

AMY LANE

TALKER'S

Redemption

Dedication

For all of the Talkers of the world, who have been broken multiple times but then pull themselves up and keep going for no other reason than for the people they love. You are the definition of strength.

Darkness

THE school shrink that Brian dragged Tate to see was really a nice man. Fifty-ish, graying, paunchy, with a balding head and a ponytail, Dr. Sutherland looked like he'd smoked plenty of weed in his misspent youth, and kept that happy, jovial buzz for the last thirty years.

Tate found himself loathing the guy. He loathed his deep, gravelly voice. He loathed the man's misshapen neutral-colored cardigan sweaters and slogan-bearing T-shirts underneath. He hated the brightly spangled tinsel that decorated his office for the holidays and at this moment, more than anything in the world besides his own skin, he hated the guy's over-perceptive hazel eyes.

"So, Tate...."

"Could'ya call me Talker, Doc? I like Talker. You know, 'cause it's not just a name, it's like, a function, you know, like a noun and an adjective and a name and a...."

Brian's hand, always somewhere steady on his body during these sessions, tightened on his knee, and Talker subsided. He was talking too much. Blathering. Going on, because he was uncomfortable. Brian knew it, because Brian loved him, and took care of him, and listened to him, and knew all his most painful of painful things, and when Brian told him that he needed to focus, he listened.

Whether he wanted to or not.

"Okay," Dr. Sutherland said gently, ignoring the fact that he'd been calling Tate by his given name for nearly six months, since Brian had started dragging him there out of sheer, stinking worry. "Talker, this is the first time you've brought up the rape...."

"Date," Talker said tightly. "It was a date. A really shitty one. Don't make it all about the drama, Doc." Tate turned to his lover, and Brian shook his longish, sandy-blond hair out of his eyes so Talker could get some comfort from him. "Tell him, Brian. Tell him it's not all about the drama."

To his surprise, Brian closed his eyes tightly, as though he were in his own pain. "It hurt you," Brian said softly. "It hurt you so bad...."

"But I'm all over that now!" Tate felt it before it happened, that sense of dislocation between where he was and where he wanted to be. They'd happened less since he and Brian had gotten together, but this subject—The Worst. Date. Ever—brought out the twitchiness in his shoulders and the sudden jumpiness in his chest.

When his body jerked this time, Brian's cornfield-sky eyes flew open, and his Adam's apple bobbed convulsively. "Yeah," he said hoarsely. "All over it. I feel you. All done."

Talker cringed from the bitterness in Brian's voice. "Brian," he said placatingly, knowing his voice was hurt, and not able to keep it to himself. He'd never been able to keep it to himself—not his heart, not his hurt, not anything. Until Brian had come along to be his friend, he'd been one big exposed nerve with nothing to keep him from running into shit. Once Brian had come out of the closet and into Tate's arms, it had been like being cloaked in a suit of armor, covered in velvet. He'd been kept warm and safe, and nothing could hurt him.

Except his memories.

Brian shook his head and looked away. "No worries, Tate," he said tightly. "I'm sorry for getting snotty. I just..." He shot Talker a look that seemed hunted, and then looked at the shrink like he was the last best hope he had, and the guy had dropped him off the roof of a ten-story building. For a minute, Talker was afraid Brian would have to leave the room, and being locked in there by himself, with no one but his shrink, was one of his worst fears, and Brian knew it.

Brian didn't, though, 'cause he was solid. He closed his eyes hard, and when he opened them, they were shiny and red-rimmed. "You were hurt. And you didn't... you were so tight in your hurt, there was so much shit you didn't see. And I saw it all. And it hurt me. And it won't stop hurting me until you talk honest, and you're not doing that now."

Talker frowned and stroked the back of Brian's hand. It was wide-palmed and capable, like Brian. Brian didn't think quickly, but he usually thought right, and so many times Talker needed someone who thought right to keep him from running off and doing something stupid that he thought up too quickly.

"I don't want to hurt you." Talker was devastated by the thought. He didn't want Brian to have to ever face the consequences for something he himself had done. Brian had taken such good care of him. Talker wouldn't hurt him for the world.

Brian shrugged now, although it obviously cost him. "No worries. Just... just, you know. Talk to the shrink, okay?"

Tate turned back to Dr. Sutherland with haunted eyes. "Okay. You wanted to know about The Worst. Date. Ever. It sucked, okay?"

"TATE?" Brian's voice called Talker out of his reverie. "Tate? Tate... baby... *Talker!*"

Talker's shoulders jerked so hard that his tendons actually snapped against the side of his neck and he had to suppress a grimace of pain.

"Sorry, Brian, I was thinking."

Brian's arms came up around his waist, and Talker realized that he'd spaced out, right in front of the coatroom where he worked, and he leaned his head up against Brian's, feeling his warmth and easing up a bit on the embarrassment. Brian moved his head gingerly, trying to avoid the glued spikes of hair that Tate wore Mohawked down the center of his head, and Tate wished for a second that he would let his hair grow out. Brian kept complaining that the 'hawk was going to put an eye out.

"I know you were, baby," Brian said, making Talker focus on the moment. "What about?"

Tate managed to give him a weak smile. "Last week's session."

Brian closed his eyes, and Talker turned his head tightly, so he could take a moment to wonder at the blond tips of his lover's eyelashes.

"It was rough," Brian said softly. "It's gonna be rough until we hash it all out, then it'll be better, okay?"

Talker's throat got tight, and he nodded jerkily. "Waiting for it to get better."

Brian's lips feathered along the right side of Talker's face. The side of the scars. Talker had tattooed over them, and it had hurt like a son-of-a-bitch, but he hadn't cared. Every moment it hurt, Tate had told himself that this way, the world would get to see him the way *he* wanted to be seen, not the way that his cruel old man or drunk old lady had tried to make sure he was seen. There was one person in the world Talker trusted to touch him, touch his face and his body on the right side, and that was Brian. Except for... for...

The Worst. Date. Ever., right? Because Trevor hadn't been "allowed," right? Tate had told him the date was over, right? *Right?*

But Talker hadn't been able to say that to Brian or to Dr. Sutherland, not at first, and maybe that's why his mind had been yanked back to their session like some sort of hideous time-travelling neural retriever that kept returning home to the one place that really beat the hell out of it.

"It'll get better," Brian murmured. "I promise, baby. That's what I'm here for, to make it all better."

Oh, Brian, you do. You do. You make it better every time you touch me.

Talker put his hand over the sturdy hand that rested on his own flawed shoulder and shuddered. "I just don't see..." he muttered and then tried to focus on the song that had been playing in his head all day. It didn't come, and he twitched a little.

"Don't see what?" Oh God, Brian's arms came up and wrapped around Talker's chest, and he just felt so good. His shoulders were so wide, Tate didn't see how anything could ever hurt him if Brian stood between him and the world.

"Why it just can't be us. Why do I have to spill my guts in front of old-hippie-shrinkoid..."

"That's not nice!" Brian must have really liked Sutherland, because he didn't often defend members of the human race.

"Yeah, whatever. Why do I have to spill my guts for Doc Sutherland? You know the truth. You can help me.... Why can't we be enough?"

There was a sigh in his ear, and those strong, strong, gorgeous arms tightened around him to the point of making it hard to breathe, and then they relaxed.

"I'm not enough, Talker," Brian said at last. "Don't you deserve more than just me?"

Talker sniffed, appalled at the thought. "You're more than I deserve, period," he said, meaning it.

"You mean an all-male review lined up to blow you isn't on your list of things you've earned?" Brian kidded, and Tate had to smile at that.

"Well, you know, besides that."

"Well, you'll have to settle for a couple of people that care," Brian told him, all serious again, and Tate wanted the light moment back.

"I'd rather have the naked men."

Brian wasn't fooled. He gave Talker another whisper kiss on his temple and said, "C'mon, get your coat. I'll take you home and make you dinner."

Tate had recovered some of his "Tigger-bounce"—as Brian called it—as he put on his denim jacket and red scarf and took Brian's hand as they went out the door. It was two a.m., and Gatsby's Nick was closed, and it was time for all good bar-backs to go home with their ever-patient boyfriends and make love. Or at least *this* good bar-back, Tate thought with a little smile. He needed Brian's bare skin on his and those wide shoulders to shelter him from the bad thoughts and the pain.

"Night, Jed!" he called to the bouncer who still stood at the door, making sure the last of the patrons left peacefully.

"Night, Talker, Brian." Jed nodded, and Brian smiled his quiet smile. "Be careful on the way home. There's supposed to be ice!"

"I'm always careful," Brian called back. "The damned Toyota doesn't go fast enough to be reckless!"

Jed's white smile was a surprise in his night-dark face, but a pleasant one, and his chuckle followed them out into the crystal December night.

Jed and Brian were pretty tight these days, and Brian wasn't tight with *anyone* except Tate, and maybe his ex-girlfriend, Virginia. He might have had a few co-workers he talked to, but Talker's Prince Charming was, perhaps, the quietest, most self-contained person Tate had ever met. But Jed had helped Brian get Tate out of a dangerous frame of mind when they were first getting together, and of all the people in Gatsby's Nick, he seemed to be the one person Brian had really gotten to know.

If Jed hadn't been straight, with a wife and two kids, Talker might have been jealous, and that wasn't fair, because if anyone deserved a busload of friends, it was Brian. Brian had a few co-workers at his own work, and his aunt, and... and....

And Talker.

And Talker had him. It was the one truth he knew.

The parking lot was dark and poorly lit. Talker guessed if more women came to Gatsby's Nick, they might have fixed the broken soda lights, but men didn't like to whine about getting mugged and the heebie-jeebies—not even gay men—so the lights stayed broken. Until The Worst. Date. Ever., Talker hadn't cared about the broken lights either, but in the months since, he'd been more susceptible to the willies than eleven years of foster care should have left him. Every night Brian or Jed walked him out, he told himself that nothing was going to get him, nobody was jumping out at him, he was safe, he was safe, he was—

“What in the fuck?” he stuttered.

There were three of them, and one of them looked like Trev, except the last time he'd seen Trev, the guy's nose had been

perfect, and he hadn't had gold crowns on his teeth. And he hadn't needed a chain, jangling ominously from his hand, to seem like a threat.

Brian took a deep breath and grabbed his shaking hand. "Don't panic," Brian said harshly. "He's not here for you. Go get Jed."

"Brian?" Why wouldn't Trev be there for Talker? Trevor had hurt him. God, it had hurt, and so had the betrayal and so had the helplessness. Tate dreamed about Trevor, sneaking into his room and ripping his asshole open with a four-by-four and whispering, *You want it, you little bitch, you know you want it...*

"Talker, just go!" Brian ordered harshly, and Tate looked around them to the three advancing figures in the darkness. Except for Trev, the other two had dark stocking caps on, the kind with spaces for their eyes and nose and mouths, and nondescript clothing, right down to their dark parkas against the December cold.

Talker might have stood there, mesmerized, terrified, until his brains were turned into pudding, but Brian grabbed his shoulders, turned him toward the door to the club and shouted, "*Run, goddammit! Get Jed, now!*" just as the first figure got to him and hit him in the back of the bad shoulder with a lead pipe. Brian let out a howl, but as Talker ran, looking behind him as he went, Brian managed to round back and land the guy a solid in the nose, right before Trevor whapped him across the head with a chain.

Talker started screaming as he ran, and when he made it to the front of the club and through the doorway, he realized he was screaming Jed's name.

Jed was hunched over the front table, eating a sandwich with one hand while he tallied bar receipts with the other, and as Talker gasped, "Help, Jed, it's Trev...." Talker thought he'd never seen a human being move so fast.

“Shawn,” he shouted to one of the waiters, “call nine-one-one *now!* Tell them it’s a fight and they’re gonna need medical! Sandy!” he shouted to the lead bartender, “Want to come with?”

Sandy had red hair and a hellacious temper, and he was vaulting over the bar like an action star, even as Talker led the way back out to the darkened parking lot.

Brian was down by the time they got there, a still sandbag of a figure lying in the midst of three assailants, all of them kicking the crap out of him. Jed shouted, “Trevor, you piece of shit, leave him alone!”

Trevor looked up, and wiped blood that was mostly not his from his face. “Yeah, big J? You go ahead and report me for this! Think Talker’s fuckin’ roommate’s gonna do good in jail?”

Jed ignored him, and as the other two men melted like December fog, he managed to land a solid punch in Trevor’s nose, and Talker heard something crunch as more blood spattered across the icy concrete.

But then Trevor was gone, and Tate had other things to worry about.

“Oh God... Brian... oh shit... Jed... Jed... come help him... *Brian!*”

Brian was breathing, but his eyes were swollen shut, red, puffy, bloody beyond recognition. Half his face was a mass of blood, and Tate saw one of his teeth lying on the ground two feet away.

Talker didn’t want to think about what the rest of his body looked like under his ripped jacket or the jeans. He knew that there was blood seeping through his tattered T-shirt at his stomach, and that his arm was twisted and bent at an odd angle under his body. His bad arm, the one connected to the bad shoulder, the one he

wrote with and pretended didn't hurt after a long shift waiting tables with the trays at his shoulder—that arm.

Oh Christ.

He grabbed Brian's other hand and squeezed it, holding it to his cheek, and the bruised lumps of flesh over Brian's eyes contorted. Brian scowled at him a little. "Told you to run."

"I did, idiot. I got help."

Brian breathed out, tried to nod. "Don't worry. Won't hurt you. He won't hurt you. Won't let him hurt you...."

Tate's shoulders shook more, and his vision blurred, and Brian was still mumbling "Won't let him hurt you...." as the staff of Gatsby's Nick covered Brian in their own jackets and shivered in the a.m. cold. He'd stopped mumbling, though, by the time the world became red lights and harshly barked questions. Talker just sat there, ignoring the authority people and the aching cold coming up through the sidewalk to his knees. Brian was lying there, covered in other people's jackets and winter mist and blood. Talker's grip on the battered hand was the only thing that kept Talker from screaming.

By the time the paramedics hefted him into the ambulance, Brian was completely silent. They drove off, after Jed managed to get a hospital name from Talker. Brian had insurance which was a blessing that hardly registered, because for the moment, Brian was leaving, leaving, leaving Talker on the icy sidewalk, feeling as though a bomb had gone off and he was the only one left standing.

Shade of Winter Sky and Concrete

DR. SUTHERLAND sighed and looked away from Tate as though there was something in his tattoo-masked face that was too awful to bear. Instead, he caught Brian's eye, and Tate felt his lover physically recoil.

"So, Brian," the nice man said in a voice that was a little too hearty. "You're trying to tell Tate that what hurts him hurts you too. How did you feel after The Worst. Date. Ever.?"

Brian, steadfast Brian who could endure about anything, went very, very, very terribly still.

Talker turned to him, a little surprised. There was a look on Brian's face, like he'd gone to Mars on vacation and had left his body there to answer messages.

"He was fine," Tate said, unnerved by Brian's silence. "He was great. Helped put me back together. Made me feel safe. It wasn't..." Tate's voice faltered, and he looked down to his hand with the half-glove on it. He had this game he played, with his scarred, damaged fingers, where he'd try to get them to twitch, and then a little bit further, and then a little bit further. When he was a kid, the doctors told him that it would help him keep mobility in his hand, and he liked that. Now that he was an adult it just made him feel in control. He could control that hand, even though it had been damaged. The analogy to his life was just too hard to ignore.

