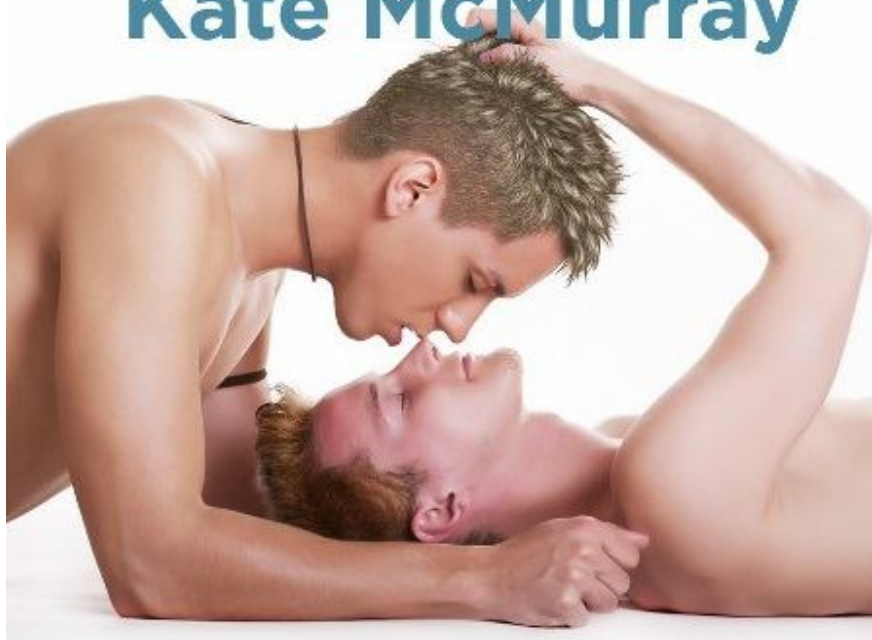




KINDLING FIRE WITH SNOW

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SETH wore many masks.

At work, for instance, he put on his serious mask, his yes-sir mask, his professional mask. This mask was mostly bland and agreeable, perfectly appropriate for the business-casual environment. He kept the mask firmly in place as the day progressed, as he slogged through corporate hell, as his boss made unreasonable requests, as he wished he were anywhere but in his office. He'd finally graduated to a workspace that was sort of near a window, and he had to keep himself from gazing too much. The view was mostly of other skyscrapers, and it was partially obscured by Bob Wilson's bald head, but what mattered was that it showed what was out there, outside the daily drudgery of the office job Seth needed so he could put on a different mask at night.

He left the office one night after many of his coworkers had left for the day, most of them cutting out early to get on the commuter trains back to their suburbs. The weathermen were doomsaying about a blizzard coming that night, as if it had never snowed in New York City before, as if the remnants of the last storm weren't lingering on the sidewalk. It didn't escape Seth's notice that the old snow still sat in sooty clumps on the curb like used cotton balls.

It started to drizzle, a precursor to the snow, perhaps. It had been warm the last few days, making the old dirty snow turn to slush, then melt into puddles on the sidewalk, giving the streets a glossy sheen that reflected the lights of the stores and buildings that soared into the sky. Seth thought the city lost some of its magic once Christmas was over, that the strings of lights someone had forgotten to take down seemed tawdry instead of festive.

It was nights like this that his missing Evan became a palpable thing, that Evan's absence became more of a presence, that Seth could feel the empty space beside him where Evan should be, that Seth could so easily imagine that arm slung around his shoulders or the ghosts of his fingers lingering against his hand.

Of course, now Evan was gone, run off to California, a place that was sunny and warm instead of dreary and wet. "I'll always be your friend," he'd said on his way out the door, but some friend—Seth hadn't heard a peep from him in weeks.

He sighed and rubbed his face, preparing to put on his next mask, his I'm-fine mask, his I'm-happy-to-spend-time-with-my-friends mask. Part of him wanted just to go home, to sit in the dark with low music, or to watch TV, or not to deal with people that night, to wallow in his sadness and the loss of Evan.

But he'd made plans. He took a deep breath and pushed open the old wooden door to Lachlan's Pub and strolled inside. Marty was already there, sitting at the bar, a grin on his face as he talked up a brunette with big boobs. Seth unbuttoned his coat and waved to Marty, who gestured for him to come closer.

"Hey, Seth." Marty grinned and slapped Seth on the back. "This is Astrid. Isn't that a spectacular name?" He paused to let Seth look her over.

She was pretty, Seth conceded. He shook Astrid's hand. "Nice to meet you." To Marty he said, "You're awfully early. I wasn't expecting you until closer to seven."

Marty nodded. "They closed the office early on account of this blizzard they're expecting to come obliterate the city any minute now. I heard they've already closed the public schools tomorrow. This of course means we're only going to get a couple of inches of snow, tops. It's always so much ado."

Seth leaned on the bar and managed to catch the bartender's attention. He ordered a beer and surveyed the room as he waited.

The crowd was a little thin; Lachlan's tended to get pretty lively during happy hour, but the weather seemed to be keeping people away. He turned back to grab his beer, and as he took a sip, he heard a voice behind him.

"Seth? Seth Roland?"

Seth turned around, and suddenly he was seventeen years old again.

"Hi. It is you! I'm Kieran. We worked together when we were kids, remember?"

Funny that it was the job that he chose to remember. Because here was Kieran O'Malley, who, granted, was often associated in his mind with soft-serve cones and perfect little frosting roses atop immaculate white ice-cream cakes, but who also evoked in Seth's mind Saturday afternoons spent horsing around in between serving bratty teenage girls, silly conversations late at night when they closed together, and stealing kisses when the store was empty. Here was Kieran O'Malley, the cute guy from the next town over, the first person to see through all of Seth's masks, to see the person that Seth really was. And here he was smiling, looking the same yet totally different, older, more beautiful, and he was a thirty-year-old in a bar in New York City instead of an awkward seventeen-year-old in an ice-cream parlor in suburban New Jersey.

"Kieran," Seth said, and something in him wanted to shed everything right then, to pull off his coat and his dull work wardrobe, to leave everything bare and open in a way he hadn't let himself in years, because there had been a time when Kieran had understood him, had loved him, had been his friend. Yet this man who stood before him, who nervously ran his fingers through his hair, was also a complete stranger. Instead of saying everything he wanted to say, Seth tugged on his polite mask, his nice-to-meet-you mask, and he smiled.

“I remember,” he said. “It’s nice to see you again.”

THEY shook hands, and Kieran hardly believed it. He hadn't really thought about Seth in years, except in that abstract, flashcard-of-important-life-experience kind of way. He tried to take stock of the man before him now. He looked so much like summer afternoons and ice-cream cones, but Kieran figured they were basically strangers now. He was attractive, no doubt, with a runner's build and olive skin and those expressive brown eyes. His hair was short, cropped close to his head, and improbably blond, several shades lighter than the eyebrows now knit together as if Seth, like Kieran, were trying to fathom how his childhood memories had been conjured up in this way.

Kieran smiled. If nothing else, Seth Roland had grown into a handsome man, which wasn't a surprise, really. He'd been a good-looking teenager, even though he'd been thinner and had kept his naturally dark hair on the long, unruly side in those days.

"So what brings you out on a night like tonight?" Kieran asked and felt like an idiot for it. He had never been especially good at small talk, and he was a clumsy flirt, which didn't even cover the fact that he had no idea how to handle this. He couldn't decide if he should stick to polite questions, like those he'd posed to old classmates at the reunion a couple of years before, or if he should treat this more like picking up a guy in a bar.

"Oh, this is kind of my regular pub. I work a couple of blocks from here." Seth glanced at the guy who sat on the stool next to him, a dark-haired man who had an arm casually draped around the waist of a pretty woman. Seth pointed to the man with his thumb. "This is my friend Marty, and... Astrid was it?" The woman nodded. Kieran gamely shook hands with them both. To Marty, Seth said, "Kieran and I worked at an ice-cream parlor

together when we were in high school.”

