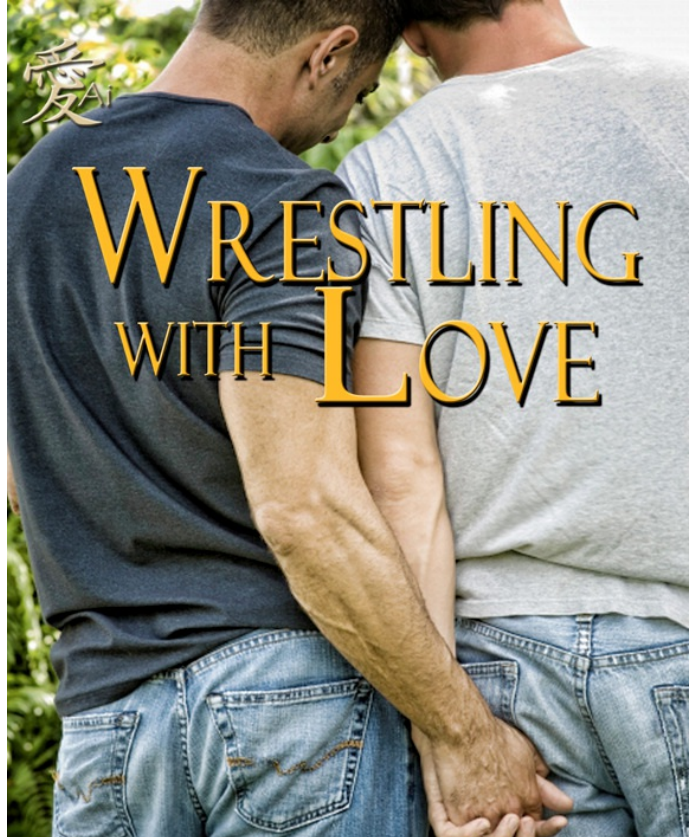


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WRESTLING WITH LOVE





D. H. STARR



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Wrestling With Love

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Love

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Jen for always being there and to Magaly and Tracey, my Bronx girls.

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I'd like to thank Sedonia Guillone, editor and publisher of Ai Press, for continuing to see the merit of the stories I have to tell. Her vision, guidance, and support have helped to shape who I'm becoming as a writer and is freeing my mind so that my characters can live their lives on the pages of my books.

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Author Note

This book has a standalone prequel, *Wrestling With Desire*, a young adult novel. *Wrestling With Love*, also standalone, is not young adult. Derek and Scott have moved on to college and are dealing with greater independence and issues of a more grown up nature.

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Chapter One

"Ouch, that hurts." Derek Thompson winced as his muscles stretched beyond a comfortable limit. "I'm not in a good position. Here, let me move over, like this." He shifted his body so that he was squatting.

He could see the reaction his movement had on his boyfriend Scott Thayer's face, which had taken on a pained expression as he adjusted himself to the new position.

"Okay, is this better for you now?" He was sweating, and Derek could see the sun which was shining through the attic window in his parents' house reflecting off the droplets of sweat gliding down the sides of Scott's face.

“Yeah, that feels better. Now go easy. I want to make sure I’m ready for this before we begin again.” Derek took a deep breath and prepared for the pressure that was coming.

Scott only lifted his hips an inch at a time, watching Derek carefully to make sure he was okay.

Pressure increased deep inside Derek, and then he felt a sharp pain. “Ouch! Son of a bitch!”

Scott grimaced. “Did I hurt you again?”

Derek gritted his teeth, taking measured breaths until the pain subsided. “Yes. I never knew I could feel pain like this. Maybe we should stop for a minute.”

Scott sighed. “Dammit, Derek, you’ve said that the past three times we tried. Can’t we just do this and get it over with?”

“I can’t help it if this fucking sofa is as heavy as an elephant.” Derek slumped to the floor, rubbing his side where the corner had jabbed him in the ribs. With eyes narrowed into slits, he turned to face Scott, a retort on the tip of his tongue. When he stared into those Caribbean blue-green eyes, his resolve melted. I can’t stay mad at someone who can make me all floppy inside just by gazing into his eyes.

“Well, how the hell did you get the couch up here in the first place?” Scott released his hold and walked around to the front of the sofa, now positioned in the middle of the room. Grabbing his t-shirt which lay on the floor, he plopped down heavily and began to mop his face and shoulders.

Derek, feeling the pain in his side ease, got up and sat next to Scott. “I guess I forgot how heavy it was when Dad and I brought it up here last year.” He smiled sheepishly, batting his eyes. “I really appreciate that you offered to help me,

though. I guess I forgot how much I missed your help during those couple of months when we kind of split up last year.”

Scott glared at Derek and he immediately regretted bringing up the painful memory from their past. Still, he wouldn't hold back from saying what was on his mind. Once they'd gotten back together, Derek made a promise to both of them that he would communicate his feelings rather than allowing them to build up inside. Neither 8

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of them had handled the stress created by Scott's father well, and they had almost lost each other as a result. Part of the problem had been Derek's difficulty with opening up. He still wasn't great at it, but he was working on it every day. Scott's expression softened and his crooked grin appeared on his face. Without fail, that grin turned Derek on and decimated his ability to think coherently. "Shut up and come over here."

Derek sat next to him, sinking into Scott's embrace. As Scott cradled him, Derek was pulled close so their faces were a mere inch apart. "You're lucky I love you so much," Scott said, white teeth gleaming behind full lips. "Otherwise, I would have quit this thankless job after our first try." He closed the gap between their mouths, locking Derek in a rugged kiss. Melting into Scott's strong arms, Derek reveled in the way warm hands gently stroked up and down his back, lingering at the base of his spine, fingers dipping inside the waistband of his pants before he began the slow journey back up Derek's back. Their tongues wrestled and a mild taste of salt entered his mouth as sweat mixed with saliva. That, and the hint of Scott's musky scent which surrounded the two of them, caused his cock to become rigid.

The heat in the attic was pronounced, even with the window

open. As they kissed, their bodies slipped against each other. Derek used the slickness to glide his hands along Scott's hairless chest which had broadened over the course of the summer due to his incessant workouts. He hadn't complained about all the time Scott spent in the gym because the effect was not only visually pleasing, but gave him new mounds of muscle to grab onto during their make-out sessions. He hoped Scott would be able to make the varsity wrestling team at this new weight class, since he would never weigh in at this high school weight of one hundred sixty seven. If he watched his diet, he might be able to make the one hundred seventy nine pound weight class. Jesus, I didn't realize he's gained twelve pounds of muscle in the past six months since we won the division championship.

"Hmm," Derek sighed. "This is nice. Why did you establish the rule that we can't do more than kissing and beating off until we get to college? I'd be happy to just leave the couch right here, get down on my knees in front of you and—"

Scott laughed. "As nice as that sounds, don't you remember the last time we decided to spend quality time up here? Your mom almost caught us in this position. She pops up here unannounced all the time. I don't want to worry about who's going to walk in on us as we finally start to experience that level of intimacy together. It's only two weeks. We agreed to this months ago. Besides, you're the one who said you had to move the couch to the other side of the room so you could set up your mixing equipment and all of your music by the window. Now that this piece of shit is in the middle of the room, we're gonna to finish the job." He released Derek and pulled out of the embrace, glancing toward the door.

Derek reflexively followed his gaze and listened to hear if his mother was coming. His thoughts were interrupted by Scott's question. "Explain to me one more time why we can't just slide it across the room."

Derek looked at Scott in horror. "Do you see this floor? Look at it."

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Scott complied. "Yes, it is made of wood. It's shiny. Very nice."

Derek shoved him, a smile spreading across his face. "Don't be a wise ass. If we slide the couch it will scrape deep grooves across the room with its metal legs. My dad told me he intends to turn the attic into an office once I go to college so he can do taxes from home, instead of spending the ridiculous hours he does at work. If he finds the floor all scratched up, he's not going to be happy with me."

"Okay, fine. We'll do it your way. But you realize you owe me after this, right?"

Scott gave Derek's shoulder a squeeze then looked at him with a wickedly seductive gleam in his eyes.

Derek flushed. "Oh, I'll reward you. Don't worry about that. Remember, my parents are going out to dinner tonight. How often has mom actually left us alone in the house since she found out we're together?"

Scott leaned back, stretching his arms, a dreamy look crossing his face. "That's right. I forgot. They're going to be gone all night. I can't wait to get my hands on you."

Derek became quiet and Scott turned to face him. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. It's just hard to want you the way I do and have to

control myself. I know it's only a couple of weeks until college, but then you say things like that and it makes it so much harder for me."

Scott's expression became serious. After a few seconds, the corners of his mouth began to tremble and pull up into a smile. After another moment, he burst out laughing.

"What the hell are you laughing at?"

Scott became serious once again. "Just your choice of words. I'm sure that I make things hard for you several times a day."

Derek stared at him, unsure of what Scott was talking about, then his meaning registered. Giving him a playful shove that wasn't entirely playful, Derek stood.

"You're right. You do make me hard several times a day and taking care of that is the last thing I want Mom to catch us doing."

Claire Thompson, Derek's mother, had asked him if he was gay during his senior year. When they talked, she'd been wonderful, affirming her love for him and letting him know they would work through their feelings as a family. As supportive as she had been, from that moment on, she became the guard of Derek's chastity, never allowing him to be in a room alone with Scott without the door being open. She constantly popped in wherever they were, keeping them on their toes and making it difficult to do anything more intimate than some serious kissing and some light petting. Her presence had been the primary excuse that Scott had given for holding off on sexual exploration, and it took a number of serious discussions for Derek to finally get out of him that he just wasn't ready to take that step yet. Something in him needed to feel that they had moved onto the next phase of their lives together before he let down his guard

enough to explore the physical side of his sexuality. 10

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He pushed the thought from his mind, not wanting anything to spoil his good mood. At least his mother knew who he really was and what Scott was to him. That in itself was a comfort. He still hadn't come out to his father, and Scott hadn't told his mother either. In fact, if anything good resulted from his break with Scott during senior year, it was that he had come out to his mother. Otherwise, Derek would have probably kept his identity to himself and would still be hiding.

One of the things he most looked forward to in college, was exploring life living as an openly gay man. He wanted to come out and shout from the rooftops that he and Scott were together. If he had to wait two more weeks before Scott would be ready to explore the physical side of their love for one another, he could find plenty of other satisfying ways to pleasure himself and Scott until then. Turning his thoughts to Scott, the same niggling concern crept into his mind. It was one thing to want to hold off on oral sex and making love. At least Derek knew when they would get to that level of intimacy. It was Scott's private nature that concerned him. He wasn't ready to live openly as a gay man the way Derek wanted to. He understood Derek's needs and was incredibly affectionate, but never in public. The closest he ever came to showing public displays of affection was holding Derek's hand or leaning against him whenever they were hanging out with Beck Stoltz, Derek's best friend since childhood. Thinking about what life would be like for the two of them once they got to college, the possible problems their different needs might create, caused his stomach to churn uncomfortably.

Shaking his head, Derek pulled himself from his thoughts.

Scott made a good point. While his mom was incredibly accepting and had made tremendous efforts to talk with him about his feelings for Scott, she wasn't going to turn a blind eye to her teenage son's raging hormones. "And don't you play the gay card either, young man," she had said when he had accused her of treating him differently than she would if he were straight. "At least I allow you and Scott to spend time in your room. If you had a girlfriend, I wouldn't allow that, even with the door open." Derek couldn't come up with a suitable counterargument, so he let it go. Round one...mom. Derek glanced towards the door to make sure his mother wasn't coming, turned to Scott and kissed him once more, then stood up. "Ok, let's get this done."

After another half hour of straining and creative expletives, they finally got the sofa to the corner of the attic. Setting up Derek's sound system and his new mixing board, which Scott and Beck had bought him as a graduation present, was much easier work. While Derek set up his equipment, Scott walked over to the window and looked out at the back yard. "What time did Beck say she wanted us to come over?"

Derek, still dripping from the exertion and the sweltering heat in the room, decided to make the most of his discomfort. Walking over to Scott by the window, he tossed the shirt he had been using to wipe himself down on the ground next to them. Standing in the light coming through the window, he stretched, flexing so each ridge of his abdominal muscles and his mounded pectorals created shadows along his body, accentuating his well-formed physique. "I'm going to be dehydrated soon if I don't 11

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drink some water." He turned to face Scott and was rewarded by a slight dropping of his mouth and a bulge

appearing in his pants which hadn't been there a moment earlier. He felt a smile creep across his face. "Beck wanted us to come over at three. What time is it?"

Scott looked at his watch, shifting back and forth from one foot to the other, gabbing at his pants. It's one-thirty. We have an hour and a half to kill. You have any ideas?" He lifted his eyebrow suggestively, making his intentions perfectly clear.

"I thought you were the one who said we need to be careful with my mom around."

Scott ignored his comment and walked over to the music collection. He grabbed Derek's favorite, John Mayer's Continuum, and placed it into the CD player. "Let's see if we set this up correctly." After a few seconds, the sound of John's folk-rock style music filled the room, the base reverberating through the floor boards. Scott walked over to the couch and sat down, placing his hands behind his head and leaning back. Derek surveyed the room. It looked good. By pushing the sofa to the corner and lining his equipment along one wall, his father had full use of the attic and wouldn't have to remove any of Derek's things. The result was pleasing, even if the process had been painful. With Scott sitting on the couch and still noticeably aroused, the attic became much more appealing than it would have been otherwise. Standing in the middle of the room, dancing to the music, Derek seductively gyrated his hips, making sure his muscles bulged and flexed with each movement. Every few seconds he glanced at Scott and was pleased to find two dazzling eyes following his every move.

Scott's eyes bugged out suddenly. He crossed his legs and stared over Derek's shoulder.

Derek turned around and was shocked to find his mother standing next to him.

"Derek, I've been calling your name for the past three minutes. It's no surprise you couldn't hear me with all this racket coming from your stereo."

Derek rushed over to his sound system, busily picking up his shirt from the floor and pulling it over his bare chest, and then turned down the volume. "Sorry, Mom."

Holy crap! How much of that little show did she see?

Claire shook her head, her hands planted on her hips. "It's fine. I didn't come up to pester you about the volume of your music. I wanted to let you know your dad and I have decided to go out early to take in a matinee before dinner. Are you boys all set for dinner or should I prepare something before we go?"

"No, actually, we're heading to Beck's in a little while. Her parents built that pool earlier this summer, and we're going for a swim and a barbeque."

"That sounds nice. Be sure to tell Beck we'd love to see her before she leaves for college. I can't believe you've all grown up and are starting your first year of college."

Derek watched as his mother's eyes welled up. "It seems like just yesterday I was taking you to your first day of kindergarten and now, look at you." A tear escaped from 12

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her eye and slowly rolled down her cheek. "There I go, being a silly, emotional mother. Well, you know what they say; a mother hen never wants her chicks to leave the nest."

Derek rolled his eyes. "Mom, come on, I'll be maybe ten minutes away."

"I know, but you won't be under my roof any longer." She grabbed a corner of her apron and dabbed at her eyes. "You boys have fun. Oh, I like the new set up in here. Very spacious."

Scott shot Derek a victorious glance, then the corner of his mouth began to creep up into his sly grin, which would soon create a potentially embarrassing situation for Derek if his mother didn't leave soon. Luckily, Claire turned and left just before Derek's arousal became visible, bulging in the front of his jeans. When she left the room, Scott got up from the sofa and walked over to Derek. "I just thought of what we could do to kill some time before we go to Beck's."

"What? And could you please not do things that turn me on when my mom is around? My cock started dancing the Macarena when you flashed your grin at me."

Derek reached into his pants and dramatically readjusted himself.

"I forgot, all I have to do is say one or two words and you sport wood. It's really very flattering—"

"Okay, enough," Derek said, cutting him off. "What is this idea that you have?"

Scott walked over to the window and looked out. "I was thinking...oh, there are your parents getting into the car. Good! I was thinking we could take a shower together before heading over to Beck's. We both stink and, well, the only showers we've taken together were in the locker room at school with a ton of other guys."

All of Derek's blood ran to his cock. Why hadn't he thought of that? It was like Scott had a sixth sense. Just when Derek was beginning to feel doubt or concern about the two of

them, Scott's alpha side would emerge and turn Derek into a puddle of longing at his feet. Without bothering to readjust himself, he dashed for the door, calling over his shoulder. "I'll race you to the bathroom."

Having the house to themselves, they didn't have any concerns about being interrupted. They undressed hastily in Derek's room, tossing their clothes to the floor, and tumbled across the hall into the bathroom. Stepping into the steamy interior of the enclosed shower, they embraced each other, allowing the hot water to slick their bodies. Scott ran his hands up and down Derek's back, gently caressing his skin, as Derek ran his hands over broad chest muscles and defined abs, then leaned in and tilted his head up, bringing his mouth to Scott's, as water washed through their hair and down their faces.

Needy hands gripped Derek's ass, pulling him closer and grinding their now rigid cocks together. "Before we get too far into this, you know we aren't going to do anything more than petting right?"

Derek was too lost in the heat of the moment and by standing naked next to Scott to argue. "Yeah, yeah. I know the rules. Not until we get to college."

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Scott returned his attention to touching Derek. "I love the way your body angles down from your shoulders towards your waist and how your ribs ripple your sides, but disappear into you're your lats. Your muscles aren't too large, but they're so clearly defined. I could spend days just looking at and touching you." After delivering his praises, he lowered his

head and captured Derek in a hungry kiss once again. Derek had fantasized about showering with Scott hundreds of times, but even his most explicit dreams didn't come close to the reality of standing under the rush of hot water as he held the only boy who had been able to draw him out of his shell. Pulling out of the kiss, he stared at Scott. Besides the dazzling blue-green eyes, Scott had shaggy blond hair which was now matted to his forehead and clinging to his neck. His skin was naturally bronzed, and he had a strong jaw line which gave him a rugged, masculine appearance. A bit of scruffy stubble completed the image nicely. Rising onto his toes, Derek placed his lips at the crook where jaw met neck and slowly kissed his way down the lean cords of muscle until he reached the collar bone. Glancing down, he gasped at the sight of his bulging pecs and washboard abs. All other images and thoughts vanished as soon as he saw Scott's cock which stood fully erect between their two bodies.

The combination of running water, slick skin on skin, and Scott's naked body in the full light of the bathroom sent a new wave of excitement through Derek. "Remind me why we haven't showered together before."

Scott bent his head so his forehead touched Derek's, his hands still securely planted on each butt cheek. "She's called Claire and if she ever caught us doing this, she'd lock up that chastity belt she's got on you and throw away the key forever. Once we get to college we'll have all the time in the world to do this and much more without worrying about your mom."

Taking some body wash, Derek applied a generous amount to the loofah which hung from the shower nozzle and began to clean Scott, forming a rich, thick foam as he did so. "Oh, yeah, that's right." He snickered and continued his scrubbing. "Can we stop talking about my mom now? I'm sure we can find other things to focus on."

Allowing water to wash away the soap he had applied to

Scott's body, Derek lowered his lips to one nipple, closing his mouth around the succulent bit of flesh, running his tongue in circles as the nub hardened.

Scott groaned and placed a hand on the back of Derek's head, holding him there. Needing no further encouragement, he bit down, using his teeth to increase the stimulation. Over the past few months he had learned exactly how to drive Scott wild. Stimulating his nipples was one of the most effective ways. As he teased, moans filled the bathroom as his erection pressed against Derek's stomach. As if choreographed, they both reached down and wrapped their fingers around rigid shafts at the same time. Slowly tugging at each other, they began to increase their motion. Tension began to build up in Derek's balls and his core muscles began to quiver in fast, ticklish spasms of pleasure. "Scott, I'm...going...to...come." With a loud moan, 14

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he tilted his head back, water crashing onto his face, as his cock erupted under Scott's skillful manipulation.

As soon as Derek's release subsided, Scott's breathing became heavy. Derek quickened his pace as he jerked at his cock.

Scott grabbed Derek behind his neck and pressed their foreheads together tightly. His cock pulsed, releasing ribbons of cum into Derek's hand while he stared directly at Derek. His moans were not as loud as Derek's had been, but they contained an animal ruggedness, almost as if he were growling.

Derek felt the lingering spasms of Scott's orgasm as his cock pulsed in his hand. Leaning heavily into Scott's body,

he rested his head on the rounded shoulder muscle and sighed. After a moment, Scott wrapped his arms around Derek. "That was incredible."

"Mm," was all Derek could manage. Bending down to pick up the loofah which he had dropped at some point, he had no idea when. He was rewarded with a sharp gasp from Scott.

"I forgot how fuckin' amazing your ass is. I don't get to see it nearly enough."

Scott's voice had regained some volume, but still contained the ruggedness which sent ripples of electricity through Derek.

Standing and applying soap to the loofah, Derek laughed. "Turn around. Let me get your back." Scott turned, exposing the smooth tanned skin of his back and Derek allowed his eye to roam down the tapered lines of his body until they rested on his firm, rounded ass. While it didn't have as much bubble as his own, Derek still found the sight alluring.

He began rubbing the loofah in gentle circles at Scott's shoulder and the scent of pomegranate and mango filled the bathroom as suds formed and slid down his back. Derek felt a light twinge of jealousy as some of the soap slid into the crack of his ass. He had dreamed of getting closer to that part of Scott for the better part of a year and those suds rushed right to the area without hesitation. One day I'll make that journey. Working his way lower and lower, until his was just above Scott's butt, his own excitement continued to build up inside of him. Unable to control himself, he leaned forward, pressing Scott into the wall, his erection firmly against his ass. Scott leaned back, his head resting on Derek's shoulder. In a relaxed voice, he whispered into Derek's ear. "You better stop before we—"

His words were cut off as Derek ground his hips forward, his

cock sliding into the crack of Scott's ass. They both gasped and Scott turned around. "Derek. Stop. You know how I feel about this."

Derek lowered his head and was rewarded by an eyeful of his thick, fully erect cock. "Your words say one thing, but your body—" His words were cut off this time as Scott cupped the back of his neck and pulled him in for a deep, hungry kiss. There was desperation in the movement of his tongue as it massaged the inside his mouth. When he pulled out of the kiss, Scott's eyes burned and Derek wondered how it was possible 15

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for the cool blue-green to seem like burning flames. "There will be plenty of time for us to do whatever we want in two weeks when we're at college and away from our parents.

Disappointment filled Derek like water being poured into a vase, but it wasn't long before Scott pulled him into another kiss. Derek's thoughts blurred and shifted until he couldn't remember what he was upset about a moment earlier. Then Scott placed two strong hands on his shoulders and pushed him gently backwards until his back touched cold tile, evoking a sharp hiss out of him. Scott smiled and the cold sensation evaporated as heat rushed through his body.

Scott took the loofah and applied more of the sweet, citrus-scented body wash, then began to rub the mounded plains of pectoral muscles on Derek's chest. Slowly working his way down, Derek felt the soothing abrasion of the mesh which massaged his skin. As Scott worked his way down, Derek's cock began to pulse once again, rhythmically bobbing with each heartbeat. "Scott." His voice came out raspy, accentuated by the echo created by the steamy air in the

shower stall. "Unless you're prepared to finish what you've started, you might want to stop. As it stands, we're already going to be late getting to Beck's."

He stopped washing and looked down. When he looked back at Derek, it seemed indecision was playing behind his eyes. Scott captured his lower lip between his teeth, a sign Derek had learned meant Scott was contemplating something. For a moment hope filled him that Scott might reconsider his rule about waiting until college. But his hope was dashed as Scott turned the water to cold, abruptly bringing an end to the sensual heat simmering between them.

They both started jumping about, fighting to be the first to get out of the shower. Laughing, they dried off, made their way to Derek's room, and got dressed. Scott picked up his bag and headed for Derek's door. When Derek didn't follow, he turned around and peered at him with a confused expression on his face. "Everything all right?"

"Yeah, I just forgot something. I'll meet you out by the car." Scott shrugged and headed outside. Once Derek heard the front door click shut, he reached for his bag and checked inside the front pocket. The envelope containing Scott's graduation present was still there. He couldn't wait to give it to him, but wanted the moment to be perfect. Satisfied that he had everything he needed, Derek met Scott outside and they headed to Beck's. It was already three o'clock and they were going to be late, but Derek didn't care.

When they arrived, she was already sitting by the pool. She had always been plussized, but her face was beautiful. High cheek bones captured the light from the sun to accentuate her face. Her smile, when she was smiling, lit up her face. Her brown bob matched her personality, pert and light. Yet there was a softness to her that had never been there before. Beck had always had a hard edge, only letting her guard

down with Derek. During senior year, their friendship had been strained, as Derek and Scott spent 16

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more and more time together. But in the end, he learned how to balance his relationship with his boyfriend and his best friend from childhood.

Derek walked up to her, carrying the requested list of food supplies. "Where's George?" he asked, looking around. Beck and George had been in the drama club all through high school and had gotten together at the beginning of the summer. What had started as a fun little fling that began on their summer camping trip in Maine, had turned into a torrid love affair and continued for the remainder of the summer. Beck glared at him. "Don't think that asking me about my boyfriend is going to distract me from the fact you're twenty minutes late. You know how much I hate it when you're late for things. I should kick you in the nuts right now."

"Sorry, we were, uh, we had to...do some stuff."

Shaking her head, she walked up to him. "You had to, uh, do some stuff? Well that clears everything up." She grabbed the bag Derek was holding and peered inside. As if someone had flipped a switch, her sour mood became sweet. "Good. Buns, burger meat, chips, soda. Oh, you got my favorite. Double Stuf Oreos."

Despite Beck's propensity for threatening the male anatomy with various acts of violence, something she had been doing ever since she knew what balls were, she was one of the funniest people he knew. Still, her behavior had become more erratic since she had started dating George. She had become far more moody and unpredictable. It had begun to

grate on Derek's nerves. "Beck, you asked me to get them. Why are you acting surprised?"

Speaking as if she hadn't heard him, she continued with a chipper tone. "You're always so thoughtful Derek. Thank you." She tore open the Oreos and popped two into her mouth.

"But, Beck, you asked me to get them for you."

Scott walked over and stood behind Derek, placing his arms around his waist. Leaning over, pretending to kiss his neck, Scott whispered, "Derek, don't get twisted. This is Beck. We love her, but she's nuts. Hey, maybe that's why she's always going on about nuts and what she'll do to them."

Derek laughed and leaned back into Scott's embrace.

Beck turned to see why Derek had started laughing and, seeing the two of them standing together, smiled. "You two are still the cutest couple I've ever seen."

Derek was still annoyed with Beck, but since she was talking about him and Scott, he decided to drop it. He had to agree even if it was narcissistic, the two of them did make an incredibly cute couple, and he never tired of hearing Beck say so. He wished he could let everyone know how happy he was, but Scott wasn't ready for that. The only person outside of them who could appreciate who they were to each other was Beck, so he stole every comment he could get from her and revealed it. Deciding to return to his initial line of questioning, he turned back to Beck. "So, where's George?"

"Oh, he's at the store picking out sheets and other crap for college with his mother. He'll be here any minute. I'll tell you, I'm so glad my parents have been gone for the 17

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past few days. He may not look it, being less muscled than you two wrestling boys, but he's got the biggest cock ever. I can only get my mouth a third of the way down his shaft." Beck pursed her lips, deep in thought for a moment. "Well, maybe I can get half way down. Just thinking about it is making my pussy wet right now."

Derek felt Scott cringe behind him and his own gut churning at the thought of Beck's stimulated genitals. He made an exaggerated show of clutching his stomach and mock-heaved as if he were getting sick. "I love you, but that was an image I did not need before eating."

Beck turned to Derek. "Like you don't tell me about your love life with Scott."

Derek walked over to Beck and guided her towards the poolside table. Sitting her gently down, he crossed his legs and placed a teacherly look on his face. "Yes Beck, I do tell you about my love life with Scott, but I don't go into depth about his cock or our bodily fluids. Remember all those talks we had about the difference between a share and an over-share?"

"Come off it Derek. Do you really care if I talk about my sex life or a wet snatch? Seriously." Her tone had shifted from cheerful to snippy. Resisting the urge to snap back, Derek counted to five in his head. Not only did Beck's mood swings concern him, but she had touched upon a sore topic for him. He and Scott hadn't had sex yet, and the fact that Beck had bothered him. Not that he was jealous of Beck, but he envied that she had been able to experience what he wanted to experience with Scott. What irked him was that Beck's feelings for George had basically sparked up over the summer whereas he and Scott had been together for almost a year. It hardly seemed right or fair.

Thinking about it caused a dull ache to pulse at his temples. Rather than think about it, he decided to keep his focus on Beck. "So, how is everything between you two?"

Beck looked towards the gate separating her back yard from the street and then turned to face Derek and Scott. "I suppose I can talk about this with you, but you have to pretend I didn't say anything when George gets here. The two of us have been fighting lately. I think it's the stress of separating for college in two weeks. That's eons away. I don't know why he is beginning to pull away now."

The three of them sat down at the glass table by the pool. Scott kicked off his sandals and placed his feet on the table top, one over the other. "Well, today it will just be the four of us. We'll grill some burgers, play in the pool. Maybe we can play chicken and get him all hot and bothered for you. With you on his shoulders you can touch and tickle and stir up that lovin' feelin'."

Beck smiled. "Thank you, Scott. You're a true gentleman." Turning to Derek, she crossed her arms over her chest. "See! Some boys haven't forgotten the fine art of romance."

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"Besides, that will give me a chance to have Derek up on my shoulders. Knowing how much you love balls, I'm sure you can appreciate my excitement for playing chicken." Scott ducked as Beck swung her arm to smack him on the back of the head. Derek shook his head. "Oh yeah. That was the essence of true romance he just painted there."

Their conversation was abruptly cut short by the creak of the gate. George came in and Beck threw on a gleaming smile. She jumped up and ran over to George, hugging him and giving him a big, open-mouthed kiss. Derek looked at Scott and was met with an expression of confusion, one eyebrow slightly raised. George was the only other person from their high school who knew Derek and Scott were gay. Once he and Beck had become serious, it became necessary to tell him if they were going to spend time together. At first, Scott had argued against telling George, but he eventually caved, knowing how important it was to Derek to spend time with Beck. There was no way they would have been able to go on that camping trip right after graduation, just the four of them, and keep their relationship a secret. In the end, Scott and George had become good friends. It was a shame Beck and George were having troubles. As much as her mood swings aggravated him, he was happy she had found someone who loved her. If he were a betting man, he would place money down that Beck was the root of their problems. For all of her good qualities as a friend, she was still insecure because of her size and tended to push people away before they had a chance to pull away on their own.

Shaking the thoughts from his mind, he turned to George. "Hey. How's it going?"

"My mom just dragged me to every store in Harvard Square making sure I had all of the necessities for college life." He had used his fingers as quotation marks when he said the word 'necessities.' "I don't know why she didn't just go and do the shopping for me. It's not like I know or care what the thread count of my sheets are or how many pairs of clean underwear and socks I have."

Derek turned to George. "George, it's an accepted rule that you should always have at least seven pairs of clean underwear and socks."

George turned to face Derek. "Man, I think you are an awesome guy, but that was such a fag comment." Scott burst out laughing.

Blushing, Derek replayed his statement and had to admit George was right. At least he hadn't remarked about the thread count of sheets. That would have been even worse. "Fine, I'll give you that. So, are we eating first or swimming?"

Scott and George answered the question by stripping down to their boxers and diving into the pool. Beck turned to Derek. "Boys. They love to jump and hump. Promise me you'll never become a boy. I love the fact you can just sit around, watching television and talking. We can enjoy each other and let the men do their man things."

Derek wasn't sure if he had just been complimented or insulted, but knew what Beck meant so he left it alone. "Beck, I'll always be there with a good video to watch and Oreos to eat. I promise." With that, he hopped off the seat, stripped down to his 19

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boxers, and jumped into the pool with Scott and George. Beck walked to the steps at the shallow end and sat at the edge, dipping her feet in the water. For the better part of an hour they hung out in the pool, George and Scott tackling each other as they played basketball and Derek floating idly by the steps chatting with Beck. Once they were thoroughly waterlogged, they hopped out to dry and Beck walked over to the grill and began preparing dinner. Once dressed, George headed over to stand with her.

As they lay out on lounge chairs and relaxed in the hot August sun, Scott glanced around to see where Beck and

George were before speaking in a hushed whisper.

"While we were in the pool, George wouldn't shut up about the sex he has with Beck."

Derek shuddered, the image of Beck and George together, naked, filling his mind. It wasn't that George was unappealing. He was a normal looking guy, dark hair, average build, pale skin, sharp features. It was odd to see the two of them together, Beck being larger and George much leaner. With the image of them engaging in various acts of coital bliss, Derek's body shuddered in disgust. "Eeew, please tell me there's a reason for that particular overshare."

Scott shook his head. "Why do you get so skeeved out by the idea of a naked woman?" He held up his hand. "Don't answer that. The point is, I'm freakin' horny as hell right now." He glanced once again to where Beck and George were standing, their backs to the two of them, then looked at Derek. His eyes were smoldering, holding him in a fierce gaze. Reaching to his groin, he grabbed his cock and squeezed, the hardened length obvious under the fabric of his pants.

Feeling his own cock start to grow and lengthen, Derek shifted so he was resting on his side, facing Scott. "Are you saying that you want to..." He was pretty sure his voice trailing off made it obvious what the question was, but Scott remained silent for a moment. "Because if you are, I swear you're driving me crazy. We had the perfect opportunity in the shower back at my house."

Finally Scott spoke. "I know I said I want for us to wait until we get to college, but maybe it's worth the risk."

Heat flooded through his body and Derek was sure his face had flushed red. "Mom and Dad probably won't be home until

late. Maybe after this we can head back to my place.”

A dreamy expression passed over Scott’s face and Derek could practically see the thoughts as they passed through his mind. Scott’s eyebrows rose slightly, then he shifted his hips, reaching down to readjust himself. Finally, he sucked the plump bottom lip which Derek loved to kiss into his mouth. When he spoke, his voice was soft.

“I want to. But it’s too risky. If your parents came home in the middle of our first time...” He shook his head and closed his eyes.

“Ok, good point. That would certainly ruin our first time. But if we’re going to wait, you’ve got to stop making me go up and down like a flag on a pole. You’ve given me at least five hard-ons today alone.”

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Disappointment filled him. Not only did Scott withhold physical affection except for when they were alone or with Beck, but he was holding off on the sexual connection which Derek had been hungering for throughout the summer. He had masturbated more times than he could remember to the image of tasting Scott’s cum as it shot directly into his mouth, rather than licking it from his hand. And each time he imagined the two of them making love, Scott always on top, he had to take a cold shower just to be able to make a public appearance

As if he sensed Derek’s mood, Scott took his hand and brought it to his lips. “I love you, D. You know it’s not that I don’t want to share intimate experiences with you, but we’re

only a couple of weeks away from being at college together. We'll be living together and have all the time in the world to do everything we want without having to worry about being interrupted or found out."

The last words caught his attention. "Found out?"

Scott released his hand and placed it over his own eyes. "I didn't mean it that way and you know it."

"Then how did you mean it?"

"I just meant...all I was saying...why do you always pick this fight with me? I'm not ready for people to know I'm gay. If I were, do you think I'd keep us a secret? I love you, but you have to understand I can't force my feelings."

Derek knew he was right, but his stubbornness prevented him from letting go of the argument. "What if I don't know how you feel? If you really loved me, wouldn't you want the world to know?"

"Come on. You don't really believe that, do you?"

Derek stared at him, ready to continue arguing, but one look at his earnest expression and the genuine emotion flowing toward him melted his resolve. He knew Scott loved him and he knew just as equally that wanting to keep his sexuality guarded was no indication of his feelings for him.

"No. I don't." Staring into Scott's sincere and loving eyes, Derek knew the time was perfect. "Be right back." Hopping up, he gave Scott a quick peck on the cheek and ran to his bag. When he came back, he excitedly extended his hand which contained the white envelope with Scott's gift. Scott's crinkled brow and cocked head clearly revealed his confusion and caused Derek to laugh. "I finally got you your graduation present. I hope you like it." Handing the envelope

over, he sat on the edge of the chair, waiting expectantly as Scott turned it over in his hands.

Scott sat up. "Derek, you didn't have to do that. I know you said you felt bad about not getting me a graduation gift, but you shouldn't have. I told you at your graduation party that your love was the greatest gift you could give me. Just being with you and knowing that you're there for me is better than anything you could give me, especially since I've moved around so much in my life."

Scott's father had been transferred several times as he had grown up, forcing him to constantly make new friends and never knowing how long he would remain in one 21

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place. It was touching that he felt that Derek's consistent friendship and love were good enough for him, but, Derek knew Scott would love this gift. "Just open it."

He opened the envelope and pulled out two tickets. Reading them, his head snapped up and he gaped at Derek. "I don't believe it. You bought Howie Day tickets? They're for next week in New York City. Are you serious? Thank you. I wonder who I'll take." Derek shot up to his feet. Scott stood and hugged him. "I'm just kidding. Of course we're going together."

Derek relaxed in Scott's arms as he always did whenever Scott touched him. "It gets even better. Beck's uncle lives in the city and she already called him to ask if we could stay there for the night. We're going to drive in on Friday, go to the concert that night at the Bowery Ballroom, then come home Saturday."

Scott's eyes lit up, then a slight expression of concern crossed his face. "I have to run it by my parents to make sure I can go."

Derek beamed. "Already taken care of. I called your mom before I bought the tickets and after Beck had checked with her uncle to make sure we had a place to crash. Shannon already said it's fine." Derek had grown to like Shannon, Scott's mother, a great deal ever since she stood up to Scott's father. Scott's father had come down hard on Scott for one poor grade their senior year, forcing him into a house arrest and one of the worst depressions of his life. It had been Shannon's actions of talking to Derek's mother and then standing up to her husband, ending Scott's punishment, which had brought them together again. Shannon had done so because she was worried about how depressed Scott had become, unaware that her actions also opened the door for them to rekindle their relationship and helped them to become closer than ever.

"Thank you Derek. If you had to get me a gift, I'm glad it was something we can enjoy together. I don't know how I got so lucky to have someone as incredible as you as a boyfriend."

Derek never liked it when Scott said things like that. It suggested he didn't know how wonderful he was or that he deserved the best. Although he wasn't going to bring it up right now, he was going to do everything he could to help Scott finally see himself for who he was, a sensitive, kind, and giving person who appreciated life. "Scott, we're both lucky." He leaned in and gave Scott a quick kiss.

As their mouths sealed together, a mixture of bliss and worry filled Derek. He was thrilled Scott was excited for the trip, but the lingering self-doubt that Scott wanted to keep their relationship a secret, constantly reared its head. There was no question in his mind that it was the years of succumbing to his father's commanding nature that caused Scott to doubt

his own worth. Most likely, it was the same thing that made him uncomfortable about opening up about being gay and together as a couple. The thought rankled, like pouring salt on a cut, but now wasn't the time to address it. Sinking deeper into the kiss, he wrapped his arms around Scott and leaned in. As their tongues twirled against each other, his errant thoughts drifted from his mind, as if carried away on a light breeze. All that mattered right now was that he was in the arms 22

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of the man he loved and that they were heading to New York together. Anything else could be addressed at another time.

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Chapter Two

On Friday, Scott was bouncing around his room like a ping-pong ball, grabbing everything he could think of that he might need for their trip. Derek, thrilled to see Scott so happy and excited, sat on his bed, watching him with amusement. When he finished packing, he had filled a suitcase. "I wonder if I thought of everything."

Derek got up from Scott's bed. "We're going for one night. You couldn't possibly need even one-third of whatever you've packed in there."

Scott looked at the suitcase, then laughed. "You know, I'm so used to packing all my stuff because of moving around so

much, it's become a habit. How about you help me choose what I need, we'll shove it in my duffle bag, and then we can go to your house and you can put your stuff in with mine."

The thought of them sharing a bag for a trip seemed like a concrete image of coupledness and Derek loved the feeling of closeness it evoked in him. My God! If the simple act of putting clothes in a bag can get me all romantic and sappy, I must be whipped worse than I thought. Awesome! "Okay, what you're wearing right now will be fine for the ride to New York." Scott was wearing jeans, a white t-shirt with blue sleeves, and sandals. Derek walked over to Scott. "I love this shirt. It highlights your broad shoulders and the blue compliments your eyes. Maybe you shouldn't wear that in the car. I may become distracted and run us off the road."

"I'll take my chances." Scott gave Derek a quick peck on the cheek. "So, for the concert, I think I'll wear this." He held up his white long sleeve shirt with the picture of the Tasmanian Devil on it; the same shirt he had been wearing when he walked into their shared English class a year earlier. "Are we going to go out afterwards?"

Derek hadn't thought past the concert. "I don't know. We're both eighteen. We can't get into bars. I suppose we could go out to dinner or walk around."

"But if we're out and about in the city, shouldn't I bring something dressy?"

"What? Like dress pants and a button down shirt. Hell no! We're going to be in the East Village. That's where Madonna got her start. It must be one of the most casual spots in the city. But..." he hesitated as a specific picture of Scott flashed through his mind. Walking over to Scott's dresser, he started opening drawers until he found the one with the tank tops. He pulled out a Brompton High Wrestling tank and handed it to Scott. "Wear this after the concert."

Scott took the shirt and shoved it into the bag. "I guess you want me to wear that because it will be hot with the summer heat. Good thinking."

"No, Scott, that's not why I chose it for you. Have you actually seen yourself when you wear it?"

Scott shook his head. "No, I just throw it on and leave."

"Well, if you took a moment to look at yourself with that on, you would know why I want you to wear it." Derek imagined Scott in the tank with his broad shoulders, 24

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prominent collar bones, strong pecs, and tan skin on display with only two small straps of cloth to block clear view of his muscles. The tank also hugged his abdomen, highlighting his well-defined torso and creating the perfect picture of masculinity and strength. I fuckin' love that tank top.

Scott smiled. "Ok, you're the boss." He threw a pair of black combat boots into the duffle bag along with his toiletry kit and was done packing. "Let's head over to your house now so I can pick out your wardrobe."

They went to the kitchen to say goodbye to Scott's mother, Shannon, who was reading while drinking a glass of wine. "We're off," Scott said. "I'll call you when we get there to let you know we're safe."

Shannon got up and gave Scott and Derek each a hug. "You boys are going to have such a wonderful time. New York is so breathtaking. It's so full of life and energy and culture. Drive carefully and have fun."

Derek had already packed his clothes in a small bag, so when they got to his house, he dumped his things into Scott's bag. His parents provided the same dutiful warnings of driving safely, then walked them out to Derek's car.

Claire gave Scott a hug, then pulled Derek into a tight embrace. She had been doing more and more of that as the beginning of college approached. "Have fun you two. Do you have enough money?"

Derek and Scott each had two hundred dollars for the trip, saved up from various birthdays and graduation gifts. "I think so. We should be fine." Derek tossed their bag into the backseat of his car and they pulled out of the driveway. As Derek settled into his seat, getting ready for the trip by making sure everything was adjusted the way he wanted it, Scott rifled through the CD collection. Pulling one out, he slipped it into the stereo hiding the cover so Derek wouldn't know which one he had chosen.

Derek rolled his eyes. "Which CD did you put in? This is going to be a long ride. Shouldn't we make sure I enjoy the music choice as well?"

Scott smiled, a sinister playfulness tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Are you trying to say you don't trust my judgment?"

"I'm...you...shut up." Heat rushed to his cheeks and he was sure they had flushed red.

"Nice comeback." Scott leaned back in his seat and within a few second the car was filled with the sounds of Howie Day. Acoustic guitar and folk-songy vocals combined to create a soulful, relaxed mood. "Oh, I like this. I've never heard him before."

Derek was thrilled with the CD choice. This particular record

had his favorite song, Madrigals. It wasn't so much the song that Derek liked, but the way Howie played it. The way he slowly integrated one sound, recorded it to his mixing machine, looped it, and then added another sound was what inspired Derek in his own mixing. This particular version of Madrigals represented everything he strove for when mixing.

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"Fast forward to track four. That song is what you can expect when we get to the show tonight." Scott obeyed and reclined in his seat so he was lying back. His shirt lifted out of the waist of his pants revealing a thin trail of blond hair and copper-toned skin. Just the sight of his pelvis, the sculpted oblique muscles curving toward his groin, guiding Derek's eyes to the spot just under the button that he longed to touch and taste, drove him mad with desire. Pushing the thoughts to the side, he focused on the music and lifted his gaze to glance at Scott's face.

Scott's eyes were closed and he had his hands resting on his stomach, his fingers tapping to the beat Howie was recording. A thin smile lit up his face as his head nodded back and forth. As Howie began to sing the melody, he opened his eyes and looked at Derek. Seeing the motion, Derek glanced at him and was struck by the awe in his eyes. He smiled then turned back to face the road. "Pretty good, isn't he?"

"How have you not played this for me before? I totally get your music now. All through high school when I watched you mix for the parties, I knew you were inspired by this guy, but I had no idea you modeled your work after him. It's amazing. Your stuff is just like his."

Derek's chest protruded a bit as he filled with pride. "You think? My mixing sounds like his? Really?"

Scott sat up. "Fuck yeah. Is he gonna play stuff like this tonight?"

"Probably. He usually stretches a couple of songs out, creatively mixing various beats and sounds together like this. It's why I love him so much."

Scott closed his eyes and leaned back in his seat once again. "You love him, huh? Should I be jealous?"

Derek laughed. "Hardly. He's straight."

"But if he were gay..."

"You'd still have nothing to worry about. I may love him, but I'm freakin' head over heels for you." He reached over and placed his hand on Scott's leg, then realized what he had done and instinctively pulled his hand away. Scott managed to catch his hand before he could remove it entirely, bringing it back to rest on his lap. "I like how hot your hands are. I can feel the heat straight through the fabric of my jeans."

Derek's heart pumped just a bit faster and his breathing became just a hint shallower. "You don't mind?"

"Why should I mind?" Scott laughed. "We're alone in the car. No one else is around to watch or bug us. We're heading to New York together to enjoy your graduation gift to me. Why would I mind you touching me?"

"I guess no reason." Derek continued driving, one hand on the wheel, the other resting on Scott's lap, listening to the melodies of his favorite musician. Derek had driven to the city with his parents a few times and recalled that the trip seemed very long. With Scott in the car, the trip seemed to

fly by, and Derek was 26

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surprised when they crossed the Connecticut-New York border. "Wow, we're almost there. That went fast."

Beck's uncle, Joshua Stoltz, lived in the West Village. They followed the signs which led them to the Henry Hudson Parkway and drove down to Christopher Street. As they turned off the Parkway and drove through the West Village, they saw thousands of people on the streets. There were old ladies, young couples, kids on skateboards, people dressed in suits, people barely dressed at all. Derek saw two men, probably in their mid-twenties, holding hands as they strolled down the sidewalk. Neither glanced around to see if anyone was watching. To his surprise, the people walking by them paid no attention either. As he drove, he noticed there were lots of gay couples. "Scott, look, there are so many guys holding hands and, look, there's a couple kissing over there."

Scott had been observing the scene too, not with the same thrilled sense of awe, but with a hint of shock and maybe even horror in his face. "I know. I can't believe it. If we walked around Harvard Square like that we'd probably get beaten up or, at the very least, we would draw comments and stares. I don't know if I could do that."

As Derek watched them, he had reached a totally different conclusion. If it was okay for all these people to hold hands and show affection, then it should be okay for him and Scott to do the same. "It's different, but I like it. Maybe we should have applied to colleges here instead of Boston."

They arrived at Christopher Street and spent another twenty minutes looking for a parking space. It seemed most streets

didn't allow parking between the hours of 7:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. except for loading trucks. Finally giving up, they found a parking garage and drove in to park their car. The prices were ridiculously high. Back home, an overnight parking spot cost about twelve dollars. Here, they would have to pay almost forty. Deciding it was a worthwhile expense, Derek handed over his keys and told the attendant that they would be leaving before 5:00 p.m. the next day. Beck's uncle was forty-two and worked as a psychologist. He was gay and had a boyfriend, Pierre, who worked in the fashion industry, although Derek questioned Beck's definition of fashion when she informed him Pierre was a sales clerk at H&M. They lived in a sizable apartment on the top floor of their building located on Christopher Street in the heart of the gay part of the West Village. Everything about city life was new and exciting. As they walked up the steps to Josh's building and pressed his apartment number, Derek jumped when a voice sounded in his ear. "Derek? Scott?"

"Yes. It's us."

"Great. You're right on time. I'll buzz you in. Come to the top floor." They heard a buzzing sound and Scott opened the door.

When they arrived at the apartment and Josh opened the door, Derek was taken aback. Beck's description of her uncle left much to be desired. Josh was tall and well-toned, standing at five feet, eleven inches and weighing in at one hundred ninety-five pounds, he guessed. His body was well proportioned and he had perfect teeth. 27

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"Welcome boys," he said, beckoning them inside. "I hope your trip wasn't too long. Did you hit much traffic?"

Josh drew them into the front hall. Beck's description of this too, had left much to the imagination. The apartment was small, but the way it was decorated made it seem spacious. The living room and kitchen were connected, forming one large open space. A table, positioned along the wall near the kitchen, gave a slight separation between the two rooms, and the furniture, antique couches with stained wooden legs and chairs with similarly colored leather cushioning, were placed at angles so the room didn't have a square feel to it.

Derek shook Josh's hand. "No, not at all. We just got to talking and before we knew it we were here."

Josh smiled. "I remember the days when I was young and took road trips with my friends. So exciting!" Josh had a dreamy look in his eyes. "You two make a handsome couple. Beck said you were cute together. I see she wasn't exaggerating."

Scott stiffened slightly. Not enough to be noticed, but enough for Derek to know Josh's comment had bothered him. He, on the other hand, felt entirely at ease. "I guess it's one of the few times that she managed not to exaggerate. You know how she is."

Josh flashed a knowing smile. "Yes. I know. It's wrong of me to say so, but she is my favorite of all my nieces and nephews. She has always had a certain flair. I guess I've felt she and I were kindred spirits." He walked over to a chair in the living room and sat down. "Please, take a seat."

Derek and Scott walked to the couch and sat next to one another.

"So Derek, you've known her since kindergarten. I'm surprised I never met you before. I've heard all about you though."

Derek smiled. "Well, I only just came out to her a couple of years ago, so she probably didn't even think to introduce the two of us until then. Most of the time she and her parents came here to visit you and now I can see why. This city is exciting."

Scott had become surprisingly silent. Derek reached over and placed a hand on his leg without even thinking. He felt the muscle under his hand begin to tremble and saw Scott sit up a bit straighter. Jesus, Scott. He's Beck's uncle. He knows we're a couple. Josh continued, seemingly unaware of the silent interchange between Derek and Scott. "Yes, I'm sure you'll enjoy yourselves. The Bowery Ballroom used to be quite a dance spot back in the day. Now it's turned into a concert hall and the newest and most alternative musicians play there. Come, let me show you to your room."

Josh led them down a short narrow hallway. The first door they came to was the guest room. It contained a queen sized bed, a dresser, and a television. Scott placed their bag on the bed. "Let me show you the rest of the place," Josh said. Continuing down the hallway, they came to another door. It was Josh and Pierre's room. The bathroom was at the end of the hallway. "Well, this is my home. You're welcome to it any time you like. Maybe you boys would like to settle in for a little while

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before dinner. I've made reservations for us to have dinner at six o'clock. I hope that's okay."

Derek looked up. "Oh, you don't have to take us to dinner. It's nice enough you're letting us stay here."

"Nonsense. Like I said, Beck is my special girl. I have no

children of my own so when I get the chance to spoil her or her friends, I take advantage of it. And, I'm paying. No discussion or arguments."

Derek tried to protest, but Josh was insistent so he gave up, allowing his generosity. Once in the guest room, Scott closed the door and began unpacking their things. Derek lay down on the bed and observed him. His movements were quick and he was silent. Derek already knew it was because of how open everything had been. The men on the street, Josh openly acknowledging the two of them as a couple, Derek's hand on his leg, all of it represented the one thing that distinguished the two of them from each other. Where Derek felt like he had stepped into his own personal heaven, he assumed Scott felt the exact opposite. The question was whether he should bring it up or wait for Scott to.

After several minutes of silence, Derek realized he would have to be the one to speak first if they were going to speak at all. "What's the matter? Aren't you glad to be in the city?"

Scott walked over to the bed and sat down. "I had no idea Beck had told Josh about the two of us. It makes me uncomfortable. I'm used to being the one who's in control of who knows about me and us. All of a sudden, more and more people know. It scares me a little."

Derek sat up and slid an arm around Scott's shoulder. "I know. It's different and it's strange, but do you think, maybe while we're here, you could see what it's like to not pretend? Could we see what it feels like not to hide what we are to one another? I mean, Beck says Josh and Pierre have been together for over ten years. They're terrific role models for us. And all of those guys out there holding hands. I want to be able to do that with you."

Scott turned to Derek, an apprehensive expression on his face. Derek sensed he was gearing up to provide an

argument, but when he spoke, the words came as a complete surprise. "I don't know how you put up with me. You're so brave and open and I hold you back. —"

Placing his hand over Scott's mouth, Derek took a moment to push the lump that was forming in his throat back down. Once he had regained his composure, he began speaking, a hint of strain detectable in his voice. "Don't. We've been down that road before and we're not going there again; especially not today. You are my everything and I'm lucky to have you in my life for more reasons than I have time to explain right now."

Lifting his hand to remove Derek's, Scott kissed his palm, then leaned in to rest his head on Derek's shoulder. "I know you feel that way. I just feel bad that I got all tense 29

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like that when you put your hand on my leg. I don't want to disappoint you, Derek. I love you."

"And I love you. Just because I'm ready for all of this and you aren't, doesn't mean you aren't a great boyfriend or that there's a problem between us. I'm sorry I brought anything up. Let's just enjoy the weekend."

"Do you know what I love most about you, Derek? You are so genuinely yourself and you speak to me with such understanding. I'll try to get into the spirit of living openly as a couple while we're here, but don't expect miracles from me. It's not like I can just shut off my discomfort overnight. But I'll try, I promise."

Derek shifted so he sat in Scott's lap, hugging him around the waist and resting his head against Scott's shoulder.

Scott chuckled and wrapped his arms around Derek.

"You're a little snuggle monkey. Come on. Let's go join Josh in the other room. Josh was sitting by the window, working on a New York Times crossword puzzle. When the boys entered, he placed the paper down. "I hope the room will be okay for the two of you. It's small, I know, but we tried to make it as comfortable as possible."

Scott sat down next to him. "It's fantastic. We just unpacked. Thank you so much for letting us stay here. Now that I've had a chance to stretch, I feel much more awake."

The warmth that filled Derek's chest caused his breathing to come faster. Scott's charms worked wonders on him, but seeing him direct them toward other people always filled him with a mixture of pride and arousal.

"I'm glad." Josh gestured for Derek to join them at the table. "I just got off the phone with Pierre. He'll be meeting us at the steak house. Would the two of you like a glass of champagne to celebrate your visit to the city?"

"Champagne. Yeah, definitely." Derek turned to face Scott when he started laughing. "What?"

"You. I've never seen you become so excited to drink. Usually you only drink sports drinks or water." He slid his chair closer to Derek and tentatively placed an arm around his shoulder. Heat like hot flames licked at the skin on the back of his neck. Derek couldn't decide whether the sensation was pleasurable or uncomfortable, but he didn't have a chance before he felt himself being pulled closer to Scott. Soft, plump lips met his in a brief kiss. He inhaled sharply, the heat at the back of his neck spreading like warm liquid through his veins. When Scott pulled out of the kiss, Derek's eyes locked with his and they stared at each other in silence for a few seconds which seemed to stretch into years.

As thrilled as Derek was, the shock of Scott's actions planted a small doubt in his mind as well. Did he just do that because I asked him to or because he wanted to? Once again, Derek didn't have a chance to contemplate his thoughts as his attention was drawn to Josh who sighed. Looking up to face him, Josh had clasped his hands over his heart in a dramatic display of affection. "To be young and in love. You boys remind me of what it was like when I was your age. Let's have a glass of champagne. I 30

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don't make a habit of providing alcohol to underage people, but you're practically family and you aren't driving anywhere, so a glass won't hurt."

One glass turned into two and by the time they had to leave for the restaurant, the three of them finished the bottle and Derek was feeling buzzed. They walked east down Christopher Street towards Fifth Avenue and headed north to Twelfth Street. The restaurant where they were meeting Pierre was called The Striphouse, which was known for its wide variety of steaks. As they walked, Josh pointed out the many stores and buildings, describing how they had changed over the years.

When they arrived, Pierre was waiting for them. He was much smaller than Josh and had a petite frame. About Derek's height, he must have been at least ten or fifteen pounds lighter. His skin was fair and he was dressed in black slacks and a white button down shirt which was probably two sizes too small for him. The shirt was unbuttoned to the middle of his chest and he wore a form fitting black tank underneath. He was attractive, but not at all Derek's type. Beaming, he hugged Josh and gave him a

kiss, then turned to face them. "You must be Derek and Scott. Welcome to the Big Apple."

Derek was surprised Pierre didn't have a French accent and was quickly embarrassed by his assumption.

Once seated, they ordered and the waiter brought bread and water to the table. Josh and Pierre ordered glasses of red wine. Scott had relaxed after the couple of glasses of champagne he drank back at Josh's apartment and was leaning back in his chair with his arm draped across the back of Derek's chair. Again, Derek found himself filled with a mixture of pleasure and surprise at how easy it seemed for Scott to slip into the kind of behavior he had desired for so long. As was typically the case when the two of them were out with other people, Scott handled the socializing, allowing Derek to sit back and observe. As much as he had learned to open up with Scott, he was still most comfortable when blending into the background and watching how others interacted. It had been how he had managed to keep his identity hidden all through high school and remained his comfort zone when in new situations.

"So, Beck says you two have been together for over ten years. That's amazing."

Scott was smiling, his dimples dotting his cheeks, and both Josh and Pierre were staring directly at him as he asked the question.

Pierre smiled. "Yes, over ten years, and I haven't run away screaming yet." Josh was affectionately running his fingers along the back of Pierre's neck. Pierre glanced at him and they exchanged a romantic look. "I was working at a thrift shop in the East Village," Pierre went on, "lamenting the lack of opportunities to get involved at some of the bigger name stores to the other person working with me, when all of a sudden, in walks this beautiful man looking for vintage shirts.

Of course, I went right over and asked if I could help him. He was looking for a long sleeve Retro Monkey shirt. I found it delightful that such a handsome and well-built man would want to buy such an item."

A blush came to Pierre's cheeks at his own reference to his lover's build. "I brought several over and assisted him in picking out just the right one to compliment his 31

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physique and skin tone. He ended up buying a lime green shirt with the Retro Monkey head emblazoned across his chest. The green of the shirt combined with the brown tones of the money brought out the hues in his eyes. The shirt also fit him snugly, accentuating his muscles in alluring ways. I loved how the monkey's cute little ears stretched and molded to his chest."

Josh picked up the story. "I was utterly charmed that this young, handsome man was so attentive, so I asked him right there when he got off work and if I could take him out for drinks. He agreed, of course, and we met up at the Boiler Room. I wore my new shirt and we took things from there. It was love right from the beginning." He leaned over to give him a sweet kiss on his cheek, then continued.

"Pierre has excellent taste in clothes and after a while, he took a position as a personal shopper at Barney's, but the stress and the cattiness of the work got to him. He had a ton of regular customers who would only work with him and we had just bought the place on Christopher Street, so he was afraid to tell me how unhappy he was or that he wanted to quit."

Pierre continued. "I was terribly afraid if I told Josh I wanted

to leave Barney's to work in a store with quality clothing but without all of the pressure and stress, he would think I was unmotivated. Also, we were a relatively new couple and I didn't want him to think I was taking his salary for granted. So I suffered through another year unhappy in my job, becoming more bitter and nasty by the day. Pierre shook his head. "The fights we had back then. Let's just say it's a wonder Josh kept me around. When he finally confronted me, asking me what bug had crawled up my ass, I told him the truth. The bastard, bless his beautiful soul, actually laughed at me. He told me he didn't care how much money I made and if being this miserable was a result of the work I was doing he would prefer I didn't work at all. Of course, I love working, so that was out of the question, but the next day I quit Barney's and have been working for various clothing stores ever since."

Josh turned an affectionate gaze at Pierre. "You see, boys, it's only through communication that a relationship can survive. You'll have your ups and downs, but if you love each other and are willing to talk honestly, things can and will work out."

Derek was amazed at how freely and openly the two of them were talking. They had only just met, and here they were sharing the story of how they met and how they worked through a rough patch in their relationship. I wonder if, in ten or fifteen years, Scott and I will be like them?

When dinner was over and the waiter brought the check to the table, Derek tried to pay for some of the bill, but Josh dismissed his efforts, grabbing the bill and slapping down his credit card without even looking. Replacing his money, he simply thanked Josh and, once the bill was paid, followed him as they headed back to the apartment.

"Before I forget," Josh said, "here's a spare key to the place. You two can stay out as long as you like, but program my number into your cells in case you need me for anything."

