

A man with dark hair is shown in profile, looking out towards a city at night. The city lights are reflected in the water in the foreground. The overall color palette is warm, with oranges and yellows from the city lights and the sunset sky.

Lynn
Lorenz

Remember
Me?

REMEMBER ME?

...“You know him?” the detective asked.

“A long time ago.” Chad stepped out of the way for the nurse to insert an IV into the back of Jeff’s hand. “Back in high school.” Summer camp on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, to be exact.

“What do you know about his family?” The detective had his pen out now and was scribbling on a small notebook.

“Not much. I heard his parents had been killed recently, that’s all.” Chad had never admitted to anyone that he’d kept track of Jeff over the years. Why would he? It had been a long time ago at summer camp. They’d never seen each other since then. He’d never called Jeff. Never kept the promise to keep in touch.

But Chad had never forgotten the boy who’d awakened the knowledge in Chad’s heart that he was gay. He’d never forgotten those blue eyes or the very first time he’d kissed another boy.

Fuck.

Chad ran his hands through his hair and exhaled. “Nurse, we’ll need x-rays and a full blood work-up. Let’s see what damage’s been done here.”

He pushed every screaming emotion back under the rock in his heart and methodically and precisely went over the patient’s body to ascertain the extent of his injuries.

Chad halted in his tracks as Jeff groaned. His eyes fluttered open, impossibly lush black lashes surrounding those killer blue eyes that had haunted Chad’s dreams. For a moment, Jeff’s gaze wandered around the room, passed Chad, then returned and locked on Chad’s face.

Jeff frowned. “You never called,” he whispered. He closed his eyes and flat-lined...

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Pinky Swear
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REMEMBER ME?

BY

LYNN LORENZ

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REMEMBER ME?
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Thanks to my readers, and to my hometown, New Orleans.

CHAPTER 1

The furious bleating of Chad's beeper woke him from the first sleep he'd had in two days. He rolled off the cot in the doctor's on-call room, stuck his feet into his loafers, and staggered through the swinging door.

Now fully awake, he hit a dead run all the way to the door of the stairs and pounded down them to the emergency room. As he burst through the door, he nearly knocked down a nurse.

"Heh!" she exclaimed as she protected the tray of blood samples she carried from spilling.

"Sorry," he yelled over his shoulder, but didn't stop.

Another nurse up ahead waved him to the room. "They just brought him in. Assault victim. Multiple contusions. Possible internal injuries," she barked at him as she thrust a chart into his

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hands.

He barely glanced at the patient, who the EMTs were shifting from their gurney to the ER room bed. Behind them, a man hulked in the doorway. Since Katrina a year ago, most of the hospitals in New Orleans had closed down, leaving the few smaller ones not flooded to handle the returning population. Their small ER stayed on constant alert.

Chad glanced at the victim, registering all the visible signs of the assault. Swollen lips and eyes, blood-caked hair indicating a head injury, torn, bloody clothing. He'd seen the same things a thousand times in his stint as an ER doctor over the last three years.

But something made Chad look twice. Something that tweaked a long-forgotten memory. Something that sent his stomach into a freefall.

"Do we have an ID?" Chad asked, hearing the tremble in his own voice, hating it, and hoping no one else had heard it.

The man in a rumpled dark suit stepped forward. A cop. Actually, a detective. Chad had seen his share of them by now to spot one. "We found his wallet. They beat him, took his backpack, and left him for dead."

"Name?" Chad stared at the young man's face as he ran his hands over the guy's arms and legs to check for breaks.

If he'd bothered to look up, he would have seen the nurse staring at him. He never asked about his patients. Not their names, not about family, nothing. Too risky. With names came emotions, and the only way Chad had been able to follow his dream of being an ER doctor had been to cut off his emotions. At least that's the excuse he'd told himself.

Be quick, be professional, be cold.

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“Jeffrey Stone. Twenty-six. Student at Tulane.” The big detective shrugged. “That’s all we have on him. We’re trying to reach the family now.”

Chad’s heart stopped. Dead. *It couldn’t be, could it?* “Are you sure it’s Jeff Stone?” He glanced at the cop and got a somber nod. “I don’t think he has any family.”

“You know him?” the detective asked.

“A long time ago,” Chad replied as he stepped out of the way for the nurse to insert an IV into the back of Jeff’s hand. “Back in high school.” Summer camp on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, to be exact.

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“Not much. I heard his parents had been killed recently, that’s all.” Chad had never admitted to anyone that he’d kept track of Jeff over the years. Why would he? It had been a long time ago at summer camp. They’d never seen each other since then. He’d never called Jeff. Never kept the promise to keep in touch.

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Jeff Stone.

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* * *

"How much longer do you think he'll last?" The nurse gazed into Chad's face, sadness filling her eyes as only the soft beeping of the monitors told them the person tucked like a child into the hospital bed still lived.

"I don't know. He's a fighter." Chad looked down at the young man who'd been beaten nearly to death by a couple of teen gang members for the money in his wallet and his backpack. Just looking at the swollen eyes, smashed nose, and torn lips made Chad's own body hurt. He didn't even want to acknowledge the pain in his heart.

"Who could do this to another human being?" she asked as she touched the patient's hand, her fingers adjusting the tape holding in the IV.

Chad didn't answer. He didn't have a clue, despite seeing this sort of thing on a regular basis at the ER. He stared at Jeff's other hand—slender, delicate. The once-cared-for nails had been scraped clean by the cops looking for DNA evidence of his attackers. The urge to touch his hand, make contact of some sort, swelled so strongly in him that he couldn't resist.

Did Jeff still play guitar? Had he been at Tulane studying music?

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He slipped his hand under Jeff's and held it. The only reason he'd hung around after his shift at the ER was to pronounce him dead. It was the least he could do. Sure, he'd gotten Jeff's heart beating again with the paddles, but something had nagged at him to do more. Chad just didn't know what.

Jeff lay in the bed, six hours later, still fighting for his life, and Chad had found himself unable to leave his side.

After his shift ended, Chad had showered in the doctor's locker room, changed into his street clothes, and come to Jeff's room to wait, still wearing his hospital badge and stethoscope.

As an ER doctor, there'd been so many victims of crime and accidents on whom he'd pronounced time-of-death. If he was smart, he'd let the next doc on shift take the somber duty, and he would have, but that would be like abandoning Jeff all over again.

When their gazes had met, in that brief moment, something profound passed between them. Chad didn't know what exactly, couldn't put it into words, but it had rocked him. Jeff had recognized him. After all those years.

Jeff remembered him. And now, all Chad wanted was to know if it was a good memory or bad. Had Chad changed Jeff's life the same way Jeff had affected Chad's?

He might never know the answer to that question. It ate at him, cutting into his gut, bleeding him of his strength and determination. Weakening him.

Now Chad couldn't bring himself to leave Jeff's side. *Fuck*. Chad had always been able to walk away. From friends, occasional lovers, even his disapproving family.

He pulled the chair over and sat, still holding the limp hand. He looked up at the nurse as she returned the chart, picked up her plastic tote of medical supplies, and left the room. The door closed

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behind her.

Once again, it was Chad and Jeff all alone. The monitor beeped, the slow tone telling Chad that Jeff's heart beat slow but steady, that he still breathed, still clung to life.

Fighting for all he was worth.

Jeff wore glasses now, but no glasses had accompanied him in from the ambulance. Chad noted the small indentions on either side of the bridge Jeff's nose and he imagined what they had looked like.

Most likely black, geeky looking glasses.

Jeff had always been the geek type. Small-framed, yet no longer a gawky teenager, and now very much a man. Evidently Jeff had worked out because his body, despite being bruised and battered, had been toned.

Chad had always been attracted to geeks. He thought it sort of typical. The big, strong guy who liked smaller, more effeminate men. Yeah, he was a walking stereotype.

But now he wondered if in all those years, all those hook-ups and one-night stands, had he just been trying to find his way back to the one man he could never get out of his mind?

It was nearly eight hours after Jeff had been brought into the hospital and no one had shown up to claim him, which was weird. Usually, Chad had to fight off the hordes of family and friends who either came in with the patient, or showed up as soon as they heard about it, demanding answers and results.

But Jeff lay alone—dying.

Maybe when Jeff lost his parents, he'd lost everything. Something about that hurt Chad to his heart. Something deeply familiar. If he were in this situation, who would be there for him? His mom. Maybe, if he were dying, his father might put in an

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appearance. But friends? No. He'd been drifting toward "loner" status since before med school and it had only worsened once he'd started working. It was just so much easier.

Where were Jeff's friends? His lover? His roommate?

No one deserved to die alone.

"I won't leave you," he told Jeff. "Not this time."

Jeff's chest rose and fell.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Chad glanced at his wristwatch. According to his schedule, he should be home in bed by now. His gaze darted to the door, but his heart kept him firmly planted in the chair, something holding him there, impossible to flee what lay in front of him.

He'd never gotten emotionally involved with a patient before, but Jeff? He didn't lie to himself; the moment he'd realized who lay on the bed in the ER, Chad's heart hadn't really stopped beating. He'd gotten it all wrong.

It had *started* beating.

Chad spent most his waking time working at the ER and the rest of it cocooned in his apartment on Magazine Street near the hospital, avoiding the world and never giving any emotional "complications" that might arise a chance.

He'd let a hundred chances go by. In bars, at parties, friends of friends, blind dates, set-ups, he'd let them all slip through his fingers like grains of sand.

It occurred to Chad that he might be more half-dead than Jeff, who struggled with each breath and heartbeat to live. There must be a reason the guy hung on.

Would Chad fight so hard to stay alive? He didn't want to think about his answer. The self-realizations striking him repeatedly about the head and shoulders were bad enough.

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He knew what the chart said, knew the damage Jeff had sustained in the attack. Even the detective had remarked on the brutality of it after they'd stabilized Jeff in the ER.

Why Jeff? Who'd done this? Where the hell were his friends?

Chad slipped his cell phone out of his pocket and thumbed through the numbers to find the detective, named Brown, who'd brought Jeff in and spoken to Chad. He'd asked Chad to keep him informed.

Ignoring that it was nearly five A.M., Chad made the call and after a few rings, the detective answered, "Brown." Seemed cops, like doctors, never slept.

"This is Dr. Wright from the ER. I'm calling about Jeff Stone. You brought him in tonight."

"Yeah, the beating." He heard papers shuffle. "Got some news for me?"

"He's still alive."

"Holy shit." A long sigh.

"Look, did you find any relatives? Friends? Anyone I can notify to get here?" Chad asked, his pen poised above the clipboard.

Another weary sigh. "My partner and I went to his apartment and got the super to let us in. We searched through his things looking for an address book. I found one, but there were only a few names with none listed under Stone, and no notes or anything to let us know they were relatives."

"Oh."

"Once the university opens, I can try getting some info from them, but I don't hold out much hope. They usually won't release info without a court order." Chad could hear the detective's shrug.

"Did he have a cell phone? Maybe it has a number?" Chad

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offered.

“No phone. If he had one, they must’ve stolen it.”

“Right.” Chad sighed. “Okay. Thanks.”

“Look, what’re his chances, doc? Will he wake up?”

Chad stared at Jeff. “I thought he’d be gone long before now, so he’s really fighting.” For the first time, a glimmer of hope unfurled in Chad’s heart. “If he makes it past the first twenty-four hours and stabilizes, he just might make it.”

“God, I hope so. I’d hate it if the bastards who attacked him get away with it. If he wakes up, he might be able to identify them.”

“That’d be great.”

“Look, keep me informed on his condition. If he wakes up, call me so I can interview him. If he dies, call. I’ll have to escalate this to murder.”

Chad’s gut spasmed at the ugly word. “Right. Thanks, Detective Brown.” He closed the phone and leaned back in his chair.

Jeff had eighteen hours to go before he beat the odds.

Chad wasn’t a betting man, but something told him to put his money on Jeff.

CHAPTER 2

Chad had eventually gone home, pushed out the door by the late hour and the ICU nurse. After a short drive, he'd found a parking spot on First Street, around the corner from his building. He trudged up the stairs to the second floor, unlocked his door, went inside. Once he'd locked both the deadbolt and the chain, he began stripping off his clothing as he headed to his bedroom. He'd fallen into his bed and, within moments, fell asleep.

In the morning, he woke with a raging hard-on and his hand grasping it. He closed his eyes and imagined Jeff's hand holding him, Jeff licking his balls, Jeff taking his cock deep inside him. Chad shuddered as his balls climbed higher toward his body, aching to unload.

He'd been dreaming about making love, and just like all the

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other times, it had been Jeff underneath him. Jeff on the bank of the lake. Jeff gazing up at him, their arms wrapped around each other. Jeff's blue eyes begging a promise and a kiss from Chad.

At the last image, Chad's orgasm rocked through him, just as the sob broke from his mouth.

"Oh, God!" he choked out, unable to stop his release. After the final spurt painted his belly, he buried his face in his pillow, knowing all his secret dreams of Jeff would be over and done if Jeff died. With Jeff dead, he'd truly be alone.

The guilt of leaving Jeff, without a word of explanation, ripped Chad apart, and unable to control the mix of terror and shame inside him, he shook with his sobs until there were no tears left for his pillow to absorb.

Chad rolled onto his back, arm thrown over his face, knowing he had to get up, shower and get back to work.

He had responsibilities. Patients. Paperwork.

Jeff.

* * *

Every time he got a chance, he glanced at the clock, counting down the hours. When it hit twenty-four, he called up to ICU.

"It's Doctor Wright. What's the status on Jeff Stone, the beating victim?"

"He's been upgraded to stable. He's doing better this morning."

Chad sighed, the relief flowing out of him like air from a punctured tire. "I'll be up to see him soon. Has he regained consciousness?"

"No, sir."

"All right." Chad hung up, walked over to the desk and picked

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up the next chart. “Alvarez?”

An old man stood up, waved and waddled over to him, with a young woman at his side.

Chad scanned the chart. “Chest pains?”

“My father doesn’t speak English.” She smiled at Chad.

“Well, I only speak a little Spanish.” Chad grinned and led them to the examining room.

* * *

Chad entered the ICU and stopped at the nurse’s desk to check Jeff’s chart.

“No calls? No visitors?” He flipped open the metal clipboard without waiting for permission from the nurse, despite not being Jeff’s assigned doctor on the floor.

“No, no one. It’s so sad.” She glanced down the hall toward Jeff’s room.

