Christmas with Danny Fit Mang Lane

Fantasy and Fiction

KIT ALLEN moved out of his mother's house one week after he started his new workout regimen, two months after he got his new personal assistant at work, and six weeks before Christmas. He was thirty years old, and these events had more in common than first meets the eye—all except the Christmas.

Jesse, his new assistant, was a beautiful man, with hair the color of dark honey and sloe brown eyes. He keyboarded like the wind, understood the internet like a prodigy, ran interference when Kit was getting work done, and prodded him to get up out of his seat and move around when he'd done too much work and had to force himself to remember to breathe. He was constantly trying to anticipate Kit's needs, and since Kit didn't seem to need much, he was constantly trying to bring Kit things—coffee, water, a funny YouTube.com video he'd never seen—that Kit hadn't known he needed but apparently couldn't live without.

Something about Jesse made Kit supremely aware of the fact that he was forty pounds heavy and had never gotten laid.

It wasn't that Jesse *tried* to make Kit feel uncomfortable. In fact, just the opposite. Jesse went out of his way to be friendly, and since Kit had always been a shy, awkward sort of boy and then a reserved, awkward sort of man, overtures of friendship were foreign to him.

"Would you like me to get you coffee, Mr. Allen?"

"Uhm...." And suddenly another cup of coffee sounded both wonderful and frightening.

"How about some water? Water's good for you, you know."

"Uhm...." It was the first time in his life he'd ever felt that something good for him would actually seem good for him.

Jesse would offer to eat lunch with him when he worked at his desk, and Kit would freeze, absolutely stunned. Should he make conversation? Should he work on the tables and figures he'd stayed in his office to finish in the first place? Holy crap! How was he supposed to behave when Jesse sat and chatted to him about television and movies and....

Wait a minute.

"Yeah," Kit said in bemusement, "I thought David Tennant was the best Doctor Who. How could you not? But I think Matt Smith has a lot of potential—he's got this wise thing about him that makes him seem a little older, you know?"

Jesse's face lit up, and he looked a little surprised as well. "Absolutely—and I think Amelia Pond is adorable. Donna Tate seemed like a lot of fun too—probably less likely to try to get into my pants, which would be more comfortable. So tell me, do you like Torchwood too?"

As it turned out, both of them shared a deep and abiding love of science fiction television, starting with *Doctor Who* and moving on to *Torchwood*, *Being Human*, *Firefly*, *Dollhouse*, *Stargate* (SG-1, *Atlantis*, and *Universe!*), *Battlestar Galactica*, *Babylon 5*, *Warehouse 13*, *Eureka*, and even that most holy of holies, *Star Trek*, all five incarnations, including the only spin-off not to make it seven seasons, *Enterprise*. After that first week, lunch became less and less about doing work at his desk and more and more about talking about sci-fi with Jesse.

It was at the end of the second month that Kit saw Jesse with some of the other men from his building, playing basketball in the yard across the street from their accounting firm in the slanting November sun. He'd waved, and Jesse had waved back, but after a couple of months of working together—and eating lunch and yearning, at least on Kit's part—Kit was not quite sure if he was comfortable enough to go up and say anything.

"Hey, boss-man! Come join us!" Jesse called, his breath steaming in the sharp November air. Kit looked up, feeling helpless again. Jesse was wearing an old sleeveless T-shirt, and sweats, and tennis shoes with socks that did *not* go up to his knees, and he was casual and sweating, and the razor-gold sun glistened off his shoulders, and the muscles in his biceps looked firm and hard and defined and, well....

Kit was Kit. Short for Christopher. Had played the tuba in the band, but had nearly hyperventilated from carrying all that weight during the parade.

"Maybe next week!" he called desperately. "Got dinner plans!"

Well, sort of. His mother expected him home for dinner, but he didn't feel any compulsion, really, to make it there on time. He'd been dodging his mother's dinner table since high school she tended to cook with cheese, butter, and bacon, and Kit was fully aware that some of what he carried around on his ass came from that table and nowhere else. But he thought that maybe, with a week of preparation, he could find a way to play basketball and not feel like a marshmallow in a tracksuit. So he went to Borders and bought some workout videos and went home and introduced himself to Danny Fit.

Danny Fit was beautiful.

He spent that first evening in his room getting to know Danny as the fitness guru on the DVD took Kit through strength training, cardio, and finally (thank God!) ten minutes of yoga and cool-down.

Danny was tall, early fortyish, with toffee-brown hair and pebble-dark eyes and a blinding white smile in lean tanned cheeks. Danny had a long, lithe, perfectly trained body where every muscle popped out like an anatomy poster, except covered with golden smooth skin.

By the time Kit was done with the yoga video, he had such an aching erection that he brought himself off in his pants as he writhed on the yoga mat.

He hadn't masturbated since he was fifteen, when he realized he was jerking off to the jocks in his gym class instead of the pretty girls in French, and that his mother *must* be right—playing with himself was sick and wrong, and he shouldn't do it.

But since then, Kit had been to college. He knew what gay was, and he knew he was it, and he knew that he'd never settle down with a nice girl like his mother kept telling him to do before he moved out. His mother was older and ill and cranky. Nobody liked her. She had no friends. If he left her, she'd have no one. Kit had been unwilling to have the "gay" discussion with her, so he had simply sat on his sexuality, squashing it down with creampuffs in the morning and potatoes at night. He'd sat on it, and it had lain there, flat and uninteresting and pretty much playing dead. And then Jesse had looked at him with sloe eyes and said, "You know, David Tennant doesn't look like a llama at all."

And then Danny Fit had worn loose pants during a warm-up, and Kit had seen his junk flopping heavily under his shorts.

And now Kit's cock—which had mostly been used for taking a leak before that moment—woke up and screamed *I WANT! FEED ME ASSHOLE!* And Kit had given it a good handshake until it threw up.

As Kit lay facedown in a puddle of his own come, his vision fastened hungrily on the lean, fit man making Downward Dog look like a porn video, he realized two things.

One was that his body felt like it had been hit by a tractor. He was *really* out of shape.

The other was that he needed a sex life, even if it was an imaginary sex life with a guy who was probably straight. (At that point, he wasn't sure if he was imagining Danny or Jesse—but he didn't think it mattered.)

Then his mother started banging on the door. "Christopher! Christopher! I'm going to bed now! I need you to turn the television down! For chrissakes it's almost nine o'clock! What the hell are you listening to? I won't put up with no fornication videos, you know that, Christopher!"

Kit rolled over to his back and pushed himself heavily off the yoga mat, wiping his hand on the inside of his shorts. "Ma?"

"What?" The smell of tobacco wafted through the door. Oh yay—another Virginia Slims bit the dust.

"I'm moving out next week."

"I'll believe that when I see it! Don't be stupid, Christopher. You don't have anyone to take care of you! What the hell are you going to do in your own place?"

Kit thought about it and pushed up his meaty body. "Go on a diet and get a cat. Now go away, Ma. I've got to take a shower."

The next day was Saturday. By the end of the day he had a nice little house lined up, not too far from the accounting firm he worked at in downtown Sac. It was brick, in the thirty blocks (so, pretty damned nice, since he'd saved up a lovely fat down payment while living with his mother), had hardwood floors in the living room and two bedrooms, and green tile in the kitchen and bathroom. It had a small front yard and a backyard big enough for some hydrangeas and a cat. It had a one-car garage, central heat and air, and decorative wrought iron around the windows.

Kit figured he could be an aging gay man in there with considerably more personal space and comfort than he had in his mother's home.

And the only thing that smelled like cigarette smoke was him.

On Sunday, after surprising the hell out of a real estate broker—and thanking the gods that the previous owners had already moved and were waiting for a quick sale—he went shopping for some furniture. He bought nothing with flowers, nothing with a lever that reclined, and nothing in pastels. It was all deep colors—a dark-brown couch, a dark-burgundy loveseat, and a dark-navy stuffed chair, in corduroy, even though he was pretty sure a cat would shed all over it.

He didn't care. His furniture. His cat.

He tied it all together with a black throw rug with all the dark colors tumbling about the dark surface like blocks. He was

pleased with the results. He was particularly pleased that it looked like a man's furniture. His mother's constant bitching about "those girlie faggot boys, taking over the whole goddamned world" didn't seem to have rung true for him.

He got the furniture on sale, because it was three weeks before Thanksgiving, and he was mildly surprised—for once he didn't have to think about frozen turkey and potato buds. For once, he would have something to be thankful for. The quick sale of the house coincided with the furniture delivery—oh my God and holy crap. He would be moving in the Saturday before Thanksgiving.

The thought made him a little dizzy, and he flopped down on the showroom model of his newly purchased loveseat and sat there, just beaming, until he was pretty sure he made the salesgirl uncomfortable.

It didn't matter—he'd already put the money down. He was safe.

When he got home from all that, his mother asked him where he'd been.

"Buying a house and ordering furniture, Ma."

"Real fucking funny, Christopher. Seriously. The neighbor's dog's been yapping all fucking day—I need you to tell it to shut up."

"Tell it yourself, Ma."

"It doesn't listen to me."

"Neither do I. Excuse me, Ma. I want to work out before bed."

He'd worked out the night before—really worked out, not worked out and jerked off—and he felt like shit. His shoulders kept cramping, his legs kept tingling, and his stomach ached in odd ways from the yoga. But then, he'd felt like shit for so much of his life, he figured this was just a higher-quality shit.

This night he did cardio twice and skipped the strength training. The strength training made him sore, that was true, but that wasn't why he skipped it.

He skipped it because of the girl.

Danny had two girls, a sweet little girl in green leotards with red hair, and a dark-haired dynamo with a *big* smile and fan*tast*ic tits. The girl in the green leotards looked nice, like someone's mother or sister or best friend, and she helped Danny on the cardio video.

The girl with the dark hair and fan*tast*ic tits looked like she and Danny had been making out in the closet right before the strength-training video was shot. It was offensive. It made him not want to pull on the big green rubber band and stretch all sorts of painful things in his chest that really shouldn't be stretched.

Both those women should *know* that Danny was his!

So he skipped strength training and ran around in circles attached to a rubber band attached to his wall. It hurt like hell and made him blow like a busted car exhaust, but at least he didn't have to look at that bitch with the dark hair and know she'd had his man.

At the end of the yoga session (which he welcomed, breathing hard), he fell asleep on his yoga mat in full workout kit. It had been a helluva day.

THE next day, he could hardly pick himself up off the floor and get to the shower. And the floor was drafty—he'd managed to pull his coverlet off his bed and onto his body while he'd been sleeping, but he still had a stuffed nose and a clogged head at work that morning, and lunch with Jesse was just awkward.

"You got a cold how?"

"I dob wab bu talk aboub ib," he answered miserably.

Jesse sighed and said, "Okay, boss. Tell you what. You stay here at your desk, and I'll be back in half an hour with lunch."

"I'b nob thab hunwy," Kit replied. He should have gotten some cold medicine on the way to work. There was some in his mother's medicine cabinet, but somehow taking it just seemed to violate all the rules of self-emancipation.

Jesse patted him on the head, and Kit knew that his careful water-comb was probably a bit of a mess, but he didn't care. He found himself looking limpidly up at his assistant as though this pretty, dynamic person held the keys to the universe.

"Don't worry, baby. I'll get you something that'll work."

Kit nodded helplessly and put his head on his desk. He had his own office, but it was small, and certainly not big enough for a couch or a comfortable chair. His whole body ached anyway—what was a cramp in his neck from spending his lunch hour asleep?

Jesse was back in half an hour, and he felt a little bit better after the nap. Unlike Friday, which had been hard and bright with sunshine, this November day was sad with fog. Jesse came in with his honey-colored hair lank from the fog and his sloe eyes bright from the cold.

So. Not. Fair.

In fact, it made Kit want to crawl under his desk for the rest of the day.

But Jesse pulled out some sort of magical soup that was spicy enough for the smell to penetrate Kit's sinuses, and then he pulled out a cup of hot water and tea and some Theraflu, and in ten minutes or so, Kit felt almost human.

And his worship of Jesse had in no way diminished.

"God!" he said from a suddenly clear nose. "That was wonderful. What was it?"

Jesse preened. "Thai soup from La Bou. Pretty up there in calories, but nothing beats it when you're sick."

Kit looked stricken. "Calories. Oh shit. Calories. I should be counting them, shouldn't I? I started the workout, but I forgot the diet." Suddenly his time with Danny Fit seemed tainted, somehow, with this omission, as though he'd cheated on Danny with the big mayonnaise-covered hamburger he'd eaten after he shopped for furniture the day before.

Jesse looked at him, repressed curiosity radiating from every line of his fit body. "You started working out? When?"

Kit felt like a deer in the headlights. If he told Jesse about the workouts, he might have to tell him about moving out, and maybe about being gay, and all of it was just so embarrassing. He wanted Jesse to look at the new him—or at least the new him projected sometime after New Year's, the one with his own house and the smaller waistline and the cat.

But then, if he didn't tell Jesse, who would he tell? The lady at the counter of Barnes & Noble? It was true, they'd developed a rapport as he'd bought his sci-fi novels, but they weren't on a first-name basis. He could tell one of the other senior accountants, but those men all had families, and he wasn't sure they'd go for the new, gay Kit. (He wasn't sure if they liked the old, genderneutral Kit either, but, well, that one was at least safer.)

Maybe he'd tell part of it. He'd keep Danny a secret. And Ma. Or at least the parts of her he hadn't wanted friends to visit in high school (which sort of explained why he had no friends either).

"Friday," Kit said, aware that he'd sat there like a frog in the road while Jesse waited for an answer.

Jesse's lips quirked up, and he didn't look hurt at all. "I thought you had a dinner date Friday."

Kit flushed. At first he thought it was some sort of by-product of the cold and cold medicine, but as his eyes got round, and his mouth made a little O, he realized it was sheer fucking embarrassment.

"I'm not graceful," he muttered helplessly into Jesse's amused silence. "I didn't want to embarrass you." Oh, and *that* wasn't too much information?