“Wild,” said Marty, looking at Astrid. He seemed to not be taking much interest in Kieran, his attention caught up in the woman he was holding. Kieran wondered about protocol. Marty was a stranger, and Kieran wouldn’t out Seth, even if his first instinct was to throw his arms around the old boyfriend he hadn’t seen in twelve years. Something told Kieran Seth wouldn’t welcome that, anyway. Kieran spared Marty a glance before turning his attention back to Seth.

“Do you live in the city?” Seth asked.

“No, Hoboken. I’m in Midtown for a conference.” Kieran shook his head. “This is such a crazy coincidence.”

Seth nodded, staring unfocused at something behind Kieran, his expression not giving anything away. Kieran was starting to suspect that his attentions weren’t exactly well received. “Well, um, if you’re busy, I’ll just go back to my friend.” He pulled his wallet out of his pocket and fished out a business card. He handed it to Seth. “That’s got my cell phone and my email on it. We should catch up sometime.”

Seth blinked and took the card. “I’m sorry, it’s just very strange to see you again.” He smiled.

Seth’s smile was disarming, and Kieran stopped his retreat to look at it. What he saw was the best part of his teenage years, a smile that he’d seen over the tops of ice-cream cakes, next to him at the counter, beneath him on the couch in the basement at his mother’s house. He found himself laughing. “Yeah. I mean, it’s a small world and all that, but I honestly never expected to see you again. It’s a pleasant surprise.”

“Marty seems to be abandoning me to make out with that girl.” Seth gestured. “Come, sit with me. We’ll talk.”

Kieran wanted nothing more, but he thought of Emily, sitting alone at their table. He turned to look at her. She smiled and

gave him a thumbs-up. When he'd seen Seth and mumbled aloud that he thought he knew him, she'd encouraged him to go to the bar. "Even if he's not who you think he is, he's cute," she'd said. Now she grabbed her bag and the beer she'd been nursing and walked up to them. She handed Kieran his coat, which he took and tucked under his arm.

"This is my coworker, Emily," Kieran told Seth. "She and I attended this conference together. I'm an editor at a tech magazine. We're supposed to be learning about the new toys that are coming onto the market, but I wasn't that impressed by most of what I saw, you know? Were you?" He turned to Emily.

"Eh. There were some cool things, but most of them were not that practical, so I don't see them selling well." Emily smiled. "I was thinking I'd call my boyfriend. He lives on the Upper West Side."

Kieran knew she was giving him space, but he wasn't sure he wanted to let her go. If he bombed with Seth, which seemed likely, he wanted someone to ride the train home with. "Are you sure that's a good idea? It's supposed to snow pretty badly tonight. If the subway gets screwed up, you'll never make it into work tomorrow."

Emily laughed. "Oh darn," she said. She glanced toward the windows at the front of the bar. "It's not snowing yet. It's too warm to snow. The last time they predicted a storm like this, we got a dusting. It'll be fine."

Someone turned up the volume on the TV over the bar, diverting everyone's attention. A news reporter was on the screen. "At this time we're hearing reports that fifteen people are injured, but there aren't any serious injuries. For those of you just joining us, a PATH train has derailed on the track between Pavonia/Newport and Hoboken, on the Hoboken-bound side. All service has been suspended until further notice. Reporters on the

scene are telling us that it could take a few hours to clear up the tracks, but representatives from the Port Authority are saying that service will be restored in time for the morning commute.”

There was a collective groan through the bar.

Kieran groaned with them. “One thing I love about New York. A train derailing isn’t a tragedy, but a nuisance.”

“I’m definitely calling my boyfriend now,” Emily said. “You need a place to crash, Kieran? I’m sure Jake would let you sleep on the couch.”

The prospect of playing third wheel with Emily and her boyfriend was not one that excited Kieran much. He hesitated when answering her. He could take the ferry, he thought, trying to remember when it stopped running.

“I live in Brooklyn,” Seth said.

Kieran turned to look at him, more surprised than anything else.

Seth continued, “I haven’t seen you in a very long time. You’re right, we should catch up. I mean, you can sleep on my couch.”

“Are you sure?”

Seth smiled. Kieran couldn’t help it—he kept looking. Seth’s smile was one thing, but Kieran took in the rest of him, too, the way his upper body had filled out since they were teenagers, the width of his shoulders, the long line of his back, the way his jeans fit. Kieran liked what he saw. He smiled back.

“I’m sure,” Seth said when Kieran caught him giving the same once-over.

SETH was out of practice bringing men home. Still, there was something familiar about the queasy feeling in his stomach, the anticipation driving up his heart rate. Because though he'd offered Kieran the couch, he knew better. There was something between them that felt like unfinished business.

Yet he still felt uneasy. He wondered if having a one-night stand cheapened whatever was between them in some way. When Kieran consented to go home with him, he mentally flipped through his inventory of masks, coming up with an expression he hoped said, "We just ran into each other for the first time in years. Isn't that funny? Ha-ha."

They walked to the subway together, Seth telling Kieran a little about his neighborhood and otherwise sticking to safe topics of conversation. They descended to the subway platform, which struck Seth as unusually crowded. It was well after rush hour, and the crowds were usually thin at this time of night, consisting of mostly late-working stragglers or people heading home after happy hour.

"Everyone's in a hurry to get home before it starts snowing, I guess," Kieran commented aloud.

When the train came, it was packed. Kieran hooked a hand around Seth's elbow as they pushed onto the train. The touch was a little alarming at first, alien yet familiar, Kieran's hand hot even through the layer of Seth's wool coat. Seth glanced back at Kieran as the doors closed, and Kieran took his hand away.

They were jostled together by the sheer number of other people competing with them for space, but they managed to make their way to the center of the car. They reached for the pole at the same time, Seth's hand covering Kieran's. Seth pulled his hand away and grabbed the pole just above where Kieran's hand

rested. He looked up at Kieran, who looked back, his blue eyes sober and serious. Then he grinned.

They rode silently for a little while, their bodies colliding gently when the train jerked, touching when the train stopped and passengers pushed them around to get by. Seth looked over Kieran, the way his black coat nicely framed his shoulders, the stubble on the part of his chin and neck not hidden by his scarf, the way his Adam's apple jutted out from his neck just so. He had a flash of kissing Kieran in that very spot, and it felt like a million years ago. He wanted to kiss him there again, but then the brakes on the train squealed, and Seth remembered where he was. He glanced around at other passengers, most of them lost in books or their own heads. He spotted a couple standing near the door, the woman's head resting on the man's shoulder, the man's arm slung around her, holding her close. That felt like a reminder of what he couldn't have. He sighed.

Con conversationally, Kieran said, "This reminds me a little bit of my high school reunion. Whenever that was, two years ago, I guess. Each time I spoke to someone, I had that same sensation of knowing who I was talking to, but not really knowing them anymore, if you know what I mean." He chuckled. "Everyone remembered me. Isn't that crazy? I didn't do a good job of keeping up with people, but the reunion was at a bar a few blocks from my apartment, right in Hoboken, so I couldn't not go, you know? And I thought, 'No one here will even remember me', but I walked into the bar and someone shouted 'Kieran!' It was so surreal. I don't think these people liked me nearly as much when I was actually in school with all of them. A couple of people had even found out I'm gay and told me how great that was." He laughed and shook his head.

"I didn't go to my reunion," Seth said. "I don't even go home that often. My father...." He gestured in front of himself, not

really wanting to talk about his family. Kieran looked at him, a question in his eyes. Seth sighed. “My father has become more religious of late. Every time I go home, he tries to drag me to shul with him, then he talks about finding a nice girl for me to marry, and I say, ‘Dad, I’m gay, remember?’ and he doesn’t even hear me anymore.”

