking his room, fearing the worst, of seeing Tate tighten within himself, the Talker inside him silenced by pain....

"I'm here...."

"Stay...."

They kissed some more and ground against each other, almost painfully, but it felt so good. No woman's flesh had ever felt as good wrapped around Brian's cock as Tate's bare skin and pubic hair felt, chafing, pressing, rubbing....

Brian had come earlier that night, and Tate... Tate had probably not come, even in the privacy of his room, for many months. He was hard... hard, pulsing and even Brian could feel the ache in him, the need.

Brian's hand was inexperienced, but he reached it down between them and grasped Tate firmly. He felt... much like Brian's cock felt in his own hand, except for some roughness on one side, and there was always... always....

"Aaaaaaaahh...." Tate's head fell back, and he grasped Brian's shoulders so hard he threatened to leave bruises. Brian didn't mind.

"Good?" he asked, stroking again. The skin was so damned soft, and the heat and the hardness shot desire right up Brian's spine. Tate made that sound again and finished with a, "*Please please please... oh God more....*"

The sound of Tate's pleading was almost enough to make Brian come, but he had something he had to do first. He really wanted to *taste* it, to take it into his mouth and *suck* on it, but Tate was too raw, too close right now, and he was clutching Brian's shoulders like he didn't want to let him go. Brian had to settle for stroking it, and every time Tate spurted pre-come on his hand, Brian shivered. He started rubbing the head with his thumb, and he loved that little keening sound Tate made when he did that, so he kept it up, and then he felt Tate's cock throb in his hand and he made one himself. It didn't take long after that, a few awkward pumps, some frantic strokes over the cockhead, and before he knew it, Tate threw back his head again and shuddered. His cock

throbbed violently in Brian's palm (oh, such power!) and the space between them was spattered and hot and sticky.

Brian ignored the hot stickiness and pulled Tate back into his chest so he could hold his dream boy while he trembled the last of his orgasm into Brian's arms.

"Oh," Tate murmured, when he could speak again. "That's sex."

"s not sex," Brian panted, his breath fluttering the ribbon of hair over Tate's perfect ear. His groin was still hard and every muscle in his back stretched taut with the aching need to come. "s soooo much better than sex."

Tate pulled away for a moment, and a dreamy, glowing version of his usual luminous grin was shining up at Brian. "You haven't even come yet."

Brian grinned back. "Not gonna. Something I've got to do first."

Well, first he needed to fetch a washcloth and clean them both up—but he had to confess to a secret yearning to just clean Tate off with his tongue. The thought made his cock (already bobbing rather incongruously as he walked to the bathroom) jump and throb. Maybe someday, when they both knew what they were doing, they could get sloppy like that, but right now he had a promise to keep.

He cleaned Tate off, and Tate laid there and watched him with those ink-dark eyes. When he was done, he put the washcloth on the end table and bent his head to the exact spot on Tate's stomach where the old scars met the smooth skin, and kissed it, extending his tongue a little to touch. He extended his hand downward, down to the apex of Tate's thighs, and looked curiously and without shame in the yellow glare of the street lamp through their window.

Tate's hip and flank and upper thigh had all been burned. His scars extended to one of his testicles, and it was shriveled, bald, and unthrifty, but the rest of Tate's equipment seemed to be unblemished and in working order, and Brian was glad. He extended his hand down the tender swell of Tate's stomach, rubbed his thumb along the demarcation between unblemished skin and proof of Tate's survival, down his stomach, down his thigh, and gently, gently, along his most tender of flesh.

"It's... not perfect," Tate whispered.

"Bullshit," Brian responded reverently, and kissed his way down to Tate's hipbone, tickling carefully with his tongue.

"Brian," Tate objected, turning sideways so Brian couldn't reach. "Please. Not tonight. Please don't touch me there. Not when you can see."

Brian sighed and rested his chin on Tate's hipbone. "I want to kiss you everywhere," he said softly.

Tate twitched, lying there in the bed. "I couldn't stand it if you turned away from me," he said. "Not here. It... I mean, it's *you*. I couldn't stand it if *you* thought... if you were all like, you know, 'eeeeewww' and...."