Jesse's amusement went away. "It was just a pickup game, boss—no worries."

Kit shrugged and tried to smile it off. He dealt with the takeout trash in a distracted way and attempted to say something that would make it no big deal. "If the working out starts doing its job, maybe next time I'll take you up on it."

The grin on Jesse's face was blinding. It made dimples pop out. It made the sun shine through the fog. It made Kit's cock jump up and down like a horny Scottie dog yipping to be petted. Kit managed to keep all that inside, though, and simply sit through the grin like a mere mortal sat through the searing blast of heavenly grace. Jesse shrugged. "It's getting cold—probably our last game for a while. You've got time."

Kit managed a hopeful smile, and as he sat up straighter, that pinched nerve in his neck twinged and he grimaced.

"Ohmigod!" Jesse said it all as one word, like a college student, and Kit wondered how much younger the other man was. "What did you do to yourself?"

Fuck. "I fell asleep on the workout mat?"

The sound Jesse made then wasn't a laugh, really, or a snort, and if Kit had to classify it, he'd say it was a nonverbal exclamation point, with a question mark thrown in.

"For the love of.... Holy shit, boss—how long did you sleep there?"

Kit's neck was tied up in a little question mark, too, so he had an excuse for screwing his eyes shut when he answered. "All night. It's how I came down with the cold."

Jesse stood up and moved behind him, and then there was a heavenly warmth, and a pressure on his neck and on his shoulders. It stroked and kneaded insistently, and Kit sat up a little straighter and made an embarrassing purring sound in his throat.

"Feel good?" Jesse asked, massaging a little harder right... right...

"Nnnnhaaaahhaaa," Kit managed. Oh God. His cock ached but let it. Jesse was *touching him.* Suddenly Kit understood that college word. *Ohmigod ohmigod ohmigod ohmigod....*

Jesse chuckled a little and kept squeezing the muscles in his neck. He bent down then, and his breath tickled Kit's ear as he

spoke. "You should come work out at my gym," he said softly. "I swear, we'd never let you fall asleep on the yoga mat."

"Nnngg?" Oh good. A college degree and obviously some advanced communication skills.

"Promise?" Jesse said softly, and in spite of the warmth and the arousal and the *ohmigod human touch*, there was, as always, Kit's whole problem with Kit Allen.

"I don't know if this body is ready for prime time," he muttered, and Jesse chuffed softly in his ear.

"You let me know." But he didn't move. His hands kept moving, but the rest of Jesse stayed still, inappropriately, wonderfully close.

"Besides, I'm gonna be busy," Kit choked out, unable to stop himself. "I'm moving at the end of next week."

"Moving?" Jesse stayed close, and Kit managed to nod. Those wonderful hands—and the cold medicine, and the craptastical night's sleep—were beginning to take their toll all over again. Kit felt another nap coming on.

"Out of my mother's house and into my own." Kit was so tired. His head dropped, and he put his arms up on the desk, disregarding the crumbs from lunch, and rested it there. He couldn't remember feeling so... so... so *safe* in his entire life.

"Wow," Jesse breathed. "When did you decide to do that?"

"I should wake up," he mumbled. Kit was almost asleep, and lunch hour was over, and that was easier to say than *When I saw you play basketball and wanted to touch you.*

"I'll watch the door for you while you nap some more. A little more sleep and you'll be all better." The words were real. Kit was

pretty sure the words were real-but he must have imagined the kiss in his hair.

Age and Inexperience

THEY didn't talk about the backrub.

Kit was unsure how to bring it up.

Hey, I know I'm an overweight loser who still lives with his mother, but, uhm, you touched me, and I'm probably making a big deal out of this because I haven't been touched since I was, like, in day care, but I'm thinking that it was a special, very awesome sort of touch, but you're beautiful, and you bring me soup, and you love the one thing that's kept me sane as a thirty-year-old virgin, and I can't help wondering if maybe you're not straight and maybe, just maybe, you like me a little.

And please don't sue me for sexual harassment.

That last line was the kicker right there.

Kit was pretty sure that if Jesse was actually Jessie-shortfor-Jessica, he might be able to bumble his way through a *your job does not depend on this, I swear* come-on. It would suck, and Jessie-short-for-Jessica would probably quit out of sheer embarrassment, but he could do it.

But coming on to a male assistant, one he'd done all but bare his heart to? Uhm, no.

He slept for an hour that day, and when he woke up, he rubbed his face, reflected that, hot damn! Did he feel better!, brushed the crumbs off his desk, and went back to work. Jesse left before he did (per usual) with not much more than a wave and a "Hope you feel better, boss!" and Kit didn't have much of a chance to do more than wave back and say "Thank you!" before he disappeared down the sterile beige hallway.

The next day, it had been business as usual—he'd tried to insist that he pay for both their lunches, since Jesse had sprung the day before, but Jesse had simply shaken his head and smiled.

"No-and we're not eating out. Here. I brought us something."

He'd proceeded to produce two chicken sandwiches—the kind made with chicken breasts and tomatoes and lettuce and pickles, on plain old wheat bread—and Kit had almost wept.

"These are really good!"

"Yeah—and they're pretty low-cal. The chicken's easy to cook...." And he'd proceeded to write the recipe down for Kit.

Kit said, "Oh crap! I have to buy pots and pans and shit!"

Jesse smiled a little. "That didn't occur to you until just now?"

Kit's blush covered his entire body. He was going to have to explain this now, or at least part of it. "I'm having all my furniture delivered new. All I have to move is my clothes and some other stuff. It'll probably fit in my car. I hadn't thought about cooking stuff—I guess I should have."

"Okay—man, I haven't wanted to pry, but that's just... uhm...."

The blush got worse. Jesse was furrowing his perfect brow at him, and Kit could only stammer through the rest.

"She's not a nice person, but... my dad walked out on us, and she didn't have anybody. I just"—*edit edit*—"reached a point

where I needed my own life." He shrugged. "I've got plenty in savings—I just...." Don't know how normal people live. Never had enough imagination to think about a real life on my own. Was asleep, like a giant squishy possum until you looked at me with a basketball under your arm, and I woke up thinking I had to be a better man.

"I just needed to get my grown-up on, I guess."

Jesse smiled, and it was brilliant. "My home life sucked too. You stuck around, you know, to make it better. That's nice. I bailed. I've been living in shitty apartments since I graduated from high school. That's why the assistant job—tech school got me out quicker, and I wanted to, you know, have a *life* and not just be in school."

Kit blanched. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-three," Jesse said through a full mouth, and Kit couldn't decide whether to blow out a sigh of relief or not. "I worked for another firm for a couple of years but...." He shrugged as he let the sentence trail off. "They moved you from person to person, you know? Sort of assistant-by-slut, right? And I had enough moving as a kid. I just wanted to find a good boss, someone I could work for and have fun with and...."

Inexplicably, Jesse blushed.

Kit blinked, transfixed, but Jesse was looking down at the desk and couldn't see how that one moment of embarrassment started a terrible hot/cold chain reaction of hope in Kit's chest, like a BENGAY (or Jesse-might-be-gay) poultice around his heart.

"I just wanted to make a connection, you know?" Jesse said at last, looking up, and Kit nodded, in that moment completely understanding. Their eyes met and caught, and Kit had some more trouble breathing. Christ—this was a kid, and Kit didn't even know if he was gay.

When he heard his own voice, he thought someone might have taken over his body.

"I need to go shopping for cooking stuff this week, but I wanted to go to a movie on Friday. Anything good out?"

The smile that bloomed across Jesse's face made Kit glad he'd gotten up that morning. He'd been tempted to call in sick and nurse his aching muscles, and maybe watch Danny Fit videos until his cock was sore, but he'd decided that was too pathetic, even for him.

"The Fifth Element is playing at the UA—Friday night only."

Kit's own smile was suddenly not hesitant at all. "Best. Movie. Ever."

Jesse shook his head, and his smile turned subtler and almost sly. "Serenity. That was the Best. Movie. Ever."

The intimate and thrilling moment was over, and they were back talking about science fiction, and Kit was relieved. They would go to a movie as friends. They both seemed to need friends—it would be good. Kit could have Jesse as a friend and Danny Fit as a lover. The mathematical ease of that formula made Kit feel good all day.

It wasn't until Jesse was leaving that Kit realized people weren't necessarily as neat and tidy as the figures he used to make his living.

"Uhm, boss?"

Kit looked up from his computer, and Jesse—who always seemed so natural and graceful—was actually fidgeting at the door. "Yeah?"

"Uhm, what do I call you? I mean, it's not the fifth grade you're not my teacher. But all I know you as is Mr. Allen. You go by Chris? Christopher? Topher?"

"Topher?" Were there people actually named Topher?

"There's an actor that goes by that.... No, seriously. What do I call you?"

He'd die—literally shrivel up and die like a salted slug if this beautiful young man ever called him "Christopher" in the same irritating smoker's-gravel twang his mother used. "Kit," he said. He didn't know how not to make his voice go soft.

"Your friends call you Kit?"

His colleagues called him Chris. "My dad, uhm, called me Kit, before he took off." His dad had been a good guy, really, but not much could have stood up to that determined, seething nerve bundle of sourness and despair that was currently sucking down Virginia Slims courtesy of her alimony check.

Jesse just stood there for a minute, those big brown eyes wide and limpid, and his mouth set in a half-smile. "Kit," he said after a moment. "See you tomorrow, Kit."

Kit nodded, not sure when his mouth had gone so dry. "See you tomorrow."

That night he made it through forty-five minutes of workout without hyperventilating or falling asleep on the floor. He even managed to take a shower and start going through his clothes for the move. He'd ordered a dresser and a bed from Sears—he could leave his mother the stuff in his room (old and battered anyway) so she could have a guest room, and he could masturbate in a bed that didn't reek of his own childhood.

While he was packing, his mother wandered by. She was wearing one of those big, all-purpose dresses and flip-flops, with a scarf over her brightly dyed platinum hair. He'd seen a variation of this outfit every day of his life, except a couple of blissful weeks of band camp that his father had paid for.

"What in the hell are you doing?"

"Packing to leave. I told you-I'm moving out on Saturday."

"You're moving out the week before Thanksgiving? What kind of bastard does that?"

"I can still come by for dinner, Ma," he placated. The thought gave him the hives.

"Don't fucking bother. What? I support you for thirty years, and you just bail on me? Who's going to take me to the market? Who's going to take me to church? Don't you have any fucking courtesy?"

Kit stopped packing and thought about it honestly. "I don't know, Ma. You're the only person I see, and you're not exactly a stellar example."

His mother blinked at him through poisonous green eyes. Kit had green eyes too—but they weren't that bright. He thought the green might have been a contact.

"What the hell does that mean?"

Kit sighed and walked over to close his door. "It means that if you wanted me to take you to church or to the market, all you had to do was ask me for my new phone number and pick up the phone. Since you'd rather bitch at me for being ungrateful, I'll take that as a no."

The door snicked shut (he didn't slam it—and was very proud of himself for that) and Kit was left alone, in what used to be a claustrophobic room. It was the secondary room of the house, with a bed, a bookshelf, and an old television, the kind with the regular screen that weighed two and a half million pounds.

Now, with his clothes folded and put in suitcases and his books in boxes around him and his posters (including a *Serenity* poster signed by Nathan Fillion that he'd had framed) down and in a neat stack in the corner, he felt a curious sense of freedom. The walls were all white—it was like he could stand on the bed and leap and fall into the sky and never land.

Then he thought of painting the walls of his new house (he drove by it every night, opened the door and walked into the echoing space of it, just to dream of what it would look like when all the furniture was delivered) and he thought landing might be very nice too.

When he slid into his bed that night, all showered and clean, thinking of good things for the future, he started thinking about Danny Fit.

He imagined his body, slimmer, fitter, his muscles defined, and his chest waxed (now that he was thirty, he'd started growing a small sized chest pelt, right between what he was hoping would someday be pectorals but were now man boobs). He imagined Danny climbing in next to him, and the way that perfect body would feel. Danny looked to be about forty—Danny would know what he was doing. He would tell Kit all of the mysterious things about sex with a man that Kit didn't seem to be able to get off the internet, and he would show Kit what to do to make things feel good. Kit allowed himself to wonder what it would be like to run his hands down another man's firm, taut ass and grasp a hard (thick, long) cock in his hand. He was sure Danny's mouth would be soft against his, and Danny's hands would be hard, and his breath would be minty fresh.

He couldn't imagine much after that. He'd never experienced the giddy feeling of skin against skin; he could only rub his own body—his padded ribs, soft stomach, tender nipples—but it was enough. He thought that Danny's mouth might be hot and wet on his cock, and the thought alone was enough to make it start oozing pre-come. He slid his hand under his shorts and started playing with his new favorite toy. His fist tightened on it, and his thumb rubbed the head while he thought of that toffee-dark head bobbing up and down while the lean hands touched him voluntarily.

And then he thought of nothing, saw nothing, just fell into the white-blindness of orgasm like he'd fallen into the freedom of his four white walls.

A few minutes later, after washing up quietly, he was back in bed and trying to imagine laying in someone's arms, and if that would be like seeing the walls painted in his new house—would it make being gay real? Would it make sex real, to touch someone without the one specific goal? What was touching like, really, when sex was out of the way (temporarily)?

It was a lovely thing to daydream about, and he tried to picture Danny's face as he pillowed that dark head on Kit's shoulder and rubbed his chest.

What he saw instead, just as he dropped off to sleep, was Jesse's young, narrowly pretty face with the big dark eyes and the fall of honey-colored hair, and the expression he had of being desperately eager to please.

JESSE came shopping with him for pots and pans. Kit didn't expect him to, and almost canceled the trip to the movies altogether.

Jesse left at his usual time that Friday, with a "Meet you there at eight, okay?" and Kit agreed, and left shortly after Jesse. When he got outside, Jesse was leaning against the wall, leaning against the shiny granite of the outer wall and smoking casually in the twilight.