Kieran readjusted his hold on the pole, his hand brushing against Seth’s. Just that brief touch felt like static electricity against Seth’s hand. Kieran leaned close, and Seth could smell him, spicy aftershave and mystery. “I don’t remember your family being especially religious,” Kieran said. He seemed completely oblivious to the effect he was having on Seth, which Seth thought was probably just as well.

“They weren’t really religious until I was twenty or so. I mean, you remember—we only ever went to services on the High Holy Days. Then Dad got sick. I mean, he had a heart attack and spent a couple of days in the hospital.” At Kieran’s surprised expression, Seth clarified, “He’s fine now, although he has to watch his diet. But he decided when he got home from the hospital that he’d been spared by a higher power and that he should show his gratitude by becoming more faithful. He fell in with the Orthodox community in Teaneck. Which is fine, I guess, except when he starts nagging me. Especially now that my sister is married. He keeps saying, ‘Seth, what you need is a nice Jewish girl’.”

“I’m guessing what you really want is a nice Irish boy.” Kieran winked.

Seth loved Kieran’s smile. He’d always liked his floppy auburn hair, his pale skin, and the dusting of freckles over his nose. He remembered liking the contrast of their skin when they lay shirtless together on Kieran’s mother’s couch on weekday afternoons. He’d liked the pink hue of Kieran’s arm against the

darker olive of his own chest. Seth closed his eyes for a moment and opened them again to find Kieran still standing close to him, smiling. “Yeah,” he said. “That sounds about right.”

Kieran ran a hand down Seth’s arm, and it was like a full-on electric shock. Seth fought off the shiver. Kieran smiled. “Luckily my parents gave up on me a long time ago, but I guess it helps that I have three older brothers to carry on the family name.”

The train rumbled aboveground to go over the Manhattan Bridge, which caught Kieran’s attention. He stood facing south, affording him a nice view of the Brooklyn Bridge. “Wow,” Kieran said. “I haven’t been to Brooklyn in a while. I forgot what this view was like.”

Then Kieran went silent, which gave Seth too much time to think about what was going on between them. The years that had passed since they had last seen each other felt like bricks in a wall between them. In some ways it was insignificant. On the walk to the subway, Kieran had asked what Seth had been up to in those intervening years, and Seth didn’t have much to say—he’d gone to college; he’d gotten a job. It felt like nothing and everything had happened.

Or, Seth thought, there was more to it than that. Kieran and his freckles and his blue eyes had been a part of Seth’s childhood in a way. He’d left childhood behind, went off to college, and during the second week of school, he’d set his eyes on a dark-haired biology major named Avery, who took it upon himself to initiate Seth into the ways of gay sex. The things Avery had showed him, the way Seth had lost himself in Avery’s flesh, in passion and sensation, had made what had happened with Kieran seem like a childish whim. There’d been other men after that, and then there was Evan, and though Seth had sometimes thought back wistfully to his time working at the ice-cream shop

on Washington Avenue, and though he sometimes came across photos of Kieran in an old photo album and remembered him fondly, Kieran was so firmly a part of his past that it felt strange to stand next to him now, transfixed and aroused.

Kieran gazed out the window as the train moved back underground. Seth tried to look at Kieran objectively, like they'd just met. It was a futile exercise. A thousand memories flooded back, of running his thumb over those freckles, of those long eyelashes tickling his cheek, of what it was like to kiss the lips that were now pursed as though Kieran were thinking seriously about something. Seth could see the hairless skin of Kieran's seventeen-year-old chest as he passed his palm over it. He remembered the one time they'd gotten brave enough to stand naked before each other. He remembered that time that they'd... and none of it seemed so innocent anymore.

And Kieran, of course, must have had similar experiences. He'd grown into such a beautiful man. Seth concluded that there was no way to separate the past from the present.

"What are you thinking about?" Kieran asked softly. "I can hear the gears in your head turning."

"Lost years," Seth said.

Kieran nodded.

They started to speak again, all small talk, recounting vacations they'd taken and silly things that had happened at their jobs, and soon the train rumbled into the station near Seth's apartment. Seth led the way to his building and could feel Kieran's gaze raking over him, felt him making his own assessments. Seth felt suddenly self-conscious in a way he hadn't in a long time. He looked at Kieran, and their eyes met, and some kind of understanding passed between them, an acknowledgement that they were attracted to each other, and Seth understood that the attraction was on the primal level, that they were drawn to each

other's adult bodies and not to the old memories.

He fumbled with his keys when he tried to open the front door, which made Kieran laugh, and then they ascended the stairs to Seth's fourth-floor apartment. As he unlocked his door, Seth did a mental inventory of what lay in the living room. Not much. Maybe the sweater he'd worn the previous day, a few loose DVDs, a pair of shoes. Then he remembered the photo of Evan he'd left on the coffee table. He put on his I'm-not-still-hung-up-on-my-ex-boyfriend mask and opened the door.

Kieran came in behind him and looked around the apartment as if he were a potential new tenant. "Just you?" he asked.

"Yeah. I know it's not very big, but it's the first place I've had by myself. I've only been here about three months or so." He didn't add that he'd moved in after Evan left, unable to afford the place he and Evan had shared, no longer wanting to be there if Evan wasn't also.

He glanced at the photo on the coffee table, a framed five-by-seven snapshot taken when they'd gone to Paris. He'd come across it a few days before when he'd unpacked the last of his boxes, and he'd left it on the coffee table not knowing what else to do with it. He could still remember the day it was taken clearly: Evan had wanted a silly tourist shot to show his mother, so he and Seth had persuaded some random Frenchman to take their picture. They'd stood there, Evan's arm tossed casually around Seth's shoulders, the Eiffel Tower in the background. Seth had always liked the photo, a reminder both that he'd been to Paris and that he'd been there with Evan, but looking at it now, with Kieran in the room, he felt embarrassed by it, by the cheap postcard quality of it, by the reminder of a life that was no longer his.

Kieran followed his gaze and saw the photo. "You're not seeing someone, are you?"

“No, not now. Are you?”

“No.”

Seth took a step toward Kieran. Then he stalled. He couldn't help but think that maybe he was about to go about this backward, that he and Kieran should get to know each other again before they had sex. It also wasn't really fair to Kieran if they did this while Seth was still hung up on Evan. And would having sex now destroy those precious memories of their teenage years together? On the other hand, odds seemed high that they'd each go back to their respective lives after this night and not ever get another opportunity to do this, and more to the point, Seth wanted Kieran now, wanted to push his fingers through Kieran's hair, wanted to touch Kieran's chest, his ass, wanted an opportunity to do things with Kieran he'd only fantasized about. He put on a mask that he knew made him look braver than he was, and he took another step forward. “Did you ever wonder what it would be like with us?”

Kieran seemed to understand what Seth couldn't bring himself to say out loud. “I did, yes. I've wondered a lot. Something tells me I won't have to wonder much longer.”

And still Seth hesitated. Could he do this? Should he do this? He knew if he put the brakes on it now, if he told Kieran to sleep on the couch, that Kieran would comply. He knew he should put a stop to this whole thing while he still had control. But he didn't move. He didn't speak.

It was Kieran who took the last step, closing the space between them. He put a hand on the side of Seth's face, and slowly their mouths met. This kiss was soft at first, but then, as if thinking with the same mind, they both parted their lips, opening to each other. Seth wanted the kiss to feel familiar, but it didn't. Too much time had passed and too many men had come in between, and he found that kissing Kieran was an entirely new sensation.

It was good: Kieran's lips smooth and firm, his taste vaguely metallic, the stubble on his face like sandpaper, all reminders that he was real, that he wanted Seth just as badly as Seth wanted him.

