

Lilacs

By Megan Derr

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"You've always said you prefer honesty, no matter how painful the truth is, so I'm going to be honest. Mother, I hate you."

"Yes, dear, that's nice," his mother said absently. She looked up from the glossy guide book that had become her bible from the moment she'd decided upon Operation Get to Know Each Other.

Personally, he wanted to know why he couldn't have gotten to know his new stepfather and stepbrother at the beach. At least there, if he wound up hating the stepbrother, he could have consoled himself by molesting a well-tanned surfer boy.

But, no. High school history teacher mother decided to drag them – kicking and screaming, he had definitely kicked and screamed the entire way – to the historical spot she'd always loved but never been able to visit.

He glared at her. "You are so totally the reason I'm gay, mother."

"Oh, now I know that isn't true. I've had six gay men tell me I almost turned them straight." She sighed. "Those were the days."

"Mom! What have I told you about telling me things like that?" Gene shuddered. "I so wish I'd taken summer classes after all."

Rolling her eyes, his mom closed her guide book and tucked it into her tote bag. "Honestly, Gene. This grouchiness needs to go away. David is used to you, but I don't want you making a bad impression on Teddy. Just because you can be an ass doesn't mean you should be one all the time."

Gene shrugged. "Best to begin as I mean to go on?"

"You are so much like your father," she replied, rolling her eyes again. "Sadly, the methods that worked on him won't work on you."

"I'd ask, but I totally don't want to know," Gene said. His mother smirked, and he held up his hands to ward her off. "Seriously, mom, shut up. I really don't want to know. Parents aren't allowed to admit they have sex. That's just gross."

"Men," his mother said. "Come on, Mr. Prude. David sent me a text while you were trying and failing to flirt with the straight boy at the counter. He's meeting us at the little coffee shop we passed on the way here."

"I really do hate you," Gene said, glaring at her. Mothers were totally not supposed to notice their sons flirting, and they definitely weren't supposed to point out when they failed. At least he'd never have to deal with a girlfriend; from what he'd seen, those were even worse than mothers.

Obediently taking the bags of stuff she'd already managed to purchase – he could hear the Visa crying already – he trailed along behind her as they hiked back to the coffee shop. "Let me go put this stuff in the car, mom."

"That's fine, dear," his mother said, her tone distracted, and Gene didn't even have to look to know she must have spotted David inside. Hiding a smile, he took the car keys from her hand and went to put all her purchases in their car, whistling as he made his way back to the coffee shop.

He supposed there were worse things in life than putting up with Ye Olde Tourist Spot if it made his mom so happy, and she could do a hell of a lot worse than David.

Even if, between the two of them, he spent an awful lot of time feeling like he was stuck in the never ending high school history class from hell.

Not that he had much room to talk – being an English major didn't really do much to get him out of the dork department. Still.

Double checking the car was locked, he stuffed the keys into a pocket of his cargo shorts and high-tailed it back to the coffee shop. He saw his mother and David – and stopped short as he drew close enough to see his new stepbrother.

"What in the hell are you doing here?" he demanded.

Theodore North, a rattlesnake in human guise. Pretty as fuck, but venomous and snotty. He bared his teeth in a mockery of a smile. "Eugene, what an unpleasant surprise."

"Please do not tell me I'm related to you now. And if you call me that again, asshole, we're going to repeat Theta Chi all over again and this time the cops won't put a stop to it."

"Oh, dear," he heard his mother said.

"Of all..." David said at the same time.

Gene barely heard them, his attention only for the asshole across from him. There was no fucking way goddamn Theodore North was his stepbrother. How the hell had he not figured this out sooner?

He could see Theodore was wondering the same thing. Man, those green eyes looked like they were about to burst into flame. Gene hoped the bastard spontaneously combusted.

"The only reason you're still alive, *Eugene*, is because those cops came."

Gene braced his hands on the table. "Yeah, you wanna put your money where your mouth is, slu—"

"Eugene Thomason!"

The unhappiness, more than the anger, in his mom's voice made him shut up. Glaring furiously at Theodore, he sat down and folded his arms across his chest.

"Teddy, that's enough," David said sternly.

He snorted in amusement that Theodore went by 'Teddy.' A warning look from his mother, however, forced him to keep his mouth shut – though he could see from the nasty look he got that his amusement had been noted.

"I cannot believe...it was the two of you who got into that ugly fight?"

"Yeah," Gene said bitterly.

He glared at the coffee table, wishing he could just get up and leave. Damn it, he'd finally mostly stopped thinking about that night. It was over a year ago. He should be over it.

Except, you know, not. Theodore – Teddy, hahaha – had been visiting his campus for the photography competition. Gene worked for the campus paper; he'd been doing interviews of the competitors.

They'd hit it off as friends immediately. Back then, he'd stupidly thought Theodore was a good guy. Hell, he probably would have made a few moves except he'd been utterly gone on his boyfriend, Robert. Theodore had taken third place, and left, but had come back to take a special summer course. Man, that'd been an awesome summer.

Until the party at the Theta Chi house, when he'd caught his boyfriend fucking his friend like the world was going to end in five more minutes.

After that, he didn't really remember much. He'd smashed Robert's stupid cheating face in, then he'd gone after Theodore. After that, he really only remembered the cops pulling them apart.

Luckily, they'd just gotten off with being read the riot act and ordered to keep their heads down the rest of the summer. A week later, Theodore had left. Gene hadn't seen or heard from the bastard since.

His mother had fallen for David nine months ago.

How in the hell had he managed to miss Theodore was his stepbrother? Man, talk about a bad movie. "What a fine comedy of errors this is," he said bitterly.

"That's enough, Gene," his mother said, sounding tired and sad.

David cleared his throat. "I think you boys should learn to put things behind you."

Gene started to speak, but a swift kick to his shin made him stop. He glared at his mother, but kept his mouth shut.

"You're brothers now, so you can't keep on like this. I wish we'd figured it out sooner, but what's done is done."

No one said anything.

His mother sighed. "I agree with David. What's done is done – I know, sweetie, don't give me that look – and nothing good will come of fighting like this."

Personally he thought they were both crackers. Would they handle it any better to know they were suddenly related to the slut who'd pretended to be his friend and had been messing around with his boyfriend the entire time?

Survey said no.

Sometimes, parents were just a little bit stupid.

"Here," his mother continued. "I purchased these for the two of you, in hopes it would give you a chance to get to know one another..." She sighed again.

Gene frowned and picked up the sheet of paper she'd set down on the table.

Historical Scavenger Hunt

Despite his best effort, Gene found himself interested. It was such a stupid, cheesy tourist trap type thing, but he'd always liked scavenger hunts. Especially big ones like this, where you had to trek fuck everywhere.