He was getting upset, which was not what Brian wanted at all. He kissed his way back up to Tate's stomach, and nuzzled it, proud when he elicited a giggle. "Okay—so I love you, and I think you're beautiful, but we'll take a little time with that, okay?" Which was something Tate had *not* taken with his other attempts, Brian thought with a sigh. He'd left himself vulnerable and bare to people who didn't know him, didn't love him, and he could hear it in Talker's voice—they'd scarred him all over again.

Tate grunted and ran his hands through what was left of Brian's hair, and Brian kissed again, using his tongue gently on the rough flesh. "Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you."

"Then what do you want me to do?" Brian asked, keeping his voice pleasant—and giving Talker some control.

"What?" Tate put out a hand to Brian's flank and petted him.

"I was gonna kiss down to introduce myself to Mr. Happy... not an option. So, you know, I need a plan." He kissed again, gratified when Talker wiggled. "You're always good with plans."

"Kiss up my body," Tate said, his voice husky. "So I can kiss you, and then I can kiss *your* Mr. Happy."

Brian smiled softly at him, and "Mr. Happy" gave a vicious, painful throb of its own. "Deal."

He kissed Tate's scar-line again, and again, up to Tate's shoulder, where the tattoo began, then up to his neck and his chin. He felt the places where the skin was so thin, he couldn't imagine putting needles and ink there, or the pain it would entail. He felt the rough, lumpy parts, and the twisted parts, where skin and flesh had fought in the healing. By the time he'd made it to Tate's chin, Tate was whimpering. Brian kissed the scar where Tate's lip piercing had been, before it had gotten infected, and then stroked his tongue along Talker's lips with a tease.

Before Brian claimed his mouth, he said, "You are all beautiful, Tate Walker. You hear me?"

Tate nodded and opened his mouth under Brian's. The kiss went on a long time, and all of Brian's urgency, all of that glorious, *gimme gimme gimme, need it need it need it omigod gotta gotta have it ba-bee* was back when Tate's warm mouth broke off from his.

Tate didn't go for subtle—there was no kissing his way down Brian's body. One minute they were kissing, and the next, his open mouth was engulfing Brian's swollen cock. Brian about came off the bed, it was so sudden, and then Tate's mouth tightened and he sucked in his cheeks and bobbed his head up and down so his lips massaged the ridge of Brian's circumcised cockhead. His fist came up to the base and squeezed, and within seconds, Brian was seeing stars.

As blow jobs went, it was not the most expertly given—no foreplay, no tasting, no licking or teasing—it was all about Tate's craving to have Brian's flesh down his throat.

Brian could live with that.

It took a minute, maybe two, before Brian thrust into Tate's mouth *hard*, moaned "Coming...." with just enough time to give Tate some warning, and started shaking with *gimme gimme gimme gotta have it ba-bee* before he groaned hard and came. His entire body came off the bed, and he clutched Tate to his groin as he shook and shuddered and groaned some more, curling around his dream boy as he dumped come into his mouth.

His dream boy swallowed like it was something he'd dreamed about too.

When the convulsions of climax had stopped, Tate pushed himself back up to face to face, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and grinned.

"No one's let me do that before."

Brian nodded. "I can see why," he breathed, still trembling. "Your technique's sort of dangerous. You suck me any harder and you'll be choking on my eyeballs."

Tate's grin widened and he chortled softly, and Brian kissed him because he had to.

They fell asleep, practically in the middle of the kiss. Brian woke up a little later and reached down to arrange the covers over both of them, and while he was doing that, Tate mumbled something about “little spoon” and rolled over on his side. Brian took him up on it, and they fell asleep, Brian’s front to Tate’s back, so Brian could engulf Tate in his arms and his wide shoulders and keep his dream boy safe.

It didn’t work. Tate twitched in his sleep. Not constantly, but occasionally. And he almost woke up twice with bad dreams. Each time, Brian thought about all the times no one had been there for Talker when he’d had bad dreams, and his chest hurt.