"Brian?" Dr. Sutherland asked carefully. "Brian, you know..." The doctor sighed, seemingly at a loss, and slouched back against his comfy tapestry chair. "You boys know, you've been coming to

see me for about six months, and... I'm glad. I look forward to seeing you in here every week. But I'm worried. You've made some progress in some things—Tate, you seem to be less... uhm... high-strung every week, and you can keep your attention focused for almost the entire session. But....” He looked away from them, his eyes seeming to find patterns in the random dance of tinsel across his bookshelf.

When he looked back, he was as resolved as Talker had ever seen him.

“You boys have got to start to talk about this thing like it really happened—both of you. You have to grab it by the horns and stare it in the face, and call it what it is.”

Talker heard his whimper and hated himself, and his hand twitched in his lap hard enough to startle himself. Brian moved, finally, to put his hand over Talker's and to calm him down.

Dr. Sutherland watched them, and his jaw tightened, and he sighed determinedly.

“Brian, if you think I'm less worried about you than I am about Talker, then you haven't been paying attention. You've got a lot of shit, just threatening to explode out your chest, and I don't know what you're going to do if you can't let it out....”

Brian made an unexpected sound then, as he held Tate's hand in his lap and stroked absently at the wrist with his thumbs. Tate had to look at him carefully before he identified it as a bitter, ironic sort of laugh.

“Don't worry about me, Doc,” Brian said, his eyes still far away, the part of him that Talker loved still mostly on Mars. “Don't worry about me. I found a way to let it out. Trust me. Most of it's not in my chest anymore.”

Brian had smiled then, and it was a chilling, dark-side-of-the-moon sort of smile, and not Talker's Brian's smile at all. Tate shivered, and Brian seemed to snap inside himself, and his smile warmed up and became Talker's Prince Charming smile again, and the session went on.

Tate would wonder, though. What was behind that smile? What was it that Tate had missed, when he'd run his own mission to Mars? A lot could have happened when he was getting his shit together after The Worst. Date. Ever.

“SO THE thing is,” Jed said seriously as they were in his car, following the ambulance through the mostly empty streets of Sacramento, “the thing is, you can't mention Trevor's name.”

Talker jerked—hard enough to run into Jed's arm as he shifted the ancient Ford Escort, and beyond swearing under his breath, Jed didn't say or do anything.

“Why wouldn't I tell the cops it was Trev?”

He'd been living for that moment, the moment they came and took Trev away, Brian's ruined face being the only thing they needed to convict the guy.

Jed looked at him sideways as they sat at a red light. It was the moonless part of the night, and Jed's dark face was hard to read anyway. Talker could only wait for him, patiently, and hope he could make himself clear.

Jed shook his head. “You were out of it, you know. For a while, you really didn't notice shit. Let's just say that some shit went on between Brian and Trev that won't look too good if the cops hear about it, okay?”

Talker stared at him like he was from far away. “Do you know we’ve got a rat?” he said after a minute, and Jed just stepped on the accelerator. Tate watched him *fight* not to give a double-take to his passenger, but he couldn’t help it. Sometimes his brain was as confused as the scars and the tattoos on his face.

“She’s really sweet—Brian wanted to name her ‘Talkette,’ right, because she’s a pied rat, and she’s all patchy, but only one side of her face is black, like me, but I said name her something happy, and so we named her Sunshine. We keep her with a sunlamp, you know? And Brian made her a blanket over her cage, because it’s cold, and even though we have heat this year, the place is drafty still, and he heard that they get delicate with temperature drops. And he cleans her cage every week, and gives her a bath and trims her toenails. I mean, we get home, and he just plops her on his shoulder and she puts her paws on his ear and reaches over and gives him little rat kisses and... and....”

Talker twitched—Tate-the-twitch, that’s what they called him in school, and even his favorite teachers had moments when their eyes got big and they breathed hard through their noses because he would do it when things got quiet, and it would always, *always* send the class into chaos.

He heard that same exasperated breath from Jed, and tried to focus himself on what he was talking about.

“He’s the gentlest person on the planet, Jed. What could he have possibly done to deserve this?”

Jed’s indrawn breath had a very different quality to it this time. “He defended *you*.”

Tate’s goddamned vision went gray at the edges, and red spots surfed in front of his eyes. His lungs burned, and he must have made a strangled sound because suddenly Jed was pulling

over and putting the car in park and shoving his head down and yelling at him to breathe.

He did, eventually, remember to breathe, and the burning in his lungs and the strange auras in front of his eyes all eased up, and there was nothing but the steady rubbing of Jed's hand on his back.

"He didn't... he didn't... he didn't..." Oh Christ. Not *that* again. He'd cleared up that little problem when he was twelve, when he yelled, "I *am* a fucking faggot and get the h-h-h-hell a-ww-waayyy from me!" at his father, when the fucker had come to visit him (beat him) while he was living in foster care.

But Tate had to get this out on his own; Brian wasn't here to read his mind for him, to stroke his hand, to make him believe he was safe. It *was* just like being twelve again. It was him and the faltering infrastructure that cared for him. Of course, it only cared for him when it suited the purposes of the alien, adult intelligences in the surrounding stratosphere.

"Oh God," he whispered, half to himself and half to Brian, unconscious in the ambulance that was two blocks down the road. "Brian, what did you do?"

Jed's voice next to him was a little bit angry. "His hands were tore up for weeks, Talker. How could you not see it?"

"Same way I lived with him for almost a year and didn't see that he was in love with me!" Tate snarled back, so bitterly angry with himself he was surprised he didn't just crawl out of his own damaged, macabre skin and run down the streets as a bloody skeleton, shrieking in pain. "I... I just didn't see him."

Not all of him, anyway. Not the part that loved him. Not the part that would, apparently, become violent to protect him.

"How..." Tate had to start again, and it had nothing to do with the stammering that he'd overcome as a kid. "How bad was it?"

Jed grunted, and put the car in drive. Apparently Tate wasn't going to hyperventilate and pass out, and they both wanted to get to Kaiser when the ambulance did. "It was a fair fight," he said. "Brian gave him a chance to defend himself. But... man, Brian's strong. And he was pissed. And you were scaring the hell out of everyone. I had to pull him off, and Trev needed a trip to the hospital." Jed blew out a breath—a shaky one. Talker realized that Jed cared about Brian, a lot. Not like a lover, but like a little brother, maybe. Like Jed had been caring for Tate, since he'd started working at Gatsby's Nick.

"But it wasn't this bad... not nearly this bad. Brian used his fists, and there was only one of him. Trev... he was out the next morning...."

Talker whimpered. Brian would *not* be out the next morning.

"Would the police really arrest him?" he asked after a moment. Jed negotiated a right hand turn onto Alta Arden before he answered.

"They would if they thought Brian's attack was unprovoked."

Tate didn't have anything to say to that, so for once, he stayed silent.

The hospital was a nightmare, but a familiar one. Tate had spent over a year in the hospital after the fire that had scarred the right side of his body, and even though he'd been a kid then, he still understood doctors and nurses and the rhythms they danced to. In fact, it had been a nurse in the burn ward, a kind one, who had first brought him music to listen to while he was healing. She'd been young, and she'd brought him Green Day, The Cult, and Pearl Jam, as well as old stuff (for her) like The Ramones and The Clash. He'd clung to that music when the pain had gotten too bad. When other people had simply whimpered or cried when they'd ripped off the burn scabs, Tate had been screaming the lyrics to Pearl Jam's

“Jeremy,” and bless his nurse, she’d been singing with him. *Jeremy spoke in... class today...*

Talker found he was humming that song while he sat next to Brian’s bed and heard the doctors talk about ultrasounds and internal damage and whether Brian had it or not. He knew what internal damage was too. He’d been beaten by a foster father once, and had spent a few nights being measured for the big medical boogie man of internal damage. It had been a “no” on the surgery (and a new foster home, one a little more “gay-friendly”) but he remembered the somber looks on the faces of the doctors as they’d palpated Tate’s swollen abdomen, and he feared for Brian now more than he’d ever feared for himself.

His body was tough: damaged, but tough. His body could take one more surgery, one more beating, one more disaster.

His heart couldn’t take even the thought of no more Brian.

There was a motion behind him, and he had to suppress a violent twitch as he felt a thin, female hand on his shoulder.

“How’s he doin’... oh God.”

Tate closed his eyes and grabbed the hand on his shoulder.

“Hi, Aunt Lyndie.”

Lyndsay Cooper was Brian’s only living family—Tate had called her while Brian was being triaged and prepped for a room. It was the only thing he could remember doing in the last three hours, besides trying not to climb out of his own skin.

Lyndsay’s arms came around Tate’s shoulders, and he shivered into her hug. Brian’s Aunt Lyndie had spent the last six months trying to make herself into the family that Tate had never had. Feeling those thin arms around his shoulders made him suddenly feel safe. Safe enough to be weak.

“He looks really bad,” Tate said, his voice wobbling. “They think he’ll be okay, but his nose is broken, and his shoulder—they’re talking about going in to bolt shit back together and he’ll be in a sling for a while. They’re...” deep breath. “They’re still waiting to see if he’s going to need surgery for his insides.”

Brian’s face had been cleaned of the blood, but it was still swollen and blood-filled and unrecognizable. Brian, Talker’s beautiful, perfect Brian, and his face was never going to be the same.

“YOU’RE beautiful.” Brian’s voice from the side of Talker’s bare thigh sounded reverent, and Tate had been forced to cover his eyes, just to let his lover see his disfigured genitals.

“Man, don’t bullshit me.” Not Brian—not Talker’s Prince Charming.

Brian shifted up in the bed and Tate felt fingers gripping his chin fiercely and forcing Tate to look Brian in his cornfield-sky eyes. “You are beautiful. You are perfect. Let me look at you and love you, Talker. Don’t shit on what I’m saying because you’re embarrassed or ashamed. I love you, so you’re beautiful, okay?”

Talker nodded, willing Brian to go back to looking at his shriveled testicle and scarred thigh and cock, because as ugly as he thought they were, they were nowhere as naked as his face right now. Brian ignored that and caught his mouth in a kiss, and by the time the kiss was done, and Talker was arching his bare body against Brian’s hand, Talker was willing to concede to anything, anything, as long as Brian kept touching him, kept kissing him, kept believing he was beautiful, in spite of all evidence to the contrary.

“AS LONG as he lives, he'll be fine,” Tate said in the now. The memory was snugged securely in Talker's chest. He looked at Brian's savaged face, stitches over his cheekbones, his forehead, along the line of his swollen jaw. There was heavy plaster on his newly pinned and bolted arm and shoulder, and bandages around his torso, his stomach, and one of his thighs. In that moment, the movement of Brian's chest was the most beautiful thing in the world, and the memory became true.

Lyndie dropped a kiss on the shaved side of his head, and he shivered again in her arms. “Why would someone do this, Tate? I still don't understand what happened....”

Tate looked up in that moment to the glass outside the ICU room. There were two cops out there, the kind in the suit and tie and not the uniform. For a minute, he wondered why a kid getting beat up in a darkened parking lot would rank a detective instead of a green beat cop.

The brown haired one, the older one, looked at him darkly through the glass, a corner of his mouth pulled up in a sneer. Aha. Brian didn't rank because he was Brian—he ranked because he was *gay* Brian, and this could be a hate crime.

Awesome.

Lyndie made a sound—a distrustful sort of sound—even as she kept her arms around his shoulders, and Tate had to appreciate her once more. Lyndie was as excited as he was to see the police. Maybe artists would know first hand how much fun it was to be an outsider dealing with authority.

“What are they doing here?” she asked, and Talker squeezed her hand.

“Trying to find out who did this,” he said, and then his mouth went dry. He swallowed hard and tried to put off the bad for another minute. “Where’s Craig?”

Craig Jeffries, also in his fifties, was a stolid, quiet, pleasant man who liked to sit and watch sports on television when he wasn’t at work or fixing up Lyndie’s little cabin. He’d moved in with Lyndie the year before, and Brian liked him and liked the fact that his beloved aunt, the woman who raised him, wasn’t alone.

“He’s parking the car. Why, is there something you need?”

Talker nodded. Mostly, he needed to get Lyndie out of here for the grilling, but he also really needed a favor. “Sunshine is at home. She’s under the heat lamp, Aunt Lyndie, and Brian made her a blanket, but shit’s freezing and power is going off. Could you make sure she’s okay?”

Lyndie nodded and pulled out her cell phone, texting pretty rapidly for a grown-person, and then she smiled when she got the response.

“He’s got a key too. He’ll check on her and come back with some coffee and something to eat. We should know something by then, and Craig and I will take you home.”

Talker swallowed. “Could you just bring me a change of clothes? They’ve got little shower cubicles here somewhere. I’ll just shower and come back. I don’t want to go.”

Lyndie “hmmmd” and kissed his cheek—the one with the scars and tattoos—and he couldn’t make himself afraid of her if he tried. “Kay, baby. You stay the first shift, but we’ll be back. Don’t worry. We’ll take care of you too.”

She pulled up a chair next to him while they waited, and both of them kept a wary eye on the detectives and Jed through the glass. Jed had his arms crossed and his lower lip thrust out. He

looked the picture of mutiny, and Talker's stomach roiled. Oh God. Jed wasn't giving Brian up, but... but... oh shit. Letting Trevor go? That just hurt. Just fucking rankled and stank to high heaven.

Oh shit. Shit shit shit shit shit....

Talker started shaking, shaking so bad his teeth shook, and Lyndie, who had taken out her yarn and a crochet hook from a big tapestry bag at her hip, put them down and grabbed his hands.

"Talker... Tate... baby... you have *got* to calm down!"

But it was too late. The detective, the younger one with hair so blond it was transparent at the line of his pink and sunburned neck, had caught his eye as though he expected Tate to say something. Tate was suddenly the object of attention from everybody who had been standing outside of Brian's little room, and he had to fight the very real, very immediate urge to urinate. He hated cops. Fucking hated them. Hated the way they asked questions like they were your friends, hated the way they judged you. All those foster homes, all those cops—they'd come, they'd asked questions, they'd looked at Tate like he was the reason they were there, he was the reason the fucking people he'd ended up with had been more interested in their check from the government than in Tate. And then, in high school, it had been constant.

"WHAT'RE you doing here, skater boy?" The hands shoving Tate against the dusty brick of the school were hard and indifferent. Tate's scarred cheek would sting for the rest of the day.

"Gonna steal something?"

"Just skating." The skateboard was his ticket to freedom in those days—before he found out that in order to fly, all he needed was his own two feet.

"Don't you got no place to go? C'mon, freak, get your ass home."

Home was a foster family who wanted to help, but that he was too tired to talk to. It was just so much easier to take that board down the pipe rail of the stairs and pretend he never had to land.

HE'D had no home to get his ass to, not until Brian. Having the track coach single him out and tell him he was going to join the track team because, dammit, that way he just might live to adulthood, had been one of the few positive defining moments of his existence.

And, well, it had lead to Brian.

Brian grunted, the sound yanking Tate out of his fugue so violently he bumped Lyndie's jaw. She didn't move, but she did look up at Brian's ruined face and say, "Baby?"

"Hey, Aunt Lyndie." Brian's voice, usually low in his throat anyway, was just a rumble of gravel, slurred through swollen lips.

Lyndie moved up to the side of the bed, but she didn't let go of Tate's hand. "Hey, Baby, you gonna live?" Her voice trembled, and Talker squeezed her hand, since he had it. He remembered that Lyndie raised Brian because her only other family had been killed in a car crash when Brian was six. As strong as she was trying to be, even Lyndie needed some faith.