And, double plus easy because they only had to take photos of stuff, rather than lug around a bunch of crap.

He'd probably have a blast, even if it was a history lesson tourist trap, except he obviously was supposed to do it with fucking Theodore. They were signed up as a team – and the whole thing started in thirty minutes.

"I'd rather shoo—" Theodore was cut off as David abruptly stood and yanked him up, then dragged him out of the coffee shop.

"Sweetheart, I had no idea," his mother said softly, forcing Gene to look away from the pleasing sight of Theodore getting yelled at – complete with angrily waving arms.

"How could you?" he said with a sigh. "Shit, none of us figured it out. But I don't see how you expect me to get along with the bastard, not after what he did to me."

His mom bit her lip, fiddling restlessly with her iced latte. "Well, you could always try talking about it. Maybe there are things you don't know. I'd imagine a couple of drunk, angry men didn't bother to discuss things."

"He was fucking my boyfriend," Gene said flatly. "There was nothing to discuss."

"Will you at least try not to kill each other, then?" she asked. "David and I...damn it, I was so excited about the two of you meeting. David's told me so much about him, I just knew you two would get along."

It was the 'damn it' which did. His mother never cussed, except when she was really upset. The last time she'd said the f-word, they'd been standing over dad's grave, and she'd taken the lord's name in vain quite creatively.

"I'll try mom," Gene said. "I'm sorry I started acting like an ass."

"That's all right, sweetie," she said, and patted his hand. "To be honest, I would have taken it with about the same amount of grace." She gave him a Look. "Though, I'm serious about the talking about it. Men would fight a lot less if they learned to talk instead of throwing punches."

"Mom," Gene said.

"Oh, stop whining. You're twenty one, whining isn't cute anymore." She reached into her purse and pulled out a ten. "Go get something to drink, and when you get back I expect you to act civilized, all right?"

"Yeah, mom," Gene replied, and kissed her cheek before accepting the peace offering and going to order his own iced latte.

When he sat down again, he ignored Theodore, who proved his own civilized nature by ignoring Gene.

See, they could act mature.

Emphasis on the 'act' cause all he wanted to do was finish what the cops started.

"Do you have a camera?" Theodore asked suddenly.

"Huh?" Gene asked.

"A camera," Theodore repeated, and Gene could just hear the unspoken 'dumbass' at the end of it.

He nodded, figuring telling Theodore to shut the fuck up would not please his mother. "Yeah." He reached automatically to touch the digital camera tucked into another pocket of his shorts, and recalled abruptly that Theodore had helped him pick it out. They'd poured over cameras for like two hours; the shop clerk had been ready to commit murder or suicide by the time Theodore had finally given him permission to buy one.

That had been the first week of summer; he'd dragged Theodore with him because he and Robert had been arguing again and he'd wanted to have fun instead of brooding. It was when he'd first accused Theodore of being fussy.

He'd almost thrown it out, after the fight, except even he wasn't stupid enough to destroy a four hundred dollar camera.

"I've got one on me, but it's not digital," Theodore said. "I left that one back at the hotel."

"Okay," Gene replied, not really caring.

Theodore looked at him like he was an idiot. "So, you know, we'll probably need your camera for the fu—the scavenger hunt."

"Oh," Gene said, finally getting it. He looked at the piece of paper, then back at Theodore.

"Okay." Catching a warning look from his mother, he finished his latte and stood. "We'd better go, if we're going to be there on time."

"Yeah," Theodore said, and Gene wondered if that same look of pending execution was on his own face.

Dropping a kiss on his mother's cheek, he waved farewell to David and led the way outside.

They walked in silence along the streets, and Gene was briefly distracted from imagining all the lovely ways he could kill Theodore by a group of period actors. Man, he was glad they didn't have to dress that way anymore, though the boots were kinda cool.

"So what's the big deal with this place?"

"I thought David was a history buff too," Gene replied. "Shouldn't you already know?"

Theodore rolled his eyes. "My dad studies ancient history, asshole."

"Fuck you," Gene snapped.

They fell back into silence.

Theodore sighed. "Look – I know you hate me."

"You think?"

"Shut up!" Theodore snapped. "Look, I'm just trying to say – we're never going to get along again, obviously. But my dad has vowed to cut off my balls if I upset your mom again, and she seems cool, I don't *want* to upset her. So I told him we'd try to get along, and I think we should in front of them. Otherwise, I don't give a fuck. Okay?"

Gene shrugged irritably, biting down on an urge to tell Theodore to go to hell. It wasn't fair to make their parents miserable, just because he and Theodore hated each other. He knew that. He didn't like it, but he knew it. "Okay."

Theodore sighed, and if Gene didn't know better he might have thought it sounded like relief.

"Um, and call me Teddy – if you keep calling me Theodore, my dad will know something is up." He rolled his eyes.

"Sure," Gene said, and started to smile in sympathy – then realized what he was doing, and silently cursed.

Another silence fell as they walked along.

A few yards from the place where they were supposed to start the scavenger hunt, Teddy finally spoke again. "So what *is* the reason this town is so famous? You know, other than it being about the American Revolution."

"Well, it took place then, and it happened between the colonials and the redcoats, but it wasn't so much about the war – just a massive personal tragedy." Gene frowned in thought. He'd heard the story a bajillion times growing up, but had managed to avoid his mother and her history obsession since graduating. "The mayor of the town, Thomas Northfield, was staunchly against the rebellion. His son John however, was for it. He worked secretly against the redcoats, passing messages along, stuff like that. His best friend, a man named William Brown, was a redcoat. One night William found out about his

friend's deception, and they apparently had a huge fight in the mayor's house. The mayor wasn't there, it's mostly his journals and all that tell us what happened – he was in the village when an alarm went up about a fire. When they got to it, however, the house was beyond saving."

Gene drifted off, eyes moving to the old wooden tower just visible above the tops of the trees a little ways off. "They said they found the bodies in the tower; the only part of the place that didn't burn down. Northfield's journals say it looked like they died of gunshot wounds, and he bemoaned that if not for the fire, it's possible they could have been saved."

"Depressing," Teddy said. "Sounds like a movie my cousin likes to watch."

"Oh, yeah, I'm pretty sure my mom watches the same damn one," Gene said with a snort.

Then he realized he and Teddy had just gotten along, and scowled. "Come on," he snapped. "Let's fucking get this over with." Not bothering to wait, he bolted for the tourist center where the hunt would begin.

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"Dude, would you slow down?"

"Who the hell says 'dude' anymore?" Gene asked.

"Me," Teddy snapped. "Now stop moving for two goddamn seconds so I can get a few pictures."

Gene heaved an aggravated sigh, somewhat mollified when he saw a tick in Teddy's cheek.