Kit's heart completely fell to his knees.

Jesse looked at him—that pleasant, eager-to-please expression on his face. "You're leaving early? I thought you usually stayed an hour."

Oh God. Calm down. He's not your mother. This is a stupid thing to get upset over.

"Yeah," Kit said, trying hard to keep his face neutral. This man had been nothing but nice to him—treating him like a pariah over one bad habit was not something a good person would do. "I thought I'd go shopping first. You smoke?"

Jesse grimaced, and his look at Kit was full of sloe-eyed contrition. "Yeah—old bad-boy habits die hard." He exhaled then, ground out the butt in the sand tray outside the building, and fell in step next to Kit.

For some reason, not *seeing* Jesse smoking made it easier to bear. It was like the filthy, disgusting, embarrassing reek of his

mother's tobacco habit disappeared if Kit could only smell the smoke in his own clothes.

"You were a bad boy?" he asked, finding that hard to believe.

Jesse shrugged, tucking his hands in the pockets of his denim jacket. It was chilly—Kit had brought a flannel lined camp jacket, which was probably not what the other accountants wore, but he liked it. Jesse had a denim jacket without gloves or a scarf, and Kit looked at him worriedly. He was going to get sick if he didn't stay warm.

"I was," Jesse confirmed, oblivious to Kit's contrary attack of revulsion and worry.

"What makes you a bad boy?" Kit was honestly curious. He had so little experience being bad himself, he really wanted to know.

Jesse gave him a sly, slanting look from under his eyelashes. Kit was a few inches taller than the younger man, and the expression made him extraordinarily alluring.

"I snuck alcohol in my water bottle," Jesse said airily. "Snuck cigarettes in the bathroom. Made out under the bleachers when I should have been in English. Lots of stuff in a high school for bad boys to do, you know."

Kit's heart tripped over itself. He sounded flirty—and young.

"Who'd you make out with?" *Great, Kit. Sly.* They were walking toward the parking building on the corner of J Street, and Jesse seemed intent on staying with him, so he assumed the guy (boy—he was a boy, right?) had parked there too.

Jesse's grin turned coy. "Anybody who'd make out back. Soccer players, cheerleaders, theatre majors, band kids—I was sort of a man whore back then... but since I mostly stopped at third base, it was all fun."

Oh shit. All those answers were gender neutral! And wait wasn't third base oral? How many blowjobs had he given? Gotten? From whom?

They started walking up the parking garage and got into the elevator together. Jesse asked him what his high school had been like, and while he was fumbling an explanation of why the fucking Sousaphone was *not* sexy, the door opened, and they both got out and headed for Kit's little blue Honda Hybrid.

They got there, and Jesse went to the passenger side, grinned impishly, and said, "So, boss. Where are we going?"

Kit gaped at him, completely caught off guard. He was a bad boy? He smoked? Kit had a fleeting moment of disdain—*Danny* wouldn't do any of these things. *Danny* kept his lungs and his nose clean, and, in his dreams at least, *Danny* was 100 percent hella-fucking-gay. The silence grew awkward, and Jesse looked away, his hurt unmistakable.

"I.... You know, since we're going to the movie and everything. Never mind. I didn't realize you had other plans before...."

"Shopping!" Kit said quickly. Jesse's hurt was terrifying. The idea that Kit could wipe the easy smile off that pretty face completely boggled him. "We're going shopping for cookware."

Jesse turned one of those shining grins toward him, and Kit smiled back gamely. He'd just ask nicely for Jesse not to smoke in the car. TURNS out, Jesse didn't ask, and his help with the cookware thing was invaluable.

"What's that called again?" Kit asked. It was a pan with a slotted cover. All he really knew was that it was shiny.

"A broiler pan." Jesse was holding back a smirk, and Kit realized he must seem pretty silly to someone who'd been cooking on his own for five years.

Kit looked at the thing doubtfully, but when Jesse added, "It's so you can cook meat without grease," Kit dropped it into the basket so quickly it clattered, and both of them hunched their shoulders and grimaced as the echoes died down through the expensive cookware store in the K-Street Mall. The basket already weighed a ton, and Kit wondered if he did a couple bicep curls with the thing, would it help make up for the fact that he wasn't going to work out that night.

He must have grunted, because Jesse said, "Oh Jesus—here, give it to me and go look at plates and stuff. You'll need a place setting for eight, at the least...."

"I don't know eight other people!" Kit protested, not realizing how pathetic that sounded until it came out.

"Yeah, but I know at least three, so plan on that!" Jesse shot back with good humor as he trotted the basket up to the front so they didn't have to carry it.

Kit had a fantasy, then, as he looked sightlessly at seven different, brightly colored sets of stoneware. Him and Jesse, sitting at the kitchen table he'd just ordered, having cooked a dinner that was healthy and good, with an open bottle of wine and Jesse's asof-yet faceless friends. A part of him tried not to choke on the sap in this vision, but most of him was swooning at the perfection of it. It was... it was like his fantasies of Danny Fit, going down on him. It was grown-up and happy, except, unlike Danny Fit, this one seemed as close as the man (kid) chatting up the sweet young thing at the cash register.

The fantasy changed, and now it was Jesse and the sweet young thing, over for dinner, and Kit's misty vision changed, and he was their lonely gay friend with the cat.

He sighed and settled on the stoneware in the different dark colors—burgundy, navy, forest, and earth. Well, at least he was in his own home and Jesse had helped him cook.

Jesse came up behind him and bumped shoulders. "So, boss—you got something in mind? Cause I want to get to the theatre in time to buy popcorn!"

Kit realized his stomach was grumbling too. "Crap," he muttered. "I was going to stop and get something to eat."

"Popcorn," Jesse said decisively. "You can eat healthy any other time, but movies demand popcorn. Now let's go ring this up and schlep it to the car."

"Schlep?"

"Yeah, schlep. My history teacher used to say it all the time. Great word. Now come on."

Jesse made friendly with the checkout girl, and Kit had to admit she was pretty cute. He had a friend now—a friend with a past, sort of, and even Kit knew that was more fun to deal with in a friend than a lover.

Again, it was all mathematical in its simplicity. He could have his grown-up cake, his friends, his wine, his something-not-fried dinner, and he could have Danny Fit give him imaginary blowjobs on a regular basis. It was good. Nobody would get hurt, and Jesse would be happy. He liked that.

Of course, he would have liked the new and improved body he had planned even more—especially when he and Jesse each took an equal share of the pots, pans, and stoneware to "schlep" back to the car.

"Oh God," he panted. "I've got to stick to that workout thing!"

"How's that going?"

Kit gave him a sour look. He sounded revoltingly perky.

"Every night!" Every night Kit turned on the DVD, and Danny Fit made him hurt. Then he jumped in the shower, climbed under the covers, and Danny made him hurt so good.

Jesse gave him one of those sideways looks again, and if Kit wasn't sweating and out of breath already, the look alone would have done it.

"It's showing, trust me."

Kit almost walked into the concrete pole at the parking garage, and Jesse laughed good-naturedly while he tried to orient himself. He was too embarrassed after that to speak until they got to the car.

But then they were heading for the movie theatre, and that was all good. Popcorn, sodas, talking about how Luc Besson must have had a very active knight-in-shining-armor complex as a child—and *The Fifth Element*? Enough said.

Or it should have been, but they kept talking—just like they talked at work, except longer. They talked through coffee and through the ride in the darkened city to Jesse's car. They talked in the car for a while, in the dark, and Kit could study Jesse's features—could drink in his expressions, the way he tilted his head, the animation that took over his eyes when he was talking about science fiction and computer games and World of Warcraft and the things he loved.

At one point, as the conversation finally wound down, Jesse gave him one of those sideways looks. "So, what are you doing for Thanksgiving?"

Kit smiled a little. "Unpacking. Learning how to cook a little tiny turkey. Thinking about getting a cat for Christmas. Why?"

Jesse looked away. "I'm actually visiting the evil ex."

"The evil ex?" *Ex-what? Ex-boyfriend? Ex-girlfriend? Ex-cat or ex-turkey? Jesus, Jesse—can I buy a pronoun?*

"Yeah... a cheating slut bag, if ever there was one—but the slut bag's got a little sister who's sick."

Seriously, Jesse. A pronoun. Would it fucking kill you? "How sick?" Kit asked instead.

Jesse shrugged and looked away. "Leukemia sick. Pat's a bad person, but Emmy—she's the best. Odds are good she'll get better, you know? But she asked me to come visit, and as much as I hate home, I'll go."

"Where's home?"

"Truckee."

Kit whistled. Truckee was a small town/area between Sacramento and Tahoe—it was a long drive and an even longer culture gap. "Hope you have your cold-weather gear." It was already snowing in Truckee. Truckee was, in fact, where all the news people went during ski season to tell you how cold it was and how impossible the snow was to get through. It was like the last stop between where things got shitty and things got too shitty to drive.

"Yeah," Jesse sighed, looking out the window. "In more ways than one."

"You staying with your parents?" Jesse had mentioned them briefly—"mom and step-fuckhead du jour" being his exact words.

Jesse shuddered. "Hell no. Emmy asked her parents to put me up—they've always loved me, so I get the couch."

Kit couldn't help it. He put a hand on Jesse's shoulder, just to sort of take up some of the melancholy he saw there. "Sounds dire."

Jesse turned to him with a suddenly brilliant smile. "It's all good. I can tell them I've got a new job, and a new friend—and he's a little bit weird, but, you know, so am I. It'll be fine."

Kit dropped his hand and ducked his head a little, embarrassed and pleased. For a moment, he forgot all about his private arrangement with Danny Fit and concentrated on squashing that little zing that thrilled under his skin at the idea that Jesse thought he was worth mentioning.

The zing traveled straight to his groin, and all the social easiness that he'd had for the last few hours started gasping for breath as all his blood rushed to his cock.

So much for squashing a damned thing.

The silence stretched between them, and Kit looked up, realizing it was his turn to say something. "I hope you enjoy your visit." The answer scored zero points for originality, interest, or even relevance. He was going to see a little girl sick with cancer how much fun could Jesse have?

Jesse's mouth quirked, wry and somehow disappointed. "Well, I'll see you at work before then. I hope you enjoy your move." He'd moved a little, leaned forward, maybe to see Kit's expression in the dark.

Kit nodded and swallowed. The swallow didn't take, because his mouth felt like a sandbox, and he had to try again. He found that his smile, though, was incredibly sincere.

"I've been looking forward to *that* for most of my entire life!" He managed to say fervently. Jesse laughed, and the strange, awkward moment was broken.

"See you Monday!" he called, getting out of the car, and Kit waved and watched him unlock and start his little yellow Corolla.

Suddenly work on Monday sounded even more fun than getting out of his mother's house on the weekend.

Full and Fmpty

AS IT turned out, moving out of his mother's house was a lot simpler than living with her had ever been.

She sat on the couch and smoked in silence, studying the shopping channel while Kit loaded up his car with his clothes, his posters, his books, DVDs, and music. At the very end, he was hefting the television down the stairs, and she snapped, "That's mine, moron."

Kit stopped and put the set down. "Dad gave it to me when I turned sixteen." Dad had been good on gifts and college tuition—not so good on cards or phone calls. Kit consoled himself with the thought that guilt money from Dad and guilt imprisonment from Ma allowed him to skip the crappy college apartment stage and go directly to the dream house.

"Bullshit. I let you have it when he left it on the stoop."

Happy Birthday, Kit had been Sharpied on the box. They were lucky it hadn't been stolen before Kit got home from school.

But it wasn't worth fighting about. Kit was minutes from freedom. He took two steps up and put the television on the landing. He'd buy a smaller flat screen for his bedroom on the way to his new home.

He got to the bottom of the stairs and looked at his mother, who refused to look at him. He was tired already—but not, he hoped, as tired as he would have been three weeks earlier, before he'd met Danny Fit.

"I'm cooking on Thanksgiving, Ma. I could bring you something. You could come over—"

"Don't bother. You're going to leave me here alone?"

"You don't like me to talk when you're watching television anyway." It was the truth. And the television was always on.

"Don't be a smartass. Don't you care about me at all?" Her voice broke a little, and he realized she was actually hurt a little by his leaving. He decided he owed her the truth—she was manipulative, and not a nice person, but she was his mother.

"I'm gay, Ma. I'm moving out before you kick me out, because I'm tired of not having a life." He turned away then, so he didn't have to see her process this and didn't have to see her revulsion when it finally sank in. "Give me a call if you want to get together for Thanksgiving, okay?"

The door closed on absolute stunned silence.

He got to the little house right before the movers came. He had a chance to open the doors, to carry in his stuff and put it in the corner by where the bed would go. (He'd ordered a bed from Sears, along with the washer and dryer and refrigerator—all of it was due today. It was actually pretty wonderful—all the fun of moving in, none of the stress of getting the stuff in and out of trucks. Kit thought seriously about never moving out of this perfect little house.)

The movers arrived, and suddenly Kit was ass deep in people ripping off plastic covers from pristine furniture. Within two hours of chaos and big trucks in front of his tiny house, he had a house that looked like a showroom and a shopping list as long as his forearm.

After a trip to Lowe's, a trip to Sears, and a trip to Target, and a trip to the grocery store, he had a bunch of bags in his kitchen, some groceries in the fridge, a new small television in each bedroom as well as the giant plasma one he'd had delivered, and no energy at all to do anything else.

He hooked up the small television to the new cable box, took a shower, realized that he had to go back to Target for towels, and used an old T-shirt instead. He fell asleep on a brand-new mattress and brand-new blue flannel sheets, with his old desk lamp still on and the television playing a *Star Wars* marathon.

He had never been happier.

The next day he went to the store for what he hoped was the last time for at least a week. The sheer bulk of things he needed to survive was astounding: toaster, microwave oven, shampoo, liquid soap, hand soap, dish soap, clothes soap, toilet soap and toilet brushes—all of it came from someplace. He sighed when he had the last grocery bag unpacked, then called his mother's house and left a message.