The thought propelled Tate up, because he couldn't give back to Lyndie if he was a pathetic, sniveling mess on a hospital chair. He gave the cop, still studying them through the window, a defiant, fuck-you glare, and moved up next to Lyndie, so Brian could see him.

"Talker," Brian murmured. His face relaxed, and it was like knowing Tate was there let him feel better.

"God, Brian! Who did you think you were there, Matt Damon?" Talker tried to make his voice light, because heaven knew, what he wanted to do was howl.

"More like... Nathan Fillion," Brian croaked and Talker had to laugh a little. Captain Mal on *Serenity* had fought an epic battle and had come out looking... well, not quite as bad as Brian did right now.

"Well," Tate said bitterly, "you should have been trying to be more like Shaggy and Scooby and just bailed when the bad guys showed up."

Brian's swollen lips turned upwards and then sobered. "I wouldn't let them get ya, Scoob," he said, and then he seemed to relax some more, and as they watched, he faded out into the happy oblivion offered him by the clear tube in his arm.

Talker swallowed. "That's not very Shaggy-like of you," he whispered, knowing Brian wouldn't answer. Of course it wasn't. Brian may have had longish blond hair, but he'd never been a coward.

Lyndie bumped his shoulder and then looked up to where the cop stood, his attention taken for a minute by something Jed was saying.

"Who were the bad guys, Tate?" she asked softly, and Talker's knees went weak. He teetered as he stood and held on to the rail of Brian's bed to keep from falling. Lyndie let go of Brian's hand and helped him back to the chair, then crouched next to him and rubbed his back repeatedly while Talker stared at the whirling lights in his vision. God, he hated this. Hated the fear. Hated the feeling of being a small black hole in the big gray vortex of a winter sky.

“SO, IF it wasn't that bad, Tate, tell me about it.”

“The Worst. Date. Ever.? What's to tell?”

Dr. Sutherland arched an eyebrow and Tate wondered if his scarred cheek washed unevenly with color, or if it was all lost in the tangle of tattoo and twisted skin. But it wasn't the flush that bothered him. It was Brian's stoic silence, as though he were prepared to sit there, forever and ever and ever, just to wait for Talker to get his shit together.

“It was stupid,” Talker said, rolling his eyes. “Hella fucking dumb. It was... a misunderstanding, you know? I mean, when I left the house, I was practically throwing myself at him. And, he had every right to expect...” Can't finish that sentence. “And I was so excited. I was thinking, ‘Weehoo—tonight's the night, I'm finally gonna get laid!’”

Brian let out what might have been a laugh next to him, and Talker couldn't look at him—couldn't hardly stand his touch on Talker's knee. Brian had been there the whole time. He must have said, “But I love you...” twenty times, and Tate knew... oh goddammit, he fucking knew how hard it was to put your heart out on the line like that, and Brian had done it for him, and done it repeatedly, and Tate had patted his head like a puppy dog and said, “Yeah, baby, too bad you're straight.”

“You and Brian weren't together at this time?” Dr. Sutherland's voice was surprised—as he should be. Talker would have been ten-thousand kinds of fool to not know Brian really was Prince Charming, right? Turns out, Talker was twenty-thousand kinds of fool, because he'd walked out on Prince Charming to go get his cherry popped by Snidely Whiplash.

And Brian saved him again. "Tate still thought I was straight," he said softly. "My bad. I... I didn't come out very convincingly at first."

The doctor frowned, as though knowing there was a story here and not sure if he wanted to chicken-walk into it, or stick to his guns. He finally just nodded at Tate to carry on.

"I... I kept thinking about Brian," Tate confessed. Brian didn't know this. Didn't he deserve to know this? "I... you didn't see how he looked as I walked out the door. He..." An apologetic glance at Brian, who was looking at him like he held water in his cupped hands as they stood in the middle of the desert. "He looked at me like I was worth something. Like it hurt him to watch me leave. Like he was worried about me." Brian made a tiny sound then—a sound almost like Sunshine the rat, except sadder. "So I decided to come home."

Brian sucked in a breath, and Tate risked a look at him. "You never told me that," he muttered, his low voice broken like a fire grate.

Talker shrugged. "It seemed like some useless information," he said, and Brian shuddered, all over, and swallowed. Talker had seen Brian cry once, and only once. It had been the night they'd gotten together, the night Brian had shaved his head to a Mohawk and put on makeup and combat boots and tried to convince Tate that yes, his roommate was gay, and yes, dammit!!! he was very much in love with Tate Walker. So Brian was pretty good at keeping it low key, keeping it together, not letting anything hang out.

But it was hard, a struggle, something that hurt to watch, as Brian swallowed and swallowed and willed his face into its usual placid, stoic expression. Finally, he got hold of the quiver in his lip and said, "Not to me. Not useless to me," before he took Tate's hand and kissed it, gently, and then looked away, to the same pile of

tinsel that Dr. Sutherland had studied with such intensity a few minutes before.

“So if you were going home to Brian, then what happened that night was....”

Tate shrugged, and tried to make it nonchalant and ironic, like one of those suave movie actors, confessing to hidden, echoing caves of pain in their past with a few, carefree words.

“A misunderstanding,” he said faintly. “It was a misunderstanding.”

HE LOOKED down now at Brian's shattered face and damaged body. His lips moved, maybe to use the word again, because God knew, it had Brian choking on his own bitterness back in the shrink's office.

“What?” Lyndie asked. She'd asked him who the bad guys were, and Tate moved his mouth again, maybe to tell her that it was “a misunderstanding,” but he couldn't. Not when his lover was here, damaged and bleeding, unconscious and in pain. This was no “misunderstanding.” This was retaliation, from a twisted, violent soul.

“Revenge.”

The word was so quiet, for a minute the labored sound of Brian's breathing silenced it.

Lyndie's arm went around Tate's shoulder, and she pulled his bald, Mohawked head down for a kiss. “I didn't hear you, baby. Tell me again?”

“Revenge,” he said again, louder this time.

“Revenge?” But Lyndie sounded speculative—not surprised. “Somebody getting back at Brian?” she asked carefully, and Tate

lost the same battle Brian had won, and his face crumpled like cellophane, and suddenly he was sobbing into Lyndie's arms.

“Oh God... did everybody know but me?”

Sometime as he was losing it, crying as he hadn't cried since the same night Brian had, the police officers tried to come in. He never saw the look sweet, fragile-seeming Aunt Lyndie cast over his shoulder to make them go away, but he had the feeling that it was that sort of danger in Brian that had brought them to this pass in the winter as it was.

Excuse Me While I Lose Something

“SO, TALKER, you were in your date's home, and what happened next?”

Tate shrugged. “We were sitting on the couch, watching a movie, and, you know, suddenly Trev's all hands. And it's not like I can blame him, right?”

“I can,” Brian said darkly, and Talker flushed.

“I told him, you know? Not in so many words, but I tried really hard to make it clear that I was looking for...” Talker blushed. “It. Sex. A good time. Whatever.”

“Love,” Brian muttered. “Be honest, dammit.”

Talker was surprised into looking at him, and his lips pulled up into a smile that he'd always hated because his teeth were crooked and his canines were prominent and his teeth were crowded, and no, foster kids didn't always get taken to the dentist when their wisdom teeth grew in. “Well, if I was, I was looking in the wrong place for it, wasn't I?”

AUNT LYNDIE'S presence was the right place for love, just like Brian's was.

Talker calmed down after a while. The dreaded cops had backed off, and were waiting outside of Brian's room with dark glances and a way of making anyone who tried to visit the room feel unwelcome—even the nurse.

The nurse didn't "bustle"—in fact, a few years older than Lyndie, with lovely gray eyes in tanned skin, she seemed to radiate a sort of competent serenity, and Talker was grateful.

"With all of that," she said, after "hmming" over the pink fluid coming from Brian's catheter at the foot of the bed, "you'd think this guy was the winner of the fight and not the loser."

Tate bit his tongue to keep from blurting out, "Yeah, but he won the first one." Instead, he focused on what she was doing with the catheter bag.

"He's bleeding," was what he actually did say.

The nurse turned to him and nodded, keeping her face calm. "Yeah—yeah, he is. But it's not too bad. The kidneys are sort of fragile that way. They bleed a little with almost any trauma. Sometimes, even putting the catheter in turns the urine pink. So we're not too worried, not yet."

Talker nodded. "What are they going to do with his shoulder?"

The nurse sighed. "That's a tough one. I think, when he's stabilized a little more, and we're sure his insides are going to hold up, they're going to have to operate to repair the ligaments and some of the torn muscles there. That's going to be an ongoing thing right there—physical therapy, the whole nine yards."

"It's gonna hurt," Tate said quietly, and the nurse nodded sympathetically.

"No two ways about it," she confirmed.

Tate couldn't seem to stop stroking Brian's hand. "He's tough."

Brian's shoulder must have been in agony, that last year on the track team. He'd stayed—by his teeth and nails, but he'd stayed on and thrown, because he wanted the education. Tate remembered Brian's last meet. Just picking up the shot had made sweat break out on his brow. He'd run and hefted, his body a sturdy miracle of

muscles and grace, and the shot had flown like a shooting star. The throw had actually placed second, but it hadn't mattered. Brian had fallen to his knees quietly as soon as it left his hand, and then, without fuss, he'd blacked out. It had hurt that much, and Brian hadn't said a word.

The nurse nodded, and recorded something in the chart by the bed. "Well, I hope you're tough too," she said frankly. "It's going to be a long, long haul."

Tate swallowed, hard. Tough; he dressed tough. The black half-glove to disguise his disfigurement. The tattoo to hide the scars. The Mohawk to hide the fact that his hair grew patchy and uneven on one side of his head. The clothes and the spiked hair and the spiked collars. All of it, all of it, to hide the damage underneath.

"I'll have to be," he said through a raw throat. He didn't have a choice. This was Brian, and Brian deserved to have his dreamboy there, which meant he needed Talker to hold fast, be steady. To be tough.

"SO I stood up and grabbed my coat." He left out the part about Trevor's hand down his pants, and how suddenly he couldn't stand for Trevor to touch him. "I took two steps toward the door, and Trevor says... you know. 'Where are you going? I thought we were having fun?' That sort of thing."

He was leaving a lot out, and Brian probably knew it. But it was so embarrassing—Trevor was such an ass, and Tate had liked him. But his actual words—"I know you want it, bitch. Where the fuck do you think you're going? Man, just drop your pants and let me take that sweet little ass!"—they were just too humiliating. They were unnecessary.

Besides, they weren't the words that mattered.

LYNDIE made a sound by his side, and Tate looked up to the doorway. The detectives were there, and Tate swallowed down a wave of black nausea. "Be tough," right?

"Mr. Walker, can we talk to you?"

"Some...." It came out as a whisper, and he firmed his voice up a little more. "Somewhere else."

The dark-haired one nodded, the bitter one who liked to sneer through the window, and Tate looked at him distrustfully. "Right outside here," was what he said, and Talker stood up and moved toward the door to the little cubicle, wondering why his knees shook so bad.

Suddenly Lyndie was right there behind him, her fragile, long-fingered artist's hand tucked into his, and Tate thought he might be able to make it outside of Brian's room after all.

Still, once he got out there, he stood there with his back up against the glass, like he was trying to pass transparently through it to get closer to Brian.

"We've talked to Mr. Roberts," said the dark-haired detective, "and we just want to make sure we have the whole story."

"Mr. Roberts?" The name was unfamiliar. "Oh yeah. Jed. I forgot." Talker swallowed and felt his Adam's apple bob. "Last names don't come up a lot in restaurant work, you know? I mean, I don't think half the people there know my real name. So yeah. Jed. You talked to Jed. He was there. He'll know."

Talker half waited for Brian's subtle touch on his shoulder or his hand, but it didn't come, and... and... thereyago. He twitched hard enough to jerk his hand from Lyndie's and bang his head

against the plexiglass. He had to work hard to focus through the stars to see the detective with the fair hair who was looking at him with more concern than scorn.

"Kid, what are you on?" the dark-haired guy asked, and Talker twitched—less violently, but it was still a twitch.

"Nothing," he muttered. "They'll take away my track scholarship if I do drugs."

"*You* got a scholarship? You must run like the fucking wind, do you know that?" The dark-haired cop sneered, and Tate felt his face twist into a grimace in return.

"I had to dodge a lot of foster parents to get this fast," he snapped, and it was only partly a lie. He'd really only needed to run from the one.

But the anger was good—the anger kept him from wilting like a limp dick, letting down Brian, letting down Lyndie—hell, letting down Jed and even the nurse who'd seemed to feel like he'd be there for Brian when he was needed.

The cop rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, cry me a river. You want me to feel bad for you, or you want me to feel bad for the poor meat sack hoping his kidneys didn't pulp when he got beaten?"

The idea that Tate was responsible for Brian's still body in the next room sucked all the marrow right out of Talker's spine. "I want you to make sure that never happens again," Tate said hollowly, and his vision went gray around the edges. He remembered what it felt like to be the boy in the hospital bed. He'd *been* the boy in the hospital bed. He'd do anything to keep Brian from being that boy... anything.

"OH GOD, Dr. Sutherland. Do I have to finish it? You know what happened. I told you what happened our first day, right?"

They'd gone over session time, but then, they had Sutherland's last session of the day. Talker was starting to think he'd planned it that way so Talker wouldn't have an excuse to stop dumping out his spleen on the doctor's coffee table.

"You said the word, Tate, but you didn't connect it to yourself. You've been in here for six months, talking to me about The Worst. Date. Ever. Now for some people, that means the conversation was boring and they got stuck with the tab. For you, it means you could barely sleep, you started acting out in bizarre sexual ways, and the guy who loves you has lost twenty pounds." Tate sucked in his breath and looked at Brian with tortured eyes.

Brian grimaced. "I haven't lost weight, dammit!" he snapped. Then he looked disgruntled, which was something that happened when he couldn't control his circumstances and was not exactly sure why. "But my chin got sharper. I think it's a baby-fat thing. It's like I turned twenty-two and my face grew up."

Talker grinned at him softly and Brian grinned back. "It suits you," Tate murmured, and Brian blushed, completely undone in that one small compliment.

"I aim to please," he said, blushing harder. The doctor let them have their moment. Maybe he was as smart as he seemed, and he knew those little good moments made all the hard bad ones worth it.

But all moments had to end, and Sutherland's voice was the sinuous voice of the serpent-traitor.

"You love Brian, Tate?"

Tate frowned at the intrusion, and he and Brian turned to face the doctor together. "More than anything," he answered back, absolutely sure it was the easiest question ever.

"Even your pride? Even your pain? Are sure you really love him?"

Talker's shoulders got tight, his skin stretching tautly over his right shoulder blade just to make the whole moment more uncomfortable.

"I'd die for him!" And he would. Say the word, there's Tate Walker, lying down in traffic and throwing his worthless life away so someone as good as Brian could cross the street.

Dr. Sutherland nodded. "Good. I'm glad to hear it. Now would you tell the truth for him?"

Talker's lungs turned to ice, and he fought off a terrible urge to pee.

"KID, are you all right?" This was the officer with the fair-colored hair, the taller one. He looked younger than the dark-haired one, a family man, maybe. Maybe Talker reminded him of a son or something, but that was unlikely, since Talker had never really been anyone's son, not since he was six, and wasn't that a blessing?

"I'm fine," he croaked, trying to focus, focus. When he was six, he'd learned to go to the place with the music in his head, thanks to that nice nurse with the Walkman, and the music was playing now, now that he was talking to the policemen who weren't ever really his friends.

Jeremy spoke in... class today....