Now, go and change into what you'll be wearing so Pierre can determine whether you're appropriately dressed. It is his area of expertise." They obediently went 32

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to the guest room and got changed. Scott threw on his Tasmanian Devil shirt and his combat boots. Derek put on a white Polo shirt and his pair of black All-Star Converse sneakers. Once they were dressed, they headed back to the living room to be inspected. Pierre walked over to Scott first. "Jeans are always good. The shirt is cute. It definitely compliments your body. Love the boots. What are you planning on wearing after the concert?" Scott took off his shirt to show off the tank top Derek had picked out for him before they left. Pierre nodded approvingly. "Very nice. And with a high school logo as well. The boys won't be able to keep their eyes off of you."

Josh walked over and handed Scott a glass of champagne. "Here, you probably need this after Pierre's scrutiny." Looking like he had just been inspected on a conveyor belt, Scott accepted the drink gratefully.

Next, Pierre shifted his attention to Derek. "Oh my, the jeans are perfect, but I imagine anything would look good on you with that hot little bubble butt."

Scott took a sip of his champagne and walked over to Derek. "I've told him he has the hottest ass I've ever seen a million times, but he refuses to believe me."

Derek was sure his face had turned crimson by this point, but he was thrilled Scott had just offered him a compliment on his physique in front of two men. Pierre nodded. "Yes. Very nice. And I love the All-Stars," Pierre walked slowly around

Derek until he had completed a full circle, “but the shirt has to go.” Grabbing Derek by the hand, he whisked him toward the bedroom. “We’ll be back in a moment,”

he called over his shoulder.

Once in his bedroom, Pierre rummaged through one of the two closets and started raking through his shirts. Finally selecting a black short-sleeved collared shirt, he held it up to Derek’s body. “Perfect,” he said. “Take that rag off and try this on.”

Derek removed his t-shirt and slid his arms into the sleeves of the black jersey. As he began buttoning, it became immediately clear that the shirt was far too small for him.

“Uh, I can only button the first four buttons.”

Pierre led him to the body length mirror along the wall next to the closet and stood behind him, adjusting his shirt so it was centered over his chest. The bottom hung just below the waist of his pants and it opened in a wide v-shape at his chest, revealing a portion of both his pectoral muscles and highlighting the crease between them where the muscles joined his sternum. Stepping back, Pierre asked Derek to turn around for him. “Perfect. You look incredibly hot. Let’s go show the guys.”

When Derek walked back into the living room, Josh whistled and Scott’s mouth dropped open and he crossed the room until he was standing directly in front of him.

“You look awesome!” He walked around Derek to take a look from all angles. Coming back to Derek’s front, his eyes were filled with wonder and admiration. “You look so fucking hot.” He reached over and ran his finger along Derek’s chest, tracing the crease in the middle. Both Josh and Pierre giggled, but Derek couldn’t focus on anything but Scott and

his willingness to be so open about his admiration once again. Turning to Pierre, Scott's crooked smile crossed his face. "You're good!"

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Pierre bowed and smiled, wrapping his arm around Josh's waist. "Derek, you can keep that. It looks far better on you than it does on me. Plus, how can I deny Scott something that will bring him so much pleasure in the future?"

Derek stood in a stunned silence, surprised by the attention. More than anything, he was shocked by Scott who continued to openly admire him publicly, showing all of the affection he usually saved for their private time together. The fact that Josh and Pierre were complimenting them as a couple, and Scott seemed to be eating it up, sent waves of electricity through him. It was like he was a different person. If this was a taste of what life would be like at college, he realized he had been worrying needlessly. When Derek came out of his momentary haze of thoughts, Scott was standing in front of him, gazing at him with hunger in his eyes. "Well, I suppose we should get going." He leaned in and gave Derek a kiss on the lips and squeezed his ass. As their lips touched, Derek closed his eyes, the sweet scent of champagne filling his nose. When they pulled apart, Derek licked his lips and could taste a hint of the flavor. Scott hugged him, then turned to face Josh and Pierre. "Thank you for dinner. It was awesome. And thanks for being so cool. Derek wanted me to try to be a little more public about our relationship and it feels really easy to do that around the two of you."

Josh smiled. "It's like I said. Things won't always be perfect, but if you love each other and communicate, things will work

out.” With that, he walked with them to the door. “Remember, call if you need anything and enjoy your evening.”

As they headed to the concert, Derek considered the ease with which Scott was showing him affection. This is what he wanted from Scott, but he never imagined it would come so naturally or quickly for him. Not wanting to assume too much or to cause Scott to feel self-conscious, Derek kept his thoughts to himself, but as they walked down the street, hand in hand, he couldn't help but hope things would continue like this once they began college together.

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Chapter Three

There was a long line at the Bowery Ballroom when they arrived. The crowd was young and there was an excited buzz as people began to enter the concert hall. Scott allowed himself to be guided up the stairs to the balcony, chuckling to himself as Derek practically jumped out of his skin. “I can't wait for you to hear Howie Day play his music live. It's so much better than his recorded music. He has this mixing board which he uses during his concerts and he blends his own music right there as he's performing. It's like he's playing in a band with four people but it's just him.”

Scott loved listening to Derek talk about mixing. Ever since the first time he had gone to his house and learned how he picked out sounds and loaded them onto the mixing board to be blended into songs, he had begun to listen to music differently. He no longer judged songs by the type of music or by how they made him feel. Now, when he listened to music, he heard how sounds were put together to create the

feelings and mood. Staring at Derek, Scott's chest puffed out with pride. His passion was one of the things Scott loved most about him, and watching him enjoy this evening was more fulfilling than he anticipated.

As they stepped into the open balcony area, Scott was surprised to find there were no seats. Like the main floor of the concert hall, the upstairs area was also a standing area. Looking down at the crowd below, Scott could see why Derek had chosen to bring them up to the balcony. Most people crowded in front of the stage. With all of the milling about before Howie came on stage, Derek and Scott were able to slowly creep closer and closer to the railing until, just as the show was about to begin, they had an unimpeded view of the stage.

Finally, Howie came on stage and greeted the crowd. The stage was practically bare, quite different than the typical set up and lighting he had come to expect from concerts. There was a stool and several bottles of water and, Scott noticed a good deal of equipment on the floor. One piece of equipment captured his attention. It looked kind of like a rug, but there were several pedals with wires hooking into a recording device similar to Derek's mixing board. Scott had to get in close in order for Derek to hear him.

"What's all that?" He placed his hand on Derek's hip and leaned his head on his shoulder before realizing he had done so. It caught him off guard how he had so naturally touched Derek while surrounded by strangers and it surprised him even more that he enjoyed the public contact.

"It's how he mixes his music during the concert. You'll see. It's awesome. I'm not even going to pretend I know how he's set it up, but he uses his feet to record sounds that he plays and then does something else with his foot to loop the recording." Derek was practically jumping up and down as he was explaining this to Scott. Listening to him sent chills of

excitement through Scott and reminded him of their multiple evenings up in Derek's attic as he mixed for parties or for fun. It was a different kind of 35

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admiration than when the two of them talked about wrestling. That was something they shared. Mixing was purely Derek's.

Sliding his arms around Derek's waist, Scott hugged Derek close. There was only a slight hitch in Derek's voice as he paused mid-sentence, and then he continued explaining the process Howie used to record while performing. The words floated through the air to his ears, but Scott wasn't hearing. Instead, a slew of thoughts were flying through his mind, crowding out anything but Derek and their touching bodies. Looking around, the concert goers were busy talking and waiting. No one was paying attention to them and the few people who glanced their way smiled, then went back to their conversations.

Inhaling deeply, a mixture of fresh soap and Derek's own unique smell filled Scott and stimulated his senses. Closing his eyes, he tightened his hold and ground his groin against Derek's ass. Already aroused, the friction from the rubbing caused his cock to strain within his pants. He was about to lean in and kiss Derek's neck when the lights dimmed and Howie came onto the stage.

The concert began with some of his standard popular songs such as Collide, She Says, and Be There. For his fourth song, he played Ghost, telling the crowd to get ready for a crazy ride before he began the song. He started with a beat which he tapped onto his guitar. After he completed a couple of rounds of the beat, he tapped another part of the floor contraption and the beat began to replay. He then played

guitar harmonies, recording and looping them as he had with the beat. Next, he recorded a few vocals. By the time he began singing, he had at least eight different recorded sounds looping at the same time, harmonizing him.

The song lasted much longer than the radio version. After about ten minutes, he began to experiment with new vocals and beats, removing some that had been looping and replacing them with others. He messed with the tempo and the volume, filling the concert hall with a myriad of sounds.

Scott looked at Derek, who had a dreamy expression in his eyes, swaying to the music and gripping the railing tightly. Watching him enjoy the music filled Scott with emotion. This was exactly what Derek loved about music. He loved how a musician could create a mood that could move you through the air, losing a sense of place and time. Sliding behind Derek, Scott wrapped his arms around his waist and rested his head on Derek's shoulder, closing his eyes and letting the music fill him. He was brought back to the party senior year when he had first watched Derek mix; the party where he finally took Derek outside and kissed him. That had been almost a year ago and he loved the man in his arms more now than he could have ever predicted. When the song ended, the crowd screamed and cheered. Scott leaned in and whispered in Derek's ear. "He's great, but I still think I like your music better."

Derek turned in Scott's arms so he was facing him. "Are you saying that so you'll get lucky tonight. 'Cause you don't have to work for that to happen."

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Before he realized what he was doing, Scott leaned in and kissed Derek. It wasn't one of their intense, meant for the bedroom kisses, but it was lingering and sweet. Drawing out of the kiss, Scott suddenly realized what he had done and nervously glanced to either side of them. A few people were looking at them, but they were smiling. No one seemed to be bothered or to even care that he had just kissed another boy. Shrugging, he returned to his position of holding Derek around the waist as Derek leaned against the railing.

Leaning his head back, Derek put his mouth next to Scott's ear. "I'm not complaining, not by a long shot, but I can't believe you just did that."

Scott laughed. "Well, no one seems to care. Maybe it's the music. Maybe it's that we're in the East Village. Maybe it's this city. Who knows? But it felt good to kiss you in front of people. Just don't expect me to do it all the time. I'm still uneasy about public displays of affection."

When the concert ended, they headed north on Avenue A. Josh had told them that they would be able to find a ton of restaurants and coffee shops where they could sit outdoors and enjoy the summer night. As they walked down Avenue A, Scott decided to test his new sense of freedom and took Derek's hand. At first he felt tense and glanced around to see if anyone was watching them or reacting badly, but as it had been at The Bowery, no one paid any attention to the two of them as they walked down the street. He quickly relaxed, twining their fingers together, and rubbing the inside of Derek's wrist with his thumb.

"I'm amazed by you tonight, Scott. I can't believe how touchy feely you're being. I love it."

Scott smiled, squeezing his hand. "I'm kind of surprised by myself as well. But, I'm enjoying this. New York is so different than Boston. Back home, everything is so conservative.

Here, it's like nobody cares about anything you do."

As they continued, they passed several other couples of various gender configurations. Kids with brightly colored hair or metallic spikes sticking out of lips and noses walked side by side with preppy college kids. It was as if The East Village were the original melting pot that the history books referred to in school. Every type of person imaginable could be seen, yet everyone blended together and co-existed peacefully.

A few blocks later, Derek stopped in front of a brightly lit window. Scott stopped mid-stride and stood next to him, slipping his arm around his waist. "What's up?"

"Check it out. It's a pool hall."

Scott glanced up at the storefront and read the name which blazed in bright pink letters. "The Pink Triangle Pool Hall and Pub. Well, I guess it's not much of a stretch to guess the clientele in here."

Derek shoved his arm and laughed. "I haven't played pool in forever and this place looks fun. We don't have to worry about being underage, but we can get a taste of gay life in the city around people who are our age and older. Want to go in?"

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"Sure. I love pool." Derek's smile caused his own mouth to pull back into a grin. Jesus. He's really easy to please tonight. He took Derek by the hand and led him into the hall. "Besides, I'm hungry and we can get food here."

Derek's smile broadened until it lit his entire face. "Yeah. I'm

hungry too.”

When they went in, they were immediately greeted by a thin man, pale, with a large mole on the side of his neck. His hair was bleached platinum and he wore a tight black long-sleeved shirt which accentuated how lanky he was. “Hi, boys. You here to eat or play?” His voice was high pitched and he spoke with a lisp. Even so, Scott found him to be charming. He wasn’t trying to be someone he wasn’t.

“Can’t we do both?” Derek pouted but then the corner of his mouth began to curve up and he broke out in restrained laughter.

The receptionist smiled, dimples adorning his cheeks. “Of course you can, sweetie. I’ll set you up at a table and then you can order from one of the bar boys. We have a full menu. My name’s Steve. I haven’t seen the two of you around and I would remember if I had.” He gave Scott and appraising look, then gazed up and down Derek’s body.

“Nice to meet you, Steve. We’re actually from Boston, but came into the city for the Howie Day concert at the Bowery.” Derek removed his hand from Scott’s and followed Steve to an empty table.

As Scott followed the two of them, watching them chat, he was surprised by the twinge of jealousy that crept into his gut. He had never had to face sharing Derek with anyone. Here, surrounded by dozens of gay men, many of them very attractive, he had to work hard to keep his insecurities at bay.

When Steve stopped by an empty pool table, he turned to Scott. “You’re one lucky guy, Studmuffin. Derek here tells me this trip is your graduation present.” He sighed, a dreamy expression crossing his face. “That’s so romantic. I know my no-good other half wouldn’t do something like that for me.”

He placed a hand on Scott's shoulder and gave him a squeeze. Despite the thin arms, he had a surprisingly strong grip. "Hold on to him. He's a keeper."

Scott stared at Derek whose face had turned beet red. Without diverting his eyes, he responded to Steve. "You don't need to convince me. I already know I'm the luckiest guy around." He walked over to Derek and slid one arm around his waist, resting it on his ass, and with the other hand he cupped Derek's neck and pulled him into a deep kiss. As Derek melted into his embrace, he was momentarily distracted by how possessive he felt, as if he were staking his claim amidst a pack of wolves. When he broke out of the kiss, he turned to face Steve, feeling a bit like he was sending the unspoken message, He's mine. Keep away.

Steve didn't seem to notice, standing with his hands clutched over his heart and a dreamy expression on his face. "So adorable." He shook his head, then turned and headed back to the door where a line had begun to form.

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When he turned back to Derek, his boyfriend wore a surprised face with a slightly ajar mouth. "What was that all about? Not that I'm complaining, but to kiss me like that in a crowded place like this..."

Scott shrugged. "I don't know. I was watching the two of you talking and saw how Steve was looking at you and I guess I got..." The words were on the tip of his tongue, but somehow he wasn't able to get them out. Staring at his feet, Scott wondered why he was having difficulty expressing himself. Derek was usually the one who bottled up his feelings, but to

Scott, admitting he felt jealousy seemed somehow to admit weakness. He was the strong one, the one Derek leaned on. To feel insecure placed him on uncomfortable ground.

He raised his eyes to face Derek and was once again surprised by the expression that greeted him. All of his features were relaxed, content, and his warm amber eyes held Scott's like a magnet. "You were jealous." He closed the distance between them and hugged him, squeezing tightly and leaning his head against the rounded shoulder muscle. "You don't need to be. I was bragging about you the whole way to the table."

"I know. It's silly. Forget it." It was just like Derek to say or do the exact right thing to bring levity to a serious moment. Wrapping his arms around Derek, he ran his hands up and down his back. "Hey."

Derek lifted his head from Scott's shoulder and looked up at him. "What?"

"I'm having a great time. This was a terrific graduation present. Thank you."

"In case you hadn't figured it out yet, I like doing things that make you happy. You're welcome."

Scott leaned in, brushing his lips against Derek's. Warmth covered his mouth as their lips parted and Derek's tongue gently tumbled with his own. After a moment, Scott pulled back, a taste of ginger ale in his mouth. He inhaled deeply, a hint of Derek's musky scent filling his nose. It reminded him of wrestling season and practicing with him after the team had left the room. Normally, work-out smells were unpleasant, but Derek's scent aroused him. In a hushed whisper, but in a voice filled with urgency, he leaned close. "I love you."

Lifting up onto his toes, Derek gently brushed his lips against Scott's, kissing him once more, then whispered his response. "I love you too."

It was while they were staring at each other, lost in their private world, that the bar boy stopped by. "Excuse me, guys. Can I get you something to drink? Guys?" The both of them turned toward the voice that was speaking.

Scott raised two fingers. "Yeah, could we have two ginger ales?"

"Sure thing." The bar boy's gaze lingered on Scott, roaming up and down his body, before he winked and headed back to bar.

Scott turned to face Derek. "Now, where were w—"He cocked his head to the side, surprised by Derek's narrowed eyes, following the retreating bar boy. "Problems?"

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"Nothing much, except that slut was stripping you with his eyes." Derek placed his hands on his hips and glared at the back of the waiter's head.

"Look at me." Derek dragged his eyes away from the bar boy and faced him. He placed a finger under Derek's chin, lifting it so he was looking directly into his eyes.

"You're jealous? You don't need to be. I would have complimented you the whole time if he gave me a chance to talk."

"Shut up." Derek laughed. "Throwing my own words back in

my face. Just for that I'm gonna kick your ass in pool."

"Right. Like that time you kicked my ass last year when we played air hockey at Dave and Busters?" Scott grabbed the triangle and began setting up the balls.

"That was different. I was letting you win because your dad was being a prick."

"Right. You let me win. I forgot." Scott shook his head and continued racking up the balls. As he did, the bar boy returned with their drinks. He didn't even glance at Derek as he placed the glasses on the side table next to them. Staring at Scott's pecs which were pushing at the fabric of his shirt, he took a step closer to him. "Will you be getting anything to eat?"

Scott glanced at Derek and smiled. Walking over to him, he draped his arms over Derek's shoulders in a loose hug, staring into his eyes. Without looking away, he responded. "Yeah. We're starved. Bring us a plate of chicken fingers and some minicheeseburgers with caramelized onions." He then leaned in and sealed his lips to Derek's. The playfulness, the back and forth of claiming one another in the face of various good looking young men who were clearly interested in one or the other of them, was intoxicating.

"Um, okay. I'll place your order." His voice didn't seem quite as eager to please when he spoke. "Your food should be up in about ten minutes. Name's Freddie if you need anything else."

Derek broke out of the kiss and stared over Scott's shoulder. "Thanks Fred. We'll let you know if we need anything."

"It's Fr—" he closed his mouth, turned on his heels, and walked off. Derek returned to the kiss he had broken then pulled back when he couldn't contain his laughter. "I don't

think Freddie likes me very much.”

“C’mon. Let’s play some pool.” Scott grabbed his soda and took a few gulps, then selected a pool stick and began to chalk the end. “Didn’t you say you were going to kick my ass or something?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

They played a few rounds and were fairly evenly matched. Each time it was Derek’s turn, Scott stood back and admired his body as he leaned over and aimed. The black shirt Pierre had given him rode up his torso, revealing his taut abdominal muscles. The contrast between his narrow waist which rounded out into his bubble butt was accentuated by the hint of skin revealed at the base of his spine. It took all of his 40

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self-control to keep himself from walking behind Derek to get a better look at his best physical feature, but there was no amount of will-power in the world that could draw his eyes away from that perfectly rounded ass.

It was only when Derek called his name that he managed to snap back to the room.

“Hey, the food’s here.”

Scott looked to his side and saw Freddie had delivered the food. Undoubtedly he had tried to capture Scott’s attention, but with Derek nearby, even if he had stood directly next to him waving glow sticks, Scott wouldn’t have noticed. Grabbing a chicken tender, he dipped it in the honey mustard and bit off a huge bite. The combination of hot oil,

crunchy bread crumbs, and tangy-sweet sauce filled his mouth. It wasn't until he started eating that he realized how hungry he had been. The two of them took a break from playing and stood in silence, stuffing their mouths. Five minutes later, the food was gone. "Damn, I was hungry. I could eat another round of those burgers. They were slammin'."

Derek picked up the pool stick and walked back to the table, preparing to continue where he had left off. Within seconds, Scott was lost once again in the magnetic draw of a perfectly rounded butt. It wasn't until he reached for his drink that he realized a man was standing by their table, watching Derek as well. A n immediate sense of protectiveness surged through him as he stared at the man who was gaping at Derek's ass.

Walking over so that he completely blocked the man's view, he leveled him with a steady gaze. "Do you need something, mister?"

The man snapped his attention to Scott and closed his mouth. "Huh. No, sorry. I was just watching the two of you and wondered if you wanted a third. I'm here alone and you two look like you're having a good time."

The man was probably in his late twenties. He still had youthful good looks with cropped brown hair, and an athletic build. He had brown, brooding eyes, but there was a slight hint of crow's feet at the corner and his hairline seemed to be receding slightly. Not much, but enough to show he had some additional years on him. He was about to tell the guy to fuck off when Derek walked up. "Hey, what's going on? It's your turn."

The man returned his attention to Derek, his tongue snaking out of his mouth to wet his lips. Once again, a surge of protectiveness filled Scott and he stepped a bit closer to

Derek.

The man stepped forward as well and extended his hand toward Derek, ignoring Scott altogether. My name is Charlie. I was asking your friend here if you'd mind if I joined the two of you.

Derek cocked his head. "How can three people play pool together?"

Charlie's smile widened. "Oh, there are all sorts of versions of pool. Let me teach you how to play cut-throat."

Derek laughed nervously. "Uh, that's okay. Scott and I are fine playing just the two of us."

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Charlie lifted his Budweiser to his lips and took a long slug, then returned his attention to Derek. "Aw, c'mon. It's fun. And then I can show you some other fun things that can be done with three people."

Derek backed up a step, butting into the table. Charlie took another step forward, closing the distance between them. Before he knew what he was doing, Scott stepped forward and grabbed Charlie by the arm. "Listen buddy, I think you need to fuck off."

Charlie shook Scott's hand off his arm and took another step towards Derek so that there were barely a few inches separating them. He reached out and placed his hand on Derek's arm. Scott could see Derek's eyes widen as his fingers gripped the side of the pool table tightly. "You have one hot ass. I could make you feel real ni—"

On a surge of hot adrenaline, Scott grabbed Charlie's arm and yanked hard, forcing Charlie back a few feet. Moving himself so that he stood as a physical barrier between the two of them, Scott released Charlie and shoved. "Listen shit head. I don't know who the fuck you think you are, but if you don't back the fuck away from my boyfriend, I'm gonna fucking kill you." He took one more step forward and squared off his shoulders to that he was standing face to face with the man.

Putting up his hands in defensive surrender, Charlie backed away. "Hey. No offense, man. I just thought you guys were hot and might like to play. I guess I was wrong."

Without moving, Scott, continued staring at him, rage boiling inside. Charlie glanced at Derek once again, then turned and walked away. Blood pounded inside Scott's head, each beat thrumming behind his ears. His fists were clenched and he ground his teeth as he watched Charlie retreat. It wasn't until he felt a soft, warm touch on his shoulder that he began to calm down. "It's okay."

Scott turned around and pulled Derek into a hug, squeezing him tightly. "Are you okay?" He felt Derek's arms wrap around him, grounding him. "You want to get outta here?"

"Is it because of that guy?" Derek's voice was strong and sure. "Don't let him ruin the evening for us. You were so awesome. I've never been so turned on as when you stepped between us and stood up for me like that."

Scott smiled and leaned in, his breath carrying the scent of the chicken fingers and burgers, the flavorful scents making Derek hungry once again. Leaning forward, he kissed Derek with a tenderness that caused his surroundings to blur and vanish, his world centering on Derek's lips and tongue. It was a kiss of both possession and love and it sent fire through

him and straight to his cock. When he pulled out of the kiss, he stared into Derek's and saw the same fire burning inside him as well. "I want to...I'm thinking about..."

Derek put down the pool stick and walked over to Scott. "What's wrong?"

"No. Nothing's wrong. It's just," Scott scratched a spot on the back of his neck. He wasn't itchy, but the action seemed to sooth the tension building up inside him. "I'm feeling really close to you tonight and with all the energy racing through my system 42

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right now and how protective I'm feeling, I was hoping you might want to head back to Josh's place."

"You want to go to Josh's place. What for? The only thing there is the bedroo..."

Derek's voice trailed off and he stared at Scott, his eyes expressing a combination of surprise and questioning. "Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?"

It amazed him how shy and demure he was being, but for some reason, being around so many other men who were all openly gay, was lowering his inhibitions. He was pretty sure he wouldn't feel like this once they returned home, but here and now, it felt right. Although they had set a rule of waiting until they went to college before having sex, Scott didn't want to wait. He wanted to continue exploring these new experiences, including intimacy that he had only allowed himself to fantasize about. Hooking his finger into one of the belt loops on Derek's jeans, he pulled him closer.

"I think I am."

Derek grabbed his pool stick and placed it back with the others, took Scott by the hand, and dragged him toward the door. Scott allowed himself to be led, trying not to trip over anything as he was pulled through the room.

When they walked out of the pool hall, the evening had cooled, a soothing summer breeze lowering the humid heat from the daytime to a temperate, dry warmth. Scott put his arm around Derek's shoulders and pulled him in close. "Are you sure you don't mind that I'm asking us to break the rules?"

"Are you kidding? I've been begging you to break the rules ever since we made them." Derek was still pulling Scott, excitedly, but suddenly stopped. "Just so we're clear, we're breaking the no sex until we get to college rule, right?"

Scott chuckled. "I'm not sure yet, but maybe not that rule just yet. Can't we just see what happens?" He took Derek's hand and the two of them continued walking west on Sixth Street at a more leisurely pace.

The sidewalks were still filled with people. Stores were still open. There were numerous cars driving on the streets. It seemed that everywhere he looked, the city was moving and glowing, as if the entire place was plugged in and humming. They walked in silence for a while. Finally, Derek broke the silence. "Scott, do you think it will be like this for us when we're in college?"

"Like what?"

"Do you think we'll be able to go out and hold hands, and kiss, and not have to worry about who sees us?"

Scott had been thinking about that same question all night

and knew his answer wasn't what Derek wanted to hear. He considered his words carefully before answering. "I don't know. This is an exception. We don't live here or know anyone, so there's no risk when we show our affection. I'll admit, the idea of it freaked me out when we first got here, but I've loved every minute of it. When we're at college, we'll be making friends. I know you aren't going for the wrestling team, but I am and jocks 43

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don't tend to be terribly gay-friendly. I think we're going to have to wait and see what it's like before we're this open about our relationship."

As expected, Derek's body language reflected disappointment. His head lowered slightly and the hand he was holding clenched slightly. "But, it's nice to be able to hold and kiss you without thinking about who might see us. At first, I was trying to do it to make you happy, but at some point it just came naturally and I haven't been thinking about it when I hug and kiss you. We'll get to this point eventually. Just not right away when we get home and start college."

The answer was honest and that was what Derek deserved, even if it wasn't what he wanted. In the long run, Scott knew they loved each other and whatever conflicts their difference in comfort might create in terms of living openly as a gay couple, they would work through it.

Slowly, Derek's mood lifted and their pace picked up. "I hope we do get there, because being here is making me realize how much I hate that we're not out. Maybe, now that we've tasted what it can be like, you'll miss it too much to let it go."

"Maybe." He released Derek's hand and placed it around his

waist. Derek always managed to find a positive spin on things and, standing next to him, remembering all of the times he had felt low and Derek had lifted him up, the reason for their trek across the city resurfaced in his mind. He had no idea what he would miss or not miss when they returned home, but right now he didn't care. All he wanted was to strip Derek out of his clothes and to experience him in a way he never had before. When they reached the apartment, they made their way to the guest room as quietly as they could, not wanting to wake up Josh or Pierre. Slipping out of their clothes, they got into bed wearing only their boxer briefs. Scott turned to his side so he was facing Derek. "Tonight was wonderful. Thank you again."

Derek touched Scott's face, then pulled him into a kiss, rolling Scott onto his back and allowing his body to rest on top. Bringing his knees up so that he was straddling Scott's waist, he ground his hips so that his ass rubbed against the hard shaft. Running his fingers through Scott's hair, he clenched his fists and pulled their mouths together. Heat surrounded them as Scott wrapped his arms around Derek's body, allowing skin to slide against skin. His tongue wrestled inside Derek's willing mouth, twirling in circles as sweet saliva passed back and forth between them. Arching his hips so that his groin pressed up into the crease between twin mounds of strong gluts, Scott closed his eyes, a million feathers ticking their way up and down his body and molten heat flowing through his veins.

Rolling Derek onto his back, He broke out of the kiss, panting for breath. After a few moments, he lowered his head and sealed his open mouth to Derek's neck, running his tongue along the ropes of muscle. The more he slid across muscle and tendon, the more Derek writhed in pleasure underneath him, splaying his legs, making room for Scott to place his full weight on top of him and grind their cocks together. 44

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Working his way down Derek's body, Scott nipped at his collar bone, grazed teeth over the bulging pectoral muscles, taking extra time to attend to each nipple until they hardened into rock hard nubs in his mouth. Lower and lower he traveled, tracing the ridges of Derek's abdominals with his nose, licking along his navel, and inhaling deeply as Derek's arousal became a sharp, pungent smell. With each breath, his own arousal intensified until his cock stood rigid sliding against the inside of his briefs, pulsing with each beat of his heart.

He had admired Derek's body hundreds of times before. On the wrestling mat, when running, in Beck's pool, naked in bed. But lying naked with him, hot skin touching hot skin, his mouth a mere inches from Derek's cock with a glistening droplet of precum shining at the head, Scott's breathing became shallow and his head reeled with rushing thoughts. He had imagined taking Derek into his mouth before, but faced with the moment, a mixture of fear and excitement caused him to freeze. Inhaling deeply through his nose, a Derek's musky scent mixed with hints of Acqua Di Gio filtered into him and immediately soothed his nerves. What am I worried about. This is Derek. I've wanted to taste him for as long as I've known him. Slipping his fingers beneath the band of Derek's briefs, he slowly slid them down his legs and over his feet. Tossing them off the bed, he began to work his way back up his legs, giving them as much attention as he had given his upper body. As he came closer to Derek's cock, the musky, odor of precum and exertion filled his senses. He nestled his nose into the crook between Derek's legs, the soft skin of his scrotum hot against his cheek, a hint of moisture forming in the space between balls and thigh. As he breathed in, the aromas and smells were

more intense than he had ever experienced. He reached down, removing his own boxer briefs and kicking them off the bed next to Derek's.

Grabbing his own cock, he ran his thumb over the head, slick precum coating his finger. As he ran the pad of his finger in circles, he spread the fluid around the ridge of his glans and heightening the stimulation on the sensitive skin just below. With his other hand he reached up and grasped the base of Derek's cock, angling it so that it stood straight up, pointing toward the ceiling.

Derek's breathing became shallow and his hips gyrated beneath Scott's face. Looking up, he met Derek's gaze, his eyes glazed with lust and pleasure, but unmistakably focused on him. Derek lifted his head. "Scott. You don't have to do this. If you still want to wait until we get to college we could—"

Scott lowered his head, taking the head into his mouth. Precum coated his tongue and the immediate salty tang electrified his taste buds and sent currents of pleasure through his body and directly to his cock. As he took more of Derek into his mouth, his own shaft seemed to grow even thicker. Massaging himself, he used the mixture of saliva and precum which coated Derek's shaft and was dripping down his chin to ease the process of taking more of Derek in.

When the head hit the back of his throat, Scott's gag reflex kicked in and he choked for a moment, withdrawing partially, but not entirely. Trying once again, he lowered

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his head until Derek's cock was almost all the way to the back of his mouth. Allowing a bit more to slide in, he attempted to breathe out as he forged ahead. This time the

gag reflex didn't come on as fast.

He would have continued practicing, but on his next journey up Derek's cock, he felt a quivering tremble come from deep inside Derek as thick thigh muscles undulated under the weight of his body.

Derek was whimpering. "Scott, feels so fucking good. God! Don't stop."

Although this was his first time giving a blowjob and he didn't know what he was doing or how to loosen his throat to make room, Derek's grunts and exclamations told him that he was doing something right.

When he began to take Derek into his mouth once more, Scott felt two hands grip the back of his head and push down. It was as if Derek knew exactly how far to go, because he stopped just short of the spot that would have caused Scott to gag once again, and unleashed thick gushes of hot, sperm into his mouth. A bit dribbled out of the space at the corner of his mouth where he hadn't formed a perfect seal, but he quickly recovered and began gulping what Derek had to offer. As each gush of cum filled his mouth and slid down his throat, excitement built up inside him, starting in his chest, as his heart rate increased and travelled along each nerve in his body until a tingling sensation took hold deep inside his core. The stimulation of his own stroking created a tingling deep inside of him which started in his groin and radiated outward, shooting trembling blissful sensation along each of his nerves. Before he knew what was happening, his own orgasm overtook him, the tingling turning into an electric fire, bouncing around inside him, shooting up his shaft, and erupting in satisfying contractions which shook his body.

"Oh. Uhh." Several strings of cum had landed on Derek's leg, so Scott let his cock slide from his mouth and slunk lower on the bed so that he could cleanse Derek's by licking his own

spunk from him.

Once he was satisfied he had adequately cleaned up after himself, he worked his way back up Derek's body. When he reached Derek's neck, he kissed him gently, then lowered all of his weight onto him, mouth next to ear.

Satisfied, exhausted, filled with awe, the only thing he had energy to do was to whisper one phrase. It was something he had said countless times and had meant it each and every time, but after this, it carried a new weight. "I love you so much."

Derek lazily draped his arm over Scott's shoulder, making room on his chest for Scott's head. "I love you too."

Within a few minutes, Derek's breathing came slow and even. Scott, surrounded in a blanket of warmth and love, closed his eyes. Somehow, he had expected that Derek would have performed this act on him first. The fact that he was the first to bring this particular pleasure to Derek didn't bother him, but it highlighted how different his behavior was here in the city. As he felt sleep begin to come over him, he registered one 46

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last thought. No matter how wonderful this trip had been, he knew deep down that once they returned home he would return to his old self. As much as he wished he could give Derek everything he wanted, living out loud and putting their relationship out there for the world to see were things he simply wasn't ready for. Not in a place where he knew people and had to live beyond his life with Derek. He only hoped Derek would understand and give him the time he needed to be ready to give him everything he wanted.

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Chapter Four

When Derek woke the next morning, Scott's arms were still wrapped around him. Images from the night before flooded his mind causing him to smile. The concert had been as fantastic as he knew it would be, but it was the things that happened after the concert that were most exciting to him. Scott had been so affectionate and then, to take charge and to suggest that they rush home so they could—

His mind trailed off as the images of Scott's lips stretched taut around his shaft and the wet warmth of the inside of his mouth filled his mind. Since he already had a morning hard-on, replaying the scene did not alter his state of arousal, but the recollection of Scott's groans caused his head to spin. There was no question that the two of them had moved to a new level in their relationship. He had always imagined that he would have been the first one to perform oral sex, but the fact Scott had been wasn't something he was going to complain about. Stretching, Derek gently lifted Scott's arm so he could get out of bed. Scott stirred, but didn't wake up. Pulling on his boxer briefs and jeans, he walked into the living room. Josh was reading the newspaper by the window. "Good morning. If you had waited another hour I would have said good afternoon. There's some coffee in the pot in the kitchen. I'm afraid it isn't hot anymore, but you can zap it in the microwave if you like."

Rubbing his eyes, Derek trudged over to where Josh was sitting. "Thanks."

Josh put down his newspaper and surveyed Derek. "Would

you like me to make you a fresh pot? You look like you could use it.”

Derek protested weakly, not wanting to put Josh to any trouble, but when Josh waved his hand dismissively, he made no effort to stop him. Following Josh to the kitchen, Derek took a seat at the table and laid his head on his arms. “I’m so exhausted.”

Josh chuckled. “So, tell me about your evening. Actually, tell me about your evening before you got home last night. Pierre and I already know what happened then.”

Derek’s head shot up and he stared at Josh. “What? You...”

Josh laughed. “Please Derek. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. We thought it was sweet to have two young boys in love in the house. It reminded us of ourselves when we were younger.” Derek dropped his head back on his arms with a thud. After Josh had turned on the coffee maker, he sat at the table next to Derek. “So, what did you boys do after the concert?”

Derek recounted the evening for Josh, trying to be as detailed as possible. When he got to the part about Charlie grabbing his arm, Josh cut him off. “Someone grabbed your arm? Are you okay? I should have warned you that the men in the city can become pretty aggressive when they see a handsome young man that they want. Actually, I guess that’s true of men in general, isn’t it?”

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Derek smiled, “I wouldn’t know. It’s only been Scott and me.

I've never had the opportunity to know how other gay men behave. Actually, until I met you and Pierre, Scott was the only other gay person I knew.

"All that will change shortly. College is a time for growing up, and for many of us gay boys, it's a time for coming out. So, tell me what happened after that." Josh sat back in his chair.

"Well, it was kind of sweet actually. Scott stood between us and said he would kill the guy if he ever touched me again." Derek smiled, remembering Scott's protectiveness.

"You know, when the two of you first walked in, he seemed very reserved, but it doesn't surprise me that he would threaten someone who accosted his boyfriend." Josh was thoughtful for a moment. "That's really sexy. I like him."

"Yes, he sure is," Derek placed his feet on the edge of his seat and hugged his legs to his chest. Everything about Scott's behavior the night before had been exactly as Josh had said...sexy.

Josh smiled. "Oh, you boys bring so much back to me. I remember being young and figuring myself out. There were so few role models back then. We had none of the high school gay and lesbian clubs you have today. I was so afraid to be open about my feelings for men that I kept myself closeted until I moved to the city at twenty-three."

Derek considered that for a moment. "When you first came out, did you fly out to everyone or was it a slow process?"

Josh looked at Derek with kindness in his face. "It was painfully slow. At first, I would only go to bars miles away from my home or anyone who might know me. Later, I met a group of friends. They were much older than me. I was still in high school and didn't know anyone my own age who was also gay. Some of the men tried to take advantage of me.

Looking back and knowing what I know now, I took some horrible risks just wanting to be accepted and to be around gay people. It's just pure luck I made it through my youth with my health intact."

Derek shuddered, thinking of what it must have been like for Josh. "So, when did things start to change for you?"

"Well, like I said, it became much easier for me when I moved here to the city. It was a fresh start." The coffee maker beeped and Josh got up to pour Derek a cup. "No one knew who I was, which made it easier for me to be who I wanted to be. Luckily, I chose to be myself. I dated, learning from each new relationship, and then, I met Pierre and have been committed and happily in love ever since. How do you take your coffee?"

"Milk and sugar." Josh prepared a cup and handed it to him. Derek took the coffee and held it to his nose. "Mmm, the smell is already waking me up. So, when you were dating, back when you first moved to the city, did you hold hands and kiss in public?"

"At first, not so much, but over time I began to realize that no one really cared. Sometimes people would glare and occasionally some ignorant fool would make a 49

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homophobic comment, but that was rare." Josh maintained eye contact as Derek took a sip from his coffee and considered what he had just heard. "You said Scott showed affection last night? I take it he doesn't normally."

"No, he doesn't. Last night made me realize how much I really want to be able to be open about who I am and about

who Scott and I are. I'm beginning to become resentful of the fact I need to hide my feelings and who I am. I loved being able to hold Scott's hand while walking down the street last night and kissing him in public."

Josh nodded, "And how does Scott feel?"

Derek furrowed his brow. "It hasn't really come up for us yet. We've both always been very aware of our surroundings and have kept our relationship secret. Recently, since my mom found out I was gay, it kind of opened a floodgate for me and I'm finding it harder to keep our relationship secret. It almost feels like we're hiding something, like there's something wrong with the fact that we're two guys together. Beck always knew, but then we told George during our camping trip earlier this summer, and now you and Pierre know. The more people who know, the better I feel. It's like our relationship is more real because people can see how we feel about each other. Scott isn't so thrilled about the fact that more people are finding out about us. But last night, he was so physical and affectionate. It's very confusing."

Josh placed his hand on Derek's arm, patting it lightly. "What you both are feeling is completely normal. It sounds like you're coming out of your shell and you want to explore your sexuality outside the confines of the safe world you've lived in. That's good. Do it, carefully. But Scott seems perfectly capable of exploring his sexuality as well. In a more private, intimate way, just with you. That's good too. It means he feels safe with you and trusts you won't hurt him as he figures things out. As long as the two of you keep communicating and respect that each of you will move at different paces, you can help each other along."

Derek took another sip of his coffee as he considered Josh's words. They made sense and, at least on a surface level, made him feel like the differences between him and Scott were normal. "Well, if last night is any sign, then maybe

Scott's ready to let more people know about us. Maybe we won't have to keep it such a guarded secret anymore."

"Maybe, but don't be surprised if, when you get back home, he returns to being more private in his expression of his love for you. You're here in a city filled with gay people and no one knows who you are. That makes it safe for both of you. You're surrounded by men who are used to being who they are openly and you can experiment with your affection for one another without running the risk of damaging your social lives back home." Josh got up and walked over to pour himself another cup of coffee.

Derek considered this. What Josh said made sense, but it wasn't what he wanted to hear. "Is there anything I can do to make things easier for Scott? Here in the city, it seems so easy for him to give me what I've always wanted. How can I make things feel less risky back home?"

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Josh sat down, a knowing smile crossing his lips. "It sounds to me like you're asking how you can change Scott. You should know by now you can't change people just because you want them to be a certain way, any more than someone could change you. The important thing is to know what you want and to keep your focus on that. The hardest part of relationships, I have found, is when the two people want different things at the same time. Then you have to determine whether you can live with the differences or if the difference is too big to overcome. I know it sounds trite, but there is a great deal of truth when people say they have met the right person at the wrong time."

"That almost sounds like our feelings could cause us to break up." The thought of him and Scott breaking up caused Derek's heart rate to increase. "I don't want something like being more open about our relationship to be a make or break issue."

"Then you won't let it become one. I must sound like a broken record, but I'm going to say what I've said a few times already. Communication is the key. As long as you talk to Scott about what you're feeling and he does the same, most problems don't have to break you apart." Josh took a sip of his coffee and Derek reflected on all that he had just said. "It has been wonderful meeting you, Derek. I understand now why Beck loves you so much."

Derek smiled, thinking of Beck. "I love her. She's been my rock at every stage of my life. I'm so glad our colleges are so close together."

"Morning, guys." Scott shuffled into the room, his blond hair a mess, sticking up at odd angles. "I think someone shoved rocks into my head last night." Josh reached across the table and gave Derek's arm a squeeze and then got up to pour Scott some coffee.

* * * * *

Derek and Scott spent the day walking around lower Manhattan, exploring the West Village and Chelsea, then worked their way east to Gramercy Park and back south into the East Village where they had been the night before. They grabbed a bite to eat at Sidewalk Café, a cute restaurant with outdoor seating. Scott showed no signs of discomfort or regret over what they had done the night before and was lively company. When the waiter brought their food, they both ate in silence for a few minutes, famished.

"I didn't realize how hungry I was," Scott said, taking a huge

bite of his cheeseburger. Some of the grease ran down the side of his mouth and onto his chin. He grabbed his napkin to wipe it away, then leaned back in his chair and stared at Derek. Quite hungry as well, Derek had finished his Oriental Chicken Salad and had ordered a side of sweet potato fries which had just been delivered to the table. Picking one up and popping it into his mouth, he stared back at Scott. "What's wrong?"

Scott continued to look at Derek for a moment. Leaning forward, he reached for one of Derek's fries. "I was just thinking about last night."

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"You mean that guy. What an asshole. You were awesome." A surge of pride flowed through Derek as he remembered how Scott had physically intervened when Charlie had become overly assertive.

"No, not that. Although I really would have kicked the shit out of him if he didn't back off." A brooding expression flashed across Scott's face, but was quickly replaced by his quizzical look once again. "I was talking about last night after we got into bed."

Derek felt heat rush to his face. "Oh, that." He wasn't sure whether Scott regretted the act or was fine with it. His fears must have shown because Scott's expression shifted.

Grinning, Scott playfully kicked Derek's leg under the table. "Yeah, that. Don't get me wrong, I loved it and want to be able to do that whenever I want." Derek raised his eyebrow suggestively and Scott quickly amended his statement.

"Okay, not whenever I want, but whenever we're alone. I'm just wondering how you feel about it. We had an agreement and I want to know if you are okay with what we did."

"Are you fucking kidding? I loved it." Derek glanced around to see if anyone had stopped to stare at them. His voice had come out louder than he intended. "I was worried that you might regret it."

Scott reached across the table and took Derek's hand in his. "I don't regret a single thing from last night. Nothing."

The genuineness of his statement, the power of the emotion behind his words, caused Derek's breath to catch in his chest. "You made me feel so special and important when you defended me. Seeing you get all territorial and protective was a real turn on. In bed with you last night I realized we haven't really had the chance to sleep together like that. Then you told me that you love me. It all just sort of combined and..."

"And...." Scott squeezed his hand gently.

"And it was the best night of my life. I'll remember our first time together for as long as I live."

Scott nodded. "You were amazing, Derek. I've never felt that good in my life. I can't wait until you return the favor." His comment caused Derek's cock to grow. "I'm really looking forward to college life with you." He paused, looking a bit timid. "Uh, I was wondering..." His cheeks began to become red and he scratched the back of his head.

"What?" the warmth and comfort of their conversation paused briefly as Derek wondered what Scott might say next.

"Are you as anxious to have sex as I am?" Scott's cheeks

were beet red at this point, but he maintained eye contact.

Derek choked on the fry in his mouth and needed to take a couple of gulps of water to get it down. "Where the hell did that come from?"

Scott let out a sigh. "I don't know. It's all I've been thinking about since last night, like I'm some kind of sex crazed addict. It seems like the closer we get to being together in college, the more I can't stop thinking about it."

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Derek laughed. "You know I've been waiting impatiently for us to have sex. I'm the one who's the horny monkey, constantly pushing for sex and having to be reminded of our deal." As he studied Scott, several emotions filled Derek at once. Confusion, excitement, tenderness, love. The greatest emotion of all, though, was one of connection. Josh had been right. Communication was the key to remaining connected and close. The thought of having sex with Scott was incredibly erotic and arousing, but there had been one question on his mind each time he thought about it. "Um, Scott, I was wondering, which one of us, I mean who will..." Derek felt heat rush to his cheeks once again and he stopped talking as his ears began to burn. Scott's lips raised into his flirty grin which melted Derek each and every time. "I'll admit, I would prefer to be the top, but the idea of you inside of me makes my dick start to drip."

"How romantic!" The image Scott described was crass, considering that Derek had fantasized about their first time having sex as a delicate and sensual experience, but the fact he was one the same page with Derek was turn-on enough

to excuse his coarseness. Deciding to go with the moment, Derek threw on a playful smile. "We wouldn't want you walking around with a dripping dick, would we?"

Scott grabbed another of Derek's fries. "No, it can be a real nuisance." Pushing his plate towards the middle of the table, he leaned back in his chair and folded his arms over his chest. "I like it here. There's something about this city that makes me feel comfortable and at ease. It's a shame it doesn't feel like this back home."

Josh's warning from that morning that Scott might go back to being more reserved when they returned home flashed through Derek's mind. "I like it too. I really appreciate that you made an effort to show your affection while we were out last night."

Scott leaned across the table. "Come here." Derek dutifully leaned in and Scott kissed him gently on the lips.

As he did so, the waiter showed up at the table. "Can I get you anything else?"

Taken off guard, Derek looked up, shielding his eyes from the sun. "No, I think that'll be all." When the waiter deposited their bill on the table and walked away, both Derek and Scott looked at each other then started laughing. "I can't believe you just kissed me in broad daylight in front of all these people."

Scott shrugged, "Like I said. There's something about this place that puts me at ease."

They headed back to Josh's apartment after lunch. Derek shoved their things into the duffle bag and returned to the living room, thanking Josh for his hospitality.

"Please. It was my pleasure. You're welcome any time." Josh

gave them each a hug before they left. A few minutes later, they were sitting in Derek's car. The ride home went quickly. There were very few cars on the road between New York and Boston. When Derek pulled up to Scott's house, they agreed to call it an early 53

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evening, Scott's yawn matching Derek's exhaustion. The coming week was going to be filled with preparations for college. Orientation for freshman was only a week away. Before getting out of the car, Scott turned to Derek. "Thank you again, Derek. This was the most amazing present. I loved everything we did."

Derek placed his hand on Scott's thigh. "It was as much a present to me, even though it was meant for you, but you're welcome." He gave Scott a quick kiss on the lips and watched him walk to his front door.

As he drove himself home, the events from the past twenty-four hours replayed themselves in his mind, filling him with happiness. Pulling into his driveway, one nagging thought took hold. It wasn't enough to ruin his mood, but it was impossible to ignore. I wonder whether he'll be as affectionate with me once we're at college. While he didn't want to pressure Scott, the fact he had a taste of what it could be like being open about their relationship was something he wouldn't forget. Now that he had experienced it, he wanted more. Pushing the thought aside as best he could, he entered his house where he knew his parents would be waiting to hear about their trip. 54

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Chapter Five

The next morning, Derek's mom woke him early. "We have a long day ahead of us, Sweetie. This is the last Sunday you'll be living at home before college and we still have a lot of shopping to do." They hopped into his car and headed into Boston where they were going to a number of different stores. Most of them were in the Copley Place Plaza. Their first stop was Bed Bath & Beyond. Derek needed sheets, towels, and other basic items. His mother loved shopping there and had prepared ahead of time by writing a list of the things they needed to control her impulse buying. Once they finished there, they headed to The Apple Store to pick up his new laptop. Boston University had a special deal for new freshman where they could buy laptops at significantly reduced prices as long as they ordered them through Apple. Derek had convinced his parents to purchase a few programs to be built into the hard drive which would allow him to transfer the music mixes from his home system. He wouldn't be able to bring his mixing equipment with him to school, so having the music on his computer and programs to allow him to modify the songs was the best he could hope for.

"Okay, I know we discussed getting a MacBook, but your father and I called ahead and changed the order." Derek's heart sank. He had been excited about getting a new laptop and figured his parents probably went for the more sensible choice of getting him a desktop so that he wouldn't be able to carry it around all over the place. When the sales clerk emerged from the back room, he held a box that was far too small to contain a desktop. When he set it down on the counter, Derek's breath caught in his chest and his mouth fell open. "You bought me a MacBook Air. Holy shit!" The words escaped involuntarily and he had shouted them out drawing looks from several customers.

His mother's face turned slightly pink as she glanced around them. She opened her mouth as if she were about to say something, but the clerk came to Derek's rescue.

"Don't worry about it ma'am, it's a fairly common reaction. We've been hearing that and similar phrases all week." He smiled broadly and Claire closed her mouth, seeming to relax.

She paid for the computer and suggested they go to eat at Legal Sea Foods. Once seated, his mother looked at him for a long time without speaking. Her expression suggested she was contemplating a serious topic and Derek braced himself for another conversation about being gay and being careful. When she finally spoke, he relaxed, relieved that she was only being sentimental and weepy. "I just can't believe you're going off to college on Saturday. The time has gone so quickly." She dabbed at her eyes with her napkin.

Derek was excited, but also nervous. He had never lived away from home and was beginning to feel the weight of having to take responsibility for himself. "I'm not going 55

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to be that far away. I can still come home easily. You'll still cook home meals if I want them, right?"

His mother laughed, Derek's question infusing levity into a situation that had potential to become quite emotional "Of course, Honey. I'll be so happy whenever you come home." She took a roll and dipped it in some herb infused olive oil. Derek took one as well but smeared a good deal of butter on his. His mom shook her head, smiling.

"To be young. I wish I had your metabolism. I miss being able

to put butter on everything the way I used to.”

“Come on, Mom,” Derek said, “You’re talking like you’re over the hill already.”

“Yes, I suppose I’m feeling nostalgic right now. But, enough about me. Tell me about your trip to New York.” Derek told his mother about Josh and Pierre, about the concert, and about exploring the city. He studiously left out the parts about Charlie and what had happened between him and Scott when they returned to Josh’s apartment. His mother listened intently, asking questions and smiling at Derek’s enthusiasm. Once he had finished, she reached out and placed a hand on Derek’s across the table. “It sounds like the two of you had a wonderful time. I’m happy for you.” She became silent and thoughtful for a moment. “There is something that I would like to talk to you about.”

Derek looked up, a wave of panic filling him once again. As much as he appreciated how cool his mom had been about him being gay, he assumed this talk would be about sex and that was not a talk he wanted to have. He had barely gotten his head around the idea of what his sex life would be like with Scott and the idea of talking about it with his mother before he even had a chance to experience it himself gave him an unsettled feeling in his chest and gut.

As he waited for his mother to begin speaking, his breathing became shallower and palms began to sweat. “I know we haven’t talked much about you being gay, but I would like to talk to you about it now if that’s okay with you.”

Derek felt his shoulders stiffen. Here it comes. "Um, okay, that would be fine." He glanced around at other tables, sure that everyone was preparing to listen in on their conversation.

Claire squeezed his hand. "Nobody's eavesdropping on us, Derek. And if they were, who cares?" Derek was surprised his mother was more comfortable with having this kind of a conversation in public than he was. "What I really want to talk to you about is...what I feel I need to talk to you about is... actually, I want to talk more specifically about the two of you."

Derek reflexively pulled his hand out of his mother's. "What? What do you want to talk about me and Scott for?"

Claire shook her head, a steady gaze trained on Derek until he calmed down.

"Honey, I want to know what the two of you are to one another and where you see your relationship going. Please, it's important to me. I'm still not entirely adjusted to the idea that you're gay and I am certainly not comfortable about thinking of you as a sexual 56

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person..." Derek's neck began to burn. His mother chuckled. "But, I want to be involved in your life and to know about the things that are important to you. Look at this as a growing experience for both of us. I can learn how to feel more at ease discussing your relationship with another boy, well, man and you can begin to trust that these conversations won't be too painful. At least no more painful than it would normally be to discuss such things with your mother."

Derek saw her logic, but the idea of discussing his physical sexuality with his mother had a particularly large ick-factor. "Okay, but if I freak out, remember that you're the one who started it."

"I'll keep that in mind." His mother looked at Derek with a mixture of amusement and nervousness. "So, tell me how you feel about Scott. I'd really like to know the thoughts you have about him."

That was a safe enough question as long as he kept his answer simple. Careful to choose what he shared in as platonic a manner possible, Derek began. "Well, Scott is amazing. He's smart and fun. He's got this way of enjoying life without taking it too seriously. The only time he was really down was when his dad punished him this past year for not getting straight A's." His mother scowled at the mention of Scott's father. Derek knew his mother hated Scott's father

since he had created the circumstances that broke him and Scott up during their senior year. Despite the pain of remembering how alone and empty he felt during those few months of separation, Derek was scandalously pleased with her reaction. "He's a deep thinker and he knows how to communicate his feelings way better than I do. It's one of the things I like best about him. I've never met another guy who is so comfortable expressing his feelings."

His mother was thoughtful. "Those are all admirable traits and I can understand why they would be appealing to you. But, that's not what I really wanted to know. What I want to know is how do you feel about him? When you think about him, what goes on inside you?"

Derek had purposefully avoided providing that kind of information. It caught him off guard that this was precisely what she wanted to know. "You want to know what goes on inside me when I think about him? Really?"

"Yes." There wasn't even a moment of hesitation when she spoke.

"I love him." Although his feelings for Scott ran deep, they were just that simple. His mother shifted in her seat and maintained an even expression on her face.

"Okay, can you tell me how you know you love him?"

Derek considered the question. He had never really thought about the reasons why he loved Scott in a way he would explain to someone else. He just knew he did. "You know I'm not great at explaining things, but I'll try. When I'm around him, I feel happier. He brings things out in me that I was too afraid to show before. Like talking about my feelings. At the division championship, when you and Shannon couldn't find us, we were upstairs. That's when we made up after the two months of being separated." Despite the fact their break had brought them even closer together when 57

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they reunited, each of them more certain than they had been before that they were truly happiest together, the memory still hurt. "Anyway, when we were up there, he told me I make him feel more safe and secure than anyone else ever has. It filled me with pride and happiness when he said that to me. Just knowing I was able to give him that was incredible. Then there's his crooked smile which I find incredibly cute. And the way he looks at me when he thinks I'm not paying attention. And of course, there's the way he—"

"For someone who doesn't use words very well, I'd say you're doing quite well."

His mother's face contained a mixture of contentment and discomfort. "Does he love you?"

"He says he does. I'm not in his head, so I don't know all of his thoughts, but he wants to make me happy. When we're alone, he holds my hand or puts his arm around my shoulder so I can lean against him. He gets excited by my mixing. He doesn't put up with any of my crap, but when he calls me out on stuff he never makes me feel bad. I trust him completely. I don't know if those are all signs of love, but whatever it is, it feels really good." Derek was surprised at how easily it had been for him to share these thoughts with his mother.

When he finished, Claire smiled. "It makes me happy that you've found someone who you connect with so naturally and comfortably. Scott is a very nice boy...man...and what you've described definitely sounds like love." She reached across the table and took Derek's hands once again. "Honey, if Scott is an important part of your life, which he clearly is, then he's an important part of my life. But there's one thing that has been troubling me."

"What's that?" Once again, Derek braced himself for some embarrassing or awkward comment from his mother.

"I wonder if you've given any more thought to telling your father that you're gay. If you're not ready, I understand, but he loves you and deserves to be a part of experiencing your

life.”

And there it is.

Claire smiled, but it wasn't a happy smile. It was more of a knowing smile. “I know you're nervous about coming out to him, but when we first talked, I told you we would deal with this as a family. We can't do that until you trust your father enough to open up to him.”

Claire released Derek's hand, but maintained eye contact with him and Derek couldn't avert his eyes. “I know I said that you should tell your father in your own time. I still feel that way. But I want to encourage you to consider telling him sooner rather than later. He's a good man and he loves you very much. I know it will be hard for you to do, just as I know it will be hard for him to hear, but if you're in love, your father should know about it. Parents want their children to be happy. Part of being happy is loving someone and being loved in return.”

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Derek's heart rate quickened. “I don't know. The thought of

talking to Dad about being gay scares me. I don't know if I could handle telling him I also have a boyfriend. It feels like something that would create tension and awkwardness between us."

"It will, for a while, but then you'll both adjust. Keeping secrets is never good."

Claire leaned back in her chair, brushing a stray bit of hair out of her eyes and behind her ear. "You've seen how things have gotten easier between you and me. It will be the same for you and Dad." Claire took a sip of her water and studied Derek, then shook her head, sighing lightly. "I'm not saying to do it right now. But, I want you to think about it. Can you do that?"

"Can I ask you a question, Mom? Why is this so important to you now, right before I'm about to start college?"

Claire brought her water to her lips, a line crinkling the center of her brow. After a short silence, she lowered the glass and turned to face him. "I know this is going to sound horrible, Honey, but part of my reasons are selfish. Having you around the house, if I need to talk about my feelings about this, I have you right there to talk to. But with you moving out, I'm afraid this will feel like a big secret and I'm no good at keeping secrets." Tears welled up in the corner of his mother's eyes and she dabbed at them with her napkin before they had a

chance to spill out. "I'm so sorry. The last thing I want to do is to put pressure on you; especially now when you are about to start a whole new phase in your life."

Derek considered his mother's words. It had been a huge relief to him when his mother had confronted him a few months earlier. He knew all too well what keeping secrets felt like. Funny that he had never considered knowing he was gay would put her in the same situation with his father. "Mom, it's not selfish at all. I can't believe I—"

"Oh, but it is selfish. Don't try to convince me otherwise. I'm your parent and should be protecting you, taking on the burden of the things I can't make your life easier and happier. This is about making my life easier and happier. It's not right."

It was Derek's turn to reach across the table and take his mother's hands. "Mom. You've always been there for me. I can't make any promises about when I'll tell Dad, but I can promise you this...I'll think about it and I'll come out as soon as I can."

Claire smiled, looking at their joined hands in the middle of the table. "Just don't do anything on my account. Tell your father when you are ready. If there's anything I can do to help you, I will, but this is your news and you need to be ready to tell him."

Derek considered what it would be like if he was completely out to his family. There would be no more secrets. He could be open about who he was and share all of the best things going on in his life. As uncomfortable as having a conversation with his father might be, he could see the payoff would be great in the future. "I'll think about it. I promise."

"Good. I really think you'll be surprised at how understanding your father can be."

Claire remained silent for a few minutes. She played with her hands and seemed to find 59

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it difficult to look at Derek, which he found strange since they had just had a challenging conversation. "I do have one more question to ask you."

Even though they had been speaking openly, something in his mother's tone and body language shifted and it set him on edge. "Sure, Mom. What is it?"

Claire hesitated for a few more moments, then inhaled deeply, letting the breath out slowly before she began speaking. "Are you and Scott doing anything which might be

considered risky?”

Derek's stomach clenched and his ears began to ring. Did my mother just ask me if I'm having sex with Scott? “Mom, I really don't think that's something we need to talk about.”

Looking Derek squarely in the eyes, Claire's hesitancy disappeared and was replaced by maternal confidence and authority. In some ways it relieved Derek to get back to familiar footing with his mother. He knew how to behave when she got all motherly on him. “Yes, Honey. Actually, I believe it's exactly the thing we should be talking about. There are many things out there that can hurt you and we've never had a discussion about sex and protection other than the fundamentals. Now that you may be in a situation where you have to actively choose to make good choices and to use protection, I think it's very important that we talk about it.”

Derek placed his elbows on the table and lowered his head to rest in his hands.

“This is not happening.”

When he finally looked up, he was slightly irritated to see an amused expression on Claire's face. “I know it's embarrassing, but I would rather you were embarrassed than unprepared. So, I'm going to ask you again. Have you and Scott done anything that would be considered risky?”