"Ma, just so fair's fair, I wanted to say thank you for all the stuff you bought to make things run smooth. I appreciate that now. Thank you."

She didn't call him back, but then, the message was more for his conscience than because he thought she would. At five o'clock at night, when the last razor-edged shaft of light was shattered by the darkness, he had, for the most part, the home of his dreams.

It was really, really quiet in there.

He had a spare bedroom, and he'd bought a rubberized carpet for it and set up his small television on a shelf in there, and suddenly he had all the room in the world to work out, and not just a yoga mat. The cardio left him breathless, the strength part reminded him that he'd been unusually active, and the yoga relaxed all those tight muscles, but none of it, surprisingly, made him horny.

He showered, set up his computer and computer desk in a corner of the living room, and then started dinner. At Jesse's urging, he'd bought a cookbook, and tonight, it was mushrooms and onions cooked in chicken broth on top of a baked potato—no butter—with a breast of broiled chicken and a small salad.

It wasn't bad.

He went to bed early, thinking of all he'd have to tell Jesse at lunch.

IT WAS the telling that made it worth it. Jesse laughed—*a lot* when Kit recounted the conversation the movers had about the couches. ("I never realized that 'fuck' was a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, and article!") He giggled when Kit told him about the six zillion shopping trips. ("You know, it didn't occur to me until the next day that I could have gotten *all* that shit at Target!") And he was gratifyingly supportive about the cooking. ("Bagels and low-fat cream cheese, tomatoes, salad, canned vegetables. It's weird how much shit I *didn't* know a grocery store had in it until I shopped with a cookbook in my hand.") They finished lunch (Kit brought it this time—chicken breast on wheat with apple slices and two yogurts for dessert) and Kit said, "So, when are you leaving for Truckee?"

Jesse sighed. "Wednesday afternoon. I hope it's okay if I leave early."

"No worries. I'll probably be the only one in the office anyway—everyone else sort of just doesn't show up. You could take the morning off if you wanted to. I'm good."

Jesse gnawed on his lower lip, the gesture making him look charmingly (terrifyingly) young. "You know, I hate to think of you all alone during Thanksgiving. I've.... Even when I moved out, I always had people to eat with."

Kit colored. He must have seemed so pathetic—it was embarrassing. He stood up to get rid of the lunch mess so he didn't have to look Jesse in the eyes. "Are you kidding? Thanksgiving with*out* Ma? It'll be the first time I have something to be thankful for." He stopped for a moment and then added, "Besides my new assistant, of course," with complete candor, even if he couldn't look at Jesse when he said it.

"I'm a 'thankful'?" Jesse asked, and Kit managed to get a glimpse of dimples and bright brown eyes before he concentrated fiercely on the hand sanitizer on his desk.

"Best friend I ever had," Kit said, appalled at his own truthfulness. Oh God. Better say it now, so Jesse could run off and sleep with his ex-whatever in Truckee and giggle over his weird boss.

"Nice," Jesse said, nodding thoughtfully. "I'm honored." There was a silence, and then Jesse stood apologetically. "Time to get

back to work. Can't keep my crappy apartment without my crappy paycheck, right?"

Kit imagined that Jesse's "crappy" apartment looked like it had been lived in, probably had old furniture, with real dents in the walls and scuffs on the floor, and a haphazard mess in the bedroom. There had probably been sex in Jesse's crappy apartment, the kind that involved two people, and probably laughter as well.

"I'll bet your crappy apartment is fun place to be," Kit said a little wistfully.

Jesse stopped at the doorway, and the look in his eyes was wise and old. "Anyplace can be fun, Kit, when you're not alone there."

"Yeah." Kit tried hard not to sigh, and then remembered the other part of his plan and brightened. "I'm going to get a cat."

"Can I help you look? I like animals—I just never have apartments where they can stay."

The strangely empty hollow in Kit's chest suddenly warmed and filled, and he knew his smile gave too much away, but he couldn't make himself care. "That would be awesome. Before Thanksgiving or after?"

"After," Jesse said regretfully. "I've got packing and cleaning tomorrow night, and my bestest bestie is in town tonight." Kit must have looked puzzled. "My best friend from high school," Jesse clarified. His expression softened, got dreamy. "I wouldn't have survived high school without her. Anyway, I promised her a night of talking and a crash on the couch, so if you can wait until Saturday? PetSmart has adoptions on Saturday—I'll meet you at your place, if you give me the address, and we can go then!" It was a date, one that made the rest of Kit's day bearable, especially when he went home to his empty house.

He got used to the empty-house noises, though. He cut cardio out of his workout program and walked around the neighborhood Monday and Tuesday, enjoying seeing the other people around him, the happy families, the places where kids played in the yard and adults had porch swings or benches to sit on. The neighborhood was nice—but not too nice. You could still see people, unlike the really pricey places where they all huddled inside or "went somewhere" for recreation. He waved at the guy who lived next door as he helped his daughter on a bicycle, and the guy waved back. He went home, did his workout, fixed his dinner, watched some sci-fi, and surfed his computer. It was a lot like living with Ma, except....

Better.

It was still a lonely existence, he figured as he walked in to work Wednesday, but it was his, and that made it better. (He'd also managed about six loads of laundry and some dry-cleaning. His clothes already smelled less like tobacco. He tried to tell himself that this was yet another reason to wish that Pat was short for Patricia, but it sounded hollow, even in his own head.)

To his surprise, Jesse was at work, waiting for him.

He was dressed casually—no slacks and button-down work shirt, but jeans and a sweater, and his hair, instead of being carefully blow-dried back, was gelled and a little spiky. Kit literally found it hard to talk for a moment. God. Just... God. He was beautiful. He was so beautiful. For a moment, Kit knew his eyes got bright and shiny. He was beautiful, and Kit was... Kit. Even if he lost a zillion pounds, he had sandy hair, muddy greenish eyes, and an unlovely rectangle of a face. He could never have Jesse, even if Jesse were gay, even if Jesse stopped smoking, even if... even if....

"Kit?" Jesse said softly, and Kit took a breath. Spots were flooding his vision, so he must not have done that in a while. He took another one.

"I didn't expect to see you today," he said, trying to be bright and breezy. Oh God. He was so fucking bad at bright and breezy.

"I wanted to say bye on my way out of town."

Kit couldn't look at him. He made a business out of walking past Jesse to take off his jacket, then hang it on the hook inside his office. "That's nice of you," he said, meaning it, but unable to make eye contact. "It is. I mean, I know I probably seem sort of sad, by myself on the holiday, but I'll be fine. You never told me about your time with your friend the other night. You'll have to fill me in when you get back. Saturday, right? You said you'd be back by...."

Oh God. He was babbling, and he'd taken off his jacket and put down his briefcase and booted his computer and arranged his pencils, and he didn't have anything else to do to mask the fact that seeing Jesse right now completely unhinged him. Jesse was so beautiful, bad boy in high school (and that was actually starting to be a turn-on) or not.

"Saturday," Jesse said from right next to his chair.

Kit was so startled that he gasped and flipped the pencil right off the desk.

"Here. I'll get it." Jesse's voice was very gentle. He knelt down and stood halfway up, eye level with Kit. Their eyes connected, and Jesse straightened but kept one hand on the back of Kit's chair and the other on the desk, so that he was leaning over, and Kit was looking up at him, flustered and helpless.

"I'm looking forward to Saturday," Jesse said softly. "I really want to see your new dream house."

"It's a little lonely," Kit confessed, embarrassed.

"Well, we'll make it not so lonely."

Jesse was leaning into him, close enough for Kit to tell he didn't use aftershave, and his soap was subtle and clean. His eyes gleamed with an intent that Kit had never seen and could barely recognize. "Jesse?"

Jesse's mouth was a precious little bee sting of a pout, and he quirked up one end of it. "Yeah?"

"What's 'Pat' short for?"

The quirk became a full-blown grin. "Patrick."

Kit's mouth made a soft little O, and Jesse's grin disappeared, and then their lips were touching, and it was.... Oh God. Jesse took advantage of his complete and total bemusement and invaded with his tongue, and he tasted... like coffee, faintly of cigarettes, but not enough to matter. He just.... He tasted like human contact and warmth, and that ever-present laughter. He tasted of sweetness. Jesse was the boy (man) who made Kit's days sweet, and he tasted just exactly like that.

Kit was breathing hard when Jesse pulled back from the kiss, and his body felt like the Fourth of July, without the heat, stickiness, and smell of sulfur.

"I'll see you Saturday," Jesse said softly, kissing his forehead.

"Sbulahbhay." Oh God. Kit's brain had done it. It had scrambled itself and would never be useful again.

"Yeah. Saturday." He kissed Kit again, quick and hard, and then stood up and flashed that killer, *let's suck Kit right down the rabbit hole again* grin, and turned around and left.

Kit stared after him for what must have been half an hour before he realized that he was never going to get any work done at all, and that maybe he'd have a better day if he either went home and masturbated repeatedly or went shopping for his small Thanksgiving dinner and caught a movie.

He went for option B, mostly so the anticipation of option A could grow painful and delicious for the rest of the day.

While he was shopping, he saw a flier for the local soup kitchen, asking for volunteers and supplies. That night, after getting a small, fresh turkey, potatoes, greens, a box of Stove Top, and a fresh box of bakery cookies (instead of pie), he also threw in half the canned-good section of his local grocery store. After he got home, worked out, and got ready for bed, he took a moment to actually think about the kiss in his office.

It had been... soft. That was his first thought, and he savored it. Jesse, whose ex was Patrick and not Patricia, had kissed him, and it had been soft. It had just been lips and tongue and the taste of Jesse's smile, and he'd come by just especially to tell Kit bye and to... to kiss him.

He found the thought was too wonderful even to masturbate to. In fact, lying there, thinking about all the years he could have been kissing but hadn't been, it made him want to cry. Then he thought that maybe it was worth it, not kissing anybody, just so Jesse could be his first kiss, and then he really did cry.

He was glad nobody got to see him, weeping in the dark, mourning a youth spent in a cocoon of fantasy and science fiction

and smothered in the bitterness of his mother and an eternal, voiding sort of loneliness.

He pulled himself together after a minute. He had the possibility of a real life now, and he didn't want to be a loser in it. He could no longer say he'd never been kissed, and he could no longer say he'd never been in love. He had been—although, whether it was with Jesse or Danny Fit, the vote was still out.

He told himself firmly that either way, he had a life, even an inner one; then he wiped his eyes on his new sheets (which weren't as stiff as they'd been when he moved in) and then set his alarm early.

It was hard getting up at four a.m. to prep his turkey and put it in the oven, and it was even harder to dress in jeans and a sweatshirt and go out into the smoking cold of dawn.

But it was worth it when he drove up to Loaves and Fishes with cans of everything from green beans to Spam and asked one of the volunteers where they needed it. They helped him park his car safely (a big if, off of Richards Boulevard) and the woman—in her fifties with frizzy gray hair and a warm smile who was there because, she told him, her kids were in college and her husband was sleeping in—took him to the back, showed him where to leave his jacket, and put him to work peeling potatoes.

He peeled potatoes for two hours, listening to the sounds of the soup kitchen, the forced happiness of the volunteers, the remorseful gratitude of the people who'd had it too rough this year to do for themselves. When he had half an hour left to get his bird out of the oven, he told his volunteer (Margaret) that he had to leave, but he'd return sometime if she liked.

She hugged him. No "personal space," no "you're a stranger and I barely know you"—she just hugged him, told him warmly that she would love to see him whenever he had the time, and wished him a happy holiday.

Kit thought he might show up at the soup kitchen a lot after that—if there were people there who would adopt him and be kind, well, then, he probably had lots of charity in his heart to give.

He went home, and the turkey smelled great. The sides weren't too difficult, and he lit candles, put a vase of flowers on his table, and set music, then sat down and had himself dinner.

He imagined that Jesse was there. He imagined that Danny was there. Danny would be a perfect host and a good lover. Jesse would be a perfect guest and a lot of fun. And maybe, if Kit was lucky, Jesse would gift him with more kisses like the one in his office.

At the end of the meal, he couldn't decide who he'd rather have at his table in reality, but he was aware that a little bit of reality was necessary. He packed up a small tray of food, complete with cookies, and took the ten-minute drive to his mother's tiny Victorian on R Street.

He knocked on the door with conviction, and when she opened it—in nothing but a house coat, red eyes, and a dangling cigarette—he thrust the package into her hands.

"Happy Thanksgiving, Ma. Enjoy."

He turned around, not expecting a lot of thanks or even recognition, and he reached the top step of the porch before she said, "What? You're not even going to eat it with me?"

He contemplated ignoring her, but then it hit him. That was the closest thing she'd ever expressed to an actual desire for his company. He turned back around. "Sure, Ma. What's on TV?"

"Crap. Nothin' but crap. But *Wizard of Oz* is on right now. You used to drive me crazy with that one when you were a kid."

Kit blinked. He didn't remember this. "Figures," he said philosophically. "Yeah. I might have a cookie." He'd packed all the extras with the meal—why not?

He stayed through the rest of the movie, while his mother ate her little impromptu meal, balanced on her lap. The dining room table was dirty, still—lots of bowls full of cereal and a few empty beer bottles. To his memory, she'd always had food on the table for him. He thought about the people in the soup kitchen that morning—the same couldn't be said for them, could it?

"How's the food, Ma?" he asked, hoping he didn't sound needy.

She swallowed a bite. "It doesn't taste like shit. But you need more damned cheese in the mashed potatoes."

He smiled, practically swooning with the compliment. "I'll remember that next time."

"You'll come visit again?"

"Yeah. How 'bout Monday night?"

"Why not Saturday?"

"I'm getting a cat."

His mother took a bite of turkey and potatoes and prodded the green beans experimentally with her fork. "I could come over and see it sometime. I like cats."

Kit nodded. "No smoking in the house, okay Ma?"