"Back off him and he will be!" Lyndie's voice actually made Tate spaz again, and his head cracked audibly against the plexiglass this

time, and he saw stars. That black, festering nausea was back and Talker started shaking with the need to throw up.

The cops looked up, looked at her, and for a minute there, he thought he could breathe.

“Ma’am, we’re just trying to find out what happened to your son.”

“My *nephew* was beaten by some thugs in a back alley—as awful as it is, it happens all the time. What he *wouldn’t* want is for Tate here to be bullied by a couple of cops who think they know every goddamned thing!”

Tate looked at Lyndie through a haze of dark vision. She was lying for him. All this woman had ever done was be nice to him, but she was lying for him, so he didn’t have to tell the truth. Jed had lied for him, Brian had fought for him, oh, *dammit*, couldn’t Tate Walker with the punk hair and the BAMF tattoo protect himself?

“Lady, he *looks* guilty!” the dark-haired guy said, and Tate whimpered.

“I’d die before I hurt Brian,” he whispered, and the two cops were all about him again.

“Yeah, so why the flop-sweat, ace?” It was the blond guy, but his voice was almost gentle.

“Don’t like cops, don’t like hospitals, don’t like seeing my boyfriend beaten up.” Some attitude crept in there, and Talker gave many thanks to an absent God. His vision cleared for a second, and he pushed off the wall with his hands. The stucco was smooth and cold against his palms, and it was not, was *not* the beveled wood of Trevor’s front door, and there wasn’t a lock or a sneer or a bobbing, veiny cock anywhere in sight.

Oh, Jesus, where had that thought come from?

Talker swallowed again and tried so very very hard to keep it all together.

Lyndie came up next to him and fumbled for his hand again. When he finally managed to grab hers in return, she muttered, "Oh Christ. Tate, your hands are like ice. You look really shocky—I think we should get a nurse."

"I'm fine," he lied. He'd never felt so trapped in his whole life, except for that one time when....

"SO TREV stands up, right? And he says I'm not going to leave, and I try to laugh it off. I tell him—" swallow "I tell him that I was worried about Brian, and I'm going to go home and make sure he's all right."

"Were you?" Dr. Sutherland asked, and Tate nodded, relieved to answer.

"Yeah." Talker swallowed and looked at Brian, who was clenching his hand. Brian's lips twitched up in reassurance, but Talker wanted to reassure him back. Yeah, I was blind, but I saw something was wrong, baby. I didn't just wander out with another guy and not think of you twice, I swear. "Yeah, I was worried. You... even if you're not sleeping together, you can't just take someone like Brian for granted."

"SO, YOU saw your boyfriend get beat up?" The dark-haired guy pounced, and Talker was backed up against the motherfucking wall.

"We walked outside, and they were all coming with chains and shit, and..." Oh Christ... oh motherfucking Christ, this was true, "and I froze, cause I'm not strong, and..." twitch "and I spaz out so fucking easily, and I just... just fucking froze. And Brian shoved me

away and told me to go get Jed, and I did. I did and, we weren't gone more than a minute, but it was... there were three of them, and Trev had a chain...."

The cops suddenly went so still, it was like the hospital turned into a museum.

"Who had a chain?"

Lyndie's hand tightened on Talker's, and suddenly he was back to the last time he was back against a wall.

"TREV grabbed my shoulders, you see. He threw me against the door, and I was reaching for the handle, and he grabbed my shoulders again and threw me so I was bent over the couch."

"Did you say anything?"

Brian's hands were cutting off the circulation in his fingers, and they weren't tight enough. Dr. Sutherland's voice was almost welcome, because it kept him focused, focused, ah, gods, it was so hard for Tate to keep focused.

"I said I wanted to go home," he whispered. "I said I wanted to go home, that Brian was waiting for me, and Trev said I should just take it like the sweet little bitch I was. And then his hands were... I was wearing this bizarre belt, you know, with spikes and shit, and he had a hard time with it, and I kept trying to get away but... Jesus, Trev's strong. He finally had to twist my arm around my back and pin it there with his chest so he could pull down my pants."

"Did you say anything then?"

"I said 'Please Trev, let me go. I want to go home to Brian.'"

“DID I say a name?” he asked, just to keep himself in the now. Dr. Sutherland’s voice, his own voice, the terrible moment he was recounting, it was all pulling at him, twisting his brain around into a knot, and he was having a hell of a time keeping it straight.

“You said ‘Trev,’” the blond cop with the wrinkles and lines around his eyes said. Tate was going to have to learn their names—hell, he might even have to look them in the eyes eventually—but right now, it was hair color and age, and he couldn’t make himself care about details. “Would that be the same Trevor Gaines who was beaten up at your bar about five months back? Because we dealt with that case, too, and Mr. Gaines refused to give us a name as well. But he did make a lot of threats about revenge. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you, Mr. Walker?”

“No.” Not until Jed had told him in the car, on the way over.

“Are you sure?” Blond cop again. He was the only one Tate would look at. “Because if this is a revenge beating, you need to know it’s not going to stop. Your boyfriend will get back at him, and Mr. Gaines will get back at Mr. Cooper—these things tend to go on until someone’s dead, and your boy isn’t looking too good.”

Tate moaned. “It wasn’t his fault,” he whispered. The blackness was all around him, swallowing him whole. He could see the cop’s face, and feel Lyndie’s hand, but there was a whole ocean of darkness between him and any human being who could pull him out.

“IT WASN’T your fault,” Brian said softly. He’d given up on just holding Tate’s hand. He’d moved his shoulders behind Tate and was holding Tate’s upper arms and talking softly, like he was willing Talker to calm down with his body alone.

"Sure it was," Talker said bitterly. "I went into the house, I was planning to get laid. Totally my fault."

"What happened next?" Dr. Sutherland prompted gently.

"What do you think happened next?" Talker snarled. "My pants were around my ankles, my ass was in the air, and Trev, fuck him, had the upper hand! There's only one place this is going, Doc. Do you really need a visual?"

"What did you tell Mr. Gaines at this point?" Fuck him. Fuck him, fuck them both, and fuck this. Was this really fucking necessary? Did they really need to hear it? God-fucking-damn-them-all-to-hell!!!

Jeremy spoke in... spoke in....

"IT WASN'T Brian's fault," he said now, stronger, some resentment building in his voice.

"Was this some sort of jealousy thing?" the dark-haired guy asked, and Tate squinted and tried to focus.

"Who are you?" he asked, hoping he didn't sound stoned. "What is your name?"

"I'm Detective Henries, why, you want my badge number?" Sneer. Scowl. Disdain.

Tate shook his head, letting the rest of it roll off his back, like Trev's sweat that night. "I just want you to believe me that it wasn't jealousy."

Henries snorted. "Yeah? You people get pretty fucking jealous sometimes, you know?"

"Aww, Jesus, Henries!" the blond guy admonished, and Henries shrugged.

“You say what you want, but I’m telling you, this is a cat fight over this tattooed freak right here!” he snapped, and the idea that Brian and Trevor were actually fighting for him was so horribly, ghoulishly funny... almost as ghoulishly funny as asking your rapist for lube, right?

“I TOLD him to use lube,” Talker snapped, and his head felt swollen and explodeable. “And then I asked for a condom. Anything. Cause... cause Trev’s really big, right? We’d kissed before, and I felt him up against my leg, and all I could think about was, ‘Oh, Christ, some fucking lube, Trev?’ but he laughed and held my head down to the couch.”

“Oh God....” Brian’s voice was tortured next to him, and Tate turned to him, an unfair anger at his lover blurting out of his mouth.

“Oh God what, Brian? Cause I can tell you that if there was a God in that room I didn’t feel him!”

But Brian was solid, through and through. He didn’t flinch from Talker’s hard look, or let go of his hand. “Oh God, I can’t believe you ever thought you asked for this!” Brian gave back, his own face hard, his own anger on the surface. “How could you think you deserved to be....”

Talker shivered and shrugged. “I mean, really, Brian. I asked for a condom and lube... how bad could it have been?”

... class today. Jeremy spoke in... class today....

HENRIES was looking at him like he was insane, and that was always bad. “What’s so fucking funny, freak!”

"You call him that again, I'm gonna fucking sue you, asshole!" Tate looked twice at Brian's Aunt Lyndie. He didn't think he'd ever heard the woman swear, much less rumble into a fight like a pit bull on meth.

"Lady, we're just trying to get a straight answer from this kid! Because I'm telling you right now it looks like your nephew got beat up for a freaking cat fight, and quite frankly, that's not worth our time!"

"If that's all you see here, you don't deserve to know the fucking truth!" Lyndie snarled, and Talker realized that the tiny woman had moved in front of him and was standing, teeth bared, between him and the world. He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes, because she was defending him, and the only person in the world he thought would ever defend him was Brian, and he didn't deserve it, he so didn't deserve it, but he hadn't deserved what Trev had done either, and, oh Christ, isn't that what this all came down to?

"Why don't you let us be the judge of that?" It was the blond guy, the guy who was not Henries, and he was trying to calm the situation down. "Come on... I'm sorry. Jed called you Talker. What's your name again?"

"Talker," Tate said, wondering if he could get a glass of water. His mouth felt gritty, like he'd been chewing latex.

"Talker? Really?"

Lyndie bristled and looked like she was going to go after him again, so the blond guy put his hands out and backed down.

"Okay, Talker. I'm Detective Melville—"

"Like *Moby Dick*?" Really? Anything that blew through his spasming brain was fair game? Good to know.

But it seemed to put Melville at ease. "Yeah, you read it?"

"English thirty-A, Introduction to American Lit, Professor Kay Glowes. What was your question?"

Lyndie looked behind her shoulder at him, her lined face contrasting with the wealth of dyed black hair that rippled down her back. She smiled wryly, and for a second, just a bare second, Tate felt like he could hold it together, and then he realized that it was Brian's smile, and his hands started shaking all over again.

"Okay, Talker, who took English thirty-A, why were you laughing a minute ago? I've got to tell you, man, it didn't sound sane."

JEREMY spoke in... class today....

Brian's shoulders shook, and it looked like he was laughing, but he was wiping his eyes with the back of his hands like a little kid. "That doesn't mean you wanted it!" he said, his voice so gruff and choked it practically tickled Tate's toes.

"I told everybody I wanted it!" Tate snarled back. "I told you!"

"And you don't get to change your mind?"

Tate had never seen Brian angry before, and Brian's shout almost unmade him. "Don't yell at me!" He cringed, hurt. Brian darted his eyes from the door to Talker to the shrink, and he still seemed to know that the only thing Talker wouldn't forgive was if he bailed.

"Well then, don't laugh about it," he said after a moment, hiding his face in his hands. "You asked to be treated decent, like a person. Don't laugh about it."

"C'mon, Brian—you've got to admit, it's a little bit funny."

Brian looked at him with swollen, red eyes and tears and snot and pain running down his pretty, American-boy-freckled face.

Suddenly he got self-conscious and used the inside of his plain T-shirt to wipe himself off. He held up his hand to Talker's cheek, the damaged one, and wiped with his thumb. His hand came away wet and his thumb was smeared with the eyeliner that Tate used on both eyes to hide the fact that the lid on his right side was slightly misshapen. He'd lost some vision in that eye, but not all. He'd been lucky.

Jeremy spoke in... spoke in....

"Look at us, baby," Brian pleaded. "Look at us here. Are we even a little bit funny?"

Class today....

"IT WAS funny that you thought Trev was my boyfriend," Talker said, thinking that he *couldn't* think. They already knew, right? They knew it was Trev. They knew Brian had beat him up first. Maybe, if they knew Brian had a reason, maybe if they knew *that*, then Brian wouldn't get into trouble. Maybe if they knew how afraid he was, how afraid he was, how afraid he was... oh God... how long could he hold it together?

"He's not your boyfriend now? Or he never was?"

Talker started to shake, shake hard. "He never was," he muttered. "Never my boyfriend, never even my friend...."

"C'MON, you sweet little bitch, c'mon...."

"Jesus, Trev, use some fucking... ouch! Fucking ouch! Some fucking lube, goddammit! Ouch... fuck, Trev, it fucking hurts! Stop it!"

"Just like you want it!"

"I don't want it! No! Stop it! Dammit!"

And the little voice in his head, the one that screamed when his heart was jagged, shrieking... Jeremy spoke in...class today....

"YEAH, kid? How are we supposed to believe that? What can you possibly say to convince us...?"

"WHAT did you say, Tate?"

"C'mon, Doctor Sutherland!"

"The guy was hurting you, wasn't he? He was hurting you, and you asked to leave, and you were fighting him, right?"

"He had me pinned! He's really strong, almost as strong as Brian, but Brian tries not to hurt anybody, and I couldn't move my neck or my shoulders and it hurt..."

...spoke in, spoke in... Jeremy spoke in....

"HE WANTED to fuck me, but I didn't want him...." Could he make this reasonable? Could he even make sense at *all*?

"Yeah? Fucking convince us!"

"SO WHAT did you say?"

Jeremy spoke in... class today....

DETECTIVE MELVILLE was trying to stop his dark-haired partner from getting in Tate's face, and Tate was trying to claw his way through the back of the wall and get to Brian.

"You don't like our version of it, Talker, you've got to give us another version, okay?" Melville's voice was gentle, but nothing in Talker was gentle right now, nothing in Talker was gentle that night with Trev, nothing in Talker was gentle talking about it, nothing was gentle, nothing was peaceful, nothing was—

"STOP IT! I SAID NO!"

HIS throat was raw, because he'd screamed it, and the stucco/Plexiglas was sliding past his head like a child's playground ride, and he thumped to his ass as a queasy miasma soaked through his vitals, inescapable and horrible. "I said no," he repeated weakly. "I told Trevor 'No!'"

And then he leaned over and puked all over Detective Henries' shoes.

Chaos Echoes

THE confusion was exquisite.

Henries was trying to claw his way out of his shoes and screaming obscenities at Talker, Melville was yelling at him for clarification, the nurses had all scattered for some towels and a mop bucket, and Lyndie....

Lyndie was crouched right next to him and leaning her forehead against his temple and humming. Talker was humming too.

"Try to forget this," he muttered and heard Lyndie hum in counterpoint. "Try to erase this... from the blackboard...."

"That's a sad song," Lyndie murmured, and he nodded.

"You know that one?" he asked, a little surprised. The chaos jumbled around them, but he and Aunt Lyndie, they were good.

"I do," she said softly. "How 'bout you listen to mine, okay?"

After a minute, Talker managed to tune out everything but her soft humming. Jeremy's screams for attention were drowned out by something he'd heard a long time ago but couldn't place.

"Pretty song, Aunt Lyndie," he murmured, and she rubbed her temple with him again.

"Used to sing it to Brian, right after his parents died," she murmured. She kept her voice low, and her mouth right near his ear, so it was like a bubble, just the two of them, Talker, and this nice woman who had defended him like a mama bear. "I'm not religious, you know, but the tune is pretty, and the idea that God

dances, that's pretty too. It used to make Brian feel better when he was sad."

There was a sudden quiet, and Tate wondered if the chattering of his teeth could echo down the corridor. "It's w-w-working, for me ttt...ttoo," he said after a tight, strung-out moment. He relaxed his jaw just a smidge. "Do you think they'd let me get up and shower?"

Lyndie glared up at the two surprised policemen who had stopped shouting and were just looking at the two of them, like they were trying to get in their bubble. "Yeah, baby—I think puking is a pretty good way of getting them to back the fuck off. But the nurse asked me if you wanted a sedative first, what do you say?"