"We're supposed to be hunting. There are exactly twenty five pictures we have to take. You're on what, number six hundred and twelve?"

"Shut the fuck up," Teddy said, and turned away to snap several pictures of some stupid purple flowers. "You never could hold still."

"Just take your damn pictures so we can finish this before next week." Gene kicked irritably at a rock, rolled his eyes, then turned and continued up the path. The dumb purple flowers lined it, and he kicked a snapped off bundle of them.

When they refused to go as far as he wanted, Gene bent and picked the bundle up.

Lilacs mean it's safe to come.

"Fuck!" Gene dropped the flowers as if burned. "What the hell was that?"

"What's your problem?" Teddy asked, coming up behind him, making Gene jump again.

Gene shook his head. "Nothing. Let's just get to the damn tower."

The tower didn't look nearly as old as he thought it should, but a sign just inside said it had recently undergone restoration. It smelled like dust and rock, and also like too many people had tramped through.

Oddly, at the moment, it was totally empty.

A flash of purple caught his eye, and Gene looked up reflexively – a small bundle of the purple flowers, dried, hung from the top of the archway.

Lilacs mean it's safe to come.

"What in the hell?"

Teddy just looked at him, then turned away to snap pictures.

Gene put a hand to his forehead, willing away the headache that had come up out of nowhere. Maybe he just needed more caffeine; he hadn't had that much in the way of coffee or pop, and normally he drank a great deal.

Shrugging it off, he shot a disgusted look at Teddy's camera happy back, then started climbing the stairs to get a picture of the plaque hung where the bodies of William and John had been found.

At the top, he shivered. Fuck, wasn't heat supposed to rise? Why was it so damn cold? Still shivering, Gene moved across the small space to the plaque. The room wasn't big, maybe...well, a lot longer than he was tall, and he was five foot eight. Big enough to be an okay bedroom, he guessed. One big room, with the plaque and display opposite the door. The plaque was actually on a stand which was set in front of a roped up area behind which mannequins or dolls or whatever they were called had been arranged in an attempt to recreate how the bodies had been found.

Morbid, but he supposed it wasn't much worse than what he saw in the million and one museums to which he'd been dragged as a child.

Shaking his head, Gene snapped the necessary picture, then wandered around. Near the fake people was a stand. Beneath heavy glass was the journal of Thomas Northfield. Gene couldn't read the worn chicken scratch – well, he didn't feel like trying – but a handy little plaque nearby provided a transcription.

It described finding the bodies long after the fire had finally stopped, the grief that came with knowing if not for the fire, they might have been able to save them. Gene frowned. If he recalled correctly, it was only later on that they figured out John had been a traitor – or, he supposed, a true American. It all depended on which side of the fence you called home.

Jeez, was he losing his mind or was it getting a hell of a lot colder?

He could see his damn breath. And was he crazy or did it suddenly smell awful flowery?

Man, it was so past time to go.

Wrapping his arms around himself, Gene turned to go – and screamed.

Stumbling back, he cracked his head against the wall. "Fuck!" His eyes watered with pain, and he swore he saw stars.

Of course, he'd take stars over ghosts any day of the year. Not that he'd seen ghosts, 'cause he hadn't. No way. He was not a crazy person.

When he opened his eyes again, everything seemed normal. The room was still cold, but his breath wasn't visible – and there were no ghosts.

Not that there had been before. Deny deny deny.

Shaking his head, making a note to hunt down some damn aspirin when they got back, he strode to the door – and ran smack into Teddy.

This time his head cracked the floor, and Gene half wished it had knocked him unconscious cause his head really fucking hurt now. Sitting up with a groan, he gingerly touched the back of his head and glared at Teddy. "Watch where you're going."

"You watch—dude, why is it so cold up here?"

Gene groaned and carefully did not think about the ghosts he had not seen. Instead, he kept glaring at Teddy for good measure.

So far he'd been too busy trying not to kill the bastard to really look at him. Now, though – now he was remembering that he really had always thought Teddy was too goddamn pretty. He'd always liked the pretty ones.

More than once that summer, he'd guiltily thought that if not for the fact he and Robert were the real deal, he would so have been hitting on Teddy. Strawberry blonde curls and a face not quite girly, but not super masculine either. If David was anything to go by, he'd acquire a distinguished look about him as he got older – assuming his prissiness didn't turn him into a wrinkly sourpuss.

They'd gone swimming once; god he hadn't been dumb enough to repeat that. He was not a fan of torture – or pissed off boyfriends, and Robert had been pissy that whole evening after.

"It is really cold up here," Teddy said. "Are we done? Can we go?"

"Who the hell was just getting on me for impatience?"

Teddy sent him a withering look.

Returning the glare full measure, he started to finally stand up. He paused as Teddy held out a hand, and reached out to knock it away – and just as the backs of their hands collided, he could abruptly see his breath.

I give you fair warning, sir. If you kiss me, I shall know you love me.

Well, there is no help for it, because I fully intend to kiss you.

Jerking back, Gene struggled to his feet and then moved further away from Teddy. "What the fuck—"

Teddy was white. Like, turned into a snowman white. The hand holding his camera was trembling alarmingly. He lifted his other hand, shaking just as badly, to point at Gene.

Or rather, Gene suspected, pointed *behind* him.

He didn't bother to turn around and look. The fact he could see his breath was more than enough for him. "Run."

Teddy turned and fled, and Gene was hot on his heels. They bolted from the tower and ran down the lilac-strewn path, down the hill and across the field that led back to the city proper.

Bracing his hands on his knees, Gene gasped and panted for breath.

"What. The. Fuck." Teddy said between gulping down air.

Gene shook his head. "Nothing," he said. "I didn't see a goddamn thing."

Teddy looked at him, then nodded. "Yeah, fuck it. Let's go get a beer or something."

Part of him started to protest, because this was, after all, the asshole who'd taken his boyfriend – but then he remembered seeing his breath, and the ghosts, and Teddy's white face--- "Fuck beer, I'm going straight for the tequila."

"Gene! Teddy!"

Groaning, Gene turned and waved to his mother, who was walking along the sidewalk toward them, arm in arm with David. "Hey, mom."

"Hey, Mrs. Thoma—" Teddy blinked. "No, I guess you'd be Mrs. Northfield, huh?" He grinned.

Gene scowled and looked away. Assholes were not allowed to be pretty and have nice smiles, god damn it. Totally against the rules.

His mother laughed. "Sweetie, you can call me Anna."

Now his mom was calling someone else sweetie? What the hell? Not fair. If Teddy didn't knock it the fuck off with his sheep's clothing, Gene was going to beat him until it was obvious Teddy was really a wolf.

Stuffing his hands in his pockets, Gene waited sullenly for his mother to stop being nice to Teddy.