"Be fucking picky. Yeah, fine. Whatever. Just make sure your

fucking cat has all its fucking shots, okay? I don't want rabies."

"Yeah, Ma. Germ-free cat. It's a deal."

"You got a faggoty boyfriend yet?"

"Got a hope for one."

"Just don't do no ass-fucking while I'm there."

Kit swallowed, thoughts of sex with Danny *or* Jesse suddenly fleeing his mind like rabid bats from a ghost-shrieking cave. "I guarantee it."

He left at the end of the movie, after clearing up the takeout mess and sharing a cookie. He kissed her cheek firmly before he left, and although her smile would never light up the world, she wasn't calling him a fucking faggot and throwing him out on the lawn.

It was a start.

Maidens and Maidenheads

HE SPENT Friday painting one of his bedroom walls burgundy, and he liked the effect so much, he painted one of his living room walls blue. He would have gone out and bought some more sci-fi or comic book prints to hang after that, but he understood that Black Friday was sort of a nightmare, so he figured he'd done good.

Saturday, he was shocked to hear knocking on his front door at six o'clock in the morning. He stumbled out of his bedroom in sleep pants and a T-shirt and threw open the door before he even looked through the peephole to see who it was.

Jesse launched himself into his arms, wiggling and breathless like a puppy, and kissed him full on the mouth, morning breath and all.

Kit stumbled backward and managed to find the couch in the front room by luck so he could tumble backward over the arm of it. Jesse kissed his morning breath away, and he smelled like coffee and tobacco, and Kit didn't care. His mouth was warm and wet and soft, and his body on Kit's was hard and lithe. Oh... oh *God.* There was a man's body, wiggling around on top of him. Seriously! And he didn't mind that Kit was rubbing his back and cupping his ass. In fact, he was arching against Kit, and their groins were hard and mashing together imperfectly, and it felt... oh damn... even better than his own hand on his cock. The thought was enough to make Kit come, just a little, and he groaned and pulled back, because he was trying not to embarrass himself by coming in his pants after a little bit of necking.

Jesse perched up on his chest and grinned. "Sur-prised?"

Kit tried to reply and could pretty much only manage a stupid grin. He nodded and then reached up for a little peck on Jesse's lips. Jesse pecked back, and Kit remembered something to say.

"Did you drive all night?"

"Yeah, pretty much. It was slow coming off the summit anyway. I...." He yawned. "I caught a couple of catnaps at the chain stops, but...." He yawned again and sagged against Kit comfortably. "You don't mind if I nap with you, do you?"

Kit blinked. Why not? He'd been hoping to sleep in until nine. This way he could sleep in with Jesse next to him. A part of him wanted to dance and sing—or go catatonic with shock—and he ruthlessly squashed it. He wanted to enjoy this, dammit, and not spend all his time being stunned that it was happening.

"Yeah," he said, and then pushed Jesse off of him playfully and scrambled to sit up. Jesse gave him a hand, and they both went into the bedroom. Jesse looked around appreciatively, letting out a low whistle.

"This is pretty swank, Kit, new paint smell and all! You sure you want to squander it on a lowly assistant?"

Kit shook his head. "It's missing personality and warmth," he said seriously. Then he smiled, liking Jesse all sleepy and disheveled, smelling of the car and the caffeine and fast food and, yes, the dreaded smoking habit that Kit hated, but still looking beautiful and perfect. "That's where you come in."

Jesse turned half-lidded eyes toward him and blinked. "That could be the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me," he said softly, and Kit blinked back.

"You need better compliments.... Here, do you want some sleep pan— Never mind." Because Jesse had stripped down to blue boxer-briefs and a T-shirt, leaving his jeans, hooded sweater, boots, socks, and denim jacket in a puddle on Kit's floor.

He scrambled into Kit's new bed like a child, tucking under the comforter into Kit's spot. "Oh, God, it's warm," he sighed, and his teeth were chattering a little. "Something about being up this time of morning and outside, it makes me so cold! What are you doing?"

Kit straightened from laying Jesse's jeans over the chair in the corner. "Straightening your things...."

"Well, stop it!" Jesse ordered crossly. "Get in here and be the big spoon! I'm freezing!"

Alrighty then. Kit abandoned all attempts at straightening and crawled into bed behind Jesse, using his height and the width of his shoulders to pull the smaller man back into his arms. Jesse wiggled and chattered, and Kit held him closer and tighter, until both of their bodies tightened and relaxed with sort of a sigh, and they melted into the mattress.

Jesse felt so good. Kit closed his eyes and rubbed his cheek against that smooth, honey-colored hair.

"How was your Thanksgiving?" Jesse mumbled, already close to sleep.

"I missed you," Kit said honestly. He could do that, since

Jesse was there in his bed. "What made you decide to come back so early?"

"I almost slept with the evil ex." Jesse's voice was matter-offact, and Kit tried hard not to kick the first man who'd ever wiggled into his bed right back out.

"Waaaah?"

"See," Jesse didn't sound so close to sleep anymore. He sounded very... very careful, actually. "The thing is, his sister is dying."

"Oh, Jesse...."

"Emmy didn't tell me when she called. She didn't want to depress me—or even pressure me into visiting—but the whole family knew. She won't make it until Christmas. I brought her a book, you know, since I wasn't going up for Christmas, and it just hit me that she'll never have a chance to read it."

Forgiven. Kit didn't realize he could forgive something like cheating or almost cheating. He'd never even thought of it. His dream guys never cheated, period the end. Danny Fit never cheated on him—unless it was on those days Kit skipped strength training, and he was getting it on with the red-leotard girl on the DVD behind Kit's back—but Kit doubted it. But here, in the real world, with a heartbroken Jesse in his arms, Kit didn't even need to hear the rest of the story to see where this was going. An "almost" lapse, when he and Jesse had been nothing more than a kiss in the office? Forgiven. As simple as that.

"I'm so sorry," he said quietly, and Jesse took his hand and kissed it with so much tenderness Kit didn't think he could say anything else for a while.

"See"-Jesse kept talking like he hadn't just shorted every

fuse in Kit's brain—"there Pat and I were last night, out on the couch, and I was trying not to just lose it, because the whole family was being so strong and so brave for the whole two days, and I didn't want to be the big, bawling baby in the middle of them, and Pat put his arms around my shoulder, and there we were. You know. Pity sex—it was going to happen. And then Emmy called me into her room—she'd been out and about all day, but she was too tired and needed to be hooked up to oxygen and shit, and I got up so fast I think I elbowed Patrick in the chest."

Kit chuffed a little bit of laughter into Jesse's hair. Apparently Jesse was enthusiastic like a puppy in his natural state.

"Anyway," Jesse continued, "I go in there, and she tells me to sit down, and then she just starts talking. And she's only sixteen, but I used to talk to her about everything—like one of those kids in the movies, who seems to know more about adult shit than adults do? And she tells me that she knows what gay is, but she always used to imagine me as a knight in shining armor, and that I'd be the one to come pick her up and put her on my horse and take her away to do icky forbidden things to her when she turned eighteen. She made me laugh, you know? There she is, and she's skinny and she's dying and she's got me cracking up, and then she says, totally serious, 'Baby, please don't sleep with my brother'. I almost choke on my tongue, because I still don't expect shit like that to come out of her mouth. I'm like, 'Sweetheart...' and that's all I got."

Jesse's voice was cracking now, and his shoulders were trembling, and Kit realized with some awe that Jesse had driven all night to come here, to his little, cold house, and fall apart in Kit's arms. He tightened those arms and nuzzled Jesse's hair and held on. "So then she starts going on about how she's going to die a virgin, right? And that's a girl's worst nightmare. I crack a joke. I'm like, 'Well, sweetie, if you thought *I* was going to be your knight in shining armor, I don't think you were going to lose that soon anyway'. She laughed and then told me I was an asshole, and I'd missed the point."

Jesse was quiet for so long that Kit wondered if he'd fallen asleep, shaky breathing and all. "What's the point?" he prompted gently.

"The point was that she would rather die a virgin than just give it away and have it mean nothing, and that even though I was a guy, that didn't mean I couldn't feel the same way. And I thought about it, you know? Pat and I—we fucked each other, and then we went out and fucked anything that moved. When I said 'enough', Pat just didn't take me seriously, you know? That's why I broke up with him and moved out here and got my tech thing after high school. Did I really want to just up and have pity sex with someone who didn't take me seriously, when I had a guy in a place I'd sort of made mine, who kept looking at me like I made his heart beat?"

Kit couldn't even blush in embarrassment. He hadn't realized how transparent he'd been—but he couldn't regret it now.

"So I told Emmy thank-you for the set-straight, and she smiled a little and asked me if I had someone I liked better than her slut-bag brother—her words. They love each other a lot, you know, but they give each other shit too. Anyway, I told her about you, and she told me to go home and go pick out a really good kitten for her, since they hadn't been able to get her a new one when she got sick. And I told her I loved her, and kissed her goodbye, and said bye to her folks, and left at midnight and came here."

"I'm glad you did," Kit told him, feeling weak and stupid. He was crying a little, like a big pussy, and he was really glad that Jesse was turned away so he didn't have to see Kit come unglued from a story. Then Jesse turned around, and there Kit was, naked with his clothes on, but Jesse had been weeping too. He used his thumbs to clear Kit's cheeks and kissed him softly on the mouth.

"So I just drove all night to see if it's true. Are you going to tell me if it's true?"

Kit looked at those shiny brown eyes, limpid with grieving, and wondered if he'd ever had any courage at all. "Does my heart beat for you?"

"Yeah."

Well, it certainly didn't beat for Danny Fit, now, did it?

"Yeah."

Jesse smiled a little, obviously exhausted, and snuggled into Kit's arms like a child—or a lover—and raised his face for a quick, sweet kiss. "Good."

KIT didn't think he'd sleep then—it was such a new sensation, having someone in his bed, touching his body. But Jesse fell asleep almost in the middle of their kiss, and Kit didn't want to move. Jesse needed comfort. Jesse needed *him*. The idea was extraordinary, alien, and amazing. If Danny Fit had walked out of the television one morning and sank to his knees to take Kit's cock in his mouth, Kit could not have been more dumbstruck—or happier. What was strange was that Jesse's misery—and the fact that Kit felt miserable with him—didn't seem to make it worse than he imagined. There was no disappointment in the real-world pain that Jesse brought with him. There was only joy that it brought Jesse too.

It was on this thought that he actually closed his eyes and fell asleep.

He woke up a little cramped from being wrapped around Jesse, and went to wash his face and brush his teeth and shower, not thinking that anything more extraordinary than Jesse sleeping in his arms could possibly happen.

He came out of the shower with a towel wrapped around his hips and was surprised to see Jesse, awake, lying on his side, the cover pulled up to his waist.

His T-shirt and boxer-briefs were in a puddle on the floor in front of him.

Kit was not quite surprised enough to drop his towel—but it was close. Jesse dropped his head a little, shyly, and said, "I, uhm, used your toothbrush when you were in the shower. I guess you didn't hear me."

Kit blinked and looked at him again. His chest had no hair at all, and his muscles were small but well-defined. His chest wasn't broad, but his waist tapered anyway, and his abdomen wasn't a six-pack like Danny's, but it was stringy and taut as it disappeared under the blanket.

"Didn't hear you," Kit repeated, his mouth as dry as baby powder. "Uhm...."

Jesse's eyes met his unexpectedly. "You wanted to, didn't you?"

"God yes!" Kit burst out with so much passion that he startled himself.

Jesse grinned. "So, uhm, do you like to top or bottom?"

Blink. "Wha?"

"You know, do you wear the condom or not?"

Oh God. Kit needed to correct a very basic assumption right here and now. "Uhm, Jesse?"

And now Jesse was looking both uncertain and a little bit hurt. "What?"

"You're making this really big assumption—"

"You just said you wanted to!"

"I do! I do! Oh God, I do! I just haven't yet."

"Haven't had sex with me? I thought we were, you know, going to... going to do that...."

Oh God. Suddenly hiding his face was more important than hiding his soft belly and hard private parts, and Kit pulled the towel up to bury his face in it.

"I haven't had sex *at all, ever!*" he confessed piteously, so embarrassed he thought his penis might fall off with the pure shame of it all.

The silence in the room was so profound that Kit found he had to look over his hands to make sure Jesse hadn't killed himself laughing.

Jesse had swung himself up in the bed and kept the sheet around his waist, and was regarding Kit with absolute sobriety. When Kit met his eyes, he said, "Really?" Kit nodded and shrugged at the same time. "It was just easier," he rasped, feeling like some sort of explanation was demanded from him. "I lived at home, with my mother. I... I wasn't a catch, you know? I'm a pudgy accountant, right?" He shrugged again and tried to look anywhere but Jesse's wide, sympathetic eyes. "I don't know if I like to top or bottom. I don't know how to" oh God—"touch things, or what feels good to someone else or... etiquette, or...." He trailed off and then manned up. This could be the worst thing he had to confess, ever, and he'd done it. Finish strong or not at all, right? He looked Jesse in the eyes.

"About all I really do know is that I probably don't need a condom. Which is good. Because I don't have any."

And that last part seemed to prompt Jesse into action. He stood, and for a second he struggled with the sheet like he was going to take it with him, and Kit struggled with the towel to put it back around his body, and then Jesse dropped the sheet and came over to Kit and took his hands.

The towel flurried to the floor.

"You didn't even hope for me?" Jesse said softly, and Kit avoided his eyes. He'd pinned all of his hope on Danny Fit, really, because he had absolutely no expectations of that one ever coming true.

"It hurts to hope." It was a painful admission. He wondered if he could ever tell Jesse about Danny Fit and decided that maybe, just maybe, *that* would be harder to do than confessing to his overripe virginity.

Jesse nodded. "I know that," he said. "I *do* need a condom, okay? Because you don't want to wait for someone who might be special, because it hurts to hope for something like that. And then you just sleep with anyone who might make it hurt less, and not

with the right someone who won't make it hurt at all." He kept his head down and seemed to stare at Kit's hands, his soft accountant's hands, as he stroked the backs of them with his thumbs. "I'm not a virgin," he said with a sardonic smile. "I've done lots of things... lots of *men* that I'm not proud of."