The data looked good. Jeff had survived the first twenty-four hours, his blood pressure, oxygen levels and heartbeat had stabilized. No other problems had arisen, like any brain swelling or seizures, and that was a very good sign. Nearly miraculous, in fact.

“I see Singh’s taken the case.” Ravi Singh was a good doctor; Jeff was in good hands, but for some reason Chad wanted to see for himself.

He entered the room. The lights over the bed illuminated the still-swollen face of the boy—now a man—he’d first kissed. Jeff held most of Chad’s firsts. He stood at Jeff’s side, staring down at him, letting the floodgates of memory open, spilling over him for the first time in a long time.

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* * *

It had been dark, and they'd met at the bathrooms the first time, using their flashlights to light the dirt paths from the cabin.

Something had been building between them all week, from the first moment Chad had met Jeff, one of the dozen boys in the cabin Chad and another counselor were responsible for guiding that session. Chad had been seventeen years old. It had been the summer before he'd gone to LSU. Jeff had told him he was sixteen, but Chad thought it was more likely fifteen. What they were doing was way off limits—any fraternization between counselors and campers had been strictly forbidden.

If they had been caught, Chad would have been fired. But he'd been young, reckless, and desperate to know what the feelings he'd had swirling around in his gut meant, what made him wake up early to get to the showers and jerk off before the other counselors arrived.

Jeff had been waiting for him in the darkened building, perhaps wondering and wanting the answers to the same questions as Chad.

All their questions had been answered that night.

* * *

After he sat in the chair next to the hospital bed, Chad leaned forward and took Jeff's hand. "I'm here. You're not alone, Jeff." He gave it a quick squeeze, not expecting a returning gesture.

For now, Jeff remained unconscious, and Chad knew Jeff's body had a lot of healing and processing to do, which might be the best thing in his condition. He'd probably not wake up for days or,

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at the worse, weeks.

That didn't matter to Chad; he'd still be here. He lied and told himself his vigil was only a vestige of responsibility left over from the ER. Once someone showed up to claim Jeff, he'd call it quits. He'd shut down his emotions and move on, just like he usually did when faced with anything that bordered on personal.

Jeff *had* to have someone. Grandparents? A friend, at least. Maybe a fellow student? Someone who would miss him, report him gone, wonder where he'd been.

Chad opened the drawer in the side table and found the large plastic bag with Jeff's belongings. His clothes had been too bloody and too torn to save; the EMTs had cut most of them off him, and the rest the nurses in the ER had cut away and tossed out.

Only a watch, his empty wallet, a set of keys, a pair of bloody Vans, and some change filled the bag.

For a moment, Chad thought about what he was on the verge of doing, wondering if he was stepping over the line between patient and doctor. He cut short any arguments, just as he might silence a colleague with an opinion he didn't want to hear, opened the bag and poured out the stuff onto the table. He picked up the wallet and opened it, then pulled out the small notebook he kept in his lab coat pocket.

He jotted down Jeff's address, driver's license number, and went through the small collection of business cards the thieves had left behind. Two were for take-out food and the other was for one of the professors in the music department at Tulane. Chad found his school ID and copied down his number. Maybe they had some info on file and, if it came to it, he'd use his position as a doctor to demand the information.

At this point, as a doctor he couldn't do much for Jeff, but at

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least he could try to locate someone. The cops hadn't done much, and Chad doubted they'd expend too much energy, time and manpower doing it.

But he had time. Between work and his non-existent social life, he had all the time in the world.

Jeff slept; his quiet breathing and the monitor the only sounds in the small hospital room.

Chad sat back, folded his arms, creating a game plan to attack this problem, just as he had done every time something stood in his way in the ER. He'd gather the information, devise solutions, then deploy them, usually while barking out orders.

Only this was different, and Chad found himself on unsteady ground, staring at a line in the sand he wasn't sure he should step over. Just what might happen, how would his career be affected if Chad acted on his desire to do something for this young man?

Once upon a time, during a hot central Louisiana summer under tall pine trees, Chad had crossed that line and damn the consequences. Once upon a time, he'd been open, he'd yearned for understanding, he'd been brave.

Did that make him a coward now?

Once Jeff awoke, he'd be able to give the authorities answers to the mystery of his life, but until then—and no one knew how long that would be—there was only the mystery. And Chad didn't like mysteries. He liked answers.

Fuck that coward shit. He owed more than that to Jeff.

His decision made, he glanced at his watch, then scooped everything back into the plastic bag except Jeff's keys, and replaced it in the drawer. He stood, tucked his notepad and the key ring into his pocket, and looked down at Jeff.

"I'll figure it out, I promise. There has to be someone." On an

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impulse, Chad leaned over, closed his eyes, and brushed his lips over the small space on Jeff's forehead without damage. The skin was warm and soft. *Nice*.

Well, that might be construed as crossing the line, but Chad shrugged. He'd made his decision, and he was just stubborn enough to ignore what others might say about it. Finding Jeff's family and friends was more important.

He slipped out of the room, heading down the hall and out of the hospital. It was late afternoon, and he had plenty of time to begin his own investigation. By the time he got into his car, he'd decided to start with Jeff's apartment located uptown in the Riverbend area off St. Charles Avenue.

* * *

The building was typical of low-priced student housing located between Carrolton Avenue and the river on one of the narrow, potholed streets. Bikes were chained on four small balconies. Cars parked along the street weren't upscale cars, mostly older models, but the neighborhood looked well tended and clean. Jeff opened the glass front door and found himself in a small foyer. Mailboxes in the wall gave the names of the tenants.

He climbed the stairs to Jeff's second-floor apartment and knocked, not expecting anyone to answer. It felt so odd going into someone's home without asking first. After a minute, he pulled out the key, inserted it, and let himself in.

All the lights were off, except a soft glow from the kitchen. One door led to the bedroom, one to the bathroom; both stood open. He closed the front door behind him, locked it and stepped farther into the room.

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Meowrrrrr.

Chad yelped, staggered backwards, arms out, and a grey tabby cat hissed, jumped off the back of the sofa, and flew out of the room.

Jeff had a cat. *Just great.*

Chad exhaled to slow down his racing heart and then looked around.

Barely furnished with mismatched furniture, it screamed student housing, and reminded Chad of his own student days, just a few years ago. A small wooden desk sat on one side of the room with a plastic folding chair in front of it. A monitor, but no computer. Jeff probably hooked his laptop to it, but it had probably been stolen in the robbery.

In a corner, a guitar case leaned against the wall, with a chair and a music stand beside it. On a small bookcase, several stacks of sheet music filled the space. So he was right—Jeff still played.

Everything was neat and clean, though sparse. Chad went into the kitchen. No phone connected to the wall jack, so Jeff probably only had a cell phone. He pulled open drawers, noting how well organized everything was, despite there being not much in them.

One drawer held a set of silverware for four, the kind you'd buy in a dollar store, with blue plastic handles. A few spatulas, an oven mitt, and a few dishtowels, all in plain navy blue.

A set of pots and pans, and a teakettle. One baking sheet, with round circles that looked as if it had only been used to bake cookies.

The cat's empty food and water bowls sat on a plastic placemat in a corner.

He opened the fridge. Juice, cheese, a package of deli ham, a jar of grape jelly, one stick of butter, dozens of packs of

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condiments in a bowl, a roll of ready-to-bake oatmeal cookie dough, and nothing else. The pantry held even less, unless he counted the half a dozen boxes of macaroni and cheese.

Had Jeff worked? It looked to Chad as if he were a full-time student, just getting by on student loans and spit. With a chuckle, Chad remembered his own days as a poor student, when Ramen noodles and Coke were the only thing keeping him alive.

Chad found himself standing outside Jeff's bedroom, holding his breath. This was it. Coming into Jeff's apartment was one thing, entering his bedroom, another.

He exhaled and stepped inside.

Double bed neatly made. One dresser, one side table with a lamp. His closet door was shut. A paperback book lay on the table.

No pictures. None. Not on the walls, not in frames.

It was as if Jeff hadn't really lived here. Like a hotel room with the bare necessities provided for the occupants' use. A wave of sadness washed over Chad and he dropped onto the bed, staring around him.

What had he expected to find? The cops hadn't found anything and they knew what to look for. Again a pang of uncertainty hit him, asking if he should really be there.

Chad did what he always did when faced with doubts—he forged on.

He pulled open the drawer to the side table. An unopened bottle of slick and a used tube of anal lube. Chad growled at the thought of Jeff sharing his body and the reality that the younger man might have a lover hurt more than he knew it should.

A magazine caught Chad's eye and he pulled it out, staring at the pictures of naked, erect men as he thumbed through it. He put it back, stood and searched the closet, but all he found was an

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assortment of jeans, corduroys, shirts, and a jacket.

Chad froze, his hand touching a worn blue-and-black plaid shirt. From its state, Chad knew it had been one of Jeff's favorites; it would have made his blue eyes stand out. Without thinking, Chad brought the arm of the shirt to his face and inhaled.

Jeff's scent filled his nostrils and Chad drank it in shamelessly. Not the same as he'd remembered, but still good. Earthy, with a touch of sweetness. It turned him on and that was...just wrong. Right?

Never in a million years would he have said he'd ever sniff another guy's clothes. What the *hell* was wrong with him?

Ashamed of what he'd done, he dropped the cloth and moved to the dresser. It held only socks, briefs and an assortment of T-shirts. He didn't touch them. Sniffing a shirt was bad enough, but underwear? He pushed the drawer shut too hard and the slam startled him.

"Shit." He exhaled and looked around. Nothing of a personal nature. No letters to home, no pictures of friends or family.

Chad ran his hand through his hair.

He left the bedroom and went into the bathroom. A mirrored medicine cabinet nestled in the wall. His own reflection flashed as he opened it.

Box of a dozen condoms. Jealousy flared in Chad to his surprise. But he opened the lid, found one missing, then checked the expiration date — six months ago. So, Jeff wasn't a player. Chad exhaled and put them back.

He pushed the shower curtain back—generic shampoo, soap, shaving gel and razor. A set of towels hung from the towel rack and there was not much else to go on.

Jeff's life was still a mystery, and Chad hardened his

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determination to solve him. Perhaps he'd learn more at the university or downstairs talking to the manager.

Time to go, but before he left, he should take care of the cat.

"Here, kitty kitty!" Chad called out, but the grey beast didn't show itself. He went back to the kitchen, picked up the bowls and put them on the counter. He filled one with water from the tap and put it back on the mat. Then he searched cabinets for the cat food.

Only a few cans of cat food stood in a tower, next to it a box of dry kibbles. He pulled the top off one and dumped it into the bowl, his nose wrinkling at the smell. After placing it next to the water bowl, he washed his hands.

That done, he looked around again. Still no cat. He took down the box and shook it, rattling the nuggets. "Dinner, kitty!"

Another meowrrr and the cat slunk into the kitchen and went to the bowl. It sat and gobbled up the food, paying little interest in Chad.

"So, what's your name, cat?" The cat wore a little blue collar with a metal tag.

Chad reached down, petted the cat's back, and checked the tag. "Murray, huh?"

Seemed a good name for a tom tabby.

With nothing more to do, Chad left the apartment, locked up, and made his way to find the manager. The sign hung over a ground-floor apartment, so Chad knocked on the door. A dog barked on the other side, a small, yappy kind of creature, and when the door opened, the woman held the little fluffy white dog in her arms.

"Yeah?" She gave him an up-and-down stare, and he gave her a smile.

"Hello. I'm Doctor Wright. I work at St. Charles General

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Hospital and I'm hoping you can help me with one of your renters."

"Help you?" She leaned out of the door searching as if he had someone on the ground for her to deal with.

"With some information. Can I come in where we can talk in private?" He used his most compassionate doctor's voice on her, and it must have worked because she nodded and stepped aside to let him in.

"Sure. Have a seat on the couch, Doctor Wright." She fell into the couch and put the dog next to her. It eyed him warily. "Now who is this about?"

"Jeff Stone. In 2B." Chad waited as she searched her memory.

"Oh, yeah. Jeff. Nice kid. Always in school. Keeps to himself. Never any problems. Too bad what happened to him." She shook her head, *tisked* loudly, and looked sad.

"Did the police talk to you about it?"

"Yeah, they came by and asked a few questions." She squinted at him. "So, what are you here for?"

"Well, he was beaten very badly, you see. We didn't expect him to live. But he's fighting for his life and I thought if I could find someone, a relative, a friend, someone who could be with him..." He let his words fade out. "I just hate to see him alone."

"Oh, poor boy." Her eyes filled with tears. "All alone." She sniffed and dabbed her eyes with a crumpled tissue.

"I wondered if in his rental paperwork, he listed a next-of-kin or emergency contact?"

She shook her head. "No. I remember asking him at the time he filled it out, but he said his parents had died in an accident and he didn't have anyone."

"Damn." Chad's hope faded and his shoulders slumped. "Are

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you sure?"

"Yep. Checked it for the cops."

"What about a special friend? Did Jeff have anyone who visited frequently?" The last thing Chad wanted to do was out Jeff, so he kept his questions neutral.

"No. Like I said, he was quiet. No parties, no friends." She leaned closer. "No boyfriends, if you know what I mean." She winked at him.

Oh. Chad cleared his throat. "You mean Jeff was gay?"

"Sure. Got a couple of them this year. Don't bother me. My sister's boy is one." She shrugged. "Live and let live, I say."

"Okay, thanks." Chad stood and gave her a nod. "He's going to be in the hospital for quite some time. What about his rent?"

"Well, if he doesn't pay it, I'll have to evict him. We have a waiting list for the apartments." She frowned. "Owner's rules, not mine."

"But if he's still in the hospital, what will you do with his things?"

"The furniture comes with the apartment, so we put the personal stuff in boxes and store them. After three months, if no one claims it, we give it to the local shelters."

"But it's the end of the month this week. Can't you make an exception?"

"I'm sorry, really I am, but there's a policy and I have to follow it. Eviction takes a couple of months, unless *you* want to pay his rent?" She shook her head, and Chad had to admit she looked torn up about it.

"I'll think about it and get back to you." He could certainly afford a few months of whatever she charged for the place; it couldn't have been much. Still, Chad didn't think Jeff would be

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out of the hospital in a month, if ever.

Another line in the sand appeared.

Chad turned to leave, then turned back. "If it's alright with you, I'd prefer to box his things up and hold onto them for him." He'd help Jeff find another place once he was back on his feet again.

She eyed him hard, assessing him. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. There's no telling how long he'll be in the hospital." Chad shrugged, unwilling to say more to her, when he had no idea what to tell himself.