When Seth's fingers traveled to the buttons on Kieran's shirt, there were a million things passing through his head. He was satisfying an old curiosity, yes, and he was easing his loneliness, but he was also wanting. He was aroused in a way he hadn't been in a while, and Kieran was here and present and in his arms, and suddenly that was all that mattered. Summers and afternoons after school at an ice-cream parlor in New Jersey, three years of Evan—everything that happened before that moment that he and Kieran had kissed stopped mattering. What mattered was that a man to whom Seth was very strongly drawn—a man with broad shoulders and blue eyes and a tight ass, a man who smelled sweet and masculine—was here now before him.

Kieran's hand moved from Seth's ear to the back of his head, holding him in the kiss as his other hand pulled Seth's shirt out of his pants. Seth felt the hand on his head travel to his neck, down his back, and finally over his ass. Kieran's lips moved down to Seth's chin, along his jaw, down his neck. Kieran's mouth was hot and Seth felt his teeth gently slide over his skin. He groaned as he felt his body come alive under Kieran's touch. He was hard, and he felt Kieran hard against his hip, and he started to worry that his knees wouldn't hold out much longer. This was his last chance, he told himself, the last opportunity he'd have to put a stop to their coupling. He knew that was what he should do. But Kieran's hands on him were warm and coaxing, lighting a fire within him. His body ached to feel everything Kieran's hands only hinted at. He began to move to push Kieran away, to tell him to stop, but instead, he said, "The

bedroom is that way.”

Kieran mumbled something Seth didn't understand, gesturing toward the bedroom. Seth had to pull away from Kieran to move, and he took his shirt off on the way, hoping Kieran would do the same. He stood at the foot of the bed and turned around in time to see Kieran pulling his mostly unbuttoned shirt off over his head, then pulling off the T-shirt he'd had on under it. Seth was pleased to see some dark hair had sprouted across Kieran's chest in the years since he'd last seen it, and he realized again how foreign this body was, how little he knew of this new Kieran. He was about to learn a lot, though. He loved what he saw of Kieran's body, loved that dark hair against Kieran's pale skin. God, he wanted Kieran. He sat on the edge of the bed and lay back on it, reaching down to undo his pants.

“No, let me,” Kieran said.

Seth held up his hands, watching in amazement as Kieran crawled on the bed and lay next to him. Kieran ran a hand over Seth's bare chest, bending his head to kiss him again. As they kissed, Kieran's hand moved over Seth's clothed erection. They both groaned into each other's mouths. Seth shifted his hips, encouraging Kieran, needing to be touched, needing to be rid of the clothes that separated his straining cock from Kieran's hand, from Kieran's skin, from Kieran's body. Just as Seth thought he'd go mad with unfulfilled wanting, Kieran undid the button on Seth's pants, dragging down the zipper with maddening slowness, sliding his hand inside and cupping Seth over his underwear. A shock went through Seth's body, the tingles up his spine a thing he'd forgotten was possible, and he pushed against Kieran's hand, wanting more friction, more contact.

Then Kieran laughed.

“God, what on earth could be so funny?” Seth asked, figuring it was time to take things into his own hands, as it were. He pushed

on Kieran's shoulders, pushing him back on the bed. He bowed his head and nibbled at Kieran's neck and shoulder as he undid Kieran's pants.

"You remember the first time we—" Kieran started to say. Seth shoved his hands into Kieran's pants, which shut him up. He found Kieran's cock, which was hard and hot. As he stroked it, Kieran said, "Oh, that's good," and closed his eyes.

"What were you saying?" Seth asked, pulling Kieran's pants and underwear down his legs.

Kieran grunted as Seth pulled his pants off over his ankles. Seth looked up at Kieran's now naked body laid out on his bed, Kieran's pale skin seeming to shine in the dim light of the overhead lamp, his hard cock resting on his stomach. He was strong and beautiful and so unrelentingly sexy to Seth. "I was just thinking," Kieran said, his breathing erratic, "about that time, the first time you came with me back to my house after a shift. We were so young and so hot for each other that all it took was a couple of minutes of making out on the couch, and I came before we even got our clothes off."

Seth remembered. He took Kieran's hands now and put them on his hips, guiding them to slide his pants down. "I came too," Seth said. He remembered the day so well, a formative moment of his youth, the first time he'd ever had an orgasm in the presence of another person, and he'd felt embarrassed when he'd lost control so early, but when Kieran confessed to having done the same, they'd laughed about it.

Kieran maneuvered their bodies so that he was on top again, and he finally succeeded in pulling Seth's pants down and off his body. "I don't suppose that will happen again," he said, his gaze intent on Seth's body. Seth felt self-conscious until he realized Kieran was very much enjoying looking.

Seth pulled Kieran down for a kiss. Kieran slid his body over

Seth's, giving Seth the skin-to-skin contact he craved. He felt a thrill at the way Kieran's body felt on top of his—pleasantly heavy, his skin smooth and warm. Kieran was a little bigger than Seth, a couple of inches taller, several pounds heavier, and though he didn't exactly have a gym-carved body, there was a strength looming beneath his skin. Seth had always liked being with men who were a little bigger than he was, and he was attracted to everything that was raw and masculine about Kieran: the flat chest, the dark body hair, the salty smell of his sweat. As their lips slid together, so did their bodies, and Kieran's cock rubbed against Seth's, sending shivers through Seth's body, making his back arch as he finally got that friction he wanted. He cried out and dug his nails into Kieran's back, which made Kieran groan and pump his hips.

"I want to fuck you."

The words were out of Seth's mouth before he could stop them. Kieran propped himself up on his hands and looked down at Seth. There was a brief moment in which Seth was sure Kieran would push off the bed and walk away, but then he said, "Yes."

They rolled around on the bed until Seth was back on top. He tried not to think about any deeper meaning in the situation, of being so recently reminded of being virginal teenagers grinding ridiculously against each other, of his experience since then with other men guiding him in what to do. He ran a hand along Kieran's skin as he reached for the nightstand. He pulled lube and a condom from the drawer. He tried not to remember that this box of condoms was purchased the previous month in anticipation of Evan visiting, a visit Evan had cancelled.

It was Kieran beneath him on the bed, though, not Evan, and Kieran felt so delightfully different, the landscape of his skin so unlike Evan's, still foreign and exciting, something to learn and explore. Seth found himself hoping there would be more than

just this night, that there'd be time to learn Kieran's flesh anew. Kieran, who had spent so much of the evening smiling, looked suddenly serious as he parted his legs. While Seth upended the lube and poured some on his fingers, Kieran took the condom, tore off the wrapper, and rolled it on Seth's cock. Seth had to stop and close his eyes, enjoying the warmth of Kieran's fingers.

Seth bent to kiss Kieran's stomach, then slid his fingers along Kieran's crack, finding the spot he was looking for. As he slowly inserted a finger, he felt Kieran's fingers on his cock again, slick with lube this time, stroking him. Seth groaned, his whole body charged up, but he forced himself to be patient as he prepared Kieran. He pushed in a second finger and watched Kieran's face, watched him bite his lip. "Is this okay?" Seth asked.

"More," said Kieran.

Seth added a third finger, then curled them, trying to find Kieran's prostate. When Kieran jerked and grunted, he knew he'd found it. Kieran grabbed his knees, pulling them up to his chest, and he groaned.

"Fuck," Kieran said. "That's good. But I want you."

Seth stroked himself a few times. He squirted more lube on his cock before he held it in his hand and guided it toward Kieran. He pushed in slowly, and the sensation of sliding into Kieran, who was slick and tight and warm, was intense. Kieran's body squeezed Seth's cock, and Seth had to will himself not to come, which he almost did when Kieran grabbed his ass and pulled him in the rest of the way. The reality of the situation struck Seth suddenly: he was inside Kieran, in Kieran's arms, a place he'd never been before despite once being in love with him. They were together now, though, and thinking about it blew Seth's mind.