It hurt bad enough to wake him up about half an hour before his alarm. He laid there, snuggling into Talker’s body and peering thoughtfully at his shoulder tattoo in the gray light coming in from his window, and thought very carefully about what he wanted for himself, and what he wanted for Talker.

He was slow on the uptake sometimes, but he did get shit eventually, when he had some quiet in his own skull to figure them out.

“What are you thinking about?” Talker’s voice was sleepy, and Brian kissed the skin on his shoulder with a small smile.

“How do you know I’m thinking?”

“Dunno. Just do. It’s like the silence changes.”

That made Brian smile, too, and he rubbed his cheek on that decorated rough and smooth shoulder. He liked the feeling—mostly because it was Tate’s skin.

“I’m thinking that I’m not enough,” he said after a moment. “I can try to be—I’ll die trying to be enough. I’m thinking that so many people have let you down, you need more than just me.”

Tate grunted a negative. “You’re all I need,” he said confidently, but Brian thought that maybe it was the same sort of confidence that had led him out the door with Trevor and Blaize, without thinking that anything could possibly go wrong.

He especially thought so when Tate said, “You’re my Prince Charming, saving me from me.”

Brian grunted, and didn’t add, “Yeah, but not soon enough,” because that was going to be his own burden to carry. He didn’t say, “But what if I die?” either, even though he, of all people, knew that losing the people you loved most was a real possibility. That thought was morbid and it was the last thing Tate needed to hear or think about. What he did say, however, was maybe one of the wisest things he’d ever thought of.

“Yeah, Talker, but do you have any idea how many people it took to get me in that bathroom?”

“How do you mean?”

Sigh. “I mean, it took Virginia to help me come out of the closet, and Aunt Lyndie to help me get dressed and to accept me for who I was, and it took the guy I knew from work to take my shift for me and it took Jed to put the big yellow sign up so we didn’t get interrupted forty gazillion times... and that was just to get *me* into that bathroom. Talker—all you got is me. And Aunt Lyndie—you know that, right? She loves you too.”

“Mmmm.” Tate took one of Brian’s hands and rubbed his cheek against it. “I like her too.”

“Good,” Brian said. Talker’s neck was there, and exposed, and he had to kiss that before going on. “But you need someone else to help you fix your heart.”

Tate was quick, way quicker than Brian, and Brian knew the moment he was truly awake and had followed the conversation. “Oh geez... Brian... I don’t want to.”

“I’ll go with you,” Brian said firmly. “And I don’t want to either. But I want you happy. You didn’t see me. I mean... you saw me, but you didn’t *see* me. You needed someone to keep you safe so bad, you didn’t see that I loved you too. Now that you know I love you, I think you need someone safe.”

Talker sighed, hunched his shoulders, and shivered. Brian covered those narrow shoulders with his own. “We can’t afford it, and even if we could, I don’t even know where to go.”

“It’s free at school.” He’d looked into counseling the day Tate had made laundry explode all over the washroom.

Talker made a negative sound, and Brian persevered. “I’ll make the appointment for you,” he whispered. “We can go during our break between classes. Please, Talker. Please.”

There was a taut and palpable silence. Finally Tate’s shoulders relaxed, and Brian knew he’d won.

“Yeah, fine. But I gotta tell you, you sure can kill a good morning glow, you know?”

Brian’s naked body was pressed along Tate’s naked back, and Brian’s relief was so acute that all of that glorious skin to skin gave a big, happy throb. He wiggled his hips suggestively and smoothed his hand down Tate’s stomach and all points south.

“Sorry, baby,” he soothed, taking Tate’s semi-hard cock in his hand and playing with it to see what made it grow harder. “Let me make it up to you.”

Epilogue

Later

HE DIDN'T warn Talker about the appointment. He made it, and a week later, as they were meeting during their class break, Brian grabbed Tate's hand and said, "Come with me." (They'd scheduled a break between classes together since they'd moved in. Thinking back on that decision, Brian had to wonder at his own stupidity. What guy *does* that for someone he doesn't want to sleep with?)

Talker's disappointment when they showed up at the school counseling center was palpable.