"Did you boys have fun on the scavenger hunt?" Anna asked.

Gene looked up from staring a hole in the ground, eyes catching Teddy's. "We, uh, forgot about it, mom."

"Really?" His mother said, and oh jeez she had that smug little smile that always meant she wasn't saying 'I told you so.'

God, he hated parents. He was twenty-one, didn't that mean he was too old for this shit?

He was so entirely doing tequila shots tonight. Until he forgot about stepbrothers, asshole boyfriends, and ghosts. "Look, can we go get dinner or something?"

Anna rolled her eyes. "I miss the days where I could give you a beating. Honestly, Gene, where are those manners I know I gave you?"

"Left them in my other pants," Gene said, but with a smile so she knew he was joking and wouldn't knock him upside the head.

The look she gave him said he wasn't fooling anyway, but she'd let it go for now. Great, that meant a talking to once they were alone. Note to self: do not be alone with mom.

"We made reservations at a nice steakhouse up the hill," David said. "It's walking distance, unless you boys are worn out from tramping around the forest all day. Did you get any good pictures, Teddy?"

"Lots," Teddy said, face brightening, and he started talking a mile a minute about everything he'd seen and photographed to death.

Gene listened with half an ear. Teddy had been busy with his photos the day they'd met; Gene had gone with him to the darkroom to interview him while Teddy worked. He'd never been in a darkroom before – it had been weird, dark and chemically, the different students working silently except to quietly consult one another on things Gene didn't even remotely understand. A corner of the world he'd never seen, weird but cool.

Scowling at himself for remembering something positive in regards to Teddy, he kicked at a stray rock and wished the evening were over already so he could get to consoling himself with agave juice.

He jumped as his arm received a hard pinch, and started to snarl a protest – then saw the gleam in his mother's eye and made a face. "Did you buy out all the stores yet, mom?"

"Not quite," David said, breaking away from talking with Teddy. "They closed before she could finish."

"Hahaha," Anna replied. "Knock it off or I'll buy each of you the ugliest t-shirts I can find and make you wear them."

"Yes, ma'am," David and Gene chorused, while Teddy only laughed at them.

Gene resisted an urge to kick another rock. Damn it, he didn't want Teddy acting like he actually fit or something. He'd fallen for the 'I'm a nice pretty boy' act once. He wasn't going to fall for it a second time.

Even now he could still remember how they'd looked. He'd gone to find them to see if they wanted to go home and play video games or something – and instead found Robert fucking Teddy into the mattress.

He balled his fists up against an urge to hit something. One year later, it still felt like it had happened yesterday.

"Sweetie, get your head out of the clouds before you fall on your face," Anna said sharply.

"Huh? Uh, yeah, mom. Sorry." Gene shook his head and tried to stop thinking about it.

He sighed in relief when they finally reached the steakhouse. All he had to do was get through the next two hours or so and then he could slink off to be by himself. No stupid backstabbing friend turned stepbrother, no glaring mother – and no ghosts.

Oh, gods, he wasn't thinking about the ghosts he hadn't seen and how had he managed to almost forget about them? He shuddered and wished they'd stayed forgotten.

"Are you all right, sweetie?"

"What?" Gene blinked at his mom, then shook his head. "Yeah, fine. I felt a chill."

He trailed along behind his mother and David as the host guided them through the restaurant to a table in the back that had an awesome view of the forest – including the damned tower, and it figured he got the seat that put him in the perfect place to stare at it all night.

Making a face, he turned away – and caught Teddy's eyes, and he could see that Teddy knew why he was upset.

Jerking his gaze away, he looked at the menu until their waiter appeared to take their drink orders.

"Margarita," he said. "Plenty of salt, and an extra shot of tequila with it, please."

Teddy chuckled. "You and your tequila."

"What can I say? Viva la Mexico. Real men drink tequila."

David laughed. "I'll stick with the beer. I haven't touched tequila since my college days. There's a good two, three days of my life I don't remember, and tequila is to blame for it."

Gene scoffed. "You're all wusses." He looked down his nose at his mom. "Especially wine drinkers."

Anna rolled her eyes, but smiled. "Stop heckling us and figure out what you want to eat."

"Steak, duh," Gene replied. "What sort of man orders anything else in a steakhouse?"

"The same kind of man who orders a margarita?" Teddy teased.

"Hahaha, it is to laugh," Gene said loftily. "You be quiet."

He realized a minute later he'd just joked with Teddy.

Damn it. What the hell was his problem?

Glaring at his menu, Gene sat in silence until the waiter returned with their drinks and took their food orders. Ordering onion rings for his appetizer, and a prime rib for dinner, he then slammed back his extra shot of tequila. Usually he dumped it in the margarita, since restaurants never put enough in, but right now he wanted to feel the tequila with no interference.

He ignored his mom, whom he knew was giving him a worried look.

In fact, he was pretty certain the silence around the table was his fault. Damn it. Why was he the bad guy? Didn't David care at all that his fucking son had spread his legs for Gene's boyfriend?

He drank his margarita and stifled a sigh. He'd agreed to a truce, so he should probably act like it. "So are we getting dessert here, or did you scope out a better place while you cleaned out the stores, mom?"

"I saw an ice cream parlor, but it didn't look terribly promising," Anna replied, some of her tension easing. "I say we eat here, assuming we have room by the time we finish the main course."

"Oh, I'll have room," Gene said.

Teddy grinned. "Especially if there's something chocolate on the menu."

Anna rolled her eyes as David chimed his agreement. "If any one of you whines about a sore stomach later, I'm going to laugh at you."

Gene snickered and drank more of his margarita, content to sit back and listen with half an ear. Soon he'd be back at school; all he had to do was get through the next few days, and damned if he'd let stupid Teddy ruin it all.

He was jerked from his thoughts by Teddy.

"So, Mrs.—um, Anna—Do you know of any ghost stories about the tower and stuff?"

Anna laughed. "Why," she teased, "did you boys see a ghost?"

"Hahaha," Gene replied, and gulped his tequila.

"Just curious," Teddy said. "It's, um, sort of a creepy tower."

Laughing again, Anna toyed with the stem of her wine glass. "As a matter of fact, and Gene should know this story, my brother – Uncle Thomas, dear – swore up and down he saw a ghost."

"I don't remember that story," Gene said.

"You were probably ignoring me, then," Anna said, sighing and shaking her head.

Gene shrugged. "Probably. So tell us now."

Anna pursed her lips in thought. "He visited this place, oh, thirty or so years ago now. It was one of his research things, you know how your uncle is, dear."

"Yeah, crazy," Gene said. He flapped his hand at Teddy and David. "He's more obsessed than mom about the American Revolution."