Talker blinked. His shakes were easing up, and the black spots in front of his eyes were starting to clear. "I don't want to be a victim," he said quietly. There was a doctor coming down a corridor with a vial and a syringe, and Tate had to say it louder.

"I don't want to be a victim!" The silence became listening, and he looked at the doctor. "Please don't dope me up. Brian's still waiting for surgery... I'll... I'll clean up. I'll get changed. I'll... Jesus... oh Jesus, I'll calm the fuck down. Just... don't stick that in my arm." He shuddered and looked at Lyndie pleadingly.

"I'm not afraid of needles," he said, and she nodded her head soberly. "I'm not. I... you know," he said conversationally, "I spent a year in a hospital when I was a kid. I've been back. I don't like them, but, you know, I can deal. I just... I don't want to be out of it here. I don't want... I don't want the world to have the upper hand."

Brian's Aunt Lyndie nodded and glared up at the cops. "Did we hear that, detectives?" she asked, her voice brittle. "No sedatives. No bastards yelling in his face. He wants a shower and a little fucking respect, and then maybe you'll get an answer we can all live with. Talker didn't hurt anybody, right? *He* was the one who got hurt, and you two bozos need to remember that!"

"We're sorry, ma'am," Melville said, backing off. He cast a baleful look to where Henries was trying to wipe off the tops of his shoes with a towel held by the faintly amused nurse.

"You fucking should be!" Lyndie snapped, and then she stood and offered her hand to Tate. Tate took her up on it and stood, and then turned his back on the cops and the corridor and the chaos. Lyndie took him past Brian's room, and then up to a bemused nurse. "He says you've got shower cubicles?"

The nurse nodded, gave them directions, and then, to Tate's eternal gratitude, produced some scrubs and some sample shampoos from the nurse's station. Lyndie set him up at the shower, and told him she'd be back in a minute, and he got to spend twenty minutes in a cubicle, covered in blessed, glorious, hot water, pretending the world didn't exist.

Sort of.

HE WAS coming unglued on Sutherland's nice couch in his nice clean office, and Brian was holding him.

"You said no," Brian whispered.

"I did."

"It wasn't your fault."

"I shouldn't have...."

"It wasn't your fault."

"You know better."

"I know the truth."

Tate looked up, feeling wretched and vulnerable. "The truth is, I didn't see you. You were right there, and I didn't see you. I don't know how you can even look at me, after that."

Brian grimaced, and his blue eyes flickered away and then back. "Of course you saw me. You're the only person in my life who ever has."

BRIAN'S eyes had been so wide, the first day they met, as Tate had looked for a place to sit on the bus. They'd been wide, but they hadn't been filled with disgust or pity or irritation that, oh fuck, they were going to have to sit next to Tate-the-tattooed-twitch or oh-my-god-not-that-fag-with-the-face look. His cornfield-sky eyes had just been wide, and lonely, and his pretty face had looked pleased to be singled out, in spite of the fact that everything else about Brian had been made to blend into the landscape he moved through.

Tate really *had* seen him. He had. Whether Brian was straight or gay, that wasn't how Brian was meant to be seen. Whether his heart was as sweet as rain? That was what Tate had needed, and it was that rain, that cleansing, scalding rain that washed over Tate now.

Tate came out of the shower feeling shaky but resolved. He'd just bared his soul and lost his lunch in front of the entire world, with his lover unconscious at his back. He could live through everything.

He hoped.

"Hello, Dr. Sutherland," he said, feeling poleaxed and surprised.

"Hey, Talker." The shrink was sitting patiently outside of the shower in a folding chair, knitting.

"Do you make all those funky cardigans? I thought it would be your wife or something?" Tate had a bag with his soiled clothes under one arm, and was using his other hand to hold up the falling waistband of the aqua-colored scrubs, and it should have been a

bizarre question, but Dr. Sutherland must have really liked him, and not just been saying that, because he smiled.

“My wife knits too.” He held out a foot encased in a VERY brightly colored wool masterpiece. “She makes socks.” Sutherland stuffed his needlework into the satchel at his side and then stood up and started walking down the corridor with Talker.

“What are you doing here, Doc?” Tate asked, but he had to admit that the man’s wide-legged, big-bellied gait was comforting in the sterile white hallway. It would be easier to wait for news if he was there.

“Brian’s aunt called me. I guess she found my number in your wallet when you went to shower. She seemed to think you might need some moral support.”

Talker squinted. He realized that the man’s hair wasn’t in its usual queue, but hung to his shoulders in a snarled mess, and that his cardigan (a handsome one in a dark gray color) was misbuttoned. “You got here pretty fast. Jesus, how long was I in the shower?”

“A long time,” Sutherland said gently. “But I only live about five minutes away.”

There was a pause, and Talker had to swallow, because the guy had to have been worried about him to come out in the... fuck. Was it morning yet?

“I don’t want to talk about it again,” he said after a minute. “I got it all out in the office, and then... tonight...” He shrugged. He was pretty sure Lyndie must have told the doc all about it.

Suddenly the doctor was closer than he usually stood, and his arm stretched up and looped around Tate’s shoulder. He smelled like baby powder; the doc must have showered before he got called out of bed to look after his two boys.

“No worries, Talker. The detectives are going to have to question you again in an hour or so, and we still need to wait for news on Brian. You don't have to say a word, okay? But Lyndie was worried, and she seemed to feel you were worth the trouble, so here I am.”

Tate nodded and blinked, hard. “All right,” he said hoarsely. “Have you seen Brian yet?”

Dr. Sutherland's careful breathing was his only giveaway when they got to Brian's room, but he was shocked, Tate could tell.

“The swelling's pretty bad,” Lyndie said softly. She was sitting quietly, working on her own yarn work, and Tate had a brief moment of disconnect, imagining what Brian's aunt and his shrink might say to each other: *“Yes, I prefer the hookie thingie, with the yarn that has all the fuzzies on it!” “I'm a big fan of pointy sticks myself, and I like my yarn plain, like all my sweaters.”*

The noise in his head faded, though, and he got another look at Brian's face. It looked like another bandage had been added, and he looked at Lyndie in confusion.

“They lanced the bruise by his cheekbone and the one over his eye,” she said quietly, her hands growing white around her hook and her yarn. “They said it looks worse than it is.”

Talker nodded and fought the quiver in his lip, and then he sat at Brian's bedside. Dr. Sutherland dropped the side rail for him, and he just sat, holding Brian's good hand in his own, in the fugue-like silence that was punctuated only by the vital-sign monitors and Brian's deliberate breathing through his newly-broken nose. Talker started dreaming a little as he sat there, exhausted, wired, and frightened. They weren't the bad dreams for once. It was like his body had shut down the capacity for the bad dreams in this fraught moment of peace, and all he was left with were the good ones.

“WHAT?” Brian had just woken up, the morning after their last session with Dr. Sutherland. It had been an exhausting night—they’d had to work and everything, and they had literally plodded up the stairs, took turns in the shower, said “hi” to Sunshine the rat, and fallen into bed.

But this was morning, and the light was shining through the window like an ice pick, and Tate had woken up to find that Brian was right where he had been for the last six months, snoring just loud enough to be totally embarrassed if he knew.

Talker hadn’t told him yet. It was like a secret thing that only he knew. (Well, Tate and Virginia, since she’d been the only other one Brian had ever had sleepovers with. Since Virginia had also helped Brian to bust out of the closet, Tate would do her the favor of pretending she never existed.)

There were other secret things that Tate knew. He knew there were five freckles on Brian’s left cheek that were slightly darker than the others, and four on his right. He knew that Brian was really proud of the four studs in his ears and the one in his nose because he thought he was pretty boring and average and the studs did something to alleviate that. Tate knew that Brian was sort of a snob about people—he didn’t like people who were too loud or who made noise just to get attention, or who said mean things to make people laugh. He knew that Brian hated pirating music because he thought of musicians as artists like his Aunt Lyndie, and he hated to cheat them.

Talker knew Brian forgave him for doing that exact thing because Brian knew that music kept him on this earth when nothing in the world, not even Brian’s touch, would do the job.

"What what?" Talker smiled. Something about the way Brian looked at him made him forget his scars and his tattoos and his crooked teeth.

"What are you thinking? Whatever it was, you were thinking it so loud it woke me up."

Talker leaned forward and bumped noses with him, making him smile again. "I was thinking that we're wearing too many clothes," he lied.

Brian shivered. They had heat, but heat was expensive, and the central heat and air was... inconsistent at best. They kept the rat in their room, with the sunlamp, and a small space heater, and they slept in sweats and sweatshirts, under a double-thick sleeping bag that Brian had found for cheap at a thrift store in June.

"That's a crock of crap," he said, rolling his eyes, and Talker felt compelled to come clean.

"I was wondering if you missed it."

"Missed what?"

"That thing we don't do."

Brian frowned at him. "The... the..." He blushed terribly, disconcerted as he always was by sex on a platter.

"The butt-sex?" Talker asked ingenuously, and Brian wrinkled his nose and rolled sideways, so they could be face to face. Talker liked it when they did that—it felt like little kids at a sleepover, except Brian would sneak his hand under Talker's sweatshirt and rub his chest, and as far as he knew, little kids never did that.

"Well go out and say it like that!" Brian kidded gently. And, sigh, there went that hand. It was a little cold, but still worth it as it outlined Talker's stringy muscles and played desultorily with his nipples and generally made him feel touched, which he needed so badly sometimes, it was like his skin was screaming.

"I will, thank you. Do you miss it?"

Brian pursed his lips (they were sort of pillowy when he did that) in honest thought. "I did it with girls sometimes, and it was okay," he said, and Talker's mouth fell open so wide he almost drooled on the pillow when he was awake.

"You what?"

Brian wrinkled his forehead and tried to explain. "Girls are different in real life than they are in books!" he said, sounding anxious. "They're... aggressive and shit! One girl brought her own condoms and her own lube and just... just... got on her hands and knees, greased herself up and said, 'Put it in there!' And, well, you know. That thing's pretty much got a mind of its own... it went!"

Talker was giggling by this time, because Brian sounded so... so... put out by being asked to ass-fuck a pretty girl! "Yeah?"

"Yeah!" Brian was laughing, but his ears were also pink. Talker wanted to kiss him, badly, but not as much as he wanted to hear the end of the story.

"So... how'd it feel?"

"Tight," Brian answered promptly. "It was tight—and it felt really good." He shrugged. "But it was the last time I heard from the girl, and she told me the sex was awesome, and she seemed to like it, but, you know..." He shrugged the shoulder that wasn't pressed against the mattress.

"No. No I don't."

Brian sighed. "It was... it was like all the girls I was with. They were fun, and I liked their company, but their touch didn't... didn't make anything get warm. Didn't make it pop or zing or ache." That hand moved up to Talker's neck, so that his pulse throbbed against Brian's palm. "Didn't make me feel any of the things I feel when you touch me or smile or... you know, sing in the shower or leave your

shoes in the hallway or have conversations with the rat when you think I can't hear you."

"Mmm..." Tate sighed, but better, and arched into Brian's touch. And then refused to give up his bone. "But, don't you miss... you know, fucking something?"

Brian grimaced and then turned pinker, which meant he was about to talk dirty. Tate watched him try to find words with great delight. It didn't happen often. "You mean besides your hand or your mouth or your thighs or pretty much any other alternative? Just because it's not... not... orificial sex doesn't make it, you know, unofficial sex, right?"

Talker couldn't help it. He laughed, the sound shaking him from his chest through his stomach to his balls. "Orificial sex?" he howled when he could find breath. "Orificial sex? Oh. My. God! Is that like a word you just made up or something?"

Brian's ears went from pink to practically purple, and he buried his face in his pillow in embarrassment, and Talker couldn't help it—he had to kiss that delicate shell of warm, embarrassed ear. Brian wriggled underneath him, and he kissed it again, and then he used the tip of his tongue, and Brian wriggled some more.

And then kissing Brian's ear wasn't enough. Tate moved to the nape of his neck (still pink, but turning blotchy, like Brian was aroused more than embarrassed) and nibbled on that for a minute. They had managed a shower the night before, and Brian tasted like shampoo and warm male. His hair was long enough to push aside so it didn't prickle, and Tate kept kissing down to the neckline of Brian's sweatshirt. Brian made a sound that was half giggle and half sigh, and Tate suddenly needed... oh, God, he needed.

He groaned and arched his hips, grinding up against the hollow made by Brian's upper thighs and his tight little ass. Brian groaned too, and pushed back, and Tate kept kissing his back. He

rucked up Brian's sweatshirt and played peekaboo with the pale gold skin. Brian had three small moles on his back, flat and dark, ranged unevenly around his backbone, and Tate kissed his way between them in a game only he knew. He got down to the waistband of Brian's sweats, and Brian pulled up off the bed to give him better access. Tate took it and shucked the whole works—sweats, tighty-whiteys, sleep-socks—down to the foot of the bed and off.

Brian started to roll over then, and Tate stopped him.

“Hold still!” he laughed, continuing his kissing exploration in its original direction. Brian's asscheeks were tight, and when he sucked in his stomach, they dimpled. Tate wanted to play with them. He could see Brian's testicles—getting hard and heavy—drooping in the center of that magic, mysterious triangle, and covered in blond fur, and he wanted to play with them from this new angle too. This was fun—this is what Brian had introduced him to, in their bed. Fun and exploration and pleasure and dizzying, giddifying joy.

Brian made things easy. He pulled up his knees practically under his chest and pushed his shoulders down against the bed... then he started fumbling in their dresser drawer.

“What are you doing?” Tate asked in between little kisses right at the cleft of that tight little bottom.

“Gnnnnngggg,” Brian groaned, and Tate grinned, then reached under that lean, muscular body and stroked Brian's looonnngg, reasonably thick cock as it bounced under his tummy. (Brian was unaware of the absolute beauty of the ginormous wonder stick at the apex of his thighs. Tate had—so far—managed not to tell him that he could walk into any gay bar in the city, drop his pants, and yell “Who wants to support me for life!” and get some really eye-widening offers. He was planning to keep that a secret too!)

Tate kept stroking, and started licking Brian's balls (very grateful that Brian liked to shower thoroughly, because this could be a really unpleasant position to be in if he didn't) and Brian stopped rummaging for a minute, pressed his face against the pillow again and let out a short bark of a laugh.

"Gaaaawwwddddd Talker! Killing me! Killing. Me!"

And Tate opened his mouth wide and engulfed his entire testicle, just to hear him strangle on his breath into the pillow. He kept doing it, and after a minute or two, the rummaging around in the dresser resumed, and Brian blurted, "Thank God!" and then his hand came back, and he fumbled for Talker's hand as it stroked his cock.

Talker let go of the cock (not easy to do. God, it felt good, all swollen and tight like that) and wrapped his fingers around....

A round plastic bottle of lube.

"Wha?" He was startled.

"Jesus, Talker," Brian breathed. "I'm all... all... just grease me up and take me, right?" He thrust back with his bottom to punctuate the idea, and Talker just gaped at him, his hard-on aching in his sweats and his brain on flash-fry.

Brian made a little whining sound and turned around to snatch the bottle back. While Talker was still coming up with words for, "But... but you're the top! I'm supposed to... oh Jesus." Brian poured clear, slippery lubricant on his fingers and reached back, and and and oh holy bat, crapman, he was thrusting a finger into his own tightly puckered entrance, and Tate couldn't look away.

Brian sighed and grunted, and his whole body shook like a dog getting scratched in just that right place, and then he added another finger.

All thoughts about “top” and “bottom” charged out of Talker's skull, and he wanted to touch his lover in the way that was making him moan softly into the pillow with every molecule of his body, even the ones in the ends of his hair and his tattoos.