Taking a huge gulp of water, Derek forced himself to answer. "Well, my understanding is that everything is risky behavior, but if you're asking me what I think you're asking me, then no, we haven't done anything which would be considered significantly risky...yet." That last bit wasn't necessary, but if his mother was going to make him uncomfortable, it was only fair for him to make her a bit uncomfortable as well.

His mother's reaction caught him off guard. There wasn't a hint of awkwardness or hesitation when she spoke. "Well, I am assuming the two of you intend to...er, engage in behavior which would require the use of protection. Am I correct?" The heat rushing up his neck and across his face must have colored his cheeks because his mother actually laughed. "I thought so. In that case, I think it's important for the two of you to discuss how you'll make sure you'll keep each other safe."

Derek mouth involuntarily fell open. "Are you talking about the use of condoms? If that's what you are saying..." he trailed off, disbelief that he was having this conversation still thrumming through his head. He knew the basics of preventing disease, but did he and Scott really have to worry about that? "But we're both virgins. I don't see how the use of —"

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Claire's lips tightened into a thin line. "Condoms are always a good idea, Derek. You never know for certain what another person is doing. Still, I'm glad to hear you are educated. But that's not all that I am talking about. I'm also talking about communication. You need to talk to each other before you take things to that level. Sex between two people who love each other is a beautiful thing, but your first time...and now I know it will be your first. Your first time can also be very scary. If you talk about it beforehand, it will make the experience far more pleasurable for the both of you. And don't forget when you decide to try, you can always stop if it doesn't feel right. There's no rule that says that once you start you can't—"

Derek put up his hand. "Mom, I really appreciate that you're trying so hard to be involved in my personal development, but this conversation is beginning to freak me out. Do you think we could cool it for a while and maybe resume this when I'm thirty or something?"

Claire reached across the table one last time, stroking Derek's hand. "Okay, Dear, I understand that talking about sex with your parents can be very uncomfortable. Thank you for indulging your mother. It's put my mind at ease to know

you're willing to speak honestly with me, even if I am cornering you into the conversation." She waved for the waiter and once the bill had been paid, they headed back to Derek's car. Opening the door for his mother, Derek waited for her to get in, then closed the door and settled into the driver's seat. He glanced at his mother who had a broad smile on her face. "What?"

"Nothing, Sweetheart, that was just very chivalrous of you." She stroked the side of his cheek, then replaced her hand on her lap.

Derek felt slightly embarrassed by the recognition, but pleased at the same time. "I don't think I thanked you yet."

"Oh, Honey. It's my pleasure. I want you to have everything you need when you start college. It's very exciting."

"No. That's not what I meant. Well, I mean, I do want to thank you for the stuff you bought me, but I was thinking of something else."

"What is it?"

Derek placed his hands on the wheel, but didn't shift the engine into reverse. Turning toward his mother, he was struck by her caring gaze. "I wanted to thank you for being so cool about...I just want you to know I recognize that I'm really

lucky to have a mom like you. Not just 'cause you're cool, but because you accept me for who I am."

His mother opened her mouth, but said nothing. Instead, she placed her hand over her heart and stared out the front windshield. After a moment, she reached into her purse and pulled out a tissue, dabbing it at the corner of her eyes. "You're entirely welcome, Derek. I love you so much."

When they arrived home she turned to Derek before they got out of the car. "Oh, I forgot to tell you. Shannon and I are planning a small party for you and Scott to send 61

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you off to college. If you like, feel free to invite Beck. I'd love to see her as well before you all leave."

"Thanks, Mom. That sounds nice. I'll call her later on and see if she can come. And Mom, thanks for getting me all of this stuff and for...for everything else."

Claire leaned over and gave Derek a peck on the cheek. She then opened the door and headed into the house.

Later that day, Derek called Beck. "Hey, you'll never believe

the conversation I had with my mom.”

“Do tell. I’ve been bored out of my mind all day. I need something to entertain me.”

“So we go into Boston to get stuff for college. Everything’s going as it normally would, and then, bang, right in the middle of lunch my mom asks me if Scott and I are having sex.”

“Shut up! No she didn’t!” Beck’s voice shot up an octave from its normal pitch, forcing Derek’s to hold the phone away from his ear.

“She did. And she talked about protection too.”

“What did you say?” Beck loved gossip. Most stories would be repeated to anyone who would listen, but Derek knew she would never repeat his stories to anyone.

“I tried to tell her I didn’t want to talk about it, but she wouldn’t let it go.” Derek incorporated as much inflection into his voice as possible to heighten the dramatic effect for Beck.

“Did you have a cow then,” Beck was laughing, “or was there more?”

“There’s more. She started talking about what I should do if I began to have sex and then changed my mind.” Derek didn’t

have to add flare to this tidbit of information since it carried drama all on its own.

“What did she say you should do? Wait, I just want to say that I can’t believe your mom had this conversation with you.”

“She said I could stop at any time.” Derek shuddered at the thought of receiving sex advice from his mother. He knew he was one of the lucky ones, a gay teen whose mother accepted him unconditionally, but even a PFLAG kid would probably feel sick to their stomach if they received sex advice from their parents.

“No...she...didn’t! I can see it now. You’re riding Scott like a cowboy on a mechanical bull and all of a sudden you think,” her voice took on a ditzzy tone, “Gee, I don’t think I want to be doing this right now and ask him if you can stop.”

Derek laughed. “Exactly. Like, I’m going down on him, bringing him right to the edge, and then suddenly say, Oops, I forgot I left my laundry in the dryer, can we continue this later? I like to fold my clothes when they’re warm.”

“Priceless. Oh my God. I wish I could have been there.” Beck giggled, then became silent for a moment. “Although, you have to admit it’s pretty cool she’s talking to you about this stuff.”

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"Yeah, my mom's cool. I'll give her that. But still, would you want to talk to your parents about sex?"

"Eew! No thank you. That's just gross."

Derek laughed again. "Listen, I didn't actually call to tell you about how my mom set the groundwork for five years' worth of therapy. She's throwing a party on Friday for Scott and me to celebrate going to college and wanted me to invite you. I'd love it if you could come."

"Well, why didn't you say so in the first place?" Beck voice took on an aggravated tone.

"I just did." Derek rolled his eyes. Does she even realize how fast she flips her moods?

"Sure. I'll be there on Friday. By the way, how was your trip to New York? I talked to Uncle Josh and he said he thought you and Scott were great and that you could visit anytime you like." Her voice had shifted once again, now chipper. Derek smiled to himself. She's fuckin' nuts, but I love the hell out of

that girl. He then started telling Beck about his trip to New York, this time not leaving out any details as he had with his mother.

* * * * *

On Friday, everyone showed up at Derek's house around one o'clock. They were going to have a barbeque and there was ice cream and cake. Derek, Scott, and Beck lounged around on the porch as Claire and Shannon chatted in the kitchen. Henry, Derek's father, was by the grill with Scott's father. When he had finished, he called everyone to the picnic table in the back yard. As Derek approached, he noticed a weary expression on his father's face. His mother walked over and whispered in his ear. When he whispered back, she glared at Scott's father with an agitated expression on her face, then recomposed herself.

The conversation during lunch was pleasant enough, and when it was time for the cake, Claire and Shannon brought out a huge pancake which had Derek, Scott, and Beck's names on it and three sparklers spraying embers in every direction and dotting the frosted surface with flecks of black.

Just before the party broke up, Claire approached Derek and Scott. "Could I talk to you boys for a moment?" They followed her into the house and into the living room. Derek's heart pounded inside his chest and a cold sheen of sweat

broke out on his skin. Please don't have a conversation with both of us about sex. Please!

Claire turned once they were all in the living room and faced them. "Please, sit down." She looked at both boys as she settled into a chair facing the couch where they were sitting. Crossing her legs, she placed her hands on her lap. "I won't embarrass you by speaking at length here, but you're both beginning college tomorrow and I want to let you know how proud I am of you. Derek, you've grown up so much and have become so brave."

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She then turned to Scott. "I may be out of line speaking to you about this, but I have come to consider you like a part of this family and I speak my mind with my family. Scott, you make my son happy and treat him the way any parent would want their child to be treated. I know neither of you want to talk about your...relationship with me, but I want to let you know I approve. You are always welcome here and can call me for anything you need."

The cold sweat on Derek's neck turned to droplets which

began to trickle down his back as a freezing wave passed through him and settled in his chest. What in the hell are you doing? If his mother noticed his discomfort, she didn't show it or stop what she was saying. "Scott, Derek has told me how you aren't comfortable about being open with your sexuality yet, but I want to let you know, when you choose to tell your mother, she will be receptive and a great ally for you."

Scott took in a short breath and Derek turned to face him, noticing his bronzed summer tan had become a shade paler. "Does she know about me?"

"No. I don't think she suspects and I haven't said anything. Nor will I." Scott visibly relaxed. "But, I am going to give you the same advice I gave Derek last weekend. I want you to seriously consider talking to your mom. As you know, your mom and I have become close friends. If there's one thing I know, it's that she loves you unconditionally. There is nothing you could say or do to change that. Nothing. When you do choose to talk to her, she's going to be okay with it. She loves you and she'll still love you afterwards. I think the fact you're with Derek will make it easier for her. I know it made me feel better knowing Derek had you." Despite his mortification, Derek couldn't deny the warmth that replaced the chill from a few moments earlier. Scott remained silent, not moving as the seconds ticked by, each one feeling like hours. When he spoke, Derek exhaled, releasing the breath and tension he hadn't been aware he was holding in. "Thank

you, Claire. I'm completely comfortable with Derek, but there's a big part of me that feels like something bad will happen if I let people know about me and about us. I understand why Derek came out to you and I've seen how much better his life has become. I'm growing comfortable with the idea of you knowing about us. But, coming out to my parents, my mom, is a process that will take me longer than it took Derek."

Listening to Scott, it saddened Derek to observe how challenging it was for him to talk about being gay. It made no sense since he was so at ease when the two of them were alone or with Beck, and he had been amazing in New York. The fact that he was talking so easily with his mother was a step in the right direction. It gave him hope Scott would eventually come around and live as openly as Derek wanted him to. Claire looked at Scott and smiled. "Derek said you were insightful and expressive. I now see what he was talking about. Of course you must do what feels right to you and in your own time. I simply want you to know you can talk to me and I truly believe you can talk to your mother as well." She stood up, an air of finality to her movement.

"Come here, both of you." They walked over to her and she gave them each a hug. "We 64

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better get back to the party before every one wonders what I've done with the two of you."

Derek wanted to remain in the house with Scott for a minute to make sure he was okay after his mother's speech. "We'll be out in a minute, Mom. Thanks for the party. It was really nice of you."

His mother nodded and walked out to the back yard. Once he heard the door click shut, he turned to face Scott. "Are you okay?"

Scott sat back down on the couch. "I think so. It makes me feel weird knowing your mom knows about us, but she's so sweet and understanding that it's hard to be too uncomfortable. Besides, you told her about us so long ago I should be used to it by now."

Derek felt a little bit better. "She wants me to come out to my dad and for me to tell him about us. I didn't tell you before because I was afraid it would freak you out and I haven't planned when I'm going to have that conversation with him, but I'm gonna have to sometime soon."

"You're telling your dad? Derek, I don't know. What if he flips out?" Scott was clearly anxious about this idea and once

again, Derek sat quietly, wondering why it was so hard for him to deal with coming out. No one had reacted badly so far. Quite the opposite, everyone had reacted with compassion and acceptance.

"I told her I would think about it, but she made a good point. We're a family and families shouldn't keep secrets from each other." Derek sat next to Scott, but didn't make contact with him, giving him some space to react and process what he was saying.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is that I feel like you're part of my family and I want my mom and dad to both know who you are to me...who you really are to me."

"Please, Derek. Please let's take this thing slowly. Let's talk it through before we tell people, especially family. I love you and you make me so happy, but I'm not ready to be public as a couple. I know, our trip to New York doesn't match what I'm saying, but there was no risk there. Here and at school we know people and will see them all the time. If they don't react well, it could make life difficult for both of us." Scott looked at Derek with pleading eyes. "Does that upset you?"

Derek thought about Scott's question for a second. "I'm not thrilled about it, but you were right in what you said to my mom. It will take you longer than it took me to open up about who you are and who we are. There are going to be times

when I want to tell someone and you don't want me to. We're going to have to figure out how to handle that when it happens."

"That's fair." Scott put an arm around Derek. "Thank you for understanding. I want to make you happy and I don't want to be someone who holds you back. But we're a team and need to compromise to make sure we're moving in a direction that we can both live with." He ran a finger along Derek's jaw. "Hey, you okay?"

Derek turned to Scott and tenderness filled him. He wanted to do whatever he could to ease the process for him. "Yeah, I'm good."

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Scott pulled Derek close and hugged him tight. "Just think, tomorrow, we're going to start college life and we'll be living together. I've been thinking about it all week; ever since we got back from New York. I've especially been thinking about what our first night together will be like." He kissed Derek gently on the lips. The soft warmth of his breath surrounded Derek. Closing his eyes, he inhaled deeply, a sweetness

mixing with the rustic aroma of Scott filling his head. The kiss remained chaste, but was filled with Scott's gentle romance and love. After a moment, Scott pulled away from him, a cool sensation replacing the heat from where their lips had been touching. Opening his eyes, Derek was surprised to see a hint of mischief in Scott's eyes. "Just don't beat off before tomorrow night."

Derek looked at Scott, not understanding why he would make such a request. As if a light switched on in his mind, an image of the two of them alone in their dorm room formed. As it did, he felt a wide smile cross his face. "It's a deal."

With that, they got up and returned to the party. Derek wasn't entirely sure whether their conversation had gone well. The fact remained that Scott didn't want him to come out to his dad. But at least they were communicating. Josh had said that was the key. Derek hoped he was right.

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Chapter Six

The next morning, Derek hopped out of bed, having barely

gotten any sleep during the night. He had packed most of what he needed the night before into his car and had to pack additional things into his father's car to keep the move down to one trip. Boston University was a city school, spanning for many blocks along one of the major streets, Commonwealth Avenue. While there were dormitories and quads, the school did not have the same kind of encapsulated feel as most college campuses. That was one of the draws of the campus, but it was also one of its weaknesses. Being so spread out and located in an impersonal environment made it more difficult to create a campus spirit. Still, there were quads, academic buildings, a student center, and other locations which helped to create a social environment for the students. All freshmen had been invited to spend two days at the school before the rest of the student body returned. Derek had hoped to be able to go to orientation with Scott, but with two car's worth of things, he and his father had to follow one another. Scott was going with his parents.

As Derek and his father prepared to leave, his mother stood in the living room, looking lost. "I can't believe you're leaving." Tears were streaming down her face. "I know this is a good thing and I am happy, but if I could keep you here with me forever I would."

Derek felt a lump form in his throat. He walked over to his mother and gave her a hug. "Come on, Mom. Don't cry or you're going to make me start crying." Gathering control of

herself, she hugged Derek back. After about a minute, Derek wondered whether she was going to let him go. "Uh, Mom. I need to get going now." She didn't release her grip.

Looking over his mother's shoulder, Derek shot a pleading look to his father. Henry walked over and placed a soothing arm around Claire's shoulders. In a playful, but soft tone, he coaxed Claire off Derek. "Honey, let him go. That's it. You're doing it. Very good."

His mother shot his father a dangerous glare. "If you think you're being funny, you're not."

Laughing, his father pecked Claire on the cheek. "Aw c'mon, Sweetie. That was a little funny."

Managing a weak semblance of cheerfulness, she released her hold on Derek.

"Please be careful, and make sure you call me if you need anything."

"I will, Mom. I promise. And I'm not going to be that far away. I'll come home all the time." Derek wasn't sure his promise was entirely true, but it did seem to make his mother feel better. A few minutes later, they were driving into Boston, heading to the university.

The college campus was teeming with students and their families. Luckily, there was ample parking since it was only the freshman class registering. Students were to 67

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report to the Student Center to receive their orientation packets and would then have the better part of the morning to bring their things to their dorm rooms before the official orientation activities began. As Derek and his father walked to the Student Center, Henry looked around at the faces of students and their parents. "Son, this is going to be an amazing experience. You're going to meet people from all over the country and from around the world. You'll have the chance to take courses taught by professors who spend their lives engrossed in their work. Enjoy it. Don't let the years pass by without appreciating that you're here."

Ever since they had eaten at Bisuteki, his favorite Japanese restaurant, during his senior year, Derek's father had been much more communicative with him and spoke a lot more about feelings and experiences. That had turned out to be a pivotal night in Derek's life. Not only had his relationship with his dad taken leaps forward, but his mother had paved the way for him and Scott to reconcile having spent the evening talking with Shannon about Scott's depression. Looking at

his dad, Derek now saw the man as a man, rather than as larger than life as he always had growing up. I think I see what Mom means. I bet Dad would be really great about me being gay. "Don't worry, Dad. I'm so excited right now I could practically burst. I'm nervous, but that's a good thing right?"

"Absolutely. If you weren't nervous, I would be."

When they arrived at the Student Center a line protruded from the entrance, wound around the building, and extended into a quad. He and his father got into line and Derek took out his cell to call Scott. When Scott picked up he sounded excited. "Hey, it's our big day."

"Yeah, it is. Are you here yet?" Derek wanted to get through this line and get to their dorm room.

"No, we're almost there. How is it?"

Derek looked around trying to find the right words to describe the scene. "It's a madhouse. The line is about five miles long."

Scott's voice lost some of its enthusiasm. "Really?"

Derek laughed. "No, not really, but it is very long. When you get here, come and find us. That way we can get to the dorm room at around the same time."

“Will do.”

When Scott clicked his phone shut and put it back in his pocket, he turned and noticed his father was looking at him. He remained silent just long enough for Derek to feel slightly uncomfortable, then his expression returned to normal. “I’m glad the two of you will be living together. I know I say college is amazing, and it is, but it can also be scary. I feel better knowing you’ll be with someone who you know and who will have your back.”

Derek agreed completely, but was surprised to hear it coming from his father.

“Yeah, it does make me feel better knowing I’ll have one of my best friends by my side.”

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His father looked around the campus. He seemed to be lost in thought so Derek stood in line and surveyed the various students who would be part of his graduating class. His attention was suddenly drawn back to his father who had snapped out of his reverie. “Scott’s a really good kid. Your

mother told me about some of the things he's had to go through what with moving around so much and having a father who's so tough on him. Most kids would become sullen and depressed by that kind of a life, but Scott seems like a real upbeat guy. It's impressive."

Derek was unsure how to respond. "Yeah, he's a great guy. He fit in immediately as a new senior last year and has turned out to be a really dependable...friend as well."

His father nodded, his lips pressed together in thought. "You're a dependable friend for him too. As a matter of fact, that's probably one of your greatest strengths as a person. You're loyal, almost to a fault. I've rarely seen you pass judgment on others. Not many adults are able to do that. I'm very proud of you."

Derek felt the lump from earlier that morning return to his throat and said nothing for fear of breaking down.

"I think you're going to find that quality to be a real asset," his father went on.

"Kids kind of lose their minds with all of their new freedom and sometimes having a slow and steady friend is exactly what gets them through the day."

The line had begun to move a little faster. By the time they

were about a hundred yards from the entrance of the Student Center, Derek heard his name called. Scott was heading towards him with his parents following closely behind. Before they were within earshot his father mumbled something under his breath. Derek could swear he had heard said Oh great. Despite what his father had just said about Scott, he couldn't help but wonder who the comment was directed at. "What's that about, Dad?"

"Huh? What's what about?" His father looked like a kid who just got caught doing something wrong.

"Why'd you just say Oh great like you meant exactly the opposite?"

His father sighed, a remorseful expression crossing his face as he turned to face Derek. "We can't talk about this because they're almost here, but I don't like that man. You know, Scott's father. He's...unpleasant."

Derek's concerns faded as his father continued speaking. "This is what I was just telling you about. When people are faced with uncomfortable situations, most don't know how to put on a game face and keep their hand close. You're quite good at that."

He then plastered on a smile that to people who didn't know him seemed genuine, but to Derek made his father look like

he was constipated.

An hour later, they arrived at the table for students whose last names began with letters S through Z. Derek and Scott got their orientation packets and returned to their cars to head to their dorm on the West Campus near the Charles River. At first glance, Derek became excited as they pulled up in front of their dormitory. It was a red-brick building and looked like the surrounding apartment buildings lining the street. The same style he had admired on all of his runs along the Charles River 69

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while in high school. Once inside, his excitement practically tripled. Their room, while not physically large, was designed to maximize the space. Both beds were located atop unfinished wooden lofts, desks and dressers built beneath them. With the raised beds, there was a great deal of floor space. Looking around the room, Derek noted there was enough room to place a love seat between their two beds and they could probably find a small throw rug and a coffee table to complete a living room of sorts. Looking at the rest of the room, he saw that there was one area that had about five feet of wall space. Maybe I'll actually be able to bring in my mixing equipment. It took them an hour to unload all of

their things from their cars and haul them up the stairs. Once everything had been arranged, their parents wished them well and left. They were finally on their own, college students, boyfriends, and living together. Derek turned to Scott with a wide grin, his excitement barely contained within him. "I thought they'd never leave."

Scott rushed to Derek's side, wrapping his arms around him. "I know. I can't believe it. Here we are. This is our room." Placing a hand on the back of Derek's neck, he pulled him into a fierce kiss. His tongue brushed over Derek's lips and probed within, massaging the inside of his mouth. There was an unusual and pleasant hunger in the kiss and Derek allowed his body to be drawn in by Scott's grasping arms. A hint of sweat heightened Scott's scent, surrounding the two of them and sparking his arousal. There was also a bit of sweetness which filled his mouth as his own tongue tousled with Scott's.

The taste caught him off guard and he pulled out of the kiss. "What did you have for breakfast?"

Scott slowly moved them backwards until Derek felt the wall against his back.

"Pancakes. Why?"

"Oh, that's what the taste is. Maple syrup."

Placing one leg between Derek's, Scott pressed his body tightly against him, pinning him to the wall. "I have something that you can taste which isn't sweet at all."

Scott began to grind their hips together and captured his mouth in a kiss once again. Derek's cock responded immediately, expanding in his pants. He could feel the long, hard length of Scott's cock against his inner thigh and wrapped his hands around Scott's back until they rested on his ass cheeks. Pulling him in, Derek matched the grinding motion, intensifying the friction against his own cock. Everything about the day converged in his mind. Starting college, moving in with Scott, this kiss, Scott's hunger, his own arousal, merged within Derek and caused him to pant. Grasping at Scott, he became more aggressive and the two of them were fighting to get as much of their bodies together as they could. Feeling a tingling in his stomach, Derek realized that he would come if this didn't stop soon. Pulling away was extremely difficult, not only because he didn't want to but because they had become so entwined in each other that movement was restricted. "Scott...getting close...slow down."

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Scott pulled his head back to look in Derek's eyes. "Oh my God. You look so fucking hot. Your face is radiating pure lust right now." He reached his hand down and began to rub Derek's cock through his pants. Derek gasped. Slowly, Scott started to work his buckle open. Kneeling down, he rubbed his face against the stiffness of Derek's cock and pulled his zipper down with his teeth, causing Derek to writhe under his touch.

Pulling Derek's pants down to his ankles, Scott nuzzled his nose under Derek's balls, breathing hot air against his skin. Lifting his head, he opened his mouth and captured the underside of Derek's cock through his boxer briefs. Derek shuddered as waves of bliss passed through him. "No, stand up."

Quietly obeying, Scott first glanced up to meet Derek's eyes, then raised himself off the floor, slowly kissing his way up Derek's body, lifting his shirt as he moved. When he reached Derek's navel, he took an extra few moments to kiss the wispy trail of fuzz which extended from the base of his erection up to his belly button. The hot wisps of air brushing at the light dusting of hair tickled and sent shivers along his skin. Continuing up Derek's body, Scott stopped once again at his nipple, running his tongue in circles around the flesh which tightened under his attention. When Scott bit down with

just a hint of pressure, a mixture of pleasure and pain seared the center of his pectoral muscle and radiated outward, like fireworks were going off inside his body.

Unable to take any more stimulation, Derek reached down and hooked his hands under Scott's armpits, pulling him to his feet. Scott leaned in to kiss him once again, but Derek turned his head, lowering his lips to the spot on Scott's neck that always turned him into putty. Using his tongue to slide against and massage the cords of muscle, he was immediately rewarded by a moan which started deep inside Scott's chest and rumbled out of him. Gentle hands worked their way around Derek's head, holding him in place, fingers twining in his hair, but not gripping. Derek removed his mouth from Scott's neck long enough to pull Scott's shirt up and over his head, then kissed and licked a sensuous trail down Scott's collar bone, and lower. He stopped at one nipple which was as hard as a pebble against his lips. As he flicked the nub of flesh, biting down as Scott had, another moan escaped from Scott and his hand returned to rest on the back of Derek's head, this time applying more pressure as he arched his chest to give Derek better access.

He continued sucking one nipple, then moved across the broad expanse of muscle until the other nipple was pressing against his tongue. He could have continued kissing, smelling, and licking Scott's body for hours, reveling in the sounds and movements of Scott's pleasure, but his own

excitement was building up inside him and a far better reward awaited him a couple of feet below.

Bracing himself by placing his hands on Scott's torso, Derek began to bend his knees, squatting as he continued to trail kisses down each ridge of abdominal muscle. He kissed his way down Scott's side, allowing the bristle of his stubble to gently brush against the smooth skin.

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Scott's voice cut through his exploration long enough to provide just the right kind of encouragement. "Oh my God. It tickles and it's torture at the same time. You're making me crazy right now."

His response was to rub his cheek against the skin, lowering his head until he was parallel with Scott's cock. The curve of his oblique muscles served as perfect gripping points so he could crouch in front of Scott's pelvis, his perfectly rounded bulge pushing out at the fabric of his jeans. Derek leaned in and pressed his nose into the space where Scott's leg connected to his groin. Even covered in clothing, a rich aroma filled his nose and senses.

Unable to hold off any longer, Derek reached for the button of Scott's pants, sliding the top button out of its hold so a slight hint of blond hair became visible. Looking up at Scott, Derek felt a smile creep across his face. "You're not wearing any underwear."

Barely able to form words, Scott's voice came out as a whisper. "I came prepared for—"

Derek forced Scott's words to catch in his mouth as he pulled at one of the flaps of Scott's pants, releasing the remaining buttons and bringing his lips to the taut skin of his navel. As he kissed, licked, and inhaled, taking in new sensations, tastes, and richer smells, he reached down and gripped his own cock tightly at the base, squeezing to stave off the orgasm which was quickly rising within him. Finally unable to withhold any longer, Derek worked Scott's pants over his rounded ass and slid them over muscled thighs until they passed his knees and slid easily to the floor. Scott's cock sprung out from its confines and bobbed in the air in front of Derek's mouth, dripping with precum. Seeing the slick and shiny head and smelling the sharp pungent scent, Derek used his free hand to angle Scott's cock towards his mouth. Scott took in a sharp breath as Derek licked at the droplet of precum which had formed a glistening string as it fell from his penis opening. Finally, as if claiming his reward, Derek leaned forward and closed his mouth over Scott's

cock head. Scott's muscles tensed and then quivered as if they were being charged by an electrical current, his salty essence filling Derek's mouth with a taste more intensely of Scott than anything Derek had ever experienced before. The combination of flavors, smells and the feeling of hard hot flesh in his mouth, sent blood rushing to his already engorged cock and he began to pump, unable to contain his rising excitement any longer.

Trembling muscles, fluttering heart beats, slick suction, each of Derek's body parts seemed to work in conjunction to bring both himself and Scott to the precipice of a greater bliss than he had ever known.

As Scott's precum mixed with Derek's saliva, the pace of his suction increased as he took more and more of Scott's cock into his mouth. With each forward movement, he allowed the slickness to help the invading member slide past the back of his throat. The first couple of times he tried it, his gag reflex caused him to stop, but he learned how to relax his throat by breathing out and found he could take more and more into his mouth without choking.

Up until this moment, he had always thought Scott was a good size, not too big, but big enough to fit perfectly in his grip. With Scott inside his mouth, he realized he was far bigger than he had originally thought. When the hairs dusting the base of Scott's cock tickled his upper lip, a renewed surge of excitement filled him as he realized he'd finally taken all of him in.

Scott's hips did a slow roll as he grabbed the back of Derek's head and pressed his pelvis against his lips. For a split second, Derek's senses honed in so that the only thing he could sense was the feeling of being completely filled. Then Scott released his head, just before Derek needed air, as if he knew the perfect moment to release his grip. Derek's senses flooded him, the scent of precum, the feel of the veins along Scott's shaft, the groans demonstrating Scott's pleasure wafting down to his ears all combined within him to heighten his arousal.

He continued pumping at his own cock as Scott's mass increased and began to throb. A few words travelled down from above, but Derek was too engrossed to recognize what was being said. When he felt two strong hands on his shoulders, trying to push his head away, Derek gripped Scott's hips tighter, securing his mouth so his cock was buried all the way down his throat.

The first jet of cum that erupted from Scott's cock coated his mouth, the intense flavors and sensations rippling outward causing his body to involuntarily shake in response. Rather than pull back, he instinctively began to swallow, his muscles working with him to somehow take each spurt of cum without losing a drop. As the thick, salty semen flowed down his throat, a flash of icy heat raced through him, starting in his mouth and his balls and radiating out from both points until they met somewhere in the middle. As if a bomb exploded, pleasure shot through his body and his own orgasm exploded out of his cock, ribbons of his own spunk shooting out of him. Clamping down on Scott's cock, he pumped the remaining drops of sperm into his mouth as continued stroking his own cock which continued to spasm in his hand. When both of their bodies stopped bucking with the aftershock of their releases, Derek let Scott fall from his mouth and leaned his head back so he was staring directly into Scott's blue-green eyes, tranquility reflecting in his twin seas. He remained locked in an intense gaze for what could have been hours, but was only a few second, then stood up.

Scott placed his hands on either side of Derek's face, still heaving from the energy of his orgasm, hardly able to form words. "So...amazing. Love you....so...much." He drew Derek into a gentle and loving kiss, then pulled out, a suctioning sound filling his ears as they separated. Before Derek could complain, Scott spoke. "I can taste my sperm in

your mouth. That's the fuckin' hottest thing I've ever experienced. Is that what it was like for you when I kissed you in New York?"

"Well, if you feel like your world just exploded into a million brilliant pieces of ecstasy, then yes." Derek smiled, but was pulled back into a fervent kiss, the pressure as Scott pulled their heads together at once painful and exhilarating. 73

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They continued kissing for several minutes, before finally landing back on earth. Scott pulled out of the kiss and looked at Derek. "That was the most intense experience I've ever had. Being inside your mouth, having you make yourself open and vulnerable to me like that. It felt like a piece of you was submitting to me. That might sound horrible, but when I came in your mouth, I felt like I had just claimed you as my own. I hope you don't mind that I felt that way, but it made me feel so freakin' hot."

Derek listened, still a bit foggy from his orgasm. When the haze finally cleared, he hugged Scott tightly. "Are you kidding? That was even better for me than when you blew me. I like submitting to you, if that's the word you want to use. It feels right for me to make you feel good. We need to do

that a lot.”

“Agreed.” Scott’s mouth pulled up into a smile. “But I don’t want us to be lopsided. It can’t just be about you pleasing me.”

Derek hoped the grin spreading across his face didn’t look as giddy as he felt. He ran his fingers gently down Scott’s cheek. “Babe. Haven’t you figured it out yet? You make me feel safe and protected. Like when you stood up for me in New York when that ass-wipe, Charlie, grabbed me. When you let me show you how much I love you, when you let me be yours, I’m at my happiest. I could curl up in your arms and sleep for hours right now, knowing that part of you is inside me.”

They stared at each other, Scott’s eyes shimmering, not with tears, but with a soothing blend of cool color that filled Derek with warmth, then he looked at the clock.

“Holy shit, we’ve only been at this for fifteen minutes. It felt like days to me.”

Derek laughed. “If that felt like days, then I guess this year will feel like a decade.”

“I like how you think, Sexyman! I suppose we should actually open our orientation packets and figure out what we’re

supposed to be doing for the next two days.” They pulled apart, got dressed, and sat down on the floor between their beds to map out the rest of their day.

Their packets listed their activities. The entire freshman class would be meeting in the athletic center’s basketball court to be welcomed. They would then be split into groups of forty-five, would receive a tour of the campus, and engage in some getting-to-know-you activities and games. Derek looked at his group number. He was in group fifteen. Scott was in group twenty-two. “This sucks, we’re not in the same orientation group.”

Scott peered at their packets. “That does suck. Well, it’s only for these two days and most of the stuff we’re doing is together.”

Derek didn’t like the idea of spending any time away from Scott during their first two days at college, but Scott was right. It wasn’t a big deal and they would be together as much as they liked all year. “It looks like we have about a half an hour before we have to be at the athletic complex. How do you feel about walking around for a while?”

“That sounds like a good idea.” Scott gave Derek a loving hug and they left their dorm room. They walked through several quads, all lined with dormitory and academic 74

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buildings, a mixture of old-style brownstones that characterized colonial Boston and contemporary glass and cement structures with lots of windows and angles. As they walked through the campus that would be their home for the next four years, a sense of freedom energized Derek. Living with Scott. Going to college. It was a step towards adulthood and independence. He recalled his father's words from that morning and finally, it dawned on him what he had been saying. I'm going to be able to live my life entirely as I choose. No secrets, no hiding. Just living out loud and being who I am. He wanted to hold Scott's hand to celebrate this new stage in their relationship, but he knew Scott wasn't ready for that yet. Not only would Scott become uncomfortable, but they had spoken enough times about this issue that he might even become aggravated. No matter how far he had come in his desire to let more people know that that he was gay, he cared far more about his relationship with Scott. Still, their physical lives were becoming more intense, more connected, and his desire to express his love openly grew with each passing day and experience.

When they arrived at the athletic complex, thousands of students were milling about, all of them looking slightly lost. His class had about four-thousand five-hundred students in it.

They crowded into the auditorium and the dean for the freshman class called for attention about ten minutes later. "I would like to welcome the Boston University class of 2014. Each year, we hold a two-day orientation so that you, the newest members of this old and respected institution, can become comfortable in your surroundings before the rest of the student body arrives. There are several upper classmen student volunteers who will be guiding you through the next couple of days. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions you have and get to know as many people as possible.

"We expect you will experience great success over the next four years, but we also know you will struggle. The job of the faculty is to ensure that you succeed. If you struggle academically, we'll support you. If you struggle emotionally, we'll support you. We can help you better if you come to us early. Too many students have waited too long before they sought help and some of them were unable to overcome the obstacles they faced. That will happen for some of you as well, but our success as a support team is dependent upon your success. We take that very seriously."

The freshman class applauded as the dean thanked them and wished them well. The next person to come to the podium was the senior class president. "Hey guys. My name is Elizabeth. It's hard to believe just three years ago I was sitting where you are now, not knowing what to expect and scared out of my mind. I was also excited. I'm sure most of

you are feeling that way right now.”

The woman had long blonde hair and pale skin. Of course, Derek was sitting far enough away that anyone would look decent, but it was her voice more than anything else that put him at ease. It was fluid, like a flute, and soothing. “Orientation was one of the first experiences which helped me feel like this was going to be my home. Each of you has been assigned to an orientation group. That assignment is designated by a number. If you look around this room, you will see numbers one through twenty. In the 75

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hallway, you will find group numbers twenty-one through forty. Your group leaders are juniors and seniors who, like me, felt the small orientation groups were particularly helpful for them. Once you meet with your small group, you will be given a tour of the campus and will then be guided through several activities to help you begin to get to know one another.”

Even from across the room, Derek could see how white her teeth were as her mouth pulled up into a wide grin. “I still have several friends who I met in my small orientation group when I was a freshman. I want to wish you all the best of luck. Have fun, take this privilege seriously, be careful, and try

things you never imagined you might try before. You never know whether some random course you take turns out to be the one that sets you on your four year path here. It might be the course or the professor who makes the critical difference in helping you to shape what you want your major to be and what you want to do with your life. So, have fun and go meet the members of your small orientation groups.”

Students clapped again, more vigorously this time, then moved toward the posted numbers matching their assigned groups. Derek turned to Scott, his stomach suddenly tight. “I guess I’ll see you at dinner.” He felt a little awkward having to leave Scott so soon after they had just arrived, especially after what they had just done in their room, but he pushed the feeling aside, realizing he was being silly. Scott winked at him. “See you then.”

Derek watched Scott follow a group of students who walked toward the hallway, then headed over to the large number fifteen posted in the room. Once his group members had convened, Derek’s group leader introduced himself.

“Hi. My name is Hank Adams. I’m a junior. Today I’ll be giving you a tour. Then we’re going to play a couple of games. Some of you may find these games are kind of stupid, but try to get into the spirit of the day and you’ll probably have fun.” He then led the group out of the athletic building and began their tour. Derek inspected the students in his group. He did

a quick count and noted there were forty-three of them altogether, not including Hank, and their mix was a model of diversity. Having grown up and gone to school in Cambridge, he was accustomed to living in a multicultural society, but this went beyond what he was accustomed to. As he surveyed the other students in his group, he noticed one boy who was staring at him instead of listening to Hank. He had caramel colored skin which seemed to shine with health and radiance, high, strong cheekbones, and a close cropped buzz cut, revealing an attractively shaped head. He was tall and sturdy looking, the perfect balance between bulky and slim. Derek guessed he would probably be a good athlete. Their eyes locked and a smile crossed his lips revealing perfectly white, straight rows of teeth which gleamed slightly in the sunlight. Without a moment's hesitation, he walked over to Derek who was sitting on the outskirts of the group. "Hi. You're cute. My name's Tyrell Jackson. What's yours?"

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Derek had never met a gay person his own age who was so forward, but aside from shock, he found the openness refreshing. It was what he had imagined college life would be like. Even though Tyrell had spoken quietly, he still looked

around to see if anyone was watching them. "I'm Derek. It's nice to meet you."

"It sure is. I was checking you out the second we left the athletic building. You're hot." Tyrell was clearly comfortable expressing his sexual attraction to Derek which was flattering, but it caused him to fall back on old habits. All through high school he had masked his true identity by blending in, falling into the background. To be approached by a complete stranger publicly declaring his attraction in front of a group of strangers set him on edge, even if no one seemed to be paying attention to them. Man up, Derek. This is what you wanted. To live openly and honestly as a gay man.

"Uh, thanks? I think." Derek wondered if there was something about him which suggested he was gay. He had never thought of himself as obvious, but Tyrell seemed to know right away.

"Aw, hell. Are you one of those guys who can't handle a gay guy telling you how fine you look? Damn, you didn't seem like that type." His tone had gone from flirtatious to accusing and he was staring at Derek as if he were sizing him up and making a snap decision about the kind of person he was.

"No. Not at all. I just never met anyone who was so direct about, you know, who they are." Derek wondered why he

couldn't have just said the word gay. He also wondered how Tyrell could make such a bold statement about who Derek was as a person without even knowing him.

"You mean you've never met a guy who told you he was gay right from the start?"

Tyrell tone sounded almost hostile by this point.

Derek didn't know whether to feel embarrassed or annoyed. After all, he hadn't done anything to Tyrell to deserve accusation and judgment. Squaring his shoulders and allowing his muscles to push at his clothing, revealing his size, Derek faced Tyrell. In a strong voice but controlled voice, he responded. "No, I haven't met anyone who's told me right off that he's gay. But I don't have a problem with gay people, if that's what you're getting at."

Tyrell looked at Derek critically. "Hmm. You're not afraid to come back at me and aren't taking my crap. You're okay."

"Gee, thanks. I'm so glad you approve." He hadn't tried to hide the sarcasm in his voice. Now that Tyrell had returned to a friendlier tone, Derek decided he was annoyed.

Tyrell flashed a bright smile once again. "Aw, don't be like that, Doll. I kind of come off harsh at first, but deep down I'm a real sweetie."

Derek was unimpressed. It was novel to meet someone his own age who was so comfortable with his sexuality, but to become accusatory toward complete strangers was wrong. "I'll reserve my judgment on that."

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Tyrell's laugh sounded heartfelt. "A feisty one. I like it. You and I will be friends. I can tell." Derek wasn't sure Tyrell was someone he wanted to be friends with, but something in his mind told him to hold off on making any decisions. Once Hank had completed the campus tour, he asked if anyone had any questions for him. Tyrell was the first to raise his hand. "I was wondering what you know about the LGBT Association. Is it active or is it one of those keep-to-yourself closet groups who meet in secret locations every once in a while?"

Hank didn't seem rattled by Tyrell's question or the blatantly offensive manner in which it had been asked. "There are tons of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students attending BU who are very open about their preferences. I don't personally know of any transsexuals, but that doesn't mean they aren't here. My roommate is gay and he's actively involved with the LGBT

Alliance on campus. It's a fairly active club. BU makes a banner and walks in Boston's Gay Pride Parade with the other colleges and universities in the area. They also sponsor fundraisers to support some of Boston's organizations which help homeless gay youth. They're pretty big on community education as well."

Derek was impressed. Not only with Hank's depth of knowledge about gay life on campus, but with the extent of the work done by the group. This wasn't just some little club that gathered in secret. It was a well-established, proud organization that did things Derek would enjoy doing. He made a note to find out when the group met and check it out. Maybe Scott would want to join him. He immediately modified his thinking. Don't push him. That won't help anything.

At the conclusion of the day's activities, the group played one last get-to-know-you game where Hank called out various experiences and anyone who the comment applied to had to step forward. He started with general comments like, If you're seventeen, step forward or If you are from the east coast, step forward. But, Hank had prepared some really interesting questions as well. One that particularly caught Derek's attention was, Have any of you succumbed to peer pressure? Most of the group stepped forward and several shared their experiences. By the end of their meeting, Derek could see how this structured practice of letting people get to

know each other in small numbers was an excellent way to help people realize they had a lot more in common with each other than they would have guessed.

Derek had really enjoyed the experience, with the exception of his interaction with Tyrell, but he really wanted to see Scott. Dinner was in an hour and Hank told the group they could hang out or go to their dorm rooms. Derek headed back to his room hoping Scott was there.

When he got to the room, he was disappointed to find it empty. Alone, Derek's mind took over as he replayed the events from orientation. It was eating away at him the way Tyrell had acted. He had never met anyone who jumped to such immediate conclusions about him. Although he admired Tyrell's openness about being gay, he didn't like the fact that sexuality seemed to be the only thing he cared about. It also bothered him that Tyrell had singled him out.

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Derek had never thought of himself as blatant, but Tyrell had somehow known he was gay. Why didn't I tell him I'm gay and have a boyfriend? Since thinking was only getting him

riled up, he decided to call Beck. Her first day at Brandeis was Wednesday so she would probably be home. Her phone rang a few times before she picked up.

“Hel-lo.” She sounded out of breath.

Derek was relieved to hear her voice. “Hey Beck, I have a question for you. Do you think I come off as obviously gay?”

“Huh?” Beck’s voice had a raspy edge to it.

“I asked if you think people can tell I’m gay just by how I look and act.”

“No, not at all. Why? Mmmm...”

“I just got back to my room from orientation. There was this guy named Tyrell who came onto me and then got all hostile when I wasn’t receptive to him.”

“Uh-huh....uh...”

Derek held the phone away from his face and looked at it, cocking his head to the side. Returning the phone to his ear, he continued. “Beck, is something the matter? You sound really weird.”

“Right there. What was that, Derek?”

"I asked if everything's alright?"

"Oh my God. That's it, what you're doing to my clit...." Derek threw the phone from him. Beck couldn't have possibly said what he thought she just said. Slowly walking towards his phone, he picked it up as if it were a large spider or some other unwelcome bug and tentatively brought it back to his ear. "Beck?"

"Derek, you're there. Sorry. George was just eating me out and I was really close when you called. Now, what were you asking me?"

Derek had the urge to toss his phone away once again, but refrained since he didn't want to damage it. "Beck! Why the fuck did you bother answering if you were in the middle of... yuck!"

Beck's voice took on an air of menace. "Don't you give me shit! You're the one who called me, remember?"

"Yes, but I assumed if you were otherwise...um...involved, you would let it go to voicemail." Derek couldn't shake the image of George buried between Beck's legs and felt his stomach churn.

"Whatever. What do you want?" Beck's voice was slightly less venomous.

“Never mind. I’ll call you later. Tell George I said hi. And tell him I said good job too, I guess.” Derek clicked his phone shut and shuddered. At least he wasn’t obsessing about his interaction with Tyrell any longer. He could always count on Beck to distract him, even if the distraction made him nauseous.

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Chapter Seven

“What are you doing on the floor?” Scott walked over to Derek, plopped down next to him, and wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

Derek leaned his head against Scott’s shoulder. “Just reading. It’s been a long day. I’m really glad to see you.” He tilted his head so he faced Scott and gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek.

Scott removed his arm from Derek’s shoulder and placed his palm face up on Derek’s lap. Derek reached down and traced the lines with his finger. As he concentrated on the warmth beneath his fingertips, Scott continued talking in a

soothing voice. "How was your small group session?"

"It was good. I like how they do this for incoming freshman. There was this one creepy guy, though. His name is Tyrell and he basically came onto me and then treated me like I was some gay basher when I didn't respond in kind." Derek felt a small twinge of guilt, as if he had done something wrong to attract Tyrell's attention. "He said I was hot and when I said nothing he accused me of being homophobic."

"What the fuck? Are you serious?" Scott got up paced around the room, his extreme reaction catching Derek off guard. "Some fuckin' dick came on to you right on the first day of school in front of everyone in your group?"

"No, he was discreet, sort of. Well, maybe not discreet, but he was quiet. At least it didn't seem like anyone else was paying attention to him. But it was how presumptuous he was that ticked me off. I wanted to tell him I was gay and have a boyfriend, but I figured that was probably not the best move on the first day of school and wanted to talk to you first." The fact that he had dodged addressing Tyrell's advances bothered him even more now that he faced Scott. Like he had somehow betrayed him. "You know I only want you, right?"

Scott stopped his pacing and turned to face Derek, his expression shifting from angry to gentle. Sitting down next to

him again, he pulled Derek onto his lap. "Of course I do and you did the right thing. What the hell is wrong with that guy, hitting on people during orientation? No one knows anyone yet. What if you had been the type of person who would have gotten violent?"

Derek had expected this reaction from Scott and was pleased for the understanding, but part of him wished Scott had surprised him telling him to set Tyrell straight. He would have loved for Scott to have been there to show Tyrell just how unavailable Derek really was.

Feeling slightly defensive, he turned to face Scott. "The funny thing is, although Tyrell was repellant, I had to admire how completely honest he was." Derek's breathing came at a faster pace and he gripped his fists into balls. Unsure why his anger was building inside him or what Scott had done to deserve this mild attack, he threw the next thought out without filtering the rising energy inside. "There's a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Alliance here at BU and I'm interested in going to a meeting to 80

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see what it's like." He squared his shoulders so he faced Scott, challenging him with his posture to dare and talk him

out of it.

Scott stiffened next to him. "I don't like that idea. I know it's something you want, but if you go, won't people assume you're gay? And if they assume that, won't they assume I'm gay?" The comment pissed him off, but Derek managed to remain silent and let Scott finish his thought. "It makes me really nervous. I don't want either of us to do anything that'll force the other into a move they don't want to make."

For the second time in five minutes, Derek was surprised at how much Scott's attitude grated at his nerves. "I think going to a meeting would probably cause the members of the group to question my sexuality, but I really don't see how that would have an impact on what people think about you." Sarcasm wormed its way into his tone. "Hell, people might simply think you're the poor guy who got paired off with a fag as a roommate." As he spoke, Derek's blood began to rush behind his ears and heat rose up his back, crept along his neck, and settled in his cheeks.

"Our orientation leader, Hank, has a best friend who's in The Alliance and people don't think he's gay, so there's no reason to believe people would assume you're gay."

Looking at Scott's expression of shock caused him to pause for a moment, but the next words hurtled out of his mouth before he could stop himself. "God forbid anyone finds out

you're gay. I should probably pretend I don't know you when we're out in public."

Scott stepped forward so there were merely inches between them. "What the hell, Derek? You know that's not how I feel. We've talked about this before. I'm not ready to come out. If you want to go to a meeting, fine, go. I thought you wanted me to communicate with you, to tell you my thoughts and concerns. If you don't want me to be honest with you I would be more than happy to tell you what you want to hear."

Derek's heart sank. As if a stopper had been pulled inside him, his anger and energy drained out, leaving him exhausted. "You're right. I'm lashing out at you and it's not fair. I do want you to tell me what's on your mind. But I also want to go to an Alliance meeting to see what they're all about."

Scott's shoulders relaxed and his face softened. "I know you do and I'm sorry too. Just because I have hang-ups about people knowing who I am...who we are, doesn't mean I'm not proud to have you as my boyfriend. I realize how lucky I am every day when I wake up and think of you. I know one day I'll get to the place you are. I'm just not there yet. I'm not ashamed of us. Our relationship is the most important thing to me. I wish I were ready to go public with it, but I'm not. Can you understand that?"

Derek's sinking feeling vanished in a matter of seconds. Scott had verbalized all of Derek's hopes of a future where they could live openly as a couple. "That's entirely fair." He leaned in and kissed Scott once more, a lingering soft kiss, warm lips pressed against warm lips.

Scott pulled back and ran his fingers through Derek's hair, mussing it up playfully. Derek laughed, but became serious when a grim expression crossed Scott's face. "Now, about this Tyrell guy. Do you think I can take him?"

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Derek laughed again. "Without a doubt."

"Good, because any guy who decides he's going to go after my man is setting himself up for a serious problem." Scott pulled him into a tight hug again, causing Derek to feel the sense of possessiveness he loved so much.

"So, if Tyrell comes on to me again tomorrow, can I tell him I'm gay and that I have a boyfriend?"

To his surprise, Scott's answer was emphatic. "You better tell

him you're gay and have a boyfriend. Just do it discreetly. I want you to point him out to me if you see him at dinner tonight."

Derek leaned against him. "Yes, sir." He laughed and allowed Scott to kiss him before they headed out to the cafeteria.

Scott didn't have to wait long to meet Tyrell. As the two of them looked for a place to sit, Derek heard someone calling from behind. "Derek. Hey, Derek." He turned around and found himself face-to-face with Tyrell. "I was hoping I would run into you."

Derek glanced nervously at Scott, a flitting movement of his head, like a bird taking in its surroundings, then turned to face Tyrell. "Hi, Tyrell." Scott tensed as he said the name. "I guess you found me."

Tyrell was all smiles and self-confidence. "I just wanted to say I thought it was really cool how you stood up to me during orientation. Like I said, I come off strong at first and most people shy away from me or are too chicken to confront me." He lifted an eyebrow suggestively. "And, for the record, I only dole out compliments to guys who stir something in me." He followed the comment with a wink. The shock of a second direct flirtation along with the fact that Tyrell was doing it right in front of Scott, forced Derek into action. Although he didn't

dare look, he could tell Scott was gearing up to react to Tyrell's behavior. He hoped he didn't choose to fight him right then and there. "Um, Tyrell, I think we already discussed this earlier."

"Yeah, yeah. You've never met anyone who's as blatant as me and you don't have a problem with gay people. Got it."

As much as he admired Tyrell's courage to be himself, there was something desperate and forced about his insistence of focusing on the fact he was gay. Turning towards Scott, Derek introduced the two. "Scott, this is Tyrell Jackson. He's in my orientation group. Tyrell, this is Scott, he's my best friend and my roommate." It hurt Derek to introduce Scott this way, but he knew this was how it had to be for now. Tyrell extended a hand towards Scott. "Well, well, I certainly want to come and play in your dorm. Two hotties in the same room? So unfair." Tyrell openly sized Scott up, allowing his eyes to roam along his entire body. A sense of possessiveness sparked inside Derek, but he kept it at bay.

Scott shook Tyrell's hand stiffly. "Hello." To anyone who didn't know Scott, his greeting seemed plain enough. To Derek, Scott's entire demeanor revealed he had already decided he didn't like Tyrell.

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Oblivious to Scott's dismissive behavior, Tyrell continued in his appraisal of him. "I bet you get a lot of head turns with those perfectly square shoulders and that gorgeous unkempt blond hair."

Scott stood still, simply looking at Tyrell. "I'm sorry. Are you trying to hit on me?"

Derek silently gasped, holding his breath to see what Tyrell's come back would be. Why the hell hadn't I thought of that line?

Tyrell barely missed a beat, but Derek thought he saw a spark of surprise cross his face. "Would you like for me to be hitting on you?"

"No, I wouldn't, actually." Scott's words came out in a calm, even tone, no sarcasm or anger present. He stepped forward, his movement slight, but in doing so, Scott placed his body between himself and Tyrell. The act sent a thrill of excitement down his spine which caused him to shudder involuntarily.

Despite the rush he experienced whenever Scott's alpha

side emerged, Derek didn't want to deal with a confrontation in the middle of the cafeteria on their first day. "And not because I have an issue with gay people. It's because I have a problem with anyone who feels it's okay to cross boundaries with people they don't even know."

"Hey, calm down, man. Why are you so intense about this? All I'm saying is I think you're cute. That's a compliment."

Scott maintained a cool presence. "Yes, it is a compliment and yes, I do get quite a few stares because of my body. But appreciation of my physicality is never what attracts me to people as friends or what I look for in a relationship."

Tyrell looked from Scott to Derek, then back to Scott. "Dude, you need to seriously relax."

Scott did relax a bit, and it became clear to Derek why as soon as he responded.

"You're right Tyrell, I'm sorry, but I feel very protective of Derek and when he came back to our room tonight he told me about the conversation you two had. See, we went to high school together, we don't keep secrets from each other, and we always have each other's back."

A new rush surged through Derek, but this time the energy flowed south. Staring at Scott, all he wanted to do was get

him back to their room. Fuck, it's a turn on when he comes to my defense. "Your comments tonight have demonstrated to me what Derek shared earlier. Maybe, if you're lucky, you and Derek will become friends. If that happens, you'll figure out why your comments offend me. But I can promise you I won't be so nice the next time we meet if you continue to make him uncomfortable." He glared at Tyrell for a few seconds longer than necessary before finishing his thoughts.

"And for the record, I respect the fact you're comfortable with who you are and you being gay has nothing to do with the fact that I don't like you."

Tyrell stared at him, his eyes narrowed into slits, then his mouth widened into a grin. "You're just jealous that there's competition for Derek's attention." He turned and walked away, a confident swagger to his gait.

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Derek turned to Scott. "That was pretty good. I'm impressed at how much you said without actually saying much of anything at all." He bit the inside of his lip, contemplating how to finish what he was going to say. "That last bit was a bit

harsh though, don't you think?

"That guy, my sexy boyfriend, is a fuckin' asshole. He's extreme and he's dangerous. Those are two things that are the complete opposite of who you are. Be very careful with him." He held up his hand, effectively cutting off the retort that was on the tip of Derek's tongue. "Before you wonder why I am saying this, it's not because I don't trust you. It's because I don't want him to hurt you."

Derek's confusion must have been clearly written on his face, because Scott's expression softened as he continued. "What I'm saying is, a guy like Tyrell, when he realizes you won't satisfy his needs, might decide to retaliate. He may decide to get back at you by creating an excuse in his mind that your rejection is based in denial of who you are. If he did that, I'd be forced to pummel the shit out of him, and I don't think either one of us wants that to happen."

Derek understood completely what Scott was saying. Once again Scott explained a very real scenario in a logical way, but hadn't told Derek what to do or not do. He simply expressed his concerns. I love this man so much.

After dinner, they went to the Student Center and hung out with the many students who were there, eating and playing pool, foosball, or video games. Music blasted from a huge stereo system and the dance floor was filled with dancing

students. Back in their room, Derek and Scott undressed and crawled into one of the two beds. Scott leaned in and kissed Derek tenderly, then the intensity increased, until they were writhing on the bed, groping and rubbing against one another. Scott pulled out of the kiss and stared into Derek's eyes, a heat burning beneath the surface that took Derek's breath away. As he stared into smoldering blue eyes, he began to breathe once again, short pants coming rapidly. Images from his fantasies formed, faded, and reformed in his mind as he imagined Scott rolling on top of him, entering him for the first time. This is what they had been waiting for. What they had talked about. Knowing the moment was upon them, Derek reached his hands around Scott's neck and pulled him down into another kiss.

Scott lifted his head, his eyes seeming slightly unfocused, his body trembling. They remained prone, staring at each other for a few more seconds, then Scott rolled him onto his side and slid in behind him. Derek's heart raced in his chest, his blood coursing through his body at a fevered rate. When Scott slid his arm around Derek's chest and pulled him in so his back nestled against Scott's chest, he held his breath, ready for this moment, terrified and elated.

"Baby, this has been one hell of a day." He spooned Derek even closer. "You feel so good in my arms."

"I love how it feels to be held by you. I can't believe we're

finally going to do this.”

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Scott's body tensed behind him before he spoke. When he did, his voice was warm and liquidy, but there was a hint of tension lingering behind his words as well. "Derek, I know we talked about this, but I'm exhausted. Could we just sleep tonight?"

"But, I thought..." Derek clamped his mouth shut, disappointment swelling inside of him, crowding out all other emotions. To try to speak or to argue was more than he could handle. Instead, he lowered his head onto the pillow, releasing a long, slow breath. What the hell's going on? After all this time, Scott's just going to sleep? Feeling confused and let down, he lay there in silence, listening to the occasional car on the street outside their dorm building mingle with the sound of Scott's breathing.

Scott laid his head next to Derek's on the pillow. Their kiss, the desire to take him, to be with him for the first time had swept through him like brush fire, practically drowning out all other thought or feeling. It wasn't that he didn't want to have

sex with Derek. He found it difficult to think of anything but having sex with him when they lay together in bed. His taut body, the affectionate caresses from his gentle hands, the sweet scent of spearmint gum on his breath, everything about Derek called to him emotionally and physically.

Yet he couldn't deny that he was scared. Scared that he wouldn't know what to do. Scared that the moment would disappoint Derek. That he wouldn't be able to live up to what Derek had built this moment up to be for the two of them. Taking Derek's cock into his mouth or letting Derek blow him; these were things he knew they could do. He had pleased Derek and felt confident that he would continue to do so. But when he and Derek finally had sex, it wouldn't be just sex. There was far too much love between them for it to ever simply be sex.

He ran his hand along Derek's side, feeling a hint of tension in his lover. Derek was disappointed, but at least Scott knew why. This he could live with. Even if Derek called him out on his choice to wait even longer than they had discussed, he could handle that too. What he couldn't handle was not being good enough.

The repetitiveness of the thought generated an anxious frustration within him and he tightened his hold on Derek, pulling him even closer. Derek loved him. He might be upset, but he would forgive him. The timing had to be right. He had

to be ready and as much as he wanted to give Derek everything he wanted, this was not something he could rush.

Derek's breath began to even out, eventually growing slow and steady. Scott took several deep breaths through his nose and exhaled gentle through his mouth, concentrating on releasing the tension from his body with each exhale. He would make sure that their first time would be everything Derek hoped it would be.

* * * * *

Sunday's schedule was not as full as Saturday's. Derek stretched, feeling tense and tired. Turning to face Scott, the disappointment of their evening slammed into him like 85

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running into a wall. Why didn't he want to have sex with me? I thought this was what we both wanted?

Scott stirred, then opened his eyes. "Mmmm. Morning." Derek remained silent for a few seconds and Scott opened his eyes. "Is everything all right?"

"I..." The words were on the tip of his tongue, but to say them

would make what didn't happen real. He had spent too much time holding his opinions back during their senior year. Steeling himself, he forced the words out. "I thought we were going to have sex last night."

Scott's eyes widened just a hint, then relaxed. "I know, but I was just so tired. It's not that I don't want to. I do, but I don't want us to do it just because we said we would."

He wanted to protest, to tell Scott that his comment made absolutely no sense, but simply couldn't bring himself to do it. Things were going too well between them. He didn't want college to begin with tension. He didn't want to fight. Hustling Scott out of bed, he led them to breakfast. It took all of his concentration to withhold from bringing up the one thing on his mind. Yet not bringing it up caused it to become a weight sitting on his chest, stealing his appetite, and crowding his thoughts out of his head. Maybe tonight will be the night. The thought helped to alleviate some of his doubts, but some still lingered.

Derek remained filled with anxious energy during breakfast, drawing several strange looks from Scott, but he simply played it off as excitement about being at college. Finally, Scott finished and they headed out to the athletic complex. Hank had asked Derek's group to meet by a large tree just to the left of the entrance of the athletic complex. Leaving Scott once they arrived was hard enough, but when he

spotted Tyrell standing under the tree branches, his chest tightened. Although he found the aggressive behavior over the top and pushy, he still admired his openness. That, combined with Tyrell's unusual good looks, sent a mixture of sensations through him. Excitement was undeniable, but guilt and anxiety spun around it like electrons revolving around the nucleus of an atom, fast and furious, crowding out his ability to enjoy his new acquaintance. Each step toward him heightened the uncomfortable sensation of walking into an interrogation room or onto a stage, two things Derek would normally avoid at all costs.