"Especially after he came here and purportedly saw ghosts," Anna said with a sigh. "From then on, he'd have nothing to do with this place."

Gene snorted. "I sure as hell wouldn't blame him."

Ann sipped her wine. "Gene, sweetheart, are you certain you don't remember this?"

Gene drank the last of his margarita and signaled the waiter to bring him another. "Trust me, mom, I'd remember. I know he's crazy, and I sort of remember now that you said he came here before, but I don't remember him seeing ghosts."

"You didn't mention that before," Teddy said.

"I prefer not to discuss crazy relatives unless forced, and it's not like it makes a difference," Gene said, thanking the waiter as his drink was brought with the appetizers. He attacked his onion rings with a vengeance, hoping they'd drop the stupid ghost talk.

No such luck. His mother resumed the moment her wine had been refilled and the waiter vanished.

"He swore up and down he saw their ghosts," she said. "William and John. They 'stood there plain as day, John with a nosegay of lilacs. He said they acted in unspeakable fashion – though he never bothered to tell me what the heck unspeakable meant – and then he ran away."

Teddy frowned. "Lilacs? That's those purple flowers all over the place up there, right?"

"Yes," Anna replied. "The settlers planted them shortly after arriving, including the woman who eventually became Thomas' wife – and John's mother. Her name was Elizabeth. There's an old story about Thomas and his wife, actually, and those flowers. He recorded it in his journal. Apparently when they were both young, Thomas was rather a poor man, and Elizabeth's father didn't approve of Thomas courting his daughter."

She paused to sip more of her wine, and Gene realized with dismay he was hooked. All he could remember was that single stupid sentence. God, he really hoped it wasn't the ghosts invading his brain. No, he wasn't thinking about it. Ghosts bad.

"Obviously, parental approval was never a requirement for young people," Anna continued. "Elizabeth's father was often away on business – he was mayor, back then. Thomas would sneak over to see her whenever her father was gone. To let him know it was safe to come, Elizabeth would hang a sprig of lilacs over the door."

Gene suddenly felt extremely cold and supremely freaked out.

Lilacs mean it's safe to come.

"Sweetie."

He jumped at the sound of his mother's voice. "W-what?"

"Are you all right?" Anna said, frowning in concern. She smiled faintly. "You look as though you've seen a ghost."

"Haha," Gene replied, and drained his margarita.

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Gene was drunk. He was more than willing to admit that. It had been his goal, and given the amount of piss he was leaving in the bushes, he had more than reached that goal.

Zippering up, he continued to stumble his way through the woods. He shouldn't be wandering around dark woods at night while pickled, some part of his brain said, but the rest of his brain liked being pickled and didn't much care for the spoilsport in his head.

Ignoring said spoilsport, he continued on his way.

Stumbling, he reached clumsily out for balance and instead only took a branch of something with him.

Flowers. Purple.

When the stupid damn sentence echoed in his head again, Gene flipped slowly over onto his back to glare up at the trees and stars. "Shut up," he said.

He shivered as a breeze picked up, and he could see his breath again and he should probably start running but he wasn't really certain he could move...

You looked like that once, as I recall. Not your finest moment, sweet.

I believe I told you not to let me have quite so much rum.

Ah, but you do wicked wicked things when you indulge in rum.

One indulgence does generally lead to another.

I suppose we should not leave him here.

He's made of sterner stuff than that, love. It was not the rum that killed me, after all.

You are really quite hopeless.

"I don't want to hear more voices," Gene said plaintively. He slowly sat up, bracing himself on his arms, and stared blearily at the figures before him. They looked like they'd fallen out of a history book, made all the more surreal by the way the white clouds of his breath gave brief illusions of mist.

Fuck fuck fuck.

He hadn't slunk off and gotten drunk just to put up with more of this shit.

Standing up, only falling down once in the process, he turned away from the ghosts and moved as quickly as his drunk ass permitted.

He swore as he realized he'd gone to the tower – downhill, dumbass, not uphill, was the way home.

"Gene?"

Jumping, letting out a startled cry, Gene whipped around. "Don't fucking do that!" He groaned. "Shit, I think you just mostly killed my buzz, asshole."

"What the hell are you doing out here while you're drunk?" Teddy hissed.

"Why are you following me?"

Teddy hesitated, something flickering across his face that Gene was still too drunk to figure out. Not that he wanted to, mind. "I saw you drinking on the balcony, then suddenly you were gone. Given the way you like to crash pretty much anywhere, I figured I'd go make certain you weren't sleeping in the fountain or the kitchen or something. I thought you'd gone to bed, but when I went outside to make certain you weren't out there, I saw you walking out of town."

"Brilliant, Sherlock," Gene said, slumping against the heavy wooden door.

"Come on, idiot, let's go back to the hotel."

"Fuck you," Gene replied, and jerked – stumbled – away as Teddy tried to touch him. Keeping one hand on the tower, he moved around it to the areas that were picketed off as being where the original house had lain.

The tower, he recalled, had only one door. It could only be accessed from inside the house. John and William had fled to the tower in hopes the blaze would not reach that, except that didn't make sense because didn't William try to kill John and they wound up killing each other or something?

Probably he was forgetting something.

Giving in to a drunken impulse, he ducked under the ropes that warded off where the house used to be and stumbled around. Weren't they talking about rebuilding the house? He thought mom had said something like that, once. Or maybe he read it. Hard to remember.

He stopped, sniffed. Why did it suddenly smell like smoke?

"Gene!"

"Go away," he snapped. "I came out here so I didn't have to put up with you, you know."

"I know," Teddy said.

Even drunk, Gene was struck hard by the pain in those two words. What? Stopping his aimless wandering of the nonexistent house, he turned to face Teddy, not pulling away when a hand wrapped around his upper arm.

"Come on," Teddy said. "We need to go back."

Gene didn't move. "Why?" he asked, hating that his voice cracked. His hand moved of its own volition, reaching up to touch Teddy's cheek, his lips.

Teddy drew a sharp breath, and Gene suddenly wished they had more than a full moon and flashlights by which to see. Maybe it was better not to see clearly, though, because if it was in the dark it didn't count, right? Or something.

The lips beneath his fingers were warm, almost hot, and so soft. He'd wondered before, alone where no one could catch him, if Teddy's lips would be soft. Unable to help it, Gene leaned forward, hearing Teddy's breath hitch again, puffs of white in the dar—

Oh, fuck.

He could see Teddy realized it at the same moment he did, and broken out of his stupid fucking trance, Gene realized the smell of smoke was even stronger.

"Oh shit oh shit oh *shit*," Teddy said. He stumbled back, dropping his flashlight.

Gene spun around, not quite sober enough to remember he didn't want to turn around, and tried to cuss but couldn't remember how to make his jaw work.