They began to move. Seth's mind went blank, aware only of the sensations of their bodies moving together. Seth slid in and out

slowly until Kieran's back arched and he started begging for more. Kieran's nails traced patterns on Seth's back as Seth moved in and out faster, and he was overwhelmed by how good it all felt, how tight Kieran was, how good he smelled, how much he liked being in those arms. He bent his head and kissed Kieran, and their tongues tangled and moved in an imitation of what their bodies were doing. Seth reached between them and grabbed Kieran's cock.

Kieran gasped. "Shit, if you touch me, I'm gonna come," he said, panting.

"Good."

Seth stroked Kieran at the same pace he pushed in and out of his body, and soon Kieran threw his head back and groaned. Seth licked the exposed skin of Kieran's neck. He loved the roughness of the stubble there against his tongue, loved the salty taste. Kieran groaned long and low. Seth felt his cock vibrate between them before he came all over Seth's hand and both of their chests. The vibrations of Kieran's body rubbed Seth in all the right places. He pumped in and out of Kieran a few more times before succumbing, before everything became mumbles and nonsense. Then the orgasm tore through his body, and he held on to Kieran's shoulders as he filled the condom.

They lay together tangled until Seth grew uncomfortable. He rose to clean up and take care of the condom, and when he came back to the bed, Kieran lay there on his side, looking contemplative.

"What are you thinking about?" Seth asked as he slid into bed, echoing Kieran's earlier question.

"Lost years," Kieran said with a smile. He pulled Seth into his arms. "I'm not sure my teenage self could have even conceived of that. What we just did, I mean." He kissed Seth.

Seth ran a hand through Kieran's hair and pulled away slightly.

“Me neither,” he said. “I’m glad we waited.”

Kieran smirked. “Yeah,” he said. He yawned. “Well.”

“What a long, weird day,” Seth said.

Kieran chuckled. “Do you want me to get the light?”

“Okay.”

Seth stretched his body while Kieran got up. He heard Kieran go into the bathroom, so he closed his eyes and settled against the pillow. He was vaguely aware of water running and then of the light being switched off, and by the time Kieran slid back into bed, Seth was drifting off to sleep.

KIERAN spent a good chunk of the night awake. He wasn't especially surprised by this—he'd struggled on and off with bouts of insomnia over the last few months—but he didn't mind so much that night, as he quite enjoyed just lying next to Seth. When the heat in Seth's building turned off around midnight, Kieran was happy enough to snuggle up against Seth under the big down comforter.

The not sleeping seemed almost like a certainty, a part of the routine now. It worried him a little, and sometimes he felt like he was essentially running on fumes, but he pushed his worry aside and concentrated on other things: the way the lights from the moon and the street lamps played across the room as the night progressed, the ragged quality Seth's breathing took on when he was deeply asleep, the feeling of Seth's sheets against his naked skin.

Morning came eventually, and at seven, Seth's alarm went off. Seth grunted as he woke up and hit the alarm. He looked surprised when he found Kieran in his bed, but he pulled the comforter up over his shoulder and settled back into Kieran's arms.

"How did you sleep?" Seth asked, looking very much like he was about to slide back into a dream.

"Oh, you know."

Seth raised his head and looked at Kieran. "I don't know. That's why I asked."

Kieran sighed. "Not so well, but it's not your fault. I haven't really been sleeping at all lately."

"Oh."

"The last few weeks—I don't know. It's been a while since I had a really solid night's sleep." He waved his hand. "Don't

worry about it.”

“Do you want to try to sleep more?”

“No. I’m awake. I suppose we should get up. You have to go to work, and I have to get back to Jersey. Mind if I flip on the TV and check if the PATH is back up and running?”

“No, go ahead.” Seth rubbed his eyes. “The remote for the TV in the living room should be on the coffee table.”

Kieran climbed out of bed. Before he left the room, he caught sight of snowflakes falling outside the window. This must be the rumored storm, he figured, thinking it looked pretty tame, little white flecks floating in the blue-gray sky. He walked over to look. Seth’s bedroom window looked out at a row of fenced-in postage-stamp-sized backyards, all of them now covered in a thick white blanket of snow. “Holy shit,” he said.

“What?” Seth asked sleepily from the bed.

“You should come see this.”

Seth made a series of grumbling sounds as he pushed out of bed. He slid a hand over Kieran’s bare ass before he took a look out the window. “Wow!” he said. “I guess we got that snowstorm after all. That’s gotta be more than a foot of snow.”

Seeing the snow seemed to wake Seth up. He moved quickly, pulling on a T-shirt and a pair of briefs before tossing a robe at Kieran. The robe was a little small, but Kieran made the most of it, pulling it closed as he followed Seth into the living room. Seth flipped on the TV.

Kieran glanced around the room, still as surprised as he had been the night before by how colorful it was, especially in contrast to the dull colors Seth had been wearing the previous night. The living room walls were dark red, the sofa had a fuzzy orange throw tossed over the back, and there was a bright green rug on the floor between the couch and the TV. Seth’s apartment was an exclamation point compared to Seth, who seemed

mundane at first glance. Kieran was pretty sure there was a lot more to Seth than he let the world see.

“Twenty inches of snow were reported in Central Park,” said the reporter on the screen. “More snow is expected before the end of the day, with additional accumulations of as much as eight inches. This storm is already breaking all kinds of records across the city. City workers are hard at work cleaning up the streets, but the mayor’s office is urging all nonessential employees to stay home.”

“Forget about the PATH train,” Kieran said. “Am I even going to be able to get out of Brooklyn?”

Seth frowned. “Are you really that eager to leave?”

Kieran reached over and touched Seth’s hair, which was a disheveled mess. His hair was dry, betraying his affinity for dyeing it blond. Kieran wondered how long he’d been doing that, what had made him dye it to begin with. Kieran tried to smooth some of the hair down. “I’m not eager to leave at all,” he said. “I wonder if my boss would buy, ‘Sorry, I got snowed in’, as an excuse not to show up for work today. I mean, people in Vermont get snowed in. This is New York City. The streets are probably already plowed.”

“Yeah, but you just heard that report. Nonessential employees should stay home, or I guess not travel.”

Seth looked so earnest, had finally let his pretense of indifference go, and Kieran felt it in his gut. He leaned over and kissed Seth’s cheek. “Why, Seth, are you trying to tell me that you’d like me to stay awhile longer?”

Seth laughed and put his hands on Kieran’s shoulders. “Yes, stay,” he said.

Kieran smiled. He pushed Seth down onto the couch and was about to pull off his briefs to give him a blowjob he wouldn’t forget anytime soon when he heard a phone ring.

Seth groaned and pushed Kieran off before getting up. He searched through the clothes strewn across the floor until he found the pants he'd been wearing the night before and extracted his cell phone. He answered it, listening a few minutes before he said, "Yeah, thanks for letting me know. I'll see you tomorrow." He hung up the phone and looked triumphant. "That was my boss," he told Kieran. "The office is closed for the day."

"Wow, just when I thought there was nothing that could shut down the forward progress of commerce in this city, everything gets waylaid by a little bit of snow."

"If your office is still open, maybe you could develop an unfortunately timed case of the flu?" Seth suggested.

Kieran laughed. "You've already convinced me to stay," he said. He got up off the couch and walked to Seth, sliding his hands along the sides of Seth's torso before putting them on his lower back and pulling him close. Kieran pressed his face against the space where Seth's neck and shoulders met. He inhaled before he nipped at Seth's skin, which made Seth shiver and push his fingers into Kieran's hair. Kieran ran one hand along Seth's smooth ass and around his hip, then to his cock, which he was delighted to find was hard. Kieran shrugged out of the robe he was wearing. "No one's going to be in the office to call for at least another hour. You want to help me kill time?"