Derek sat down and remained quiet, listening to Tyrell rattle off the events of his evening without really paying attention. When the whole group had shown up, they took off to find a relaxing, sunny patch of lawn on the football field. For the day's activity, Hank had planned for the group to pair off and answer a series of questions about each other and then present their partner to everyone else. When Hank called Derek's name, there were several students still unmatched, Tyrell being one of them. Again, warring emotions battled inside him. Part of him prayed he wouldn't be paired off with Tyrell. Deep down he knew his life would be much easier if he could get through these two days and then never have to deal with

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him again. But a much larger part of him, the one that overshadowed his better judgment, hoped they would be paired. He had made a snap decision about Tyrell the day before and it bothered him. There was no way anyone should or could be judged in one day. His father's words from a few days earlier echoed in his mind. I've rarely seen you pass judgment on others. Not many adults are able to do that. If his dad thought it was a good quality, Derek assumed it must be.

Hank reached into the baseball cap which had the names of each group member and pulled out a slip of paper. Turning it over in his hand, time seemed to slow down.

"Tyrell. You are matched with Derek."

Tyrell stood up in what could only be characterized as a leap and walked excitedly over to Derek. The two of them headed off to one side of the group. Derek had barely sat down when he felt an immense pain in his ass...and it wasn't a pain coming physically from the ground. "So, your friend seems like a real shit head. I mean, he basically ripped me to shreds in the cafeteria last night. What was that all about?"

A moment of rage caused his vision to blur and for a moment he actually thought he saw tinges of red. Tyrell didn't know he

and Scott were boyfriends and so he had no idea what he was saying was deeply offensive. Still, why would he insult Scott when he knew he was Derek's friend? He wanted to grab the front of Tyrell's shirt, pull him roughly in so their noses were almost touching, and tell him that Scott was his boyfriend and he should steer clear of both of them if he valued his perfectly sculpted facial features. Knowing he wouldn't, he simply shrugged his shoulders. "Scott's very protective of his friends."

Tyrell flipped over the paper Hank had given them. "Well, let's get started. These questions are straight forward enough. Where are you from? What interests and hobbies do you have? Why did you choose to come to BU? Do you know what your major is going to be? That sort of thing."

Derek reminded himself he didn't want to judge Tyrell too quickly. Beneath that aggravating exterior may be a genuine person Derek might be able to like. And he was the first person his own age Derek had met who was openly gay. Being able to talk to someone about the things going on in his head and in his relationship would be a nice change from high school. If Tyrell could just stop being such an ass, some redeeming qualities might have a chance to shine through.

He began by asking questions. Tyrell was from a small town just outside of Birmingham, Alabama. He had chosen to go to B U because it was the biggest college he'd been

accepted to and was the furthest away from home. "My hobby? Hmm. I guess my hobby is to find cute guys to spend time with." He raised his eyebrows suggestively as he had the night before.

Derek leveled him with a steady gaze. "That's your hobby?"

Tyrell smiled. "Well, maybe it's not a hobby, but it's what I spend most of my time doing."

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"What else did you like to do in high school?" Derek was not about to share with the group that Tyrell's hobby was scoping out hot men. Why can't he drop the act for just one second?

"All right, fine. I really enjoy art. All forms of art. Painting, photography, theater, and especially ceramics. I've developed a nice line of kitchenware. It's not on the market or anything, but my whole family has their kitchens stocked with things I've made."

For a moment, Derek began to see Tyrell as a normal person who had interests which extended beyond the male

gender. This would be what he would share with the group. He looked at his list and saw there was only one question left. "So, the last question is what do you fear most about being in college?"

Tyrell's face took on a serious expression. "Honestly, my biggest fear is that people will be just as closed minded as they were back home in Alabama. Being gay at home sucked and I caught a lot of hell. I was beat up a number of times and, although most of my family accepted me, the ones who didn't are convinced I'm going straight to hell, and they weren't afraid to tell me and anyone else who would listen."

Sadness filled Derek as he considered Tyrell's experience. He knew some people reacted strongly to gay people, becoming upset or uncomfortable, but damning gay people to hell wasn't something he had ever been exposed to. Meeting someone who had actually had it happen to them was an eye opener.

"How did you handle that?"

Tyrell surveyed Derek. "You really want to know, don't you?" His entire demeanor tensed. "Why?"

Derek remained silent, trying to process the simple question. How could Tyrell think he wouldn't want to know why?

Because you haven't come out to him. That's why. He doesn't know you're gay. Guilt flooded him in one huge wave; guilt at not being open and at not being true to himself. Whatever Tyrell might be, he wasn't a liar. "I think it's horrible you had to face that. Families are supposed to love you unconditionally."

Something in Tyrell's body language relaxed. Almost as if he had aged and was looking at Derek through adult eyes. "Not all families are like that. If you're lucky enough to have one who loves you without question or condition, cherish it."

He stared at Derek, as if waiting for him to say something. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell Tyrell everything. To open up and accept him as a friend, but when he spoke, the words didn't come. Instead, he kept the focus on Tyrell. "So what did you do when those family members condemned you like that?"

Tyrell remained silent for a moment, then settled into a more comfortable position, a slight sigh emitting from his chest. "Well, as you can probably guess, I told them I would rather be down in hell with a bunch of hot guys than stuck in heaven with tightass shit heads like them."

"I bet that got a reaction." Derek couldn't help the smile that pulled at the edges of his mouth.

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Tyrell smiled as well, but his eyes became distant, as if he were picturing the event in his mind, but not with pleasure. "It worked to shut them up."

Derek smiled. It wasn't because he thought what Tyrell had shared was funny, but this honest side of him was very likable. "Okay, so that translates to you're afraid people won't accept you for who you are but, deep down inside, you don't really give a damn who accepts you."

Tyrell nodded. "That's a reasonable summary. Before I begin asking you questions, I'd like to ask you one not on the list."

Derek steeled himself, not knowing what to expect.

"Why do you feel the need to reduce my answer to a general summary? Why can't you just answer the questions the way I've answered them?"

Derek hadn't realized he had done that, but to have it expressed so plainly caught him off guard. "I've always kept a low profile and tried to avoid saying or doing anything

which would draw attention might make people uncomfortable. It's just the way I have always been. Sharing some of the things you have said would make me feel uncomfortable."

"I can buy that. Keeping a low profile has never been my skill. I'm always over the top and I tend to piss people off." There was a hint of sadness in Tyrell's voice as he spoke. He shifted his position so he sat closer to Derek, their legs almost touching. The closeness made Derek uneasy, but he pushed the feeling aside, not wanting to set Tyrell off again. "See, that was a cool thing to say. It's honest. You aren't trying to pretend you're something you're not. You're just being yourself." Despite Tyrell's annoying traits and his flagrant manner of putting people ill at ease, he was showing a side of himself Derek could actually like. As soon as the thought crossed his mind, Scott's warning flashed through his mind. He's extreme and he's dangerous. Tyrell remained quiet for a moment. "No one's ever said anything that nice to me before. I guess I'm so busy being an image of someone, I never learned how to be myself."

Derek liked this Tyrell much better than the one he had met yesterday.

"Do you think your roommate hates me?"

He was pretty sure Scott not only hated him, but had thought

of several ways to keep Tyrell far away from both of them. "Hate is a strong word. Scott's a really nice guy. He doesn't like conflict and tries to avoid it. Not in the same way I do, he's not nearly as guarded when it comes to his feelings and his likes and dislikes, but he does avoid strong emotions like hate."

"And love?" Tyrell asked.

Derek shook his head. "See, that was not a cool question. What are you trying to imply right now?"

Tyrell flushed. "Nothing. I just hate it when I don't think people like me, so I try to find things wrong with them."

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Derek understood but didn't find the practice to be to his taste at all. "Scott is perfectly capable of love."

"How do you know?" Tyrell's interest seemed a little too intense and prying for Derek's liking.

Taking the safe road, he replied carefully. "Because he's my best friend and I've seen him in love before." Tyrell accepted

the answer without argument or further questioning.

After about thirty minutes, Hank called the group together and each pair took turns introducing their partner. It was interesting to get to know some of the more personal details of his group. He could certainly see how some of these students could become good friends. When all of the pairs had shared, Hank let them know his dorm and room number. "If you guys have any questions or if you just need someone to talk to, please feel free to come and see me."

With that, the group dispersed. Tyrell walked with Derek. "So, interested in heading over to the student center for a bite to eat? Maybe we could continue talking?"

Derek was tempted. Tyrell had revealed a side of himself today he could be friends with. But he wanted to get back to Scott. No matter what the differences were between his own desire to immerse himself in the gay community and Scott's desire to remain private, he still preferred spending time with Scott more than anyone else and for the past two days they had been forced to spend time apart. "I'm gonna take a rain check. I want to settle into my room."

Tyrell nodded. "Okay. I'll see you around I guess." An expression of doubt and sadness passed over his face.

Derek reached into his pocket and pulled out a receipt he

hadn't thrown out from his shopping spree with his mother. "Do you have something to write with?" Tyrell shook his head. "Fine. Give me your phone."

Tyrell handed his phone over with a perplexed expression on his face. Derek took it from him and entered his cell phone number into it. Handing it back, he allowed his fingers to brush against Tyrell's soft caramel skin, a slight ripple of electricity running along his arm at the contact. He pulled his mind from the sensations of touching Tyrell, shocked he would have any such reaction at all. "Here's my number. Call me and we'll make plans."

Tyrell smiled, then tucked his phone back into his pocket, turned, and walked away. Derek allowed his gaze to linger on the retreating figure. The way the other man's jeans hugged his hips and molded to the round of his ass drew his eyes in like a magnet and he had to shake his head to break the momentary trance. What the hell? Derek headed back to his room. Scott was already there standing between the two lofted beds.

"Hey there. What're you doing?"

Scott turned with a start, covering his heart with his hand. "Shit. You scared me."

He walked over to Derek and pulled him into a hug, smelling

of freshly cut grass and 90

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sweat. The scent caused Derek's cock to thicken in his pants. "I'm deciding which bed we should use."

Derek smiled. "I'll tell you what. Let's spend tonight in one and tomorrow night in the other and we can see which one inspires us more." All I care about is what we'll be doing in one of those beds.

Scott's eyes filled with mischief. Placing his hand behind Derek's neck, he pulled him in, sealing their mouths together, and sliding his tongue between his lips. He tasted of Pepsi and breath mints. As the kiss deepened, Derek reached around Scott's waist and pulled their hips together, their erections pressing against each other. After another few seconds, Scott pulled out of the kiss. "Shit. I forgot the door was open. Do you think anyone saw us?" He pulled away from Derek and poked his head out, glancing up and down the hallway, then shut the door. "No one's in the hall."

Derek slumped his shoulders. "That's a relief." The sarcasm in his voice was obvious to him, but Scott didn't seem to notice. "Orientation was interesting today. I got paired off

with Tyrell and he was actually kind of cool instead of a prick.”

Scott’s smile disappeared as the corners of his mouth curved down. “I don’t like that kid. You need to watch out for him.”

A retort bubbled to Derek’s tongue, an argument ready to happen. Why does Scott have to react so negatively? Does he think I’m helpless and can’t look out for myself? Rather than fight, he dropped his bag on the floor. “Have you eaten? I’m starving.”

Scott’s frown lifted and brightness returned to his face as his broad smile and prominent dimples lit up his face once again. “I was waiting for you. C’mon. Let’s eat.”

He allowed Scott to lead him to the cafeteria, listening to him talk about his orientation group meeting and wrestling try-outs. Derek remained quiet, nodding and responding as appropriate, but in the back of his mind, he was replaying his conversation with Tyrell. I know there’s a good guy in there. It would be nice to have a friend I can share things with. Then, when Scott pisses me off like this, I’ll have someone to bitch to about it who really understands. He instinctively reached for Scott’s hand, but stopped himself just in time, the restraint fueling his aggravation. What bothered him most was that this morning he had been so disappointed, filled with doubt

and worry that maybe Scott didn't want to have sex with him. That maybe there was something wrong with him. He had spent all day thinking about their evening, what their first time together would be like. Yet his frustration with Scott, his rising anger that Scott didn't seem to be on the same page as him, or worse, didn't trust that he could take care of himself, pushed the desire to have sex out of his mind. Realizing that the two of them didn't seem to be on the same page drove the wedge that was forming between them a little bit further into place. As they got ready for bed, Derek remained unusually quiet, wanting to see what Scott would say or do to make up for his comments earlier in the day. When he said nothing, Derek's anger flared, but once again, he kept it in. As they climbed into bed, Scott sliding in behind him and wrapping his arm around Derek's body, the stark 91

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contrast between the cocoon of warmth surrounding his body and the icicles in his heart was almost painful.

Scott's breath became slow and even, and before long, a gentle purr of a snoring sound emitted from him. Knowing Scott had been able to fall asleep so easily, clueless to the fact that Derek lay there hurting and upset, was more than he could bear. His mind began reeling, but there was nothing he

could do. He couldn't wake Scott up and start a fight over something he didn't even recognize as a problem. That would do nothing to make him feel better. He needed Scott to see how important it was to initiate their intimacy, the intimacy they had promised each other, without Derek having to remind him or ask for it. He had done enough to set the stage. At some point, Scott needed to pick up the slack and show him that their relationship, moving to the next stage, mattered as much to him.

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Chapter Eight

On Monday, the rest of the student body showed up. It was like the private campus which had felt so large and spacious suddenly turned into a crowded city. Derek had breakfast with Scott as usual, but there was a residual tension that lingered between them. His exhaustion certainly didn't help matters much. Scott's easy slumber had been a stark contrast to his own fitful restlessness. Somehow, having Scott in the bed with him, specifically not doing what Derek had hoped he would have done, made sleeping virtually impossible. The minutes had dragged endlessly, until

sometime around four a.m. he had finally fallen asleep.

Trudging across campus to his first college course, an experience which should have been exciting and energized, felt like a chore. Worse, yet, he was taking Introduction to Psychology. With his luck, the professor would open with his position on Freud's theory of Ego and Id, and Derek was pretty sure where his ego would tell his id to go stuff itself if he were forced to confront his inner demons. The thought elicited a short chuckle from him, but it wasn't enough to lighten his mood. After class, he sat with several of the kids from his first class outside the Psych building. His fellow classmates were chattering excitedly about their dorms, parties that had already been planned, hot chicks the guys had noticed and gorgeous hunks the girls had flirted with. Everyone around him seemed to have exactly the right attitude and spirit of starting college, new adventures, and reveling in new freedom. Their excitement only fueled his own sense of disappointment and exhaustion. Not wanting to seem like a downer, he quietly excused himself and headed outside. The weather was still beautiful and the sun always made him feel better. It wasn't until he had walked for a few minutes that he decided to call Scott and find out how his first class had gone. When he flipped open his phone, he was surprised to find that he had a missed text message. That's right, I put my phone on silent during class. Without looking at the number, he opened the message. Hi, it's me. You said to

call if I wanted to get together. What are you doing for lunch today? Derek stared at the message, trying to figure out what Scott could possibly mean by “if I wanted to get together” but then noticed that the number did not have a Massachusetts area code. It’s Tyrell. Derek felt a mixture of relief and dread as the realization hit him. In the end, relief won and he texted back. Heading to lunch now. If you want to meet, I’ll be @ the caf near the Psych bldg. D.

He put his phone from silent to vibrate and replaced it in his pocket, then headed toward the cafeteria. He hadn’t even made it five steps, before his cell buzzed in his pocket, causing a tickling sensation to run along his upper thigh and naval. Taking out his cell and flipping it open, the message was short and to the point. C U There. Five minutes later, he was standing in line with Tyrell babbling about the boys in his English Lit class. Derek nodded and smiled where appropriate, but wasn’t really listening, absorbed in his own thoughts and the questions he wanted to ask Tyrell. He 93

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grabbed a salad and a bottle of water, not terribly hungry and, picked a secluded table in the corner of the room where the two of them could talk without being surrounded by too many people.

Derek knew what he wanted to ask, but wasn't sure how to bring it up. He still wasn't sure about Tyrell, but he had things on his mind and Tyrell was the only person he could think of who might be able to help. As he tended to do when he was unsure of how to proceed, Derek decided to use the direct approach. "Can I ask you something?"

Tyrell stopped talking mid-sentence, cutting off his discussion of the size of the package of the guy sitting next to him in lit class. "Sure. What's up?"

"You've had sex, right?"

Tyrell let out a facetious laugh through his teeth. "Is the Pope Catholic?"

"Yes will do." Derek was beginning to think this whole idea of inviting Tyrell to lunch was a bad idea, but now that he was here, he figured he didn't really have anything to lose. "My question is, how was your first time?"

"How was my first time? What do you mean?"

"I mean, was it special? Was it with someone you loved? What was it like?"

"My first time was in the passenger seat of some dude's pick-up truck on a mud path in the middle of the woods half a

mile down the road from a back-ass gay joint in the middle of Red-Neck, Alabama. Love had nothing to do with it. I just wanted to get it over with."

The image was the complete opposite of what he wanted his first time to be, yet somehow, it didn't surprise him that Tyrell would paint it in such a nonchalant manner. He suspected the truth was a bit less crass and blunt than what he had just heard. "Let me back up. I'm asking because I'm a virgin and I'm wondering whether first times should be just right or if there's no such thing as the perfect time."

Tyrell's expression softened. "I assume you're asking for yourself?"

Scott felt heat travel along the back of his neck, causing a slight sheen of sweat to form, making his skin feel sticky. "Can we leave that bit out and just focus on the first time part? I'm not ready to disclose too much yet, but it's been on my mind."

"Well, if I could have a do over, I wouldn't have given it up in a fuckin' truck. I wouldn't have given it up at all. Once I started, it kind of spiraled out of control."

"So, you regret your first time?" Derek speared a fresh piece of lettuce and popped it into his mouth. The cold wetness of the leaf burst in his mouth and soothed him.

"No. I don't regret it, but I would do things differently if I could." Tyrell stared at Derek, a curious expression behind his eyes. "Why are you asking me about this? Is there a specific reason you want to know or is this field research on gay sex?"

Derek laughed despite his nervousness. "Maybe something in the middle of those two options."

Something shifted in Tyrell. "So you're asking out of curiosity for some reason you won't disclose." He reached across the table, taking Derek's hand in his. Derek glanced 94

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around, looking to see if anyone was watching, but didn't remove his hand. The warmth from Tyrell's touch radiated along his skin like a heated blanket slowly covering him and the sensation comforted him. "If it's your first time, I'd try to make it special. Maybe you should invite this lucky someone to lunch, maybe even text them out of the blue, and take it from there."

"Huh? Text them to invite them to lunch so I can lure them into sex? Tyrell, when I texted you...look, I'm not talking about you. I hope you aren't getting the wrong idea here."

“Shh. Don’t worry about it. It’s okay.” His voice dripped with confidence and sensuality. “If you say it’s not about me, I believe you.” He patted Derek’s hand, then released him, giving him a wink before placing his hands in front of him on the table.

“Seriously, Tyrell. I’m not talking about you. I’ve just been thinking about—”

“I heard you the first time.” He winked again. “It’s not about me. But since you asked the question, I’d say a great first time could happen anywhere and anytime. Like it could happen on the spur of the moment, say after two friends finish having lunch.”

Derek stood up, his chair making a scraping noise on the floor as he did so. “Look. I’m sorry I texted. This was obviously a mistake to talk to you about this. Forget I said anything. I have to go.” He grabbed his bag and stood.

“Wait. Where are you going?”

“I just have to get out of here.” Derek slung his bag over his shoulder and practically ran out of the cafeteria. Once outside, the fresh air hit him and immediately helped to clear his mind a bit. Walking in the direction of his dorm, he mentally cursed himself for thinking Tyrell would have been

someone to talk to about something so important.

Despite his disappointment with Scott and his seeming blindness to Derek's unhappiness, there was no one else he would rather be with or talk to. But that was exactly what he didn't want to do. He didn't want to have to tell Scott to initiate their sex. He wanted it to come organically from Scott. He needed to know that it was something that meant as much to Scott as it did to him.

Fuckin' catch 22. I want what I want, but I don't want to tell him what I want, so how can I get what I want. His own thinking began to confuse him. Rather than continue to fester, he headed back to his dorm room. Scott wouldn't be back for a couple of hours and Derek could blast his music from his laptop without worrying about disturbing anyone.

* * * * *

However, the month of September flew by and Scott still hadn't made a move to have sex. Derek forced himself to stay quiet and wait, accepting their usual routine of blowjobs and kissing. In the meantime, he and Scott quickly made friends with the students in their dorm and had attended all of the parties. Although there were strict rules that surrounded parties and drinking, the rules were leniently enforced.

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your drinking limit and when to slow down seemed to be as big a lesson learned at the beginning of college as the content of the courses. Neither Derek nor Scott struggled with their studies, so they had plenty of time to take advantage of their life in the heart of Boston.

They took Boston's train system, called the T, to various parts of the city and walked around, window shopping and spending as much time together as they could. Sometimes others would join them and they were happy for the company, but it was their time alone that both of them loved best.

Their living situation had turned out better than either of them could have hoped for. They had heard roommate horror stories from other students; stories about best friends who were now enemies. For Derek, Scott was as compatible in his living styles as anyone could be.

The one thing that remained a constant drain on what would have otherwise been a perfect arrangement, was the disconnect between them in terms of sexual connection. Derek had learned how to adjust his throat to take Scott all the way in without gagging, and based on Scott's ability to wring orgasms out of him, his ability seemed to move along

the same path. Yet the one thing Derek had wanted, to connect on that final level, remained just out of reach.

He could have initiated the sex. Nothing in Scott's behavior suggested he was against it, but nothing in his behavior suggested he was for it either. That was the part that rankled him. Derek didn't understand how they could go so long without Scott clueing in. Rather than confront him about it, he kept his feelings to himself, all the while remembering what Josh had told him about communication and wondering why he was being so stubborn.

On Friday, before one of their trips into the city, they stopped by the Student Center to get their mail. Although both of them lived literally minutes away from their college, their parents still sent them care packages. The food, pens, and other miscellaneous supplies were unnecessary, but neither of them said anything, enjoying being spoiled while still adjusting to taking care of themselves.

As they walked to their mailboxes, Derek noticed a pink neon flyer that was posted on the bulletin board. It announced an upcoming meeting of the LGBT Alliance on Monday at 7:00 p.m. in the Arts Center. Derek had been looking for information about the LGBT Alliance, but had felt uncomfortable asking anyone about the group. He had seen Tyrell around campus, but ever since their lunch where he had misconstrued Derek's question about first times, he

didn't want to ask him about anything to do with being gay or going to The Alliance events. Besides, Scott continued to warn him about Tyrell each time they crossed his path.

Still seeing the flier brought back all of his desires to make a connection with someone else who was gay. Someone who wasn't Scott. Someone he could talk to so he would know he wasn't alone in his feelings and experiences. He jotted the information down on one the letters from his mailbox and put his things in his book bag. 96

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Once they had settled into their seats on the T, Derek turned to Scott. "There was a notice in the mailroom about a LGBT Alliance meeting on Monday. I'd like to go and see what it's all about, but just wanted to run it by you first." Derek was going to go to the meeting whether Scott wanted him to or not, but he would feel better if Scott was supportive. Despite Scott's insistence that he didn't want to come out, he had also been clear that he didn't want to stand in Derek's way either. While this wasn't entirely satisfactory to him, it was better than nothing and he didn't want to push too hard, especially when there was a much bigger issue on his mind that lingered between the two of them.

Scott looked at him and sighed. "To be honest with you, I'm surprised it's taken you this long to bring it up. I was sure you would have told me you were going to one of the meetings within the first week of school."

"I probably would have if I'd seen a flyer before now, but this was the first one I've come across all year. I didn't want to just go up to people and ask about it. Even I'm not ready to be that out yet." He was pleased with Scott's reaction and placed his hand on Scott's leg, giving him a light squeeze.

Scott flinched, looking at Derek's hand on his leg, then around the car they were riding in to see if anyone had been watching them. "Derek, come on. We're in public."

He pulled his hand away, the sting of Scott's words lingering, but Derek kept his feelings to himself. "Sorry, it was just a natural action. I didn't even think about what I was doing." Scott smiled, but remained slightly stiff. Attempting to break the tension, Derek said, "I'm glad you don't have a problem with me going to the meeting."

Scott relaxed as he turned to face Derek. In doing so, it forced Derek's hand to fall away from his leg. "If it will make you happy to go, then go. A part of me is interested to see what it's like as well. Before you get any ideas, I'm not so interested that I'm willing to go to a meeting, but I'm confident you'll be able to explain the meeting to me with a fair degree

of detail.”

“Gee, thanks. I’m so glad you have that much confidence in me.” He was sure Scott was trying to be playful, but his comments only raked against his already frayed nerves, coming off as condescending rather than humorous. An image of the two of them walking in New York City, hand in hand, flashed through Derek’s mind. He wished he could show his affection the way Scott had allowed him to there. Beck’s uncle, Josh, had warned Derek things would probably return to the more private and guarded ways he was used to, but Derek had hoped Scott would have let his guard down at least a little. Remembering what Josh had said about differences creating problems, fear whipped through his chest, leaving a cold trail in its wake and causing the hairs on the back of his neck to rise. They sat in silence for a while, Derek continuing to have his inner dialogue. Eventually, Scott turned to him with a hint of apprehension in his eyes. “Listen, I don’t want you to get mad, but there’s a party in the dorm. I was talking to the resident leader, Elizabeth McCannery, and she was complaining about the cost of the DJs for 97

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these parties. She said along with charging students for beer, they had to tack onto the cost of the party for a DJ. I

kind of let her know you're an amazing mixer. She was really interested and asked me how much you charge. I asked how much they normally pay someone for one of the parties and she said two hundred and fifty dollars. I promised her I'd ask if you might be willing to mix for the party at a reduced rate."

Scott's eyes looked round and innocent, like a puppy dog's. "I hope you don't mind that I did that."

Derek laughed. It was so like Scott to bring up a topic of conversation which could so quickly divert the unpleasant thoughts running through his head and fill him with excitement. He had been the person everyone asked to mix for the parties in high school and had been disappointed to leave his mixing equipment at home. Now, maybe he'd be able to mix in college as well. It didn't matter whether he was paid. Creating the music to set the mood of a party had always been something that made him feel good. Plus, the fact that Scott had taken the initiative in plugging Derek to their dorm RA was flattering and helped Derek to place Scott's minor rejections into perspective. It might not have been the specific initiative he really wanted Scott to take, but it was a step in the right direction. It showed that he was on Scott's mind. Elizabeth, his R. A., had been the senior class president; the one who spoke to the entire freshman class during orientation. He loved her and would do whatever she wanted. "Why would I be mad at you? I miss my mixing. I would do it for free."

Scott raised an eyebrow. "I said I would do it for free, but I'll charge them a hundred dollars." Derek had never considered charging for mixing before. It had always been something he did because he loved it. This was an intriguing idea. He could do what he loved and also get paid for it. "Maybe I can mix for other dorm parties as well and we can earn money to take another trip to New York."

Scott's eyes lit up. "I would love to go to New York with you again. We travel very well together." He leaned in, placing his mouth next to Derek's ear. Hot breath tickled the skin of his neck, a touch of mint surrounding him as Scott whispered in his ear. The same chill from moments earlier ran through Derek, but this time it left a trail of excitement and heightened sensitivity in its wake. "Besides, I've been thinking about how awesome it was to be able to walk down the street and hold your hand, or kiss you, without looking over my shoulder, wondering who's watching us. The words changed the frenetic chills to a liquid warmth that spread through his body, heating most notably in his groin. To have Scott acknowledge his desire to show public affection, to know he had been thinking about the same things Derek had, erased weeks of frustration. As much as he wanted to acknowledge his feelings, to let Scott know his relief and happiness, he didn't, afraid it would cause Scott to regret having said anything in the first place.

As they discussed the party and what he might mix, they changed their plans and decided to go to Harvard Square so Derek could check out some records. Getting off at the Massachusetts Avenue stop, they walked through the tunnels to the Red Line. Once in Harvard Square, they headed to the record shop where Derek purchased what he 98

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needed for the party. Scott had become good at picking out sounds that would mix well together. Ever since Derek had first showed him how he mixed music during their senior year, he had come to enjoy participating in the slow but magical process of taking isolated sounds and turning them into compilations designed to elicit a specific mood in a party.

Back at the dorm, they ran into Elizabeth sitting in the first floor lounge. She smiled and waved for them to come and join her and her friends. They sat down and made small talk for a while until, unable to contain himself, Scott interrupted Elizabeth in the middle of a story. "Guess what? Derek said he would mix for the party. He said he would only charge a hundred bucks. It's a steal. Trust me, I've heard him mix for parties before and you're getting way more than your money's worth."

Derek managed to keep his mouth shut, but to hear Scott get so excited about him, singing his praises with such pure admiration, fueled his arousal. Elizabeth beamed a radiant smile and turned towards Derek. "Really, that's excellent. I was excited when Scott told me you DJ for parties, but I didn't want to make a big deal of it in case it wasn't something you wanted to do."

Derek was flattered. He liked how Elizabeth managed to make people feel important without being obvious. She had a way of enforcing rules without seeming like she was power-hungry and without making people feel stupid. Plus, as far as girls went, she was really cute. Blonde shoulder length hair, blue eyes which rivaled Scott's, high cheekbones, alabaster skin. Even gay, Derek could see she was sexy. Returning his attention to the party, he faced Elizabeth. "So, what's the mood you're going for? The music at other dorm parties has been basic pop radio songs. Are you looking for something like that or more techno-dance stuff?"

Elizabeth raised a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. "I'm impressed. You take this seriously don't you?" She and her friends all turned their attention to Derek. Scott was sitting quietly to the side, smiling proudly. "I don't think we want it to be like a dance club. That would definitely bring attention to our dorm and we might find it difficult to get party permits in

the future. However, if you can spice up classic music so it's danceable, that would be perfect. Can you do that?"

"Definitely!" Derek loved being given instructions on what to mix. The more he knew about what the party planner wanted the mood to be, the better he was able to mix songs which fit the bill. "I'll head to my parent's place to begin mixing tonight."

"Great, and thanks. I can't wait to hear your music. Let me know if there's anything you need."

"Actually, is there anyone with a big car or a van? I'm going to need to bring my mixing equipment and my sound system to the dorm and it won't all fit in my car."

Elizabeth told him she would arrange for someone to help pick up his stuff the next morning.

Scott and Derek hung out for a few more minutes, then walked up to their room. When they got there, Scott sat down and looked at Derek without saying anything. 99

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Derek dug through his desk drawer trying to find his keys. If

he was going to mix for a party the next night, he'd have to go home and begin mixing. Finally he found them and grabbed his coat from the back of his chair. Turning to Scott, he stopped everything, taken aback by the penetrating stare that greeted him. "What's wrong?"

Scott stood up. "Nothing." He took a few steps closer to Derek. "It's just you're incredible and I don't know how I got so lucky to have such a smart, hot, and talented guy as my boyfriend."

Derek felt the hairs on his arms bristle. Whenever Scott looked at him with a seductive glance or said something that reflected his feelings, his body reacted physically. "If I have to prepare a mix for tomorrow night, you're hauling your ass back to Cambridge with me and keeping me company." He grabbed his cell in one hand and Scott's arm in the other, then hit speed dial. His mother answered the phone just as Derek pulled Scott from the room. "Hey, Mom, are you guys going to be around tonight? You are? Good. Scott and I are on our way over... No, everything's fine... Yes, I'm keeping up with my studies.... Mom! I'll be home in half an hour.... lasagna!

Excellent. Can't wait to see you."

A half hour later, they entered Derek's house which was filled with the smells of garlic, burger meat, cheese, and tomato

sauce. Claire and Henry were in the kitchen and came rushing to the front door as soon as it opened. "Derek! It's so good to see you."

His mother grabbed Derek in a tight hug, rocking him back and forth. His father came up and nudged her to the side, placing an arm around his shoulders and leading him up the stairs towards the kitchen.

Claire, having been forced to release Derek before she was ready, narrowed her eyes momentarily at her husband, then quickly turned her attention to Scott. "It's so good to see you, Scott. How have you been?" She squeezed Scott in a hug and held him longer than necessary. "I'm just so happy to see you boys. I've missed you both."

Derek huffed. In spite of her coolness she could be so sappy. "Mom, just because you didn't get to keep me in a vice grip when I first walked in doesn't mean that you can keep Scott in a strangle hold all night."

She released Scott, looking back and forth between him and Derek, then laughed nervously and headed up the stairs. Once they were all in the kitchen, Claire hustled the boys to the table, which had already been set, and placed heaping plates of lasagna and garlic bread in front of them. "Not that I'm complaining, but what brings you here?"

Derek shoveled a huge bite of lasagna into his mouth, savoring the mixture of flavors and textures. "My dorm is having a party tomorrow and they want to pay me to mix for it."

His father looked up in surprise. "Really? That's great. You're going to make some money off your hobby. Terrific!"

His mother was not as enthusiastic. "What kind of a party is this? Will there be alcohol?"

Derek took a bite of his garlic bread. "Yes, Mom, I do believe there will be alcohol."

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"Don't get smart with me. I don't like it. You boys are only nineteen. It's illegal for you to be drinking and it can be so dangerous." Claire was wringing her hands. Derek found it ironic she would become stressed at the idea of him drinking, but she was apparently fine with him having sexual relations with Scott. Jokes on me. She's right to be more worried about drinking since I'm not having any sex.

"Claire, for God's sake, leave the boys alone. They're in college. Did you seriously think they wouldn't be exposed to drinking?" Henry shook his head. "Honestly, they're smart boys, they won't get themselves hurt. Maybe sick, but not hurt." He started laughing, apparently finding the idea of his son's first experience with drinking and getting sick amusing.

"That is not funny, Henry. It's as if you don't even care whether he drinks or not."

As Claire and Henry bickered, Scott cast a nervous glance at Derek, who smiled and mouthed, "Don't worry. It's just them." Scott shrugged and relaxed, shoving a heaping forkful of lasagna into his mouth.

After his parents had gone back and forth for about five minutes, Derek decided it was time to interrupt them. "Mom, Dad, I actually came home so I could begin mixing. I have a lot to do for tomorrow night and in the morning someone from the dorm is going to come here with me to pick up my equipment. It looks like I'll be able to keep my stuff at school after all, Dad. You get to have the whole attic to yourself."

Claire and Henry stopped their argument mid-sentence. Claire was the one who spoke up. "Oh, Honey, you just got here. Can't you two sit with us for a while so we can catch up? It's been a month since we've seen you."

"Yeah. But you two can't quit bickering long enough for us to talk."

Scott let out a loud, single "ha." Claire, Henry, and Derek all turned to face him. Blushing, he finished chewing the food in his mouth, then spoke up. "What? I think it's funny that you're telling them to stop bickering when you bicker with me all the time."

For a moment, Derek was prepared to respond with several of his own thoughts about exactly where Scott could stick his opinion, but then it struck him what Scott had just done. He had effectively compared the two of them to his parents. On the one hand, panic set in. He hadn't come out to his father yet. Would he suspect anything from what Scott had just said? Yet, the comment meant more to him than words could express. In fact, words escaped him and his eyes became slightly blurry as a lump formed in his throat.

"For the record," Scott said, "I like seeing your parents bicker. It lets me know that you come by it honestly and that it's not me, it's you."

Claire and Henry looked at each other, then both burst out laughing. Claire walked over to Scott and gave him a hug. "Is my Derek giving you a hard time? It's the men in this family. They're so infuriating."

Henry rolled his eyes and returned his attention to the food on his plate. The four of them spent the next hour eating and talking about Derek and Scott's classes and their new friends. Finally, Henry stretched his arms, letting out a loud yawn. "It sounds like 101

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the two of you are having a great time. I wish I could hear more, but I'm tired. Hon, maybe we should let Derek and Scott get to work upstairs. Derek, maybe you can come home a bit more often than once a month. It was good to see you, son." Henry stood up, said good night once more, then retired for the evening. Claire remained behind. When she heard their bedroom door close, she turned to face them with a serious look. "So, how has your living situation been working out? It's a big step when two people go from dating to living together." Derek could always count on his mom to be direct and to say something that was entirely embarrassing. Scott chimed in. He had been in rare form this evening. "Actually, Claire, it's been going really well. We're compatible in terms of how neat we like to keep things, which isn't really all that neat, but at least we're the same in that respect. We both value the time we need for studying so we make sure our room environment is conducive to that. And, it's nice to know when my day is over,

I have someone I look forward to seeing.”

Claire listened to Scott, then cupped his cheek, smiling. “I forgot how good with words you are. I can’t tell you how happy it makes me to hear someone who talks about my son that way. Of course, I’ve come to love you as my own. So, aside from the bickering, has he found other ways to annoy you yet?”

“Other than his growing interest in exploring the gay and lesbian community? No. That’s the only topic which seems to create any tension between us. He seems raring to come out and I’m still feeling very hesitant.”

Derek worked to ensure his feelings didn’t come flying out of his mouth, but Scott was sorely mistaken if he thought that was the only other issue that was creating tension between them.

“I see. It’s a difficult thing you two boys have to deal with. I don’t have personal experience with the coming out process, but I do have experience with the struggle of knowing when and how to let your parents know what is going on in your life. It took me years before I was able to tell my mother I was sexually active and that I would not be a virgin on my wedding day.” Derek’s skin burned with a heat like a flame and he was sure he had turned scarlet. His mother patted him on the arm. “Derek you should really work on that. You’re a man now

and shouldn't feel so skittish about such conversations."

Derek scoffed at his mother. "It's one thing for you to question me about things, but to hear you talk about...you know...that stuff...it's embarrassing."

Scott laughed. "Claire, you know what I love about you?"

"What, dear?"

"You tell it like it is unapologetically. You see things from all perspectives and provide insights which are useful to everyone."

"That's a sweet thing for you to say, Scott. Do you know what I love about you?"

Scott shook his head. "I love that you love my son. You and Beck are the two people who I know will do everything you can to keep Derek safe and happy."

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Derek, concluding that Scott and his mother had bonded enough, decided to break up the mutual admiration session.

"Dinner was great, mom. Thanks so much for letting us come on last minute's notice. Maybe Scott and I should get started upstairs. We'll keep the volume down so it won't bother you or Dad." He got up and brought his and Scott's dishes to the sink and began to rinse them.

"You don't have to do that, Honey. It makes me feel good to be able to clean up after you. It reminds me of when you lived here. You boys go ahead and get started on your work. And remember to keep the door open." She walked first to Scott, giving him a hug and a kiss on the cheek, then to Derek, taking advantage of the fact Henry wasn't in the room to pry her away from him. She gave him a long hug and held tight until she was ready to release him.

* * * * *

Elizabeth had arranged for her boyfriend, Ron, to take Derek to his home early on Saturday morning. As Derek waited, he surveyed his dorm room. Scott was still asleep looking innocent and peaceful. The five foot space on the wall he had originally thought would be a great place for a bar would be the perfect place to set up his mixing equipment and sound system. Ron knocked on his door and the two of them headed out.

Although the days remained warm, the appearance of crisper, colder mornings signaled that fall was settling in. As

they walked out to Ron's van, Derek took in the hues of yellow, red, and brown that revealed themselves as undertones in the leaves of the trees lining the sidewalks. None of the leaves had changed completely, but it was clear the world was going to be filled with a myriad of warm, fiery fall colors pretty soon.

Ron was one of those guys who looked like he might be a meat-head. Burly, with a buzz cut and always wearing a varsity jacket, Derek had originally thought he would be a closed-minded jock. To his pleasant surprise, Ron turned out to be quite warm and friendly. "Liz says you're mixing at a reduced rate for the dorm. That's really cool of you. I'll be there tonight. If you're good, maybe I can hook you up with some other gigs."

"Really? Do you think people would want to hire me to mix for their parties?"

"Hell, yeah! If you're good and you're cheaper than the competition, you could start up a nice little business for yourself. It would be a great way to earn some spending cash. Most kids who need extra money work in the cafeteria, the mail room, the library, boring stuff like that. Mixing for parties is a way cooler way to earn money."

When they arrived at his van, Ron handed over the keys and hopped into the passenger seat. "You know where you're

going. Why don't you drive?"

An hour later, they were back at the dorm. Scott was up when Derek got back to the room and helped the two of them lug the equipment into their room. Derek spent the rest of the day mixing while Scott worked on his assignments and went out to pick up 103

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some food for them. By the time Derek had to set up for the party, he had completed enough music for about two hours. It wasn't a lot, but he could borrow from recordings he had mixed through high school to make sure there was a continuous flow of diverse music.

Scott helped Derek set up his sound system and mixing equipment in the main lounge on the first floor. Derek hadn't mixed in a long time and was pretty excited for the chance.

Once the party started, he played simple music. The songs weren't modified too much, but he played around with the beat and added a few additional sounds and vocals so the songs were embellished versions of what was played on the radio. Once he noticed people had become fairly tipsy, he decided it was time to up the tempo and show the group

what he was made of. He played a quick tempo for a few beats, then added in first one vocal, then a second. The mix sounded a lot like the beginning to a typical dance song, but he was going to use the sounds to compliment John Mayer's Say, which was played about a hundred times each hour on most of the radio stations. Although mixing harmonies to standard pop songs was not his preferred type of music to play, he was good at it.

As he increased the tempo of the beat, adding intermittent snare drum sounds which gave structure and pace to the song, people started to turn to face him, unsure of where he was going with his song. When he finally added John's voice, the crowd began first to sway, then to dance. He slowed the tempo during John's lyrics, then extended the time during the refrains by adding several sounds and using the phrase Say what you need to say over and over to different beats, vocals, and sounds, bringing the crowd up to a mild frenzy, then bringing them back down. When he finally finished the song, the crowd erupted in cheers. Elizabeth danced up to him. She was wearing a cute blue cashmere sweater, which brought out the blue of her eyes, and jeans. As she approached, her shoulder-length wavy hair swayed lightly back and forth, framing her face. Her smile lit up her face and filled Derek with happiness. If he were straight, she would probably be the type of girl he would go for. Of course, Scott was the masculine version of her in terms of looks and

personality.

"That was fantastic. I've never known anyone who could take standard songs and break them apart like that. I loved how you took his line and repeated it over and over, changing the way it sounded each time you played it."

Derek's chest swelled. "It's not what I usually mix, but it was fun playing around with a different style. I'm used to mixing for dances or parties where people want to get really hyped up."

"I'd love to hear that." She scratched her head. "Well, how hyped up are we talking about?" She looked skeptical and Derek remembered her concerns about not being able to get party permits in the future.

"I get people pretty hyper," Derek admitted. "I could play just one and then keep the rest of the music like my first song." Elizabeth agreed and Derek's belly did a jump 104

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of excitement. She had just given him permission to play the kind of music he loved best. Derek switched to one of his standard pre-mixed tracks and let it play. Since most of his music was pre-recorded, he didn't have to stay with his

mixing board while the song played.

He sidled over to Scott and the two watched the crowd. The dorm filled with the sounds of his music and people began jumping around in the dimly lit lounge. Almost everyone was dancing by the time the song had been playing for two minutes, with the exception of a few hard-core drinkers who were in the corner passing a bottle of Jose Cuervo around. Derek couldn't help but feel a sense of pride. "They really seemed to like the music."

Scott put an arm around Derek's shoulders. "And why the hell wouldn't they? Your music is amazing. I wouldn't be surprised if you get more gigs because of this." The thought of getting paid for mixing college parties was intriguing, but Scott's arm around his shoulder in front of their entire dorm was what had Derek's full attention. Glancing around, he saw that many of the dancers were looking in their direction, smiling and jumping about, all having a great time. No one seemed to be bothered or curious about their physical contact. More importantly, Scott didn't seem uncomfortable in the least.

When the party was over, Elizabeth and Ron helped Derek and Scott bring his equipment back to their room. "That was fantastic, Derek. Thanks so much." She handed him a hundred dollars in cash, taken directly from the money the party-goers had paid. "Would you be willing to mix for the next party?"

Derek agreed enthusiastically. "I love mixing. It doesn't feel like work to me."

Elizabeth smiled and said goodnight. When she and Ron left the room, Scott shut the door. He walked over to Derek, giving him a huge hug, then kissing him gently on the lips.

"What was that for?" Derek asked.

Scott leaned his head down and kissed Derek's neck. "I'm really proud of you. You're so talented. Wherever you go, you charm the pants off of people. Come on, I want you to charm the pants off of me right now." He grabbed Derek by the hand, dragging him up into their bed.

For a moment, Derek thought Scott was about to finally take the initiative he had been waiting for, but once they were in bed, he simply cradled Derek, kissing him and running his hands along Derek's back. Although he felt a twinge of disappointment, he was too tired to really put much energy into being actively upset that they still hadn't had sex yet. Scott had done a lot of things in the past twenty-four hours which had made Derek really happy.

It might have been his imagination, but it seemed that Scott was beginning to come out of his shell a bit. First, the comment at his parent's house. When he brought up the

bickering, it had been subtle, but it still suggested a degree of intimacy between the two of them. Scott had never been so open about the time the two of them spent together in 105

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front of anyone. Then at the party, Scott had put his arm around Derek's shoulders. A small gesture, certainly nothing that would be mistaken for anything but a friendly act, but still, it had been done in front of the entire dorm. Scott's hand wrapping around his cock pushed his thoughts out of his mind as he gasped. The sound of his breath was muffled as Scott's lips closed over his. Their tongues wrestled and danced as the pace increased on his cock, bringing Derek's evening to the best high of the night. Thinking about whether Scott was getting closer to coming out or to initiating sex between the two of them would only spoil the moment. He could wait until tomorrow to return to stressing out about their relationship. 106

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Chapter Nine

Derek had a lot of work to do on Sunday and chose to enjoy the outside while the weather was still warm by sitting out in the quad with his books sprawled out around him. Scott had gone for a run and was going to borrow Derek's car to visit his mother later in the day since his father had left that morning for one of his business trips. It was a good chance for Scott to spend time with his mother without his father's critical comments to tarnish their time together.

As Derek studied, many of his dorm mates stopped to sit with him, complimenting his mixing from the previous night. Several mentioned friends in other dorms and were going to be sure to let them know about him. Derek was beginning to think mixing for parties was going to become a lucrative business for him while at college. As long as it didn't interfere with his studies, he was fine with that. After a few hours, he decided to go to the cafeteria to grab some lunch. As he packed his bags, the pink flyer for the LGBT Alliance meeting caught his eye. Butterflies began to flutter in his belly. Before college, he hadn't even known other gay people aside from Scott, let alone deciding to go to a gay and lesbian meeting. Now that he had just established himself as someone who would be sought out for mixing parties, the idea of doing something that would reveal his sexuality seemed a bit scary. What if word got out to others? What if people decided they didn't want some gay guy mixing for their parties? What if didn't want to be friends with him?

Derek had had these fears before and had allowed them to stand in his way. It was time to embrace who he was. He made a mental note to attend the meeting regardless of any potential fallout to himself. He wasn't worried about Scott because Hank had said his best friend was gay and no one seemed to think any less of him. If Scott wanted to keep his sexuality private, Derek's status as a gay man wouldn't interfere with that. Not quite hungry, but knowing he would be soon, Derek picked up his things and headed across campus to the cafeteria near the Arts Center. It would give him time to enjoy the day and take in the different parts of campus he hadn't yet explored. Each area of the grounds housed students with different interests and majors. There was the science and math section of campus where many students wore thick blackrimmed glasses and plaid shirts. Derek chuckled to himself, thinking all these students needed to complete their costume were pocket protectors. As he got closer to the Arts Center, students wore much more casual clothing. Women wore wraps as skirts and guys wore bandanas on their wrists or tied around their heads. Most wore sandals or flip flops and had colorful woven belts holding up jeans with large, worn holes in them. Derek felt guilty observing with such a stereotypical eye, but then considered his own section of campus, where most of the students were on sports teams and wore athletic pants and t-shirts with either high school or college logos on them. Checking out his own outfit, he laughed realizing he was just

as much a stereotype as everyone else. He was wearing a Brompton High wrestling tank-top, a pair of Adidas work out
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pants, and sneakers. He knew if a student from another part of campus had walked by him when he was studying in the quad they would have seen him as just another nameless jock. The thought shifted from amusing to slightly disturbing. If people lived together with others like themselves, acting and dressing their respective parts, how would anyone ever open up to and accept differences. The thought was way too deep for him to handle on an empty stomach.

Once at the cafeteria, he took a seat by a window and ate alone, contemplating his first month at BU. College life was so different than high school. He reveled in the freedom of being able to do whatever he wanted and loved being surrounded by thousands of students his own age. He could go in and out of the city at his leisure and was living with his boyfriend, in a dorm with lots of really cool people. The bonus was that he could continue to mix while at college and even make some money at it. Courses hadn't been going long enough for him to really get a sense of whether they interested him or not, but he was taking classes which hadn't

been available in high school such as sociology, art history, and music technology. He was really enjoying the music technology course and was learning a great deal about the mechanics of the mixing he so enjoyed.

As he watched people walk by outside, a few students sat at his table. There were two guys, both rather attractive and one girl who was relatively overweight. They were in the middle of an animated conversation.

One of the two guys said, "I'm really looking forward to tomorrow night's meeting. The first one was really lame."

The second guy said, "First meetings are always small and boring. Once the year gets underway, they usually get much better, especially when we start planning the really big events. That's when most people show up."

The girl rolled her eyes. "Big events. More people. Why do boys always worry about the size of things?"

The last comment caught Derek's attention. Interrupting their conversation, he asked, "Are you guys talking about the LGBT Alliance meeting tomorrow night?" All three students looked at him as if he had materialized out of thin air, none of them responding. Derek found their stares comical and wondered if he should ask again in sign language.

Finally, the girl answered him. "Yes, but we don't call it the LGBT Alliance. We just call it The Alliance. Why do you want to know?" There was a defensive edge to her voice.

Derek thought the reason for his question would have been obvious. "Well, I'm interested in attending." Both of the boys surveyed Derek with a new sense of interest. The girl extended her hand. "My name's Charlotte. These guys are Phillip and Oscar," she said, waving dismissively at the two boys sitting next to her. They both nodded, but didn't speak. "So you're interested in joining The Alliance? That's great."

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"What year are you?" There was something predatory in the way she asked him questions, as if she were interrogating rather than engaging in conversation.

"I'm a freshman and I live over in the quads." Both of the boys stared at each other, then resumed their silent examination of him.

Charlotte smiled, "Don't mind them. They keep to this part of campus but have fantasies of what it's like over in the jock section of the world." Her comment reminded Derek of his

observation on the walk to the cafeteria. Why did students feel the need to consign themselves to specific parts of the campus? Wasn't the point of college to meet people you otherwise wouldn't normally meet?

Finally, the boy with the darker hair extended his hand. "Hi. I'm Phillip and what she said isn't entirely true. We have friends in all of the different parts of the campus, but we tend to spend most of our time over here." Derek assessed him. Aside from shaggy dark hair, he had angular features: sharp jaw line, narrow nose, prominent cheek bones. He would have had a classic English look except for the dotting of freckles covering his cheeks which gave him an all-American boyish appearance.

"That's because we're majoring in performance arts and most of our classes and friends live over here." Oscar had spoken and extended his hand and smiled. Derek thought he could sense a slight hint of a flirtatious glint in his amber eyes. He had ginger hair, pale skin, and quite a few more freckles than Phillip and was lanky, his arms as thin as twigs. "So you're a freshman, huh? How do you like it here so far?"

"I love it. My dorm is awesome and I love the freedom. It's really fun." Derek shook his extended hand, then redirected the conversation back to The Alliance meeting. "So, you guys said the first meeting was pretty small?"

Charlotte shook her head as Oscar answered him. "The first meeting is always the smallest. People are settling in, getting into their routines, and don't put time into extra activities until the year has gotten started. Tomorrow night's meeting should be a lot bigger. We put up flyers and we'll begin planning some of this year's events."

Charlotte wiped her mouth and then took a huge slug of her soda. "Tomorrow we're hoping to have a bunch of new meat, such as yourself. It's important to make sure we encourage new students to join each year, otherwise The Alliance would fizzle out."

Derek had finished eating his lunch and still had some studying to do. "Well, I'll see you guys tomorrow night." He got up and brought his things to the garbage can. When he looked back to wave goodbye, he noticed both Phillip and Oscar whispering into each other's ears, both sets of eyes trained on him.

* * * * *

The next night, Derek was standing in front of the mirror he and Scott had installed on the wall. He had already gone through three outfits, dismissing each for one reason or another.

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“Should I be worrying?” Scott walked up behind him, wrapped his hands around Derek’s bare chest and tweaked a nipple. He then leaned in and grazed his teeth along his neck. “You look great.”

“What, like this? I’m only in my boxer briefs.”

Scott lifted his head so he was staring into Derek’s eyes in the mirror. He lifted his eyebrows suggestively. “You could slip out of those and stay here instead of going to the meeting.”

Derek ignored the automatic reaction to wonder if this was the time Scott would finally take the initiative for the two of them to have sex and stuck out his tongue instead. He then bent over to pick up the jeans lying next to his feet. Scott gave him a sharp slap on his ass, then went back to his desk to work on a paper. Slipping on his jeans, he decided to go for a neutral look and threw on a white t-shirt and Converse sneakers.

“All right. I guess I’m ready.” He turned to face Scott. “I assume asking you to come with me is pointless.” Scott had gone to his desk and didn’t even look up from his work.

“Right. I’ll be back after the meeting.” He opened the door and started to head out when Scott called after him.

Turning, Derek was surprised to find Scott standing next to him at the open door.

“Have fun tonight.” He pulled Derek into a hug and kissed him on the lips. Heat crept along Derek’s skin, causing it to tingle along his arms, back, and neck. He smiled, then turned to head out and felt a sharp slap on his ass once again. A short squeal escaped his lips as he headed down the hallway. The last thing he heard before stepping into the stairwell was Scott’s light laughter.

When he arrived at the Arts Center, there were signs which directed students to the second floor conference room where The Alliance meeting would be taking place. When Derek arrived at the room, it was already a crowd of about fifty people. Taking a seat on the outskirts of the room, Derek looked around to observe the people at the meeting. Most of them were chatting in groups of two or three. He saw Phillip, Oscar and Charlotte who waved at him.

Looking around the room, he saw the only other person who he recognized, Tyrell, who skipped toward him, his excitement barely contained. “Well, well. Look who’s here.” Derek summoned up his energy and mustered a smile. “I’m surprised it’s taken so long for us to get together, especially

after our last conversation, but I guess it's serendipity that we should see each other here at a meeting of the LGBT Alliance."

Derek hadn't known what to expect, but he certainly wasn't expecting he would have to take any crap. "I thought the group was called The Alliance, not the LGBT

Alliance." Before Tyrell could respond, the meeting was called to order. The president was a senior named Jared Peters. He stood at the front of the room and waited for conversations to settle down. His demeanor was quiet and understated. Just watching him elicited a sense of calm. Once everyone was paying attention, Jared began the meeting. "Welcome to the second meeting of The Alliance for this school 110

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year. I'm very happy to see more people who have decided to come tonight. Before we begin, I'd like to talk about my goals for this year. Along with some of our standard activities such as the food drive for the homeless center in East Boston, we're also looking for people who would like to join up in the Big Brother-Big Sister program of Boston. Unfortunately, we can't allow freshman to join that particular

program since the university has a rule that you have to establish a 2.0 GPA for two consecutive semesters before you can volunteer for activities as part of a school sanctioned group, but, there will be plenty of other opportunities for all members to participate in fundraising and awareness activities.”

Derek was impressed by the rule. It made sense to ensure students were taking their studies seriously before allowing them to participate in activities outside of their academic lives. He returned his attention to Jared. He was average looking, not muscular, but not pudgy either, brown hair, skin with a moderate tone and an occasional blemish. His features were unremarkable. It was his presence and his voice that caused him to stand out. He stood with unassuming confidence and his voice hummed like a brand new car engine. Soothing and clear. “My biggest goal for this year is something that’s been close to my heart ever since I began at BU. I’ve always noticed, with a bit of sadness, how segregated the various communities are. People seem to fall into their cliques and rarely break out of them.

My goal for The Alliance is to engage in public relations activities and events which show the campus body that we, as the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members of BU, are as diverse and well-rounded as any other community. I’m hoping to promote social events which encourage members from all sectors of our student body to

come together and enjoy each other, free from ridicule or judgment. Although this is a tall order, I believe the students of BU are able to step outside of the safety zones of their established groups of friends and socialize with people who are different from them.”

Most of the group cheered, although there was some grumbling and a few students rolled their eyes.

The more Derek listened to Jared, the more he liked him. Tyrell was sitting uncomfortably close to him, his shoulder and arm pressed up against Derek's. Every once in a while, he would lean in and whisper something in his ear, but Derek managed to tune him out and focus on what Jared was saying.

All through high school, he had tried to be friendly with all of the different crowds. Beck was in the drama crowd, he was in the athletic crowd, but he also knew everyone else as a result of his mixing. The segregation of groups on campus seemed to be a trend other people noticed as well, one Derek didn't like. He completely agreed with Jared's goals and wanted to do anything he could to support the vision.

“Can you believe that crap?” The voice surprised him. He had been so engrossed in what Jared was saying that he forgot Tyrell was sitting next to him.

“Shh. I’m listening.” He returned his focus to Jared, but a piece of his mind remained agitated at Tyrell’s comment. Just one more thing for me not to like. As soon as 111

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he had the thought, his father’s comment sounded in his mind. You don’t pass judgment on others.

Jared continued to map out various activities and initiatives he was planning for the group and then called for the meeting to end. Before everyone left, he let them know the next meeting would be in three weeks. Most people left once the meeting ended, but a few hung back. Derek stayed behind and began putting chairs back where they belonged and picking up extraneous bits of trash.

“C’mon, let’s head out and do something.” The suggestiveness in Tyrell’s voice was unmistakable.”

“I think I’m going to hang back and help straighten up the room. Back in high school, whenever we had meetings, everyone would trash the room. I kind of like to help set a room back in order since I’ve had to clean up other people’s messes plenty of times. It’s not fair for Jared to have to do it by himself.”

Tyrell looked at him as if he had sprung horns, then shrugged and left the room. Once the room had been cleared, Derek approached Jared. "Hi. I'm Derek. I really enjoyed what you had to say. This is my first meeting and I didn't know what to expect, but I'm impressed with your goals for the group."

Jared's smile was warm, his entire body evoking a sense of welcome and acceptance. "Thanks. I've been in the group for the past three years and I haven't been too happy with the things we've accomplished. There are some things that have been great, like the fundraisers we do to support local agencies. But, we've never done anything to promote awareness, acceptance, and integration here on campus."

"I know what you mean. I went to high school in Cambridge and I didn't know any other gay kids. Well, I only knew one other gay person, but that was only in my senior year. I would have loved to have had role models to show me that being gay was okay. It would have been great to have had the courage to give my classmates a chance to accept me for who I was rather than who I allowed them to think I was."

"High school is very different from college. My experience was similar to yours. I didn't know any other gay people either. I came from a small town in Vermont though, where the diversity consisted of whether people liked to eat turkey or ham for Christmas dinner." Derek laughed. Jared had a

dry sense of humor which was something he could appreciate.

"If there's anything I can do to help out, I would love to get involved. Since I'm a freshman, it seems like I need to make sure I get through this year with my grades in good order, but it also sounds like there are several different opportunities for me to volunteer my time." He hoped Jared would want him to get involved. It seemed they were both interested in breaking down walls instead of allowing people to build them up. He had spent enough of his life building walls to protect himself that this opportunity was a welcome change.

Jared smiled once again and shook Derek's hand. "I can promise you we'll find plenty for you to do. Thanks for taking the time to talk to me. I hope to see you at the 112

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next meeting." He took one last look around the room. "Well, I guess that about does it." The two headed out of the conference room together. When Derek entered the hallway leading to the stairwell, he was stopped by someone calling his name. "Derek, hold up, I want to speak with you."

Derek turned and saw Tyrell leaning against the wall by a

water cooler. Sauntering over to where Derek stood, Tyrell opened the stairwell door, allowing Derek to pass through before him. "You want to go to the Student Center and grab a soda and pizza?"

Despite his propensity for saying and doing things to aggravate him, Derek couldn't deny how attractive he was. With the fall coming on, his own skin had begun to lose its summer bronze, but Tyrell's caramel skin remained rich and luminous. As much as he was hesitant to spend time with him, afraid his actions would send the wrong message once again, he decided to give him another chance. "Sure. I'd love to."

They walked in silence. It was an awkward silence and Derek almost made an excuse to leave, saying he had work to get done for classes, but, just as he had worked out how to escape, they were at the Student Center. "Let's head upstairs. I'm buying. What would you like to drink?"

Derek was caught off guard by the offer. "Uh, I'll just have a Coke I guess."

Tyrell nodded. "I'm going to have a slice of pizza as well. Would you like one?"

"Sure. Thanks." As Tyrell went to get their food and drinks, Derek looked around, trying to find a table as remote and secluded as possible. Recalling that Tyrell had a tendency towards extreme behavior, Derek decided the safest choice would be to seclude the two of them. He had no idea what Tyrell wanted to talk about and wanted to make sure that they

were out of earshot if the conversation turned to topics that he wasn't ready to discuss with the entire student body listening in. Tyrell came to the table and placed a plate of pizza and a soda in front of him. He took a sip and crossed his arms over his chest, staring at Derek. Once again, the silence became uncomfortable until Tyrell finally spoke. "Why didn't you tell me you're gay?"

Derek hadn't expected this question. "What do you mean? You never asked." Tyrell gave him an exasperated look. "Besides, it was my first day of school and I've spent my whole life keeping my sexuality a secret. What makes you think I would simply reveal personal information to a complete stranger?"