She sighed. "Okay. You can take his stuff, but I need some paperwork signed on it."

"Sure. I'll come around in a few days and pack up."

"Hey, you're taking that cat of his, right? I don't want any strays hanging around here. I'll have to take him to the pet shelter."

Chad frowned. He hadn't thought about it. Holding onto a few boxes was one thing, but taking responsibility for the cat was another. Something much more involved.

"Yeah, I'll take the cat." *Crap.*

She nodded and shut the door.

Had he lost his mind taking possession of Jeff's cat and his stuff? Why not? Both the cat and his belongings would only be given away otherwise because Chad knew Jeff would be damn lucky to be home in one month.

Besides, how much trouble could a cat be? Old ladies kept them. Kids had them.

He went back up the stairs.

He'd never been allowed to keep a pet when he lived at home. At college and med school, it never occurred to him to have one.

Now he sort of liked the idea.

CHAPTER 3

Chad held Jeff's hand. "I brought Murray home yesterday. I think he likes his new digs. At least, he hasn't tried to escape." Chad shrugged. "I hope you don't mind, but today I boxed up your stuff and brought it home, too. The super said they'd give it away if it wasn't claimed in three months, and I didn't know how long..." His voiced faded. "Anyway, I figured it'd just be easier for you when you get out of here."

Jeff slept on, his warm hand soft and heavy in Chad's, odd yet comforting, only he was supposed to be there to comfort Jeff, not the other way around.

"I'm going over to Tulane tomorrow after my shift, so I won't be here until later. I'm going to see if I can get any info from them about you."

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Jeff didn't reply; not even a finger twitched.

Chad sighed. "I have an extra bedroom I use as an office, so I stashed your stuff there. When you're all better..." He choked off his words as the nurse came in.

"How's our guy today, Doctor?"

"The same." Chad gave her a sad smile.

"Well, good news. He's getting kicked out of ICU. We're moving him to the fourth floor."

"That's great!" It was good news. It meant Jeff was out of any immediate danger and they expected him to improve. "Tell Doctor Singh I want to talk to him."

"Sure." She nodded and left.

Chad sat, eyes closed, dozing, until a throat cleared.

"You wanted to see me, Doctor?" Dr. Ravi Singh stood in the doorway, a frown on his face.

"Yes." He stood as he eased his hand from Jeff's. "I wanted to talk to you about Jeff being moved out of ICU. It's not too soon, is it?"

Singh's eyes narrowed. "Are you a relative?"

Chad knew that tone of voice. It was the one doctors adopted to enforce their power over mere mortals. He'd used it himself frequently. And he knew, whatever he said, Singh would either open up and share, or close down and not tell a drop of info, doctor or not.

"He's my partner," Chad lied, giving Singh a look that dared him to question him.

"Oh. I didn't know." Singh blinked, then looked from Jeff to Chad.

"Didn't know what?" Chad asked, giving his voice an edge.

"That you were ga— With someone. Uh, serious." Singh

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fumbled over the labels and words.

“Well, I am. We are.” Chad smiled at Jeff at the lie, only then realizing how much he wished the lie were the truth. For most of his adult life, he’d fled from other men, afraid to become involved, to suffer the pain and hurt he saw all around him, but since Jeff had come back into his life, the sand under his feet had shifted, along with his resolve.

“Sure. Okay, well, his scans look good. No cerebral bleeding and his broken ribs are healing nicely. Not as much internal damage as we initially thought. He must’ve curled into a ball to protect himself, thus avoiding a lot of organ injuries. The brunt of the attack was along his back, although how his spine wasn’t damaged is amazing.” Singh shrugged. “You know the drill. I’m sure you’ve looked at the charts.”

“Of course, I just wanted to talk to you in person.” Establish some ground rules— for one, that Chad was involved in this case, like it or not. If Singh balked, if he resisted, he could make it very difficult for Chad. Board of Ethics bad.

“I can’t tell you when he’ll come home, if that’s what you’re looking for. I know it must be hard...” Singh let his sentence fade. “Anyway, if I learn more, I’ll let you know.”

“I’d appreciate that.” Chad nodded, then Singh left the room.

Chad sat back down and what he’d done hit him.

He’d lied to a colleague and he’d never done that in his short professional life, but that wasn’t what threw him.

He’d claimed a man as his, and that was something he’d never done before.

Clearly, Chad had lost his mind.

He stared at Jeff’s face. The swelling had receded, but the painful looking colors of green, purple and yellow still mottled his

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skin.

He stood, leaned forward, and pressed his lips to Jeff's as gently as he could and still feel them against his. Warm and dry. Such longing to feel those lips respond rose up in Chad's heart that tears filled his eyes.

What on *earth* was he doing?

He'd become emotionally involved with an unconscious man. A man he'd wronged years ago. A man he'd made promises to and then broken them all.

It had to be the single stupidest thing he'd ever done in his life.

What would he do when Jeff woke up? How would he feel when Jeff said, Gee, thanks, but I want my life back now and you're not in it?

The answer to that left Chad gutted and terrified and he hated his reaction, the weakness of it. He slumped back into his chair and ran his hand through his hair. What was done was done; he'd made his bed, so it was time to man up.

He took Jeff's hand in his, and said, "So, the doc thinks you're doing great! Should be about time for you to wake up now, Jeff."

He gave the hand a squeeze. "Come on, sleepyhead. Time to get on with your life. You beat the odds. Time to open those beautiful blue eyes of yours and show them what you're made of."

But Jeff slept on.

* * *

That voice again.

Deep and dreamy. Just like his other dreams. Long dreams that went on and on without an end in sight. Dreams with no meanings, one flowing into the next.

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Dreams about summer camp. Tall pines and the lake. Swinging on an old rope and dropping into warm water. Laughing. Running down dirt paths between cabins. Nights around an open fire, grilling hot dogs and marshmallows on thin branches.

Sweet dreams.

He held his breath, steadied the bow, and pulled back the string, harder and harder, until the muscles in his arms and back quivered. Then he let go and the arrow flew across the field to the target. And missed.

Chad's arm reached around him. "Try it again." Chad's hand wrapped his on the bow, his fingers over his on the string, his back pressed against Chad's chest.

Chad's breath in his ear as he spoke sent shivers down his spine; electrical sparks raced even lower.

Working as one, they pulled back and aimed the arrow.

"Let go." The whisper, deep and dreamy, echoed in his head.

He'd let go that summer. Let go all the way.

It had broken him, the letting go, because once you let go, you never got it back.

He'd never gotten it back.

The bow slipped from his hands. Chad turned away and walked off, still clutching the bow and arrow.

* * *

"Murray, come and get it!" Chad placed the bowl of food on the floor of his kitchen and grinned as the tabby strode into the room, tail held high, wound around Chad's legs and then sat in front of the bowl. After two weeks of skirting around furniture, dashing away to hide under the bed when Chad came home, finally

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the cat had settled.

He left the furball to eat and hurried to dress for work. Before he went out the door, he flipped through his mail, then froze, staring at a letter addressed to Jeff Stone from Tulane University.

Two weeks ago he'd gone to the admissions office, explained Jeff's situation, and had him withdrawn from school, without losing his status or affecting his grades. He'd thought about his decision, but after talking to the dean of admissions, they'd decided it was the best thing to do for Jeff.

Without thinking about whether he should read it or not, he slipped his finger under the flap and tore the letter open.

After a quick scan, he exhaled. All the paperwork was in order. Jeff would be welcomed back to school when he'd recovered. His admission would be put on hold, ready for when he could go back.

Murray strolled into the living room, sat and licked his paw to wash his face.

"Good news for your daddy, Murray." Chad chuckled and put the letter back in the envelope, then put it in the drawer he'd cleared for Jeff's papers, including the first bills from the hospital and the insurance letters. Ready for when Jeff would need them.

It had been nearly a month since the attack and Jeff hadn't woken up yet.

Chad hadn't been a religious man, but every day he prayed this would be the day Jeff would open his eyes and return to the world of the living. Each day, Chad lived with the hope and the fear warring inside him.

Hope for Jeff's recovery.

Fear that, once recovered, Jeff would walk out of Chad's life. It would serve him right because he knew he didn't deserve any more than a thank you and a quick goodbye.

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He gave Murray a final pet before he left for the hospital. First, he'd check on Jeff, then get to ER to begin his shift.

* * *

"Hi, Jeff," Chad sang out as he came through the door. Jeff lay in the bed, the tubes still feeding him, still quiet and unmoving except for the steady rise and fall of his chest.

Chad pulled up his chair and took Jeff's hand. "I got a letter from the university. You're all set. Once you get out of here and back on your feet, you'll be able to pick up right where you left off."

He gave Jeff's hand a squeeze. "And your insurance is working on the bills, so don't worry about anything. We can deal with it later." He leaned forward and brushed a lock of brown hair from Jeff's forehead. Only a faint hint of the bruising on Jeff's face remained to tell of the attack.

Turned out Jeff had grown into his beauty in a sweet geek kind of way, and Chad wondered if Jeff would think Chad handsome in return. *Probably not.*

It was just another one of his fantasies about Jeff. The dreams had started about two weeks ago, dreams where Jeff would wake up and fall in love with Chad.

Man, talk about stupid. What was he, some closet romantic? Those things only happened in movies and books, not in real life.

He knew it, but until it happened, he'd stay right where he was, at Jeff's side, until the man told him to give him back his cat, his stuff, and leave.

"So, what's been going on here? Had any tests lately?" Chad kept up the steady stream of chatter as he checked Jeff's chart, not

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really sure if talking did any good or not. He'd heard various reports about patients who'd heard everyone around them, but couldn't wake up to reply, and he hoped Jeff was one of them.

"Murray's doing well. He thinks he owns the place now. Did he sleep on the bed at your place because he's found a spot at the foot of the bed. It's okay. I don't mind; I was just wondering."

Chad stayed as long as he could, but the time for him to start his shift was only minutes away. He stood, leaned over and pressed a kiss to Jeff's lips. It had become a ritual of his visits, a tiny piece of the fantasy he allowed himself.

"I have to go now. Try to wake up, Jeff. Please. For me. I want to see you smile, want to hear your voice, want to feel you squeeze my hand and kiss me back." He sighed, gave Jeff a final pat on the hand, then left, but part of his heart remained with Jeff.

* * *

He'd waited where the path split in two—one way to the cabin, one way to the lake. Chad came down the moonlit path and stopped. Without speaking, they headed for the lake.

The water had been warm, the night humid.

Without a word, they undressed in the near dark. Chad took his hand and they stepped into the lake, going farther and farther, until the water came up to their chests.

Chad still had his hand. He pulled Chad closer. Chad's other hand ran over his shoulder, trailing water drops and fire over his bare skin.

Looking up into those brown eyes, the moon reflected in them, he reached out and took Chad's hardness in his hand.

Chad gasped, then lowered his mouth to claim his.

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Soft lips on his. A brush of unshaven stubble. The heat of what he held in his hand burning him up inside, even underwater.

He opened his mouth and let Chad fill it with his tongue.

God, it was heaven.

Kissing Chad. Holding Chad. Touching Chad.

He slid his hand over the rigid length as Chad moaned into his mouth. His own dick ached to be touched. Chad slid his hand over his shoulder, down his chest, under the water, along his waist, and then the touch disappeared.

Until Chad wrapped his hand around his meat and stroked him. He thrust into that tight grip, felt Chad pumping into his grip, as their mouths locked together, swallowing gasps and moans.

As he exploded, his body shaking, he broke free, crying out to the night sky.

Chad had buried his head in his shoulder, arm wrapped around his neck to hold on, shuddering and whispering his name.

If he died now, he would be happy.

CHAPTER 4

“Everyone should have a boyfriend like you.” The young nurse smiled at Chad as she changed the IV on Jeff’s hand.

“What do you mean?” Chad looked up from the book he was reading to Jeff, the one he’d found on Jeff’s nightstand, a science fiction by an author he didn’t recognize.

“Well, you’re here every day, reading and talking to him. After over a month, you haven’t given up on him. It’s nice.” She shrugged.

He didn’t bother to correct the woman. In fact, he liked that she thought he belonged to Jeff. He’d done nothing to discourage that impression, but so what? No one else had stepped forward to say Jeff belonged to him.

“Oh, well, he just needs time to heal and wake up.”

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She put her hands on her hips. “Where’s his family? Did they disown him because he’s gay? That’s so stupid.” Anger flared in her brown eyes.

“He doesn’t have any family. They were killed in a car accident. But thanks for the support.” He gave her a smile. Chad had learned few new things about Jeff and almost nothing about his family. He’d learned Jeff loved oatmeal cookies. He had a cat named Murray, currently sleeping on the foot of Chad’s bed. He was working on a master’s degree in music education so he could teach high school. However, those weren’t the important things, the things Chad longed to know.

She finished smoothing down the tape on the back of Jeff’s hand. “Does he know how much you love him? Did you ever tell him?”

“Love him?” Chad’s head jerked up to meet her gaze. He’d never put words to his feelings, but now that she’d said it...yeah, he’d fallen in love with Jeff. Or back in love. He had no idea which anymore. How crazy was that? Not only was it crazy, it was profoundly stupid and completely out of character for Chad.

She laughed. “I can see it in your eyes every time you look at him. He’s a lucky man.” She gave him a wink, picked up her supplies and left.

The nurse was wrong; Chad was the lucky one. Jeff had come into Chad’s life once and he’d been too frightened to do anything about it, not even call and explain how much he wanted to be with Jeff, but college and his parents had ended it.

Now Jeff had come back into his life, if you could call what he had a life, and given him a purpose, someone to care for and worry about, someone to connect him with the rest of the world outside his work and his apartment. Oh, yeah, and a cat.

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He took Jeff's free hand and leaned over to kiss the back of it, then he placed it back on the bed.

"I'm a lucky guy, Jeff. Lucky to have you in my life, even if it's just like this."

Chad closed his eyes and prayed silently. *Please give Jeff the strength to wake up and be the man he's meant to be. With or without me.*

Praying for Jeff to wake up and love Chad was too selfish, and Chad had always been told by his mom that you never prayed for yourself, but for other people.

He stood and slipped into his lab coat. "I'll be back after my shift, so try to wake up by then, okay?" After leaning over and giving Jeff a quick kiss, Chad whispered, "I love you, Jeff."

Chad left the room and headed to work. He had to face a ten-hour shift before he could return, visit Jeff, then go home for some much needed rest.