Seth answered by kissing him eagerly, pressing his tongue against Kieran's lips. Kieran opened his mouth and let Seth's tongue probe for a moment before starting to explore Seth's mouth with his own tongue. Their mouths parted long enough for Kieran to pull the T-shirt back over Seth's head, and then they smashed back together as Kieran ran his palms all over Seth's chest, over the flat planes and hard nipples. He wondered if Seth were the sort of man who worked out his aggressions at the gym, because his chest was spectacular: not too muscular,

but fit, with defined pecs and the hint of strong abs. He ran a hand over one of those pecs and closed his fingers around a nipple. Seth hissed when Kieran pinched.

That Seth was capable of such reactions was still a revelation for Kieran. Each hiss and sigh and moan made his cock pulse. He tried to pull Seth toward the couch but stumbled instead, and Seth laughed before they tumbled onto the floor. Seth was still laughing when Kieran rolled on top of him, which Kieran assumed meant he was unhurt by the fall. He pressed Seth's shoulders to the floor and kissed him again. He felt Seth's hands on his back, felt Seth pull him close. Kieran wasn't sure if this was just animal lust or something more, if anything would even come of these hours spent together, but in that moment, he didn't care. He was hard, and he was in the arms of a man he wanted badly.

He hooked his fingers into the waistband of Seth's briefs and slid them down his hips until the briefs snagged on his ankles. Kieran pulled them off and started to crawl back up that lovely body until his mouth hovered over Seth's hard cock. Kieran tossed the briefs away and dived, pressing his lips against the tip of Seth's cock before enveloping Seth with his mouth.

Kieran loved to suck cock and knew he was good at it. He was satisfied when Seth sighed happily. He liked the taste of Seth, salty and a little bitter, and he loved the texture of Seth's skin against his tongue. He relaxed his throat to let Seth in as far as he'd go, and Seth arched in response. Kieran pulled away just slightly, then repeated the move, which pulled an "Oh God!" out of Seth. Kieran kept at it, loving the way Seth writhed on the floor. He ran his fingers lightly over Seth's balls, and then he started to exert some pressure, which left Seth whimpering. All the sounds Seth made seemed to seep into Kieran's very skin, exciting him and arousing him. He wanted more, and he moved

faster, sucking on Seth's cock, letting his tongue run along the length of it and enjoying every moment. He took his own cock into his free hand and started stroking, feeling close to flying apart.

Seth cried out, "Fuck, I'm gonna come," and shifted his hips up once before Kieran felt Seth come in his mouth. Kieran kept his mouth on Seth until Seth's breathing started to slow. He backed away, letting Seth's come linger on his tongue before swallowing. Seth leaned up and hooked a hand behind his head, pulling him back down on the floor for a scorching kiss. Kieran was so close to coming he thought a few more strokes would bring him off, but then Seth swatted his hand away and bent toward his cock.

"I'm gonna come fast if you do that."

"Want to taste you," Seth murmured.

Seth's body twisted until he pulled Kieran's eager cock into his slick mouth. Kieran was already so charged up from sucking off Seth that he knew he wouldn't last long, and all it took was sliding in and out of the space between Seth's smooth lips, his cock enveloped in Seth's hot mouth, the texture of Seth's tongue tickling his sensitive skin before Kieran's back arched and he was coming, stars in his eyes as he shot into Seth's waiting mouth.

Kieran could only lie on the floor panting. He watched Seth swallow and smile before he crawled over and lay on the floor. When Seth looked over, he was grinning, and Kieran felt compelled to kiss that grin right off his face. When their lips parted again, Kieran rested his head on Seth's shoulder and looked down the long line of his body, very much enjoying the view. Seth's fingers moved through his hair as they lay together on the floor, their heart rates returning to normal.

"I should probably call work," Kieran said.

“Don’t get up just yet.”

“Okay.”

They lay on the floor for what felt to Kieran like a long time, with Seth eventually drifting off to sleep and Kieran regarding him with jealousy. There had been a time when Kieran could fall asleep at will, could sleep on anything anywhere, but lately going to bed was something he dreaded a little bit. He knew, also, that this was a small thing, that a little insomnia was nothing compared to the nightmares some people he knew faced, that ultimately it was a temporary condition, but he was undeniably tired. He kept his head against Seth’s chest as it gradually rose and fell, as Seth started to snore, and he closed his eyes, hoping the rhythm of sleep would take him along to dreamworld.

It didn’t.

When he started to get uncomfortable, he got up and found his cell phone. He called his office. When no one answered in either his boss’s office or the reception desk, Kieran cheered quietly. It looked like he’d get that snow day after all. But to be safe, he called his boss’s cell phone.

After exchanging pleasantries and hyperbole about the weather, Kieran said, “So I stayed at a friend’s in the city last night because of that PATH train derailment. Did you hear about that?”

“Yeah, caught it on the news last night,” Steve said. “You’re still in Manhattan?”

“Brooklyn, actually.”

Steve groaned. “That’s worse. Okay. Don’t sweat it. You can tell me all about the conference tomorrow.”

“Is the office even open today?”

“Yes, but I have a feeling not many people are going to make it in.”

“Call if anything comes up.”

When Kieran got off the phone, Seth was awake and sitting up on the floor. His hair was even more disheveled than it had been, and when he smiled, Kieran thought he looked impossibly sexy.

“Uh. That was work. It’s fine if I don’t go in today.”

“It feels a little like we just got the day off from school.”

“I don’t remember snow days involving this much nudity.”

Seth looked down at himself and back up at Kieran. He grinned.

Kieran laughed. “Come on, we should get dressed. If you stay naked, I’m going to have to have sex with you again.”

Seth hauled himself back upright. “I don’t see the problem there.”

Kieran’s mouth went dry. “Oh. Well, maybe we could go outside, though, and see what the snow really looks like. And we have to put on clothes for that. It would be a terrible tragedy if my dick got frostbite.”

“That would be a tragedy,” Seth agreed. He took Kieran’s hand and dragged him into the bathroom, where he started the shower going. When the water was running at a temperature he seemed to find acceptable, he motioned for Kieran to get in the shower with him. “You coming or what?”

Neither man had quite recovered enough to do more than fool around a little in the shower. Mostly Kieran laughed, unable to really speak because he was so amazed that the careful front Seth put up—something Kieran suspected he did habitually—was starting to crack. Seth would grin, something of the boyish charm that Kieran remembered coming to his face; then he’d crack a dirty joke, and Kieran would laugh and smear soap suds over some part of Seth’s body—rinse, repeat, and they were both giggling together when they walked into Seth’s room.

“Do you really want to go outside?” Seth asked.

“I’m curious to see what the damage is.”

Seth nodded and walked over to the dresser in the corner of the room. “I can lend you something to wear, maybe. Your pants are just going to get wet and ruined.” He stopped what he was doing and looked up at Kieran, smirking.

There, Kieran thought. Seth’s face was open; he seemed happy and present. “Can’t have that,” Kieran said, walking over to Seth.

Seth returned to the task at hand and dug out a pair of jeans and a pair of warm-up pants. He considered them both. “These jeans are big on me, so they might fit you. Or do you think these pants would be more waterproof?”

“Jeans will be warmer.”

Seth nodded and handed Kieran the jeans. They got dressed, with Seth also lending Kieran a shirt. The jeans were a little tight, but they’d get the job done. Kieran was about to walk back into the living room when he noticed Seth staring at him intently. “What?”

“There’s something kinda hot about you wearing my clothes,” Seth said.

When they went into the living room, Kieran caught Seth glancing at the framed photo sitting on the coffee table. Kieran had been wondering about that since the previous night. He’d been hesitant to ask, pretty well convinced he wouldn’t like the answer, but still, he asked, “So who is he?”

“Who is who?” Seth asked, all his defenses going back up, the blank expression back, though a quick sideways glance at the photo gave him away.

“The guy in the photo. I see you, the Eiffel Tower, and some dude.” Realizing he might have sounded a little accusatory, he softened his tone. “Who is he? I just wondered.”