"Because we need to stick together?" Tyrell's comment came out as a question, his voice slanting up at the end and there was an edge of anger in his voice.

"I don't even know you, Tyrell. What do you mean we need to stick together? What are you referring to?"

Tyrell rolled his eyes. "I don't mean we as in you and me. I mean we as in gay people. There are so many people who are against us that we need to stick together. Solidarity in numbers, you know?"

Derek did not know. He had never had to deal with animosity

directed at him for anything, let alone for something he had never revealed to anyone besides a handful of 113

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the people he trusted most in the world. “Tyrell, I’m not about to just up and out myself to someone just because they out themselves to me. I’m not like that. I thought people were supposed to handle coming out in their own time and in their own way.”

Tyrell sucked air through his teeth, the sound grating on Derek’s nerves. “Don’t give me that crap. I totally came on to you. The least you could have done was to let me know you’re gay.”

Derek was finding it impossible to follow Tyrell’s logic. “Why? Because you showed interest in me?”

“Yes.”

Derek’s stomach churned the soda he was drinking. Tyrell wasn’t just annoying him, he was making him angry. Luckily, he was better at masking his feelings than Tyrell. “That’s a pile of shit. I don’t have to tell you anything about myself I don’t want to. Now you know I’m gay, it doesn’t change the

fact I wasn't interested in you then and I'm not interested in you now." The comment had come out harsher than he had meant it to. Given Tyrell's propensity for drama and extreme behavior, he wished he had tempered his reaction.

"But the other day when we had lunch and you asked me about first times. Wasn't that code for telling me you were interested in me?"

There was no mistaking that Tyrell truly believed what he was saying. There was something pathetic about it and Derek's temper settled. "I got that impression which is why I haven't called you. I wasn't asking as a backwards way to giving you any signals or hints. I was asking because I wanted to know. I'm not interested in you, Tyrell."

Shock registered on Tyrell's face and then he smiled. "I'll be damned. I've never had someone tell me that they weren't into me before. It's kind of hot."

Derek wanted to reach across the table and strangle him. "Tyrell, was there something in particular that you wanted to talk to me about?"

"I just find you incredibly interesting and would like to get to know you better."

He seemed sincere enough, but so far, Derek saw none of

the genuine side of Tyrell that had begun to reveal itself that last day of orientation. He had never been one to dismiss someone so completely without at least taking the time to get to know them first, but Tyrell's yo-yo behavior made it difficult to want to try. "Okay, so what do you want to know?"

"Well, I'm going to guess you knew you were gay in high school. Guys who just figure themselves out in college don't come to gay meetings their freshman year."

"And how would you know that? You're a freshman. Do you have some knowledge about how people behave in college that the rest of us don't?" Derek was surprised by the acid in his voice. "Sorry, that came out nasty. I didn't mean to sound like that."

A feeble smile crossed Tyrell's lips. "Actually, I have more experience with what college kids are like than I care to admit. Where I'm from, if you're going to have contact with any gay people, you have to go to a very specific area in Birmingham. Most

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of the guys there are college age or older. I've had more experience than I'm proud to admit because I thought that

was the only way guys would be interested me.”

Listening to Tyrell and watching the way his arms had lowered to the table, relaxed and open, eased some of the tension that had been building up inside of him. This was the Tyrell he could be friends with. He internally commended himself on withholding judgment. “What do you mean?”

Tyrell blushed. “Let’s just say I did things I wasn’t prepared to do way sooner than I was ready to do them. I’ve come to expect that people only want what they can get from me and when they get it, they seem to lose interest rather quickly.”

“Oh, I see.” Derek had only experienced physical intimacy with Scott and had never felt pressured into anything they had done together. Quite the opposite, they weren’t moving fast enough for Derek’s taste. The more they were connected emotionally and physically, the more they wanted to be together. It was becoming clear their experience was completely different than Tyrell’s, probably different than most young people who were in first relationships, gay or straight.

“Have you ever had experiences with guys? Sexual experiences I mean?” Tyrell was looking down at his pizza, his demure and shy manner causing Derek’s defenses to lower.

“I’ve only been with one guy and we haven’t had sex yet.”

"Really. Why not?" Tyrell's interest seemed to perk up a bit too quickly.

"We just haven't. I'm sure we will."

Tyrell's eyes sparkled, as if he were scheming. "So, you're still dating him? Who is he?"

Derek's defenses surged back into place. "Let's just take our friendship one step at a time, Tyrell. I didn't come out to you when I knew you were gay on the first day of school. I'm certainly not about to talk to you about other people."

"So it's someone that goes to school here? You would tell me if it wasn't." Tyrell's persistence grated on Derek's nerves.

"Maybe yes, maybe no. The point is, I'm not going to tell you. What is it with you anyway? One second you start to act nice and then you get all pushy and obnoxious. It's just like at orientation." Derek took in a deep breath and held it for a few seconds, trying to settle his annoyance. "I want to be friends with you, Tyrell. I do. But you need to stop pushing so hard. If and when I want to tell you about my personal life, I will. Until then, could you please just drop it?"

A sense of relief seemed to cross Tyrell's face. "Well, I guess that explains why you weren't interested in me when I came

onto you on that first day?"

"No, I wasn't interested in you because you made me feel uncomfortable and because I thought you were a jerk." Derek felt guilty his comment had come out as harshly as it had, but it seemed Tyrell didn't get the message unless you slammed him over the head.

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"Ouch. Wow. You really aren't interested in me at all are you?" Tyrell's surprise was genuine.

"No, I'm really not."

"Okay, well, do you think we could maybe be friends?"

"Didn't I just say I want to be your friend? You need to start listening." Derek shook his head. This conversation wasn't going well and he was behaving badly. "Do you think you can quit coming onto me and respect the fact all I will want from you is friendship?"

Tyrell leaned back in his seat and stared at Derek, an expression which could have indicated hurt or deep thought,

Derek wasn't sure which. After a moment, he spoke.

"Honestly, I'm not sure, but I am willing to try."

Derek decided to take Tyrell's comment at face value. It was probably the best he would get for now. "Okay, then we can see how things progress. I really do need to get going though. I spent the better part of yesterday preparing a party mix for my dorm and I still have some work to do before classes tomorrow." He got up and picked up his bag. Turning back to Tyrell, he said, "Thanks for the soda and pizza."

Tyrell jumped up from his seat. "Do you have to go so soon? Come on. We've only just begun talking."

"I do, Tyrell, but I'm sure we'll see each other again, if not before the next meeting, then I'll see you in three weeks." He then turned and walked away, heading back to his dorm.

On his walk back, Derek considered his evening. He had enjoyed the meeting. He really liked Jared and believed there was a lot he could learn from him. Tyrell was another story, though. Most of the time, he was over the top and offputting, but there was another side to him that seemed sweet. Every once in a while, Tyrell showed a hint of someone Derek could be friends with. For now, he would keep his personal life to himself and see how things went.

When he got back to his room, Scott was still sitting at his desk, working on his paper. Seeing Scott sent a warm thrill through Derek and he leaned against the doorframe and simply watched him working. He had been so preoccupied with the events of the evening, Scott hadn't been on his mind as much as usual. Finally, Scott looked up, a wide smile crossing his face. "You're back."

Walking over to Scott, Derek sat in his lap and placed his hands on either side of his face. "Hey baby. I missed you."

Derek ran his fingers through Scott's hair, enjoying the silky softness of the blond locks. Leaning down to cover Scott's lips with his own, Derek allowed his passion and his love to pour out of him. He clung to Scott, pulling him as close as he could against his body. Scott laughed into his mouth, opening to Derek and allowing him to explore his mouth. Holding Scott, kissing him, being held, all of it washed away any concerns he had about the day and Tyrell. He was where he belonged and everything felt perfect. 116

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When the kiss ended, Scott looked at Derek with a dazed expression. After a moment, he was able to regain his composure. "What was that for?"

Derek smiled, resisting the urge to grab Scott and start kissing him all over again. Instead, he allowed Scott to cradle him in his lap and leaned his head against Scott's shoulder. "I just had a long night. The meeting was awesome. I met the group leader, Jared, and he wants to organize several events that sound really fun. Parties and stuff. But then I had a bite with Tyrell and he was...annoying."

Scott remained silent for a few minutes, just holding Derek close, then kissed him lightly on the side of the head and caressed his back. "Derek, I've told you over and over, your optimism and your belief that people are genuinely good is one of the things I love most about you. I don't ever want to see that change. With that being said, I feel a bit relieved to see you haven't completely abandoned the guard you kept up all through high school. I was getting a little concerned for a while, thinking you might just throw all caution to the wind."

He nuzzled Derek's neck, rubbing his lips back and forth, tickling him. "I'll love you no matter what you choose to do, but I don't want to see you get hurt. Just take it a day at a time. Jared sounds cool, but I still think Tyrell is a dangerous person. If he hurts you, I'm going to want to hurt him."

Derek stared at Scott, feeling slightly reproachful. "Don't give me that look," Scott said. "If someone hurts you, they'll pay for it one way or another. Don't argue with me on this because

you'll lose."

Derek realized he had no chance of winning, so he remained silent, enjoying the feeling of Scott's arms around him. "Come on, let's go to bed. It's been a long day and an eventful weekend."

Scott closed his laptop and flicked off the desk light. Stripping down to their boxers, they slid into the lofted bed they had been using as their own and Derek snuggled into the embrace that had become their natural position. Although he felt comforted being held by Scott, thoughts of Tyrell kept him from falling to sleep. As agitating as the kid could be, he had a genuine side to him that was likable. The problem was, that likable side rarely revealed itself.

Could he really be dangerous? The idea seemed extreme to him. Scott was probably just being overly protective. Drawing in a deep breath, he let out a yawn, surprised by how tired he really was. As much as he enjoyed college and living with Scott, coming out, meeting people, dealing with people who were so different from himself; it was all so much harder than he had imagined it would be.

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Chapter Ten

Over the next couple of weeks, Derek fell into a comfortable routine with Scott. His classes had picked up in terms of the amount of work they required which kept him busy studying most days. He and Scott spent many evenings in their dorm, hanging out with the other students, watching television and playing ping-pong or foosball. Derek had also taken to mixing as a method for releasing tension. Having Scott and his mixing equipment in the same room was his personal idea of heaven on Earth. In fact, Scott had become much more actively involved in the technical aspect of mixing and had even mixed a few songs which Derek played at some of the parties he had been asked to DJ. Although Scott complained he didn't think his own songs were any good, he became as giddy as a kid in a candy store when he joined Derek at the various parties and saw how the crowd responded.

His music was one aspect of his life from Cambridge he was very happy to have brought with him to BU. Not only did it get him invited to lots of parties, but it made him instantly recognizable by many of the students. He found that he was quickly making friends. Since Scott always came along to the parties, Scott was also meeting lots of people. He had actually met some of the members of the wrestling team and

was excited that pre-season was going to begin in a few weeks. On the weekends, the two of them usually went for long runs. BU was located near the Charles River, although it was an entirely different section of the river from where they had run when in high school. Together, they explored new routes and enjoyed new scenic views which consisted of the urban landscape.

There were only two things that stood in the way of perfect happiness for Derek. First, his growing popularity impacted his comfort level with coming out. The more people recognized him, the less he wanted to put himself in a position to lose everything. The part that rankled him was that he felt himself sliding back into old habits; habits he had been determined to shed. The second thing that bothered him was that he had begun to push the thought of sex with Scott to the side. It had been almost a month since he made the decision to wait and see when Scott would take the initiative. Other than their continued oral sex, which occurred at least once daily if not more often, Scott showed no indication that he was yearning to take that final physical step as a couple. Each time Derek thought about it, he felt himself slip just a little bit further away from Scott and had to work just that much harder to bring himself back. Ironically, Scott was becoming more and more affectionate with Derek in public. He was constantly touching him, draping an arm over his shoulder, running his hand down an arm, even brushing

hair out of his eyes when the wind blew it out of place. The gestures were small, but each touch was like feathers sending whispers of tickling sensation along his skin. They never talked about it, but each time Scott touched him, it erased each time he didn't touch him the way he yearned for in bed at night. Still, in those moments when Scott touched him in public, Derek would glance around at the people watching them. Sometimes no one noticed, but other times, they clearly did. He 118

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would then look at Scott who didn't seem in the slightest bit affected by what others had seen him do. It was in moments like those when Derek wondered why he was keeping his mouth shut. Why he wasn't just telling Scott the things going on in his mind and how he was feeling. The same answer always sounded in his mind and echoed as if mocking him. Because you want him to make the first move. It was Saturday night in late October and Derek was mixing for a party in another dorm in their quad. Scott suggested they go out to dinner before the party, but wouldn't tell Derek where they were going and insisted on paying for everything. Derek didn't like when people paid for him, but there was no arguing with Scott on this. He was adamant and it would have caused more problems than it was worth. "Are you

ready yet?" Scott was becoming impatient.

"I would be if you gave me the slightest hint on where we're going. Then I would know what to wear. Is this a jeans and t-shirt kind of place or a slacks and button-down shirt kind of place?"

Scott gave Derek a steady glare, then softened his demeanor. "If you really want me to tell you, I will. But then it'll ruin the surprise, and I can't wait to see your expression when we get there."

The excitement in Scott's voice melted Derek, making him feel like the most important person in the world. Scott had gone out of his way to plan a special evening for the two of them. What for he had no idea, but it was sweet and romantic.

"Okay, fine." He may have felt all warm and tingly, but he wasn't going to let go of at least a slight twinge of attitude. He realized he was being childish, but Scott already knew he was stubborn so it wouldn't be a big shock to him. Scott smiled, ignoring Derek's tone, and walked over to him. Giving him a sweet kiss on the lips, he looked at the growing pile of clothes on the floor and picked out a pair of khaki slacks and a polo-style collared short-sleeved shirt. Derek threw on some brown dress shoes and allowed Scott to lead him out to the car. At the car, he dropped his keys into

Scott's outstretched hand and got into the passenger seat without argument. It only took a few minutes for him to realize they were headed into Harvard Square. Scott was bubbling over with excitement. "So, do you have any idea what I've planned for us tonight?"

Derek searched his brain for some kind of sarcastic response, but when he looked at Scott and saw the shine in his eyes, he caved and let go of any lingering resentment at being coddled and kept in the dark. "No, you've done an extremely good job of keeping this top-secret. I have no idea and, because you're so excited, I'm beginning to get really excited too."

Scott beamed. "Now that's the attitude I was looking for. Good. Tonight will be amazing. I promise, you'll never forget it."

Derek let Scott's promise sink in as he leaned back in the passenger seat and allowed Scott to park the car. Taking Derek's hand, Scott led him down Massachusetts Avenue and into the heart of Harvard Square. Once Derek got over the shock of Scott 119

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taking his hand, he looked around. They were near Au Bon Pain, the café where they spent a great deal of time together when they lived in Cambridge. As they walked in that direction, Derek wondered why Scott had chosen such dressy clothes for him to wear. When they passed Au Bon Pain, Derek became confused and his excitement piqued. "Okay, are we almost there yet? I really have no idea what you have in store for us."

Scott placed an arm around Derek's shoulder and pulled him close. "Yes, we're almost there. Just another minute or two." Once again, Derek reveled in the affection Scott was showing him and, as promised, after two more minutes of walking, they stood in front of Fire and Ice. They walked in and Scott gave his name. The hostess smiled and walked them to their table.

Derek had wanted to go to Fire and Ice for years but had never gone. It was one of those peculiar things since he grew up so close to the restaurant. This was precisely the kind of thing Scott did to make Derek feel so special.

Looking around, it appeared just as he imagined it would. There were several cooking stations located throughout the restaurant accompanied by rows and rows of various food choices. People lined up, selecting what they wanted and placing their orders with the cooks, then returning to their tables to wait for their meals to be delivered to them. What

had made Fire and Ice so popular when it first opened was that the quality of the food was top notch, but you could choose whatever you wanted from the available items. Seafood, Italian, Chinese, just about anything. It was cool. "I can't believe it. You planned all of this and actually kept it to yourself. How long have you known you were going to take me here?"

Scott laughed. "The truth?" Derek just looked at him and Scott became serious. "I planned it a month ago."

Derek's mouth fell open. "A month...you planned this...I can't believe...wow!"

Scott laughed and this time he didn't control himself. "I always know I did something really right or really wrong when you lose your ability to form coherent sentences. I'm going to go out on a limb here and make a guess that this would be one of the things I did right."

Derek felt a wide grin spread across his face. "I'd say this is one of your best surprises yet." He didn't know what had inspired this well-planned, romantic evening, but love swelled up inside him, filling his chest and threatening to burst out in laughter and tears. "I love you so much. You have no idea."

"That, my very handsome boyfriend, is where you're wrong. You always make me feel how much you love me. How many

times do I have to tell you before you'll finally believe me? No one has ever made me feel more safe or secure than you have." Scott looked at him as if he were a priceless jewel. Locked in his gaze, Derek was unable to draw his eyes away from Scott. "Okay, I'm going to explain myself now, but I want you to promise me something first."

"That depends on what it is."

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"Just promise."

Derek decided playful flirting was an appropriate response.

"Fine, what am I promising you?"

"Promise me you won't get upset when I tell you what I am about to tell you." Scott looked very serious and Derek felt his stomach do a little roll.

"Okay, I promise." He wasn't at all confident he would be able to keep his word, but the cryptic talk was unnerving him.

"Thank you." Scott was so calm and self-assured; Derek relaxed even as he waited for Scott to say whatever it was he

had to say.

"I've been waiting for this specific weekend for the past month." Scott leaned forward in his seat, his eyes sparkling, the Caribbean blues gleaming with life and excitement. A slight flicker of a candle reflected on the wet surface making it appear as if fire was dancing on water. Fire and Ice. "You already know I love you and that you're the best part of my life. We both know living together has been amazing and has only drawn us closer together. I didn't think it was possible to find new things to love about you, but every day, you give me something new to admire, respect, and find irresistible." Heat began to burn at Derek's cheeks and a small lump formed in his throat.

"Every night, when we go to bed, I think of how lucky I am to be with you, that you have chosen me. I know I've let you down. We talked about how things would be once we started college, how we would...you know...have sex once we were living together. I've been holding back. I've been afraid. But lately I've only been excited, wanting you more and more each day. So, I made plans for you and me to be together in a very special way tonight." He leaned in and gently kissed Derek, lips slightly parted, a hint of spearmint flavor from Scott's gum spreading through Derek's mouth. When he pulled back, Scott had a wide smile on his face, his eyes gleaming with a bit of moisture.

“Happy Anniversary!”

Derek gasped. When Scott had been so cryptic about where they were going, he had suspected that it had to do with their anniversary. It was exactly one year ago the two of them had finally realized they were both attracted to each other. It was the first night they kissed and the beginning of their relationship. He had Scott's present in his pocket. It was actually a present for the two of them.

What Scott was saying went beyond celebrating their anniversary. He was talking about their physical relationship. All the stress, the doubts, had been misplaced. Scott wanted him and had planned this evening for the two of them. He'd taken the initiative Derek had been waiting for. Hot tears streamed down his cheeks. Scott smiled and reached across the table, brushing the tears away from Derek's eyes. "I told you to promise me you wouldn't get upset."

Derek laughed as the tears continued to flow. "I know. I'm sorry. I'm just overwhelmed by you. Just when I think you've done the most romantic and loving things I could imagine, you come up with something like this. You did a great job of

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surprising me. My gift pales in comparison.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box. “I got these for the two of us.”

Scott took the box from him and opened it. When he looked inside he gasped.

“Derek, what did you do?”

“I just got us a little something to show our connection.” He took the box from Scott and pulled out the two gold chains with half a heart dangling from each. “It’s cheesy, I know, but I thought it was perfect for us. We’re two parts that make up a better and stronger whole. You don’t have to wear it if you don’t want, but I wanted each of us to have it.”

Scott took one of the chains from Derek, holding it so the half heart lay flat in his hand. After a moment, he looked up, his eyes gleaming with wetness. “I don’t know what to say. This is too much. How could you aff—”

“Mixing parties. And stop. Nothing is too much when it comes to us. Especially now that you planned this evening and I know that you really do want to make love to me.”

“You thought...did I make you think I didn’t want to sleep with you by waiting?”

The wetness in his eyes welled up and a few tears slid down Scott's cheeks. Derek didn't know how to respond. The truth was that Scott had made him question whether he wanted him. "It doesn't matter now. The fact is, you do want me and I want you. Let's make sure we don't forget that in the future."

Scott looked back down at the chain and half heart in his hand, then undid the clasp and secured the chain around his neck. The lights in the restaurant and the candle at their table shone off the chain and half heart's surface, causing it to glimmer. "And there you go. Just when I thought I couldn't love you any more than I do. I've never gone this long feeling this secure and loved."

Derek knew Scott was referring to the fact he had to constantly move while growing up and was never able to set roots. Scott had repeatedly told Derek that his constancy and love was the greatest gift anyone could ever give him.

"I don't know what to say. I love you so much, Scott. Thank you for planning this evening for us. I don't have words to tell you how special this makes me feel and how much it reinforces for me the wonderful man I know you are." Derek could see Scott's lower lip begin to tremble and a lone tear slowly slipped from his eye and began to roll slowly down his cheek. Derek reached across the table and wiped his tear away. Scott smiled and reached into his jacket pocket. "I did get you one more thing. It's nothing much so please don't

object.” He pulled out a card and handed it to Derek. It was simple, but perfect. On the front it said Happy First Anniversary. He opened the card and, on the inside were the words I love you, Scott. That was it. Derek stared at the card for a full minute then looked up at Scott, knowing all of the love he felt for him showed. He didn’t remember what either of them ate, but he knew he would keep that card forever as a reminder of their first anniversary. Once they left the restaurant, they had about an hour before Derek had to go mix for the party. When Scott parked the car in 122

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the lot near their dorm, they got out and stood, looking around. Finally, Derek broke the silence. “Damnit! I wish I didn’t have to do this party tonight. I want to spend the rest of this evening in our dorm room with candles lit and no clothes on at all.”

Scott smiled. “Yes, that idea has definite appeal, but let’s go and have some fun at the party and then we can put your plan into action. There’s no law that says we can’t have both.” A sly smile spread across his face. “In fact, I’ve been planning it along with the dinner for the past month. I can’t believe you’ve allowed us to go so long without complaining about it, but tonight you and I are going to do the one thing we haven’t

done yet. It's taken every ounce of energy and restraint I have to hold off until now."

Derek froze and turned to face him. "What?"

A small crinkle of concern appeared on Scott's forehead. "Oh, I don't mean to assume anything, but I was hoping that... I was thinking we would..." His voice trailed off as he stared at Derek.

A month's worth of anxiety, disappointment, and worry flooded out of Derek in one fast rush. He's been thinking about this for a month. He wanted to wait until the perfect time for the two of us to finally have sex. The realization replaced the void left in the absence of his worries and filled him with a greater excitement and happiness than he had ever felt before. The sensation filled him until he felt he might lift off the ground. Hot tears formed in his eyes and spilled down his cheeks.

"What did I say?" The crinkle on Scott's forehead deepened and he stepped forward so the two of them were mere inches apart.

"No, it's not what you think. These aren't upset tears." He laughed and knew that Scott probably thought he was losing his mind. "It's that I've been waiting for this for so long and I was beginning to wonder if you wanted it like I did."

Scott placed a hand on Derek's shoulder. "I don't want to assume anything here, so let me make sure I understand what you're saying. You didn't know if I wanted to have sex with you?"

He couldn't bring himself to answer. He couldn't even bring himself to raise his head to look into Scott's eyes. "Something like that."

A gentle finger slipped beneath his chin, urging his head up until he was staring directly into Scott's eyes. "Baby, I've been thinking about having sex with you from the first day we started college. I'll admit, I'm terrified. I don't know what to do and I'm afraid I'll do it wrong or something. But don't you spend one second wondering whether I want you."

Derek leaned forward and rested his head against Scott's chest, sliding his arms around Scott's waist. He felt two strong arms around his shoulders and rocked him gently. It wasn't until they had been standing there for several seconds that Derek realized they were hugging in public. He started to pull away. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I did that. I know you don't—"

His words were interrupted by Scott's mouth closing over his. The taste of dinner, the heat of his plump soft lips pressing against his own, the smell of Scott's cologne 123

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mixed together making speech impossible as his senses went into overdrive. When he pulled out of the kiss, he held Derek at arm's length. "You think too much."

Not knowing what to say, he allowed a smile to fall into place and chuckled nervously. "Yeah, I'll have to work on that whole thinking thing."

"Good." Scott placed his arm around Derek's shoulder and guided him toward their dorm.

Back in their room, Derek changed into clothes more suitable for mixing and they headed out together. Throughout the party, students approached him, complimenting his songs and asking if he would be willing to mix for future parties. He agreed to most requests and made a note to himself to get business cards so he could hand them out. It would make planning these events much easier for him. Despite the attention people were paying to him, Derek only had eyes for Scott and could barely keep his concentration on his mixing.

When the party finally ended, Derek was ready to rip his equipment down and drag it across the quad to their dorm

room. Scott managed to slow him enough to actually put his things away properly before they left to go to their room. They walked in silence, a million thoughts running through Derek's mind. The evening had been magical for him, and all of the good feelings running through him centered around Scott. Their dinner together had been the single most romantic experience he had ever had in his life. And now, heading back to their room together, they were about to finally bond the way he had fantasized about for the better part of the last six months.

When they got to their dorm room, Derek felt electrified, unable to control the excitement and energy surging inside him. "Just put the stuff down against the wall. We can deal with it tomorrow."

Scott smiled. "Are you tired? It's been a busy night." He placed the mixing equipment on the floor and Derek put the sound system next to it. In one swift motion, he wrapped his arms around Scott, hugging him tightly and bringing their mouths together. He pulled at Scott's shirt, lifting it up over his shoulders and head. The sudden movement set Scott off balance and he stumbled, laughing as he tried to regain his footing. Falling, they both tumbled to the floor.

Derek rolled on top of Scott, never letting go of his grip and keeping their lips sealed tightly together. Grinding his hips against Scott, his cock stiffened and grew. He pressed

himself against Scott and could feel his erection pressing back against his own. Panting, he removed his lips from Scott's mouth and whispered into his ear. "Take off your clothes." There was a urgency in Derek's voice and he could feel Scott respond to him as he returned the gyrating motion. Between breaths and kisses, Derek panted a few short words. He hadn't planned on saying them, but when they came out, he knew with more certainty than he knew anything else that they were exactly what he wanted. "I want you to be the one to make love to me tonight."

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Scott took in a sharp breath and pulled out of the kiss. "What? I thought we might talk about it first, decide together what you—"

"Are you saying you want me to top you?"

Scott opened his mouth, then closed it. After another minute, he smiled. No. I've been dreaming of being inside you ever since—"

Derek stopped Scott from speaking by capturing him in

another hungry kiss. When he lifted his head, he only spoke a few breathless words. "I've never wanted anything so much." He worked his way down Scott's chest, trailing his tongue down the crease running in the center of his abdomen, and began unbuttoning Scott's pants. His tongue reached the light dusting of hair at Scott's navel and the pungent scent of Scott's sex surrounded him, causing his mind to swim with excitement. Looking down, he caught a glimpse of the enlarged cockhead, visible in the v-opening where his pants had been unbuttoned. The sight only served to fuel his desire even more. Leaning down, he took the head of Scott's cock, into his mouth, he flicked at the tip with his tongue, savoring the salty tang of precum which hit his taste buds and sent currents of stimulation to his own cock.

Scott moaned and pushed his hips upward. "Derek...so hot...wet...my God—"

Derek released Scott's cock, straddled his waist, and placed a finger over his mouth.

"Stop talking. We're both virgins and haven't been with anyone else, so we don't need condoms. We have everything we need. I have been thinking about this since we got back from New York and I got everything then." He leaned over and reached into his top desk drawer, removing a bottle of lubricant.

Scott was smiling, but he also looked nervous. "Derek, I don't want to hurt you. Maybe we should talk—"

Derek kissed Scott again. Pulling out of the kiss several seconds later, he panted a brief instruction "Please, Scott. Shut up! Who's the one who's thinking too much now? This isn't my way of saying thank you for tonight. This is because I love you. I love you and I want you to be the person who I do this with. I never want anyone else to ever do this with me. Please, make love to me. I'm ready and I want you to be inside me. Tonight."

Scott rolled Derek onto his back and cradled his head between his hands. "Are you sure? Is this really what you want?"

"Yes, more than anything. Please."

Scott lowered his head and placed his lips gingerly on Derek's mouth. His tongue gently massaged his lips and slowly worked its way inside. The kiss was slow and wet, tongues tousling against each other. "Do you want me to make love to you right here?"

Derek laughed. "I think I would be more comfortable on the bed." Scott had a serious but gentle look on his face. They both worked their way into bed, Scott raising himself off of Derek by doing a pushup into an upright position, then

reaching down to help Derek off the floor. Derek was the first to climb up the ladder to their lofted bed, followed by Scott whose body brushed against his as they fumbled onto the mattress. 125

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Scott's shirt was off and his pants were already unbuttoned, so he began the process of undressing Derek, pulling his t-shirt up his body and kissing his way up Derek's abdomen as more and more skin was revealed. Once he had removed the shirt and tossed it onto the floor next to his own, he reached down and snapped the first button of Derek's jeans open with one hand, then slid his hand inside the boxer briefs and encircled the straining shaft.

Heat seared though Derek at the touch and he moaned, reaching up and sliding his fingers into Scott's disheveled hair, pulling him down into a hungry kiss while pressing his pelvis into Scott's hand.

Somehow, Scott managed to work Derek's pants over his ass and then used his foot to bring them the rest of the way down his body, kicking them off and over the side of the bed. Lying naked, his cock leaking clear streams of precum onto Scott's hand Derek felt a sudden need to feel all of Scott's

skin against his own. Rolling the two of them over, Derek leaned up on his elbow and reached down with his other hand to begin pushing Scott's pants down over his hips and past his muscled thighs. When he could no longer push the pants from his position, he scooted down Scott's body, kissing his way over nipples and stomach, until his head nestled next to Scott's straining member which bobbed with each heartbeat. Leaning forward, he took Scott into his mouth while he pushed the pants the rest of the way down his legs, removed them, and carelessly dropped them off the bed. He continued to savor the hardness of Scott's shaft and the tang of his fluids in his mouth, then worked his way back up Scott's body until they lay together, face to face silently staring at him.

Derek had dreamed of this evening, this moment, for months. He had convinced himself that there was nothing in the world he wanted more than to feel Scott inside him. But now that the moment was here, that the waiting was finally over, he realized he didn't know what to expect. Will it hurt? Will I be able to do it? What if I have to stop? Question after question raced through his mind until finally he let out a single breathy whisper of a laugh. "I'm scared."

Scott brushed his hand along Derek's cheek, resting it gently along his neck. "I'm scared too. We don't have to do this if you don't want to."

“No. I do. I want to. I’m just scared it’s going to hurt. Can we take our time?”

Scott’s face melted into an expression of adoration and affection. “We can take as much time as you like. You tell me what to do and when to do it. If it hurts, tell me. We can stop any time you want. This isn’t the only time we can do this.”

Derek felt his fear dissipate slightly with Scott’s words of reassurance and understanding. “I promise, I’ll tell you what I’m feeling, but I really want to do this.”

He reached down between their bodies and gripped Scott’s shaft in his hand. Scott’s body shuddered on top of him. Reaching for the lube, Derek flipped the bottle open with his finger and lowered it to the hand holding Scott’s cock. He felt the slickness of

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the lubricant against Scott’s hot skin and it sent charges of anticipation through his body.

Scott released a guttural moan, “Oh, God, Derek. That feels so good. Your hand on me, gliding over my cock, it’s like nothing I’ve ever felt.”

Derek rhythmically massaged Scott's cock beginning at the head and sliding smoothly down the thick and pulsing shaft. Retrieving the bottle of lube, he squirted more into his palm and liberally lubricated Scott. Looking into his eyes, he was caught in a moment of pure connection. Scott was gazing directly at him and, as their eyes locked, he felt as if nothing else in the world existed at that moment. He handed the bottle of lube to Scott. "Put some on your hand and put your finger inside of me."

Scott did as he was asked and reached down between Derek's legs, running the tip of his finger in circles around the outside of Derek's opening. The sensation caused Derek to arch his back, gasping in pleasure. "Are you okay?" Scott asked, his eyes never breaking from Derek's.

"Yes. It feels so good. It's like your finger is hitting every nerve ending around my hole. Please, put it inside me."

Scott slowly applied pressure and his fingertip slipped into the tight ring. Derek sucked in a sharp breath, feeling a burning sting. Scott stopped and looked at Derek with concern clearly evident on his face. Derek grabbed his wrist, preventing him from being able to remove his finger. After a moment, the burning sensation eased and he relaxed his grip on Scott. "More."

Scott gently continued to apply pressure, and inserted the

next segment of his finger into Derek's hole. Once again, Derek felt the burning sensation. "Ah. It burns."

Scott stopped. "Maybe we shouldn't do this. I don't want to hurt you."

"No," Derek pleaded. "It's not a bad feeling. It only hurts for a few seconds, then the burn turns to something incredible. Please, keep going."

Obedying, but watching Derek very carefully, Scott slid the rest of his finger into Derek's hole. Derek felt himself wince as Scott's knuckle rested firmly against the tight rim. Staring into Scott's concerned, caring eyes, all of Derek's muscles relaxed, tension exiting his body. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. It feels so good. And knowing it's your finger inside of me makes it even better." Before Scott could answer, he reached up and cupped the back of Scott's neck, pulling him down into a gentle kiss. It was an open-mouthed kiss, but it wasn't deep and penetrating. Their tongues brushed against each other, flicking gently in circular motions, clean, fluid saliva wetting both of their mouths and lips. When Scott pulled back from the kiss, his eyes, though velvety, still showed concern.

But Derek squeezed the muscles around Scott's finger, intensifying the pleasure. More. He wanted more. "Put

another one in me,” He whispered, hearing the hunger in his own voice.

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Wordlessly, Scott obeyed. His second finger made it in with far less pain. It still caused a burning and stinging sensation, but Scott seemed to be able to sense when his muscles were opening to the new pressure and he waited to continue until he Derek opened to him. “Derek, your body is so hot, and watching your face while I put my fingers inside of you is bringing me right to the edge. You have no idea how sexy you look and how amazing it makes me feel knowing I’m doing this to you.”

Derek pulled Scott’s face to his and kissed him again, deeply this time, pressing their lips firmly together. His need flowed from his mouth and into Scott’s as they devoured each other, savoring tastes and sensations. Derek pulled out of the kiss long enough to make one request, then pulled Scott back into a fierce kiss. “Put your cock inside me.”

Scott gently lifted his head. “Are you sure?”

Derek locked eyes with him. "I can tell you're worried about hurting me, but it's not a bad hurt and it doesn't last long. Please, I've never felt so close to you. I love you. I want you inside me. I want to know that you're inside me when you come."

Losing a sense of everything but the two of them, Derek used his flexibility to his advantage, shifted his position so that his ass was completely open and exposed to Scott, each one resting against Scott's shoulders, his feet up over his head. Scott supported his weight with one arm and guided his cock head to Derek's opening with the other. He slowly pressed forward, his eyes remaining locked on Derek's the entire time.

Derek felt the head of Scott's cock slowly push its way past his tight ring of muscle. As it slid in, Derek drew in a hissing breath and Scott froze. Derek squeezed his eyes shut. The pain he felt as Scott's cock pushed into him was one of searing pain, like a flame was pushing into him. It felt as if someone were stretching him past any reasonable limit and the sting rippled from his hole and throughout his insides.

Knowing that the thought of causing him pain would make this experience bad for Scott, he forced his eyes to remain open and tried to keep a neutral expression on his face. "Stay still for a minute. I just need to get used to this." Scott looked worried, but he remained still and didn't withdraw

from Derek. Taking steady breaths, pacing himself as he did when running, the burn and sting slowly shifted into something else. As if a balm had been applied to sooth the pain, the burn shifted to a soothing warmth. The sting shifted from an abrasive sensation to a heightened stimulation, better than anything he had ever felt. As if clouds had cleared, heat flowed through him like rays of sunshine kissing his skin on a perfect summer day. His body undulated underneath Scott, his muscles quivering with excitement and delicious release. Being filled by Scott, feeling his rock hard shaft pressing at parts of him that had never been touched before, filled him with a combined sense of physical and emotional bliss that brought tears to his eyes.

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Scott had a mixed look of concern and ecstasy on his face. "Derek, I can feel what's happening inside your body. You're feeling better now aren't you? I can tell. Your facial expression has eased and at the same time your body has opened up to me. Your expression is unlike anything I've ever seen."

"More. I want more of you in me."

Obediently, Scott pushed deeper into him, a bit at a time. Just when the new stretch shifted to pain, Scott would stop. As soon as the pain subsided and turned to pleasure, he would continue. It was as if he could read Derek's body and reacted in perfect synchronicity. Knowing Scott was reading him physically caused a new wave of spasms to shoot through his body and he heard Scott gasp at the same moment. Derek looked at him. "Are you okay?"

Scott had difficulty focusing. "I just felt the wave that went through your body. You have no idea how amazing this feels. Knowing I'm inside of you and feeling your body in a way I never have before."

Scott's words drove him mad with desire. He reached down and grabbed Scott's ass, pulling him the rest of the way in so that his cock was entirely embedded within his ass. The burning sting only lasted a few moments, and then Derek felt the full pleasure of being filled and stretched by Scott. The man he loved was all the way inside of him. His very soul soared, floating in ecstasy and the moan that escaped emanated from deep within, reverberating between their bodies.

In the middle of his groan, Scott lowered his head and captured Derek's mouth in a passion-filled kiss, his tongue spearing into his mouth, then winding around to brush over

his teeth and along the insides of his cheeks. Derek thrust his tongue deep into Scott's mouth in return as the two hungrily devoured each other. Slowly pulling his cock out to the head and, just as slowly, pushing it back in, Scott began to build up a rhythm. When he was all the way in, Scott's cock head nudged his prostate. Derek's senses reeled. "That. Feels. So. Fucking. Good." Scott repeated the motion and each time he thrust forward, the same blissful rapture filled Derek's body. Quickening his pace, Scott began to pull out and push back in with a greater speed and force. Each thrust into Derek, sent shocks of ecstasy through his body. Pulling out again, he looked at Derek. "Baby, I want you to come. I'm getting so close I don't know how long I can hold off."

Derek gazed directly at Scott. "Fuck me. I want to feel you come, but I want you to look at me when you do. I want to see your eyes when you come inside me."

Scott began to pump into Derek's ass with fervor. With each thrust the expression on Scott's face became more and more contorted with blissful pleasure. Although it was difficult to maintain control over himself, Derek kept his eyes locked with Scott's which were filled with a wild, animalistic need.

Derek saw the build-up as it occurred in Scott. What started as a slightly dreamlike expression, turned into an intense and amplified expression of elation. Sweat beaded at Scott's temples, dripping down his face and neck, several droplets

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Finally, Scott thrust into Derek and remained buried deep inside him. His mouth opened into a wide oh, but all that came out was a strained whimper as his body shook and trembled.

He felt Scott's cock grow even thicker inside of him and then felt the contraction of Scott's cock moving deep inside of him. Each spasm of his cock sent electric jolts through Derek as his own climax rapidly overtook him. Beginning in the pit of his stomach, a tingling sensation spread like a spider web of electrical current and extended outward in every direction, causing all sensation to become heightened. As his orgasm began, his whole body trembled as he gasped for air. He let his head fall backwards and arched his back with Scott still buried deep inside of him. After what seemed like several minutes, Derek was able to reconnect with his senses. He allowed his body to go limp and looked up at Scott, who had a sweet and love-filled expression on his face. "I wish I had even the faintest clue what was going on in your head just then. You were gone for about thirty seconds. It looked like you went someplace where no one should ever have to come back from."

Derek didn't have words to describe what he had felt. Instead, he pulled Scott to him and kissed him with tenderness. It was a languid kiss, and they savored in each other's sweet taste and musky smell, surrounded by the aroma of their sex and effort. Sensing slickness between them, Derek reached down and realized his chest and abdomen were coated in cum. "Oops, I was so lost in that, I didn't even consider the fact I would be a mess."

Scott laughed. "Derek. I would swim in the stuff if I get to see you look like that again. That was amazing. Being inside you, feeling your body react to each small motion of mine, and then watching your body release the way it did. I don't know how the hell we'll get any work done for the rest of college."

Derek closed his eyes and felt a grin pull at his lips. "Who gives a fuck about studying?" He hugged Scott close. "I'm spent. Should we clean up?"

Scott looked at Derek as if he were crazy. "And which one of us has the energy or the desire to get out of this bed right now. Just shut up and lie in my arms." Derek obeyed, happy that they could so easily slip back into their normal banter after such an intense experience and content to lie in Scott's arms for as long as possible. He wished more intensely than ever that things could always be like this, no worries, no problems, just love. For a few moments, anyway, he put

aside his concerns. Sure enough, they'd be waiting for him when these sweet moments were over...

* * * * *

Derek woke up disoriented. He stretched and his arm knocked against Scott's face. Scott woke with a start, looked around to see what happened, then relaxed and smiled.

"Good morning." He yawned and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. 130

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"Good morning to you." Derek sat up and felt a dull ache in his ass. "Ohhh. That's a new sensation." Recalling the reason for his slight discomfort, he grinned. "Tell me last night wasn't a dream."

Scott rolled onto his side. Gazing down at Derek, he smiled. "Last night was definitely not a dream. I can honestly say it was the most incredible experience ever. You and me, we fit together perfectly. It was like I could read your thoughts and needs and you were responding to mine before I was even aware of what they were."

Derek wished he had the ability to put things into words as well as Scott. Sighing, he pulled Scott into a sweet kiss. "If I could put into words what last night was like for me, I would, but there is no way I can describe the way you made me feel. Not just the physical sensations, but the emotional feelings as well."

Scott raised an eyebrow. "I'd say you just explained it pretty well."

"Maybe, but I wish I could tell you what the emotions were like for me."

Laughing, Scott locked Derek in a playful embrace. "I'm pretty sure I have a good idea. I was there too you know. Your face did a lot of talking for you last night. It was like reading a book the way your expressions showed your feelings. It drove me crazy. I almost lost it several times and had to really concentrate to keep from blowing my load way sooner than I did."

Reaching down between them, Derek took hold of Scott's cock, wrapping his fingers around the thick, hard shaft. "Looks like you're all charged up and ready to go again?" He smiled, wagging his eyebrows suggestively.

"But, didn't you just say you felt slightly uncomfortable?"

"Uh, huh?" Derek felt his smile broaden, Scott's confusion fueling his fun. "But I'm not so worried about that right now."

Scott's cocked his head. "I don't get it. What do you mean?"

Derek pulled Scott into a kiss, rolling them at the same time so that he was lying on top of him. Maintaining the kiss, he gyrated his hips until he had worked himself between Scott's legs. The look of understanding crossing Scott's face, eyes opening a bit wider, the sea blue staring back at him, caused Derek to laugh. "You can say no if you want. We didn't discuss this or anything."

"Are you kidding? After the way you looked last night, I'd be crazy not to see what that fun is all about." Scott pulled Derek back into a kiss while Derek fumbled around the headboard for the bottle of lube he had placed there the night before. Once he found it, he dragged his mouth away from Scott.

"I'll loosen you up the way you loosened me up. If it hurts too much, just tell me and I'll stop." He poured a small mound of lube into his hand and rubbed it around to warm it up. Then, with one hand, he gripped Scott's cock once again, applying pressure and gently twisting his hand in a circular motion to create friction. Scott moaned and his head fell back onto the pillow.

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"Lift your legs a little so I can get at your hole." Scott bent his knees, placing his feet flat on the mattress on either side of Derek. The position angled his hips just right so that Derek had perfect access to Scott's puckered opening. "My God, it's so small. I don't know how I'm gonna fit in there."

Scott let out a single laugh. "I'm sure you'll figure it out."

Derek squeezed Scott's cock, running the pad of his thumb over the tip and evoking a sharp intake of air. "Behave yourself. I'm in charge right now."

The expression of love and submission, pure relaxation, that crossed Scott's face almost made Derek lose it right then, but he managed to stave off his own release and slid his fingers over Scott's hole, who moaned and spread his legs a little bit wider. Running his finger in circles along the taut muscle, Derek was afraid to enter him, knowing how the burn would feel. It wasn't until Scott's voice reached him that he realized he must have been sitting there for a while, contemplating what to do. "You okay up there?"

Shaking his head, Derek chuckled. "Yeah. I don't want to hurt you. I know how this is going to feel."

“Just go slow. What you’re doing feels amazing right now, but I want to experience what you did last night.”

He didn’t need more encouragement than that. Maintaining his grip on Scott’s cock, Derek slid the tip of his finger into Scott’s hole. The muscle immediately contracted, squeezing tightly around the tip of his finger and Scott’s eyes squeezed shut. Derek froze and waited, knowing what Scott was feeling. After a moment, his eyes relaxed and eventually opened. “Jesus Christ that hurt, but I see what you mean. It gets better and then turns into a good feeling.”

Relieved, Derek applied a bit more pressure. “I’ll go slow and let you get used to me.” He continued to enter Scott a bit at a time until he had his entire index finger inside of him. Massaging his cock, Derek probed with his finger. The inside of Scott’s ass was hot and moist, but surprisingly, it was incredibly clean as well. The odors and scents were strong, but not unpleasant. As if it were a concentrated version of Scott and the scent travelled through his body, causing his cock to stand at full attention, a pearly string of precum dripping in a sparkling sun-kissed strand from the tip. Working his second finger into Scott, he got used to the physical responses. Initial tenseness followed by a gradual loosening of muscles until there was virtually no pressure pinching his fingers whatsoever. Testing out his skills, Derek scissored his fingers inside Scott and felt the tips brush

against a smooth surface that was distinct from the walls of his ass. The cock he was holding throbbed with increased force and Scott's eyes shot open, a guttural uhh escaping from somewhere deep inside. "Whatever you just did, do it again. That was amazing."

Derek recalled the same sensation when Scott had hit his glans deep inside his ass and, for a moment, felt a pang of jealousy. But the expression on Scott's face and the way he opened up to him pushed any thought of longing to reverse their roles from his

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mind. This morning he was going to give back to Scott everything Scott had given him the night before.

Removing his fingers, he grabbed the bottle of lube and squeezed some more onto his hand, liberally applying it to his straining cock. "Are you ready for me to try this on you?"

Scott nodded, barely able to form words.

Handing the lube to Scott, Derek focused on his goal, a glistening target which he had just penetrated with his fingers. He had always pictured Scott inside of him, but to be

in a position to enter Scott caused his heart rate to soar and his breathing to become shallow. Aiming the head of his cock to Scott's hole, he ran the head in circles as he had done with his fingers. "Are you sure you want this?"

"Shut up and fuck me." He reached with his hands and grabbed Derek's ass, pulling him forward. Derek's glans pushed past the ring of muscle and another two inches of his cock slid in as well. Scott let out a rugged gasp and his eyes sealed shut as his ass clenched down. "Holy shit!"

Derek tried to pull out, but Scott held him there. It concerned him that Scott had rushed, wanting his first time as a bottom to be pleasurable. The way Scott's hole was clenching around his shaft suggesting his pleasure to pain ratio wasn't properly balanced at the moment. Remembering how it had felt when Scott had entered him, he knew that the speed of his entry probably hurt Scott like holy hell. But he also knew the desire to feel more of Scott inside him and was sure Scott felt the same way. It took a while for Scott's body to adjust, but Derek knew the moment it did. Even before Scott's face relaxed and he told Derek to continue, he had felt the release of tension inside Scott, the pressure squeezing his cock loosening up and allowing him in. Derek maintained control of his movements as he slowly entered Scott, not allowing Scott to make the same mistake he had just made moments earlier. When he was buried all the way inside, his pelvis pressing against the muscled bubble of

Scott's ass, he remained still, savoring the complete sense of heat and silkiness that surrounded his cock. It was like he was reviving the best blow job and hand job in the world all wrapped up in one. There was enough friction to stimulate his nerves beyond any sensation he had ever felt, yet the slick wetness and heat of Scott's insides massaged and soothed him.

Beginning with a slow withdrawal, each sensation registered as new and brilliant. Each newly exposed portion of his cock tickled with the coolness of air, a stark contrast to the heated welcome of being inside of Scott. Pushing back in, the ring of muscle formed itself into a perfect shape, molding to his exact width and creating a deliciously slick friction.

With each journey in and out of Scott's body, the sensations combined until he couldn't distinguish one pleasure from the next. Derek stared into Scott's eyes, looking at the sheer, raw happiness there. Scott's lust combined with his own physical enjoyment, sending sparks and electric waves through him from head to toe. 133

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When Scott's breath became labored, Derek knew he was close. As if a million butterflies were flitting about inside of

Scott, the muscles surrounding his cock began to tremble and ripple with a life of their own, drawing exponential pleasure out of him. He wasn't sure which of them came first, but when Scott's mouth opened into a wide oh, breathless pleasure emitting from him as his cock shot thick ribbons of white, pungent cum over his chest and belly, the tingling inside Derek exploded. He slammed his cock all the way into Scott just as his vision began to haze over with white lights. His orgasm took over his body as he collapsed on top of Scott. He was vaguely aware of arms surrounding his torso and legs locking around his waist, all his attention focused on the hot fluid pumping out of him and into the man he loved. When the wave of pleasure eased and he could open his eyes, Derek stared down at Scott whose expression was filled with dreamy awe. "That was the most amazing thing I've ever felt."

Derek smiled. "I know. It feels good to bottom, doesn't it?"

Scott chuckled. "No. Well, yes, I liked that too, but that's not what I was referring to." He smiled and pulled Derek down on top of him, rolling them over so they lay side by side on the bed. "When you came and I knew you were filling me with you, I never felt so close and connected to you. I won't lie, I'd rather be the one who's on top, but knowing I have part of you inside me right now is a feeling unlike any other I've had. I love you more than anything in the world, Derek."

They spent an idle half hour lounging in bed, Derek snuggled in Scott's arms, talking and holding each other, running their hands over each other's bodies. Finally, Derek managed to summon the energy to sit up, spent and lazy, but wanting to start the day. "I have class in half an hour and I'm having dinner with my parents tonight, so I guess I won't see you until tonight."

Scott sighed and stretched, then rolled over and hugged the pillow to himself. "Tell Henry and Claire I said hi," Scott said.

"Will do." Derek got out of bed, took a shower, then got dressed and grabbed his things. Before he left the room, he turned to Scott who had been watching him the whole time in silence. "I love you."

"I love you too. Happy Anniversary."

At around four o'clock, Derek hopped into his car and a half hour later was home. The house was filled with the smell of roasting chicken and baked potatoes. His mother was sitting in the kitchen with a glass of wine. "Hey, Mom, where's Dad?" He walked over to his mother and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

She rose and gave Derek a long hug. "Hi, honey. I sent him out to pick up some pastries down the street at Lou's Bakery. I actually had an ulterior motive for asking you over to

dinner tonight and I wanted you to myself before your father got home.”

Derek sat down and prepared himself for whatever was about to come. Ever since he had come out to his mother last year and let her know that he and Scott were in a relationship, she had become far more involved in his personal life. In one sense, he was 134

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pleased that she cared so much and made such an effort to accept him for who he was. On the other hand, he had become accustomed to a certain level of freedom and privacy and his mother's new investment of time and advice seemed to be a step backwards in that department.

“I've been thinking about this for a long time now, and I've tried to keep it to myself, but I simply can't any longer. I really think you should tell your father you're gay and about you and Scott.” Derek knew this would come at some point, but he was unprepared for the sudden declaration without any build-up.

“Why do you feel so strongly about this all of a sudden?” He had been thinking a lot about coming out to his father, but

was still curious why it had just now become such an important issue for his mother.

"I've been watching you and Scott and I can tell you two are becoming closer each time we're all together. It's very obvious to someone who knows you the way I do, but like I told you when we first discussed your sexuality, men don't often see things that women do. Mothers see things in their children that most other people don't see. I'm afraid that if you keep this as a secret, it's going to become too big of a burden for you."

She wasn't angry, but she was serious and had evidently given this a lot of thought. "I am one-hundred percent sure that your father will react well."

"What do you mean by burden? I'm fine."

Claire sat down at the kitchen table and motioned for Derek to sit with her. "I know you are, Honey, but as you get closer to Scott, it's going to become more difficult for you to keep your relationship to yourself. I know you and I know you will want the people you love to accept you and Scott for who you really are. Don't you think your father deserves to be a part of that?"

Derek had never considered that his sexuality and his relationship would be something that would cause stress or

discomfort to himself, but the way his mother had explained it made perfect sense. His response was automatic. "Okay, Mom. I've actually been thinking about it a lot and you're right. I think it's time and I agree with you. Dad has shown me over and over again that he loves me and will most likely react well."

The look of surprise that lit his mother's face both saddened and amused Derek and he started to laugh nervously. "What are you laughing at? This was very difficult for me to say. I've been envisioning a big argument about this and imagined dinner would be stressful at best and ruined at worst."

Derek smiled, crossing his arms behind his head and leaning back in his chair, raising the front two legs off the floor, a habit and something his mother had constantly asked him not to do. When she gave him a stern look, he returned the seat to its proper position. "You know what I love about you, Mom? You're always surprising me with your reactions to things. It's funny."

Ignoring his comment, she fixed Derek with a steady gaze. "So you'll tell your dad?" His mother's entire demeanor lifted in eager anticipation. 135

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"Yes, I'll tell him. Next weekend. I want to talk to Scott first and let him know we talked and what I plan on doing. It involves him and I think it's only fair for me to let him know. I'm not just coming out for myself by telling Dad. I'm coming out for Scott as well." Derek watched his mother carefully, looking for any signs of disapproval or dissatisfaction. He saw none.

Claire shifted in her seat, leaning on her elbows and resting her head on her hands which caused her body to angle towards Derek. It was an open and receptive posture.

"Thank you, Derek. You have no idea how much this relieves me for your sake." Her lower lip began to tremble and Derek shook his head, amazed at how often he had witnessed his mother fight back tears, or actually break into tears, over the past six months. A small smirk surfaced on his face. "You're laughing at me again," she said. Derek was saved from having to explain himself by his father's entrance. "Son, could you help me out? I have two more boxes of pastry in the car."

Claire shot up from her seat. "What do you mean two more boxes of pastry? It's just the three of us tonight."

Henry rolled his eyes and placed the box he was carrying on the kitchen counter and the dry cleaning he had picked up over the back of one of the kitchen chairs, which tilted in slow motion, landing with a loud crack on the floor. "I thought I

would send Derek back to school with a box of pastry for his dorm room.”

Claire nodded in approval, but then her expression shifted to one of confusion.

“Wait, I thought you asked Derek to get the two other boxes out of the car. I know math is your subject, but doesn’t that mean you bought three boxes at Lou’s?”

“You caught that, huh? Well, you know how much I love his baked goods. I’ll really enjoy them. What’s the big deal?”

Claire’s face pinked and her lips tensed into thin white lines. “The big deal is your cholesterol Henry. I was going to serve a few pastries tonight and then send the box to school with Derek so you wouldn’t be tempted. Weren’t you just complaining your doctor told you at your last visit that he might have to put you on medication if you didn’t change your diet? I don’t know why you—”

Derek left his parents bickering in the kitchen and went outside to grab the boxes out of his father’s car. When he returned, his father was sitting at the kitchen table with a wide grin and his mother was basting the chicken. Derek looked at his father and saw him clearly mouth the words, She never stays mad at me. Laughing, Derek took a seat next to his dad. It was wonderful that his parents had been

together for so long and still loved each other so much. He knew that telling his father would be a good thing. He was scared, but he knew in the end, his father would still love him. What worried him was how Scott would react about yet another person knowing he was gay. 136

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Chapter Eleven

The next meeting of The Alliance was on a Wednesday night. It was still troubling to Derek that students seemed to segregate themselves into groups. When he started college, he believed his life would expand and he would make friends and spend time with a wide range of different people. It felt as if the opposite were true. People fell into their cliques and their circles of friends became even more cemented than he had experienced in high school.

Additionally, he was frustrated that the few gay people he had actually spent time with tended to exhibit stereotypical behavior. There was Charlotte, Phillip, and Oscar, the bull dyke and her two flaming minions. Then there was Tyrell, militant and brash, putting his sexuality on display and confronting anyone who he perceived as a threat to him. Only Jared seemed like the kind of person Derek could relate to.

He was even tempered and his goal was to expand awareness not just for The Alliance, but for the whole student body. This was something Derek wanted as well. If he could find more people like that, maybe his own conflicted feelings would begin to sort themselves out. On Wednesday night over supper in the cafeteria, Derek shared his thoughts with Scott. Scott listened patiently, as he always did, waiting for Derek to get out what it was he had to say. When Derek finished, Scott sat quietly, taking his time chewing the bite of cheeseburger in his mouth before he spoke. "Derek, why is it so important to you that we come out? What do you think it means if we don't?"

It was a reasonable question and one Derek had been struggling with for the past couple of weeks. "Honestly, I don't know. I thought I was so sure before, but now, my feelings are changing."

Scott's expression softened. "How did you originally feel? I know you hate it when I get all psychologist on you, but just go with it."

Derek pursed his lips, but played along. "Back in high school, when you and I first started our relationship, I felt like something in my life had clicked into place. You were everything I had ever dreamed of in a guy and in a boyfriend. You were so confident and cut through all of my barriers without even seeming to break a sweat. Once I let all of my

guards down, I was overwhelmed by how much love I felt for you. I believed that wasn't something which could or should be hidden. I felt like it would dishonor both of us to deny who we were to each other, even if it meant alienation from others."

"Ok, like I said, that much I already knew. So, how have your feelings changed?"

Scott asked.

"Leading up to our wrestling tournament last year, I'd given a lot of thought to what had caused us to drift so horribly apart. Although I know it was your dad who created the problem, I also acknowledged that I added pressure to the situation and pushed you further away from me by trying to get you to confront your dad. I didn't understand how much control he exerted over you and Shannon or the impact of his treatment of you on your self-confidence."

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Scott winced and opened his mouth to speak. Not willing to allow Scott to take responsibility for their split. Derek pushed

on, but couldn't help notice that Scott's jaw muscles began to ripple with tension. "I know you think you were the one who pushed me away, but that's beside the point right now. We're talking about how my feelings have changed."

Scott relaxed, unclenching his teeth, causing the knotted muscle in his jaw to relax.

"All right, so long as you know I really do believe I was the one who pushed you to become frustrated with me. I needed someone to blame and you were the person closest to me. You know I didn't really want for us to break—"

"Yes, I know. We've gone over it a hundred times. If it makes you happy, then it was all your fault. I can't believe I'm still dating you." He stuck his tongue out at Scott eliciting a chuckle from him. "Can I continue now?"

Scott gestured for him to go on. Derek leaned back in his chair. "After we got back together that second day of the tournament, I realized the important thing was that you and I were together and we loved each other. Coming out seemed a far second in comparison.

"At the beginning of this year, we both agreed that as long as we communicated and never forced the other into a situation which would make them uncomfortable, we would be fine. And now, I'm beginning to realize we don't have to be in the

same place at the same time in terms of coming out. That's a big change for me."

"Is that the only way your perception of coming out has changed or is there more?"

"Isn't that enough?"

Scott didn't respond. Instead, he leaned back in his chair and looked at Derek.

"You know me too well, Scott."

"I love you and I want you to be happy. When I see things which upset or trouble you, I want to be there to help you figure out what you need to do. So, what else is going on?"

His emotions swelled with pure joy. Just looking at Scott, he felt like nothing in the world could go wrong so long as they were together. "I'm a bit jaded right now and it bothers me. I see how groups on campus keep to themselves. Even us, living here around all of the jocks. It's worse than high school."

Derek took a sip from his Coke. "I'm beginning to question if it's really worthwhile to focus on the coming out issue. I'm pushing for one of two reasons and neither of them reflects well on me. Either it's something I need in order to feel

completely free to love you openly without barriers or it's because I feel we shouldn't have to hide who we are to each other just because we both happen to be guys. If it's the first reason, the question is what's so important about coming out? I already feel completely free and open with you. If it's the second reason, the question is why do I care what anyone else thinks? Either way, I'm beginning to see I have no compelling reason for forcing the issue of coming out right now. It makes me question myself and, to be honest, I'm 138

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disappointed I've allowed myself to become so obsessed and to once again put pressure on you; just like in high school."

Scott's expression radiated understanding and acceptance, washing over Derek and making him feel secure. "Derek, you have nothing to be disappointed in yourself about. You're amazing. How many times do I have to say it? You're the most genuine, outgoing, open-hearted person I've ever met and I'm so proud you love me and have chosen me as your boyfriend. It hurts to see you punish yourself for something that's so not a bad thing. There's nothing wrong with you wanting for us to be able to express ourselves openly. I want that too. The only problem is that reality is what it is and

people aren't as open-minded about a gay couple as they are about a straight couple. So, let me ask one final question. What do you think it means if we don't come out openly as boyfriends?"

This was a much easier question for Derek to answer. "Honestly, the most surprising part of all of this is I don't think it means anything if we don't come out publicly. It doesn't change how we feel about each other and that's all that really matters. Breaking down the walls I'd kept up my whole life seemed like the most important thing, second only to us. Then I became fixated on coming out, getting angry at you for not wanting to and thinking you were somehow ashamed of us by remaining private about our relationship." He shook his head, thoughts streaming through his mind at a whirring pace. He only slowed down when his vision blurred and tears began to stream down his cheeks. Utterly caught off guard, he glanced around, heat flooding his cheeks as he looked to see if anyone was watching his breakdown.