He reached out and grabbed Brian's hand and pulled his fingers out, muttering, “Let me!”

Brian put his hand down and just sat there, ass in the air, vulnerable, and quivering with an unspoken begging that made Talker hurry so fast his hands shook. He stripped off his own clothes, shivering in the chill of their bedroom, and snagged the lube from where Brian had left it on the bed, then added some to his fingers.

He tended to keep his nails bitten to the skin anyway, so there was nothing sharp to snag on tender flesh, and he used two fingers, and push... push... push....

Brian's sphincter clamped down on him in a tight, wet, lube-slick grip that gave Talker the shivers. Brian moaned and Talker pumped slowly in, feeling the hot, grainy texture of Brian's insides and wondering, oh God, wondering....

His own cock, medium-sized and misshapen, was literally dripping pre-come onto the rumpled blankets. Oh God!

“Stretch me,” Brian commanded, his voice thin and impatient. “Scissor your... oh hell yes!”

Tate had never possessed any subtlety. “Now? Are you ready now?” Brian was begging. Omigod, there was his lover, on his hands and knees, slick and dilated and begging and of course Tate was good to go!

“Sooooo ready. C'mon, Talker... do it... Geez....” More pleading grunts into the pillow in front of him, more ass-wriggling and sexy shivers. Tate wanted him so bad, but—

"Don't want to hurt..." For the moment, he was uncertain, and Brian put that to rest right quick.

"Gaaahhhh, fucking dammit, Talker, would you fuck me already?"

Well. Didn't get much clearer than that, did it? Tate's cockhead was mostly unscarred, and it looked, well, perfect, right up against Brian's pucker. It looked... miraculous, pushing through it. Unbelievable. Fictional fucking. Brian stopped making noises and kept very still, and his breathing grew very even. Tate realized Brian was forcing himself to relax. He reached out a hand and stroked Brian's flank and then the small of his back, and kept pushing, gently and inexorably. This was not the time to chicken out.

"How you doin'?" Tate asked softly. He was almost there almost there almost—pop!

"Gawwwww!" Brian half-screamed into the pillow, and Tate would have yanked out then, if he hadn't been afraid it would really hurt if he did that!

"S good!" Brian gibbered. "S good! Keep going! Crap, keep going!"

Talker managed slow. It was a big triumph, going slow. He... he... oh God... slow. Slow until he was buried. Slow until he couldn't go anymore, and Brian's body clamped down on him, and he had to stop, and there they were, merged, joined, orificially engaged in intercourse, and just shaking with the effort and the pleasure and the weirdness of it all.

"Uhm... Talker?" Brian's voice was quivering just like his body.

"Yeah?"

"Man... you gonna move soon?"

Talker's grin was tight and shaking too. "You gonna grab your cock so we can both come?"

"I could do that... nnnngggg..." That last part meant he probably had. Talker pulled his hips back until he was uhm, right, you know, yeah there, and then he thrust them forward, hard enough for Brian to feel him. They both groaned, and he did it again.

He kept doing it, slowly at first, but then faster, and harder, and then (gasp) then (moan) then (aaauuggghhh!!!) he was pumping as fast as he could, without finesse or holding back and Brian was screaming into the pillow in a good way, his hand flailing on his own cock without any sort of rhythm that Tate could feel, but Tate couldn't control that, couldn't, could only control his own fucking. God! He was fucking! Tate was doing it, he was doing the fucking and—

He looked down and watched his own cock disappear into his lover's body for the hundredth time, and what he was actually doing pushed him over the edge. He closed his eyes and let the world explode around the darkness in a firework-scatter of white. Beneath him, around him, Brian convulsed, screamed, and then tightened and pushed so hard that Tate was expelled in a rush of come.

Tate collapsed over his back and Brian collapsed to the bed with Tate on top of him, both of them panting and half-laughing, half-groaning in aftermath.

Brian shifted, and Tate rolled off of him, and they were face to face like children again. Brian's stomach was clenching and fluttering, and Tate wondered if he was flexing his asshole to make sure everything was where it should be.

"You okay?" Tate asked, splaying his hand on that clenching abdomen, and Brian met his eyes and nodded.

"Great!" His eyes and his nod were fervent, and Tate grinned. "You?"

"On the fucking moon!" Tate answered. Brian's eyes darted for a moment, and his expression indicated deep internal thought. "You're sure you're good?"

"Yeah... just... you know. If I go running to the bathroom in a minute, don't take it wrong, 'kay?"

Talker giggled. He couldn't help it. He was as susceptible to bathroom humor as any other guy. "Gotcha. Forgiven."

Brian grinned. "So, are you happy? We've had... you know..."

"Orificial sex!" Tate quipped, and Brian nodded.

"Yeah, 'orificial sex'—we've had it, and, you know, we're, like, 'orificial' now." Brian sobered, and looked searchingly into Tate's face. "There's nothing wrong with us. Nothing lacking. You don't have to apologize for us anymore. We're great."

Tate blinked hard. God. All that time in the shrink's office, and Brian would get to the one thing that hadn't been said.

"We're awesome," he said back. "I love you."

"I love you too."

Before that promised sprint to the bathroom, they had time for one long, wet, sloppy, sweaty, shivering-bodies-in-the-morning-cold kiss.

Speaking Out of School

“TATE,” Lyndie’s voice was gentle. “Tate, honey, wake up. The detectives need to speak to you.”

“Bwaah?” Tate sat up and wiped drool off the corner of his mouth with his damaged hand. The rough tissue caught at his lips and he looked at it unhappily—he’d gotten barf on the woolen half-glove he usually used to cover up the half-clenched fingers, and he hadn’t asked Lyndie’s boyfriend to bring him another one. Speaking of which—

“Where’s Craig?” he asked. He really wanted to go see the detectives wearing actual clothes.

“He’s going to be a little late,” Lyndie said. There was a hesitation to her voice, and Tate was going to ask why, but then Brian’s fingers tightened over his.

“Talker?”

Tate managed a smile from somewhere south of his stomach and north of his ankles. “Bruiser?”

A faint laugh. “Haven’t you gone home to sleep yet?”

And now it was time for truth. “We need to see if you’re going to need surgery,” Tate said, squinting at the bag of fluid by the bed. It wasn’t his imagination; the urine was getting darker.

“What are you wearing?” Brian squinted, and Tate blinked owlishly back. His line of hair was flopping sideways, over the white side of his scalp, and his eyes were naked. Brian never cared if his

eyes were naked, or if he'd left his piercings off so you could see the flawed shape of his ear. Brian just cared that he was okay.

He had to be okay.

"Scrubs," Tate said, and he tried for the laugh. "I sort of threw up on the police—got messy."

Brian's least-bruised eye got wide. The inside of the white part was filled with blood. "Jesus, Talker, what happened?"

Talker shook his head, and looked away. "I didn't notice, you know? You beat the shit out of Trev, and I didn't notice."

Brian groaned—and not in the good way Tate had just been remembering. "Don't tell them shit, Talker," he rasped. "Man, let them arrest me. They don't need to know. It's not their business."

God, look at him. He was pissing blood and could hardly see. His arm and shoulder were plastered and screwed together in some hideous way that probably hurt like a son-of-a-bitch, and he was still trying to protect Tate.

"It's my business," Tate said after a moment of just looking his lover in the (swollen) eyes. "Look, baby, I know why you beat up Trev. I thanked God every day that he didn't show up, because I might not have made it if he'd ended up in the club, looking at me, trying to touch me... I swear..." Brian knew. Brian had checked on him every night after *The Worst. Date...*, fuck it. After the rape. After the fucking rape. Brian had opened the door to Tate's darkened room and listened for his breathing. Tate had pretended to sleep, but he'd heard. Tate knew that he wouldn't have made it, if Trev had walked in.

Talker made himself face Brian, as he hadn't been able to face anything else these last months. "You saved my life, Brian. You know it. I know it. You took Trev out to protect me. Now it's my turn to do the same for you."

"Mr. Walker?" The blond detective, Mr. Moby Dick himself, was looking in, and Tate gave up on some dignity-saving clothes and nodded at him as he stood at the door.

He stood and lowered his face to Brian's, barely brushing lips, because Brian's were split and sore, and mostly just rubbing their breath together. "I love you, baby," he said softly. "Don't do anything scary while I'm gone."

Brian grunted and then said, "Aunt Lyndie, go with him."

"Aunt Lyndie's staying with you, Bruiser," Tate said, brushing that wheat-colored hair away from his battered face. "But I'll take Doc, if that'll make you feel better."

"Doc?"

"Yeah, he came in to check on us. It was solid of him. I think we'll keep him around for a while."

Brian managed a little bit of a smile, but his eyes were sagging shut, and Tate had a date with a couple of cops. He rubbed Brian's wrist with his thumb and then turned to go.

"Doc?" It was as close to a plea as he would ever get, and bless Dr. Sutherland, he knew it too.

"Absolutely, Talker. Let me get my knitting."

THE detectives had secured a small conference room somewhere far enough away from the Trauma ICU that Tate knew he'd have to ask for directions back. Dr. Sutherland panted by his side, and looked relieved to sit down in the offered chair, with an offered glass of water.

Tate took the chair, wished desperately for a soda, and downed the water in one gulp.

"Do you smoke?" the blond detective asked. "We could take this outside if you wanted a smoke."

Talker frowned at him. "You can't run track and smoke," he said with a shrug. He crumpled the paper cup in the working two fingers of his right hand, and the detective followed the movement.

There was a horrible silence in the room then, and Tate watched the realization—he could practically see the guy's eyes track from his scarred, damaged hand, up his arm, to see that the tattoos on his arm covered scars, then up to his neck, where the scarring was shadowed by the creases in his neck, and then up to his face, and then his head, where the line of his Mohawk was dictated by the line where his hair would actually grow—aha! Epiphany. The only time he hadn't hated that epiphany had been when Brian had made it. Brian had been nice to him anyway, before he knew the "why" of the tattoos and the hair. Brian had sought out his company, in spite of his own shyness and reservation. Brian hadn't shown any pity or awkwardness.

"OUCH."

"Yeah, it hurt. My mom fell asleep with a lit cigarette and a bottle of whiskey. My blanket was soaked in it."

"She make it?"

"No."

"My folks neither."

Leave it to Brian to find the most painful (or was it second now, or third?) moment from Tate's life, and to find the way it made them the same.

“WHAT happened?” the detective asked, and Tate swallowed, wanting more water. Enough, maybe, to drown out the sound of his heart in his ears.

“Fire,” he said briefly. “Did you have something you wanted to talk about?”

The detective widened his eyes and said, “You don’t like hospitals?”

“You don’t like getting to the point?”

“Jesus! I was just trying to make conversation. I was waiting for Henries, if you want to know. He was trying to get the puke out of his shoes.” There was a wry twist to Detective Melville’s mouth, and Tate got the feeling that if he could have, Melville would have told him “Nice shot!”

Talker sighed and decided to take a risk. “Is there any way I could talk to just you?” he asked after a moment. He felt foolish and weak, but Melville seemed relieved.

“That would be fine,” he said. “Do I have your permission to record this?”

Tate looked at Doc Sutherland, who looked uneasy. “He hasn’t done anything,” the doc said. “Tate’s a victim. Brian is a victim. I hate the way this feels.”

Oh, God bless the man. Tate nodded. “Look, how’s this: I tell you what happened, you decide what we need to do. Because the only thing you and puke-shoes got right is that Trev’s not the stopping kind, right?”

Melville put the tape recorder back in his pocket. “I hear you,” he said. “Okay, just talk to me. They call you Talker, let’s hear what you’ve got to say.”

Tate sighed and looked away. In the distance he could hear music, and for a moment, he let the taupeness of the sterile conference room wash over him, and he hummed a few bars of Aunt Lyndie's hymn, because it didn't shred his throat the way "Jeremy" did. When he spoke, he spoke into a thoughtful silence, and he had to jerk his body back in real time.

He didn't even notice that he made the other two people in the room jump.

"I was raped," he murmured, as though he'd always been able to say it. "About eight months ago, I went on a date with Trevor Gaines, and he thought we were going to do it, and I chickened out, and he raped me." He swallowed hard, because this next thing was something Brian knew without words and Doc Sutherland had been trying to tell him. "It almost killed me. Not the thing, but...." He shuddered, still lost in the taupe of the wall across from him. "The fear, the loneliness—all of it. I...." *I danced in the morning when the world had begun....*

"Tate," Doc Sutherland said gently. Tate jerked, but the doc didn't look surprised. "Buddy, we need you to focus."

"Is he okay?"

Tate wasn't sure what he'd been doing when his head had filled with Lyndie's little hymn, but it seemed to have freaked the nice detective out.

"Is Brian here?" Tate asked back, only partially rhetorical. "Is Brian here? Is he holding my hand? Is he telling me it's all good? Because if that's not happening, then buddy, I'm not all right. See,"—and suddenly he felt totally and completely focused—"that's what I've been trying to tell you. I was not all right when Trev was done with me. I was..."—suicidal—"just so fucking lost. And every night, I'd come home, and I'd think... I'd think, 'You know? I've got a

razor in my drawer. It wouldn't take very much, and then... then I'd just be cold for a while, and it would all be okay.”

Doc Sutherland's hand started rubbing warm, soothing circles on his back, and Tate let him. He couldn't look at Melville—just couldn't.

“And the only thing that kept me from doing it, from getting up and finding the razor, was that I knew Brian would be checking on me. He'd check on me every night, you know, because we were roommates and he was my friend, and I had no idea he'd been breaking his heart over me for months before I just kited off with fuck-face-douche-nozzle Trevor Gaines. And even that didn't matter, because he still... just needed to see that I was okay. And because he's the one who would have to live with it if I wasn't, I just kept being okay.”

Melville made a throat-clearing sound, and Tate turned to him, begging him inside to just please, just listen, just... just shut up so he could get this out. Doc Sutherland saved him. Oh God, maybe no one was around that night with Trevor, but Talker was starting to understand that maybe that night had been a fluke. Maybe he had people who would have been around if they could have, because right now, Doc certainly did ride to the rescue.

“Be patient, Detective,” Doc said quietly. “He's getting to it.”

Maybe Melville was a decent guy—or maybe he just really didn't want his shoes puked on—but he backed off.

“See,” Tate said nakedly, looking at Melville and thinking, *I bet he has kids. I bet he has a son, and he's wondering what it takes to make a good kid into a pathetic fuck up who would puke on a cop's shoes and ink his face like a freak. Take a good look, Detective. I'm all I can be.*

"See," he said again, jerking himself out of his own head, "I couldn't have faced Trev again. I couldn't have. Now maybe. I couldn't face him tonight, but..." *That was before I puked on the bad cop's shoes.* "Now, maybe I could see him and not just... just check out and panic dive into my own head and never come out. But not then. So, I'm going to guess...."

"Guess?"

"I don't remember. I was... I was so far down the fucking rabbit hole, I barely even remember seeing the scars on his hands. But Brian doesn't go looking for trouble, right? And he was dropping me off at the club every day. And if it happened at the club, I'm going to bet Trev was there, and Brian... just wanted to keep me safe."

"He couldn't have gone to the police?" Melville asked, trying to be all tough.

"And tell them what?" Talker asked bitterly. "That his freakish gay roommate had a suicidally bad date?" His smile was all acid. "And that's not even on you guys. I couldn't have said the word 'rape' to save my life back then. I couldn't even say it to save Brian's."