Seth walked over to the coffee table and sighed. He picked up

the photo. “My ex-boyfriend, Evan. I found this the other night. I don’t know why I left it out. To torture myself, I guess. He’s never coming back. He went to California, and he’s never coming back. It’s so stupid to keep hanging on to this memory.” He ran a hand over his hair. “I think I don’t even miss Evan so much as I miss having someone around all the time. I mean, clearly our relationship wasn’t that good, or else he wouldn’t have packed up and moved to the other side of the country.”

Kieran nodded, unhappy that he was right, that he did regret asking. He felt a pang of jealousy, watching Seth wrestle with his feelings for this other man. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s dumb to hang on to the past like I have been. You know what I should do? I should take this fucking photo and toss it into the Gowanus.”

There was something kind of fitting about throwing a piece of the past you didn’t want anymore into the toxic water of the Gowanus Canal, Kieran thought. “So let’s do it,” he said.

Seth looked at him, his jaw slack, but then he swallowed and nodded. “Well, I don’t know how we’d get there today.”

Enamored with the idea of helping Seth discard this piece of his past, Kieran said, “Didn’t you tell me last night that you live near Prospect Park? The park has a lake, right?”

“I... yeah, sure. The entrance is a few blocks from here. But....” Seth looked at the photo in his hands and past Kieran out the window, where the snow was still coming down. “You know, Prospect Park also has an ice-skating rink.”

“Really? Why are we standing here? Let’s go!”

SETH had to put some effort into pushing the front door of his building open. Snow came up to about his knees as he waded through the door, pulling Kieran along behind him. There was a guy in an apron in front of the coffee shop next door, shoveling snow away from the entrance and toward the street. When he saw Seth's distress, he jogged over and dug them a path from the front door to the shoveled part of the sidewalk.

"Thanks," Seth said. He recognized the guy as one of the employees at the coffee shop but was chagrined to realize he didn't know the guy's name.

"Not a problem," said the guy. "I'm kind of tempted to shovel the whole sidewalk, truth be told. We're not going to do any business if no one can get here."

Seth and Kieran began to walk down the sidewalk toward the park. Once they were past the coffee shop, the snow was ankle-deep or higher, as if someone had shoveled earlier in the day but hadn't bothered as snow continued to fall.

They walked silently for half a block, Seth feeling the weight of the picture frame in his pocket. He wondered if he could do it, if he could finally throw Evan away. At the same time, he was self-conscious about letting go of his control with Kieran. But he'd enjoyed himself, too, had really laughed for maybe the first time since Evan left. He shoved his hand into his pocket and ran a finger over the edge of the picture frame. Yeah, he thought. If Kieran was going to be a part of his future, he needed let go of this part of his past.

Not liking the silence anymore, he said, "You remember ever seeing anything like this? I don't remember seeing this much snow when we were kids."

"There was that one winter. Sophomore year, maybe? I

remember because that was the year the superintendent wouldn't allow any snow days. Not sure what it was like in Teaneck, but in Bergenfield, the rumor was that the superintendent of schools had cruise tickets for the day after our last day of school, so he wouldn't let the school year get pushed back at all, lest he be forced to miss his vacation. That doesn't even make sense, so I doubt it was true, but at the time, it sure seemed like there could have been a nuclear holocaust and we all would have had to go to school." Kieran stomped a little, putting a concerted effort into plowing forward. He had on an old pair of Seth's sneakers, which hardly seemed adequate footgear in this weather. When Seth caught up to him, he said, "Anyway, this one day, we got this awful blizzard overnight. I think it was done snowing by the morning, but there were, like, two feet of snow. Every other school district in the region got the day off except mine. Mostly I remember because Ryan Acevedo and I used to carpool. You ever meet Ryan?"

"Not sure. The name is familiar." Seth mentally ran through everyone he remembered from high school. "Did he do cross country?"

They got to an avenue that had seen enough foot traffic to pack down the snow enough so they were able to walk without sinking. Kieran said, "Uh. I guess he did, yeah."

"I think I ran a few races against him."

Kieran stopped walking and looked at him. "I didn't know you were on the cross-country team."

Seth motioned to keep walking. "I guess it never came up in conversation. The manager at the ice-cream parlor, though, Steve?"

"Stan?"

"Yeah, Stan. He used to give me a hard time about it because I had to swap shifts a lot in the fall to make it to meets."

“I guess that would explain why I saw more of you in the spring. And here I’d always thought you were working extra shifts to make money for college.”

“I did that too.”

“Huh. I thought I knew everything about the teenaged Seth Roland. Guess I was wrong.”

Seth found himself chuckling. He wasn’t sure what it was about Kieran that made him smile so much—his charm, his good mood, his marvelous body. Kieran shot Seth a grin that made his skin tingle. Seth said, “I imagine I’ve got more than a few secrets yet.”

Kieran nodded. “Anyway, Ryan and I used to carpool. He lived a couple of doors down from me, and he and I and sometimes Janey Church would catch rides to school with Ryan’s dad. On this particular day, with the two feet of snow, Ryan’s dad wouldn’t drive, so the two of us hiked to school together. The snow was up to our thighs in some places. Kinda like this.” Kieran stopped to contemplate how best to get over a snow bank on the corner that pretty effectively blocked the crosswalk. He kicked at the snow and managed to forge a path to the street. Seth followed him, noting that there weren’t really any cars around.

“Let’s walk in the street here.” The snow had piled up so much on the next block that the sidewalk looked un-navigable. At least the street had been cleared by passing motor traffic. “It would suck to have to walk to school in this.”

Seth pictured having to walk to school—or to work, for that matter—in the current conditions. The snow had slowed but was definitely still falling, and Seth was finding it difficult to walk even on the street, though it was still kind of fun, moving at a leisurely pace with Kieran.

“Oh, it sucked,” Kieran said. “Luckily the walk wasn’t that far.

Bergenfield is not exactly a big town. Although, at the time, I thought going anywhere that required more than five minutes of walking was too far. I got over that in college when all of my classes were more than a fifteen-minute walk from my dorm.”

Seth smiled. “My mom made me walk to work sometimes. It was maybe only a little over a mile, but it felt like such a distance. My parents live over near the armory.” Seth was satisfied by the look of recognition on Kieran’s face. Kieran probably wouldn’t have known that either, as Seth had never let him get anywhere near his house. Maybe that was odd, given how much time he’d spent in the basement of Kieran’s house, though Kieran had lived only a couple of blocks from the ice-cream parlor. Seth felt a flush come over his face as he remembered all those afternoons spent making out with Kieran on that couch, but he tried to shrug it off, rationalizing that he’d done many far more scandalous things in the time that had passed. Hell, he’d gotten further with Kieran that morning than he’d gotten anywhere near all those years ago. Remembering that morning only made Seth flush harder. He turned away from Kieran.

At last they came to the rather grandiose entrance to the park. Kieran gawked at the huge Grand Army Plaza arch and shook his head. “Brooklyn looks so... old. Especially in the snow. If I weren’t wearing jeans, I’d swear it was 1895.”

“That’s one of the things I like about it,” Seth said. “Come on. It’s kind of a hike to the ice rink, especially if no one has shoveled.”

Moving through the park was slow going, as they mostly had to walk in the footsteps of those that had packed down the snow before them. It was taxing, but Seth was enjoying the cold air on his face, and Kieran smiled and told him to have a sense of adventure about it. They passed kids playing on the Long

Meadow, some of them being pulled around on sleds by parents who looked just as grateful for the time to spend in the park as their kids did. A couple of well-groomed dogs frolicked over snow banks. As they walked, Kieran pointed out funny things he saw—a poodle in a sweater, a kid trying to climb a tree, a dad trying to build a snowman—and Seth found it easy to laugh, which was weird too. He felt lighter, almost, despite the slog through the snow. He felt like something blocking him had been dislodged.