"Derek, you need to chill out. You're not living in fear or shame and you're not putting any pressure on me that I can't handle." Scott's voice was calming, like a warm water in a shower soothing his frayed nerves. "There's nothing wrong with exercising a bit of your protective guard to avoid the very real consequences we both could face if we were to come out completely. One consequence could be ridicule and alienation which is what we've both feared."

"I think the bigger thing to fear is whether or not we would become figureheads or mascots for a group we don't necessarily want to represent. I mean look at us. Neither one of us is effeminate. We both are highly athletic, choosing sports and teams as a large part of our identities. There's nothing terrifically unusual about either one of us. What if we became the poster children for new age gay relationship? Then we'd be an image and people wouldn't see us as we really are. They would see us as they want to see us and our ultimate goal of being able to be open about who we are to one another would still have eluded us. I believe we're only really out if we let people know who we are to one another and people actually see us the way we see ourselves. If they see us as something we're not, what's the fucking point?"

Once the words came out of his mouth, Derek was surprised at the sheer logic of what he had said. Maybe Scott was right and he was simply placing too much pressure on himself and on Scott to do something he thought was important, when in reality, it had no bearing whatsoever on who they actually were. "Thank you, Scott. I feel better 139

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now that I got this off my chest and know you still stand

behind me. I couldn't handle it if I didn't have you in my life."

An odd expression crossed over Scott's face. It began as a slight crinkling of his eyes and a pursing of his lips, but then the rest of his body became involved in his actions. He reached back with his hand to rub the back of his neck and captured his bottom lip between his teeth as he always did when he was thinking about something important. When he looked at Derek, the raw passion in his eyes was unmistakable. "I don't fucking believe it!"

"What's the matter?" Derek's heart jumped.

The serious expression broke and Scott started laughing. "I can't believe what I just realized. You and I have just switched places. Maybe not completely, but in essence, you're advocating for showing more caution and I am beginning to feel more conflicted about having to keep things hidden."

Derek shook his head, trying to make sense of Scott's words. "What the hell are you talking about?"

A wide grin crossed Scott's face. "Just now, listening to you talk about how you're feeling and watching you beat yourself up, it killed me. All I wanted to do was to hold you, right here, right now, in the middle of the cafeteria, and make sure you knew everything would be okay. That you're okay and we're fantastic. But I can't do it. Not yet, anyway. And that's

something that needs to change.”

His smile broadened and he leaned forward, excitement causing his eyes to light up. “When we live out loud, it should be to show people who we really are, not how they want to see us. My wanting to comfort you. That’s who we are. I mean who we really are. When one of us is upset, the other physically and emotionally supports him. Why should that have to be limited to our bedroom or in private. Hugging, small kisses, holding hands. These aren’t things which should have to be hidden. We shouldn’t have to fucking hold ourselves back from supporting and loving each other the way we want to. Everyone else can go fuck themselves if they care.”

Derek’s mouth fell open, but no sound came out. He couldn’t believe what Scott had just said and he was filled with a jumble of emotions that threatened to expand within his chest and push all of the air out of his lungs. “I—I...Scott, I don’t know what to say. I can’t believe you just said all that.”

“You know what? Enough of this shit. If I want to hug you, right now, and I’m damn well going to.” He got out of his seat and started to walk around the table. Derek grabbed his hands, forcing him to sit back down. “Wait, cool it. You’re all riled up and you know you make bad choices when you’re emotional. I have a better idea. I was going to talk to you about this anyways, but now, it’s perfect. On Sunday, when I went home

to talk with my mom, she made some good points and I decided to tell my dad about me and us. I told her I wanted to talk to you about it first since it involves you, but I want to do it. I want to tell him this weekend.”

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Derek realized he hadn't let go of Scott's hands, but did nothing to release him and Scott did nothing to pull away. "Right now, maybe it's enough that we can be ourselves around the people who are most important in our lives. We won't have to hide from my family any longer since both of my parents will know. We've never had to hide from Beck. And maybe, what if..." Derek couldn't bring himself to say his final thought out loud.

Scott prodded him along. "What is it? What are you thinking right now?"

Derek inhaled deeply. "What if you came out to Shannon? Your dad is hardly ever around, so most of the time, when we're at your place, we won't have to hide there, either."

Scott's face was difficult to read and Derek felt a momentary

jolt of panic. As if struck by a spark of electricity, Scott's face lit up and his eyes bugged out. "You're absolutely right. I should tell my mom. She loves you and she's stood up to my dad ever since last February when she made him lift my punishment. I'm sure she would feel like Claire did at first, uncomfortable and disappointed, but still loving and accepting of me. Yes, I'll do it. Let's make plans to go home this weekend. Since we won't know how long each of our conversations will take, we can meet up back at the dorm room whenever we're done, but I think this is the best plan we've come up with in a long time."

The conversation couldn't have gone better even if Derek had scripted it. Scott was too good to be true and he constantly proved it over and over again at the most unexpected of times. "Okay. We have a plan. All we have to do is choose whether we should do it on Saturday or Sunday."

Scott bit his lower lip once again as the corner of his mouth began to work its way up the side of his face. Derek loved that seductive look and his cock began to stir as it always did watching him that way. "I say we do it both Saturday and Sunday. But, we can come out to our parents on Saturday."

Derek smiled. He loved how easy it was for the two of them to engage in serious conversations and then fall back into playful and lighthearted back and forth banter. It was the

ease of their relationship that made Scott home to Derek. "Why wait until Saturday? I have nothing to do after my meeting tonight. We can do it all three days, including Friday."

Scott raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Fuck yeah!" Derek stood up, picking up both of their trays. "I'll see you back in the room tonight. He walked off towards the garbage, throwing a slight sway into his walk. Not enough for anyone to notice, but enough so that anyone who was looking would focus on his ass. Knowing how much Scott loved his ass, he knew Scott would notice. Before he left the cafeteria, he turned around to see if Scott was following him. He was still sitting at the table, but had his phone out and was staring at it. Disappointed, Derek turned around and headed out to that evening's meeting of The Alliance. He had barely gotten outside the building when his phone vibrated. Flipping it open, he saw he 141

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had received a text message. It was from Scott. You bastard. I watched you walk out and your ass was so hot I sprang a woody on the spot. Now I'll have to sit here for however long it takes for my dick to calm down. I'm gonna make you pay

for that. Oh and another thing...I love you.

Any disappointment Derek had felt evaporated into the cool night air. He sent a quick text back. Is that a promise or a threat? A few seconds later he received a response. It was one word, Both! Derek laughed out loud, drawing looks from students who were walking nearby. God I love that man so much.

When Derek arrived at the Art Building the conference room where The Alliance was meeting was already teaming with even more people than the previous meeting. As soon as he entered, Tyrell walked up to him. "Hi. I was hoping you would come tonight."

"Hi, Tyrell." Derek still hadn't made up his mind about Tyrell. Most of the time, his behavior was off-putting, but still, there had been a few times he had shown a side to himself Derek could be friends with.

"I saved you a seat over here by me." He motioned to an area at the side of the room. Grabbing Derek by the hand, Tyrell led him to their seats. Derek was surprised Tyrell had taken his hand, but didn't know how to remove it without seeming rude. Maybe Tyrell was trying to be nice. Derek decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. "So, how have you been?"

Tyrell sat down and turned to face Derek. "Things have been fine. I don't like my classes, but I've been hanging out with the people from this group. They all live on this side of campus so we see lots of each other."

Derek felt his mind click as he registered Tyrell's statement. It fit right into his perception that people separated themselves into groups. This comment only reinforced the idea that The Alliance would be no different than any other group he had seen on campus. "Oh, that's cool." He didn't think it was cool at all, but didn't see a point in saying anything about it.

When Jared called the meeting to order, everyone settled down. "Welcome and thank you for coming to our third meeting. Tonight we're going to begin planning some of our events. There are three events that need immediate planning and three of our senior officers will lead groups for that purpose. After I've explained the projects, you can choose which one you wish to work on and meet with that group leader. If you're not interested in working on a committee, the meeting will be shorter than usual. As Jared spoke, Tyrell rested his arm on the back of Derek's chair, slightly brushing his fingers against his upper back. Derek stiffened at the contact and looked around the room. Several students were glancing in their direction. When he turned to face Tyrell, he was nodding towards those same students. Deciding to focus his attention on Jared, Derek pushed his discomfort

aside.

Jared began explaining the three initiatives. "The first project is the Big Brother-Big Sister initiative. As I said before, the university has a rule that you must have 142

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maintained a tleasta 2.0 G P A f o r t w o consecutive semesters t o b e involved i n t h i s s o f r e s h m a n c a n ' t participate. For anyone else, we'll need verification o f y o u r qualifications. Jeff Smith will be running that group." Jeff stood up to face the group. He was a junior, lanky, with shaggy brown hair and pale skin. Sporadic moles dotted his otherwise unblemished profile and his lips were Mick Jagger big. Despite his awkward appearance, his smile was genuine and he seemed like a friendly person. Jared continued. The second project is a fundraiser for the local homeless shelter for abandoned gay youth. Statistically, these kids have a very high depression and suicide rate and the shelter does an amazing job of providing a safe and accepting environment for them. They need money for outreach so more kids will know they have options besides hustling, dealing, or worse. Charlie Wong will be running that group." As Jeff had done, Charlie stood up so people could see who he was. He was also a junior and far more

attractive. He must have had mixed race genealogy as his features were more like Keanu Reeves from The Matrix. In short, he was hot. Well-toned, tall, dark hair, skin with a hint of underlying color and healthy looking. The only thing that would have filled out the image would have been if he were wearing a pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses.

"The final group will be led by me." Jared clasped his hands behind his back, standing before the group, his stance completely unguarded. Derek liked the fact he kept his arms behind his back instead of crossing them over his chest. The posture created an open feeling and displayed confidence. "My initiative isn't tied to a large social issue like the other two, but it's something I've wanted to see happen over the past four years. I will be heading the committee to plan a huge, campus-wide dance. My goal for the dance is to promote integration. I want this to be highly publicized and hope to draw people from all groups and segments of the campus. As I stated in the last meeting, I want to break down walls. Hopefully this dance will help to achieve that."

Jared pointed to three posters which had been taped around the room. They had the names Jeff, Charlie, and Jared written on them. "If you're interested in volunteering for a group, please remain and go to the poster with the name of the person leading the work. If not, thanks for coming and our next meeting will be in three weeks."

Derek was encouraged that very few people left. He knew he was going to go to Jared's group without giving it any thought. He liked Jared and wanted to get to know him better.

As Derek stood to walk over to Jared's group, Tyrell looped his arm around Derek's. "So, which group will you be joining?"

Derek looked at Tyrell's arm and wanted to ask him what he thought he was doing. Before he could, Charlotte, Phillip, and Oscar walked over. "Hey, Tyrell," Charlotte said. "How are you doing?" Derek could see all three of them were pointedly staring at his and Tyrell's joined arms.

"I'm great. Have you met Derek?" Tyrell released Derek's arm, only to place it around his shoulder. "Derek, this is Char...."

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Stepping to the side, Derek interrupted him. "Yes, I met them a while back before the last meeting. How are you doing?"

Phillip blatantly allowed his gaze to run up and down Derek's body before answering. "We're great. How are you and Ty doing?"

Derek was confused. "Who's Ty?"

Tyrell flushed and immediately jumped in. "You know, that's my nick name."

Oscar's expression became suspicious. Tyrell pushed on. "So, which group are you guys going to join?"

Charlotte answered for the group. "We're not going to join any of them. We just stopped by to say hello and to meet Derek. We didn't realize we'd already met him."

Turning to Derek she smiled, although the smile didn't feel friendly. "Ty never shuts up about you."

Tyrell's body tensed. "Okay, well, I'll catch up with you guys later." Charlotte turned to leave and Phillip dutifully followed her. Oscar lingered for a moment, watching Derek and Tyrell, a suspicious look still on his face. Finally he turned and followed his friends. Once they were gone, Tyrell relaxed. Derek wasn't pleased with the whole interaction. "Tyrell, what the hell was that all about?"

Tyrell smiled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you were very touchy feely and you acted as if we know each other really well. I barely know you at all and I don't like to be handled without giving my express permission." Derek could feel his ears heat up and assumed his face was probably flushed.

Tyrell laughed nervously, glancing back in the direction where Charlotte, Phillip, and Oscar had just walked, then turned to face Derek once again. "So, which group are we joining?"

Derek shook his head. "The group I'm joining is the party planning group. I have no idea which group you're joining."

"I'm going wherever you are." He began to follow Derek to Jared's group. Derek stopped in his tracks. Something wasn't right. "What's going on Tyrell? You're acting really weird."

"What? I thought we said we would be friends the last time we hung out."

Derek remembered their conversation. "Yes, friends," he said, emphasizing the word, "and only friends."

Tyrell nodded. "Yeah, yeah. Friends only, I got it."

"Do you? Because it doesn't seem that way. You're acting weird and touching me and stuff."

Tyrell shrugged, an innocent expression on his face. Derek remained wary, but decided not to make a scene in the middle of the meeting. 144

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They walked over to Jared's group which had already begun to discuss the party. Jared was explaining his goals for the party once again. Several art majors, volunteered to promote the party by creating posters which could be duplicated and displayed around the campus. Others agreed to sell tickets and to work the party itself. "What we really need," Jared said, "is some great music. If this party is going to be what I envision, we need music that will really move the crowd. None of these second rate DJs who've been used in the past are good enough. We need music that's going to be remembered. We need people to dance their asses off so they're thinking about how much fun they're having. Great music and lots of dancing will get people together and, hopefully, get people bumping and grinding with others they normally never hang out with."

Derek's pulse sped up. This was the perfect way for him to help out. He raised his hand. Jared looked at him and chuckled. "You don't have to raise your hand, Derek. What

would you like to ask?"

It took Derek a moment to begin speaking. He was surprised Jared had remembered his name. "I mix. I love it and I've been mixing for parties around campus all year. I don't like to brag, but I'm really good. I did it all through high school for our parties and would love to do it for this party free of charge."

Jared's eyes widened slightly. "Really? That sounds awesome. Do you have any samples of what you've mixed? I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but I'm looking for a very specific sound for this party."

Derek nodded. "No offense taken. I totally get that. Yes, I do have pre-recorded mixes. I could burn several different songs for you onto a sample CD. For each song, I basically have twenty others recorded which are identical in style."

The group murmured and broke into small discussions. Jared nodded his head.

"I'm impressed. Very cool."

Once they had planned the party and assigned people things to do to prepare, Jared dismissed the group. He asked Derek to hang back for a moment. Tyrell lingered by his side, but when both Derek and Jared looked at him with questioning expressions, he simply said goodbye and left.

They both watched in silence as Tyrell walked toward the door. Before leaving, he turned and waved. Turning to Derek, Jared said, "I'm really glad you decided to come to the meeting, Derek. I also think it's very generous of you to offer to mix for the party and to do it for free, but we can pay you."

"No, really, I don't want the money. I believe in what you're trying to accomplish. If I can be a part of making it happen the way you're describing it, that's payment enough for me."

Jared assessed Derek. "You mean that, don't you?"

Derek was surprised at the question, but simply stated, "Yes."

"Come on, let's head out." Looking around the room to make sure everything was in order, Jared held the door open for Derek. "I think you'll make a great addition to 145

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The Alliance. I know I only met you briefly at the end of the last meeting, but I can read people pretty quickly."

As they left the Arts Center, Derek pulled his zipper up closer to his neck. The evening breeze carried a sharp chill and

blew against his exposed neck. "I'm having a get together with a couple of the members of the group next week. It's nothing much, just pizza and hanging out in my dorm room. Would you like to come by? You could bring the demo CD if you want."

"Sure, that sounds great." Derek liked the idea of being able to meet more of the gay students on a personal level. If they were friends of Jared's, they were probably nice people who Derek would like as well."

They walked in silence for a few minutes. Eventually, Jared broke the silence.

"Derek?" Jared paused, then, seeming to decide better of saying what was on his mind, remained quiet.

"What is it?"

He bit his lower lip. "Nothing, really. Just, be careful around some of the people you meet in The Alliance. As much as I promote acceptance and integration, not everyone shares my views. There's as much gossip and backstabbing in our group as in any other group. You seem like the kind of guy who keeps pretty quiet. Am I right about that?"

Derek nodded. "I tend to observe before letting my guard down."

“That’s good. It’ll help you. Take your time. Get to know people before you share too much with them. Despite the growing acceptance and visibility of gay people, lots of people still have a problem with us. That’s why I want to have this party.” Jared hesitated, then continued. “But, people outside The Alliance aren’t who really get me upset. They’re either ignorant or need exposure. It’s the members within our own group who do hurtful things that really upset me.”

“I’m not sure I get what you’re trying to say to me.”

Jared sighed. “Nothing. It’s good that you take your time to open up. Wait until you know you can trust someone before you reveal too much about yourself to them.” Jared looked uncomfortable. “I feel like I’m talking badly about people right now and that’s not my style. Sorry if I seem a bit uncomfortable.”

Derek smiled. “Don’t worry about it. I appreciate the advice.” Jared was sweet and he truly seemed to care about other people. This was refreshing after his interactions with Tyrell and his impression of Charlotte, Phillip, and Oscar.

“Okay, well, I’m heading off campus for a bit. I hope you come by next Monday night. Here’s my cell. Give me a call if you get lost or change your mind.” Jared tore a piece of paper out of his notebook and wrote down his number,

handing it to Derek.

"Thanks. I'll burn the C D for you tonight so it's ready for Monday." They shook hands and Derek headed back towards his dorm. He wasn't sure what Jared had been trying to tell him, but maybe it had something to do with Tyrell's actions during the meeting and the way Charlotte, Phillip, and Oscar had looked at the two of them. 146

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Remembering it caused his shoulders to stiffen. Why had Tyrell been so physical with him and why had the other three been looking at him as if...as if what? What was going on at the meeting? A burst of wind interrupted his thoughts and he pulled his coat closer around him. The evening was cold and the crisp smell of clean air surrounded him. Fall was really beginning to set in.

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Chapter Twelve

Saturday came faster than Derek wanted. As much as he was excited by the knowledge his father would soon know about him, he was also nervous. This was not a conversation he had initiated before, except with Beck. When he and his mother talked about his sexuality, his mother had been the one to bring it up. What amazed Derek was how Scott didn't seem nervous at all. In fact, the closer Saturday came, the more calm and sure of himself he seemed to get. Of course, Scott was always the one who remained level headed in a stressful situation. Thinking on it, that was becoming less true. The few times Derek brought up Tyrell's name and the one time Scott met him, he had become tense and angry. Well, finally a chink in his armor. On Saturday morning, they woke up early and lay in bed for a long time. It was a big day for them and, without having to say anything, they knew if they could make the morning last forever, they would. "How are you feeling?" Derek chanced.

"I'm okay. Surprisingly calm actually. It doesn't hurt that Dad won't be home so I know Mom and I won't have any interruptions and there won't be the uncomfortable tension in the house that's there whenever he's around." Scott wrapped his arms around Derek, whose back was pressed against his chest, and squeezed, pulling him even closer. "How about you?"

"I'm fine too. My gut hasn't caught up to my head yet. I know

this will turn out fine, but I'm nervous as hell." Derek ran his fingers along the muscles on Scott's arms wrapped around him. "Mmm, I love it when you hold me like this."

Scott tightened his hold even more. "Well, I suppose we're going to have to get up at some point. Why don't we go for a run? Maybe if we blow off some steam, our nerves will settle."

"That sounds like an awesome idea."

Twenty minutes later, they were dressed in sweats and running shoes, heading towards the Charles River. They ran in silence, observing the landscape of the city. Boston had a few distinguishing landmarks, but that was not what Derek enjoyed about the cityscape. He loved looking at the red and gray hues of the buildings. Many redbrick townhouses, reminiscent of a time long past, lined the skyline. The corners and eaves of the buildings were grey cement slabs of differing lengths, creating a staggered effect and framing the brick walls. He particularly loved the mornings when the sun rose, casting its orange-yellowish hue against them, the reflection seeming to create an iridescent glow over the city which reflected off the surface of the water. It gave a sense of warmth which contrasted the cold, biting air of late autumn. Falling into the trance of his rhythmic breathing and the scenery, Derek felt his nerves begin to unravel and he was able to think more clearly. He knew the conversation with his

father would go well. He just had to get through it.

Looking at Scott, Derek could tell he was lost in thought as well. Beads of sweat dotted his temples and a few of them were running down his cheeks. His neck was 148

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shining as the sun reflected against the sheen of moisture covering his skin. He was so beautifully athletic and masculine, even his sweat turned Derek on. Each time he replayed their lunch from a few days earlier, he had trouble believing Scott had actually said the things he had. In fact, he needed to remind himself it was Scott's idea to come out to his mother. It was a huge step forward for Scott who had been adamant about keeping their relationship and his sexuality private at all costs. When they got back to campus, and returned to their room, Derek was feeling awake and rejuvenated. They hadn't spoken much, but Derek didn't need to speak in order to see that Scott was in high spirits. Just being around him was enough to calm his nerves which had begun to rise once again.

Once showered, they got dressed and drove towards Cambridge. "Do you want to grab a bite to eat before we head to our homes? Maybe we could go to Au Bon Pain.

That's always a winning place for us." Derek knew he was postponing his conversation with his father as long as possible, but he was also hungry. Scott shook his head. "You know everything's going to be fine, right?"

Derek looked at Scott with a weak smile. "I do, but it doesn't change the fact I'm shitting bricks right now."

"Lovely image. Thanks for that." Scott took Derek's hand, twining their fingers together. "It's not supposed to be an easy conversation. None of the important conversations ever are."

"We should eat something anyways. Let's just go and grab a bagel and coffee."

Scott gave Derek's hand a brief squeeze, then released it. "Okay." Derek parked at a meter which seemed to magically become available right as they approached Au Bon Pain. They walked the short distance to the café and grabbed a small table.

"So, the plan remains as we discussed, right?" Scott was watching Derek carefully.

"We spend as much time as we need to with our parents and we meet up at the dorm room by six o'clock. If one or the other of us finishes earlier, fine, but six o'clock is our time to

meet back up.”

Derek nodded. Initially he had thought it strange to set a time limit to their conversations with their parents, but, after thinking about it, the time limit actually provided some comfort and security. He knew that, no matter how the conversation went, there would be a definitive end to it.

Breakfast went by too quickly, filled with meaningless chatter which meant everything to him, until finally, Scott forced Derek to get up and they returned to his car. Derek parked outside Scott's house, his car idling. Scott turned to him and leaned across the console. “You're going to be fine. We both will.” He gently brushed the back of his fingers along the skin of Derek's cheek until they rested along his jaw line. Extending his fingers so they wrapped just around the bend of his neck, Scott pulled Derek towards him and pressed their lips together. The kiss was chaste, filled with caring and love and warmth which reached all the way to Derek's toes. “I love you, Derek.”

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Scott got out of the car, turning to give Derek one last look,

then walked to his front door and let himself in. Derek released a deep sigh and put his car in gear, heading the short five minutes to his own home where his father was waiting for him. When he arrived, he wasn't surprised when the car was missing from the driveway. He had spoken with his mother earlier in the week and decided he wanted to talk to his father alone. Claire had decided to use a hair appointment as an excuse. When Derek walked in, he found his father reading a newspaper in the living room. "Hey, Dad."

Looking up, Henry smiled. "Son, how are you? Your mom went to the hairdresser, but she went out and bought some bagels before her appointment. You hungry?"

"Not really." Not only had he just eaten, but his stomach was tumbling in circles and the thought of food caused him to feel slightly nauseated. He took a seat in a chair facing the couch where his dad was sitting and crossing his legs, uncrossed them, then crossing them once again. Unable to find a comfortable position, he allowed his legs to sprawl open and flung his arms on the armrests of the chair, palms up. Henry placed his newspaper down on the coffee table in front of him and leaned back so he could comfortably face Derek. "Ants in your pants?"

"Something like that. Yeah." Derek swallowed hard and could feel his ears and cheeks begin to burn.

A worried expression crossed his father's face. "Is everything all right, Derek? You look like you aren't feeling well right now. Your face is red. Are you sick?"

"No, not sick. I'm fine. Really." He had rehearsed this talk countless times in his head, but suddenly realized he had never considered how to begin. "Dad, could we go for a walk? There's something I'd like to talk to you about and I could use the fresh air."

Henry's concerned expression deepened, forcing the crease between his eyes to become pronounced. "Sure, Derek. Are you sure everything's all right? You're making me feel a little edgy with your cryptic talk right now."

"Seriously, Dad, everything's fine. I promise. There's just something I need to talk to you about. It's hard for me and I think moving around and fresh air will help me get through it."

Henry's body language seemed to relax, although the worried expression didn't leave his face. "All right, I'll just grab my coat." Getting up from the couch, he walked over to the hallway closet, pulled out his coat, and the two of them stepped out the front door onto the leave strewn, chilly sidewalk and weaved their way down the street in silence.

For a few minutes, Derek looked at the houses of his

neighborhood, recalling memories of his life as a child. He had always been happy living in Cambridge. The familiarity of this place, his home, settled him and provided comfort. "Maybe we could head over towards the elementary school." His father shrugged and allowed Derek to lead.

Derek tested out a few ways to begin the conversation in his head, but nothing seemed right. Just start talking and it will come to you. That advice seemed as good as any. 150

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Taking a deep breath, cool air filled his lungs and made him feel better. "Dad, there's something I've wanted to tell you for a long time, but I've been afraid to. You know how much I want you and mom to be proud of me and I've been worried that this might make you feel...differently towards me." Ok, that wasn't a bad start. Henry stiffened, but quickly recomposed himself. "Derek, I've told you many times how proud I am of you. You're my son and I love you. You can tell me whatever you need to tell me, but one thing I know, how I feel about you will never change."

"I know. Mom told me that over and over, but still—"

"You've already talked to your mother about this?" He

couldn't tell if his father was hurt or upset. Probably both. Oops!

"Yes, but not like this. She brought this up with me. With you, I'm initiating the conversation. It's totally different. And a lot scarier." His dad seemed to understand, but his shoulders remained tightened and slightly raised, causing him to look hunched and older.

Steeling himself, Derek continued. "You've mentioned a few times over the past year that you've seen a change in me; that I've kind of opened up more and seem more confident." His father nodded, but didn't interrupt him. "Well, there's a reason for it. It's because I accepted something I've always known, but have only just recently come to terms with."

Henry slowed his pace, turning the corner which led to Derek's old elementary school. As they walked down the street, Derek continued to formulate how to get past the hard part of the conversation and to actually come out to his dad. He turned to look at the playground. It hadn't changed much since he had matriculated. There was a new swing set and a fairly sophisticated line of slides of varying heights, connected by ramps and ropes. There were huge tractor tires five or six feet in diameter, half buried in the ground. These had been there when he was younger and he had loved to climb on them or hide inside of them. The monkey bar set was also still there. Derek walked into the playground

and sat down on one of the benches where his teachers would sit while his class had recess. His father sat next to him.

Derek looked at his father who sat quietly, waiting, as if he seemed to know that Derek needed to finish whatever it was he had to say. "I've always worked so hard to make sure I fit in. I've protected myself, making sure people never really noticed me or had a reason to think negatively of me. Part of that is because there's been something I thought I needed to hide." He was still dodging the issue and knew it. "Last year, things....changed."

His dad had been listening, but this last comment caused a confused expression to cross his face. "Son, what is it you're trying to tell me?"

Derek took a deep breath. There was no right way to build up to what he wanted to say. There was no prepared speech which would contain the exact words to bring about the desired reaction. He just had to say it and let the chips fall as they may. "What I'm trying to tell you dad, is that....What I want to say is....I want you to know that..."

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"Derek!" His father's outburst surprised him. "I'm sorry, Derek. What is it you want to say?"

Derek closed his eyes. "I want you to know that I'm gay." When he opened his eyes, his father was sitting quietly on the bench. They sat in silence for what felt like two hours, but in reality was probably two minutes.

A myriad of emotions passed over his father's face. Shock, sadness, anger? The last emotion to register was calmness. It was like watching his father spin on a roulette wheel with emotions instead of numbers. He had no idea where his father would land and didn't feel confident enough to make any bets. Finally his father spoke, his voice gentle. "Like I said, Derek, you're my son and I love you no matter what, but can I ask you some questions?"

It wasn't the response he had anticipated from his father, but it was better than anger or disgust. "Sure. Whatever you want."

"How long have you known you're...gay?"

"I don't know the exact moment I first knew, but I was sure back in ninth grade."

His father drew in a deep breath and shook his head. "How can you be so sure about this?"

Derek didn't quite understand the question. "How can I be sure I'm gay? What are you asking me?"

His father's face became red. "I'm just curious how you could know something like that about yourself, especially at such a young age."

"I figured it out when all of the other guys started noticing girls and talking about them. When I wasn't thinking about girls the way they were, that was my first clue. Then, when I started noticing guys and thinking about them the way my other guy friends were talking about girls, I guess I knew."

His father's eyes crinkled at the corners. Derek imagined it must be the image of his son feeling about boys the way he felt about women, but he couldn't be sure. Despite the appearance of discomfort, his father also seemed to understand what Derek meant and there was no sign of rejection in his body language or tone. "Have you ever been with a girl, you know, in that way?"

Derek smiled. In the beginning he had wanted to be able to want girls that way, but his body simply wouldn't respond the way it was supposed to. Rather, it didn't respond to girls the way other boys' bodies did. "No, I haven't."

"Then how do you know for sure?" A hint of hope seemed to flash in his father's eyes.

The glimpse into his father's mind was enough to solidify the direction their conversation needed to take. It reminded him of his conversation with his mother and how she had expressed the dashing of hopes and dreams for him. She had envisioned seeing him married and having children, watching her seed grow and multiply. She had tried to explain how finding out Derek was gay forced her to readjust her hopes for 152

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him and her expectations for his future. It had nothing to do with love, she loved him no matter what, but she had to adjust to a different future. Derek knew without question he was gay. Just like he had done with his mother, he needed to explain why to his father. Knowing what needed to be done settled his nerves. His father wasn't rejecting him, he just wanted to understand. And perhaps, to a degree, he was experiencing the same dashing of hopes his mother had experienced a few months earlier when she confronted him about being gay. Pulling his thoughts out of his head and forcing them back to his dad, he spoke with confidence.

"Because I have had experiences with boys. Well, only one boy. But being with him, it only confirms everything I've ever felt and known about myself. His father wilted. "So, you've had experiences with a boy."

"Yes. Are you upset?" Derek hadn't expected his father to be pleased, but this line of questioning and the expressions he observed suggested his father was struggling with the news. "Does the idea of me being gay make you feel differently towards me?"

He was pretty sure it didn't, but the question had to be asked. The answer was far too important and if there was even a chance that his relationship with his dad would change, he needed to know right away.

His father's head snapped up. Derek could see the shock in his eyes and knew immediately that nothing had changed. "No, absolutely not. I love you and always will. This is big news and I'll admit it throws me and I'll need some time to adjust to it. I also feel a little sad you thought you needed to keep such an important thing about your life from me, but I'm happy you're telling me now and I'm relieved you had your mother to talk to about this."

Derek understood. His father wasn't disappointed and thought no less of him.

"Dad, you and mom didn't do anything to make me feel like I couldn't say anything to you. Figuring things out for myself was scary enough, but the idea of adding you and mom to the mix was terrifying. I guess I didn't give you guys enough credit. But you didn't do anything to make me feel like I couldn't tell you."

His father placed a hand on Derek's shoulder. "Derek, I know what it's like to be young and have to face something which makes you different from others. It's hard. But to face this kind of a difference...I can only imagine how scary it must be. It was scary enough dealing with liking girls, even if I knew my friends were all dealing with the same feelings. But you need to know one thing. No matter what, you are my son and I love you. I may need time to adjust, but I will, we will, and everything will be fine."

Derek felt a lump form in his throat and he fought to swallow it back down.

"Thanks, Dad."

"You have nothing to thank me for." He removed his hand and placed it back on his lap. "I do have one more question."

Derek turned to face him. "What is it?"

"You said that you've experienced things. Are you currently

seeing someone?" His father shifted uncomfortably, staring at his palm instead facing Derek. 153

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"I am." A surge of warmth rose up his spine as he thought of Scott, obliterating the chill of the air. "You know him."

"Scott." His father's voice resonated with realization.

"Yes. Scott." Derek watched his father's face for any sign of his reaction. Henry sat quietly, contemplating all that had been discussed. "Scott's a very nice young man. I've liked him from the very beginning. His father is a serious ass, but Shannon is quite a nice lady. He's a lot like you isn't he?"

Derek was surprised by this comment. "How do you mean?"

"Well, he's level-headed, athletic, makes friends easily. He likes to blend in. I can see it. I can see why you would like someone like Scott." This was more than Derek had dared hope for from his father. "Does his family know about him?"

"He's telling Shannon today. We agreed I would tell you and he would tell her. I don't know when or if he's planning on telling his father." Talking about Scott caused Derek to

wonder how his conversation was going with Shannon. Henry scowled at the mention of Scott's father. "I wouldn't blame him if he never told his father." He closed his mouth and shook his head. "I shouldn't have said that, Derek. I'm sorry. But I'm glad he's telling his mother. Kids shouldn't have to keep secrets from their parents."

Relief filled Derek's body. This conversation had gone well. His father had far better control of his emotions than his mother had when they had this same conversation. It made things much easier.

They got up and headed back to the house. When they got there, Claire had returned. She was standing in the doorway, observing the two of them as they approached the house. Once she saw that they were relaxed and talking comfortably, her posture eased and a smile crossed her face. "You boys hungry?"

Henry looked up. "You bet we are!" He walked up the steps and gave her a kiss on her cheek. She looked between the two of them, then smiled and kissed him back. As Derek passed her, he could see that her eyes had turned slightly red and, as the door closed behind him, he swore he heard a snuffle.

* * * * *

Two hours later, Derek was back in his car with a whole day to kill before he was supposed to meet up with Scott back in their dorm room. His conversation with his father had gone better than expected and he felt a bit restless. Not wanting to be cooped up on campus, he decided to take a chance and drive over to Brandeis to see if Beck was in her room. Other than a few phone calls, they had barely talked and he really missed her. Driving down Mt. Auburn Street towards Watertown, Derek appreciated the nostalgia of the streets of his youth. It was only about twenty minutes to get to Brandeis, and there was no traffic on the Massachusetts Turnpike, so in no time, he was pulling onto the college campus. He had no idea where he was going, so he simply

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parked in the first parking lot and asked someone who looked like they could be a student where Foles Hall was located. As luck would have it, he had chosen a parking lot fairly close to the dormitory.

Walking through the campus, he marveled at how different it was from BU. Where BU had an open feel to it, spilling into the city almost like an extension of it, Brandeis was completely encapsulated. There were big walls surrounding the campus blocking the view to the streets. The dormitories

were much closer together. Rather than seeing vast expanses of grassy quads, the campus seemed to have a large central grassy quad with modern looking dormitories of glass and concrete branching off in all directions. After a few minutes, he found Foles Hall and worked his way to Beck's room. He walked up the stairs and could smell the scent of pot in the hallways. Entering the third floor hallway, he heard various students listening to a full range of music. Finally, he came to room 303. The door was open. He knocked, but there was no response.

"Hello?" There was no response. He knocked a little louder. The room had a small entranceway with closets on either side only allowing a narrow view of the room's interior. He peeked into the room but all he could see was the wall at the opposite end of the room, comprised of two large windows covered with transparent curtains. A desk, piled high with books, soda cans and candy wrappers, stood in front of the windows. Typical Beck.

"Beck? You in there?" Derek was unsure what to do. Should he walk into the room? Beck might be asleep. Or, what if Beck wasn't there and he walked in on her roommate? That would be very uncool. Especially since Beck had told him she had walked in on her roommate, he paused to remember what her exact words had been. Oh yeah, flicking her clit on more than one occasion.

He took a hesitant step into the room and listened for any heavy breathing. Nothing. Taking another step, he peered into the room. "Beck, you in there?" He looked around and saw the room was empty except for two unmade beds, another desk just as untidy as the first, and clothes strewn about the floor. Huh, I wonder why they left the room door open like this and what the fuck? Their room looks like a tornado hit it? Turning to leave, he took a step towards the door just as Beck turned the corner into the room. Neither had expected someone to be there so they both screamed at the top of their lungs.

"Holy mother of fucking crap and all that is fucking holy. Derek, you scared the shit out of me. Wait. Derek! What are you doing here? I can't believe it." She stepped into the room and pulled him in a tight embrace. "I'm so happy to see you." As she hugged him tighter and began patting his back, as if she were a cop frisking him. Derek laughed and squirmed under her ministrations. "What, have you taken on a second job as an airport security agent? I feel like you're searching for concealed weapons." Derek laughed as her fingers probed at his ribs.

"You aren't eating enough. I can feel your bones all through your body. What's up with that?" She wore a concerned expression on her face. 155

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He shook his head and let out a deep sigh. "I weigh exactly the same as I did before. I'm just not wrestling, running, or working out as much so I guess I've lost a little bit of muscle mass." He suddenly realized he hadn't been as concerned about his appearance since he and Scott were so happy together and their new sexcapades were plenty of exercise, but he made a note to begin visiting the athletic complex so he could work out and rebuild his physique. "Anyway, I was home, so I decided to take a chance and swing by to visit you."

Beck stopped frisking Derek and held him at arm's length. "You're a sight for sore eyes. Let's grab something to eat. I'm famished."

Derek hadn't considered how hungry he was until Beck mentioned food. His day had been stressful and he hadn't felt hungry, but now he realized a meal was exactly what he needed. "That sounds like a great idea."

"Excellent. Let's go." Leading the way, she grabbed Derek by the hand. "You won't believe the things I have to tell you. As you know, I've been keeping you informed about my roommate and her, shall we say, friendly ways with the boys."

"Friendly ways? Since when did you begin holding back on what you really think? I believe you described her, the last time we spoke, as the sluttiest piece of trash to ever spread her legs." Derek scratched his temple as if he were checking his memory to verify his claim. "No, I'm sorry, I believe it was the sluttiest piece of trampy trash who spreads wide for anything with a dick."

Beck gave him a bland look. "Almost, sweetie, you forgot the part about her spreading for anything with a dick whether they walked on two or four legs."

"Eew, gross!" Derek laughed. "Now that's the Beck I remember." He hooked his arm inside of Beck's and she leaned into him. "I've missed you, babe. You should come spend a night over at BU with us. It's fucking great. I've even been mixing at school and getting paid for it."

"That's awesome. I'd love to visit. You should come here too. You wouldn't think it with such a small campus, but the parties here are wild." They entered a building a few minutes later and Beck took out her student ID, placing in front of the scanner so it could register her and charge her food account. Derek paid the required money and they headed into the cafeteria. "So, how are things?"

Derek loaded a tray with food and sat down across from Beck. "I just came out to my dad." Beck's eyes widened. "He

was really great about it. I think he took it better than my mom did. At least he didn't cry."

Beck laughed. "You know your mom didn't cry because she was upset. She cried because she loves you and was glad to get everything out in the open." She dipped a fry into some ketchup and popped it into her mouth. "I'm glad everything went well with your dad though. How's Scott?"

Derek leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms behind his head. "He's great. He actually blew my mind the other day."

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"Do tell." An evil grin began to spread across her face and she wagged her eyebrows up and down at him. "And don't leave out any details."

Derek laughed. "It wasn't that kind of blowing, but I've got news on that front as well. He's actually telling Shannon that he's gay right now. It was his idea to do it, not mine. I couldn't believe it. All year, I've been the one pushing for us to be more open, and all of a sudden, just as soon as I began to question whether I'd been misguided in placing such

importance on being out there in the open, Scott is the one who suggested I take the next step. It was incredible.”

“That is a big move for him. Although Shannon is a very cool lady. There isn’t much risk in telling her. But I’m proud of him.” Her head cocked to the side for a moment and she seemed deep in thought. “Wait a minute. Did you just say that you were beginning to question whether or not you should come out and be more open about being gay?”

“Yeah. It’s weird, right? All summer and so far this year, it’s all I seem to think about, and now, just as I’m beginning to wonder if I’ve made too big a deal about it, Scott is the one to push things along.”

“Why did your feelings change?” Beck looked genuinely confused. Derek shared his impressions of the segregation into groups at BU and his distaste for it. He then told her about Tyrell and his over-the-top behavior. Still, he couldn’t just paint Tyrell in a negative light. There was that side to him that Derek hoped might emerge; the genuine person who appeared at irregular intervals.

“I really liked the idea of being able to be friends with someone my own age who’s was going through the same issues and stuff. But the other night Tyrell made me feel really uncomfortable.”

"What do you mean?" Beck had forgotten about the food in front of her and rested her head on her hands facing Derek.

"So, the other night, I'm at the LGBT meeting, and he sits next to me and puts his arm around me. His friends kept looking over like they thought we were together or something. It was really creepy."

"Did you say anything to him?"

Derek shrugged. "Like what? Get your hands off of me. You know me Beck. That's not something I can do very easily."

"I know. But if I'd been there I could have said it for you. What does Scott have to say about this kid?"

"He doesn't like him, obviously, because he doesn't like anyone who makes me feel uncomfortable. He's trying to be supportive and isn't telling me to stay away from Tyrell, probably because he knows that's a sure fire way to cause me to spend time with him, but he also said I should be very careful around Tyrell as well, that he seems like the kind of kid who could cause problems for me." Derek tried to imagine what kind of problems Tyrell could cause, but was unable to think of any. 157

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Beck nodded. "I love Scott. Tell me more about this Tyrell kid."

Derek told Beck of all his interactions with Tyrell. Some of it, Beck had heard before, but in telling the whole story, Derek began to see a clearer picture of what was going on. "You know, I am beginning to see two possible scenarios here. Either Tyrell is legitimately scared to be himself and needs people to give him a great deal of time before he drops his façade, or he's truly militant and wants who and what he wants regardless of how he gets it or who he hurts."

Beck nodded approvingly. "I'm unaccustomed to a healthy dose of cynicism from you, but I must say I like it. I'm leaning toward your second scenario. This guy sounds like someone who believes being gay is the central defining feature of who he is. He sounds like he's taken an interest in you and doesn't really care that you have a boyfriend. I agree with Scott that you should be very careful. When he realizes he's not going to be able to get what he wants from you, he won't be satisfied with just being your friend and may lash out." As Beck spoke, her voice became louder and her cheeks began to flush.

"Beck, you look like your blood-pressure is shooting through the roof. Calm down. It's not like I'm a little kid. I can take

care of myself.'

She turned to face Derek and took a few deep breaths. "It's not that I don't think you can take care of yourself, Derek. But the idea of some dickhead causing you any pain makes me so mad...I swear I would rip his nuts off and run them up a flag pole."

"That's my Beck. Always threatening violence against the male genitalia. I was wondering how long it would take before you promised violence against someone's balls." Derek gave Beck a playful glance, batting his eyes at her. "Feeling better now?"

Beck smiled, then laughed. "Actually, yes, I do feel better now that I have my plan for how to handle this cretin."

"Hey, I just realized you haven't mentioned George. How is he?"

Beck resumed eating, stuffing fries into her mouth at a furious pace. After she had inhaled half of her plate of food, she looked up at Derek. "He and I broke up last week."

"What? Why didn't you call me? Shit Beck, I'm so sorry."

Beck shoved a few more fries into her mouth before continuing. "There's nothing to tell. He came by like usual, but

was acting all weird. We had sex a few times, and then at the end of the weekend he drops a bomb on me. Tells me he met someone and that he and I are through, but he hopes that we can remain friends.”

“Oh my God. What did you do?”

“What do you think I did? I grabbed his balls, squeezed them as tight as I could until he fell to the ground, cursed him and his entire family for about five minutes, then cried as he scampered out of my room.”

“Jeez, Beck. I wish you would have called me.”

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Beck shook her head. “I thought about it, but I was so humiliated that I decided not to tell anyone. But your offer to come to BU and party sounds great. It’s just what I need about now.

Derek let the topic drop, making a note to check in with her more frequently, and they talked about random things until it was time for Derek to leave. “Seriously Beck, you should

come and visit. The Alliance is having a big dance and I'll be mixing for it. Scott and I have an extra bed we don't use in our room. That would be a great night for you to come and party with us."

Beck took Derek's hand and they began walking back to her dorm. "Sounds like a plan. Just let me know when it is." Once Derek said goodbye to Beck, giving her a huge hug and kiss, he headed back to his car. It was four o'clock. If he was lucky, Scott would already be there when he got back to the room. If not, he wouldn't have to wait too long. He hoped Scott's conversation had gone well. If it hadn't, it might set Scott back in terms of how open he had become lately.

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Scott arrived at their room by five-thirty with a wide grin. Closing the door behind him and dropping his jacket on the floor, crossed the room in two steps, and pulled Derek into a tight embrace. "It was good." It was all Scott said before pulling Derek into a long, tender kiss. There was an intensity to the kiss that caused Derek's head to swim. Scott's lips,

which Derek loved for their plump and full sensuousness, covered his mouth. His tongue flitted across Derek's lips a couple of times, begging entrance. Derek opened to him, allowing their tongues to dance and play with one another. Between penetrating kisses, Scott gently nibbled on Derek's lower lip or lowered his head to lick at the sensitive spot on his neck, causing shivers to run throughout his body. Becoming more and more aroused, Derek grabbed Scott's waist, pulling them closer together and grinding himself against Scott, feeling his cock which was just as swollen and rock hard as his own.

After ten minutes, the kissing slowed and they took a moment to breathe. Scott took Derek's face between his hands and gazed at him. "My God. Each time I kiss you I get so lost in it."

Derek's licked his lips which were slightly swollen. "I know exactly what you mean."

Scott kissed Derek once more, then looked around the room. "We really need to get a couch or something."

Derek laughed at the sudden shift in conversation. "I'll get right on that. So, tell me about your conversation with Shannon."

Scott pulled a desk chair out from under one of the beds and

sat down, motioning for Derek to do the same. Derek grabbed the other chair and they sat facing one another in the middle of the room. It was comical, almost like they were sitting in an interrogation room. "See what I mean? A couch would be much better than this."

"Whatever. Tell me about the conversation." Derek wanted details.

"Okay. When I got home, my mom looked kind of nervous. I found that odd and, at first, wasn't sure what was going on. She sat me down in the living room and just looked at me for the longest time. Finally I broke the silence and asked if anything was wrong. She said I had never called her specifically to talk before and was worried I had some horrible news to share with her. I wasn't sure whether telling her I'm gay was going to fall into the horrible-news-category, but at least I knew she was prepared for something serious."

Derek watched Scott. He was practically bouncing in his seat as he talked. "So, I dodged around the topic for a while, not sure what to say or how to begin. All the while, my mom looked like she was getting more and more nervous. So finally, I told said I didn't have anything bad to tell her, but that I wanted her to prepare herself to be surprised. Then I told her I'm gay."

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Derek nodded, recalling how difficult it had been for him to get the words out.

“What did she do?”

“She was quiet for a few minutes.” Scott eyes became slightly withdrawn as if he were picturing the moment between he and his mother. “But then she walked over to me and gave me a big hug. It caught me totally off guard and I still didn’t know whether her reaction was one of shock, sadness, acceptance, or some combination of all of those emotions. When she let me go, she was smiling. Can you believe it? The woman had this shit eating grin on her face.”

Derek laughed despite the seriousness of the conversation. “Why was she smiling?”

Scott’s shook his head. “Because she said she already knew.”

Derek remembered his conversation with his own mother. “Actually, yes, I can believe that. It was the same way with my mom.”

Scott nodded. "Well, I guess I should have remembered that when I was talking to my mom, but I was so focused on getting through the conversation nothing else came into my mind at the time." His serious expression broke and he grinned once again, bringing out the dimples Derek loved so much. "Then, after another few seconds, she smacked me upside the head."

"What? Why did she do that?" Derek couldn't help the slight chuckle that escaped him.

"She told me never to scare her like that again. She thought I was going to tell her I was sick or failing out of school or something. She was really awesome, Derek. She told me that she loved me no matter what and that as long as I'm happy, she's happy."

As thrilled as he was for Scott, a piece of him sank since Scott hadn't mentioned anything about telling her about the two of them. He didn't have a chance to ask before Scott provided the information. "You should have seen her face when I told her about you and me. It was like I had given her a Christmas present. She actually said she was thrilled you and I were in a relationship and she wants us to come over very soon so she can cook us dinner. She loves you, you know. She loves that you've been such a rock for me and she's grateful you've stuck by my side through everything."

Derek hugged Scott and nuzzled into his neck. Placing his mouth next to Scott's ear, he whispered, "I am glad she likes me. It makes things much easier for both of us," then placed a gentle kiss on his neck.

Whatever thoughts had crept into Scott's head, he snapped back to his happiness as he continued to recount his talk with his mother. It warmed Derek to see Scott like this. If the conversation had gone badly, it could have set them back. Instead, being out to their parents could only serve to bring them even closer together and hopefully make it easier for them to be more affectionate with one another. Derek quickly pushed the last thought from his mind. This is no time to start pushing him. He came out to Shannon. That's awesome for both of us.

"After we talked about when I knew I was gay and how you and I got together, she started asking me about your family and whether they knew. I told her your mom had 161

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known since last year and you were telling your dad today, the same time I was telling her. Then I got really nervous for you, worrying how the conversation was going between the two of you. How did it go, by the way?"

As Derek recounted his conversation with his dad, Scott was attentive but his face lifted into the sexy lopsided grin that always distracted Derek and caused him to become aroused. It took him a while to tell his story since each glance at Scott made him think of jumping on top of him, but he finally got through it and let out a deep sigh of relief. "You really need to stop with that devilish, crooked smile of yours when I am trying to speak. It turns my brain to mush and I can't think."

Scott got up from his chair, placing the most seductive, sly grin on his face Derek had ever seen. "You mean, when I smile like this, you can't think?"

Derek sputtered, trying to say the word yes.

"And when I kiss you here," Scott kissed him on the sensitive spot on his neck,

"you lose your ability to form sentences?"

A pleasurable shudder passed through his whole body and his cock began to lengthen in his pants.

"And when I kiss you like this," Scott leaned in and kissed Derek deeply, twining his fingers in Derek's hair and pulling them close together. When he pulled back from the kiss, he looked Derek in the eyes. "What does that do to you?"

Derek took a moment to allow his brain to catch up to his senses. When he was able to focus, he laughed, wiggling his hips to try to dislodge his cock which was now a tangled mess in his briefs. "Bastard!" was all he could muster. Scott laughed and released Derek. "Come on, it's getting kind of steamy in here. Unless we're going to actually do something about it, maybe we should head out and grab something to eat.

Derek considered his options. Eat food or rip Scott's clothes off. There was only one choice. "Uh, eat, then this." He palmed Scott's groin and rubbed his hardened cock through his jeans.

Scott let out a moan. "Are you sure that's the order you want it?" He reached down and grabbed Derek's cock as well.

"No." Derek lost all control. Dropping to his knees, he began to feverishly work at unbuckling Scott's belt, crawling towards the wall as he did so, forcing Scott to back up with him. Once Scott's back was pressed against the wall, Derek looked up at him with what he was sure must be hungry eyes. "I'm going to let you see what it's like not being able to form coherent sentences for a change."

Scott's eyes widened, then closed as Derek freed his cock from his pants and wrapped his hand around the shaft.

"Mmm. Your hand is so warm."

Derek gave a few long strokes, watching the head begin to glisten with precum with each upward stroke. Leaning forward, he licked the head, allowing Scott's sweet tanginess to fill his senses and causing his own cock to throb in his pants. Taking Scott 162

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into his mouth, he could hear the sharp intake of breath. Devouring the entire length, Derek quickly undid his own pants and freed his cock.

With one hand firmly grasping Scott's erection and the other massaging his own, Derek increased the pace of his suction, allowing the slickness of his saliva to help Scott's cock slide easily down his throat. With slow twisting motions of his hand to increase the friction, he drew sputtering, guttural sounds out of Scott. Precum freely flowed into his mouth and the scent of musky sex filled the air around him, causing Derek to lose himself in the sensations and tastes. Forgetting where he was, he buried his face until his lips pressed against Scott's pelvis. Feeling Scott's cock push past the confines of his throat, Derek was glad the two of them had made a point of expanding their education by

studying the fine art of oral sex. Knowing how to take all of Scott down his throat without gagging had become one of his favorite courses during his first semester.

Scott grabbed Derek's head and fucked his mouth, babbling single word statements. "Oh....feels....good...yes!"

Derek gripped his own cock and stroked it in time with the motion of his head. Each slide of Scott's cock in and out of his mouth was match by Derek strokes along his own shaft. A tingling sensation began in his stomach and worked its way down towards his balls. He had wanted to turn Scott into a sputtering mess of pleasure and knowing he had succeeded, threw him right over the edge. The tingling sensation intensified, then exploded outward, sending shock waves of bliss throughout Derek's body. His cock pulsed in his hand, coating it with thick, hot cum, causing the skin to become slick.

Just as his spasms began to subside, Scott's body began to buck and the grasp on his head became tighter. After a few seconds, Scott shouted out and thrust all the way down Derek's throat. "God...coming." Derek could feel Scott's cock pulse in his throat as he tasted the pungent flavor of Scott's cum. Once his orgasm subsided, Derek placed his hand around the base of Scott's cock and siphoned the remaining cum into his eager mouth.

Scott shuddered as Derek released his cock, then reached down, hooking his hands beneath Derek's shoulders. He helped him into a standing position and pulled Derek into a fierce kiss which lasted for a few minutes. When they finally pulled apart, Scott's hair was bedraggled, looking sexy as hell. In a tone that was more rasp than voice, Scott uttered four simple words. "That was fucking amazing."

Derek smiled and kissed Scott sweetly on the lips. "Yes, I achieved what I had hoped to achieve."

"What was that?" Scott had a curious look on his face.

"I wanted to give you a taste of your own medicine and reduce you to incoherent speech for a change."

Scott laughed. "That's right. You said you wanted to do that. Feel free to reduce me to a garbling mess whenever you want. Come on. I'm starving. Let's go eat. 163

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After cleaning, they headed to the cafeteria. It was already dark out and the crisp evening air soothed Derek after the intense workout session from a few minutes earlier.

"Do you think we could just walk around a little bit? I kind of worked myself into a frenzy back in the room and being outside is really helping to cool me down."

"Whatever you want. Lead the way." Scott fell into step beside Derek and, for a moment, it felt like he was going to hold his hand, but instead, he bumped his shoulder against Derek's playfully.

Slightly disappointed, Derek shook off the feeling. This had been a good day and he wasn't going to let his obsession with public displays of affection ruin the step they had both taken. Heading across campus, there were very few students out. Whether it was due to the cold or because most were probably already eating, he didn't know, but Derek enjoyed the privacy. As they walked, he realized he was headed in the direction of the Arts Center. It was odd, since he didn't have a destination in mind. Perhaps it was just because this was the only other part of campus, besides the Student Center, where he spent any real time.

Scott, seeming to sense Derek was deep in thought, remained quiet. Finally, their silence was interrupted by the loud grumbling of Scott's stomach. "I think he's trying to tell us something." Scott laughed and rubbed his belly. "It's okay, you'll get some food soon." He said it as if he were placating a toddler.

“Let’s head over to the cafeteria. I’ve eaten here before meetings of The Alliance.”

Derek began to head in the direction of the cafeteria with Scott close on his heels. Once they were inside, Derek felt a blanket of warmth envelope him and needed to take off his jacket. “Damn. I didn’t realize how cold it was.”

Scott paid no attention, making a bee line for the food. Derek giggled, shaking his head at Scott’s single-minded focus, and followed him. Once seated, Scott was able to refocus his attention on Derek, a heaping pile of food on his plate. “I’m starving.” With that, he took an enormous bite of his chicken parmesan sub and began chewing, a chunk of the sandwich still protruding from his mouth.

Although the sight wasn’t pretty, Derek still couldn’t draw his eyes away from Scott. “I think I need a shrink.”

Scott glanced at him, an odd expression in his eyes. “Why?” he said in a muffled, food-stuffed voice.

“Because I’m getting turned on watching you eat your food like a caveman. That’s just not right.”

Scott shook his head and smiled, tomato sauce coating his normally white teeth. “I can’t help it if everything I do makes you horny. It’s a curse. I’ve learned to live with it.”

Derek kicked him under the table. "Yeah, it's a curse all right."

They continued with their flirtatious banter until their conversation was interrupted by a loud voice. "Derek? Is that you?"

Looking up, he saw Charlotte, flanked on either side by Phillip and Oscar. "Hey, Charlotte. Phillip. Oscar. How are you?"

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They stared at him not saying anything for a moment, switching their gaze between him and Scott, who simply stared at them, confused and not knowing what to say.

"Who's that?" Charlotte's voice sounded like the question had been more of an accusation rather than in inquiry as she pointed a stubby finger at Scott.

"I'm sorry. This is Scott. Scott, these are some of the people in The Alliance. I think I've told you about them. This is Charlotte, Phillip, and Oscar." He pointed to each of them as

he introduced them to Scott.

Charlotte turned to assess Scott with a disapproving glare, then returned to focus her attention on Derek. "Does Tyrell know you're over on this side of campus eating with... Scott?" The way she hesitated and her tone of voice made Scott's name sound like a curse word coming from her mouth.

"Uh, no. Why would he?" Derek had no idea where Charlotte was going with this.

"Oh, I don't know. He is your boyfriend after all." She folded her arms across her chest, never wavering in her fiery gaze.

Derek panicked for a moment. How could Charlotte know that Scott was his boyfriend? He hadn't told anyone at school about them. Looking at Scott, he could see he had become tense and was glowering at the unwelcome visitors. "Charlotte, how did you—"

"I mean seriously, did you really think you could bring some guy over to this side of campus and think that one of us wouldn't run and tell your boyfriend after we saw you?" After her question, she turned her acidic gaze at Scott who actually seemed to shrink a bit under her scowl.

It took Derek a moment to process what she had just said.

"Did you just call Tyrell my boyfriend? Where in the hell would you get an idea like that?"

Both Phillip and Oscar shifted uncomfortably where they stood, confused looks crossing their faces. Charlotte, however, maintained her position of indignation. "Don't you try and weasel your way out of being caught. Do you think you can play games with me? Tyrell's told us all about your relationship and I'm going to tell him you were here with another guy." She sharpened her focus on Derek and he wondered if she was trying to shoot laser beams through him. All she was accomplishing was to piss him off.

"Okay, enough of this shit, Charlotte. First of all, I'll eat with whomever I please. Second of all—"

"Don't you dare talk to me like that or try to get defen—"

"Second of all," his voice came out as a shout and drew a few stares from the students at surrounding tables, "Tyrell and I are not boyfriends. I don't care what he's told you and you can go tell him whatever the fuck you want." Derek began to shift in his seat, growing more agitated by the second. Looking at Scott, the tension which had been on his face was now replaced by clear understanding. Oscar, who had been silent throughout the entire encounter, spoke up. "You mean, you and Tyrell aren't going out?"

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Derek turned to Oscar. "No. We're not!"

"I knew it. I knew it. Something was off at the last Alliance meeting." Oscar held his hand to his chin signifying deep thought. "I mean, Tyrell was trying to get all touchy feely with you, and you were trying to keep a fair distance from him. It didn't look like the body language of two people who were together as a couple."

Derek calmed down slightly. "Wait, what exactly has Tyrell said?"

Charlotte, who had lost a great deal of her authoritative demeanor, looked around uncomfortably. "He said the two of you clicked at freshman orientation and after the meeting when you came to of The Alliance, the two of you started dating."

Scott, who had remained surprisingly quiet throughout the entire interaction, stood, the full bearing of his height and presence coming into play. Turning so he was facing Charlotte nose to nose, he lifted his hand and poked her with

a stiff finger in the middle of her chest, punctuating his comments. "Well, you can tell your friend Tyrell, that if he has any other rumors he wishes to spread about Derek, he'll have to answer to me."

Both Phillip and Oscar backed up a few paces, wearing expressions of fear and intrigue on their faces. Charlotte, to her credit, held her ground. "Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm Scott, thanks for asking, and Derek is my best friend. Anyone who creates a problem for him will have to answer to me." Derek started to protest, but Scott put up a hand to silence him. "Wait, Derek. I'm not saying you can't take care of yourself. You know that. But you're too nice." Narrowing his eyes at Charlotte, he leaned in even closer to her. "I'm not nice, however! Make sure Tyrell knows it."

Charlotte continued to glare at Scott for a moment, then turned and walked away with Phillip and Oscar scampering in her wake. Sitting back down, Scott placed his head in his hands, releasing an audible sigh, then lifted his head and looked at Derek.

"Are you okay?"

Derek was stunned. Not only had Charlotte just divulged that Tyrell was telling people they were boyfriends, but she had also accused Derek of cheating on him with Scott. "I think so.

You know that what she said isn't true, right?" It was a ridiculous question, but somehow he felt it needed to be asked.

"Of course I know it's not true. I'm asking if you're okay because that cow just created a pretty serious scene. I told you that Tyrell kid was trouble. You're just now figuring out what I knew all along." Scott shook his head, his hands still clenched into balls. "I warned you that once he figured out he couldn't have what he was after, things would get ugly. You do realize what's going to happen next, don't you?"