Melville blew out a breath. "We understand that Mr. Gaines was not hurt nearly as bad as Brian—"

"Brian was one on one—ask Jed. He'll tell you."

"Mr. Roberts said he didn't know," Melville said mildly, and Talker glared at him.

"He was protecting Brian. But I don't think Trev will leave it at this, so I'm protecting him too."

Melville sighed and nodded, conceding, apparently, that he was going to have to ask Jed for particulars of the fight. Talker wasn't sure he wanted to know, but he told himself stoutly that when he was ready for the details, he'd ask Brian himself.

“So,” Melville said, when Talker wasn’t filling in the silence. “Tonight?”

“Tonight? Tonight we walked outside to our car, and Trev and two other guys were there with chains.”

“You were unhurt?”

The accusation was implicit. And deserved.

“Brian made me run,” Talker said, back in taupe-land again. He remembered then, the sick terror of seeing Trevor, of seeing the chain, of thinking, *I can't fucking do this again*.

“Made you?” And the accusation was still there.

Talker nodded, though. He didn’t have an answer for the accusation. What? Did this guy think Talker didn’t feel the same way?

“I froze,” he whispered. “Just... just fucking froze. I...” His eyes blurred, and suddenly Doc Sutherland’s hand was holding his, and he just grabbed it for dear life, wishing like anything that it was Brian’s hand instead. “I couldn’t do it again, and Brian... he grabbed my shoulders and shoved me to the bar and told me to get Jed, and... and one of the guys got him in the back with a pipe and Trev got in there and swung...”

And it had happened. Just hours ago it had happened, and it wasn’t months ago, because Brian was still not all right.

And now, neither was Talker.

He didn’t throw up, or fugue, or disappear. But the blurring in his eyes wouldn’t stop, and now, instead of Aunt Lyndie, it was Doc Sutherland, pulling him in and letting him cry on the funky homemade gray cardigan, and Talker had no more words, not for the nice detective who seemed to have backed off, not for Doc Sutherland, not for Aunt Lyndie, not even in his head.

He made himself stop after a while, and when he looked up, Melville was still there, being patient. *God, I bet this guy really does have kids. No one can be that patient.*

"I need to check with our ADA," Melville said when he knew he had Talker's attention. "But I don't think Brian has to worry. We may need you to swear out a deposition, and then we can get Gaines on assault. We—" Melville grimaced. "If you could talk to Mr. Roberts? Let him know that he wouldn't be betraying a trust to tell us what happened? That would be *very* helpful."

Talker scowled at him. "You're not going to try and pin anything on him, right? I need to see that in writing. Jed's a good guy."

Melville nodded. "It's a deal."

Talker nodded, and wondered about sleep, and then wondered about Brian and had a moment to spare to absolutely freak out about Brian going into surgery, and then he pulled his attention back to Melville. "Are we done? Can I go...?" His face was swollen and wrecked anyway. What were a few more helpless tears, right?

Melville nodded abstractedly. "You're not going anywhere," he said on a sigh. Then he caught himself. "Hey, would you really have... you know. Committed suicide if Brian hadn't been there?"

Tate shook his head, remembering Brian's gentleness the night he'd gotten back from Trevor's. "He's the only reason I made it home in the first place."

He stood up then, restlessly, so beyond exhausted he could almost channel the glowing line taking him back to Brian. He didn't remember the trip back, but he woke up right quick when he ran into the team of medical staff, wheeling Brian's gurney down the hall.

"Jesus," he muttered, and Lyndie was there, saying, "Let him through, let him through."

"Brian?" he asked, all out of words.

"Surgery," Brian muttered. "Love you, baby. See you soon."

And they managed a brief clasp of hands before he was wheeled away. The last thing Talker saw was the catheter bag at the end of the bed, like a crimson flag.

Crystal Shards of Christmas Light

THEY were lucky. With a little bit of quick talking, and some of Lyndie's boyfriend's handyman skills, they were able to get Brian okayed to come home two days before Christmas.

Between the time Brian hobbled through the door of their newly finished threshold, heavily supported by Tate and Jed, and the moment Talker had watched him disappear down the white hospital hallway, Talker thought he might have aged a hundred years, maybe more.

They really *had* needed to sedate him after Brian went into surgery. He'd started to shake so hard his teeth had rattled and he hadn't been able to pull himself out of it this time. There hadn't been any reason to—not a thing he could have done would have helped Brian when he went away into that cold, white room.

He woke up in the OR recovery room, next to Brian's bed. Lyndie had apparently threatened, begged and cajoled, and he'd lain there, still humming Lyndie's little hymn, and watched Brian sleep as his body shook off the sedative. Brian was breathing, he was out of danger, he'd survive. The only thing at all in the silence of Talker's head was the music.

The music had gotten him through the next few weeks, but he'd had help. Lyndie had kept him fed and alive until Brian's shoulder surgery was finished, and Brian was up and around and very definitely on the mend. Craig had kept an eye on the apartment, kept Sunshine warm and fed, and started immediately on the ramp and handrails that Brian would need to hobble up and

down the stairs to their crappy apartment. Jed had taken up a collection at work, and even gone to the restaurant where Brian worked, so they could keep paying rent on their crappy apartment until Brian's disability payments kicked in.

Doc Sutherland had gone to their professors and gotten them extensions on their finals, so their entire painfully eked out last semester hadn't been pissed away, and they could continue working toward their degrees. He'd even gone to the administration and gotten some money for Brian's next semester, since the tip money they depended on for things like registration and books was not going to be coming in, even when Brian was up and about.

And even with all that help, eventually, Talker had needed to go back to their crappy apartment and sleep without Brian next to him.

It had been hard. He'd been so shaken by nightmares the first night that he'd run across the street to the drug store for a mild sleeping pill, just so he would be able to function the next morning. That had been the night before he'd had to go down to the courthouse and swear out the deposition that would get Trevor arrested, so it had been worth it.

The day at the courthouse had been a nightmare; without Doc on one side and Lyndie on the other, he flat out wouldn't have made it. They had dragged him into rooms that were a blur of faces, and he had given his depositions. He couldn't remember much of them. He'd had Staind playing in his head, practically their whole last album, and the things he said and the things people said to him were not ever going to stick.

He remembered Jed, who had given him an actual hug, the kind with the double fist bump on the back, and told him it was okay—as long as Brian wasn't in trouble, it was okay. Jed hadn't gotten in trouble either. Melville had kept his word on that, but Talker

had insisted he not be there when Jed testified. He didn't want to hear about the fight from anyone but Brian.

Henries was there, and he gave Talker a wide berth. At one point, as they'd waited in an echoing hallway with pristine granite-colored tiles on the floor, Henries had made a crack about Talker's courtroom attire. Tate had borrowed a pair of Brian's nicest khakis and a button down shirt, but he'd kept the woolen half-glove, and the eyeliner. Melville had snapped that if the guy didn't shut up, someone else would puke on his shoes, and Henries had sulked by the water fountain for the rest of the wait.

And in the end, all that mattered was that Talker made it. Talker's testimony made it happen: Trev was a bad guy, Brian had been, if not legally right then at least morally strong, and Trev's response was out of proportion. Trev gave up his two buddies, hired thugs, both of them, and he'd done it through a broken nose. (Go, Jed! Tate wished for money, just so he could buy Jed something kick-ass for Christmas, or even for his kids!)

Tate had seen Trev, from a distance, being escorted through the corridors in handcuffs, with his head up and a sneer twisting what Tate had once thought of as a handsome face. At the end of the day, the Assistant District Attorney had been happy to cut a deal: if Trevor didn't press charges against Brian, his own charges would be assault with a deadly weapon as opposed to attempted murder. Given the lengthy prison stay that the second charge would probably have landed him, he pled out, and took the eighteen months offered. It wasn't forever—it certainly didn't seem long enough—but it would keep him out of their hair until they could toughen up. And a guaranteed restraining order upon his release made Tate feel a little bit better as well.

Talker didn't even want to think about what would happen to Trev in prison. There was no righteous excitement about the tables

being turned. He didn't gloat or feel justified or vindicated as Trevor had been walked through the courthouse. He didn't even think about shouting, "Hey, Trev, now you'll know how it feels!" The whole thing just made him want to vomit, and Lyndie was having a hell of a time trying to get him to eat as it was.

He'd disappeared for a moment then, and when he'd come to himself, he'd been sitting on one of the hellaciously cold granite benches that were part of a fountain sculpture in the front of the courthouse. He sat there, knees drawn up to his chest, until Lyndie and Doc Sutherland found him, and pulled him to his next paneled room, with his next group of people he would never remember.

The only thing that kept him focused that day, the only thing that kept him from losing it, from throwing up and shaking and needing sedation on the stand, was the idea of visiting Brian.

The swelling in Brian's face went down daily. By the time they brought him home, there were still visible bruises, but the stitches had been taken out, and the disfigurement was, for the most part, gone. What remained was... Brian. Brian who would listen to Tate rambling about his day—good or bad—with wide, appreciative eyes, and a quiet comment now and then to let Tate know that he was totally invested in the conversation. Brian who told Tate how brave he had been, without any irony at all, and who talked about Christmas like it was a big deal, and Tate's biggest Christmas present wasn't just that they were both going to live.

Brian, who, the day after Talker had given his deposition, had shoved his bruised, aching, healing body to one side of his hospital bed, forced Tate to lay up beside him, put the iPod ear buds in and just held him. It had been awkward, and probably painful on Brian's part, but for Talker, it had been all the Christmas he'd ever wanted. Brian's flesh was warm, and he was a quiet, comforting heart for Talker to curl up in, and oh, God, it was worth it, all of it, the pushy

people with their horrible questions, the personal evisceration, it was all fucking worth it, just to curl up next to Brian and know that they'd be safe.

“SO YOU didn't have to see Trevor?” Brian had asked eventually, and Talker had shaken his head against his shoulder.

“That was the whole purpose of the plead-out,” Talker told him candidly, his voice muffled by Brian's chest. “Because I'm too freaky to put on the stand, and Trev didn't know that you were too out of it to testify—”

“I wouldn't have,” Brian said firmly, and Talker closed his eyes.

“I know you wouldn't have,” he said softly. “I know you wouldn't have gone up there for the same reason you shoved me back into the bar when you first saw them. You take real good care of me, Brian. It was my turn to do something for you.”

Brian made a little keening sound, and Tate met his gaze. “I just wish it wasn't something so damned hard,” he murmured, and Tate's smile had been all bitterness.

“Hard's relative,” he said, not wanting to talk about it. “You've got a year of physical therapy, I had to gut myself for a few days. Hush... this song's really good... I want to hear it...”

AND they had left it at that.

And now, when Jed had left with a promise to be back the next night (Christmas Eve) with his family in tow to visit, Doc Sutherland had made them promise to keep him on speed dial, and Lyndie and Craig were finally getting a day or two in their own home, it was just

the two of them, as they'd started out, Talker and Brian against the world.

Even Talker knew that was a lie.

"Are they all really coming back tomorrow night?" Brian asked, a little bemused. It had been Lyndie's idea, that everyone wanted to see Brian happy and safe, and wasn't it Christmas Eve anyway?

"Yup," Talker told him, making sure the afghan Lyndie had made them while watching over Brian in the hospital was all tucked up around his waist. He was sitting up in their bed, propped up by pillows, his arm in a sling, and he looked like the morning of checking out of the hospital and getting half carried up the stairs really had taken it out of him. "Lyndie said she'd come in the morning and help clean up and shop." Talker shuddered. He was pretty sure the only thing in the cupboards was cold cereal and milk. It's what he'd been living on for three weeks, anyway.

Brian's smile was a little dreamy. "Do you think we could get chips? Man, I'm *dying* for something salty and bad for me!"

Talker grinned at him. "If you want, I'll go get some for you now, okay?" He would, too. They had bags in the drugstore downstairs and across the street.

"Later." Brian shook his head. He looked around their room in the sudden silence, and said, "Hey, what's that thing Sunshine's in?"

Talker grimaced, feeling guilty. He hadn't hardly taken the rat out in the past three weeks. She'd almost bitten him the first time he'd gone for her, so he'd tried to be better. She'd warmed up since, but still, the poor creature seemed to be feeling the effects of neglect. Brian would need to make up some time with her.

"Craig made it," is what he answered, though. "I guess it got cold in here that night you got hurt. It's like a little hutch, to put the cage in, right? It's got a little battery operated heater-light, so we

don't have to keep the sunlamp on all the time, and we can mess with her days and nights, so she's not always running the damned wheel at three in the morning, and sleeping when we want to hold her. It's pretty cool!" Even if it was totally odd. All Talker knew was that he'd come home after Brian got out of surgery, and there it was. All ready and cool and... just odd.

Brian raised his eyebrows. "Maybe he needed to work off some tension," he said, and Talker shrugged. Lyndie's boyfriend—big, quiet, paunchy—had been as much a wreck as Lyndie had been during those first horrible days. But he'd also been her rock, and Talker started to realize how much he and Brian really were part of a family. The Christmas party, although Lyndie's idea, had seemed perfect. It meant they would be with family, and now Talker was starting to see why that mattered.

He would have been lost without his family in the last few weeks, and if he had been lost, Brian wouldn't have had anybody to come home to.

He shook off the deep thoughts and reached his hand into the cage gingerly. "She's been sort of tense," he explained to Brian. "She actually bit me the first time I picked her up, but we've been spending some time and she's sort of relaxing." Granted, it had been a distracted time, but the night before, after Jed had dropped him off from work, Tate had simply sat and watched television with the rat on his lap, until the poor thing had curled up and gone to sleep in the front pocket of his sweatshirt.

"But there she is!" He picked up the animal, and made little "ft-ft-ft" sounds while touching noses with it, and then he gave it to Brian, who lifted her from the middle and started examining her like a doctor.

"Uhm, Talker?"

“Yeah?” Tate kicked off his shoes and went to sit on the bed next to Brian’s good arm, so he didn’t bump the bad one. Brian was busy looking at the rat with something like fierce concentration.

“This isn’t Sunshine.”

Tate was so surprised he almost missed the edge of the bed. “What do you mean it’s not Sunshine! That’s our rat!”

Brian laughed a little, and looked down on the little creature sadly and shook his head. “This may be our rat *now*, but this rat is *not* Sunshine!” And with that he turned the critter’s back end toward Tate and Tate almost fell off the bed again.

“Bwaaaa! Holy God, are those *balls*? They’re a third its body weight!” Tate took the rat from Brian and turned the animal around. The markings on the little head were *very very* similar to the rat he’d thought had been in the brand new little rat-castle that Craig had made for it. “How did I miss that?”

Brian took the rat and put it on his chest, and then wrapped his arm around Tate’s shoulders and drew him in for a snuggle. “I think you were distracted at the time. What do you think happened to Sunshine?”

Talker thought about it, and winced, feeling sad and guilty and awful all at once. “The night you got hurt,” he said, thinking. “It was really cold, and power was going out all over the city, and I told Craig to go check on her and to get me some clothes. He... it seemed to take him forever. I didn’t get to change until...” Hell, he’d been sedated for nearly twelve hours. He hadn’t even been sure what day it was. “Until after you woke up from surgery,” he finished. Brian knew—Brian had known when they’d woken up in adjoining beds. But who wanted to remind a lover that you were weak and sad, and dissolved like a wet breath mint when things got bad?

"Aw..." Brian murmured, coming to the same conclusion. "The power must have gone out—she must have...."

The new rat bumped his chin and he petted it. Talker added a finger to the little cone-shaped muzzle and together they got to know this new development.

"Awww..." they said together, petting New Rat sadly.