"Call me if he wakes up," Chad reminded the nurse as he passed the station.

"You'll be the first person I call, Dr. Wright." She winked.

Chad chuckled, then sobered. Of course she'd call Chad. Jeff had no one else to call.

* * *

He'd met Chad every night for a week, and each night they'd taken their explorations a little further. Both were aware the camp session was almost over, and each day brought them closer to that last day of camp.

He met Chad in the middle of the night, already so hard it was painful, and they went to the lake. Chad spread a blanket under the

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trees along the bank, deep in the shade where it was so dark he could barely see his first lover.

After he stretched out, Chad leaned over him and they kissed. Chad pressed their bodies together, and they bucked against each other, until the clothes between them became too much of a barrier.

Naked, he and Chad made love, slow and languid, until the fire burned between them so hot they incinerated.

They'd fumbled, neither knowing what to do, but somehow Chad had rolled him over, pulled him to his knees. Spit eased the way as Chad breached him. It hurt. Hurt so good he didn't want it to end. Chad's groans gave way to hard panting, matching his own, and when Chad took him over the edge, he cried out Chad's name.

Chad held him tight, thrust once more, ground their bodies together, and shuddered into him.

They lay on the blanket until their breathing returned to normal.

"You'll call me, won't you?" he asked. "After camp?"

"Of course." Chad snorted. "I'm staying in town and going to Tulane."

"We'll still see each other, right?"

"Plan on it." Chad took his hand, brought it to his lips and kissed it.

He'd never felt so happy. It just kept getting better each time they were together. His heart filled and he rolled onto his side to look at Chad.

"I love you," he whispered.

Chad reached up, pulled him down for a kiss.

"I love you."

No, that wasn't right.

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Chad hadn't said those words back.

It had been a lie. It had all been lies. Chad had never called. Had never returned his calls. Had used him and dumped him.

"I love you."

Shut up, he wanted to scream, but they weren't on the bank of the lake. Wherever he was, it was as dark as the nights at the lake, but there were no stars. And he was alone.

Underwater?

Underground?

Dark, but warm. Not wet. He struggled to look around, search for some sign, something to tell him where he was.

His apartment? Could he be lying in his own bed?

As if he were surrounded by soft black cotton, thick and dense, the air around him changed and he fought to free himself. Just as he managed to break free, blinding light slammed into him, and he fell back to the dark, starless sky and the soft blanket on the shore of the lake.

* * *

Chad worried about Jeff. He stared at the chart and the vital signs records over the last few days. Everything held steady in just the right ranges. Breathing, pulse, blood pressure.

Why didn't Jeff wake up?

"Come on, Jeff. Wake up. It's time. I know you want to. I can't believe you don't want to get back to school or play your guitar again." Chad stroked Jeff's cheek.

He leaned over, kissed Jeff's dry lips, then whispered, "I love you. I need you to wake up. I need to know."

Nothing.

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Chad sighed and left the room to return the chart.

“He’s the same.”

The nurse nodded and shrugged. “These things take time. He’ll wake when he’s ready, honey. You know that.”

“Right.” *What if I’m not ready?*

She gave him a smile and headed off to her rounds.

Chad’s phone went off and he took it. “I’ll be right there.” With a resigned sigh, he jogged to the stairs and headed down to the ER.

* * *

Everyone’s parents were arriving and he’d gone on a desperate search for Chad. He’d written his phone number on a slip of paper and had it clutched in his hand when he stepped into the counselors’ cabin.

Chad had been packing and had his back to him. Several other counselors were doing the same thing.

He cleared his throat. “Hi.”

Chad looked up from his duffle bag and frowned. “Hi.” His gaze darted to the other guys, then he jerked his head, motioning for him to step outside so they could talk in private.

“I wrote down my name and number.” He thrust it at Chad.

Chad took folded paper and shoved it in the pocket of his shorts. “Thanks.”

“You said you’d call.”

“I will.”

“Promise?” He looked up into Chad’s eyes and wanted to kiss him right there, but he knew that was crazy.

“I promise.”

“I have to go soon.” He waited until the silence stretched

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between them like a rubber band, just not knowing when it would snap. “Can I have your number, too?”

“Sure.” Chad looked back at the cabin. “Wait here.” He dashed inside and then came out. “Here.” He scribbled his name and number on a camp postcard. “I’ll call soon.”

“I meant what I said that night.” He leaned closer. “I know you’re going off to college, but it’s still in town. We can still see each other.”

Chad nodded, then looked into his eyes. “Plan on it.”

One of the other counselors leaned out the cabin doorway. “Hey, Wright, let’s get finished. We need to clean this place up before we can leave.”

“Gotta go,” Chad said and made to move off.

He grabbed Chad’s arm and stopped him. “Do you...you know?” Ever since he’d given it all up to Chad, he’d longed to hear Chad say those words back to him.

“Yeah. Sure.” Chad tousled his hair and lowered his voice. Then with a wink and his face blushing red, Chad raced to the cabin and disappeared.

He stood there, his heart in his throat, so in love he couldn’t stand it.

So happy.

But happy doesn’t stay around, not for long. He’d learned that the hard way.

He turned to go...and he was back in the dark, warm place. This time, he’d break free and get out of here. Time to go home.

* * *

“Well, hello, Mr. Stone.” A woman’s voice.

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He opened his eyes again, just a crack, and tried to focus.

“Where am—” His voice came out all raspy, as if he hadn’t used it in a long time.

“You’re in the hospital, Mr. Stone. You were attacked. Do you remember?” She moved around him, checking things. Next to his bed a machine on a pole beeped, green numbers glowed on its face, and IV bags of clear liquid hung from a bar stretching out from it.

“Attacked?” He closed his eyes and tried to remember. “When?”

“Nearly two months ago.” She smiled at him, a smile that held “I’m sorry” and “Poor baby” in it.

He sank back into the bed as he tried to take it all in. He needed to pee. He wanted water. Did she say two *months*?

“Water?”

“I’ve got some ice chips for you. Nothing until the doctor checks you out. I’ll let him know you’re awake.” She bustled over to the door. “Oh, and I’ll call Dr. Wright. He’ll be so glad to know you’re awake.”

“Dr. Wright?”

“Your boyfriend?” She frowned. “Don’t you remember him either?” She looked crestfallen, as her brows knitted together. He could feel her disappointment trailing in her wake as she left the room.

“Boyfriend?” he asked the room.

He remembered his apartment, his cat Murray, his classes at Tulane. He remembered his landlady’s name and her yappy little dog. He remembered eating oatmeal cookies late at night while he studied. Remembered practicing his guitar until early in the morning, unable to sleep or stand the silence of his life.

He remembered his parents were dead. That one came back

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with a hard thud landing right in the center of his chest. Oh, hell, he remembered that one.

He didn't remember a boyfriend.

CHAPTER 5

Chad's beeper went off while he was in ER room number 12. He finished taking the last stitch in little Tommy Landrieu's leg and fished the beeper out of his pocket. The number was Jeff's nurses' station. Something between a thrill and falling down an elevator shaft hit his stomach.

"Next time you feel the urge to jump over a ditch with your skateboard, make sure there's no car parked on the other side," Chad said, giving Tommy's worried mother a grin.

She rolled her eyes and muttered, "Boys."

Tommy checked out his newest wound. "Thanks, Doctor Wright. This one is really cool! Ten stitches beats my old record, huh?"

"Yeah, it does."

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“Come on, son. Let’s go home.” Tommy’s mom dragged him out.

Chad hit the door and bolted to the stairs. He made it to the fourth floor in record time and slid to a stop at the nurses’ desk.

“He’s awake?” All the spit in his mouth had disappeared and his heart hammered in his chest. If he didn’t get a grip on himself, he’d probably have a heart attack right here in the hall before he even got a chance to see Jeff.

“That was fast! Yes, he’s awake.” She nodded and smiled, then she glanced toward the room and frowned. “I suppose I should warn you—he doesn’t remember you.”

There it was—the ugly stupid truth of all his lies and pretense.

He took a deep breath and held it. “That’s okay.” He sounded like a balloon losing air. Then he started down the hall, each step taking him closer to the real truth.

At Jeff’s door, he sucked in another lungful of courage and pushed the door open.

“Hi. Remember me?” Chad gave a nod as his gaze danced all over the room. For some reason, he couldn’t look Jeff in the face. Another lie. He was terrified to see what Jeff’s eyes reflected.

“You?” Jeff choked, reached for a cup with a spoon and shoveled in a few ice chips.

“Yeah.” Chad shrugged.

“I wasn’t dreaming?” Jeff looked stunned. And not very happy to see him.

“Maybe. I’m pretty sure you had dreams. Your eyelids flickered sometimes.” Chad knew that was about the stupidest thing he’d ever said.

Jeff frowned. “You were there. In the ER.” He pointed at Chad’s chest. “I remember the white coat and your face.” He let

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his hand fall back to the bed, as if it weighed too much to keep it in the air.

“Yeah. I’m an ER doctor. Here. At this hospital.” Chad grimaced.

Jeff stared at him. “Chad Wright.”

Chad nodded.

“From camp.”

He nodded again.

“The lying son of a bitch who broke my heart.” Jeff ground out the words from between clenched teeth.

Chad just kept himself from nodding, then after thinking about it, he nodded. Yeah, that would be him.

Now Chad couldn’t stop staring at Jeff. He was awake and damned if he didn’t look so fine and good and alive. Inside, Chad wanted to hoot and holler and dance down the hall, but from the hard look on Jeff’s face, all that joy turned into a heaping dose of “told you so.”

“Get out of my room.” Jeff closed his eyes and leaned back against the pillow.

“Sure, but—”

“I don’t want to hear any apology, no explanation. Not another word.” Jeff kept his eyes closed, refusing to look at Chad.

Chad ran his hands over the bar of the bed, wanting desperately to touch Jeff. To feel, just for a moment, the man’s body move at last. All this time, and now the very thing he’d longed for was denied him.

And rightfully so.

He just couldn’t seem to leave. To take that first step away from Jeff. God, it hurt.

Just like it had those years ago, as he stood with the slip of

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paper in his hand, wanting so bad to call and hear Jeff's voice. Knowing that when he did, he'd only have to tell Jeff they couldn't see each other. That his parents had told him Jeff was too young and he was now eighteen and could go to jail for seeing Jeff. That would ruin all his plans for college and his life.

He'd sneaked down after his parents had gone to sleep, but he'd never made the call. He'd put the phone down, gone back to his bed, and hid the slip of paper in a little box he kept special mementos in. *A coward then. A coward now.*

Jeff opened his eyes. "You're not gone." He crossed his arms, grimacing.

"Are you all right?" Chad moved toward him, but Jeff put out his hand to stop him.

"I'm fine."

"It's just that I—"

"No. You don't have the right to know about me." Jeff's blue gaze shot into him like bullets from a gun.

"You're right. I don't." Oh, man, how was he going to explain what he'd done? If Jeff was pissed now, he'd *really* be pissed when he found out.

"You don't. Please leave." Jeff set his mouth in a hard line.

The mouth Chad wanted to kiss and wanted to feel kiss him back.

"Right." He exhaled, turned away and left the room, pulling the door closed behind him.

What had he expected? It had all been a fantasy and he knew it. *Stupid fool.*

But it still hurt.

* * *

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Jeff lay back in the bed, tears of pain filling his eyes. His entire body hurt...don't even mention his heart. He blinked and they fell, so he wiped them away with the corner of the sheet. *That bastard had some freakin' nerve!*

What did Chad expect?

That Jeff would see him after all those years and what? Chad expected him to be happy to see his first love and his first broken heart? Well, his only broken heart.

He'd never let that happen again. *Hell, no.*

The door opened, and Jeff lifted his head to shout at Chad, but the nurse stepped in.

She moved silently around his bed to check his IV and his... *Oh, shit, a catheter?* She raised the sheet and peeked at him, then lowered it and smiled.

"You didn't remember him, huh?" She gazed into his eyes, questioning.

"I—" Jeff cut his reply off, then winced. "I hurt."

"Of course you do. You were beaten severely. And you've been lying in that bed for nearly two months." She switched out the blanket for a new warm one. Jeff felt groggy. Achy and groggy. And so tired.

She injected something into the tube feeding his arm.

"When can I go home?" he mumbled, his eyes barely able to stay open.

"When the doctor releases you, Dr. Wright can take you home." Her voice faded into the background.

"Good," he muttered, then drifted off.

* * *

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Chad returned later that night and spoke with Singh about Jeff. In the morning, they'd remove the catheter, see if he could pee, get him up and walking and feed him some soft food.

Then they'd see about some rehab of Jeff's muscles. Being inactive for so long would require regaining strength. Physical therapy would take care of that.

If all went well, maybe in a week, Singh assured Chad, he could take his boyfriend home.

Chad smiled and thanked the other doctor. As Singh moved off to another patient, Chad pushed open the door to Jeff's room. It was dark, except for the faint light from the bathroom falling across the bed.

He crept to the side of it and leaned over to brush a strand of Jeff's bangs out of his face. How the hell was he going to tell Jeff he'd...taken over his life? Hijacked his belongings, made a pet of his cat, and cancelled all his classes until next term?

Oh, that was going to go over big. *Not.*

Jeff's skin was so warm with life. Gone was the clamminess, the pallor, even the dry lips. Jeff's lips had plumped up and looked so kissable, Chad couldn't resist.

Softly as he could manage, he touched his lips to Jeff's, then moved away.

That was all he'd ever get, and in that moment, he knew he'd be fine with it.

Jeff might be pissed that he'd done what he'd done, but Chad didn't regret it. He'd helped Jeff. Hadn't he?

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "For everything."

The man he'd fallen in love with years ago and then again just two months ago, slept on, unaware of Chad.

That's how he should have kept it. He knew that now. Getting

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involved in Jeff's life had been a colossal mistake.

As big a mistake as when he didn't call Jeff to explain at the end of that summer.

The best summer of his life.

Chad left.

* * *

Jeff groaned and opened his eyes. The nurse from the last time he was awake was taking his pulse. "What day is this?"

"Tuesday."

"How long did you say I've been in here?" He scratched his leg, and his hand grazed the tubing of the catheter. "And when can you take this out?"

"Well, that's coming out this morning." She pointed to the plastic bag hanging on the side of his bed. "And you've been in here nearly two months."

"Shit! Two months!" He coughed, and she handed him the cup of water at his bedside. He took a sip, let it moisten his throat, and then tried to speak again. In a flash of panic, he blurted out, "Where's Murray?"