A ghost. A different ghost. Not the ones he'd seen before. This one was fat, and kinda prissy – and sort of looked like David if David were fat and prissy, what the fuck was he doing thinking that – and oh shit the guy had a gun pointed at them.

Wait, were ghost guns dangerous?

Filthy sodomite. You won't continue to corrupt my son.

"What?" Gene demanded. He tried to move, but between the cold and the fear and the tequila he was not so much with the being able to move.

The ghost cocked its ghost gun and stomped toward him, and Gene wondered what people would say when they realized he'd died of a heart attack. Probably something about too much tequila. Right now he'd really like more.

Filthy sodomite.

Gene whimpered and told his legs to move, damn it.

"Move!" Teddy said, jerking him back, pulling him, shoving him over the rope barrier and then following after him – catching his foot on the rope and Gene abruptly found himself with a lap full of Teddy.

Pushing Teddy off, ignoring the part of him that mourned the loss – not the time, dumbass, not the time, ghosts were kind of a big fucking deal – he scrambled to his knees and looked at where the ghost had tried to put a ghost bullet in his brain.

Gone.

Gene groaned and slumped on the ground. "What the fuck, man?"

"Hell if I know. The next time you get drunk and wander off into a forest, I'm not coming after you."

Though his heart was still beating fast enough it felt like it might pop, other issues were beginning to drown out the ghosts. "Why the fuck did you come after me?"

"I told you—"

"Fuck that, man. It's not your problem if I'm drunk and stupid."

Teddy frowned. "I was worried, excuse the fuck out of me."

"Excuse me if I don't want to be helped by a backstabbing asshole!"

"So you don't want my help, but you were more than willing to kiss me before the ghost showed up?"

White hot fury poured through Gene, and he knew most of it was anger at himself, but god damn it did Teddy not get what he'd done? How much it had fucking hurt to see—

Snarling a curse, he shoved Teddy back and stood, then ran as fast as he fucking could back to the hotel, stumbling and tripping and crashing his way through the dark and the dirt and the falling were making his eyes sting and he so wished this fucking vacation was over.

Ignoring the looks of the night clerk at the front desk, flashing his hotel card so the asshole wouldn't try to ask him to leave, he stomped through the halls and up the stairs to the third floor, and only with an effort didn't slam his door shut.

Not caring that he was filthy and needed a shower, Gene dropped down on the nearest bed and promptly passed out.

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It didn't matter how many times he told himself it wasn't true, he just wasn't buying it. Even to himself, he could only tell so many lies.

He'd tried to kiss Teddy last night.

Maybe he should stop getting drunk when surrounded by backstabbing friends and ghosts.

Oh, god, he was so not thinking about the ghosts. He'd rather think about stupid Teddy....

No, no, the ghosts were way less confusing.

The fat ugly ghost had called him a sodomite. So the old dude was a gay basher. Most people were back in those days. Fire and brimstone about it, really. Gene sniggered at the idea of the founding fathers at a gay pride parade.

Of course, that still didn't explain why the fuck he was seeing ghosts. Or hearing them.

Why the fuck did he remember last night? Wasn't it just like stupid alcohol to erase the fun stuff but let you remember the bad stuff? Maybe he should stop drinking.

Yeah, right. Fuck that. He'd just lock himself in his room next time. Drunk self attempting to remember where sober self had put the key would probably amuse him for hours.

Rolling his eyes, Gene stopped to take a drink of water, then capped his water bottle and continued walking.

Not that he really wanted to be back in the woods, but his only other options for carrying out Operation Avoid Teddy Like the Plague were to stay in his hotel room all day, or stay in town where his mother could locate him for debriefing, since as per usual his mother knew something was afoul in Denmark.

So the nature trails it was, and he fully intended to stay out here until almost dark – and he was not going anywhere near the fucking tower. Oh no. He was going exactly opposite the stupid tower with gay bashing ghosts and gay ghosts and—

Oh, hey, that was right. Angry ghost had said something about not corrupting his son. Had... Gene frowned, some part of his brain wondering what the fuck the rest of it was doing even thinking about it.

Just pretending, for the sake of argument, that the ghosts in the tower were definitely John and William, and they had been gay, then that would mean the trigger happy ghost was John's father, Thomas. Oh, damn, maybe he'd caught them. Fuck, he bet back then the penalty was a hell of a lot worse than it was now – and now could get pretty damn awful.

Wow, what a story that would make. Daddy killed dirty sodomite son and son's sodomite friend, hides evidence with fire!

Laughing out loud at the dumb idea, Gene shoved away stupid thoughts of ghosts. No, if he was going to think up crazy forest ideas then he was going to daydream about camping with a whole slew of pretty boys at his disposal—

Except even in his head, they all bore a striking resemblance to Teddy. That was entirely unfair. The asshole was screwing up his real life, did he have to screw up Gene's fantasies too?

Damn it, what had he been thinking?

Angry that his afternoon was being ruined by fucking Teddy anyway, he stomped through the forest, wishing he'd taken the red path instead of the beginner's green because he probably would have killed himself by now.

He was jerked from plotting Teddy's demise for the millionth time by the sound of thunder. Looking up, Gene swore loudly. That was certainly going to make the day more interesting. Well, fuck it. He'd rather catch pneumonia and die.

"You know, as much racket as you make, I wouldn't blame any hunters for mistaking you for a grizzly."

Gene stiffened, then turned around and glared. "Yeah, well, grizzlies don't live around here, and that land is protected. So there."

Teddy looked at him like he was an idiot, then bent to take a picture of only a fellow weird artist would know what. "Go away."

"It's a public forest."

"Well – I was here first."

Teddy's replied was drowned out by a nasty crack of thunder. Fuck, it hadn't been that loud a minute ago. Of course, he realized too late how much quieter the forest had gotten as he walked, and quite suddenly it was getting really damn dark.

"Shit."

"Agreed," Teddy said. "Come on, we'd better head back or our parents will freak. Did you bring your cell?"

"I don't get reception for shit out here," Gene said with a grimace.

Teddy sighed. "I forgot mine when I left this morning. So we'd better get back on the double, before—"

Even as he spoke, thunder boomed, as though on top of them, followed by lighting. Shit, he never wanted to see lightning that up close again.

He started to head back the way he'd come.

"No, this way," Teddy said. "We're three quarters of the way done with our trails – I assume you were on green, I was on yellow – so it'll be faster to finish them than back track."

Gene would have argued, but the sudden arrival of hard, heavy rain forced him to admit there were better things to argue about and they could argue them later. Teddy had started jogging, and Gene chased after him, swearing whenever he slipped and nearly wiped.

There were times when he absolutely hated his life.

Ahead of him Teddy abruptly stopped. Too late. Gene crashed into him, arms wrapping around his waist for balance, barely managing to keep them both upright.