"But why didn't they tell us?" Talker asked, bemused. "I mean... you know, shit was going down and all, but, damn! Did they think we wouldn't notice?"

He looked up to find Brian's eyes intent on his face. "I think they figured we'd see the truth when we were ready to," he said softly, and Talker swallowed hard.

"I think that's pretty wise of them," he answered, but it didn't seem to be enough, and the hand petting New Rat, the disfigured, scarred one, was suddenly shaking hard enough to blur. Brian's good hand, the one *not* in the sling, cupped over it. They wove their fingers together, and Talker spoke to their clasped hands.

"Brian, I was raped," he said. His voice was soft, but it *was* his voice.

"Baby, I know."

"I went on a date, and I ended it, and Trevor Gaines raped me, and... and I'm so sorry. Jesus, Brian... if I'd... you know, sassed up, done something, pressed charges, gone public... anything but... just crumbling and making you take Trevor out when I didn't even notice...."

Brian's hand tightened on his. "It's not your fault, baby," he said roughly. "I took that fucker down because it needed to be done. You know what?"

Talker shook his head, still looking at the rat.

“Now look at me when I say this, because you need to see it's true.”

“We both know that's my weakness,” Tate said, trying to laugh and failing. Brian didn't laugh, and Talker looked up into his lover's amazing eyes. The white part was still rimmed with red, and the scars from where the stitches had been were still a little puffy. He had a rainbow of bruising under his eye and along his jaw, and Talker knew without looking that he was missing one of his back teeth. His hair had been shaved unevenly above his eyebrow when they'd lanced the swelling over his eye, and the long fall of it was interrupted.

He was still the most beautiful man Tate Walker had ever seen.

“Are you seeing me?” Brian asked, and Tate nodded soberly. “Good, because this is what I need you to know. I'd do it again. Even having the rest of that shit coming, I'd do it again. Because...” Brian's voice cracked a little, “because I know what you were thinking of doing, those months between. Between you being attacked and me talking you out of the crazy tree. I'd do anything to make sure that didn't happen—even get beat to the ground, you hear?”

Talker nodded and wiped some more helpless tears. *God*, he was tired of being weak, he was. But Brian was so easy to lean on, even hurt, and the world just turned a better color when he leaned his head on Brian's good shoulder. His hair was back in a queue today. He hadn't spiked it in weeks, and it was, in fact, growing out on the sides a little. It was still patchy over his tattoo, but with the tatt, you couldn't see how much was scalp and how much was really hair. Talker thought maybe it was time for a new look, because this one made it easier to lean his head on Brian's shoulder, and that had to be a good thing.

"I can't believe you did that," was what he said. "Brian, you're so..." He looked at their still-twined hands, still getting to know New Rat. "You're so gentle. I can't believe you hit someone."

Brian shook his head, and Tate pulled his hand away enough to rub the scars on the back of Brian's knuckles. He'd done this many times before, he realized, but he'd never known what put them there.

"I don't remember much," Brian said softly. "I gave Trev a chance to defend himself, and the next thing I know, Jed was pulling me off of him."

"Fucker," Tate said, sincere venom in his voice. "It's more than he deserved."

"I threw up afterward," Brian told him, as though that meant something. Talker looked up at him and found himself smiling. He remembered throwing up on Henries, and thought that maybe Brian was right. Maybe it did mean something.

He remembered that first day they'd met, on the bus, and the day Brian had first seen his scars. The all-American poster child and Tate-the-tattooed-twitch—it seemed unlikely, but Brian hadn't seen that. He'd seen that they were more alike than different.

Maybe they were.

"So what are we going to name him?" Tate asked after a minute.

Brian scratched the rat under the chin and tutted to him some more before answering. "How 'bout we name him after you this time?"

"You're going to name the rat Talker?"

"Naw." Talker looked up to see Brian's fierce grin, unblemished and untainted by the last month. "We're gonna name him Harry. Big Harry Nads."

Talker snickered. "After *me*?"

"Yeah, Talker. Man, after what you did to keep my ass out of jail, I don't know who else we'd name Big Harry Nads. You think?"

Talker blushed and looked down at the rat again. "Well, it *is* a sweet ass," he murmured, and heard Brian's chuckle, "but I'm not that brave." Brian's kiss on the fuzz growing in on the top of his head felt like a benediction.

"You survived all that, Talker. You tore yourself open when you were already falling apart, and you did it for me. You're fucking fearless."

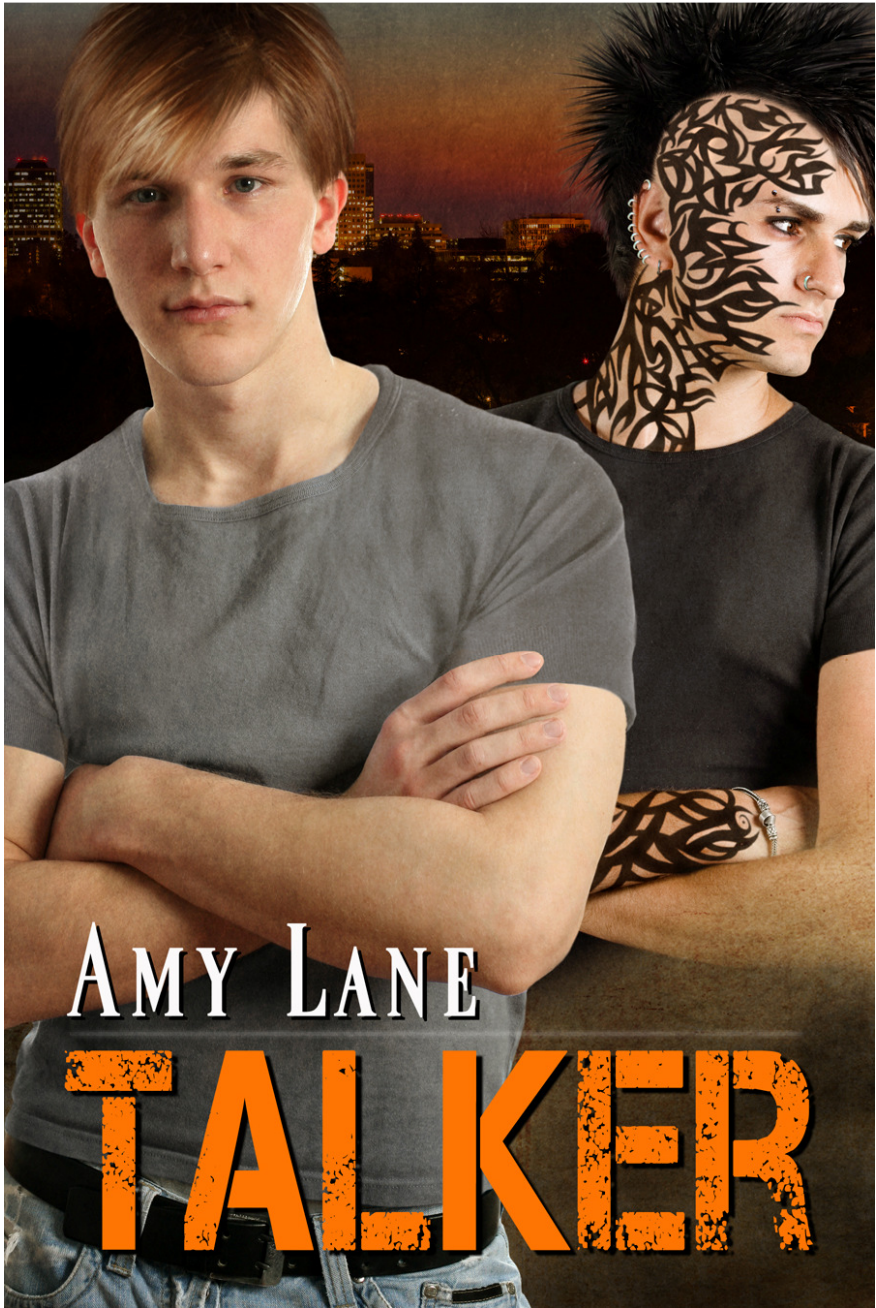
"God, I love you."

"I love you too. So—Big Harry Nads?"

Tate smiled shyly into the world created by Brian's chest and his faith and the love that seemed to have survived in the core of them, and nodded. "Yeah. Big Harry Nads the rat. He'll fit right in."

The moment was quiet, and the music started up in Talker's head again. He started singing, "Dance, then, wherever you may be...." And Brian started humming it too.

Don't Miss

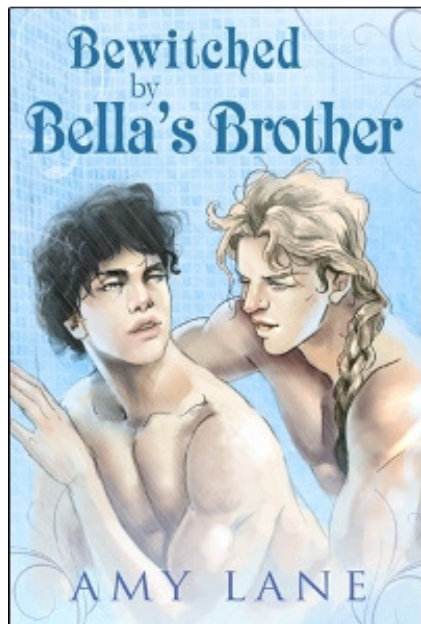
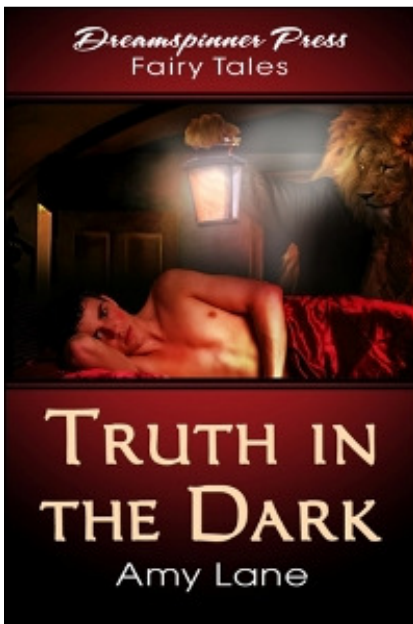
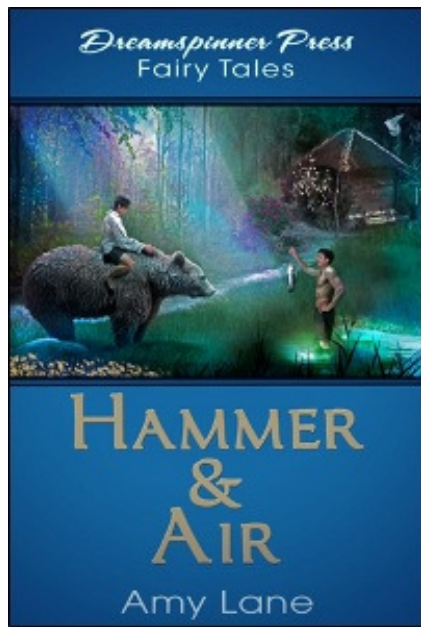
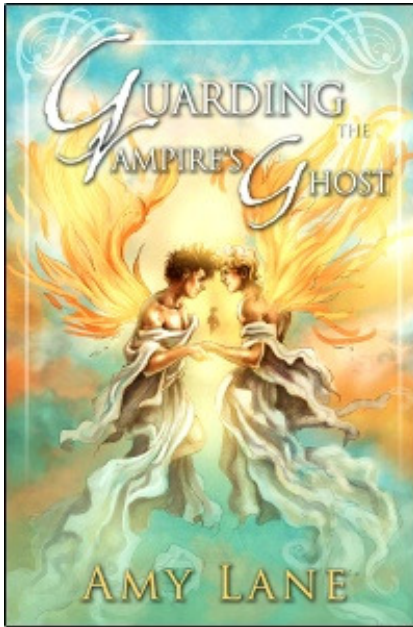


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AMY LANE teaches high school English, mothers four children, and writes the occasional book. When she's not begging students to sit-the-hell-down or taxiing kids to soccer/dance/karate—oh my! she can be found catching emergency naps, grocery shopping, 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.

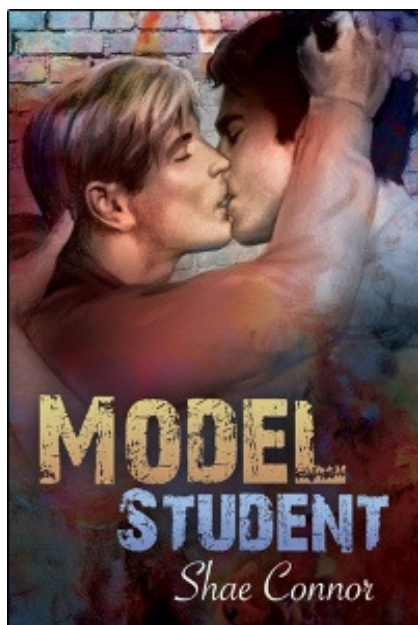
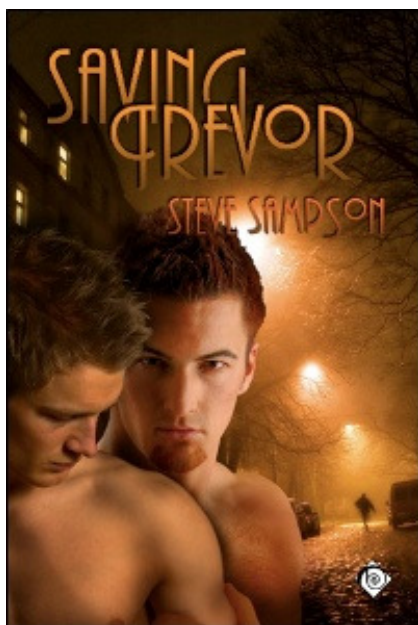
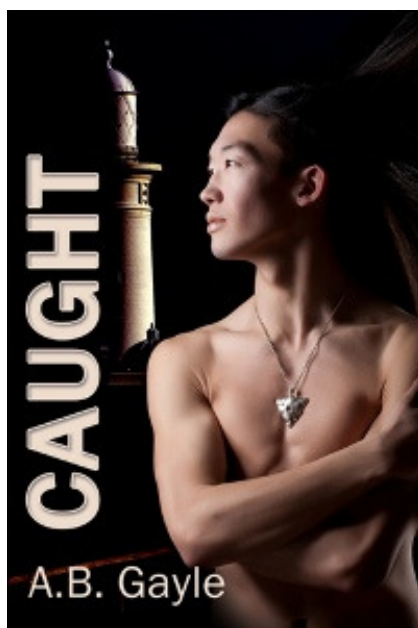
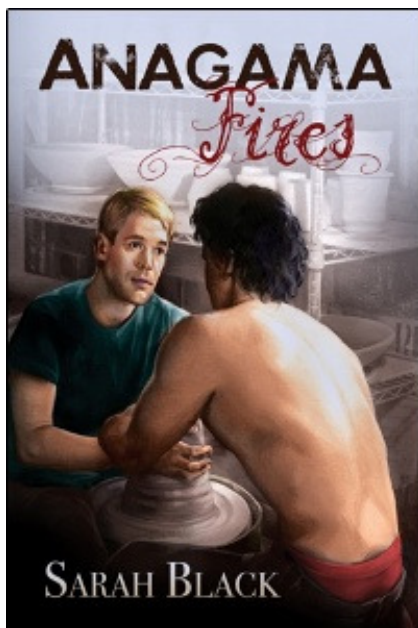
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