He looked up at Kit then, and he grimaced, and Kit thought maybe he was fighting tears too. "Do you remember the first day at work? You were showing me how to use the copy machine?"

Kit shook his head. He'd spent the entire day dazzled. There was no single moment he remembered, just Jesse, big eyes, sweet smile, all of it.

"Well, I was feeling a little out of my league—that thing's a monster, and it's all hooked up to the computer and everything, and you showed me how to use it, and you were like, 'No worries. Just think of it as the helm of the Starship Enterprise—you're like, Chekhov, right? We won't make you wear the red jumpsuit, I swear'."

Kit couldn't look at him. Were they both just standing there, naked, staring at each other's hands?

"Look at me, Kit."

Apparently not. Kit looked up, and Jesse smiled into his eyes.

"It was the nicest thing anyone ever said or did for me on the job or at school or anything. And you were nice every day since. You said 'please' and 'thank you' and put aside your work to talk to me. You were funny—when you let yourself talk. And I kept thinking, 'God, if he liked me, even a little, I would so totally risk my job to hit on him'. And I did—and it was worth it. It was worth it to drive all night because you weren't going to try to nail me when I felt like shit. The look on your face when you opened the door and saw me? I don't know how I lived my whole life without someone looking at me like that, okay?"

Kit looked at him now and let his dazzle shine through. "Okay. Okay." He nodded and said it again, because suddenly being naked wasn't a scary thing; it was an exciting thing. Jesse wasn't going to hurt him—not on purpose. He wasn't going to laugh at him or make fun of him. Something in Jesse was just as dazzled by Kit as Kit was dazzled by Jesse, and it just might be all right.

Jesse straightened and reached, and they kissed again. Kit encircled Jesse's shoulders, feeling the urge to protect him. He'd been hurt by life, Kit realized, and Kit was afraid enough of life to want to keep him safe—and to think he was incredibly brave.

Their skin rasped together, and Jesse tasted like Kit's toothpaste and raw enthusiasm. Kit loved that, and he returned it, pushing Jesse backward, steering him toward the bed. Jesse stopped when the backs of his knees hit the bed, and he sat down abruptly, then scooted back and stretched out, patting the space next to him for Kit.

"Want to start again?"

Kit grinned. "Are you kidding?"

Jesse grinned back. "Not even a little."

Kit crawled in and lay on his side, and Jesse started the kiss back up, and this time, their hands were free to roam.

Jesse's skin was smooth. He had tight, stringy little muscles, and Kit could feel his ribs under a shallow layer of them. The hollow where the small of his back dipped to his buttocks was silken, and the slightly furry tops of his thighs were soft even under the coarse hair. Kit was erect again, except now his cock was mashed up against Jesse's groin, and Kit could feel the ridge of Jesse's cockhead right by the crease in his thigh.

Kit whimpered.

"Let me touch."

Jesse smiled against his lips. "Me too."

They backed up a little, and Kit took Jesse's actual throbbing cock in his hand. It was not as large as his own, which both surprised him and didn't bother him at all. Jesse, on the other hand....

"Holy God." Jesse's fist tightened around Kit, and Kit gasped. "This thing.... Jesus, Kit—it's a fucking thing of beauty!" He stroked from Kit's base to his tip, and Kit had to remember to keep his own fist wrapped around Jesse. He stroked again, and Kit groaned and threw his head back against the pillow and let go of Jesse's body, which sucked because he wanted to explore, but... but....

Jesse stretched up and kissed his cheek. "Easy there, buddy. I've got this, okay? You're primed to go off here—trust me, I get it."

Kit was about to say "But...", and then Jesse scooted down the bed and engulfed Kit's cock in his mouth, and Kit let out a sound that he didn't know a human could make. He stroked Jesse's hair back from his face, and Jesse hollowed in his cheeks and sucked hard, pulling back until Kit popped out of his mouth. Then he turned his head and grinned up at Kit, and Kit's breath just trammeled up in his chest and stayed there.

"That felt good, right?"

Kit couldn't manage real words—about all he could do was groan and thrust his hips up, so his cock slid through Jesse's spit-slick grasp. Jesse's grin widened, and then it went away entirely as he took Kit in again. He was doing a swirly thing with his tongue on the upstroke and using his fist at Kit's base, too, and his other hand (oh, how very sneaky!) came to play with Kit's balls and to finger the cleft of his bottom. Oh God. That was unnecessary. That was too much. That was going to.... Not so soon.... No no no no no no no....

"Gwwwaaaagghhhhhh!" Kit didn't even have a chance to warn him, and Jesse swallowed quickly and again and again, until that precious, bee-stung mouth was just gulping Kit's come, and the way that felt on Kit's cockhead was.... "Gwwwaaaaahhhhhgggg! Jeeeeee-sus!" Kit's knees came up, and he turned sideways, dislodging Jesse, who scooted up the bed, wiping his mouth while Kit curled up into a little ball and shuddered.

Suddenly Jesse was there, arms around Kit's shoulders, gooey kisses in his hair, and tender strokes against his shoulders. He smelled like Jesse and sweat and Kit's come, and Kit wanted to kiss him worse than he wanted to breathe. He captured that sweet little mouth and demanded, and Jesse gave in to him so free and easy Kit could almost believe that sex, all of sex, would work.

Kit's breathing subsided, and Jesse thrust against his thigh and grunted, just enough to let Kit know that his friend (lover? They were lovers now. Fan*tast*ic!) was still in need. Awesome!

Kit pulled back and said, "Can I?" and Jesse smirked at him.

"I thought you'd never ask!"

Kit kissed his way down Jesse's body, feeling giddy as he suckled on a nipple and felt Jesse's hands tighten in his hair. Oh God... his skin tasted so good. It was sort of honey colored, like his hair, and Kit wondered what he'd look like tan in the summer, and then he kissed his way to the vulnerable skin of Jesse's stomach and nibbled, just to hear that throaty giggle that he'd heard Jesse make on occasion.

Jesse made the sound now, and Kit grinned up at him before turning his attention to the one part of a man's body that all things seemed to center around.

Jesse was right—it was a little smaller than Kit's, but it was gold with a flushed pink head, and the skin felt soft and tight against Kit's hand. Kit squeezed and the head turned purple, and Jesse moaned a little and thrust up inside the cave of his fist.

The first slide of the thing between his lips felt awkward, even when he made sure his teeth were safely covered. He kept going, though, because the sound Jesse made was... sweet. Begging. Cock-stiffening. Kit squeezed the base again and slurped down until his lips met his fist, and then he moved his fist to see how deep he could take it down his throat.

Almost all the way, he discovered, and Jesse groaned harshly and then gave Kit's hair a little jerk until Kit pulled back.

"Just use your hand, okay?" Jesse panted when Kit had pulled off it and was meeting his eyes. Kit must have looked disappointed, because Jesse touched his cheek. "I haven't been tested recently. Just to be safe, okay?"

Kit nodded. Even a thirty-year-old virgin had heard of HIV. He propped his chin up on his arm and started stroking Jesse's shaft, and then he sat up a little and switched arms, stroking with one hand and moving his other hand to explore a little. Jesse's balls were hard (at the moment) and the skin around them was soft and covered with dark-brown fur. Jesse pulled his knees up and spread his thighs, and Kit looked at him, asking permission. "Feel free," Jesse grunted, squeezing his eyes shut as Kit thumbed the pre-come on the mushroom head of his cock. "Explore at... oh God... will!"

Kit grinned, but Jesse didn't see it; then he stuck one of his fingers in his mouth and sucked, slicking it up, because he'd read a little about this and wanted to see what would happen. Then he stroked again while he took that slick, naughty little digit and finger-walked it to the entrance of Jesse's asshole.

Jesse keened, begging, and Kit grinned again. Oh God—in all his imaginings, he'd never imagined how much fun it would be to hear Jesse make those noises begging him to play with his body in carnal ways. He slid in one finger and wiggled it around, and Jesse clenched against him and thrust forward some more, and Kit was delighted enough to slide in two fingers and then grasp and squeeze and stroke some more.

"Oh Christ!" Jesse gasped. "Now!" His come was hot on Kit's fist, and some of it was white and some of it was clear as it spattered across his stomach and his lean chest with its vulnerable ribs and the tiny mole up next to his right nipple. Kit longed to taste the fruits of orgasm, like Jesse had tasted his. Jesse's face was contorted without any self-consciousness at all. He looked fierce and almost in pain, and then, as Kit kept pumping, he relaxed a little and reached out a hand to stop Kit's pressure.

Kit pulled back and reached over the bed to where he'd dropped his towel on the floor. He used the towel to wipe off his hands and clean Jesse up, his movements patient and reverent, while Jesse watched him with wide, limpid eyes. When he was done he moved up next to Jesse and claimed that mouth again with so much tenderness aching in his throat he just knew Jesse would laugh at how young he was, a virgin, in love with the first guy he laid.

When he pulled back, Jesse's eyes were shining, and he wiped the back of his hand across them with a rough movement.

"You're pretty good at this sex thing, you know that, Kit?" His voice was rough and wobbly, and Kit felt his eyes get bright too. He kissed Jesse softly and stretched out next to him, and thought that maybe it wasn't the sex he was good at, it was the love part, but he didn't say that.

It just may have been too real.

They lay quietly for a while after that, and Kit spent some time running his hand up and down Jesse's chest and arms, skimming his fingertips over youth-prominent clavicles and stroking his deceptively strong-lined jaw.

Jesse tried to do the same thing to Kit after a few moments, and Kit remembered that he was naked, and he was imperfect. The thought sent him diving for the covers, and Jesse's laugh had the ring of hurt to it.

"Come on, Kit.... I like your body too!"

Kit clamped the comforter over his chest with his arms. "You'll like it better in six weeks!" he said adamantly, and Jesse's eyes narrowed.

"I'm not waiting six weeks to see you naked, you moron! Jesus—we just.... You just let me go down on you—do you think I didn't see it then?"

Kit turned red. "Well then, you know," he said, because anybody would know after that.

Jesse prodded gently at the arm nearest him. "Know what?"

His voice was as gentle as his touch, and Kit allowed his arm to be moved for no other reason than it was Jesse.

"Know that I'm the size of a Volkswagen," Kit grumbled, and Jesse laughed. He actually laughed.

"You're thick, all right. You're thick in the head and you're thick in the cock, but your body is not nearly as bad as you think it is."

"Fine." Kit grabbed the comforter and threw it down to his hips, and Jesse laughed some more. Suddenly, Kit thought he might run naked through their little office building if it would make Jesse laugh just like that, warm and throaty and kind.

"Nice," he murmured appreciatively. "You can see where the workouts are doing their job.... See?" He poked Kit in the stomach, and Kit tightened reflexively. "Look at that. Voila! Definition."

Kit smirked a little. "You could bounce a quarter off your stomach—don't bullshit me."

"Well, you want that tummy, you need to go to my gym!"

Kit colored. "Nah. I think I'll stick with Danny Fit, thank you."

Jesse grimaced playfully. "Oh God! How's a mere mortal going to compete! Danny Fit! God of gay fitness!"

"I didn't know he was gay," Kit said, wide-eyed, and Jesse saw the hero worship and rolled his eyes.

"Jesus, Kit, pop culture isn't just for sci-fi—read a magazine at a checkout stand, whydontcha!"

"Oh." Kit looked away, embarrassed, but not for long. Imaginary, gay Danny Fit was tucked away on his DVD player, and live, cute-as-hell, willing-to-touch-him-and-like-him-for-whohe-was Jesse was *in his bed*, and getting ready to go down on him all over again.

Danny who?

THEY might have played in bed all day, but Jesse stretched at around one o'clock and said, "There's a lot more we could do here, buddy, but I'm about all come out." He rolled over onto his stomach and propped his chin on Kit's. Kit smiled at him and stroked his hair back from his face. It was a little bit greasy, because, hey, the guy had driven all night to see him, and him alone, and that was a reality Kit could live with.

"Did we want to try the, uhm," Kit blushed, but he kept stroking Jesse's hair.

"The thing?" Jesse supplied drily, and Kit nodded. Penetration. Condom. Lubricant. The big A. The *thing.* Top or bottom, Kit was looking forward to it.

"Can we wait until after we get the kitten?" And Kit was a little stunned. He'd forgotten all about the kitten, and his expression showed it.

The face Jesse turned toward him was tragic. "You said we were going to get a kitten—you're not going to go back on that, right? It was a promise!"

Kit blinked and saw a whole new Jesse. He put things together, about Jesse not wanting to visit his mom, and strings of boyfriends, and a slut-bag ex.

"Lots of people have broken promises to you, haven't they, Jesse?" he asked, actually amazed at his own perceptiveness, and Jesse looked away.

"I...I just really wanted to get that kitten. I told Emmy I'd call her and tell her what kind we got."

Kit nodded and sat up, and pulled Jesse closer to kiss his temple. "Absolutely. Adoption day at PetSmart. You shower, I'll cook, you eat, I'll shower. It's a plan.

Jesse's grin returned. "You don't want to shower together?"

Kit looked away and blushed. "I'm, uhm, trying to keep that promise, remember?"

So they showered and ate breakfast instead.

Concerts and Funerals

IN THE end, they got two kittens, a brother and a sister, a boy with gray-and-white patches that they named Mal, and a girl with black-and-white patches that they named Zoe. Jesse had approved and helped Kit pick out the bowls and the cat boxes and the collars, and together they made the appointments for shots. They took the kittens home, and Kit had made what was now a very rare stop for takeout. They ate while the kittens played with their toes (and their sweaters and their hair) and they watched old *Firefly* episodes on DVD and tried to introduce the kittens to their namesakes.

The kittens were unimpressed, but the men who already loved them had a good time.

When dinner was cleaned up, Kit told Jesse to call Emmy.