"What the hell man?" He yelled as loud as he could.

Teddy didn't reply, merely yanked his arms away and continued forward.

Then Gene figured out the problem. They'd somehow managed to loop around to the tower. The stupid evil haunted tower.

"No, no, no!" He bellowed, but Teddy either didn't hear him or was ignoring him.

Swearing, Gene wiped his wet hair from his face and followed Teddy. He wasn't sure what the hell the point was, because obviously the tower was closed and locked. Whoever ran it had obviously paid attention to the weather and gotten home in time.

Except when they reached it, Teddy pushed and the door opened smooth as anything. It didn't even creak. Well, it might have. Gene didn't think he'd hear even a damned gunshot in rain like this.

They were both panting as they stepped inside, and god Gene hoped they weren't around when the owners or whatever returned cause he was pretty sure dripping all over an historic monument was not fly.

"Man, I don't like being back here."

"Just see if you can tell your folks we're okay," Teddy said. "That storm is only getting worse, and even at a run it's a good hike back into the town itself. We're better off waiting it out a bit here, even if here is Spook Tower."

Nodding, Gene obeyed – swearing at his phone for a good ten minutes before he finally got a text to squeak through. Shoving the phone in his pocket, he looked at Teddy.

Who, despite being water logged, looked insanely good. Or maybe because he was waterlogged. Yeah, he remembered he'd had problems with a wet Teddy before – okay, thinking about something else now.

There was a flash of light, pulling Gene from his thoughts, and he blinked at what he saw. "You're taking pictures now?"

"Have to do something to pass the time," Teddy said, voice curt – and Gene realized he probably wasn't the only one playing the avoidance game today.

Mouth tight, he turned away – and wound up facing the door. "Brilliant, Holmes," he muttered to himself. Without really thinking about it, he reached up to pull down the lilacs over the door – but the voice didn't echo through his head.

It was a dried bundle, kinda like what his mom did with her roses. They smelled flowery, but not in a bad way.

Heaving a sigh, realizing he was more bored and agitated than he felt like admitting, Gene turned away and quickly climbed the winding stairs to the top of the tower.

He really hoped the ghosts would stay the fuck away; as wet as he was, adding a spooky chill to the mix would not be fun. In fact, he was starting to think he'd be warmer if he was actually wearing less. Stripping off his t-shirt, Gene hung it from the railing that had been added – not historically accurate, but nobody liked a lawsuit.

At the top of the stairs, he waited to see if the temperature started to drop, then called himself a wuss and finally entered the room.

He supposed he should be grateful the fake people weren't moving – but the day wasn't over yet, and neither was the vacation, and if he got attacked by gay bashing ghosts, why not fake people too?

Sighing, he moved to the encased journal – the pages had been flipped. Bored enough this time to puzzle out what it was saying, he bent over the case and shoved back his stupid dripping hair, squinting to make out the old words.

Some time later, he jumped at the sound of sneakers on stone. "Stop doing that."

"What?" Teddy asked.

"Sneaking up behind me."

"Stop living with your head in the clouds," Teddy retorted.

"Whatever, man," Gene said, and turned back to the journal, listening to the faint sounds of the camera as Teddy took pictures of every part of the room.

Eventually he made his way to Gene and the journal. "I'm amazed they leave this out – don't they usually keep that sort of thing under heavy lock and key?"

Gene shrugged, trying not to notice the way Teddy's t-shirt ever so slightly was touching his bare arm. They were close enough he could feel Teddy's body heat. Shivering, telling himself he was cold, he made himself focus on the question. "Usually, yeah. But this has never been a major major hot spot. Yay, noble colonial dying for the cause, tragically killed by best friend – but it's mostly one of those things which manages to get overlooked. I mean, there wasn't a big showdown or battle or anything, and only one house burned down, not the entire town. So it gets missed; I guess no one cares enough to damage property. Hell, I haven't even seen anyone but us visit the tower."

"True," Teddy said, then lifted his camera, adjusted something, and took several pictures. "What's it say?"

"He's talking about lilac – how lately he's noticed that John has been hanging a sprig of it over the door from time to time, and it makes him smile and think of Elizabeth, and he wonders what girl his son is sweet on but won't tell him about. He says he'll bide his time, and not pester John, but he is mighty curious."

Teddy snorted. "Girl. Ha! If we what we saw last night actually happened, and while I don't like seeing ghosts it's kinda hard to play the denial game at this point, then it sounds to me like ol' Thomas caught his son doing the nasty with dear William."

"I was thinking the same thing, earlier today," Gene said. "It would make sense, especially with the way they tried to escape the fire. I mean, if William was trying to kill John, and they both wound up shooting each other, why would they try to save themselves by climbing the tower?"

"Death by fire would certainly make me reconsider my options," Teddy said. "Even if I was a traitor who was shot by and then shot my best friend."

"The fat guy looked like you, and I realized later that John sort of did, too. Well, the fat guy looked more like your dad, but you know."

Teddy shrugged. "I didn't notice. I was too busy noticing that William looked an awful lot like you."

"Huh," Gene said, and couldn't think of anything else to say. Maybe they were both just crazy.

"Did he really look like me?" Teddy said. "Cause my great-great grandmother always said we have revolution in our blood, it'd be kinda cool if she was actually right."

Gene didn't know why he did it – they were talking again, despite everything. But he was mad about the almost kiss, mad about the ghosts, mad about being fucking betrayed. "Oh, probably. If he really did betray the British by siding with the revolution, well – we know where you get your habit of backstabbing friends, don't we?"

"I didn't backstab you!" Teddy snapped, and Gene drew up short as he realized that in his anger, Teddy had almost thrown his camera.

Angrily turning away, Teddy carefully put the camera away in his bag. When he stood, his face was pale, and he wouldn't look at Gene. "Believe whatever the fuck you want, but I didn't backstab you – not – oh, forget it." Stalking away, he made for the door.

Gene opened his mouth to say something, though he didn't know what, but even as he started to speak the door to the stairs abruptly slammed shut. And just like that he could see his breath.

"Not again," Teddy said on a moan.

Moving away from the fake bodies and the journal, Gene headed for the window – but halfway there, it felt like his arm was grabbed, and as easy as that he was all but thrown at Teddy.

They crashed into the door, both swearing loudly.

Gene attempted to move away, shivering in the awful cold. "S-sorry."

"Not your fault," Teddy managed, doing plenty of shivering of his own.

Making a face, Gene stepped back – and found himself shoved forward again.

"This would almost be funny, except it's not," Teddy said in a strained voice.

"No shit," Gene said. "What the fuck?"

He realized suddenly he still held the lilac, completely crushed now in his fist.

Talk.