"Who's Murray?" Her eyebrows rose.

"My cat. Who's been feeding him?" Jeff groaned. If Murray had been left in the apartment with no food, he'd be dead by now. "I need to call my landlady. I need a phone. Where's my cell phone?" He looked around the bed, but didn't see either one.

"Now, now, calm down. I think your boyfriend has the cat. From what I've heard, your assailants stole your phone when you were robbed. I'm sorry." She shook her head.

"He has my cat?" Jeff cursed. "What's he doing with my cat?"

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She stopped, put her hands on her hips and cocked her head to the side. “Uh, feeding him most likely. You sound as if you’re unhappy about that.”

“He had—” Jeff wanted to say he had no right, but instead he just ground his teeth together. What was Chad thinking?

She shook her head at him, then began straightening his covers.

“Dr. Wright has been here everyday, sitting with you and talking to you. He even read you a book. He’s got your cat, and if I were you, I’d be damn glad someone did.” She tsked. “It must break his heart to know you don’t remember him.” She reached out and gave his leg a squeeze. “He cares a great deal, but that’s all I’m going to say about that.” She winked at him, then picked up her chart and left.

Jeff exhaled. Murray was safe and sound. Thank God.

Then it hit him—he should probably thank Chad. He leaned back and closed his eyes. He needed a bit of a nap. Just a few minutes, really.

As he drifted off, he wondered how Chad had gotten his cat.

CHAPTER 6

Chad stared at the door to Jeff's room. After two months of seeing the man every day, to be barred from him left Chad alone and adrift. He's spent every moment of his free time with Jeff and now, well, he didn't know what to do with himself.

The nurse came up behind him and touched his shoulder. "Go on in and see him."

"He doesn't want to see me." Chad exhaled and turned to leave.

"Wait." She flipped open her clipboard. "He's scheduled for physical therapy at ten every morning this week. And he has to walk around the ward three times in the afternoon." She looked up at him and winked. "No telling who he could run into then."

Chad stared at her. "Why are you doing this?"

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"I love happy endings." She grinned and walked away.

He wasn't sure this would have a happy ending. Not for him anyway. For Jeff, it'd be happy all right. He'd woken up and could get on with his life.

Mentioning his life, Chad had to tell Jeff about the state of his, or the lack of it, as it was. He had to come clean, tell Jeff he didn't have an apartment to go home to and that his stuff had been packed up in four boxes, including his guitar and cat, and now all of it resided at Chad's house.

Waiting until he was released wasn't fair to Jeff. Chad knew what he had to do and once that decision had been made, like always he forged ahead.

He pushed through the door, a new resolve stiffening his spine.

"Good morning." He smiled at Jeff.

Jeff looked up from the breakfast tray and frowned. "What are you doing here?"

Chad pulled up a chair, the one he'd spent so much time in, and sat. "We need to talk."

"Talk?" Jeff rolled his eyes. "What about?" He took a bite of cereal and chewed.

At least it wasn't a get-the-hell-outta-here response. Chad sat forward and clasped his hands together, as if he were about to explain a procedure to a patient, trying to look professional, but his leg jiggled.

"In case you were wondering, I have your cat, Murray."

"Yeah, I heard. Thanks." Jeff still stared at him, eyes wary, but not glaring like the other day.

"When you first came in, we didn't expect you to live." Chad knew it sounded harsh, but he hoped honesty would win Jeff over. It was about time he was honest with the man, and even though

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nearly ten years late, maybe it would count for something.

Jeff put down his spoon. “No shit?”

Chad nodded. “We were amazed that you hung on, that you got better. But we all knew it would be a long time before you’d get out of here. Everyone searched for your family and friends, but we couldn’t find anyone.”

“There isn’t anyone.” Jeff blinked and his mouth twitched. “My parents died a little while ago.”

“I know...well, I knew that, but that’s all I knew. All anyone knew. The cops weren’t much help; they’re overworked and under paid.” He shrugged. “So I decided to see if I could find out anything. I went to your apartment.”

“Why?”

“It’s the least I could do for you.” Chad clasped his hands together and rubbed his chin with them, anything to keep from jumping up and pacing the room.

“You went to my apartment? How did you get in?” Jeff seemed more curious than mad, and Chad began to breathe easier.

“I had your keys. The cops recovered your keys and an empty wallet, but the thieves got your backpack. Sorry.” Chad’s mouth twisted. “Anyway, I let myself in and found your cat. I fed it, then went to see your landlady.” He decided not to tell Jeff about his search of the apartment and definitely not about sniffing his clothing.

“Oh.” Jeff watched Chad as he spoke, all wariness gone, replaced by a sort of resignation.

“She told me if you didn’t pay the rent, she’d evict you. She’d box up your stuff and if it wasn’t claimed in three months, she’d give it away. And send the cat to the pet shelter.”

Jeff groaned and laid his head back against his pillows. His

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fists tightened as they rested on the bed next to his body. “Fuck. Are you telling me it’s all gone? My guitar? My music?” His eyes filled with tears, and it broke Chad’s heart to see so much pain in Jeff’s face. “That was my grandfather’s guitar.”

“No, nothing’s gone. I had a decision to make. I knew you wouldn’t be out of the hospital anytime soon.” Chad swallowed and plunged ahead. “So I boxed up your things, and took your cat and your guitar. I have them. At my house.” He glanced out the window of the room, then back to Jeff.

They gazes met and held. Chad’s heart stopped beating as he waited for the explosion from Jeff.

Jeff sighed and sank back into the bed. “Thank you.” His fists relaxed and he wiped his eyes with the edge of the sheet.

“You’re welcome.” Chad stood. “I just wanted to let you know, so you wouldn’t worry.”

The man in the bed, the man he loved, nodded, but didn’t say a word. Chad didn’t really expect him to; this had gone far better than he’d expected.

Jeff stared out the window, his bottom lip caught between his teeth as he chewed on it.

Chad slipped out of the room and went back to work.

* * *

Jeff gazed out his window overlooking the Garden District. Rows of houses, mostly two-story Victorians, led his gaze to the Mississippi River, or as much of it as he could see from his fourth-floor room.

He didn’t have a place to live. That was the bad news.

All his belongings and his cat were at Chad’s. That was the

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good news.

Wasn't it?

Jeff wasn't sure. A certain reluctant thank-God-for-Chad filled him, followed by the suspicion something else was at work here. Why had Chad done that? Jeff and he hadn't kept in touch. In fact, Chad had made it perfectly clear he never wanted to see or hear from Jeff again a decade ago.

So why now?

Sure, someone might call it fate or destiny that they'd met again all these years later, but to what purpose?

Well, for one, his inner voice sneered, to save your sorry ass. How about that for a reason?

"Okay," he said to the empty room. "I get that. But so what? He's a doctor now. Am I supposed to be impressed?" Jeff sank down in his bed and crossed his arms over his chest. Great, he was talking to himself. *What next, hallucinations?*

It wasn't like his life wasn't good or his future career wasn't just as important as Chad's. Teaching music to high school kids was really important, especially in this city, where music reigned supreme, from gospel to jazz and everything in between.

The traditions of the city were important and with all the artists who'd left during Katrina and never returned, New Orleans had felt their loss. Where would the next crop of gifted musicians come from? Who would be there to mentor and train those young girls and boys in music?

Jeff's dream, ever since Katrina, had been to restore that legacy by doing whatever he could, and that meant teaching. He had his eye on a position at the New Orleans School for the Performing Arts, and once he finished his classes next year, he'd earn his masters and, with luck, land that position.

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Chad wouldn't understand that, would he? Would he laugh at Jeff's dreams?

Why did Jeff care?

He didn't.

Not one bit. If Chad didn't approve of it, tough. He could take his stethoscope and shove it.

Jeff gritted his teeth, angry all over again at the man who'd broken his heart so long ago. Because of that, Jeff had distanced himself from potential lovers. And that had worked well; he would have gotten his degree in record time if Katrina hadn't shut down Tulane. He'd had to wait until they were back up and running, and even then he'd worked on his classes on the internet. He'd never stopped playing jazz guitar, using any venue he could find to play. He didn't need the money. His parents' life insurance had assured him an education and money to live on while in school if he kept his expenses down.

It had kept him focused on his dreams.

And alone. *Don't forget alone.*

Jeff sighed. He'd been alone ever since his parents had died, and it had been hard. There was no one with whom to share his wins and losses. No one to come home to after school. No one to spend quiet hours in bed with, just talking or making love.

Just when he'd gotten used to it, when he could finally sleep at night, when he'd stopped reaching for the phone to call his mom or dad to tell them about acing a test or getting great grades, into his life waltzed Chad Wright.

Talk about a blast from the past.

Why did Chad have to look so damn good? Why did he have to be so damn nice? Why did he have to stir up all those buried feelings?

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Chad had saved Jeff's belongings from being given away. He'd taken in Murray. For the first time, Jeff saw a glimpse of the young teen he'd once known and given his heart and body to during summer camp.

"Uh-uh. Not again. I'm not falling for that again." Jeff set his jaw and with a jerk of his hand, knocked over the cup of water on his tray table. It clattered to the floor, spilling ice and liquid over the pale green linoleum.

"Shit." He groaned, tossed back the covers, and scooted to the edge of the bed. With extreme caution, he lowered the bed so his feet touched the floor and, with both hands, pushed until he stood upright.

The room swam, but it had done that the last time the nurse had gotten him out of bed for a ride in the wheelchair down to physical therapy. He waited until it passed, then bent down to pick up the cup.

Wrong move. As soon as he did it, he lost his balance and toppled to the floor. Jeff put his hand out to try and to stop himself from falling, but his arm gave way. Shocking pain had him seeing stars behind his eyes.

"Nurse!" He panted as he rolled over. Clutching his arm to his chest, he lay on his back looking up at the ceiling tiles. Damned it if he wasn't lying in the puddle of ice water. And his gown was open.

"Nurse!" He tried to reach for the call button, but it was on the other side of the bed. His ass was cold and wet.

Okay, this just sucked.

"Nurse!" This time he bellowed and the sound echoed off his walls.

After what felt like forever, but was probably only a few

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seconds, the nurse rushed into the room. “Mr. Stone? Are you all right? What happened?” She knelt beside him and inspected his arm. Frowning, she helped him to sit up.

“Is it broken?” He wanted to believe he’d just imagined the sound that had reverberated through his body.

“Looks like it could be.” Her brows wrinkled as she looked at him. “I’ll call the doctor, then we’ll get you down to x-ray.”

Jeff accepted her help as he wrapped an arm around her shoulder and she supported him to get him on his feet and into the bed. He couldn’t close the back of his stupid gown and he was too embarrassed to tell her his butt needed to be dried off.

“What were you doing?” She looked down at the floor.

“I spilled the water and got out of bed to clean it up,” he explained. He’d felt helpless before, but now he felt helpless and stupid.

“It’s all right.” She patted his hand. “Next time, call the nurses’ station, okay?”

Thank God she hadn’t fussed at him. He just couldn’t have taken it.

He sank into the bed as the nurse covered him with the blanket.

“I’ll go get you another cup of water, if you want.”

“No, thanks. Just the doctor.” He raised his arm a bit and winced. She nodded and rushed off.

God, his life was in shambles.

Chad’s words came back to him. *We didn’t think you’d make it.*

But he had. He was alive and if he could survive being beaten within an inch of his life, he could survive a broken arm.

Sure. He could do this.

He didn’t need anyone.

CHAPTER 7

Ravi Singh caught up to Chad in ER between patients. “Dr. Wright? I wanted to speak to you about Jeff Stone.”

Chad put down the chart he’d been going over and turned to face the other doctor. “Sure. What’s up?” He still kept up the pretense of being Jeff’s boyfriend, afraid if Singh knew the truth, he’d make trouble.

“It’s been three days and his therapy is going well, despite that broken arm.”

“Broken arm?” Chad’s stomach dropped in a sickening lurch and he just barely resisted clutching at the counter to stay on his feet.

“Yes, I thought you knew. He fell getting out of bed. It’s a clean break and should be fine in six weeks.” Singh frowned and a

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flash of distrust shot across his face.

“I’ve been swamped in ER pulling a double shift and barely able to get a cup of coffee,” Chad scrambled to explain. “I’ll go see him as soon as I get a break.” He gave Singh a reassuring smile.

The other doctor nodded and walked off.

Chad nearly crumpled. He should have been there. He should have done something to keep Jeff safe. After all, he’d taken responsibility for Jeff two months ago when he made the first decision to help his old lover.

His morning dragged by as he watched the clock, waiting for Dr. Mathews to arrive for his shift and free Chad to go to Jeff’s side. At last, Mathews showed up, looking somewhat fresh, and Chad briefed him on the patients, flying through it as if he were on fire.

Chad handed over the charts and took off, jogging to the stairs and then dashing up them to the fourth floor.

He slid to a stop outside Jeff’s door, panting to catch his breath. Inside, the urge to see Jeff and confirm the man was all right warred with his uncertainty over whether Jeff ever wanted to see him again.

Well, he’d have to—Chad had all his things. At some point, Jeff would have to retrieve his belongings and his cat. Jeff would just have to get over it, that’s all.

Ramrod straight, Chad knocked, then entered Jeff’s room. “Hi.”

Jeff looked from the television high on the wall to Chad’s face. “Hi.”

For a brief moment, Chad thought Jeff looked happy to see him, then the hint of a smile vanished.

“Heard you broke your arm.” Chad raked Jeff with his gaze,

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insuring nothing more had changed on the man's body, and landed on the white cast covering Jeff from elbow to hand.

"It was a clean break." Jeff shrugged.

Chad came closer, expecting Jeff to tell him to leave or stop or something, but Jeff just watched him. Chad pulled up a chair and sat. The two men stared at each other without speaking.

After minutes had passed, Chad asked, "How's rehab going?"

"Good. I'm working on building up my strength, but with the arm, I'm not as far along as I'd hoped."

"I'm sure it'll just take time." Chad tried a smile.

Jeff didn't smile back, but he didn't frown either. That had to be good, right?

"Has Singh said when he'd release you?"

"He's been vague." Jeff grimaced. "I want out of here, but..." He glanced out the window.

Chad exhaled. So, the big gorilla in the room just stood up and beat its chest..

"But you don't have anywhere to go," Chad finished.

"Right." Jeff met Chad's gaze, and something in it made Chad brave.

"You know, the offer to stay at my place until you find another apartment still stands." Chad didn't dare look at Jeff, so he kept his gaze on his feet.