Jesse made Kit stay in the room.

It was hard—even harder because although Jesse's voice was all rainbows and lollipops, his face was all mortal wounds and broken bones. Jesse made it through, though, after a thorough description of black-and-gray patches and pink paws, rough tongues, and animals so thoroughly ensorcelled by their humans that they purred on command.

He finished because Emmy was tired, but before he hung up he said, "Yeah, Emmy. He's the best. Thank you, sweetheart—I'm in good hands. Yeah. I love you too. Night night." He cried all over Kit then, and there had been no lovemaking that night. Kit didn't mind, not even a little.

They stayed in bed the next morning, though, after a shower and a quick breakfast. Jesse was not a morning person, and Kit made a mental note to buy a coffeemaker, because Kit thought it might help. (It would also have helped if the kittens hadn't spent all night purring on their heads and kneading their hair, but that was beside the point!)

Kit got his second, more thorough education on what two naked male bodies could do together. Kit leaned patiently on his hands and knees and allowed Jesse to invade his body, and the feeling had been... odd, at first. Stretchy and full and vulnerable, even.

And then Jesse had started to move, and it had become tingly, and then it had become pleasant, and then Jesse had nailed his prostate, and it became explosive. Jesse came first, moaning and sweating onto his back, and Kit found he was aroused and unfinished and aching.

"Good," Jesse panted into his shoulder. "You can do it to me now!"

The condom was another first, and Kit frowned as Jesse rolled it on. (Jesse had put his own on as well, and Kit thought it was something he should practice. It looked sort of tricky.)

"I'll get tested," Jesse promised. "And I'm always careful, so it should be good. And then we won't need them. How's that?"

That sounded great, and Kit said so, but inside he was reminded: he had waited thirty years for a good thing, but Jesse's friend Emmy proved that some people didn't even have that long.

Jesse started out on his hands and knees, like Kit had, but

Kit frowned some more. "Can we do this face-to-face?" he asked, pretty sure the mechanics would work. "I want to see you."

Jesse turned over then and blushed. "You don't ask much, do you?" His tone was edgy and impatient, and Kit realized something else about his young lover.

"I have to be naked, you have to be," he insisted. Jesse's grin was a little bitter and a little embarrassed, but then Kit took the lubricant and started doing what Jesse had done—squirting it on his fingers (it had been in bed with them, so it was warm) and then thrusting the fingers inside Jesse's bottom.

Jesse's ass came off the bed, and his head threw back and he moaned. "Oh, God... Kit... that's good...but... oh... damn... you have no subtle... *shit*!"

Kit had thrust deep inside, and he'd found it—the walnut under the skin. He'd read about it, and Jesse had brushed against it, and he found he wanted to see what happened when....

Jesse's hands scrabbled on the blankets, and his feet pressed hard into the mattress. "Kit?" he whined, managing to fasten his eyes on Kit's face. His eyes were wide, and his cheeks were flushed, and he looked... eager and begging and soft.

Kit hadn't known his cock would get this hard.

"Kit, buddy, is there any way you could... uhm... fuck me hard anytime soon?"

Kit grinned at him and moved his cock into position. For a moment, it looked... threatening. Jesse's entrance, even stretched by Kit's fingers, was still small and vulnerable, but Jesse whined, and Kit placed the flared head of his cock against that tight ring and thrust slowly in. Jesse's ass clamped down on him tighter than anything he could imagine, and Jesse's body was *so* hot. Kit groaned and pulled back until his cockhead was stretching Jesse again, and Jesse groaned and begged, "Please, dammit, Kit, *please*!" His eyes were half-closed now, and Kit thought it was totally worth it to look at his face. He'd never seen anything as breathtaking as Jesse, abandoned to Kit's body inside his own.

Kit felt a total sense of the moment as he drove his hips forward *hard* and watched Jesse throw his head back and howl. That worked so well that he did it again. And again. And again. He started thrusting harder and faster and made sure that every time he did, he at least brushed that little nerve bundle that Jesse liked so much until Jesse started begging for something very different.

"Let me touch you," he panted, leaning up enough to fondle Kit's stomach. "Want to touch you!"

Kit's technique would go all to hell if he did that, but technique wasn't what Jesse seemed to want. Kit fell forward onto his elbows then and kept moving erratically (he was close, so close, and this new angle was odd, but he was almost there...), and Jesse kissed his neck and stroked his shoulders and whispered wonderful, terrible, obscene things in his ear.

Kit would admit later, while Jesse was lying with his head on Kit's very sweaty shoulder, that it was the dirty talk that did him in. The words were filthy and erotic. In fact, the things Jesse was saying were.... Oh God... the images were *exactly what Kit was doing*! And it was that reality that sent Kit heaving into orgasm, shuddering, groaning, lunging for that impossible peak and freefalling off it with a grunt and a howl and whoop of triumph as he went.

They laughed softly into each other's arms then, and Kit

collapsed on the bed and fell out of Jesse so he could pull Jesse right on top of him.

"Kit?" Jesse panted.

"Yeah?"

"You're not a virgin anymore."

"Fucking awesome."

Jesse giggled and kissed the corner of his mouth, and Kit kissed him back. And it really was fucking awesome.

IT WAS hard telling him goodbye that evening. In two days, they had managed to turn themselves into a little family, complete with kittens for babies.

"I can get you tomorrow night," Kit said as they were kissing at the front door, afraid to go outside. "I have to come home and work out and then go visit Ma, but then I can pick you up."

Jesse pouted. He did that sometimes—he'd done it that morning when Kit didn't have oatmeal, and he'd done it at the pet store when Kit had wanted a boy and a girl kitten instead of two boys. It was not the best side of Jesse—and it charmed Kit completely.

"Why can't you come work out with me? The gym is a few blocks from my apartment. I can bring extra clothes—that'll work fine!"

Kit blushed and shook his head. "I, uhm, don't think I want to work out in front of all those people, Jesse."

Jesse sighed and blew out a breath, but he didn't press the

point. "Well, how about you follow me home from work, and I can come here and work out with you?"

Oh Jesus. Jesse in the same room with Danny Fit? That would almost be like a threesome. It sounded dangerous—and vaguely icky. Fortunately, that didn't solve the fact that Kit still needed to visit his mother, and Kit said so.

Another sigh, and Kit felt like shit, even though it was the truth. Jesse shook his head. "I swear, it's like you don't want me to meet the guy, you know?"

Kit shrugged and said, "Well, what Danny and I had together is very private," with enough dignity to sound like he was kidding.

But Jesse wasn't stupid. His eyes got big, and he put his hand over his mouth like a little schoolgirl. "Ohmigod! He's your jerk-off buddy!"

Kit wondered if he could will himself to die of a heart attack on the spot. He knew his blood was certainly thundering in his ears enough.

"I... uhm...." "He is!" "Well. Uhm...."

Jesse shook his head and chortled some more. "Never mind, baby. You keep, uhm, working out. Anyone who waited for thirty years for the right person to come along gets to have imaginary sex with as many people as he wants!"

Kit could do nothing but stand there with Jesse in his arms and blush. Jesse was Jesse, though—he could laugh like the kid he was, but he picked up on Kit's discomfort after a moment.

"It's okay, Kit-I swear. Every boy has an imaginary stroke

buddy-no worries."

A part of Kit got indignant—he objected to hearing Danny referred to as merely a stroke buddy—but most of him got it. Jesse was being supportive. Jesse was being kind.

Kit kissed him, because, dammit, that's what you did when the person who had just made love to you for two days straight tried to tell you that your weirdness was not terminal. Jesse kissed him back and then hurried out to his car.

The next day was surprisingly... normal. Kit and Jesse were good at their jobs, and they'd worked well as a team for a couple of months. Jesse didn't shut Kit's door during lunch and go down on him for a quickie, but he sat and talked to him instead. The companionship, Kit had realized long ago, was very much as important as the sex.

Kit picked him up after visiting his mother that night and got a chance to see Jesse's apartment. He was surprised to find that he did not envy it—Jesse was right. It was a low-rent apartment occupied by four men (two of them straight) who (in Jesse's words) went home to change, fuck, or drink beer. The posters were tacked on the walls, and the beige carpet was appalling. Jesse's room was roughly the size of Kit's hallway, and while Jesse had literally covered the walls with sci-fi posters—many of them cadged from local movie theaters—it didn't seem to have Jesse's warmth. It certainly didn't feel warm enough to keep Kit's Jesse safe.

Kit wondered at the lag time before sleeping with someone and living with them. He wanted Jesse in his home. He wanted him in his bed every night. What do you know? You were a virgin seventy-two hours ago!

I know that I love him. I know I don't want anyone else—not even Danny Fit.

Kit took Jesse home that night and proved it.

They developed a pattern, a system, and it worked. Jesse was at Kit's house more nights than not, and that was good with both of them. Kit always managed to get his Danny Fit workout in sometimes when Jesse was at the gym, and sometimes when he was in the living room, reading or playing with the kittens. (Mal, it turned out, was a terrible troublemaker. Zoe was stoic and responsible and occasionally ate Mal's head to keep him in line.)

Kit realized that he hadn't been turned on by Danny Fit since Jesse first kissed him. That kiss had been his real-life switch once Jesse was activated, Danny Fit became just another fitness guru, putting Kit's body through some twisty-puffy cardio-strength pain.

They went and got a Christmas tree—a small one, so they could put it up on a bookshelf and the kittens wouldn't wreak havoc with it. Jesse had never had a tree—he said something about his mom always promising and never delivering and left it at that. Kit took him to Target, and they picked out ornaments— Jesse made sure they matched Kit's décor.

And then Kit took his courage in both hands and called his mother. "Ma, we've got a Christmas tree. Come see it."

"Who's we?"

"Me and my boyfriend. You have to be nice to him, or I'm taking you home."

"I'll be Mary-fucking-Sunshine. Don't gross me out or anything. You two fags neck, and I'm out of there."

The words were harsh, but she actually managed a pair of jeans and a Christmas sweater to meet Jesse. She brought some smoke-flavored cookies, and Jesse ate one politely, and she played with the kittens for half an hour while bitching about the neighbors behind her and how their goddamned Christmas lights would flash to music until eight o'clock at night.

Kit considered the visit a success—especially when Jesse stopped at the drugstore the next day and bought a box of nicotine patches.

"Anything inspire that?" Kit asked innocently, and Jesse shuddered.

"I have seen my future, and it's wearing a reindeer sweater and espadrilles," he said back, and Kit nodded seriously. He was very conscientious about supporting Jesse's efforts after that, and two weeks before Christmas, Jesse was proud to announce he was patch free.

Three days later, they got a call from Emmy's parents, and Jesse cried all night. Kit called up the office and told the girl in personnel that neither of them would be at work until after Christmas. Jesse listened to him take charge with liquid eyes and lashes spiked with tears.

"What if I can't make rent?" he asked, his voice clogged and listless.

"What's wrong with living here?" Kit said, trying to keep it light. Jesse sobbed on him again without answering, and Kit wasn't sure if that was a yes or a no.

The funeral was two days later, and they drove up together, listening to Jesse's alternative rock music, which Kit had never really heard before.

They had just passed Auburn when Jesse started to talk, seemingly at random.

"You're going to meet my mom—she'll be there. She'll have my little brother with her. See, she never kept promises. Like, she'd always promise to have a tree, or that the next boyfriend or husband wasn't going to suck and hit on me or Jakey, or that her next job would last longer than it would take for welfare to cancel the check. So, you tell me that you want me to move in, and that's a promise. You can't just say that because it's easy. You've got a home, Kit. A real home. You want me to be a part of that, I'm going to take it serious, and I don't know how serious you can be when we've only been together for a month, you know?"

Kit opened his mouth to say he was serious, and Jesse cast him a sideways glance over the steering wheel. "Man, you still have a crush on Danny Fit—how serious can you be?"

Kit didn't want to argue with him, but short of burning all the guy's DVDs, he didn't know what else to do.

The funeral was... was sad. A child had died in a small community—most of the town turned out to the little roughhewn funeral home off the main drag of Donner Pass. When the service was over, Jesse grabbed Kit's hand and tried to drag him out before anyone could see him, but a woman—spit-whip thin with Jesse's sharp cheekbones and a mouth as sour as Kit's mother's, came up to them, a sulky boy in her wake.

"Hi, Mom," Jesse said weakly. Kit put his hand in the small of Jesse's back and was proud when his back straightened. Jesse looked up, and a real smile thawed the pinched expression around his eyes. "Hi, Jakey."

Jakey smiled back, and both of them looked unhappily at their mother.

"You coming for Christmas?" the woman asked, and Jesse shook his head.

"I'm staying with Kit."

Jakey gave him a real smile then. "Can I come with you?" he asked eagerly, and Kit was opening his mouth to say, "Christ yes!" just to make Jesse smile again when Jesse's mom sneered and shook her head.

"Come along, Jakey—we'll have a real nice Christmas at our place this year. I promise."

Jakey cast a forlorn look over his shoulder, and Jesse held up his hand, thumb and forefinger extended in the universal "call me" gesture. The two of them disappeared into the crowd, and Jesse said it was time to leave.

They went so Jesse could embrace Emmy's parents and hug his ex—an extremely handsome, fit young man with beautiful blue eyes, who looked so thoroughly devastated that Kit couldn't even think about him being Jesse's ex and could only hope the poor man's heart healed sometime soon. After Jesse's murmured promises to call, he grabbed Kit's hand and dodged people who seemed to want to talk to him, and they slipped out the back.

"You don't want to stay longer?" Kit asked cautiously as they pulled out of the parking lot.

"That's my past," Jesse said resolutely. "Jake and Emmy were the best parts about it." Kit was driving back, but he could still see Jesse's chin tremble. Maybe when things didn't seem to hurt so much, Jesse would go back there. Maybe he would get his little brother out of a home that obviously hurt to live in. But right now, all Kit really cared about was that Jesse was still hurt, and Kit needed to find some way to convince him that Kit could keep a promise, new lover or not.