Derek listened, surprised by the calm, even tone of Scott's voice. "I guess the next time I see him we'll have to have a serious conversation and I'll let him know we can't be friends."

"No, that's not what's going to happen next. I'm not going to forbid you from talking to anyone, but Tyrell just became your enemy."

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Derek shook his head. "Come on. I've never had an enemy in my life. People don't hate me. I'm not the type of person who elicits those kinds of feelings in others."

"No, in normal people you don't. But don't think for a second that you don't draw strong emotions out of people. You're easy to love. I love you. That's about as strong an emotion as one can feel, right?" Derek nodded in agreement. "Then why do you think it's impossible for someone to hate you?" Derek had no reply. "Charlotte is going to go back to Tyrell and tell him what just happened. Whatever little fantasy he was trying to play is now over and he'll be humiliated. You don't think

that he's going to try to retaliate?"

Derek hadn't given it much thought. He hadn't thought much about Tyrell at all other than the few times they had been together in orientation and at Alliance meetings.

"What do you think he might do?"

"I don't know. But if he hurts you, and I don't mean physically, I know you can defend yourself. But if he does hurt you, I'm stepping in." Scott's expression was simple to read. He was going to kick Tyrell's ass.

"I understand, but hopefully it won't come to that. I'm just glad you didn't think that any of that was true."

Scott stood up. "Come on, let's go back to the room."

As they walked back out into the chilled night air, Derek's head began to clear. Scott took Derek's hand and twined their fingers together. After a few minutes, he stopped and turned to face him. "Derek, I don't want you to worry about what I think. I trust you. I know you're mine and would never do anything to hurt or betray me. Please, don't ever think I could possibly doubt you." He pulled Derek into a hug. Derek allowed himself to be held, feeling Scott's warm breath on his cheek. "You're taking a pretty big risk holding my hand and hugging me out in the open like this."

Scott laughed into Derek's hair. "I did look around to make sure we were alone. But, maybe I'm also beginning to realize some things are more important to me than keeping secrets."

They walked the rest of the way to the dorm in silence, holding hands. Derek was still shaken by the confrontation in the cafeteria, but even more than that, he was concerned by Scott's behavior. Scott was changing too quickly, becoming open faster than Derek would have expected. Knowing Scott's tendency to react before thinking, he worried that this new openness was in response to wanting to protect Derek and not out of a true readiness to behave as a couple for everyone to see. 167

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Chapter Fourteen

That night, they went to bed in silence, just holding each other. Derek wasn't sure whether Scott was upset or simply processing what had happened. One thing he knew for sure. Scott was pissed and Tyrell had better back off. The next morning, Derek had earlier classes than Scott, so he tried to keep as quiet as possible. Getting showered and dressed, he crept out of the room, headed out of the dorm, and

towards the building which housed his sociology class. Derek hadn't even taken five steps when he was stopped by someone calling his name from behind him. "Derek. I want to talk to you." The voice sounded angry. Turning around slowly, he was confronted with Tyrell. "What in the hell are you doing here? Haven't you created enough drama and trouble?"

"Me? You think I'm the one who's caused trouble? Do you have any idea how much shit I've had to take all night because of you and your friend?" Tyrell took a step towards Derek, his finger pointing directly at his chest. "When I got to my dorm last night, Charlotte, Phillip, and Oscar were waiting for me. They told me what you and your friend said at dinner."

Derek wasn't sure what to make of Tyrell's anger. There was nothing between the two of them, so he couldn't figure out what could possibly cause him to become so irrational. It was then that it dawned on him how Tyrell must have trekked across campus and hung outside his dorm waiting for him to come out. A twinge of fear crept up Derek's spine, fingers of ice leaving a trail of shivering cold in its wake. The way Tyrell emphasized the word friend, the whole situation, it all felt menacing to him.

"Tyrell, I don't know what they said to you, but they seemed to be under the impression you and I were a couple. How did that happen?"

Tyrell took another step towards Derek. "Oh, come off it. You know something's been developing between us. The way you pay attention to my stories and tell me off when I'm being an ass. No one puts that kind of energy into someone unless they like them. You even said you could see some things in me you liked."

"As a friend, Tyrell. Not as a boyfriend." Derek was trying to remain calm and to keep his voice level. He didn't want to draw this kind of attention to himself. "If you thought otherwise, I'm sorry. You were mistaken."

An expression of shock crossed Tyrell's face which was replaced by rage moments later. "Who do you think you're trying to kid? You know there's something brewing between us. In all my life, no one has ever wanted anything from me except sex. You actually spend time talking to me. You know as well as I do that you wouldn't pay attention to me if you didn't like me."

Derek dared to take a step forward. He reached out to touch Tyrell's shoulder.

"Look, I don't know what your life has been like and if guys have just used you, that's awful. I'm sorry. But it doesn't mean I'm interested in you that way."

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A few students came out of Derek's dorm just as Tyrell swatted Derek's hand from his shoulder. "Don't bullshit me, Derek. I can tell when someone wants me and you want me."

His dorm mates froze, watching the two of them. Derek glanced nervously around.

"Would you please keep your voice down? You don't have to turn this into a huge scene." He stepped away from Tyrell, putting a little distance between the two of them.

"You want to see a scene. Listen to me, Derek. You either come clean to my friends about what we are to one another or I'm going to out you to the whole fucking school."

He crossed his arms in a defiant manner waiting to see what Derek had to say. Derek's heart skipped a beat and he panicked, but quickly regained control of himself. "Tyrell, I think you should leave. There's nothing between us. There has never been anything between us. Quite frankly, you're freaking me out. It's like you're some sort of stalker. If you told your friends we were together, that's a hole you dug for yourself. It's not my job to pull you out of it."

Derek's heart was racing, yet he could tell that his exterior remained controlled and cool. It caused him extreme discomfort saying hurtful things, even if they were true, and the crowd outside his dorm was beginning to grow. These were people he knew and there was no doubt they overheard him and Tyrell.

Tyrell's face turned red. "You'll be sorry you said that, Derek. Trust me. I'll make you pay for what you've done." He stood with his hands on his hips and didn't move. Derek's mouth became dry and he found it difficult to swallow. Before he could say anything else, Ron, Elizabeth's boyfriend, stepped up to them. "Is everything okay, Derek?"

Derek didn't know what to say or do. Reading the situation, Ron stepped between the two of them and faced Tyrell, looking tall and menacing. "I think you should leave."

Tyrell looked at Ron, then glared at Derek before turning on his heels and storming off. Derek released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "Thanks," he whispered, just as his legs began to give. Quickly recomposing himself, he hooked his bag over his shoulder and took in another deep breath.

"No problem. Who in the hell was that guy?" Ron had a concerned expression and walked over to Derek, placing his arm around his shoulder.

“Just someone I met during orientation and in...in The Alliance.” He was sure most people probably knew what The Alliance was, so he had essentially outed himself to several members of his dorm.

Ron responded without a moment to pause. “Well, whoever he is, he better stay the fuck away from here.” A number of his dorm mates grumbled their agreement. “What a fuckin’ jackass.”

Derek glanced around at his friends surrounding him and suddenly, his eyes became blurry. Not wanting to lose it in front of everyone, he thanked Ron and headed in the direction of his first class. Once he was out of sight, he sat down on the ground and the tears started flowing freely. It took him several minutes to pull himself together. 169

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During class, he was unable to concentrate. Sitting in his seat, facing his professor, with his notebook open and pen in hand, all he could do was think of what had happened to him. Tyrell had waited outside his dorm to confront him in a public and embarrassing way. People he lived with had witnessed it, and although Ron had come to his rescue, they now knew

he was gay. By the end of the day most of his dorm would probably know.

It was a nightmare and he couldn't wake up from it. All his life he had been so careful to protect himself from exactly this type of situation. He had always kept his private life and feelings to himself. Beck had been the only person to know he was gay until he met Scott and even then, Scott was the only other person to know about him. He had always carefully weighed his options and opted for the side of caution. Now, three short months into his college career, more had been publicly revealed about him than he had allowed in a lifetime.

A series of thoughts and questions bombarded his mind. What if the people in the dorm have a problem with gay people? How will Scott react now that people know? Will he freak out? How will they treat Scott? Maybe they'll alienate him too. Or maybe they'll consider him that poor guy who got stuck living with the homo. Maybe they'll console him and, in his effort to remain in the closet, he'll distance himself from me. Could this be a relationship ending event? The more he thought about it, the more stressed he became. Why had coming out been such an important issue for him? Had it really been so important to join The Alliance and to explore his sexuality? Couldn't he have waited until he had established himself more firmly in college life so he would have had a better idea of how others would react? That's what he would have done just a year ago. Hell, just a few

months ago.

But he wasn't the same person he had been a year ago. He had viewed college as the time and place to explore himself. He had believed it was important, necessary, for him to live as a gay man. And for what? Now he may have ruined everything. If he lost Scott, he would fall apart. What good was coming out if he ended up losing Scott? Plenty of people kept things to themselves and were perfectly happy. Why couldn't he have just been happy with what he had? Why did he have to push? By the time class was over, Derek had worked himself into a frenzy. His heart raced and he felt light-headed and dizzy, like he was having a panic attack. Making his way back to his dorm, he skipped his normal trip to the Student Center to get his mail. He didn't want to be around people. Instead, he wanted to curl up in his bed and go to sleep. Scott had begun wrestling season and his practices were after his classes, so he wouldn't be back until later that evening. If he was lucky, maybe he'd fall asleep and wouldn't have to face any of what had happened this day. When he got back to his dorm room, Elizabeth was waiting for him. She placed a hand on his shoulder. "Derek, I heard what happened. I wanted to make sure you're all right."

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He had been holding himself together for about two hours, but the physical contact caused his emotions to flood over. Tears welled up in his eyes and he slumped against the wall, allowing himself to sink into a sitting position. Elizabeth sat next to him, rubbing his back until he finished his first wave of sobbing. "If you want to talk about it, I'm here."

He didn't know how he felt. He was terrified of what the consequences were going to be for him now that Tyrell had outed him to his whole dorm. "I don't know. I'm freaking out right now."

"That's perfectly understandable. Can we go into your room and talk?" Elizabeth's voice was soothing and she stood up, offering Derek a hand to help him stand. He allowed her to support him and opened the door for them. He was surprised to see a love seat against the wall between their two beds.

Seeing Derek's confusion, Elizabeth explained what had happened. "Scott ordered it and asked if I would wait for the delivery since I don't have class until this afternoon. Then Ron told me what happened, so I wanted to be here when you got back. Come on, let's sit down."

Derek allowed himself to be led to the couch and sat down, placing his elbows on his knees and dropping his head into

his hands. "I still can't believe it. This morning was like watching a movie but I was one of the characters and couldn't escape the scene."

Elizabeth laughed, then covered her mouth. "I'm sorry. I'm not making light of this. That's not a bad description. What Tyrell did was horrible." Then her smile faded and she peered at him. "I really need to know if you're okay, Derek."

"I guess so. I mean I'm not about to jump out the window or anything if that's what you're asking." He let out a defeated chuckle. "But, I'm not too psyched to show my face in public right now."

"Why? Are you worried people won't like you because you're gay?" Her question was delivered in a plain voice without any judgment or discomfort behind her words.

"Yeah, I am." Derek lifted his head from his hands and looked at Elizabeth.

"Derek, no one cares whether you're gay or straight. You're a terrific guy and everyone likes you. All they want to do is make sure you're okay." She smiled, placing an arm around his shoulders. "Why would you think people wouldn't like you for being gay?"

"I don't know. In high school, no one was out and I always felt

like I had to keep it a secret. My friends would use comments like fag or homo all the time in an insulting way and I just kept my mouth shut, feeling like if they knew I was one of those fags they would kick the shit out of me.”

“Well, you’re not in high school anymore and people here have open minds. Also, could you not use the word fag? I really hate it.” She pulled Derek towards her and he allowed himself to lean against her. “Scott’s very worried about you, you know.”

“Fuck.” Derek had hoped Scott wouldn’t find out about what had happened. 171

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“What? Are you surprised?”

“No,” Derek answered honestly, “it’s just that Scott said if Tyrell did another thing to hurt me he would intervene and I’m afraid he might intervene physically. I don’t want to see him get kicked out of school or put on probation on account of me.”

“Well, you’re right in worrying about his reaction. A physical response would not be good. But there are other ways to

handle this situation without resorting to violence. Ron told me Tyrell verbally threatened you. Is that true?"

Derek ran through the morning again, trying to remember. "He said I would pay for whatever it was that happened to him after dinner last night. We ran into some of his friends and they confronted me in front of Scott, saying Tyrell was my boyfriend. I set them straight and I guess they gave Tyrell a hard time later that evening."

"Saying you will pay for something is verbal harassment. You could file a complaint. The school doesn't tolerate any form of harassment and there are serious consequences for students who engage in that kind of behavior."

Derek didn't want to bring more attention to the situation. He was embarrassed enough as it was. "I don't think I want to do that. It'll only make things worse."

Elizabeth sighed. "Whatever you want to do is fine, but I'm going to keep a record of this incident and I've spoken to some of the witnesses. There's no statute of limitations for you if you decide to file a complaint."

Derek nodded in understanding. "Wait, you said Scott was concerned. What does he know?"

"He knows Tyrell waited outside for you this morning and

tried to bully you into admitting you were his boyfriend. He knows Ron intervened and made Tyrell leave and that several of the people in the dorm witnessed what happened.”

“Great. He must have freaked out.” Derek was not looking forward to Scott’s mood when he came back from practice. How many times had Scott warned him to be more careful?

“He was freaked out.” Elizabeth took his hand, rubbing it comfortingly. Derek looked up in alarm. “Oh my God. He was pissed at me wasn’t he?”

The look of shock in Elizabeth’s eyes was unmistakable. “No. Of course he wasn’t mad at you. I actually had to sit him down to convince him not to run across campus to look for Tyrell. Then he wanted to stay here to wait for you until you got back from class, but I finally convinced him to go and told him I would be here when you got back.” She smiled. “He’s a good friend. Anyone would be worried about a friend if that happened to them.”

Derek relaxed. It sounded like Elizabeth had managed to keep Scott under enough control to prevent him from going after Tyrell. He just hoped Scott could deal with the fact people in the dorm now knew Derek was gay.

When he turned his gaze back to Elizabeth, she was looking at him thoughtfully.

"Look. Your private life is your own, but if you're afraid people are going to reject you 172

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because you're gay, you're wrong." She smiled then stood up. "So, are you going to be okay? I have to get to class."

"Yeah. Thanks for sticking around. I've been freaking out all morning." Derek looked at Elizabeth with steady eyes. "But I feel better now."

"That's my job. I'm here to make sure all of the residents of this dorm are taken care of. I'm glad you weren't overly upset by what happened. By Scott's reaction, I was worried you might have been in far worse shape. Come see me later if you want to talk some more." With that, she headed out, closing the door behind her. Derek lay down on the love seat and closed his eyes. He hoped Scott didn't try to find Tyrell before coming back to the dorm, not wanting him to take matters into his own hands. He had seen twice how Scott became incensed when defending him. The thought was comforting, causing him to smile for the first time all day. Although he didn't want Scott to actually do anything, the knowledge that he wanted to made Derek feel safe and

loved. Still, he wouldn't be able to truly relax until he faced Scott and saw for himself that everything was going to be all right between them. 173

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Chapter Fifteen

"You're here. Thank God." Scott rushed into the room, and sat down next to Derek, pulling him into his arms and hugging him tightly. "I've been so worried about you. Are you okay?"

People had been stopping by his room all evening asking if he was all right and Derek was getting tired of answering the question, still Scott was the one person he most wanted to see and whose reaction he worried about most. "I'm fine. Really. I'm okay. It was very upsetting, but I'm over it for the most part." Scott surveyed Derek carefully and it was clear he didn't believe what Derek was saying. "Okay, I'm not over it, but I'm not upset like I was earlier."

"I want to fucking kill that kid. It took Elizabeth at least thirty minutes to calm me down enough to keep me from running out of here like a madman this morning and even then, once I got outside, I almost took off towards his part of campus in

search of him.”

Derek breathed a sigh of relief that Scott hadn't. “Scott, I'm so sorry. I know you've been warning me over and over about him. I just didn't listen. I didn't believe people could be so mean and vicious. I'm still shocked Tyrell sat around waiting for me this morning and then...I'm so sorry.” Derek looked at Scott, wanting to see if there were any traces of anger to be found in his face or his body language. There was none, but he needed to vocalize the one thing that he worried would most upset Scott. “People know I'm gay now.”

Scott tightened his grip around Derek's shoulders. “Yeah, well, what's done is done. We've talked about this before. I'm not going to say I told you so, but I am going to say I think it would be a good idea for you to steer clear of Tyr...” Scott broke off, his arm tensing around Derek's shoulder. “I can't even say that fuck head's name without wanting to run out and pummel him. What I was trying to say is I think it would be a good idea for you to lie low for a while.”

Despite knowing Scott only wanted to help, something in his words didn't sit right with Derek. “What do you mean?”

Scott stood up and began to pace the room. “I mean, maybe you shouldn't go to any more of those meetings for a while. Maybe you should just focus on something else. I know you've been exploring yourself, but look where it's gotten

you.”

As Scott spoke, Derek noticed that he was averting eye contact. “Scott. Look at me.”

He stopped his pacing and turned to face Derek, still keeping his gaze lowered.

“What is it?”

A wave of panic passed through Derek’s chest. He can’t look at me. Things have changed between us. “I know you told me to be careful and I didn’t listen. I’m sorry. This puts you in an uncomfortable position. I hope you can forgive me.”

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Those words seemed to evoke a reaction. Scott’s head snapped up and he rushed to Derek’s side. “Forgive you? For what? You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“It’s...with people knowing I’m gay...it puts you in a—”

His words were cut short by Scott’s mouth covering his. It wasn’t a romantic kiss, nor was it gentle. Instead, it was

more of a needy kiss. One which communicated possession and concern. When he pulled away, he was breathing heavily and rested his forehead against Derek's. "Derek. I don't give a fuck what people think. All I care about is protecting you from getting hurt. It's taking all of my control not to storm out of here and kill that kid." He lifted Derek's head until they were locked in an intense gaze. "All I'm saying is that laying low might help cool things off for a while."

"I'm not about to hide under a rock just because this happened. If I do, then Tyrell wins." He felt a twinge of aggravation fill him. "What are you really saying?"

"I'm worried about you, Derek. What else would I be thinking? Elizabeth said that Ron saw you take off. I've been calling you all day and haven't been able to reach you."

Derek instinctively took his phone from his pocket and looked at it. It revealed he had several missed messages and texts. "I was worried that you were really upset and unhappy and there was nothing I could do about it."

Derek's anger subsided. "I'm sorry. I'm just feeling defensive."

Scott remained silent for a moment, then glanced at Derek with a hint of nervousness. Despite the discomfort of the moment, Scott squared his shoulders, as if he were

preparing to say something important. Derek sat and waited, realizing that Scott was only there to support him. If the roles had been reversed and Derek had been trying to reach Scott all day, he'd be a nervous wreck by now. Scott closed his arms around Derek's shoulder, allowing his hand to gently brush along the skin of his upper arm. "There's one other thing I'm worried about. I just began on the wrestling team and I've told you, I'm not ready for everyone to know about me yet. What happened today might force me out of the closet faster than I'm ready. Hasn't this shown that you aren't ready for everyone to know about you as well?"

The anger which had dissipated, flared up again with a vengeance. "No. Quite the opposite, actually. Elizabeth was really cool and said no one cares whether or not I'm gay. She said people like me because I'm a great guy." He stood up, clenching his fists.

"That's what's really bothering you, isn't it?" He was almost yelling now and Scott sat quietly, staring at his feet. "You're worried people will think you're gay because you have me as your roommate. Aren't you?"

Scott winced. "Maybe a little bit."

"Well, don't fucking worry about it. Your secret is safe. I haven't told anyone and I won't. Other people live with gay roommates who are straight. I guess you can pretend to be

one of those.” Derek paced back and forth across the room. Scott stood and tried to put his hands on Derek’s shoulders to stop him, but Derek jerked away. “Don’t. You better be careful or else people might think you’re a homo like me. Your precious 175

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reputation might become tarnished.” Derek knew he was overreacting, but couldn’t stop himself.

“Why are you angry with me? I’m not the one who attacked you this morning.”

Scott looked helpless, unsure of what to say or do. “You asked me a question and I answered it honestly. It doesn’t change the way I feel about you. I still love you. I’m just not ready for people to know about me yet.”

Derek whipped around to face Scott. “Well, I am so glad you decided to be honest with me, but, maybe it does change the way I feel about you.” Scott looked as if he had been slapped in the face. Although Derek immediately regretted the statement, he was too riled up and this outburst was the first time he had let out his pent up anger, fear, and frustration. “I’m meeting up with some people tonight. Jared, the

president of The Alliance, invited me over for a get together. He wanted me to bring a demo CD over to him so he could decide whether or not I can mix for the big dance."

"Derek, come on. Don't go." Scott looked on the verge of tears.

"Why? Because if anyone sees me there, they'll know for sure I'm gay? Is that what you're concerned about?" Derek knew he was being mean at this point.

"No, because I've been worr..." Scott's voice trailed off and his shoulders slumped. He sat down and said nothing. "Go ahead." His voice was quiet and he looked defeated. "I'll be here when you get back."

Scott's reaction deflated much of Derek's anger. Seeing him on the loveseat, the one he had surprised Derek with, looking hurt and miserable, made him want to rush to him and apologize for the things he had just said. Still, twinges of anger and hurt continued to pull at the edges of his nerves. He steeled himself and left the room without saying anything.

As he walked across campus, the weight of his actions hit him. He had completely overreacted, but what was worse, he'd stubbornly allowed himself to remain angry rather than to calm down. Scott was sitting in their room right now, shell-shocked and probably upset only having wanted to comfort

him and Derek had attacked. What Scott had said was nothing new to him. He knew Scott wasn't ready to come out, but according to Elizabeth he had to be calmed down so he wouldn't go after Tyrell. The first thing he had done when he got back to the room was to sit with him and hold him. Derek knew Scott loved him. Wanting to remain private about his sexuality had nothing to do with that. Attacking Scott because he was the one closest to him was no excuse, even if he knew Scott would forgive him. Everything in Derek told him to turn around and to go back to their room. He owed Scott an apology. Scott didn't deserve to sit and feel miserable while he went to Jared's room to have a good time. Derek knew this is what he should do, but he couldn't bring himself to actually do it. Something inside him forced him to trudge on to Jared's, clinging to whatever remnant of anger still remained inside him. Maybe it was the fact that Scott had actually verbalized his concerns about the wrestling team or maybe it was just pure stubbornness.

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When he arrived, Jeff and Charlie, two of the junior members of The Alliance who had led the other groups in the last meeting, were there. A few other members were present as

well. Derek was relieved to see Tyrell wasn't there. Looking around, he saw Charlotte, Phillip, and Oscar weren't there either. Jared came to the door to welcome him. "Derek. I'm so glad you could come. Guys, this is Derek, the person I told you about."

Derek smiled and shook hands with Jeff and Charlie and was then introduced to several of the other people in the room. Once he had taken off his jacket and had been given a drink, he reached into his bag and took out the demo CD. "Jared, I brought this so you could listen to it. It has five different songs on it, but, like I said, for each song, I have at least twenty pre-recorded songs of the same style. I wanted you to hear the diversity of what I can do."

Jared took the CD and put it into his stereo system, then returned with Derek to the group of people hanging out. Derek observed the group as they interacted. These guys were nothing like Tyrell or the trio of Charlotte, Phillip, and Oscar. They were down to Earth, talking about things of interest beyond sexuality and The Alliance. Jeff was an economics major and was busy talking to another guy about the stock market. Charlie was a nursing major and was discussing an upcoming student exhibit in which his work was going to be displayed. These guys were hanging out and talking about normal things. He realized it was the exact image of what he thought it would be like to be openly gay in college. At the same time, Scott crossed his mind and his

enjoyment of the moment was soured. It didn't matter that he had found a group of people that embodied exactly what he wanted, or at least what he thought he wanted. Knowing Scott was back in their room, feeling like shit because of him, caused guilt to consume him.

Jared sat next to him, distracting Derek from his thoughts. "Hey, you look like you're a million miles away. Are you okay?" When Derek looked up Jared had a serious expression on his face.

"Actually, no, not really." A shade of concern crossed Jared's face. "I had a problem this morning which kind of shook me up."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Before he realized what he was doing, he spilled the entire story of what had happened with Tyrell. The other people in the room were engrossed in their own conversations, so they didn't hear Derek's recounting of the morning's events. When he finished, Jared had a horrified expression on his face. "Come on. Let's go for a short walk so we can talk privately." Derek allowed himself to be led down the hall to the lounge area. It was empty and the two of them sat on a couch. "I'm so sorry that happened to you."

Derek shook his head. "I'm fine, really. What gets me is that

my boy...er, roommate, who is also my best friend, came back from his practice and was worried 177

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about me. I kind of took all of my frustration out on him and then stormed out to come here. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come. I know I'm a big downer right now."

Jared squeezed his shoulder briefly. "Don't be silly. I'm glad you came. If for nothing else, you can talk to someone who has experienced the things you're now experiencing."

Derek looked up. "Really?"

Jared nodded. "Yes, really. I've experienced my fair share of fear, humiliation, and public outbursts. Not so much in the past couple of years, but when I first got here, yeah."

Derek shifted in his seat so he could face Jared more easily. "What did you do? How did it affect your ability to make and keep friends?"

"It didn't. People didn't care. There will always be people who won't like us just because we're gay, but those are the exception nowadays and if they get caught harassing us,

they get put on probation or kicked out. You just have to be willing to stand up for yourself and to fight against intolerance of any sort.” Jared shook his head.

“I knew that kid was bad news from the very start. I ought to kick him out of the group.”

Derek panicked. “Please don’t. I don’t need any more shit from him. I think all it would do is aggravate him even more.”

Jared’s expression became somber. “Okay, but I do think someone needs to talk to him. Can I at least do that?”

Derek nodded warily. “Yes, but please don’t let him think I put you up to it.”

“Absolutely not. It’s my job as leader of The Alliance to make sure all members are safe.” After a pause, Jared put his arms behind his head and let out a slow breath. “So, your roommate was ready to kick some ass, huh? He sounds like a great guy.”

“He is. He didn’t deserve the shit I gave him before I came over here.” Derek felt the weight of his actions begin to crush him and wanted to run back to Scott and make things right. “It’s not his fault I’m so fixated on the way I want things to be here on campus.”

“What do you mean?”

Derek considered what he had said, then looked at Jared. “It’s got to do with being out and about how people might perceive me if they know I’m gay.”

“Is that why you asked me how people reacted when they found out I was gay?”

Jared asked.

“Yeah.” Derek was beginning to feel like a child who needed consoling. It was embarrassing and he could feel his cheeks begin to grow warmer. Jared laughed. “You wear your emotions on your sleeve. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“I never used to be so obvious. I used to be really good at hiding my feelings. I don’t know what’s gotten into me.” He felt his eyes begin to burn. 178

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“You’re beginning to figure yourself out. You’re testing the waters to see what you’re comfortable with and what you want.” Jared’s hand was rubbing his back and it felt good. It

wasn't sexual at all, just soothing. "We all go through something like this. It may happen at different times, but we all go through it. For those of us who are surrounded by loving, healthy people, we come through it feeling better about ourselves and knowing it's okay to be openly out and gay. For people who don't have stable outlets or friends, it's a much sadder story."

Derek listened as Jared continued. "I was lucky. I have loving parents and great friends. It was easy for me to come to terms with who I am and to be open about it. I don't know you, but you seem to be a self-assured person. I would guess you aren't so different from me. Am I right?" Derek nodded and continued listening.

"All these guys in my room right now are similar. They may not all be out to their families, but they do have people in their lives who accept them exactly as they are. That's important. Maybe that's why Tyrell behaves in such extreme ways. Maybe the fact all you want from him is friendship feels like a rejection to him and maybe that's what he's used to... rejection I mean."

Derek closed his eyes and shook his head, resting it in his hands. "I don't want to feel sorry for Tyrell right now. I was doing just fine on my own, slowly coming out to my family. I have this incredible boyfriend. I like being in The Alliance. I didn't need to be outed the way I was. It was humiliating and I

had no control over the situation. Jared nodded again. "That's true, and I don't blame you for not wanting to feel pity for Tyrell. What he did was wrong and there's no excuse for it. I'm simply trying to present a reason for it. I'm also trying to show you you're not in the same situation as Tyrell. I bet you make friends pretty easily don't you?"

"I do, but now I wonder what that will be like for me."

Jared laughed, then covered his mouth. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to laugh. It will be exactly the same as it's always been. Trust me. People don't care nearly as much as you think they do. Come on. Let's get back to the room."

When they returned to the room, everyone was sitting as they had been before, engaged in small conversations and listening to Derek's music. Jeff and Charlie looked up when they came in and walked over. "Hey guys, we wondered where you went."

Turning to Derek, Jeff smiled. "This music is awesome. You mixed all of it?"

"Yeah. It's a hobby of mine and I love mixing for parties. I've done a few dorm parties so far this year, but mostly I've just been modifying pop songs from the radio. I hope you guys want me to mix for the big dance we're planning. It will be the first time this year I can really let loose and mix a real dance

sequence.”

Charlie clapped Derek on the shoulder. “Absolutely. You’re it. How much do you charge?”

Derek looked at Jared, then returned to face Jeff and Charlie. “Oh, I’m not going to charge for this. I believe in the reason for the party and am volunteering to do it for free. 179

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Besides, it won’t be a lot of work since this is the kind of stuff I usually mix and I already have enough pre-recorded music for several parties.”

Jared smiled. “That’s very generous of you. I think we’ve found a future leader of The Alliance who can carry our torch once we graduate. Derek has the exact mindset we’ve been promoting for years.” Everyone complimented Derek on how much they liked the music and for the next hour, spent time talking with him. After about an hour, Jared walked over to Derek and pulled him aside. “You look distracted, Derek. It’s about your boy...roommate. Am I right?”

Derek looked down at his feet. “Am I that obvious?”

“Go back to your dorm. Straighten things out with him. I’m sure you’ll feel much better once you talk to him.” He handed Derek his jacket and thanked him for the mix once again. “Derek, I’m glad we got a chance to talk tonight. You’re an awesome guy. Try not to worry so much. Things will work out just fine. I promise.”

The walk back to his dorm felt long. Derek was nervous and wanted to get to Scott as quickly as possible. Wondering how Scott would react to him, his stomach clenched and for a moment he thought he might get sick. It was so uncharacteristic to go on the offensive the way he had and Scott had not deserved the treatment he’d received. When he finally got back to their room, Scott was sitting at his desk, studying. He looked up when Derek walked in, closed his book, and folded his hands on his lap, maintaining eye contact the whole time. Derek stood in the doorway for a minute, then walked in, closing the door behind him. Walking over to Scott, he stood behind him and placed both hands on his shoulders, slowly massaging his muscles. Scott leaned back against Derek’s touch, still not saying anything.

Scott’s shoulders felt tight and Derek took his time working the muscles, digging his thumbs into the tightened knots he could feel rolling underneath the surface. As they began to loosen, Scott let out a sigh, and leaned further back so that his head rested against Derek’s stomach. Continuing with the massage, Derek summoned his courage.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have lashed out at you like that. It wasn't fair and you didn't deserve it."

"I understand. You were upset and needed someone to unleash your frustration on. I'm the person you're closest to. It's okay."

"No, it's not okay. I can't do that. Just because I'm upset, doesn't give me the right to attack you. All you wanted to do is help me. I didn't want to hear anything nice earlier. I was looking for something to get angry at and I lashed out at you, accusing you of worrying that you might get outed in this process."

Scott tried to get up, but Derek held him in place. "I know you feel that way a little, but that's no secret. We've talked about this before. It's not like you were trying to pretend you were comfortable with something when you really weren't. I was picking a fight and it was wrong. I'm sorry. Worse, I took off, leaving you here in the fallout of my anger."

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Scott tentatively stood and turned to face Derek. "It's okay. I accept your apology. I understand this has been a difficult day and you needed a release. I'll admit, it stung like hell when you left so mad at me, but I understood that too. I love you, Derek. Just because we may get into occasional fights doesn't mean I'll stop loving you or that I don't understand what's going on. I know you pretty well by now."

He was right. Aside from his mother and maybe Beck, Scott knew Derek better than anyone. The thought comforted him. "I've been really worried all day about how you would feel now that people know about me." Derek felt Scott stiffen once again.

"I'm not comfortable with people knowing, Derek. That hasn't changed." Scott looked at him, his eyes unwavering. "And I really think that you should cool it for a while. Tyrell isn't going to let up and there's no telling what he might do next. Do you really want to draw that kind of attention to yourself again?"

Despite his conversation with Jared and his sincere regret at having attacked Scott, anger swelled inside him once again. "I don't believe it. Even after you saw how upset I got before, after I lashed out at you because you wanted me to hide who I am, you still don't get it do you? If I back off, he's won. Tyrell will have effectively scared me off."

He stepped away from Scott so he could face him. Scott,

who had still been sitting, stood and the two of them faced off, as if they were about to begin wrestling. Despite Scott's height and bulk, Derek continued, his anger continuing to grow within him. "I can't live with that. I can't allow someone to push me away from the things I want just because they've tried to intimidate me. I refuse to live my life that way."

Scott stepped away, his shoulders drooping. "Do you hear yourself, Derek? This is not a competition. You're talking about this like you have something to prove or like there's some sort of contest between you and Tyrell." He then stepped up to Derek and placed his hands on both of his arms, holding firmly. "Why does this have to be such a big deal for you? Why do you have to make it such a big deal?"

Derek shook Scott's hands off and backed away. "Because I won't be scared off from being who I am just because of some stupid motherfucker."

"I'm not asking you to be scared and I'm not asking you to be someone who you aren't." Scott's voice was growing louder and lines of frustration appeared on his forehead. "I'm just saying I don't want to see you hurt. I'm nervous about what this kid might do. Why would you want to purposefully goad him?"

"Because, he had no right to do what he did and I won't give him any power over me. The only person who matters to me

is you.” Derek spat the words out. “And if you really knew me and cared about me, you would know I can’t run and hide because of this. I need your support, not your warnings and your fear that people will figure out you’re gay.”

Scott shook his head. “That’s not what I’m saying and you know it.”

“Isn’t it? Isn’t that exactly what you’re really saying?” Derek once again realized he was picking a fight and didn’t know why he couldn’t stop himself. 181

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Scott closed his mouth and stood silently. After a moment, he spoke. “This is getting us nowhere. I think we should go to sleep.” He turned and climbed up into their bed.

Derek, still feeling stubbornly angry, climbed into the empty bed. It was the first time they had not slept in the same bed since school had begun. He heard Scott sigh, but soon, Scott’s breath became slow and even. I can’t believe he could fall asleep in the middle of one of our fights. Realizing he was once again the one who had instigated the fight, Derek felt a wave of guilt and wanted to crawl into bed next to Scott, but forced himself to remain where he was,

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Chapter Sixteen

The night of the next Alliance meeting, Scott had gone to the athletic building, saying he wouldn't be back until late. He and some of the other wrestlers were going to the Student Center to play pool. He had been spending more and more time with his wrestling friends and working out since the season began which normally wouldn't bother Derek, except for the lingering tension that remained between the two of them since their argument. "Fine. I'll see you later." He winced as he heard the sarcasm in his voice, but like so many other times over the past few weeks, he did nothing to acknowledge his tone or treatment of Scott.

Trudging across campus, a heavy mood surrounded him. There was a light snow falling and it was just beginning to stick, dusting the ground in a thin, wispy blanket of white. As he walked, he stared at his feet focusing on the black imprints left by his shoes as he trod on the fresh snow. They looked like holes his feet were boring into the ground and gave him a sense of power over the elements. Before he knew it, he was at the Arts Center. He may have passed lots

of people or no one along the way, but he had been so absorbed in his own mind he had no idea.

When he entered the second floor conference room, Jared walked over to him. "Hi, Derek. How are you? How did your talk go with your friend?"

Derek gave a weak smile. "It didn't go so well. Not because he wasn't cool, but because I was being stubborn. I still am actually. Things have been tense for a while."

Jared had a sad look on his face. "I'm sorry to hear it."

Derek smiled, feeling anything but cheerful. "Thanks."

Jared gave him a pat on the shoulder. "Don't beat yourself up. No one said life was easy all the time. We all go through rough patches. Hey, I haven't stopped listening to your music. It's awesome. The guys are so excited you're mixing for the party."

Grateful for the distraction, Derek nodded. "I'm looking forward to it." He sat down in a corner of the room to wait for the meeting to begin. Looking around he saw Tyrell talking with Charlotte, Phillip, and Oscar. They had their heads together, but would intermittently peek over in his direction and then return to their private conversation. Derek took in a deep breath and sighed. Eventually his frustration level grew

in, with determination, he stared at them, not allowing the fact they were blatantly talking about him make him feel intimidated. His plan worked well, because the next time Tyrell looked over at him, their eyes met and Tyrell quickly averted his eyes. Coward! Derek smiled grimly to himself.

When Jared called the group to order everyone sat down. "Before we begin, there's something I want to talk to everyone about. It's important that we remember, as a group, how important it is for us to stand together. If we can't count on support from each other, there's no way we can count on support from anyone else."

He paused for a few moments and let his words sink in. "It has come to my attention that one of the members of our group had an experience where they were 183

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confronted in a public manner. This person was approached in front of his dorm and was accused of something in front of his dorm mates. Not only was the accusation untrue, but it was done in such a way which forced this person to reveal his sexual orientation before he was ready to do so." Again, Jared allowed his words to be internalized by the group.

Several people stirred in their chairs, murmuring their disapproval and looking around the room. Derek could feel his face begin to burn. "I want to make it clear that such behavior will not be tolerated. Besides being an act of harassment, it completely goes against what we stand for. We are not an organization that pressures people to come out or to reveal anything personal about themselves until they're ready to do so. We're a support organization that plans events to promote integration and understanding. I personally take offense to what has happened and would like to assure everyone, if such behavior takes place again, I will report it to the dean of the appropriate class."

Derek sat perfectly still as Jared talked, not daring to look around at Tyrell, concerned that if he were to turn around it would cause Tyrell to say or do something more than he had already done.

"That said, today we're going to break up into our groups again. Jeff and Charlie's events are planned for next week. The dance is planned for two weeks from now." Jared then concluded the general portion of the meeting and asked the members to join their smaller groups.

The dance committee met for a while, discussing how to promote the event. Jared shared that Derek would be mixing, which was met with a round of applause from all but Tyrell. After about an hour, Jared called for a short break.

Derek walked into the hallway to clear his head. This meeting had been more intense than he had expected and he wished he had been given advance warning Jared was going to address the whole group. Heading down the stairs, he stood by the front entrance of the Arts Center. The air was much cooler since people were coming in and out of the building and felt soothing.

Leaning against the window, Derek dropped his head against his forearm and stared out at the lit campus. The snow had begun to come down more heavily since the meeting started. Fat, white flakes wafted in the air. Where they fell by the campus lights, the flakes took on a slightly orange hue. Watching them fall in a steady rhythm relaxed Derek and helped his mind to release the stresses and concerns he had been harboring, wishing his life could be as easy and free as falling snow. After about five minutes, Derek turned to go back to the meeting, and pulled in a breath. Tyrell was standing directly behind him. "Holy shit. You scared me." When Tyrell stood his ground and didn't say a word, Derek took an angry step toward him.

"What do you want, Tyrell?"

"I want to know when you're going to get off your high horse and admit the truth to me, everyone else, and yourself." He stood, hands on hips, challenging Derek to refute him.

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"Tyrell, just get out of my way. You're out of your mind. I don't even like you. Maybe for half a second I thought there was a little piece of you I could be friends with, but now, there's nothing about you I want to have anything to do with at all." Derek tried to walk by, but Tyrell grabbed his arm. His grip was firmer than Derek would have guessed. "Let go of my arm."

Tyrell maintained his grip and pulled Derek so they were facing each other. "You don't even know the trouble you've caused me. Charlotte, Phillip, and Oscar think I'm a liar. Jared pulled me aside the other day and told me if I ever pulled a stunt like I did the other day again he would kick me out of The Alliance." Tyrell's voice was beginning to shake and his grip tightened on Derek's arm, beginning to hurt. "This is all your fault."

"No. This is all your fault, Tyrell. You're the one who got it in your head I want anything from you. You're the one who stalked me outside of my dorm like some kind of crazy person and then made a scene so my entire dorm knows I'm gay." Anger rose up through him like bile, building in

intensity. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to stop talking, not wanting to get into an argument. "Let go of my arm."

Tyrell tightened his grip, his nails digging into the flesh of Derek's bicep. "Not until you admit there's something between us."

Derek yanked his arm out of Tyrell's grip and headed towards the stairs. Tyrell followed, tailing him closely. When they entered the hallway where the meeting was about to reconvene, Derek whipped around. "Just leave me alone," he hissed between clenched teeth.

Tyrell stood directly in Derek's path, glowering. "I will not leave you alone. No one treats me the way you treated me and gets away with it." He was speaking in a loud voice which drew the attention of the few students who were in the hallway. Derek tried to walk around Tyrell to get to the conference room, but Tyrell blocked his way again. Not wanting to get into a physical altercation, Derek began to tremble with rage. If Tyrell pushed him much further, he was afraid he would snap. "I said step aside, Tyrell." His voice was too calm, too controlled, and he knew he was close to forcing Tyrell out of his way.

"No. You've ruined everything for me." Tyrell reached out and grabbed Derek's arm again.

Derek was just about to rip his arm free and punch Tyrell when they both heard a loud voice and turned around. Jared was standing behind them, a few feet away.

“Tyrell, I think Derek asked you to leave him alone. I’m not entirely sure why that translated into you grabbing him by the arm, but I’m pretty sure it meant he wanted you to let him pass.”

Tyrell released Derek’s arm, his eyes opened wide in surprise. “We were just having a discussion. Nothing is wrong here. Right, Derek?”

Derek closed his eyes and took a deep breath through his nose, releasing it through clenched teeth, his nerves beginning to relax now that Jared was there. “We won’t have
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a problem if you step aside and let me get back to the meeting.” Tyrell moved out of the way and Derek walked past him and into the conference room. He could hear the murmurs of the students who remained in the hallway but couldn’t make out what they were saying, his own racing

thoughts crowding out his ability to make sense of anything else.

When Jared returned to the room, he walked over to Derek and leaned over to whisper in his ear. "I asked Tyrell to leave. You need to let me know if I should kick him out of the group for this." Derek shook his head. "Are you sure?" Derek nodded.

"Okay, but one more fuck up like that and he's out whether you want him out or not."

Derek didn't want this kind of attention. He just wanted to be a part of this group and to make friends. He wanted to stop fighting with Scott and to go back to their loving and caring relationship free from tension. The way things had been before Tyrell had cornered him outside his dorm. He wanted the drama to stop. The rest of the meeting went by in a blur. When it was over, several members stayed behind to socialize. Derek, not feeling social, said goodnight and headed out. At the door, Jared stopped him. "Are you okay?"

Derek was drained. He didn't want to think about his problems let alone talk about them. "I'm fine. I just want to go back to my room and study."

Jared nodded. "Everything will work out Derek. Tyrell won't continue to bother you and things will get better with your

roommate.” Derek was surprised Jared knew he was stressed about Scott. As if he could read his mind, Jared continued. “Like I said to you before, we’ve all gone through this. You have friends who care about you. Trust me. In the end, everything will be fine. It just doesn’t feel that way right now.”

Derek looked at Jared, then turned and left the room. As he walked out into the cold night, the snow had accumulated a couple of inches. It was coming down in flurries and the wind was kicking up huge white waves of snow dust. One of the wind gusts blew fine ice particles against his cheek and the side of his neck. Although the cold stung, it felt good. It momentarily erased everything else going on inside his head and all he could think of was the sharp sting of the cold and then the wetness as the frozen bits of snow melted against his hot skin. He pulled his coat tightly around him and worked his way back to his dorm.

Scott wasn’t in the room when he got there. Sitting at his desk, Derek pulled out the book he was reading for his Comparative Literature class. After re-reading the same page several times, he tossed the book down on his desk. Leaning back in his chair, he stared at the bottom of his bunk, examining the grain of the bed-board, trying to follow the natural lines of the unfinished wood.

As he took in the various hues of tan and brown, he felt the

same sense of calming emptiness come over him as he had when the wind had blown snow against his skin. He reveled in the freedom from thought and focused on relaxing his muscles with each breath in and out.

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He didn't know how long he had been sitting there, when he was drawn back to his senses, hearing his name being called. Opening his eyes, he saw Scott standing over him with a worried expression on his face. "I've been calling your name for three minutes. Are you all right?"

Derek closed his eyes again. "I'm fine. I was just zoning out."

"Derek. Open your eyes and talk to me." The anguish in Scott's voice forced Derek to open his eyes again and he could see the concern in his body language. "What's going on with you? I've tried to give you your space, but you haven't been yourself for weeks. You never hold grudges like you have with me."

Derek felt an immediate surge of aggression towards Scott but managed to contain himself. Despite the distance

between them, he wasn't going to make the same mistake he had before. He was angry at Tyrell, at his situation, at himself. Maybe he was a little bit angry at Scott for moving slower than Derek wanted him to in regards to coming out. But he wasn't going to continue to make Scott pay for a problem created by someone else. "It's nothing. I just had another run in with Tyrell and was clearing my head. I'm sorry I didn't respond when you called my name." His voice came out much calmer than he actually felt.

Scott's fists clenched and his lips narrowed into thin slits. "You're kidding! What the fuck did he do this time?"

"Jared gave a speech about how we need to have each other's backs and said if he caught wind of anyone doing anything that harassed another member of the group he would kick them out. I guess Tyrell took it personally because when I went out to get a breath of fresh air, he followed me and wouldn't leave me alone."

"What did he do?" Scott took a step closer to Derek.

"It's nothing. He just spewed the same crap as before, thinking I like him and shit. I almost punched him when he grabbed my arm but—"

"He did what?" Scott was shaking. "Holy shit. Let me see."

Derek stood up and lifted his sleeve. "It was nothing, he grabbed my arm and I had to shake him—" Derek stopped short when he noticed the bruise marks and the tiny breaks in his skin that had scabbed over where Tyrell's nails had dug into him. Scott gasped. "Did he do that to you?"

Derek was as shocked as Scott. "I guess. But honestly, I had no idea he grabbed me that hard. It didn't really hurt that much."

"We have to do something about this. He actually hurt you, Derek. How do you expect me to sit back and do nothing when you're being hurt?"

"What do you want me to do? It's nothing. It'll go away in a few days." Derek didn't want to make a big deal out of anything that had to do with Tyrell. Hadn't he proved it would only escalate things further?

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Scott's face turned beet red. "Dammit, Derek! Enough is enough. I've taken a back seat, allowing you to handle things the way you want, but now you have marks on your arm and

you're going to do nothing. How am I supposed to support that?"

"Because you're my boyfriend," Derek shouted back. "You're supposed to support what I want. It's not like I'm going out there and doing stuff to purposefully hurt myself and it's not like I'm seriously hurt now. What would you have me do about this?"

"I want you to report it. I want someone official to know Tyrell is harassing you and could be potentially dangerous."

Derek laughed openly at the statement.

Scott's blue eyes narrowed, anger flaring to make the blue seem like cold steel.

"Don't you fucking dare laugh at me! I'm serious. Tyrell is scary-crazy. You have no idea what he's capable of and, even if you aren't worried, I am. Do you know what it would do to me if something ever happened to you?"

"Don't be so dramatic. You act as if he were going to get all Fatal Attraction on my ass or something."

"Maybe he will." Scott's stare was a clear challenge.

"You can't possibly believe that." Derek looked carefully at

Scott. He was completely serious and Derek knew it. A large part of him wanted to release his anger and allow Scott to protect him, but each time he began to let his guard down and tried to stop being stubborn, Derek would remember Scott was afraid of being open about their relationship and his anger would flare, preventing him from relenting in his standoff with Scott. "You're being ridiculous. Tyrell is not a threat to me."

Scott sat down on the couch saying nothing for quite some time. When he looked up, his eyes were red, tears streaming down his cheeks. "Why won't you let me help you? Why are you being so difficult?" His voice cracked and he stopped to recompose himself. "I don't know what's going on with us, but I feel like we are drifting apart and I can't stand it."

Derek's heart stung seeing Scott in so much pain. All he wanted to do was to sit next to him, pull him into his arms, and tell him everything would be okay. Instead, he remained seated at his desk, silent.

They stared at each other for a few minutes, then Scott stood up and undressed. Moving slowly, as if he had no energy, he climbed into bed. Derek could hear his shuddering breath and knew he was still crying. Taking off his own clothes, he climbed into bed behind Scott and pulled him in close. Scott nestled against Derek's chest. This was not their usual position and it was slightly awkward since Scott was so

much taller and bigger than Derek, but Derek liked the feeling of cradling Scott for a change. He lay there holding him, allowing his mind to drift.

When Scott spoke, his voice was so quiet, Derek had to strain to hear him. "Do you still love me?"

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Derek squeezed and pulled Scott to him as tightly as he could. "Of course I still love you." I'm just being a stubborn ass and can't get past my own ego right now. Scott sighed. "Okay, good. You know you can't push me away from you, don't you?"

Derek said nothing as Scott snuggled against him. They lay together until finally, Derek heard the steady, even breaths which signaled Scott was asleep. As he lay with the man he loved wrapped in his arms, he replayed the events of the evening. Despite his efforts, Tyrell's actions were affecting his life and causing tension and unhappiness between him and Scott. Something had to change and Derek knew the change had to come from him. Scott was right. Derek was the one who was acting unreasonably. His stubbornness

reared its head, making sure Derek knew it was still there, and Derek relented, taking in a deep breath and trying to clear his mind. Whatever the solution would be, he wasn't going to find it that evening. Pulling Scott closer, he whispered in his ear, knowing his words wouldn't be heard. "You can't push me away from you either."

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Chapter Seventeen

"Hey, Mom, I'm home." Derek entered his house and walked into the kitchen. His mother was by the oven, basting a pot roast.

"Hi, honey. Come on in." The house was filled with the aromas of meat, herbs, and potatoes. His father had not yet returned from work, but was expected soon. "Come on in and tell me what's been going on with you."

Slumping into a chair at the kitchen table, Derek plopped his bag on the floor and leaned back, lifting the two front legs off the ground. His mother turned, arched an eyebrow, and Derek studiously returned all four legs of the chair back to the

ground.

“Dinner smells great.”

His mother smiled and turned back to her basting. “Well, you know I run out and buy something special whenever you say you’re coming home. Why didn’t Scott come with you? I didn’t quite understand your explanation over the phone.”

Derek winced. Despite the fact he knew it was his own fault, things had remained tense between them. He paused before answering. “He has wrestling practice. He’s usually not done until after seven o’clock.”

Claire turned and observed Derek. “There’s something you aren’t telling me, isn’t there?”

Derek tried to place an innocent expression on his face, but knew he had failed miserably. “Would you believe me if I said no?”

“Not a fat chance in hell. Spill. What’s going on?” Claire closed the oven and took a seat at the table across from him.

Derek walked over to the refrigerator, taking out a can of ginger ale. “Would you like something to drink?”

“A water would be nice, thank you. Now, quit stalling and talk

to me.” She tapped her finger on the table, indicating he should hurry up and sit down. Giving his mother a weak smile, he took out a bottle of spring water and walked back to the table, sitting down and sliding it to her. “I’ve been dealing with some issues over the past few weeks and it’s kind of put a strain on the two of us.”

His mother’s brow furrowed. “What kind of issues?”

Derek told his mother about the morning Tyrell had waited for him outside of his dorm, then the fight he and Scott had that evening. He then told her about the incident at the last Alliance meeting, about his bruised arm, and the second fight he and Scott had. The whole time he was talking, Claire sat patiently, keeping her mouth closed, but clearly becoming more and more distressed.

When Derek finished, she let out a deep breath and a serious expression on her face.

“Derek, these are not small issues. What do you intend to do about this boy?”

Derek shook his head. “Nothing. What can I do? Would it really make a difference if I reported him? All that would do is invite more shit...er, sorry...crap from him.”

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"I think by not reporting it, you're sending him the message his tactics are working. I have to agree with Scott on this issue. He's right. Tyrell sounds scary and someone should do something about him. You've never faced issues like these before. Maybe he's more dangerous than you think." His mother began to wring her hands.

"Mom, please, I came home to get a break from the stress of thinking and talking about this. I feel like a big enough jerk for the way I've been treating Scott. Now you're pushing me just like he is. I don't want to get into a fight with you as well." The all too familiar sense of anger began to grow in him as his mother communicated the same messages and warnings as Scott had been for weeks.

"Honey, you can get as angry at me as you like, but where your safety and wellbeing are concerned, I really don't care. I would rather you be angry and safe, than happy and in any kind of jeopardy." Her statement was delivered plainly, but hit home.

"I know. I'm sorry. What's really bothering me is how I'm treating Scott. I know he's not my enemy, but I can't seem to get out of my own way. Every time I'm about to admit I'm

being an ass, the thought that Scott is worried about Tyrell because of the risk it poses of exposing his sexuality resurfaced. In my head I know he's worried about me, but it really bothers me that he's not coming out with me, and to be honest, I don't see myself getting out of my own way anytime soon."

His mother chuckled, covering her mouth with a napkin as she did so. "I'm sorry, Derek, I didn't mean to laugh."

Derek leaned back in his chair, defeated. "Whatever. I'm messing this whole thing up and if I don't cut it out I'm going to push Scott away."

Claire became serious and put her hand on Derek's. "No, that won't happen. But you do need to get out of your own way. Of course, neither I nor your father are ones to talk. You see how the two of us bicker over everything. That's not because we're truly angry, it's because we're stubborn as mules. You came by your stubbornness very honestly."

"So what do you do to end your arguments with Dad? How do you quiet that fight inside you when you're in the middle of a disagreement?" For the first time in weeks, his spirits rose. Why didn't I think of asking Mom about this sooner?

"Honey, I have no idea. We love each other and we remember that while we're fighting. Sometimes our fights

end quickly. Other times they last for a while. It's just the way things go. When your father and I disagreed about issues surrounding your upbringing, the fights were usually nastier and lasted longer. When I get angry at him for eating something with too much fat or salt, the fight may only last a few minutes. If there's love and communication, it works out in the end."

"Everyone tells me things will work out in the end, but nothing seems to be working out so well right now." Derek thumped his hand on the table and his mother giggled again.

"Maybe you feel like they won't work out right now, but they will. Remember, you're still young, Sweetie. You don't have a lot of experience with relationships and 191

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with life in general. Just talk to Scott. Keep talking to him. Listen to him as well. In time, as long as you communicate, this will work itself out." His mother got up and started washing the mixing bowls and cutting boards she had used to prepare dinner. "Dad will be home in a little while. Why don't you go upstairs and rest or watch TV?"

Derek got up and gave his mother a hug. "Thanks mom. I

think I'll chill out in my room and listen to some music." He left the kitchen and went to his room, lying down on his bed. Everyone says things will work out. How do they know? He thought about what his mother had said. She said to keep communicating. To talk and to listen. Beck's uncle Josh had said the same thing.

Flipping his phone open, he scrolled through the names. When he found Josh Stoltz, he let out a quiet cheer. He dialed the number and Josh picked up after the second ring. "Josh Stoltz speaking."

"Hi, Josh, it's Derek Thompson. Scott and I stayed at your place this summer. Do you remember me?"

"Of course. How nice to hear from you. How are you?" Josh's voice was pleasant and made Derek feel better.

"To be honest, I've been better. That's why I'm calling. I've run into some problems this year and I need some advice. I thought maybe you could help."

"Of course, I will if I can. What's the trouble?"

Derek knew immediately he had done the right thing by calling Josh. His voice, his willingness to help, the fact he was gay, all of it made him feel like Josh would have the answers no one else seemed to have. After recounting the

same story he had told his mother only minutes earlier, Derek got to the main point of his call. "The real reason I'm calling is because I can't seem to let go of my anger towards Scott. It's like my brain is telling me one thing but my heart is telling me another and I can't seem to get the two to communicate."

Josh chuckled. "Well, recognizing you're conflicted is a good starting point. Why don't we begin with what your head is telling you?"

"My head? It's telling me I want Scott to come out of the closet and admit he's gay publicly. It's telling me even though he's told me from the beginning he's not ready, I'm still annoyed by it. Yet, I feel like I don't have a right to be angry with him for something he's been completely honest about."

"Ok," Josh said. "Good. And what does your heart tell you?"

"My heart is saying I don't give a damn what he told me. I feel like it's a kind of betrayal that he won't come out. I'm facing all of these problems, people are in complete support of me, and I feel like all that support should prove to him he has nothing to fear. If he would just come out then my problems with Tyrell would end."

Josh was quiet for a minute. "So, you're saying if he comes out it will solve your problems?"

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Derek was taken aback by the question. “No, I don’t think that...well, actually, that’s exactly what I said, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Is that what you meant to say?”

Derek thought for a moment. He knew he didn’t want that to be his reason for wanting Scott to come out. “God. If it is, I’m a bigger shit than I thought.”

Josh laughed. “Why don’t you try to avoid berating yourself and let’s focus on what it is you’re saying. What would be your best-case scenario for you and Scott?”

“I want for the two of us to be out and for people to accept us as a couple without there being any consequence for us socially.”

“Good. That is a worthy goal. It may be slightly unrealistic, but it’s something to strive for. Now, does Scott have to come out in order for you to be close to him?”

“No. I know he loves me and I love him. I’ve just been so

fixated on being out in college that I can't see past it." Derek heard himself and realized he sounded like a spoiled brat. "I feel like all of this stuff is happening to me and I'm dealing with it alone when Scott could be sharing the burden with me. God, that sounds so awful of me. It's like I want him to suffer with me."

"Well, there's some truth to the saying misery loves company. But I don't think that's what you're really saying." Josh's voice was so soothing Derek couldn't help but relax. "I think what you're saying is that you feel alone in handling the issues that confront you at the moment. Others are there to support you, but you're the one bearing the burden of being outed and living with the repercussions. Scott is one step removed from the immediacy of your feelings which makes his position slightly safer than yours. You're raw right now and you feel isolated. It's perfectly normal to feel that way."

Josh had just verbalized his exact feelings. "So what do I do about it?" He was desperate for the answer.

"I can't answer that for you, Derek. Not because I don't want to, but because each situation is different and how you need to handle your situation is unique, different from anyone else." His voice was even and plain, there was no emotion or judgment in his words or tone. "What I can do is share a story with you about a time when Pierre and I hit a rough patch. You already know the story of when Pierre was miserable

with his job. We told you how we spent the better part of a year struggling with his feelings of anger and frustration. It took a real toll on our relationship, but we continually communicated and finally worked through it. I suspect you're feeling how Pierre felt back then. Maybe, if I share with you how I felt while he was going through that hard time, it will give you some insight into what Scott's experience is right now."

Derek was hooked. Josh had a way of cutting right to the point. It gave him a sense he could provide help with anything Derek might have to face. "That would be so great if you could. I really appreciate your willingness to help me."

"It's my pleasure, Derek. You were very charming this summer when I met you and it makes me happy to think I can help a young gay man as he experiences things which 193

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I've already experienced." Josh paused, then sighed into the phone. "You remind me of when I was younger. It brings back such good memories for me...and some not so good memories. I look back on the harder times with greater fondness. Those are the experiences which taught me how to truly be happy."

Derek felt warmth towards Josh as if he were family. He knew how lucky he was to have such a kind person who could also serve as a role model for him. "So, what was it like for you back when Pierre was going through his rough patch?"

"Well, as we have already told you, Pierre was very unhappy because he was working for Barney's and felt it was too cut-throat. He was making an excellent salary and was concerned if he quit his job I might perceive him as taking me for granted for my money. The problem was he never told me that was how he felt. Instead, he began to pick fights and pull away from me.

"At first, I assumed it was a bad mood, something which would pass in time, but slowly, his behavior escalated. He began to pick fights with me over little things, things which had never bothered him before. Then we started to have less sex. Our intimacy in general took a significant turn for the worse. I confronted him on several occasions, but he would either snap at me, saying I was imagining things or would simply shut down, becoming even more distant. I considered many possible reasons for this change in his behavior ranging from a lack of interest in me to cheating. I had no idea what was going on and it was devastating to my self-esteem and happiness."

Derek wondered if his actions were making Scott feel the way Pierre had made Josh feel. "What did you do?"

"At first, I tried to talk to him, but he kept shutting me down. Eventually, I started to pick arguments as well. It got to the point where the two of us were fighting about almost everything. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore and, one day when he came home from work, I was waiting for him in our kitchen with my bag packed. When he saw it, he began to attack, saying I was abandoning him. I simply told him we were not effectively communicating and I wanted some space until he was ready to talk to me about whatever it was that was going on. Like I said, I really had no idea what it was and had been imagining many different possible things."

"My God. You were ready to just up and leave him?" Derek was shocked, imagining this happy couple ever being in a place where Josh could have walked away from the relationship.