Silence.

Chad cleared his throat. "It'd be temporary. I have a foldout couch in the room I use as my office. And I'm at the hospital most of the time. We'd barely see each other." He rushed it all out, unable to control himself. "Just as friends, nothing more."

"Okay."

"What?" Chad snapped his head up and stared at Jeff.

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"I said okay." Jeff cleared his throat. "It's not like I have much choice." His mouth twisted to the side.

"It's my fault. If I hadn't interfered..."

"I'd still be without a place to stay. My apartment manager would still have evicted me, my stuff would have been given away, and I'd have lost Murray." For the first time since Chad had seen Jeff in the ER, Jeff smiled at him. "Thanks. I mean it."

"You're welcome." Chad cleared his throat. "Do you want me to push Singh to let you out?" He didn't want to take over for Jeff, but merely offered to help, this time with Jeff's permission.

"That'd be great. I feel fine. I just need to get out of here, stand on my own two feet, and start getting my life back together. Not that it was all that together in the first place." He chuckled and his eyes shone a little brighter.

"I don't know about that. Seems to me you had it going on. Slackers don't get into Tulane, much less get your kind of grades."

"You've seen my grades?" Jeff's eyes widened.

Chad realized he hadn't told Jeff everything. "Well, you see, I went to the school and talked to the admissions people. I thought if you withdrew due to health issues, instead of flunking this semester, it'd be easier for you to pick up where you left off and not screw with your grade point average."

Jeff opened his mouth, but didn't speak. A chill raced through Chad, warning him he'd messed up again.

"Wow." Jeff sighed.

"Is that a good wow or a bad wow?"

"It's just wow." Jeff sank back into the bed. "No one's ever...not since my parents died...no one's..." Jeff stumbled over the words as his eyes filled.

"Taken care of you?" Chad asked.

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“Yeah.” Jeff shook his head, then looked out the window, blinking. “Thanks.” It came out rough and grainy, and tore right to Chad’s heart.

“Hey, I wanted to help you. That’s all.”

“That’s all? Like for old time’s sake?”

Chad picked at the knee of his scrubs. “Something like that.” Now, an unfamiliar shyness crept over him.

Jeff grinned. “Singh seems to think you’re my boyfriend. I’ve been wondering how in the world he got that idea.”

Chad nearly swallowed his spit. “Uh, I can explain that.”

* * *

Jeff crossed his arms and waited, his head cocked to the side. He loved seeing Chad squirm. Big, smart, “Mr. In Control” squirmed. Jeff almost burst out laughing. Chad had taken over Jeff’s life, and, at first, Jeff had been pissed as hell. But now, with the pain of his attack fading, in the realization he liked being looked after, and that it had been something he’d missed for far too long, Jeff accepted Chad’s gift.

And it had been a gift. A multi-sided gift. Without knowing it, Chad had given Jeff not just his life, but more than he’d had in a long time—Chad had cared. No one had cared about Jeff since his mom and dad died.

Now the doctor, who’d once been a self-confident teenager, struggled to explain how he’d made it all happen, and Jeff couldn’t wait to hear about it.

“I’ll just bet you can explain. My doctor holds the opinion that we’ve been together as lovers for several years. ‘Your long-time partner,’ he told me.”

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“What did you say?” Fear skated across Chad’s face.

Jeff paused, letting Chad dangle. It might have been cruel, but Jeff needed a moment to understand his own swirling feelings. When Singh had said it, Jeff had nearly blown it, almost shouted the man down, but something had stopped him in his tracks.

Pleasure.

A tiny thrill that someone had claimed him and a bigger thrill that it had been Chad. Man, that had scared Jeff. Not as scared as when he’d first awakened to find his body battered and his life on hold, but damn close.

“I’m waiting for that explanation.” Jeff smirked.

Chad stood and went to the window, staring out. “I’m a doctor, so I know what the protocol is for sharing information about patients. I knew if I didn’t give Singh a good enough reason to tell me what was going on with you, he’d keep me in the dark.”

“And you just couldn’t stand that? Not being in charge and having all the answers.” Jeff made it sound like an accusation.

“No, I couldn’t stand it because I *had* to know how you were.” Chad’s chin jerked up and his mouth set in a hard line. “You were alone. Someone had to care.” He continued to look out the window toward the river in the distance.

“Someone, huh?”

“Yeah.” Chad touched the glass with his hand, fingers spread.

Jeff wanted to climb out of bed and go to him, wrap his one good arm around the man’s shoulder, but he fought back the urge. Instead, his hand grasped the bedrail.

“I’m glad it was you.”

Chad turned to him, eyebrows reaching to his scalp. “I never sto—” He cut off the rest of what he was going to say, then cleared his throat. “I told Singh what I had to and I’m not sorry for that,

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but if he finds out, he could make trouble for me.”

“Don’t worry. I didn’t blow it.” Jeff smiled. “Thanks for caring enough to lie.”

Chad winced. “I don’t do that often, Jeff.”

“Well, I should hope not.” He laughed. “Now, when can I get out of here?”

“I can talk to him about it. I’d prefer if you were there, though.”

“Sure. Set it up.” Jeff nodded. “I’m sure I can play the part of the doctor’s boy toy.”

Chad choked, staggered back, and for a moment, lust danced in his gaze.

And what that did to Jeff’s body? Oh, hell... He bit back a groan. It might not be that hard a role to play at all.

CHAPTER 8

Dr. Singh stared at the x-rays on the wall and then glanced at the chart. Both Jeff and Chad held their breaths as they waited for his pronouncement. They'd agreed to play the roles of devoted couple to get Jeff released.

Chad had moved to Jeff's bedside taking a protective stance, in the role of the caring partner. Jeff had deferred the questions to Chad, letting him take the lead. Despite it being part of the "act," Jeff found a sense of relief in allowing the older man to deal with it all. Jeff still wasn't up to speed. He did his therapy, but it exhausted him and each day he'd returned to his room and taken a nap to recover.

Even his appetite had suffered, but he blamed it on the hospital food. Once he was out of there and could get back to his normal

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diet of macaroni and cheese, oatmeal cookies and Diet Coke, he'd be just fine.

"The reports from the labs are all good. The arm is healing. Are your ribs still hurting?" Singh asked Jeff.

"No, not really."

Singh flipped through more papers. "Physical therapy says you can do outpatient therapy three days a week in the clinic here for the next month and you should be fine."

Jeff grinned and gave a little whoop. "So can I leave?"

Chad smiled, reached out his hand and stroked down Jeff's arm. "Calm down and let's see what Dr. Singh has to say, okay, baby?"

Jesus, Chad's touch shook Jeff. That subtle slide of fingertips along his bare arm popped out goose bumps all over his body, and the "baby" shot right to his prick. If Chad touched him again, he'd sport an erection for sure.

"Okay, whatever you say." Jeff grinned up at Chad, who looked down at him with something in his gaze that warmed Jeff's blood even more. *Too bad this is all an act.*

"And don't you forget it." Chad laughed and turned back to Singh. "So can I take him home tomorrow?"

Singh looked at both of them, sighed and said, "You can take him home today. I'll get the papers ready for him to sign and he's all yours."

"Hear that, Chad? I'm all yours." Jeff winked at Chad and nearly laughed to see the reaction to his teasing. Everyone in the room heard Chad's swallow. Even Singh chuckled.

After the doctor left, Chad turned to Jeff. "Laying it on a little thick, weren't you?"

"Hey, you're the one who called me baby."

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Chad shrugged. "I thought it would sound good."

Jeff had thought so also; too bad he'd never hear it again. "It worked." Jeff gazed out the window. "I'm going to miss this view."

"It's something, huh? The rooftops stretching to the river." Chad moved to the window and leaned his hip against the wall. "I love this part of the city."

"Do you live around here?" Jeff asked. He didn't know much about Chad. In fact, Chad probably knew more about him.

"Yeah. I found a place close to work. I can walk on nice days or drive."

"Did you stay during Katrina?"

Chad nodded. "There were patients at the hospital I couldn't leave. We couldn't move them. Only a few of the male nurses and a few doctors stayed behind. We were damn lucky we didn't flood, like Baptist Hospital in Midcity and Charity Hospital downtown."

"Wow, that must've been something."

"We had backup generators only and they ran life support. Most of the time, we were in the dark. Some people in the area stayed, too, so we had people trickling into the ER every now and then, but we could only do basic triage."

"Why'd you stay?" Jeff wanted to know more about Chad. He wasn't the same man he'd known all those years ago. He'd matured and, like a fine wine, gotten better with age.

"How could I leave? I was needed."

His answer told Jeff all he'd wanted to know. Something deep inside Chad drove him to help others, and in return he felt needed, filling something fundamental and basic inside the man.

Jeff could understand that, since he had a burning need to teach. They weren't so different, after all.

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“What about you, Jeff? Did you stay or go?” Chad slipped into the chair and leaned forward, hands clasped between his knees.

“I went with my parents. I was still living with them at the time, before they died.” Jeff closed his eyes and fought back the sadness that always filled him when he thought about his parents. “We left the city a few days before and stayed in a hotel in Baton Rouge. At first, it was fun; hurricane parties everywhere, but when the levees broke and the city flooded, and we started watching the television reports —” Jeff had to take a deep breath. “Man, that was beyond intense. My mom cried every time she watched it. And my dad? You know, I’d never seen him cry before. Never. But he cried when they showed the crowds of people at the Superdome begging for water.” Jeff’s eyes teared up and he wiped at them with a tissue.

“We stayed away for months, until our money just about ran out. When the National Guard finally allowed people to return home we checked out and drove back. Our house hadn’t flooded, but all the food in the refrigerator had gone bad, leaked and ruined the kitchen floor. It took months to get the stink out of the house.”

“Damn, I’m lucky, I guess. I managed to clean out my fridge before that happened, and we could bring our extra food here to keep cool. Most of it we fed to the staff and the patients who could eat.” Chad stood, stretched, and walked to the door.

“Where are you going?” Jeff asked.

“Well, if you’re going home today, I better bring you some clothes to change into and some shoes to wear. Can’t have you going home in a hospital gown.” He chuckled. “I’ll be back soon. You won’t even know I’m gone.” And he left.

Jeff sighed. He already missed Chad.

That wasn’t good. They had an understanding. Jeff would stay

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until he could find his own place and get on with his life.

It's what he'd wanted since he'd woken and had been all he'd thought about lying in this hospital bed.

It struck Jeff hard between the eyes. If he didn't do something drastic, Chad would walk out of Jeff's life just like he'd done ten years ago. Jeff was sure he didn't want that to happen. Not again.

Desperate times called for desperate measures, didn't they?

And right now, Jeff couldn't deny the desperation clinging to him like sweat.

* * *

Chad emptied two of the drawers in his chest and added Jeff's underwear, socks and T-shirts to them. Then he hung up the shirts and pants in his closet. He went into the bathroom, cleared out a drawer and placed Jeff's shaving gear in it, then stocked his medicine cabinet with the stuff he'd pulled from Jeff's.

After adding Jeff's towels to the linen closet, and placing his shampoo and conditioner on the ledge in the shower stall, he stepped back and surveyed his work.

Bath done.

Now for the kitchen and living room.

Chad lugged the boxes he'd packed from Jeff's kitchen and added it to his stuff, pots and pans in the lower cabinets, dishes and glasses in the upper cabinets and the food into the pantry. Murray, thinking food was imminent, followed him, then sat by his bowl and waited.

"No dinner yet. Daddy's coming home today and you can get fed then." The cat meowed as if he understood and trotted into the guest room after Chad.

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Under the steady gaze of the cat, Chad opened the foldout bed and changed the sheets to a set of Jeff's and placed his pillows in the hall closet, along with his and Jeff's coats and jackets.

After going into the living room, he scanned it. There was one last thing to place, and it was the most important of them all.

"I'll bet you know what's missing, Murray." The cat watched him from the arm of the couch.

Meow.

"That's right. Jeff's guitar and music stand."

Chad's apartment was on the first floor of a refurbished Victorian on Magazine Street near the hospital. The element he loved the most about the apartment, besides the fourteen-foot ceilings, was the two tall windows that opened onto the front porch. In the brief spring and early summer, he loved opening them and letting the breeze in.

Chad moved one of the matching chairs of his sofa set between the windows, placed Jeff's music stand and guitar next to it, and stood back. *Good.* But it needed a table.

He went to his couch and borrowed one of the end tables.

"That should work. I want your Daddy to feel at home here for however long he stays." Chad smiled at the cat. "I know he'll leave, but while he's here, I want him to like being here."

Chad petted the cat. "He's so important to me, you know. I'd do anything for him, even let him go."

Murray hunched his back into Chad's touch. "Yeah, and I like you, too."

With everything done, Chad gathered up the clothes for Jeff to change into, put them in a gym bag and left.

Whistling, Chad skipped down the stairs and headed to his car, tossed in the bag and got in the driver's seat. With any luck,

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Singh's paperwork would be done, and Jeff could come home as soon as possible.

Chad thought of what to prepare for Jeff's dinner, then laughed.

Macaroni and cheese with oatmeal cookies for dessert, of course.

CHAPTER 9

“Careful. Take it slow,” Chad warned.

“I’m not helpless, you know.” Jeff grimaced as his muscles strained. Getting out of Chad’s Camaro proved harder than getting in. Chad stood on the sidewalk, hovering.

“No, you’re not. But you *are* still in pain or you wouldn’t be making that face.”

“Seriously?” Jeff had no idea what the face was, but from the worry on Chad’s face, it must not have been good.

“Sure. It’s a six on our pain chart—the one with the cartoon faces.” Chad chuckled, reminding him of the silly chart posted on his hospital room wall, with faces that ranged from smiling at zero to bared teeth and tears at ten.

Jeff glanced up at Chad, who held out his hand, offering, but

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not insisting. Chad had been so in control at the hospital, making sure Jeff had all his appointments for physical therapy set up, his meds in hand, and his paperwork done. Jeff had hovered between being annoyed and being relieved.

He took Chad's hand to help steady himself, then took the first step up the sidewalk to Chad's house.

"Nice house." Jeff figured on Chad's salary he could afford the upper Garden District and this beautiful Victorian house. "You own?"

"No. I rent the first floor. The second floor belongs to the owners."

"Oh."

"You sound disappointed." Chad's eyebrows went up.

"No. Just wondered why you didn't buy when you could afford it, being a doctor and all."