"Brian...." he said, and it was dangerously close to a whine.

"Talker...." Brian warned.

Tate sighed, and his shoulders slumped, defeated. "You're coming with me, right? You promised."

In the past week, Brian had gotten very used to holding Tate's hand in public, to kissing him briefly in the quad, to not giving a shit about what people thought of the two of them. He'd let Tate buzz his Mohawk into a faux-hawk and then taken crap about his haircut and laughed it off (although he was very glad it was growing back in), and taken compliments on the studs in his ears and the one in his nose. He'd gone into the club to wait for Tate, and although he still didn't want to dance, he'd learned to appreciate the joy of dancing, and how the men in that club were happy—so happy—to

be someplace where dancing with men was safe. He had thanked his friend at work for helping him out—and when Ray asked how his boyfriend was doing, he answered, “Better. But I’m still worried.” When a girl overheard the conversation and said, “Aww, man—it figures,” and rolled her eyes, he’d managed to grin at her, like he’d known he was gay his whole life.

Given all that, it was very easy—far easier than he ever would have imagined, that painful afternoon spent with his ex-girlfriend—to close the space between him and his dream boy and kiss him softly, then touch foreheads with him, there in the open green in front of the school health building.

“I promised,” he said seriously. “Now come on, Talker. I love you. Let’s go live up to your name.”

They had made love almost every night—but Tate was still self-conscious, and Brian still had to gentle him into being touched and looked at.

What were you going to do, Talker? Pierce it? Tattoo it? It’s yours. I love it. Let me touch it.

Your body is so beautiful, Brian. Don’t tell me you don’t see the difference.

The difference is you’re my dream boy. If I was my own dream boy, I’d be an idiot. And probably really boring. Now here... (kiss, lick, suck) doesn’t that feel good?

Ahhhh... do... no... oh God, don’t stop....

Brian wanted so badly for Talker to believe he deserved love, right down to the most elemental form of it: touch. He looked anxiously at Tate, studying that masked face and the transparent heart beneath it, hoping to see cooperation.

Talker nodded, finally, and Brian sighed in relief. Clutching hands tight enough to turn Brian's fingers blue, they turned toward the counseling office.

"Brian?" Talker asked as they got to the door. "You'll sit on my right, okay?"