"Oh yes. It was a bad time for both of us, but it was the push that got him to start talking to me. When he finally admitted how unhappy he was at work and his fears of what I would think of him if he quit, I actually laughed. I felt horrible because I didn't want him to think I was laughing at him, but, since I was imagining he had some lover on the side, his revelation was a huge relief to me.

"After I shared with him all of the possible reasons I had come up with for why he had become so distant, he also started laughing and we had our first really good conversation in months. I was able to tell him I didn't care if he worked as a sales clerk 194

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or if he had no job at all. All I wanted was for him to be happy. It was difficult for him to accept, but that was because he had always been self-reliant. That took some time to work through. But, after our months and months of arguing, we agreed to make sure to communicate and to share our feelings. That's the only way to remain on the same page and to work through whatever troubles may arise."

Derek's mind was reeling when Josh finished his story. He couldn't believe how something as small as being unhappy in a job almost caused the end of Josh and Pierre's relationship. All it took was communication to bring them back together. "Wow. So all it took was talking to work through your problems."

Josh chuckled. "It wasn't quite that simple, but I think you get my basic point. There's a piece to your situation that you have to work through on your own. You're harboring anger at

Scott and that anger is standing in your way of being able to communicate. I think you need to ask yourself where that anger is coming from.”

“I keep trying to let go of my anger, but it comes back. In some ways I think I’m angry because I feel that I’ve brought all of these problems on myself. This year has been a year of experimenting and exploring who I am. When it blew up in my face, I felt defenseless and stupid and scared.” Could it really be that simple? Could it be that the person he was angry at was himself, not Scott? Saying it out loud seemed to make it become clearer in his mind. “In fact, I think part of me is afraid I pushed myself too hard and I don’t want to admit it. Blaming Scott is much easier than admitting I may have been placing too much pressure on me.”

“What you’re talking about is transference. You’re transferring your anger onto Scott so you don’t have to direct it on yourself. It’s common for people of all ages. But the difference with you is that you recognize it. Knowing what you’re doing gives you the insight you need to be able to change your behavior. I think you know what you have to do. Now you need to dig deep and do it.”

Derek did know what he had to do. “Thank you so much, Josh. You’ve been a big help.”

“Please. Call me anytime. Once again, it’s been a pleasure

talking with you. You're very grown up for your age and have a great deal of insight. Sometimes I think your generation is growing up too fast. In some ways I envy you. To live in an age where being gay is so prevalent and accepted. But in a way, things were easier years ago. The rules were so much more straightforward for lack of a better term." Josh paused and Derek heard a gentle sigh on the other end of the line. "Be sure to come and visit us again." Derek thanked him and clicked his phone shut.

After dinner, Derek chatted with his parents, then got in his car to return to campus. Once on the road, he called Scott. "Hey, it's me."

"Hey yourself." His tone was pleasant. "How was dinner?"

"It was good. Listen, can you meet me at the Student Center? There's something I want to talk to you about." Derek was bursting with a desire to see Scott. 195

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Scott sounded hesitant when he answered. "Sure. Is something wrong? You've been in a rotten mood lately. You're not going to drop some news on me that's going to wreck me, are you?"

"No, everything is actually really right." He felt guilty Scott's first reaction was to suspect that something was wrong. "And Scott?"

"Yes."

"I love you."

Scott was quiet for a moment. Derek heard him take a shaky breath before responding. "You don't know how good that is to hear from you. I love you too. I'll see you at the Student Center."

Thirty minutes later, they were sitting in a small booth. Derek was nearly bouncing out of his seat. Scott, who had a perplexed expression on his face, sat across from him, watching Derek unfold and refold a napkin several times before finally speaking.

"What did you want to talk about? Did you want to show me the fine art of origami?"

Derek looked up, not understanding Scott's question. Looking back down at his napkin, he realized what Scott had been referring to and pushed the napkin aside. "I wanted to meet you because we have to talk. I don't want to show up at our room one day to find you sitting on the couch with a packed bag next to you."

The look of confusion on Scott's face was pronounced. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about how I've been such a huge jackass. I'm talking about the fact I've been stubborn and mean and have treated you like shit. That needs to stop, today, right now." Derek watched Scott carefully. Scott looked stunned. "I've been angry for a while now, and I've tried to convince myself I was angry at you."

"Why?"

"Because, I was really angry at myself and I couldn't bring myself to admit it."

Derek replayed the conversations he had with his mother and with Josh in fast forward. He'd figured out so much in such a short period of time. "I've been blaming you for not supporting me in my choice to come out. More specifically, I've been angry at you for choosing not to come out with me. I think I believed if I could blame you, I wouldn't have to look at myself to see where I'm responsible for my situation."

The words began to flow easier for Derek. "I'm the one who chose this path for myself and you've been nothing but honest with me from the beginning. You never pretended you were comfortable with coming out. I'm the one who's been

pushing and I'm the one who brought this situation on myself. Tyrell may be a nut job, but there's nothing you could have done to prevent him from behaving the way he did. Even if you announced in the student newspaper we were a couple, it probably wouldn't have stopped him from trying to break us up and finding some other approach to get what he wants.

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As he spoke, he saw Scott's face begin to lighten, the corner of his lip crawling up into his crooked grin. God, I feel like I haven't seen that grin in a million years! He felt his cock begin to stir. "Stop it, I'm not done yet."

"Stop what?"

"Stop smiling at me like that. It's distracting me and I'm not finished saying what I have to say."

Scott's lips curled up even further, causing Derek's cock to fill out even more. "You mean stop smiling like this?" He said it innocently, but his eyes were twinkling with villainous mischief.

"Bastard!" Derek took in a deep breath and continued, one sentence flowing into the next. "What I'm trying to say is I've been trying to blame you for what I haven't wanted to face in myself. I'm the one to blame for the situation I'm in and it doesn't mean you love me any less just because you want to remain private about your sexuality. You have every right to come out at your own pace. You've done nothing but stand behind me every step of the way and don't deserve the way I've treated you, and I am done trying to blame you for something that's not your fault." When he finished speaking, he had to draw in a huge breath and felt like an enormous weight had been lifted from his chest.

Scott sat quietly, still smiling, but looking more serious. Finally, he reached across the table and took one of Derek's hands. "Thank you. It means a lot to me you've given this so much thought and that you're apologizing. I do love you and it has been killing me that we've been fighting so much lately."

Derek looked at their clasped hands and then looked around to see if anyone was watching them. "What are you doing?"

Scott tightened his grip on Derek's hands. "I'm holding your hand. Maybe it's time for me to branch out a little bit."

"But Scott, you don't have to do that just because—"

"Shut up. It's my turn to talk." Scott's voice was gentle but

unquestionably serious.

"Are we going to fight about this now? Maybe I'm ready. Maybe I've noticed no one seems to give one shit about the fact that you're gay. Maybe that's all I needed to see. Everyone has known about you for a month and nothing has happened to you. You've become better friends with the people at the dorm. You're establishing yourself as a respected member of The Alliance. There's been no fallout as the result of you coming out. Well, aside from Tyrell, but you know what I mean. Maybe that's all I needed to see."

Derek was stunned. "You are the most amazing person I've ever met. Have I told you how much I love you?"

Scott laughed. "I think you might have mentioned it, but don't sing my praises too loudly. You just said that you're the one who's created all these problems for yourself and put your shit on me. What I've realized is I allowed you to take the scary step for both of us. I was able to sit safely back and watch you scramble with fear of alienation. I 197

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knew you wanted me to share the burden, but I was too afraid of what might happen to me if I did. You are one brave

motherfucker and I admire you more and more every day. You paved a road on your own and I've been beating myself up for supporting you privately. I realized it's time for me to walk by your side and not in your shadow."

Derek didn't know what to say, but didn't have to wait long before Scott made a decision for them "Come on, let's go back to the room. There's something I want to show you." Scott winked at Derek and his face lit up with pure lust. Derek jumped out of the booth, allowing himself to be led as quickly as possible from the Student Center. Once Scott closed the door behind them, he grabbed Derek by the shoulders and spun him around, pushing him back against the wall. Closing the distance between them, he locked his lips over Derek's mouth and kissed him with a fierceness Derek had not experienced before. Running his hands over Derek's body, Scott massaged and tugged at each muscle, causing Derek to feel like the world's most loved rag doll. Each grunt and groan that Derek emitted seemed to incite greater energy and abandon from Scott and before he knew what was happening, his shirt had been removed and Scott was yanking at his pants, kneeling in front of him on the floor. Derek tried to take off Scott's shirt, but Scott swiped his hands away with each attempt. Taking him into his mouth, Scott buried his face against Derek's groin, kneading at Derek's butt and pulling him closer. The hot wetness and the swirling of Scott's tongue caused Derek's muscles to quiver.

In all of their sexual encounters, the neediness came on fast, but the actual physical experience was slow and savored. This time there was a fierceness, a hunger, to Scott's attention. Having his cock encased in Scott's mouth before he had a chance to register his pants were by his ankles added a level of intensity and pleasure to the moment. Not only were the sensations driving him to a rapid release, but the mind-fuck was intense as well. Finally, Scott stood, and captured Derek in a deep kiss once again. Derek tried to take off Scott's shirt and this time Scott allowed it, mashing their bodies together once the fabric which separated their skin had been removed.

Scott's skin was burning with desire. Loving the feel of hot skin on skin, Derek pulled Scott closer, trying to connect as much of their bodies in as many places as possible. As Scott continued kissing him, Derek reached down, unbuttoning his pants and pushing them halfway down Scott's thighs. It was as far as his arms could reach. Scott shucked his pants off the rest of the way and kicked them across the room. Fully naked, Scott stepped closer to Derek, pushing him back until his entire body was against the wall then pressed their bodies together. Their cocks collided, oozing precum and slicking against each other. "I'm going to do something and I want you to tell me to stop if it makes you uncomfortable." Scott's breath was heaving. Slowly, Scott placed his hands on Derek's shoulders and turned him

around, pressing the head of his cock against Derek's butt. Derek could feel Scott's shaft slide between his cheeks, the wet slipperiness creating a soothing friction which sent waves 198

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of electricity through his body. Leaning in so his mouth was on Derek's neck, Scott began to nibble, then bite, at the tender skin. "Tell me if you want me to stop."

Derek felt Scott's cock head press against his hole, a grunt emitting from his throat.

"Do you want me to stop?"

Derek's didn't respond with words. Instead, he arched his back, giving Scott better access to his ass.

Scott pressed his cock head against Derek's hole, slowly applying pressure. Derek pushed back with his hips, taking Scott all the way in. The sting caused Derek to suck in air, but it passed quickly, too quickly. There was something deeply satisfying about the roughness of this love making. Leaning his head back against Scott's shoulder, he released himself into Scott's control.

Scott was gasping for breath. "Feels so good. So hot inside you." He slowly pulled out and his body began to shake with his ecstasy. "I can't believe the feeling. You are so soft inside. Every part of you is setting my nerves on fire."

Derek knew exactly what he meant. The sensation of having Scott inside of him had always felt incredible to him, but, this time, giving himself over after weeks of withholding, created a mental sensation of submission and vulnerability that intensified his feelings. "I'm already getting close." Derek hadn't even touched his cock, yet he could feel the orgasm building inside of him.

Scott began to pound into him at a faster pace. His hands groping at Derek's chest, pinching his nipples, kneading his pectorals, and sliding gently across his neck. Each touch sent ripples of sensation through Derek, causing him to tremble under Scott's manipulation. "I'm getting close too." Scott's words were barely audible through his grunts and panting.

Derek began to match Scott's movements by pushing back each time Scott entered him. With each thrust, Derek could feel the head of Scott's cock as it nudged his prostate. Tingling sensations shot through his body. It felt as if each nerve had been charged and was zipping with a life of its own. "So close. So good."

Scott grabbed Derek's hips and began to pump harder. When Scott's grip tightened, Derek knew he was close and his own muscles loosened to welcome the full length as deep as it could go into his ass.

Scott pushed all the way into Derek and remained there. His head dropped onto Derek's shoulder and he hissed as Derek felt the hard shaft pulse, unleashing sperm deep inside his body.

Knowing that Scott was coming inside of him threw Derek over the edge. He felt the tingling in his body intensify, then center in his groin. Without ever touching himself, his body was racked by his orgasm and he shot thick streams of sperm onto the wall in front of him.

Once the two were spent and their bodies had calmed down, Scott pulled out of Derek and leaned heavily against him. Derek allowed himself to be pressed against the wall, the cool feeling of the wall's surface a welcome contrast to the burning of his skin. 199

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Slowly turning around, Derek placed his hands on either side of Scott's face. Gently pulling Scott in and kissing him with a

sweet, loving tenderness. Their lips brushed against each other as if being touched by wisps of air. When Scott opened his mouth to Derek, the kiss remained languid and relaxed.

Scott pulled out of the kiss and looked at Derek. "Are you okay?"

Derek had difficulty focusing, still reeling from what they had just done. "I'm better than okay. That was more intense than anything we've ever done before."

Scott leaned in so their foreheads were touching. "For me, too. Maybe we should get angry at each other more often so we can have hot make-up sex like this."

Derek smiled. "It was definitely hot, but if we have to fight to have sex like this I think I would rather enjoy the sex we've had so far."

Scott laughed and kissed Derek again. "Maybe you're right, but it sure will be fun trying to have sex like this again, even if we aren't making up."

Derek hugged Scott. "I like the way you think." He leaned his head against Scott's shoulder. "We still have one problem to deal with though."

Scott wrapped his arms around Derek, squeezing him tightly.

“Don’t ruin this by bringing up his name.”

Derek allowed Scott to pull him in. He was right, they didn’t need to talk about Tyrell, but at some point they would unless they wanted to have a cloud hanging over them for the next four years.

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Chapter Eighteen

The next morning, the sun was shining brightly, causing the snow covered ground to sparkle. The temperature had dropped significantly overnight and the cold was biting. Derek and Scott worked their way to the cafeteria, bundled up and hugging their jackets tightly around themselves. Once seated, Derek took a sip of his coffee and allowed the hot liquid to warm him from the inside. “It’s cold enough to freeze my nuts off.”

Scott was still rubbing his arms. “You’re not kidding.” He sat back in his chair, looking at his plate. Picking up his fork, he started moving food around, but didn’t actually eat anything. It was unlike him not to dig right in and Derek watched him,

confused and growing slightly worried. Finally, he looked up at Derek. "Last night, I've never felt closer to you. I thought about us as we were falling asleep and I've been thinking about us all morning."

Derek let out a breath of relief knowing Scott was silent because of happy thoughts as opposed to lingering tension. He had also been thinking about their sex and was still floating, knowing that part of Scott had remained inside of him after he went to sleep.

"Last night was...it was...when you..."

"I love it when you can't form full sentences." Scott reached across the table, taking Derek's hand. Derek reflexively looked around. "But I wasn't talking about the sex."

Derek cocked an eyebrow. "Okay, I wasn't only talking about the sex. I was talking about us. You and me and what we are together." Derek allowed Scott to turn his palm so it was facing up. Scott began tracing the lines with his index finger. "I want to come to the next Alliance meeting with you. I think I'm ready to take that step."

Derek lost his ability to breathe for a moment. "Scott, you don't have to do that. Last night, when we talked, I meant what I said. I'm the one who's been pushing you. I understand that now. You can take as much time as you need. I don't

blame you for what I've been going through and I'm done being angry at myself. Please don't feel pressured into doing something just because you think I want you to."

Scott squeezed Derek's hand. "It's because of the conversation we had last night that I feel ready for this. Last night you opened up completely to me. You've always showed me how much you love me, but last night, laying it out the way you did, taking ownership for everything, I realized I hadn't even begun to understand the depth of how I feel about you." Scott's voice was strong and confident. There was no hesitancy or wavering. "What we have is something most people never find. I'm done hiding it. To hell with the consequences."

As cheesy as Scott was being, the fact he was saying all these things made Derek feel like he was floating. "If that's what you want, I won't argue. You know I want that. But you don't have to."

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Scott released Derek's hand and picked up his fork, this time spearing a huge bite of pancake and popping it into his

mouth. Within three minutes, his plate was clean.

“Damn, I was hungry.”

Derek laughed. I guess you worked up your appetite last night after, you know.”

He winked and Scott blushed.

“Oh yeah. I know all right.” Scott got up taking his tray with him. “I’ve got class in twenty minutes. Meet me back at the room before lunch and maybe we can work up our appetite again.”

“That sounds like a great plan.” Derek stood up, taking his tray with him and the two headed off to their morning classes.

Derek’s first class was sociology. The day’s lecture began with a summary of Peter Berger’s theory of socially constructed reality. “What I want you to consider for a moment,” his professor said, “is the distinction between the individual and the group. Berger’s theory states that individuals form their own realities, but when in a group, those collective realities form a group norm. The group norm influences how individuals behave within their society. The term Berger gives to the norms which govern how individuals behave is socially constructed reality. They are rules that tell us what is acceptable behavior and what it not, but those

rules came from individuals to begin with. Consider the power of that idea. It affects all of us every day of our lives.”

Derek had not expected to like his sociology class as much as he did. It was a course that seemed different and that was why he had enrolled, but the theories discussed, such as the one the professor was lecturing on, seemed perfectly aligned to what he was going through. He was living in a world where the socially constructed reality was that boys dated girls and everything else was considered different. It had been the reason why he had built walls around himself throughout high school and why he had become so frightened when Tyrell confronted him in front of his dorm. He looked around the room at the other students who were clearly excited by what the professor was talking about. “Let’s take, for example, an individual who believes in free speech. From the individual standpoint, that person should be able to talk or write about whatever they choose without the fear of negative sanction. Once the individual puts an idea out there for public scrutiny, others respond, utilizing their rights to free speech as well. Soon, what occurs is that you have multiple individuals all spouting their ideals and perspectives on a particular subject. What happens to the group dynamic in that situation? A group opinion emerges. What started as an individual belief becomes a non-over-arching ideal. What happens then? That over-arching ideal controls individuals who feel that they must conform to it in order to fit in.”

An image of Jared filled Derek's mind. Jared was exercising his individuality. He was trying to create circumstances that would cause people to talk, to reflect, and ultimately to form opinions. If the dance achieved what Jared wanted it to, people would begin to see the similarities that bound people together. If people started to see that straight or gay, everyone has the same desires, fears, and hopes, perhaps a new norm would emerge.

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Returning his attention to the front of the class, Derek saw his professor clasp his hands in front of him and placing them on the podium, seeming satisfied with his summary. "You can see the irony of it. An idea that begins with an individual freely expressing their beliefs becomes a social governing rule that controls large groups of people. It's fascinating. Group dynamic has the power to control individual behavior, yet nothing can become a group dynamic without individuals to create and sustain it. In other words, socially constructed realities control individuals, yet they are born from individuals. I want for you to reflect on this in your journals. I will expect a five page essay where you apply Berger's theory of socially constructed reality to something in your life

by the end of the week.”

Derek laughed out loud when he heard the assignment, having just outlined a thesis in his mind during the lecture. The current norm dictated that being gay was different, not bad, but different. People shy away from showing their differences, therefore, it would be reasonable to assume people don't come out as openly gay for fear of being seen as dissimilar from everyone else and treated differently. He wondered whether socially constructed realities could be changed and realized immediately they could. What was accepted as normal changed time and time again. What if gay people were willing to be who they are unapologetically, without worrying about how it made their differences obvious to others? Those individual actions would spark discussion and the formation of opinions. Ultimately, those opinions would spread and have greater influence over what constituted acceptable behavior and a new socially constructed reality would emerge. The thought was empowering. If people began to truly believe that being gay only distinguished people by who they loved romantically and had sex with, that would become the idea that would influence the larger group opinion and therefore it would become the new socially constructed reality. Wasn't that what The Alliance was trying to accomplish? Weren't they trying to send the message that gay people are only different to a small degree, but that overwhelmingly, their similarities

to other people far outweighed the differences? That could break down barriers. What had to happen was voices like Tyrell's had to be quieted, or at least, they had to be drowned out by a much larger sea of voices sending a different message.

When class ended, Derek not only had a detailed outline planned for his essay, but he felt like he had come to understand what it was he had been trying to accomplish this year in coming out. He wanted people to see he wasn't really different. He wanted people to know this one aspect of who he was did not separate him as someone others couldn't relate to or like. He wanted to take the power into his own hands to begin the process, as an individual, to shift the opinions of others and to cause a shift in how gay people were viewed.

Suddenly, he understood why he had been so angry at Scott. Derek had wanted Scott to support the belief that gay people weren't different, but he had ignored that Scott was an individual and had to be given time. Scott made friends easily and he was not ashamed of being gay. His beliefs would support what The Alliance was trying to 203

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promote and would ultimately help to bring people together, as opposed to Tyrell's behavior which forced people apart. How could I have been so blind? Scott and I are the same. We both believe in the same things. We're just going about it differently. Realizing he and Scott were promoting the same message, just at different rates, Derek felt a connection which ran deeper than love and friendship. Scott wasn't just a great guy. He wasn't just sexy and kind and loving. He held the same belief system as Derek. Rushing towards his dorm, he couldn't wait to see Scott, wanting to share what he'd been thinking.

Remembering what Scott had insinuated at breakfast about meeting before lunch, Derek amended his thinking. I can't wait to tell him what I've been thinking after we work up our appetite for lunch. He wasn't so obsessed with his theoretical revelation to allow it to stand in the way of mind-blowing sex.

When he got to his dorm, he rushed up the stairs. When he entered the hallway where his room was located, he stopped dead in his tracks. Scott was standing by the door with Elizabeth and several other students. Derek approached the door and his mouth dropped in shock. Written in thick black lettering was one word: FAGGOT!

When Scott saw Derek, he walked over to him and pulled him into a hug. Derek looked around and saw that everyone

was watching them. Looking back at Scott, he was fairly certain his surprise at being held in front of everyone was obvious, but Scott continued to hold him. When he released Derek from the hug, he kept hold of his hand and led him to the door. Everyone was still watching the two of them, but no one seemed to look disapproving. Instead, there were murmurs which included words like

‘horrible’, ‘Who would do such a thing?’ and ‘I wish I had seen who did this.’

“What in the hell?” Derek walked up to the door to stare at the letters forming the malicious word.

Elizabeth, who had been standing to the side of the door, spoke up. “Derek, Scott, I can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am this has happened. I want you to know I’ve already reported it to campus security and to the deans. We are going to get to the bottom of this. I promise you. No one here would do this to you. We’re all horrified and personally offended anyone would do something like this. It feels like a violation to us all.” Their dorm mates nodded and verbalized agreement.

Scott pulled Derek closer. “It gets worse.” Derek steeled himself. How could it get worse than having someone personally attack the two of them? “When Elizabeth questioned people, someone saw something.”

Elizabeth continued. "Katy, could you come here for a minute." Katy was a small freshman who lived on their floor. "Could you please tell Derek and Scott what you saw?"

Katy looked pale. When she spoke, her voice wavered. "I'm so sorry this happened. I was in my room, getting ready for my class and realized I had left my toothbrush in the bathroom, so I darted into the hallway to go and get it. When I did, there was this boy standing outside your room with a can of something. He looked at me and then 204

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took off down the hallway. No one else was in the hall and I only had time to catch a glimpse of him."

Derek felt his heart sink. "Did you recognize who it was?"

Katy shook her head. "No. I've never seen him before. He was tall and thin. His head was shaved and he had darker skin, but he wasn't black. I really didn't get a good enough look to be sure of what he looked like though. There are tons of kids who fit that description."

Derek looked at Scott who held his stare knowingly. "I think I know who you're talking about."

Elizabeth interrupted. "I think we all suspect who did this, but unfortunately, Katy doesn't have enough for us to actually accuse him. She doesn't even feel she would be able to recognize him if she saw him again unless he were standing in exactly the same position and wearing exactly the same clothing. That's pretty weak evidence to make an accusation." She turned to Derek. "But I do have the notes from the time he came to the dorm. You can still file a complaint against him for harassment if you like."

Scott put a protective arm around Derek's shoulder. "And I'm a witness to the fact that he grabbed you and caused a visible bruise on your arm. You could file a complaint about that as well. You said Jared had to intervene at the last Alliance meeting and sent Tyrell away."

Derek took in what was being said, but couldn't process it. Just a few minutes earlier, he had come to some incredible realizations about his life and about Scott. He had been elated and finally felt a sense of relief from the stress he had been placing on himself all year. Now he was staring at his door which had been vandalized in a hateful manner. "I need to think about this. Just give me a little time to think about what I want to do."

Elizabeth nodded and turned to the other students gathered in the hallway. "Let's give them some time to talk." As they

left, students hugged both Derek and Scott, letting them know they supported them and would do whatever they could to help. Once alone in their room, Scott pulled Derek into a hug. "Are you okay?"

Derek allowed himself to be held. "I'm fine. I just can't believe he would go this far. I mean, I know he's an ass, but I didn't think he was completely stupid or crazy." Derek tightened his grip around Scott's waist. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. It was a shock when I got back to the room, but in a way, the timing of something like this happening is perfect." He stiffened for a moment, then let out an awkward laugh. "Well, not that there's ever a good time for something like this to happen, but all morning I've been thinking about you and us. I rushed back here to see you so I could tell you everything I figured out today."

Derek stepped back so he was facing Scott. "What sort of things?"

Scott blushed. "While sitting in class, I was thinking about you, about us, and images of the two of us together kept filling my mind. Pictures of the two of us together with our friends. Together, so people knew we were a couple. And the funny thing is, 205

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the thought filled me with pride, not fear. I realized how important you are to me all over again and wanted to let you know how I felt. Then, when I arrived here and saw what Tyrell did..." He paused as the blush on his face turned crimson. "All I could think of was how angry I was he would do yet another thing to upset you."

Derek wrapped his arms around Scott and leaned his head against his shoulder. Scott's strong arms closed around him and large hands rubbed his back soothingly. After a few seconds of silence, Derek spoke. "You want me to press charges, don't you?"

Scott held Derek at arm's length. "Whatever you decide to do, I'll support, but yes, I do want you to file a complaint."

Derek nodded. "Okay, but can we go somewhere first? There's someone I'd like to talk to before I make up my mind. Jared lives across campus and I'd like to run this by him. Will you come with me?"

"Of course. I think it's actually a good idea to get the president of The Alliance involved in this. He'll probably know how to make this a bigger issue than an isolated dorm vandalism case."

The two headed across campus in silence, Scott never letting go of Derek's hand. When they knocked on Jared's door fifteen minutes later, Scott was taken aback when Hank answered. "Derek, Scott, what are you guys doing here?"

Derek and Scott looked at each other. Simultaneously they said, "You know Hank?"

"He was my orientation leader," Derek said. "How do you know him?"

"He's on the wrestling team." Scott turned to Hank, looking slightly uncomfortable. Hank looked back and forth between Derek and Scott, lowered his gaze to their hands which were still twined together, then motioned for them to come into the room.

"What's the matter?"

Derek explained what had happened. As he did Hank's expression grew more and more serious. Scott, still looking uncomfortable, walked over to Derek's side, placing an arm on his shoulder. Derek leaned into Scott and wrapped a hand around his waist. Feeling Scott stiffen at the intimacy, he looked up. "What's wrong?"

Scott bit his lower lip. Placing his hand over Derek's shoulder he pulled him in tighter. "Nothing. I just...the guys on

the team don't know about me and...Hank is...never mind. It's not important."

Hank was watching the two of them with a curious expression on his face. "Hank is what?" Hank asked.

Scott looked up. "You're on the team and this is a hell of a way for you to find out I'm gay."

Hank laughed. "Okay, but what does me being on the wrestling team have to do with anything?"

Scott stared at Hank. "You're on the wrestling team and just found out that Derek and I are boyfriends. Don't you think that will freak the team out a little bit?"

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Hank raised an eyebrow. "No. First of all, I wouldn't tell them. That's up to you. But even if I did, I don't think they would give a shit. Actually, Derek is pretty good looking so they'll probably razz you about getting lucky."

Derek felt his cheeks flush. He looked at Scott whose mouth had dropped open.

“What?”

Hank allowed his facial expression to relax. “Jared will be here in a few minutes. Why don’t I fill you in with a little history lesson. I met Jared last year. His boyfriend was the captain of the wrestling team. They were living together, but when his boyfriend graduated, Jared needed a new roommate, so he and I decided to room together. I can tell you firsthand that the guys on the team do not have a problem with someone who’s gay.”

Scott sat up straighter, leaning forward and peering at Hank. “Really? They elected someone captain who they knew was gay?”

Shaking his head, Hank muttered “freshman” under his breath. Derek laughed. “Hey, be nice to the young ones.”

“No offense. I was an idiot once too. You freshman have no clue that college life is different than high school. You come in with these preconceived notions of how people will think and act. It takes you a whole year to figure out that people aren’t nearly as closed minded once they have to begin to fend for themselves. Or, if they are closed minded, they’re way too preoccupied trying to keep their heads above water to put the time and energy into bothering with other people’s private lives.”

Despite the shock of seeing his door vandalized, Derek decided the day wasn't turning out too badly.

When Jared arrived, his surprise was evident. "Hey, Derek. This is a nice surprise. Who's your friend?"

Derek introduced Scott, then told Jared about what had happened at this dorm. When he finished, Jared stood motionless, staring at the floor. His cheeks had become beet red as his fists clenched and unclenched. When he finally spoke, his voice was strained. "He wrote the word faggot on your door?" Shaking his head, he sat down. Hank, Derek, and Scott watched in silence as Jared fumed. "Okay, there are a number of ways we can handle this. You say that your RA has already informed campus security and the deans?"

Derek nodded. "But the only witness isn't sure of who she saw. Her description matches Tyrell, but Elizabeth says it's not a lot to go on. Gripping his knees, Jared lifted his head from staring at the floor and looked at Derek. "You are going to file a complaint against him for the other two incidents, correct?"

Derek looked down. "I don't know. I'm not sure I want to create more of a problem."

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"Derek!" Jared's voice came out sharply and Scott pulled him in closer, angling his body so that Derek was standing slightly behind him. Jared raised his hands. "I'm sorry. Derek, I want you to seriously consider filing a complaint. We can't allow this kind of behavior to continue without addressing it. Not only have you been violated, but it sends the wrong message. People can't just behave like this without retribution."

Scott, who had remained silent, actually stepped between Derek and Jared. His movement wasn't aggressive, but it was clearly intended to be protective. "I'm sorry, Jared, but are you trying to push Derek into doing something he isn't sure he wants to do? Because it sounds to me like you want him to do something for the benefit of other people. I understand where you're coming from, but my only concern is what's best for Derek. I hope you can understand that."

Jared looked at Scott. "You're right. I'm sorry. It's just when things like this happen, I can't help but think about the bigger picture." Turning to Derek his expression was apologetic. "I'm sorry, Derek. This decision is yours and I will, of course, support whatever you decide. I hope you don't mind that I'll be working with security and the deans to address the issue

of the vandalism of your dorm room.”

Derek felt like the center of attention and didn't like it. His natural instinct to recoil flared up and he had to fight hard to push it back. “I understand,” he managed weakly.

“And maybe I will file a complaint. I just need some time to think about it.”

“Of course. Take as much time as you need. But when you decide, please let me know.” Jared sat back down and cradled his head in his hands. Scott took Derek by the hand. “Maybe we should go for a walk. Your head always clears when you get fresh air.”

Glad to let Scott take charge, Derek allowed himself to be led from the room and the dorm. They walked around the campus aimlessly. Scott had been right, the cool air was helping to clear his head and to alleviate the nervous energy that had been building up inside of him.

By the time they got back to their dorm, security had already taken pictures of the door and maintenance was repainting it. Derek was surprised at how efficiently this problem was being handled. “Wow, they really acted quickly.” Scott simply nodded.

“Scott, you know I'm not going to file a complaint, right?”

Scott nodded again and put his arm around Derek's shoulder. "Yes, I figured you probably wouldn't. It's okay. I understand." Despite his words, Scott's disappointment was as obvious to Derek as if he had sent him a text message saying you're making a terrible mistake.

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Chapter Nineteen

Since there wasn't enough evidence to formally accuse Tyrell for the vandalism of their door, the issue had been dropped. Scott kept to his word of supporting Derek in his choice not to file a complaint for the other incidents involving Tyrell. Jared also supported Derek's decision to keep Tyrell in the group. Derek didn't want to incite any additional anger or to prompt him in any way. Life had finally settled down and Derek wanted to keep it that way.

The dance had been very well advertised and it was the talk of the campus since there had only been one other school-wide dance that year. After Jared announced the success of Jeff and Charlie's initiatives and the group applauded the achievements, Jared called for the group's attention. "I am so

proud of the work we've done this year. We are truly achieving our goals. The things we're doing not only benefit the community surrounding BU, but they make us visible to the student body. I believe we're demonstrating through our actions we're a group with values and interests which are similar in many ways to everyone else. In short, I believe we're breaking down barriers. The dance should be another opportunity for us to bring the student body together in a unifying way."

The group applauded again and Jared continued. "As you know, the dance is going to be this Saturday night. That's two days from now and I'd like to invite each of you to a party at my dorm tomorrow night. It will be a celebration of our success as a group. I also think it would be nice for us to hang out socially before the dance. We've been so focused on our projects that we haven't spent time just having fun as a group."

As the meeting broke up, Derek and Scott began to mingle with the other members. Scott had quickly become a popular member of the group. His physical attentiveness reminded Derek of their time together in New York and was yet another way Scott had transitioned from reserved to open about his sexuality and their relationship. Talking to a few members of the group, he placed his arm around Derek's waist, pulling him closer. The act was unconscious, reflexive. Derek leaned into Scott's body, allowing himself to be held and

enjoying the touch of their bodies.

“Well, well. Look at the cozy little love birds.” Derek turned and saw Tyrell standing next to them. Scott’s arm tightened around Derek’s waist protectively. “How sweet.”

“Give it a rest, Tyrell.” Scott’s statement was delivered casually, but there was a clear hint of danger behind his words. “Why don’t you go find your minions who do all of your bidding?”

Tyrell looked around the room to see if Charlotte, Phillip, and Oscar were nearby.

“Maybe I just want to stand here and bask in the glory of your perfect relationship.” He glanced around again to see if anyone was looking. Then, leaning in, he whispered, “I heard you and Derek received a love note the other day.”

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Scott’s grip became even tighter around Derek’s waist and he had to exert energy to position himself between the two. “Tyrell, I think it would be best if you walk away. To joke about

something like that goes beyond what I would expect of anyone, even you. I thought you were the one who said we all have to stick together. Remember? What were your words? A s g a y people w e have t o have each other's backs. Something like that, right?"

Tyrell didn't budge. "Well, maybe my opinions are beginning to change."

Derek felt Scott begin to push him aside which would have given him a clear path to Tyrell. Maintaining his position between the two, Derek smiled. "We'll see you at the party tomorrow night. Have a good evening." As he took Scott by the hand, he had to tug to force him to follow.

Once out of the building, Scott pulled his hand from Derek's grip. The ground was covered in heavy, wet snow. It was perfect for forming tight, hard snowballs. Picking up a huge pile, he carefully formed it into a tight ball and hurled it into the trees. He grunted with the effort and got very good distance.

Derek laughed. "Do you feel better now?"

"No, not quite yet." Scott picked up another clump of snow, forming it into a ball again and hurled it at the sign which indicated the direction to the cafeteria. The snowball hit the sign, creating a sharp clang as bits of ice smashed against

the metal.

“Now I feel better.”

“We need to get back anyway. Beck’s due any minute. I’m glad she decided to come for the party. We haven’t hung out with her in the longest time.” Derek had called Beck earlier in the week to let her know about the party and the dance. She had agreed to come for the whole weekend.

Scott’s face lit up. “That’s right. Beck is coming. Awesome! Let’s go.” They headed across campus, talking about random things and making fun of one another. When they got back to their dorm, Beck was waiting for them outside. “Beck!” Scott ran up to her, arms outstretched to give her a hug.

Beck had a stern expression on her face. “I’ve been standing here for ten minutes in the freezing cold and you think I’m going to just give you a hug.” Scott stopped short, cowering slightly under Beck’s glare. “I ought to grab you by the nuts and...” her serious demeanor broke and she began laughing. “Shit, I think I’m losing my touch. I can’t even pretend to be mad at you. Come give mama a hug!”

Scott and Derek both charged forward, grabbing Beck in a bear hug. Beck finally squirmed out of their grip and Derek used the opportunity to grab Scott by the waist and pull him

backward to the ground. He grabbed a pile of sloshy snow and piled it onto Scott's face. Scott howled. "Fuck. It's wet. It's beginning to drip down the front of my shirt."

Grabbing Derek he flipped him onto his back, straddling him and placing his knees on Derek's arms so that he couldn't move. Once Scott had secured him to the ground, he unzipped Derek's jacket and grabbed a large mound of snow. Using his other hand 210

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to lift Derek's shirt, he shoved the snow against Derek's skin and started spreading it all over his chest and abdomen. Derek struggled and tried to free himself, but Scott was too strong for him and had a weight advantage. All he could do was writhe and squeal. After a few minutes, Scott stopped. "Uh-oh."

Derek looked up at him. "What's wrong?"

Scott had a serious look on his face. "It's just too bad, that's all."

Derek became slightly concerned. "What's too bad?"

Scott winked at Derek. "It's too bad Beck just got soaked." With that he jumped up and grabbed Beck, pulling her to the ground as well. She began shrieking, threatening testicular mutilation every other sentence. Derek, not wanting to miss out on the fun, grabbed snow and began tossing it onto both of them. By the time they finished and got up to Derek and Scott's room, they were all thoroughly soaked and freezing. Beck was laughing, but she had a scowl on her face.

Derek sat down on the floor of their room and began pulling his clothes off. Scott, completely soaked, stood by Beck, helping her with her jacket and boots. "You're not mad are you? It was just fun."

Beck pursed her lips, but then allowed a grin to creep across her face. "That depends on whether or not you have the proper hair products for me to put myself back together." Scott hopped up and produced a bag filled with his grooming materials. Because Scott's hair was longer and unkempt, he splurged on hair products to keep his hair shiny and healthy. It was one of the few girly things about Scott and Derek found it oddly comforting since everything else about him was so distinctly masculine. While Beck was in the shower, Derek removed the rest of his clothing and walked up to Scott. Pushing him down to his knees, he grabbed a chunk of hair and pulled Scott's face to his groin, pressing his cock which was straining and throbbing with excitement against Scott's face. "I want you to suck me until my brain

turns to mush.”

Scott looked up in shock, but then his sly, crooked grin crossed his face and took him into his mouth, delivering one of the best blowjobs Derek had ever received. Part of the allure, Derek had to admit, was knowing Beck could walk in at any time. An hour later, the three of them were sitting at a table with a large cheese pizza and three sodas. Beck took a bite and looked across the table at Derek and Scott. Scott had his arm casually draped over Derek’s shoulder and was leaning back in his seat, completely relaxed. “It’s so nice to see the two of you like this. You wouldn’t even know that just over a year ago, you guys didn’t even know each other. You’ve both come a long way.”

Derek took a sip of his soda. “Are you excited for the next two nights? Tomorrow’s party will be smaller, but you’ll meet some of our closer friends. The dance is going to be amazing. I’m glad you agreed to come. Since I’m going to be mixing, you’ll have to make sure Scott behaves.”

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Scott lifted the hand that was gently brushing Derek’s collar

bone and smacked him on the side of the head. "And what makes you think Beck and I won't both act scandalously at the dance?"

Derek stuck out his tongue and Beck laughed. "Honestly, the two of you get cuter and cuter. It is so unfair." Her eyes sparkled with her happiness for the two of them. Slowly, she took on a more serious expression. "Derek, could you please explain to me once again why you've allowed this boy, Tyrell, to get away with the things he's done?"

"I don't know, Beck. There's just something in me that feels like it would make things worse. What harm has he really done? He confronted me publicly outside my dorm and now I'm out and know people accept and like me. He grabs my arm and causes a small bruise and a few cuts and now I have my excuse for not having anything to do with him at all." Derek shrugged his shoulders. "I just don't see what benefit would come from it. I'm happy. I've come to realize what's important to me and I understand myself better now than I ever have. Scott and I are closer than ever and Tyrell is alienating himself from everyone. Which is the better revenge? Getting him in trouble or making him see how all of his efforts have failed?"

Beck shook her head. "I understand what you're saying, but still, what if he was the one who vandalized your door? He shouldn't be able to walk away from doing something like

that without paying some sort of price for it.”

Derek became acutely aware of Scott's silence. He and Derek had gotten into enough arguments over this issue that they had agreed not to fight about it anymore. If Derek decided he was ready to take action, he would.

“Well, make sure you point him out to me tomorrow night. I want to see who he is.” Beck crossed her arms over her chest, waiting for Derek's response. Derek said nothing. “Derek, I'm going to sit here and stare at you until you answer me.” Derek still said nothing, but his lips began to pull up into a thin, mischievous smile. “You little shit! You're fucking with me. Derek Thompson. You tell me right now you'll point him out or I'll—”

“All right, I'll point him out. Just don't threaten me. I plan on using my nads later on.” Scott's mouth fell open, but he quickly closed it and kicked Derek hard under the table. Derek winced. “Fuck. That hurt.”

Beck looked back and forth between the two of them. “Haven't you boys learned I don't care what you do with your dicks, so long as I don't have to watch.” She took another bite of her pizza.

Scott looked at Derek, then turned to Beck. “There's one thing Derek hasn't told you about my position on all of this.”

Derek turned to face Scott, giving him a warning look, but Scott ignored him. "What he hasn't told you is I feel that Tyrell is unstable. I think his behavior is escalating and I'm worried he may do something stupid or crazy. Does that make me sound weird?"

Although he didn't move away from Derek after making the comment, he did lower his hands to cover his groin. Derek looked at him and shook his head. "The only 212

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reason I wouldn't hurt you there is because I need that particular area to remain functional." He then turned to face Beck.

She remained thoughtful for a moment. "No, Scott. I think it sounds like you love Derek and don't want to see anything happen to him. I feel the same way. Why don't we both keep an eye on this kid and see what we can figure out?"

Derek felt his heart sink. It seemed all the people closest to him tended to band together to protect him. When his mother and Scott got together, they sided with one another. Now he and Beck were siding with one another. Derek wasn't angry, but it did make him feel like a baby. Rather than become

upset, he reminded himself Scott's protectiveness was a turn on and made him feel special. "You guys play Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson all you like. Just leave me out of it."

Beck dismissed Derek's comment with a wave of her hand as she and Scott began discussing how they could get to the bottom of figuring out just how crazy Tyrell really was. When they finished eating, they returned to the dorm where a number of students were drinking in the lounge and playing foosball. Scott joined the foosball game, leaving Derek and Beck to hangout. After a few hours, they all headed up to their room and went to sleep.

The next day went by quickly. Derek, Scott, and Beck showered and got themselves ready for the party at Josh's dorm. Since this was the first party Derek and Scott were going to as an open couple, they decided it would be romantic to wear clothes that had meaning for them. Scott wore the white long sleeve shirt with the Tasmanian Devil, the shirt he was wearing the first day Derek met him at the beginning of their senior year. Derek wore the black short sleeve button down Pierre had given him when they had gone to New York for the Howie Day concert. Before leaving, Derek pulled out a bottle of vodka from their fridge and poured a shot for the three of them. "To friends and to opening our hearts to love."

They clinked their glasses and drank. Derek felt giddy. So

much had happened in such a short period of time and he had to continually remind himself things were as good as they seemed. The love he felt for Scott was powerful. Spending the first few months of school struggling with the choice to come out and facing his fears had been trying on both of them, but here they were, open about their relationship and more in love than ever.

Although being brave enough to look into his heart with honesty had been difficult and painful, it was that act of courage which had ultimately freed him to finally accept who he was and what he wanted. As hard as it had been to admit his own shortcomings and the many ways he had created his own problems, the reward of his courage was clear. He was happy and he was in love.

Walking in the haze of his own thoughts, he wasn't paying much attention to Beck and Scott's conversation. They had been talking to each other non-stop since they got up that morning. In fact, they had been conspiratorial from the first moment Beck showed up, so Derek had taken to tuning them out. While he didn't want them to do 213

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anything to incite Tyrell, he decided he was simply going to

enjoy the day and not worry about it.

When they arrived at Josh's dorm, the lounge was decked out with the banners and posters the dance committee had made. People were already drinking and music was playing. Several people were dancing and there was a great deal of laughter. Jared came up to them when they arrived. "Hey guys, how are you? Holy crap! Derek, that shirt looks amazing on you."

"I know. It really does, doesn't it?" Scott leaned in and kissed Derek on the cheek. Jared smiled. "Can I borrow him for a few minutes? I want to go over a few last minute things for tomorrow's dance." Scott nodded, allowing Beck to drag him towards the keg as Jared led Derek to the other side of the room. "You really do look fantastic. You don't wear clothes that show off your body. You really should."

"Are you hitting on me, Jared?" He said it in a playful manner.

"If I am, I'm sure Chad wouldn't be too happy with me." Standing to their right was a tall, lean man with short-cropped brown hair and smoldering amber eyes. Jared introduced them. "Derek, this is Chad, my boyfriend. He just graduated last year."

"Yes, I've heard about you. It's very nice to meet you." Chad had been the captain of the wrestling team. When Jared's

roommate, Hank, told Scott that their previous captain had been gay, something in Scott had shifted from being afraid of coming out to embracing it. Derek felt like he owed Chad a huge debt of gratitude. Chad's smile was wide and he had prominent dimples dotting each cheek which reminded him of Scott. He glanced across the room and saw Scott and Beck huddled together, talking intently. "Jared tells me great things about you. I'm looking forward to your music tomorrow. I've heard the CD you gave him and it's awesome."

Once they had been introduced and talked for a few minutes, Jared returned to the business of the dance. "I need to know what to set up so you can do your thing." They talked for a while as Derek explained what he would need and how much time it would take to set up and test the equipment.

Once they had a plan in place, Derek worked his way through the crowded party to Scott and Beck. They were standing on the other side of the room and still whispering into each other's ears. Derek was about half way through the room when his path was blocked by Tyrell. "Where's your boyfriend?" He hissed the final word.

"He's right over there, Tyrell. Please leave me alone." Derek tried to walk past, but he blocked his path. "You mean he's over there with that cow. Who's she? His girlfriend?"

Derek ignored him and once again tried to walk away.

"Look, I don't want any problems, Tyrell. Why don't you go and bother someone else for a change?"

Just as Tyrell was about to respond, Scott appeared next to them. "Is there a problem here?" He was tense and stood with squared shoulders, looking menacing. 214

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Tyrell shrank away from him, but didn't move away. Scott walked around Derek and pulled him in close, giving him a lingering kiss on the lips. "Come on over here, Baby. I got you a drink already." Derek allowed himself to be led away. Once out of earshot, Scott turned to face Tyrell with a dangerous glint in his eyes. Tyrell stood motionless when Scott had kissed him, but Derek could feel the anger which had radiated off of him. "Do you think you should have done that in front of him? Kiss me, I mean."

"I'm going to pretend you didn't just ask me that." He took a full cup of beer and handed it to Derek.

"You're right. I'm sorry." Derek ran his fingers over the picture of the Tasmanian Devil, tickling his way across Scott's chest and feeling Scott's nipples harden under his touch. He then ran his hand over Scott's bicep, squeezing at the firm, well-

defined muscle. "You are too sexy. I almost want to ditch this party and go back to our room right now."

Scott's sexy grin slid into place and Derek could feel his own cock begin to stir.

"You're one to talk. Everyone here has commented about how amazing you look in that shirt."

Derek was about to respond when he heard a commotion from across the room. Turning to see what the problem was, his mouth dropped open. Tyrell was shrieking in a high-pitched voice and bent over. Beck, with a ferocious flame in her eyes, had one hand firmly grasping him by the balls. "Who in the fuck do you think you are? Do you really think anyone here believes a word you're saying?"

Tyrell continued to squeal, begging for Beck to release him. "I'm not lying. It's true."

"Uh Beck?" Derek approached them warily, unsure what he could say or do to remedy the situation. "Is there a problem here?"

The crowd surrounding them stood by, silently watching what was taking place, too stunned to take any action. Beck turned to Derek. "Little Ms. Tyrell here is trying to tell everyone that the two of you have secretly been dating and

having sex together. Since he doesn't know me, I guess he assumed I would actually be interested in anything this miniscule little pin-dick has to say." She tightened her grasp on Tyrell's nuts and he bent over even further.

"But it is true. And that boyfriend of his should dump him if he knows what's best for him. Derek's told me over and over he wished they would just break up." Tyrell was beginning to sweat.

Derek's shock left him unable to speak. He looked at Scott who had turned red with fury. "Don't," was all Derek could manage as he watched Scott struggle with his temper. Scott's fists clenched into tight balls, white with tension, but he made no move to attack.

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Beck, seeing that Derek had Scott under control, turned to Tyrell. "Okay little boy, I have some questions for you. First, you know as well as I do that you and Derek never had, and never will have, sex."

Tyrell started to refute her comment, but she tightened her

hold and he finally relinquished. "Fine, I just made it up."

Beck continued as if she were interrogating a witness in a courtroom. The crowd began to murmur quietly, but Beck's performance seemed to have them completely locked in rapt attention. "And why would you want to lie about something like that?"

"Because he ruined my life here on campus. He acted all nice to me and then made me look bad to my friends."

"I see." Beck's face seemed to relax a bit, although she maintained her grip on Tyrell's balls. "And why did you decide to wait for Derek outside his dorm to confront him?"

"Because I wanted to hurt him the way he hurt me. When he told my friends I had been lying, they told everyone and people began to look at me differently." Tyrell's face strained from the pain Beck was inflicting on him.

"So you admit you lied then too?"

"Yes! Please, let go of my balls."

Beck smiled. "I'm not done. Now, I'm not going to bother about how you grabbed Derek, causing a physical injury to his arm. Instead, I'm going right for the million-dollar question. Were you the one who wrote the word faggot on Derek and

Scott's door?"

Tyrell's eyes widened, then he recomposed himself as much as someone could whose nuts were in a vice grip. Everyone in the room fell silent. "No. I never did that."

Beck tightened her grip and Derek could see she was beginning to twist her hand a little, causing Tyrell to gasp in pain. "Are you sure about that?"

Tyrell strained as he spoke. "Yesssss!" The word dragged out as he hissed like a snake.

Beck calmly reached into her pocket, removing a pen. She placed the pointed end of it to Tyrell's groin. "I'm only going to ask you one more time. If you lie to me again, I'm going to spear your nuts, add green peppers, pearl onions, and tomatoes, and barbecue them a s a shish kebab." With calculating precision, she asked the question one more time. "Were...you...the...one...who...vandalized...their...door?"

Tyrell stared at Beck, assessing how serious she was in her threat. When he didn't respond, she applied pressure to the pen causing Tyrell to shout in pain. Derek looked around the room and everyone was as frozen in shock and intrigue as he was. Finally, Tyrell, panting and sweating profusely, answered. "Okay, Okay. Fine. I did do it. But I only did it to get back at him."

Beck asked one last question. "Are you saying this because I'm hurting you or because it's true?"

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Tyrell's response was immediate. "I'm not lying. I wrote the word faggot o n their door to get back at them. I wanted Derek to suffer like he made me suffer."

She released her grip and Tyrell collapsed o n the floor. Looking around, Derek could see that everyone was staring a t Tyrell, who slowly stood up and squared his shoulders, trying to regain some composure. "What's the big deal anyways? It's just a word. I just wanted to make him feel like shit. I didn't mean anything by it."

Jared stepped forward. "What's the big deal? The big deal is that what you did is a hate crime. You vandalized school property. You've harassed another student. You've inflicted physical injury. Are you s o dense and lost i n your own miniscule head to realize your act o f discrimination could have had significantly negative consequences for all of us who are gay on campus? What if other people who don't like gay people decided to follow your lead and began to

vandalize our rooms as well? What in the hell is wrong with you?" Jared was shaking at this point. "I think you need to leave. Before you do, please be very clear on one thing. On Monday, I'm going directly to the dean of the freshman class and reporting you. Enjoy your last two days as a student at BU

because I don't believe you'll be a student here after Monday."

The room fell silent for a moment, then everyone broke into quiet conversations in groups of two or three. Derek turned to face Scott just as Beck walked up to them.

"Well, that went well, I think," she said in a chipper voice, clapping Scott on the back. Derek looked at her, then Scott. "What did you do?"

Scott turned to Derek with an apologetic expression on his face. "Beck and I planned how to get Tyrell to admit what he did. We knew he wouldn't be able to resist talking shit about you to anyone who would listen and he doesn't know Beck. We decided to have Beck talk to him, hoping he would spill something we could use against him since his guard wouldn't be up with her." He then turned to Beck. "What was up with grabbing his nuts though? That wasn't part of the plan."

"You two are the ones who say I'm constantly threatening violence against the male anatomy. I had to make an honest woman of myself." She smiled an evil grin. Derek was still trying to process what had just happened. Once again, there was a commotion coming from behind Derek, then he heard someone shout, "Watch out!"

Derek whirled around just in time to see Tyrell charging towards him brandishing the pen Beck had just held to his groin. He was holding it like a knife and was moving in fast. Before he could move out of the way, Scott stepped forward, brushed Tyrell's arm to the side, and punched him in the face. There was a loud crack and then Tyrell crumpled to the ground, clutching his face in his hands. Two other students grabbed Tyrell by each of his arms while Jared instructed someone else to call security. Ten minutes later, security was escorting Tyrell from the dorm. Once order had been restored, Jared looked at the crowd. What was supposed to be a celebratory party for the successes of the group had turned into a disaster and Derek somehow felt it was his fault.

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Finally, Jared spoke. "Obviously, this is not what I expected when I planned this party." A few people laughed nervously. "But I think with all that's been happening this year, it's good that we were all together when the truth came out. This is something that affects us all. Not just those of us in this room, but everyone. We've all seen firsthand the danger of turning against one another. If this had continued, it would've reflected poorly on us and could have sent an entirely wrong message to the rest of the student body." Jared paused, appearing thoughtful. "Tyrell is clearly sick and I'm sure he'll get the help he needs. If we're going to live by our words, we should hope for the best for him." Jared paused again, looking like he was at a loss for words. Derek stepped forward. He wasn't sure what he was going to say, but something inside of him felt a need to speak. He looked around the room at all of his new friends. He looked at Jared who had been such a good role model and mentor to him. Finally, he looked at Scott, the man he loved, and he felt a warmth and confidence fill him.

"I want to say something to everyone here. First, I kind of feel like this is all my fault." Several people began to speak out in protest, but Derek raised his hand to silence them. "I only feel like it's my fault because everyone who's known about this problem has advised me to file a complaint and I haven't. Maybe if I did, it wouldn't have come to this."

Derek saw everyone was quietly watching him. Surprisingly,

although he was the center of attention, his usual feelings of discomfort were absent. "When I started college, I felt this incredible urge to explore what it would be like to come out more publicly. In high school, I'd been very secretive about being gay and I didn't want to anymore. Joining The Alliance has been a great experience for me. Although the year has presented a lot of challenges, and it's only been a few months," Derek laughed, realizing he had only begun school a little over three months ago. "I feel as if I've already grown and learned a lot about what it means to be myself."

Everyone was silent, listening to what Derek had to say. "One of the things you've all shown me is it's not being gay that takes courage; it's being ourselves. It's far gutsier to look inside and face who we are and how we need to change than to simply go along letting life happen to us. Jared's goal of building understanding and integration is noble and we're doing that, but being in the group is so much more than building a community. I'm proud to be a part of this group because each of you lives honestly and I'm learning how to do that too."

Derek thought back to the first day he met Scott. His world had changed the moment Scott entered his English class and it had become more colorful and vibrant ever since. "What I've come to believe is that, although we've faced challenges by choosing to show courage, we've also been

rewarded. Our reward is happiness. We can be ourselves and we don't have to hide. That's a n amazing thing and maybe it takes something extreme, like what just happened, for us to appreciate just how amazing the courage we show really is."

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Derek walked over to Scott. He was still talking to the whole group, but he was only looking at Scott. "My courage may have created a lot of drama, but I know what my reward is, and I'm looking at him right now."

Scott placed his hands o n Derek's shoulders a nd slowly drew him in. Leaning forward, he kissed Derek softly, but with a deep passion filled with love. His mouth surrounded Derek's and their lips pressed together in gentle warmth and tenderness. After a long moment, they pulled apart. The entire room began to whoop and cheer. Turning red, Derek faced his friends. "So, let's all raise our beers or whatever else it is we're drinking tonight, and drink to The Alliance." Everyone raised their glasses and cheered again. Someone turned the music back on. After a while, the party was filled with laughter and dancing once again.

Jared walked up to Derek. "What you said was wonderful. I really hope you consider running for a leadership position next year. I think you'll be able to lead this group in the right direction." Grabbing Chad by the hand, Jared pulled him into the crowd and began to dance with the rest of the group.

Scott walked up behind Derek and hugged him, resting his chin on his shoulder.

"You're amazing. I love you so much."

Derek turned around and kissed Scott. "Come on. Let's dance." Derek pulled Scott into the middle of the room and began to dance to the rhythm and beat of the music. Beck joined them and, as they danced, she took both of their hands. Shaking her head and smiling, she said, "You guys are the cutest couple ever." They continued dancing for the rest of the night.

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Epilogue

The school-wide dance was a huge success. It was crowded, with students lined up outside the Student Center all night long. Derek had his A-game on and his music was better than usual. After the party, people he had never seen before came up to him, telling him how great his music was and asking him to DJ for their parties. Tyrell had been given a choice. He could choose to go to counseling for anger management and could return after a one semester suspension, or he could choose not to receive counseling and be expelled. He opted to return home to Alabama and would not be returning to BU.

A small part of Derek felt sad that Tyrell had chosen not to accept BU's offer. In fact, Derek was part of the reason the offer had been extended at all. After Jared reported Tyrell on the Monday following the party, Derek took it upon himself to go to the dean of the freshman class, asking that they try to give Tyrell an option which would allow him to continue at BU. It was a difficult thing to do since Scott was completely against it, but Derek didn't want to be the reason someone got expelled from school. As the months wore on, Derek and Scott became more actively involved in The Alliance and Jared's goal was being accomplished. Scott had been particularly helpful in getting information out to the sports teams. Since he was at the Athletic Complex so often, he

began with his own team who he knew had no problem with gay people, and slowly began outreach to the captains of other teams. As The Alliance planned new fundraising events, Scott was able to increase the number of students who knew about and attended them. As a result, the amount of money that The Alliance raised for outreach programs had doubled from previous years.

Over spring break, Derek and Scott chose to return to New York. Although Derek's parents and Shannon were unhappy that they couldn't have the boys to themselves for the whole vacation, their protests were weak and they caved in fairly quickly. Once in the city and unpacked, Derek walked into the living room and sat next to Josh. "Scott and I are taking you and Pierre to dinner and we're paying." Josh started to protest, but Derek cut him off. "No arguments. I've made plenty of extra spending cash mixing for parties and it's the least we can do after all the two of you have done for us."

Taking advantage of the fact that Pierre was at work and Scott was in the shower, Josh sat down next to Derek. "So, it seems things have worked out well between you two." He nodded his head in the direction of the bathroom.

"Yes. Things are incredible. Better than ever." Derek leaned back into the couch cushion and allowed his mind to float as he thought about Scott. He was startled back to the room by the sound of Josh's laughter. "I'm glad. You and he have

something special.”

When Scott had finished his shower and was dressed, he and Derek headed out into the city. They agreed to meet up with Josh and Pierre at The Striphouse at six o'clock. Since it was spring, the weather was slightly warmer and there was a fresh smell of 220

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newness in the air. Walking south towards Battery Park, Scott took Derek by the hand. They had purchased tickets online to go to Ellis Island so they could go to the top of the Statue of Liberty, something Scott had never done before. Twining his fingers with Derek's, Scott lightly swung their hands as they walked. He seemed to be in a light-hearted and playful mood. Whereas the experience of walking hand-in-hand had been new and exciting the last time they had visited the city together, now it seemed a natural part of who they were to one another. The contrast filled Derek with a sense of fulfillment and reinforced for him how much the two of them had grown over the course of their freshman year.

Derek allowed Scott to lead and enjoyed the sights of the city and the feel of Scott next to him. “You know, I really do love this city.” Scott stopped and turned Derek so they were

facing one another. "There's so much here. There are so many people with such incredible histories and they all coexist on this one tiny little island." Scott looked up at the blue sky, then returned his gaze to Derek. "You know I'm totally head-over-heels, crazy in love with you, right?"

Derek laughed. "Yes, I think you've mentioned it a couple of times before." Derek stepped closer to Scott and wrapped his arms around him, pulling Scott into a tight hug. "And you know I'm weak-in-the-knees, heart fluttering like a school-girl in love with you, right?"

Scott wrapped his arms around Derek and hugged him back. "I guess we're both stuck with each other then."

"I guess we are." Derek released Scott and retrieved his hand as they continued walking along the Hudson River.

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About the Author

D. H. Starr is a clean-cut guy with a wickedly naughty mind.

He grew up in Boston and loves the city for its history and beauty. Also, having lived in NYC, he enjoys the fast pace and the availability of anything and everything. He first became interested in reading from his mother who always had a stack of books piled next to her bed. Family is important to D. H. and his stories center around the intricate and complex dynamics of relationships and how people work through problems while maintaining respect and love. His favorite books tend to fall in the genres of science fiction, fantasy, paranormal, and coming of age.

To learn more about D. H. Starr and his books, please visit his website at www.dhstarr.com or follow his blog at www.dhstarr.blogspot.com.

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