Chad shrugged. "A medical degree isn't cheap. I have student loans. And seeing so many people screwed over by the insurance companies and government with Katrina? Let's just say it's soured my views on home ownership."

"I understand. When my parents died, I inherited the house. I sold it to pay for school right after my parents died. After Katrina hit, the house prices went sky high, so I did well, but with school expenses and living, I have to budget it." Jeff ambled up the walkway to the steps leading to the porch. "I was damn lucky. We lived at the lakefront on the other side of the levee break. The entire neighborhood on the other side ended up under eight feet of water."

"Why didn't you buy another place?" Chad asked. "Sounds like you could afford it."

"I wasn't sure I'd stay here after I got my degree. If my plans

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for working fell through, I wanted to be able to move around. The economy isn't very good here, and the school system has fallen apart. There's talk of charter schools, but the opportunities won't be the same as before Katrina. Plus I have to admit, I'm a little gun shy about owning, too. Although, I suppose now would be a good time to buy. Two years after Katrina and prices are finally coming down."

"Yeah. I hear you." Chad offered his arm as Jeff went up the three steps to the porch.

Jeff winced with each step he took. His ribs hurt and his leg muscles ached, but that was all. He could deal with it, but he really wanted to lie down.

Chad opened the door and stepped to the side. "Welcome home."

Jeff froze and stared at him. "Home?" *Had that been a slip of the tongue?*

"Sorry. I meant to my home." Chad's mouth made a straight line.

Jeff nodded and walked through the door into a living room with a wide opening to the dining room. Jeff scanned the first room—couch and loveseat in a warm brown corduroy, coffee table, side table and lamp, all of good quality.

He turned to the windows and his heart leapt into his throat.

"My guitar!" he cried out and took a few steps toward it.

"I thought you'd need a place to practice." Chad stood behind him.

"It's...it's..." Jeff's voice went all scratchy, and he swallowed. "Thank you." It was lovely, like a painting, with the guitar on its stand, the music set out on the black metal holder, the chair waiting for him to sit and play. All of it was framed by the two long

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windows covered by sheers that let in the most beautiful natural light.

“Glad you like it.” Chad shut the door and carried the bags from the hospital to the kitchen. “Sit down and relax while I put these away.”

Just then, Murray sauntered into the room and sat. *Meow.*

“Murray!” Jeff leaned down, ribs hurting, and made kissing sounds to call the cat to him. Murray strolled over, tail switching, and rubbed against Jeff’s legs. “Hello, boy. Did you miss me?”

“He did. Told me so himself.” Chad laughed as he came in from the kitchen. “He’s a good cat.” Murray fell to the floor and rolled onto his back so Jeff could scratch his belly.

“He never lets me do that,” Chad griped. “Guess he saves that for his daddy.”

Jeff looked up and smiled. “It takes time. I had him a year before he let me do it.”

Chad fell quiet as what looked like a grimace of pain crossed his handsome features. Jeff could have kicked himself. He and Murray would be long gone before a year passed.

Chad turned away. “I’ll fix dinner in an hour, if that’s all right.”

“Sure.” Jeff didn’t know what to say.

Chad pointed to an open door. “That’s my bedroom. The bathroom is through there.” Then he pointed to another door. “That’s my office and guest room.”

Jeff nodded. “Speaking of bathrooms...” He levered his body off the couch and made for the door as Chad returned to the kitchen.

Jeff stepped into the bedroom, his gaze searching the room and taking it all in. Very nice, masculine, but not over decorated—a

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queen bed, night tables, chest of drawers with a mirror and a chair next to the bed with a floor lamp.

A closed door, probably the closet, and another door standing ajar. *Must be the bathroom.*

Jeff went in and shut the door. He pissed, flushed and then went to the sink.

His razor stood in the holder next to what had to be Chad's razor. A lump formed in his throat and he tried to swallow it down. With his hand shaking, he pulled open the drawer and looked inside.

His toiletries filled one side of the shallow drawer.

Looking up, he caught his teary reflection in the mirror. God, he looked wrecked. His hair hadn't been cut in months and he looked tired. He flipped open the medicine cabinet and picked up the bottle of sleeping meds his doctor had given him.

Chad had moved him in. Not just "Come and visit" or "Stay for a while," but the "Here, take a drawer; it's all yours," sort of moved in.

Panic filled him, and he replaced the pills, staggered out of the bathroom and went to the chest. Taking a deep breath, he yanked open the top drawer, but he didn't recognize the clothes, so he shut it.

When he pulled open the next one, he found his things. Jeff stared at his neatly folded socks and underwear, then slid the drawer closed. He didn't need to go to the closet; he was sure his clothes would be hanging up in there.

Chad had really moved him in, and Jeff wasn't sure how he felt about that.

Fear, happiness, confusion all danced around in his mind like the carousel at City Park. Fear because he'd never shared his life

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with another man; happiness because, well, damn it, *Chad* had moved him in; and confusion because he couldn't get a solid reading on Chad.

Chad might be confused or sending mixed signals, but Jeff knew what he wanted.

Jeff turned and faced the bed. This was where he wanted to spend his nights. In Chad's bed, not on Chad's foldout couch.

Despite Chad's generosity with his home, Chad had made it clear Jeff would sleep on the pullout, not in Chad's bed. A fast and sudden realization swept away all the fear and confusion, leaving Jeff with just one clear burning desire.

"We'll see how long that lasts," Jeff growled.

* * *

Chad looked up as Jeff entered the room. "Find everything okay?"

"If you mean my razor and kit, yeah. I found them. You thought of everything."

Chad jumped up from the couch, palms held out as if to ward Jeff off. "Don't be mad at me. I just wanted you to feel comfortable. That's all."

"I'm not mad. It's not a problem, so calm down, Doctor Wright." Jeff grinned as he approached. "I have to sit down before I fall down." He plopped onto the couch where Chad had been sitting.

Jeff leaned back. "I'm really tired. Do you mind if I stretch out on your bed right now? I can do the foldout later tonight."

"Sure." Chad held out his hand for Jeff to take. Their hands touched, and Jeff felt the shock and awe of it all the way to his

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knees. Chad's expression stilled as he pulled Jeff up, and his hand grasped Jeff's good arm to steady him. "Come on. I'll get you settled."

They stood so close Chad's breath puffed over Jeff's face. The urge to lean in and rest his head on Chad's shoulder came over him, but he didn't want to look needy, so he held his ground. After all, Chad had been the one to walk away and now Jeff wanted Chad to make the first move.

The moment passed before it'd started.

Chad led the way to the bedroom, and Jeff followed. As Chad turned down the covers and plumped the pillows, Jeff unbuttoned his shirt. He'd needed help getting it on over the cast at the hospital.

"Can you help me with my shirt?"

"Of course." Chad came around behind him and eased the shirt over his shoulders, then down his arms and over the cast. Whether Chad meant to or not, his fingertips grazed Jeff's skin, sending his nerves into overdrive.

While Chad hung up the shirt on the back of the chair, Jeff unbuckled his belt and pushed down his jeans, then turned and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Can you get my shoes?" He waited, one foot out, as Chad dropped to his knees in front of him and untied his sneakers.

Chad looked up, and their gazes met.

Jeff could have sworn fire and flame leaped between them.

Chad caressed Jeff's bare foot, then he took the other shoe off and gave that foot a gentle touch also. Jeff sighed and Chad's eyebrows shot upward.

"I'm really beat." Jeff tried to cover his interest with a yawn.

Chad stood and took Jeff's jeans by the waistband. "Lift up and

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I'll get these off you."

Jeff raised his butt off the bed, and Chad pulled down the jeans, leaving Jeff in nothing but his white briefs.

* * *

Damn. Jeff looked so fucking hot in his briefs.

Chad could barely keep from pushing the man down on the bed and taking him right then and there. Everything he'd dreamed—Jeff in his bed looking so hot it burned Chad up—he had it all now.

Fucking shame he couldn't do anything about it. Why did he have to promise to keep things on a "just friends" basis? He wanted Jeff in his bed, in his house, forever, not just for a little while.

He pulled his control together and straightened.

"Here, get under the covers." He held up the quilt for Jeff to slide under. "I'll wake you in an hour and then we'll eat. Right now, you need some rest."

"It sucks." Jeff scowled.

"What does?"

"Not being able to do what I want to do." For some reason, Jeff's words and his soft, sexy voice set Chad's cock aching.

"What do you want to do?" Chad whispered, never taking his gaze from Jeff's.

Jeff opened his mouth, licked his lips, and Chad thought he'd come in his jeans.

"I just want to sleep. Right here. Forever." Jeff closed his eyes and sighed as he snuggled into the bed.

Chad pulled the covers up to Jeff's shoulders, tucking him in. "Me, too, baby."

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“I like when you call me baby,” Jeff mumbled.

Chad leaned over and did what he’d wanted to do for the last week. He kissed Jeff’s mouth, soft and sweet.

And damned if Jeff didn’t kiss him back. It wasn’t much, just a slight pressure returned, but for the first time, Chad felt Jeff respond to him.

Maybe...

CHAPTER 10

Jeff woke confused and dazed. For a minute he didn't recognize where he was, but wherever it was felt damn good. Warm and soft, unlike the hard bed in the hospital, this mattress cradled him and the covers smelled like... *Chad*.

Right. He blinked and looked around as he sat up. This was Chad's room and Chad's bed. He remembered now—Chad had moved him in lock, stock and barrel.

Jeff snuggled back down under the covers and inhaled deeply. This felt so right.

All the years of dreaming and thinking he'd never see Chad again, never find what he'd lost so many years ago.

Could it be this easy?

Was this fate or destiny?

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If it were, he'd gladly thank whoever was to blame for it. He'd gotten a second chance at the one thing that had been missing from his life.

Chad.

* * *

Chad sat on the couch and stared at the door to his bedroom, unsure whether to wake Jeff up or not. Dinner was ready, warming in the oven.

With a certainty he'd only felt once or twice in his life, Chad knew this was one of those moments when what he did would affect his future. He'd felt it on the day he applied to med school, on the day he graduated, and on that one long, hot summer night when he'd leaned in to kiss Jeff for the first time.

He'd followed through on two of the three, but the last one, and perhaps the most important one—accepting he was gay and reaching for what he wanted—he'd fallen down on by not pursuing Jeff. He'd been a coward and it ate at him.

Now he had the opportunity to man up. Tell Jeff how he felt, how he'd always felt about him, how he wanted to be with him forever.

He sighed and rubbed his face with his hands. This was nuts. Jeff just got out of the hospital, they hadn't seen each other for nearly ten years, and Jeff was pissed at him for leaving him back then, and... Well, shit, the list just went on and on.

But if he didn't say or do something, he'd let another opportunity slip past.

He'd been a kid back then, just grappling with his sexuality. Today, he was a grown man, a doctor, for Christ sake, and he'd

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been out and open for the last five years.

There was no excuse for not going for it.

It was time to tell Jeff. No, time to *ask* Jeff if this was something he'd be interested in pursuing.

Chad clenched his hands together and made up his mind. When Jeff woke up, he was going to tell Jeff the truth. About back then and about right now.

As soon as they had dinner.

* * *

Jeff brushed his teeth, thinking of how he could approach Chad without sounding like a needy pussy. Or someone so fixated on the "one who got away" he'd do anything to recapture the past.

He leaned over, rinsed and spit, then wiped his mouth on the towel.

Nope. No more waiting. This had to be done. He couldn't live in Chad's house, see him every day, have meals with him if this wasn't settled and he knew where he stood. It would drive him insane, but maybe not before he died from horniness.

Chad and he would talk. Tonight. At dinner.

* * *

The door to the bedroom opened and Jeff came out. Chad sat up and smiled at him, just to gauge the man's reaction. Jeff wore a T-shirt and a pair of low-slung jeans that fell over the tops of his bare feet. Chad's mouth watered.

"Dinner ready?" Jeff asked, as he ambled into the room and over to his guitar. He picked it up and sat in the chair. His cast

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thudded against the guitar's wooden body, but he managed to get his hand in the right position.

"Any time you're ready." Chad watched as Jeff's slender fingers moved over the strings and neck, picking out a slow jazz melody. He relaxed as Jeff lost himself in the music, never once stumbling, head lowered, and his gaze on the strings.

The music filled the apartment, and Chad's heart thudded at the sweetness of the tune, the way it hung in the air, and the emotions it evoked in him. He could sit here and listen to Jeff play forever. He'd been good in summer camp playing tunes around the campfire for everyone to sing along with, but now Jeff's true talent soared.

The light through the windows bracketed Jeff in sunshine. It couldn't be more perfect a picture if he'd painted it himself.

The song ended, and Jeff stopped, his fingers splayed across the strings to silence the last note. He looked up and held Chad's gaze. Hope, longing and lust warred in Jeff's heated look.

"That was beautiful, Jeff."

"Thank you."

Chad stood, walked to Jeff, took the guitar from him and placed it on the stand. He turned back to Jeff, waiting in the chair, and held out his hand.

"Dance with me."

"There's no music."

"We can hum." Chad swore he wouldn't let his hand tremble, but if Jeff didn't accept it, he'd probably just die on the spot.

Jeff stood, took his hand and stepped into his hold. Chad slipped his arms around Jeff's waist as Jeff's arm slid over his shoulder and pressed his body into Chad's.

Chad nuzzled Jeff's ear, humming softly. It wasn't really a

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tune, more like purring. At first, he felt Jeff hold his breath, then with an exhalation, his body relaxed against Chad's. They moved in a slow, small circle, dancing in and out of the light streaming through the large windows, and with each step, it felt as if Jeff couldn't get any closer to Chad, but he did.

Burrowing inside Chad's heart, Jeff clung to him and hummed softly against Chad's shoulder.

This was paradise and Chad wished it could go on forever, but he had promised he'd take a leap of faith.

"Jeff?" he asked.

"Mm?" Jeff's voice sounded dreamy and far away.

"I have to tell you something."

"So do I. Have something to tell you, I mean."

They stopped dancing and pulled back to stare at each other.

"You first." Jeff's brow furrowed.

Chad swallowed and dove off the ledge. "I'm so sorry I never called you. I was frightened. You were wonderful, and I fell for you hard. I swear I wasn't playing you. But my parents wanted me to go to college, and you were still in high school. I hate to admit it, but I was too cowardly to stand up to them." He exhaled. "So I never called. I know you probably can't forgive me and that's all right. I just wanted you to know."

Jeff took a step back, dropping his hand from Chad's shoulders.