Gene frowned, and could see from his face that Teddy had heard it as well. He attempted to move away again, and once more was rather rudely shoved up against Teddy.

Talk.

"Are they fucking butting their noses into this?" Gene asked in outrage.

Teddy laughed weakly. "I think so."

Gene sighed, shifting slightly to glare at the ghosts he could just see on the far end of the room – one holding a nosegay of lilacs, and the way they stood next to each other made it plain they were definitely evil, evil sodomites.

Talk.

It was William talking – and Teddy was right, the ghost did sort of look like him. That was double plus freaky.

"Fine," he snapped. If he was going to be crazy, then damn it he was going to be crazy his way. "Go the fuck away."

Smirking, the ghosts faded.

Gene shoved away, letting his arms fall to his sides, balling his hands into fists. "So talk."

Teddy just glared at him.

"Man, I don't want to be here the rest of my life, and I'm pretty sure that's what the damned ghosts were threatening. So just tell me what the fuck happened, then I can call you a liar, and we can go on our merry way."

"You are such a bitch," Teddy said, but rather than snap the words, he merely sighed them. "Fine. Whatever. I'm so doing the exchange program to Australia now, and I'm not leaving it." He swallowed and started attempting to stare a hole in the floor. "He said you guys had broken up."

Gene blinked. "Fuck what?"

Teddy sighed again. "It made sense at the time, especially since I'd had more than a little jungle juice. I mean, you hadn't seen him or talked about him all fucking day. You guys had done nothing but argue all fucking summer. He'd gone to the party ahead of you, and you guys avoided each other all night."

He looked up briefly, then his gaze skittered away again. "I'd gone upstairs to get away from the noise and rest a bit. Robert came up a little while later. He looked gloomy, and I asked what was wrong. He said – he said you'd broken up with him, that you'd—" He laughed bitterly. "He said you'd fallen in love with someone else. It hurt, god it hurt, because I'd kinda been hoping you'd break up with Robert so I—"

"So you could hook up with him?" Gene asked bitterly, feeling that knife in his gut all over again.

"No, you dumbass!" Teddy snapped, green eyes blazing as he finally looked up. "So I could hook up with you – I fucking hated you were with him, when you guys couldn't go a day without bickering about something and we had such fun together and I thought—Then he said you were in love with someone else, and I sure as fuck knew you weren't in love with me cause wouldn't you be with me if you'd finally dumped Robert?" He sighed and rubbed his forehead. "I was feeling sorry for myself, and I thought Robert was feeling sorry for himself, and we'd both drunk just enough to be stupid – or at least I had – and so we decided to...and it was stupid, and I'm sorry, but I thought you'd chosen someone else and I thought Robert actually got why I was upset. I didn't realize..."

"That he was using you to get to me," Gene said quietly. It made an awful sort of sense. Robert had always had a nasty streak that flared up when his ugly jealous streak stirred. Hell, that's why they'd been fighting so much that summer – Robert thought he was sleeping with practically everyone he talked to, and he'd said more than once that Gene needed to stop hanging around Teddy.

And Gene had felt guilty, because he had sort of secretly wished at times that he was sleeping with Teddy, and in his heart of hearts he knew why he'd really been mad that night. It was sort of hard to deny it now. "I was avoiding him that night because I didn't want another fight, since I sort of dreaded it would turn into one of us dumping the other and I didn't want to do that at a fucking party."

Teddy eyed him warily. "You...believe me?"

"Yeah," Gene said, and it was hard to meet Teddy's eyes but god damn it. He hesitated – then said fuck it and went for it. "To be honest, I think what hurt me most was that you chose Robert instead of me. Hell, I hadn't thought you guys even liked each other, really."

"We didn't," Teddy said. "It was just...a lot of fucking stupidity that night."

Gene didn't know what to say. "I'm an asshole."

Teddy laughed. "Yeah, well, that night wasn't exactly a stellar example of my character."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Gene asked, reaching out despite himself to touch like he had the night before, stroking Teddy's cheeks, and then the soft lips.

The laughs were warm puffs of air against his fingers. "You kept insisting you and Robert were a done deal. I flirted like crazy, and sometimes I thought...but I figured I was wrong."

If he ever saw Robert again, Gene decided, he was going to kill the son of a bitch. "I'm sorry."

"It—it's okay. I mean we both were really fucking stupid that night."

Gene shrugged. He cupped Teddy's cheek, unable to stop touching, and in his defense Teddy really didn't seem to mind. "So can I kiss you? Or am I on probation or something?"

The temperature in the room abruptly dropped.

Teddy laughed. "I'd say probation, but I waited a long fucking time for you to kiss me and I think the ghosts are saying you don't have a choice."

"Well, even I know when to shut up and do as I'm told," Gene said, and closed the space between them, sandwiching Teddy between him and the door, kissing like he'd always kinda sort really wanted to kiss Teddy.

How long the kiss went on, he didn't know, but when he finally pulled away he realized the rain had slowed down – and the room was much warmer than it had been.

He let out a startled cry as they abruptly tumbled forward – and onto the floor, and he realized the fucking ghosts had opened the door just so they'd fall again. "I don't like ghosts."

Teddy laughed and yanked his head down, and Gene forgot all about stupid ghosts.

"We should get back," Teddy said finally. "Now that the rain is slowing, I bet your mom is harassing every official she can find."

Gene snorted. "Probably." Standing up, he held out a hand and helped Teddy to his feet.

Retrieving his damp shirt from the banister, he pulled it on with a grimace, then led the way downstairs. It was only as he saw the archway that he realized he'd lost the lilacs somewhere in the fray.

Well, the ghosts liked them more than he did. Let them have them.

He started whistling as they walked through the light drizzle, sunlight already beginning to peek through the lingering rain clouds. The lilac bushes had suffered in the storm, they were strewn everywhere across the path to and from the tower.

"You should take the posy with you, to remind you of me when we part."

"My love, I have no need of reminders, for you never leave my thoughts. I need only know when it is safe to come to you."

"One day I will plant them everywhere, and you will know it is safe to come, and stay, and never leave me."

"For a day such as that, I would wait an eternity."

"Stupid ghosts, shut up already," Gene muttered. "They're as sappy as my mom."

Teddy laughed and reached out to take his hand, tugging him close and kissing his cheek.

Gene smiled despite himself, and reached up to brush a stray lilac petal from Teddy's hair, and did not let go of the hand in his as they walked back toward town in a silence that was pleasant, and happy, and so much like the way they used to be he was half afraid he was dreaming.

Close to town, and he could already see his mother, sheesh, Teddy broke the silence. "So—is this, like, incest or something?"

"Shut up," Gene said, and gave him a playful shove before bolting towards his mother, a laughing Teddy hot on his heels.