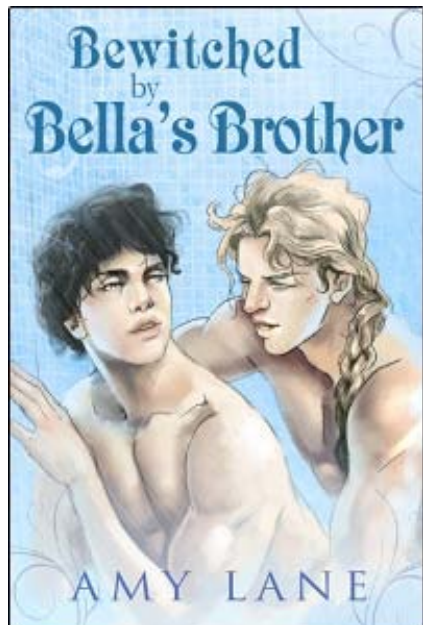
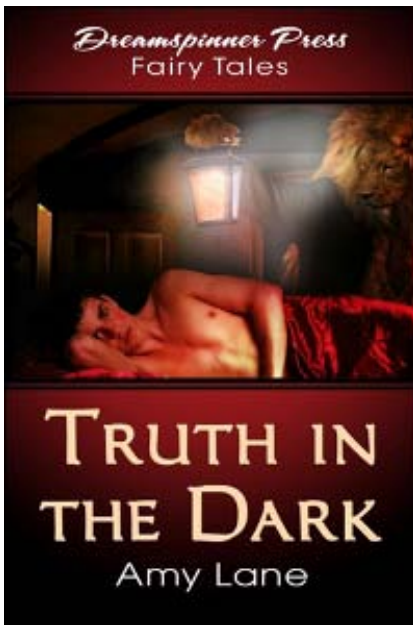
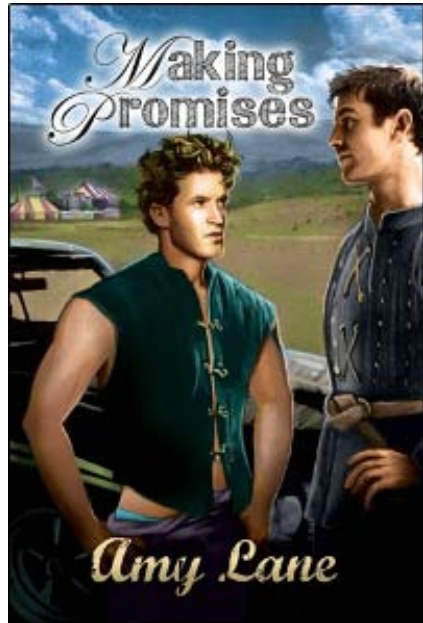
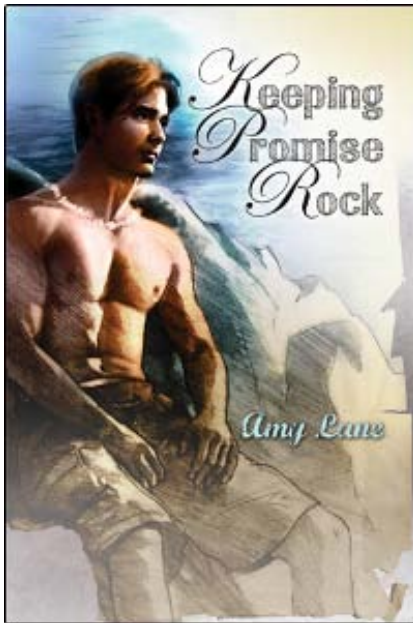
Brian's heart bled, and he closed his eyes and had a little faith that this would help the two of them make the bandages they needed.

"Always, Talker. I promise." It was apparently the right answer. Their hands clenched in faith, they walked toward a future together.

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

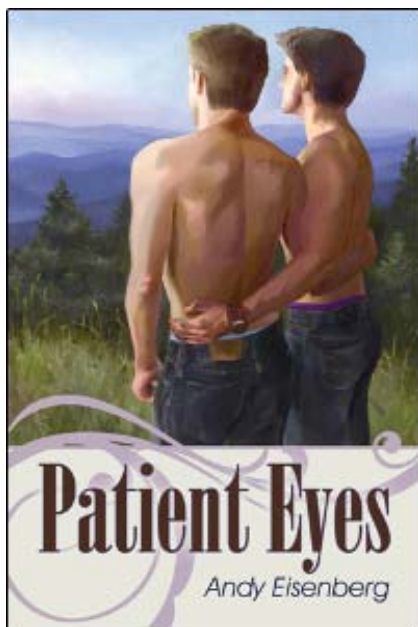
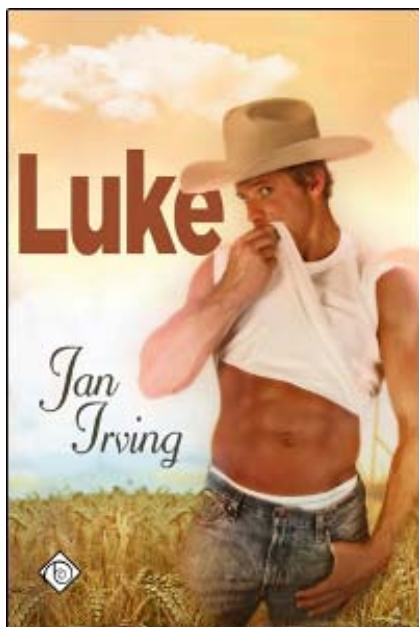
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A black and white advertisement featuring a silhouette of two men in a romantic pose, nearly kissing. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights the contours of their faces and shoulders. In the upper left corner, there is a white diamond-shaped logo containing a black spiral. The text "dreamspinner Press" is written in a white, elegant script font, partially overlapping the spiral logo and the men's heads.

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