"I forgive you. I think I forgave you the first day I opened my eyes and you walked into my room." Jeff smiled.

"Oh, God," Chad exclaimed. "Thank you. See, you're just as wonderful as you were back then," he gushed. Talking to Jeff had been so easy then, and it still was. Chad just had to get the ball rolling and open up.

"No, thank you for explaining. All this time, I thought you'd

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just used me for sex. Nailed a virgin sort of thing.” He smiled and touched Chad’s face with his fingertips. “I fell for you, too. You were my first love, Chad, and in all these years, my only love. You hurt me badly, and I never wanted to feel that pain again.”

He took a ragged breath and dropped Chad’s hand. “And I still don’t want to feel it, so if you’re playing me this time, if you don’t want me, if this is just guilt or some sort of doctor’s complex about helping people, please, tell me now. Don’t let me fall for you any deeper than I already have. Please.” Jeff’s watery gaze tore a hole in Chad’s gut.

Chad grabbed Jeff’s hand and held it tight. “I’m not playing you. It might have been the doctor thing at first, but I couldn’t get you out of my mind. I hung around all night because I wanted to be the one with you at the end. Someone who loved you, someone who knew the wonderful, sweet, talented person you were back then.”

“At the end?” Jeff’s voice caught.

“I was there to pronounce time of death,” Chad whispered. “I thought I told you that.”

“No, you said you’d hung around to see if I’d get better. You wanted to do that for me?” Jeff’s eyes widened.

“I couldn’t let you die alone. We couldn’t find anyone who knew you. Just me.”

Jeff lowered his chin to his chest and shuddered. With what seemed like a great effort, he raised his head and looked Chad in the eyes. “I’ve been alone for a long time. I hate it. I’ve lived my life dreaming, hoping you’d come back to me. Pathetic, huh?”

“No.” Chad shook his head. “Maybe it’s destiny or fate. I have no idea, but this is our time, Jeff. Baby, this is our now. Our chance to do it over again and get it right.”

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Jeff nodded. "What are you saying?"

"What I should've said years ago. What I should've been man enough to say when I finished college, or when I went to med school, or got my MD." He pressed his lips to the back of Jeff's hand. "I love you, Jeff. Please, stay with me forever."

* * *

Jeff's mouth dropped open. "What? Are you serious?" He couldn't believe his ears. This had to be a dream. He was still asleep in his hospital bed, unconscious. Comatose.

He looked around the apartment. Could he dream in such detail? The hardwood floors, the windows, his guitar? Chad? Perhaps this was heaven and he'd died?

"I'm serious, baby. I don't want to lose what we have or live with any more regrets." Chad pulled him into his embrace and nuzzled his neck. "Can we give this a try?"

Jeff gazed up into Chad's brown eyes. "Sure. But shouldn't we make sure the fire between us is still burning?"

"Oh, baby, have no doubt. I burn for you." Chad growled, bit Jeff's shoulder, and Jeff's knees nearly buckled.

CHAPTER 11

“I’ve wanted to do this for months.” Chad took Jeff’s mouth in a heated kiss.

Jeff melted under the assault of Chad as he probed with his tongue, and caressed with his hands up and down Jeff’s back. Although the touches were firm, Chad had gentled his kisses, allowing Jeff to breath in between them.

They’d moved to the bedroom, despite Jeff not knowing how he’d gotten there. Chad had control of his body, moving it at will, and Jeff liked that so, so much.

“I’ll be careful, but let me know if I hurt you.” Chad pushed Jeff down onto the bed.

Jeff said, “You won’t hurt me.”

“Never again, baby. I swear it.” Chad stretched out over Jeff’s

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body, then shifted to the side. He pulled the T-shirt over Jeff's head before moving on to Jeff's jeans. Cool air rushed over Jeff's cock as his pants were splayed open.

"Oh, fuck. Commando." Chad moaned.

Jeff lifted his ass off the bed, and Chad jerked down his jeans, stripping him naked. With his body on display, Jeff smiled at Chad, as if daring him to do more than just look.

"Touch me, Chad." Jeff's cock stood straight up, its dark red mushroom head glistening with pre-cum.

Jeff howled as Chad took him into his mouth, bathing his hot flesh with a warm, wet tongue. Nearly doubling up, intense pleasure shot along Jeff's nerve endings and headed straight to his balls.

"Fuck, you're gonna make me come." Jeff gasped as a strong suction began on his dick. Shit, Chad had learned a lot since that summer. Thank God.

"Not yet, baby." Chad's throaty voice turned Jeff inside out. This was it—his dream come true and he wasn't even dreaming.

Chad moved his hands, spreading Jeff's legs wider, so he could reach that special place hidden between Jeff's cheeks. Jeff rose up on his elbow to watch, his cast tucked against his chest, as Chad pulled off him, wet his finger in his mouth, and then clamped back onto Jeff's dick.

Chad pressed the wet digit against Jeff's hole, and Jeff almost came.

"Oh, shit, yeah. Do it. Touch me. You know where I want to feel it," Jeff begged.

"I know. Right here." Chad breached him, going straight for Jeff's prostate and nailing it.

Lightning struck and Jeff's body jerked at the mind-blowing

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pleasure. The release he'd needed for months built inside him and then, like a levee, he broke and spilled.

Jets of white arced into the air and landed on his smooth belly. Before he stopped shaking, Chad leaned over and licked a path clear through it.

"Fuck, you taste good."

"Sorry." Fire burned his cheeks as Jeff fell back onto the bed.

"Don't be. You needed it, didn't you?"

"Oh, God, you don't know how much." Jeff's throat tickled, warning him of how very close he was to spilling tears also.

"Baby, any time you need me, just say the word." Chad climbed up and kissed him. Then he crooked his finger and scraped across Jeff's pleasure center.

Jeff moaned. Chad played him like an instrument, plucking his cock back to life.

"Fuck me." Jeff pushed into Chad's touch. "I want to feel you inside me again. All those years, Chad. All those years," he sobbed.

"Hush, baby, hush." Chad brushed the bangs from Jeff's forehead. "I'm here now and I'm never leaving again." Chad stripped down, tossing his clothes to the floor.

Naked, cock erect and proud, Chad was a sight to behold. A sight Jeff had waited what felt like a lifetime to see again. He'd aged, true, but looked even more handsome in the fullness of manhood.

Jeff wrapped his arm around Chad's neck, drawing their bodies together. Feeling the heat from Chad, Jeff sighed and held on tight. "Swear it."

"I swear." Chad kissed him, then moved lower on the bed.

"I'm not sure I can roll over."

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“I want you facing me, baby. Wanna see your face when I come inside you.”

God, Chad’s words just turned Jeff on more.

Chad moved Jeff’s leg to one side. “Let me see that pretty pucker of yours.” Chad groaned. “So fucking beautiful.” He reached to the nightstand and pulled open a drawer. A tube of slick and a condom dropped onto the bed next to Jeff’s hip. “Gonna cover up and get you ready.”

Jeff watched as Chad sat back on his knees, ripped open the condom and slid it over his length. Jeff picked up the slick and squeezed some out on his hand.

“Let me.” Jeff covered the condom with lube, easing up and down the length.

Chad cursed as he thrust into Jeff’s hand, eyes closed, mouth parted, and hair falling over his face. God, he looked gorgeous.

Chad threw his head back, and laughed. “Oh, no, I’m coming inside your tight ass.” He grabbed the lube and squirted coolness over Jeff’s hole, making him shiver.

Then Chad played with him as Chad ran his fingers around and over his entrance. It drove Jeff crazy, and he whimpered his need.

Chad breached him in a steady push, working the lube deep inside, but not touching his gland, denying him that pleasure.

“Bastard. Fuck me.” Jeff hissed as Chad pulled out his fingers.

“Gonna fuck you, baby. Gonna ride your ass until you scream my name.” Chad brought his cock to Jeff’s hole and shoved it in, much to Jeff’s delight.

“Hard and fast, Chad. Wanna feel you deep.” Jeff pushed down, letting Chad in farther, wiggling until Chad’s balls touched his ass. “Oh, God, yes.”

Chad braced himself over Jeff and stared down into his eyes.

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Chad's brown eyes looked black with lust and longing, then closed as he swooped in to attack Jeff's mouth. As Jeff opened for him, Chad withdrew and slammed home, rocking Jeff's body and nearly jerking their mouths apart.

Jeff wanted Chad to hammer him. He needed to feel it right now...and tonight and in the morning and even the next day. He needed proof Chad had fucked him, had wanted him, had always wanted him.

If that made him a weak pussy, then so be it.

"God, you're all I've ever wanted, baby," Chad whispered. "I need to get inside you. Let me in. Deeper." His thrusts became wild and out of control, but Jeff welcomed each one of them.

"Want you, too."

"Forgive me." Chad's eyes filled with tears and one escaped, running down his cheek and dropping onto Jeff's neck. "Please."

"I did. Forget it. It's over and now we're together." Jeff stroked Chad's cheek.

"I almost lost you. Oh, God, baby, I can't bear it. I think it would've killed me. I know I said I wanted to be the one, but I don't think I could've done it." Chad sobbed now, still making love to Jeff, but completely devastated.

"Shh, it's all right. I'm alive. You were there for me when it counted. This happened for a reason." Jeff didn't know what else to say. "I love you, baby."

Chad lowered his head and wiped his tears on Jeff's chest, then nuzzled into his neck. His thrusting had slowed, the frantic nature of it softening into something tender and beautiful between them.

"I love you, too. Always have." Chad looked up at Jeff. "Always will."

Silence took the place of words as they rocked their bodies

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together. Chad's belly rubbed up and down over Jeff's cock as he entwined his fingers with Jeff's. He lowered his lips to Jeff's and sipped at them with open-mouthed kisses filled with love and regret and tenderness.

Chad shifted his angle, nailed Jeff's gland, and Jeff moaned into Chad's mouth. Another two thrusts had Jeff's balls slamming into his body as he unloaded between their bodies.

"God, yeah, baby. That's it. Come for me." Chad stilled as he rode the waves in Jeff's channel and then, with a loud cry, he shuddered. "Here it is. Take it. Fuck, love you." His body clenched and warmed Jeff's chute through the condom.

He fell to the side, holding onto the condom as he pulled out of Jeff's tender ass.

"I'm gonna feel that for a while." Jeff laughed and reached down to hold Chad's hand.

"Good. I want you to remember who fucked you." Chad chuckled, sounding pretty pleased with himself.

Jeff rolled onto his side and looked down at his lover as he wiped the cum off with the sheet. "If you think I need a hard fuck to remember you by, you're mistaken." He cupped Chad's face in his good hand. "I've never needed to remember you because I never forgot."

Chad kissed him. "I never forgot my first and only love either."

"Funny how life is, huh?" Jeff asked.

"Yeah, funny. But good." Chad nodded.

"So good." Jeff sighed and rubbed his tummy. "What's for dinner?"

"Macaroni and cheese, and I made oatmeal cookies for dessert." Chad smiled up at the ceiling.

"Hey, that's my favorite! How'd you know?" Jeff gave Chad

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an easy punch on the shoulder.

Chad ran his hand over Jeff's mouth, the pad of his thumb tugging at it. He leaned over, kissed Jeff, and whispered, "Welcome home, baby."

Jeff smiled and fell back on the bed. "Good to finally make it home."

Meow.

The cat jumped up on the bed and lay down next to Chad.

"Hey, Murray, I know it's dinner time." Chad petted the cat.

Murray rolled over on his back, offering his belly.

"Hey! Will you look at that?" Jeff laughed.

Chad scratched Murray's stomach. "Guess it's official now."

"Yep. Murray's got two daddies." Jeff gave Chad a kiss.

"Come on. You've got to feed your man and your cat."

"Gladly." Chad stood and held out his hand to help Jeff. Jeff took it, and Chad pulled him in close.

"I still can't believe it."

"Believe it, baby. You're mine. So is that cat. You both belong to me and I belong to you." Chad slapped Jeff on the ass, and Jeff squeaked.

"Watch it, Doctor Wright. Your man isn't fully recovered."

Chad looked down at Jeff's half-hard dick. "Looks well on its way to me." He dropped to his knees and took Jeff into his mouth.

Jeff moaned, arching into Chad. "Oh, fuck, Daddy, that's so good."

Chad popped off and looked up. "Daddy, huh?"

"Yeah, Daddy. Got a problem with that?" Jeff carded his fingers through Chad's hair, urging him back down onto his cock.

"Not a single one, baby." Chad swallowed him down until Jeff's cock head hit the back of Chad's throat.

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Jeff couldn't think of a single thing to say.

LYNN LORENZ

Ms. Lorenz lives in Katy, Texas, just west of Houston, with her husband, two teens and a neurotic dog. Originally from New Orleans, she's had gay men in her life since high school, so writing gay romance came naturally for her.

She started writing as a young teen, angsty poetry and short stories, attended the University of New Orleans as an English major, but switched to Fine Art, graduating with a B.A. She put down her paintbrush and picked up a pen just three years ago, and hasn't stopped writing yet.

Although Lynn's been previously published, *Pioneers* is her sixth book with Amber Quill's Amber Allure line, and she plans on releasing more with them.

Find out more about Lynn at www.lynnlorenz.com.

* * *

**Don't miss *Pinky Swear*
by Lynn Lorenz,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

Lane and Matt have been best friends since they were ten years old. They've been through everything together—childhood

adventures in their New Orleans uptown neighborhood, Lane's stuttering, Matt's alcoholic father, high school angst, and "coming out" in college. All through the years, they'd shared secrets and, using the powerful pinky swear, vowed to keep every one of them. But neither Lane nor Matt ever told each other his biggest secret—that they were in love with each other.

For Lane, Matt was everything he wasn't—gorgeous, sexy and outgoing. He had a different boyfriend every week, and Lane couldn't get a date, let alone the man of his dreams. For Matt, he could never measure up to Lane, never be good enough for the man who set his heart on fire. Neither wanted to risk the deep friendship they shared to find out if the other felt more. Yet after one night of incredible drunken passion, Lane woke up to find Matt gone and a note saying he was sorry and not much more.

Four years later and half a country separated, one fateful storm, Hurricane Katrina, brings the old friends together again. But four years is a long time, and Lane's grown up, matured, more sure of himself than ever. When Matt rushes home from the West Coast to find the friend he loved and fled, he discovers not just the man he left behind, but a man who knows what he wants—a best friend and a lover who won't run, who'll stay forever.

Now, it's up to Matt to make the pinky swear...

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