"Jesse...." Kit reached out and took Jesse's hand, keeping his

eyes on the road.

Jesse didn't say anything back, but he clung to that hand until Kit needed it to drive. Randomly, Kit remembered that he'd asked Jesse if he wanted to go to the soup kitchen Christmas morning. Jesse had flushed and looked away and said it sounded too much like the community Christmas breakfast at the Elks Lodge that had been meant for the poorer families in the community. "We were there a couple of times," he said through a tight mouth, and Kit resolved to go alone on another day.

Then Kit remembered that moment in November, when Jesse seemed wondrous and perfect, and unattainable. That bony hand, tight and uncomfortable, was so much more important than the imaginary Jesse that Kit couldn't figure out how he'd had the courage to love at all with only the illusion to hope for.

They went home—Kit's home, but it was becoming Jesse's too—and sat on the couch sideways, Jesse pulled back into Kit's body, and played with the kittens and didn't speak for a long time.

THREE days later, Kit spotted the announcement on a flier in the newspaper.

"Look!" he said, trying not to sound like a schoolgirl. "Danny Fit is going to be in town!"

Jesse looked over his shoulder and smacked Kit in the arm. "Yeah, but you can't go—it's in two days!" Kit looked and sighed. He'd bought tickets for the Trans-Siberian Orchestra that night he'd never been. In fact, until Jesse, he never would have had the courage to go, but they'd been looking forward to it for two weeks. Kit looked back at the flier. "But it's only downtown—and he'll be done by two o'clock. I can get here in time to get ready totally easy."

"Right," Jesse snapped, abruptly angry. "Yeah—you do that. You go ahead and risk plans you've had with me for weeks so you can go meet your imaginary crush. Peachy. I'll meet you there— I'm going home."

It was late afternoon—they'd been planning on dinner and a movie.

"Jesse!" Kit stood up away from the computer. "Wait a minute! You said this was no big deal! 'Stroke off to who you want to', remember?"

"Well yeah!" Jesse snapped. "But look at you—you find out he's, you know, real, and you can meet him, and you slobber all over yourself to go shake the guy's hand. It's like, I'm what? Second choice? You really wanted Danny Fit, but you ended up with me? Fucking awesome!"

"Fucking wrong!" Kit snapped back. He thought with wonder, *Oh—this is a fight. Now I know. It sucks. I'll try not to do this often.* "I really wanted you...." His voice broke, just that suddenly, because he'd never said this. "I *really* wanted you. And you were so... so beautiful, so kind, and it just broke my heart. And I thought that getting you would be the one thing that never would happen. So I got the workout stuff, and I felt so pathetic, like here I was, trying to make myself perfect so I could get you...."

"I'm not perfect!" Jesse looked appalled, and Kit had to stop him, or he'd get hysterical about the wrong thing.

"I *know* that! You're better than perfect. You're you. You *never* hang your jacket up, I have to beg you to do the dishes, and

your car is almost as disgusting on the inside as your roommate's refrigerator. I don't care. I *love* the real you! But if I hadn't been stroking off to Danny Fit, I never would have had the courage to... to do *any* of it. To move out, to ask a friend to the movies, to... to...." Kit's face softened, and he tried not to sound maudlin. "To let you kiss me. To open the door and hold you when you needed it. You went back home and said, 'I'm going to put my past behind me' and walked away. I think part of that was a mistake, because any idiot can see you miss your little brother like crazy, but not all of it. Don't you see? Danny Fit is the only past I've got. I want to say hello to the human so I can say goodbye to the fantasy. Is that so goddamned bad?"

There was silence between them, and Jesse fidgeted in the middle of it. It was the first time in a while that Kit was reminded of how very young he was.

"I'll clean my car," Jesse muttered, and Kit tried not to laugh.

"I could give a damn about your car. I want your trust."

Jesse's head snapped up. "I trust you...."

He was so transparent—but Kit wasn't going to quibble. "Then let me go visit my pathetic fantasy ex-boyfriend, Jesse. I promise—I'll come back to you."

God, those brown eyes were expressive. The hope in them was awful—as though it had been Jesse who had been holding back hope the entire time. "I'll hold you to that," he said, and smiled as he moved into Kit's arms, but his voice was as sober as a child's funeral.

Kit woke up early the day of the concert and dressed while Jesse was still in bed. He looked... vulnerable in Kit's bed, that honey-colored hair in disarray, his bee-stung mouth all swollen with kisses. He'd gotten his HIV test the week before, clear as expected, and since it had been three months since Jesse had been with anybody, they'd gotten to have sex without the condoms.

It had been good—really good—but the best part had been that Jesse had felt safe in Kit's arms, safe with Kit's body. Kit's stomach was getting flatter, and his biceps and shoulders were becoming more muscular and less bulky, but mostly Kit was starting to think that the wonder of his body was that Jesse sought shelter in it like an unanchored boat in a harbor.

Being needed was a wonderful thing. Kit wouldn't trade it in for all the Danny Fits in the world.

Kit started the coffee maker and left Jesse a note: *Had some* errands to run. Open the presents under the tree in blue paper. I'll be back by two.

The boxes in blue paper had a coat and gloves and a hat there had been a cold snap, and Sacramento had suffered temperatures in the thirties for the past week. All Jesse had was his denim jacket and hooded sweatshirt, and it just wasn't enough.

Kit took care of his errands in time to get to the bookstore a little early, but it didn't matter: the line was still really long. Kit grabbed the book on nutrition that Danny was selling and leafed patiently through it, thinking the recipes sounded good but that he'd have to get Jesse to look at it to see there weren't any pictures of Danny besides the one on the front.

The crowd was not all gay men, Kit was happy to see—there were plenty of pretty, plump, engaging women who seemed to find Danny Fit's warmth and style appealing. He wasn't sure why, but for some reason, this made him feel much less perverted about his celebrity obsession. Kit watched Danny eagerly through the crowd so he could look for clues as to who he really was when he wasn't the uber-positive workout buddy.

He seemed nice enough.

He smiled charmingly at people when they handed him their books, and cracked jokes with them if they looked nervous. A slightly younger man was sitting next to him, making sure he had water and being generally attentive. Kit, who had to admit he probably had the worst gaydar of any gay man in history, had no doubt that they were lovers.

When it was finally Kit's turn, he found that he stammered, because what he wanted to say was so maudlin, so corny, and so awfully true.

"You probably hear this from about a thousand people," he said, feeling inept and dumb, "but seriously—man, you really helped me get my act together."

The handsome man with the toffee-colored hair looked up and gave Kit a tired but sincere smile. Kit realized that he was working—it was a job he loved, but he was tired too.

"That's good to hear!" Danny said, making his voice warm and encouraging with an obvious effort. Kit was suddenly glad for the younger lover—Danny would have someone to go home to, someone to take care of him. "That's awesome—how long have you been working out?"

Kit shrugged, embarrassed. "Only about six weeks. But I'm sort of committed now." *In a lot of ways, actually.*

Danny nodded, and something about Kit's quiet enthusiasm seemed to calm down the ragged edges in the sports superstar, and his next smile was less tired and more sincere. "Well good. The commitment is all you can hope for, you know? People fall off the wagon all the time, but if they've got a goal in mind, then I have faith that they can do it. Who do you want me to make this out to?"

Kit's smile suddenly lost all hints of self-consciousness. "Could you make it out to my boyfriend Jesse?" He gave Danny an inscription, and Danny blinked and then laughed.

"I'm sure there's a story there somewhere," he said with an honest grin.

Kit nodded. "Yeah—but right now I have to go give Jesse the book so it ends happy." He met Danny's extended hand and shook it firmly, a meeting of equals. "It's been an honor to meet you."

"Likewise. Thanks for letting me into your life."

His hand was warm and firm, and his tanned fingers were hard-boned and soft-skinned with moisturizer, and Kit was proud to shake hands with the man.

But that was all.

When he got home, Jesse was sitting outside. He'd been raking leaves (Kit's yard didn't have a tree, but the yard next door had a fruitless mulberry, and the yellow leaves were everywhere) and the lawn was now clear of them, and there were big full black bags in Kit's green-waste can by the garage.

Jesse was wearing his hat and his gloves in the chilly December light, and he was drinking what Kit assumed was coffee, but when he got closer and could smell it, he could see that Jesse had made hot chocolate and poured coffee in it.

He sat down next to his lover, not minding that the concrete of the porch was cold as hell, and took the mug from him for a drink. Without a word, he handed Jesse the bag in his hand.

"What's this?" Jesse asked, his voice not as hostile as his expression had been when Kit had pulled up.

"Presents," Kit said between blissful sips of the chocolate coffee.

The sulky turn of Jesse's mouth relaxed a little more. "You already gave me presents. It's not even Christmas yet."

Kit grinned at him and tweaked the brim of the forest-green skater's beanie that Jesse was wearing. It matched the gloves. Green may not have been an average color, but it looked so nice with Jesse's coloring, and Kit was besotted enough to see it on him.

"You like?"

Jesse's smile was sweet and very, very soft. "I like that you're back on time."

"Good! Now open your presents!"

Jesse looked at him dubiously, then reached into the bag and grimaced. "The book? Seriously? You got me the Danny Fit book?"

Kit grinned. "Now read the inscription."

Jesse's eyes narrowed, and then he laughed a little, as though he was embarrassed. "Jesse, Kit says you have nothing to worry about. Danny'." Jesse kept giggling and aimed those goodnatured, narrowed eyes at Kit. "You didn't."

"I did."

"What'd he say?"

"He said there was a story in there, and I said yeah, but I had to get home and give you the book so it would end happy." Kit was practically dancing as he sat, he was so pleased with himself—and so nervous, too, because the book wasn't the only thing in the bag.

Jesse leaned forward finally and kissed him on the mouth, and Kit opened for the kiss, and they scooted closer to each other to share some body heat on the chilly-assed porch. Kit pulled back and nodded to the bag. "There's more in there! Look!"

The next item Jesse pulled out made him laugh helplessly. "A membership card to my gym?"

Kit nodded, still bouncing as he sat. "Uh-huh. We can go together now. You know, because...." He flushed and looked away. "Because, well, we'll be together, so I can't look that bad, right?"

Jesse kissed him again and pulled back with dancing eyes. "Are you saying I make you look good?"

Kit's grin was blinding. "Yup! Absolutely. Best workout buddy ever!"

Jesse chortled some more and then looked surprised when Kit said, "But there's more!" Jesse dug in the bag for a minute, because this next item was smaller, and when he pulled it out, he frowned.

"It's a key."

Kit nodded, absolutely sober now. "It's your key."

"My key?" There could be a lot of ambiguity here, Kit knew, but he'd meant it that way.

"It's a promise," Kit said earnestly. "And proof, you know?"

"A promise of what?" Jesse searched Kit's face, his eyes very bright, and Kit tried very hard not to screw this up.

"A promise that whenever you're willing to take me up on the

offer, it will be there." Jesse sucked in a sharp breath, and Kit kept talking. "You see? The key is yours. You can come by anytime. It's like the place is yours. But better, because if, you know, one day, you want to come in and bring your stuff, you can do that too. But it's a promise that it's open to you, you know?"

Jesse looked at the key in his palm like he was afraid to touch it. "Jesus, Kit. What if I fuck this up?"

Kit remembered a tired man giving some good advice. "People fall off from good intentions all the time, Jesse. What matters right now is the commitment. This is my commitment, you know? You and me, we're going to be real. All we have to do is commit that it's real. It's something. If we have that as a goal, we should be good, you think?"

Jesse's hand started shaking, and Kit's came up to cover it, closing his fingers on the key. He let out a big sigh of relief when Jesse's hand clenched, and he cupped his other hand over it, like it was something precious.

"We're good," Jesse said through a rough throat. He slipped the key in his pocket and wiped the still shaking hand over his cheeks, and then took the coffee from Kit and set it down on the porch.

Then he threw himself into Kit's arms and held on so tight, Kit thought maybe this moment would freeze in time, like their asses were about to freeze to the concrete porch. They held each other as long as they could, and then a moment longer, and when they backed off, Jesse was all dimples and bright, bright eyes.

"You dork! How are you supposed to impress me on Christmas if you give me all of this today?"

Kit grinned back and stood up, giving Jesse a hand up, too,

and snagging the coffee mug to go inside. "Are you kidding? We're spending Christmas in bed!"

Jesse practically choked on his own snicker. "You think you've got that much stamina?"

Kit opened the door and pulled Jesse through. Their home echoed with their footsteps and their laughter, and with the two kittens who came running with bells on their collars to greet them.

"Of course I do! I've been working out!"

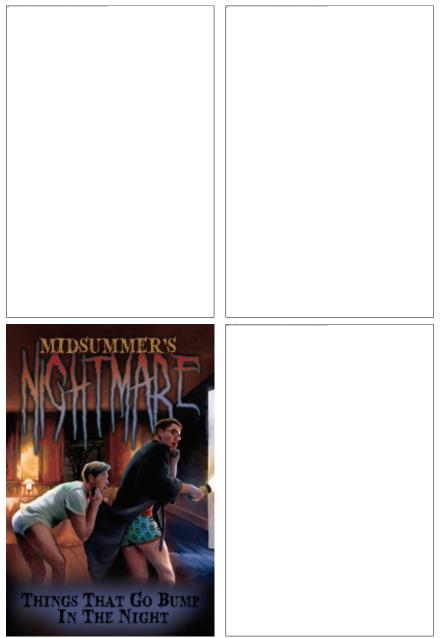
Jesse was still chortling as the door closed behind them.

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AMY LANE is a mother of four and a compulsive knitter who writes because she can't silence the voices in her head. She adores cats, knitting socks, and hawt menz, and she dislikes moths, cat boxes, and knuckle-headed macspazzmatrons. She is rarely 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 taxiing children to soccer/dance/ karate/oh my! and has learned from necessity to type like the wind. She lives in a spider-infested, 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 Wuy, and she doesn't see any reason at all for that to change.

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