He ran his hand over the coat pocket where he'd shoved the Eiffel Tower photo. He watched Kieran run ahead a few paces, and he looked so childlike that Seth couldn't stop the laughter bubbling up in his throat. Kieran turned around and grinned, beckoning Seth forward.

When they got to the rink, they found it closed.

"What a bummer," Kieran said, contemplating the sign.

"I guess there was too much snow to clean off."

"Skating or not, I'm glad we came outside. This is kind of fun, isn't it? I feel like a ten-year-old."

Seth looked around. "Prospect Park Lake is right there."

Kieran looked. It was hard to tell the lake was even there, covered as it was in snow. Seth knew about where the water was, based on the line of trees and shrubs strategically planted a few feet away from the water's edge. He looked around and noticed that there were fewer people in this part of the park and not as many kids. He walked toward the water.

"Well, I feel like an idiot," Kieran said. "I mean, winter, cold, frozen water, ha-ha."

"Yeah. Kind of hard to throw something in the lake when the lake's frozen over."

Seth sighed. He pulled the photo out of his pocket and looked at it. He looked at his face alongside Evan's, at the way Evan was

smiling widely, the unmistakable body language indicating they were a couple and not just buddies, the Eiffel Tower looming like a giant phallus in the background.

“He left me,” Seth said quietly. Kieran turned to listen. “We were together for three years, and I knew it wasn’t ideal, that we had some problems, but I always thought we’d work them out, and he seemed willing. It was a habit more than anything. I see that now. We came home to each other every night because that’s what we’d done the night before. I was probably unhappy for a long time before he left, but it still hurt when he walked out. We didn’t even fight. He just announced one day that he was moving out, and that was it. He was gone.” He shook his head. He looked up at Kieran. “I don’t want to be this person anymore. I don’t want to dwell in the past. I’ve already wasted so much time on him, and I don’t want to anymore.” Seth didn’t think, twenty-four hours before, that he would have been able to throw this photo of him and Evan in the lake, but what he’d just told Kieran felt true.

Kieran didn’t say anything but looked very serious, his lips pressed together in a thin line. He walked over to where Seth stood. Just having Kieran beside him gave Seth some strength. He held up the frame and moved to toss it toward the lake anyway, figuring it would sink eventually, but Kieran stopped him.

“Save the frame,” he said. “Make a new memory.”

Seth nodded and slid the back off the frame. He pulled out the photo and handed the frame to Kieran. He gave one last look to the smiling faces in front of the Eiffel Tower before he tore the photo in two, then in four, then in eight. He took a step closer to where he guessed the water was and threw the pieces out. The wind carried them out over the water, some of them swirling in the air before settling on the snow. Some pieces seemed to melt

into the snow drifts.

The wind picked up, and Seth felt suddenly cold.

“Are you okay?” Kieran asked.

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to go back?”

Seth nodded.

Kieran took his arm and helped him over a snow bank, and they forged their way back to the path, walking silently until they got back to the Long Meadow. Kids were still playing as if nothing had happened, as if life just carried on, which, Seth supposed, it did.

As they walked, Kieran handed the empty frame back to Seth, who slid it back into his pocket.

“I hope I’m not a relic,” Kieran said after a prolonged silence.

“What?”

Kieran walked ahead of Seth and turned around. “You’re a part of my past. I’m a part of your past. You just said you want to look forward. I don’t.... I hope that I’m not some part of the past for you. I mean, we’ve been walking today, and I keep thinking, ‘Hey, remember that time when we did this or that’, and I have all these great memories of us together, but all of those memories were so long ago. I’m thirty years old now, but all my memories of you are from when we were seventeen. The last eighteen hours notwithstanding.”

Seth nodded. “We were so young when we knew each other.”

Kieran started walking again, so Seth put a little extra effort into wading through the snow to catch up. “You were the first,” Kieran said. “The first boy I ever fell in love with. You might as well be a black-and-white photograph in an album I keep on a bookshelf. I mean, you’re this memory I have, but you’re standing right here, too, and it’s different. You’re different, I’m different, and we’ve both seen things and changed and grown

into different people than we were when we were teenagers. So I look at you now, and I see Seth, the adult, a man with a job and an apartment and an ex-boyfriend and this terrible sadness in his eyes. Then I blink and I see Seth, the guy I fell for when I was seventeen, a guy who was funny and smart, someone who laughed easily and kissed like a dream.”

Kieran looked down, looking vaguely embarrassed after giving this speech. “Kieran,” Seth said. “Stop... stop walking for a minute.” Seth took a step forward. He wasn’t really sure what compelled him to reach for Kieran, especially while there were people around who could clearly see them. He’d never been one for public displays of affection. When he’d been out with Evan, Seth had always kept his we’re-just-friends mask on, which had been the source of many an argument, but maybe it was time to move past that, to get rid of some of the masks. Kieran had seen through it all when they’d been kids. Seth knew he could see through some of the masks now, and it all seemed so silly, like the picture postcard of a past life sitting on a coffee table.

He left his face naked as he walked toward Kieran and put a tentative hand on the back of Kieran’s head. Kieran’s hair was wet, full of snow enough to soak through Seth’s gloves. Seth looked up and noticed that the snow had started to fall again in earnest. He looked back at Kieran, whose gaze darted toward the kids playing and the dogs bouncing around the piles of snow, then back at Seth. Their eyes met. Seth could acknowledge everything Kieran said, and looking at him now, he felt at once like a boy again and like the adult he was. He recognized Kieran as both the boy he’d fallen for as a teenager and the man he’d just spent the night with, two entities that were at once completely different and absolutely the same.

Maybe it was a fantasy, or maybe he was dreaming, Seth thought as he closed the distance between himself and Kieran

and pressed their lips together. If so, it was a good fantasy.

He felt Kieran gasp, a whoosh of air moving through his chest and into Seth's mouth before they settled into the kiss together, Kieran bringing his hands to rest on Seth's waist.

"You still kiss like a dream," Kieran said with a smile when they eased apart again.

"You don't have to stay a part of the past. You can be a part of the future too."

"We hardly know each other anymore."

"There's a way to fix that."

Kieran chuckled, moving away, starting to walk again. In the distance Seth could see the brick archways that led out of the park. It was taking a great deal of time to walk through all the snow, though sleds and children had cut paths through what would have otherwise been a pristine, flat white sea. Seth tripped, or sometimes Kieran, and they'd catch each other. Seth wanted to laugh but couldn't quite manage it.

Seth wondered how to fix the past/present gap. He supposed he should look forward, but it was hard not to keep poking at the past.

"Did he know you were gay?" he asked. "Ryan Acevedo, I mean. Your friend from high school."

"Eventually," Kieran said. A funny smile came over his face. "I told him senior year, a few months before prom. He asked me who I was going with, and I, uh...." He looked at Seth. "I told him I wanted to go with you."

"Really? What did he say?"

"He was kind of surprised. Then he sat there and thought about it for a moment." Kieran stumbled over some snow, but Seth caught him by the waist before he toppled over. He righted himself and kept moving. "I was pretty fabulous in high school, if you don't remember. I always liked clothes, more than was

really practical for a teenage boy in my Catholic neighborhood.”

“I do remember.” Seth let Kieran walk a little ahead of him again. He bent over to pick up a handful of snow. He smashed it into a ball. “You used to wear all those dumb T-shirts too, on your shifts at the ice-cream shop. None of them fit you right. They were mostly kids’ shirts, right? Shit you picked up at thrift stores? Like, with old cartoons or old shirts for PAL teams in the area?”

Kieran laughed. “I can’t believe you remember that.”

“They, uh, brought some attention to your chest.”

“And you enjoyed looking.”

“Yeah, I did.”

“What’ve you got there?”

Seth shoved the hand holding the snowball behind his back. “Nothing. So how did Ryan react?”

“He was cool with it, as long as I didn’t hit on him, but since I was already going out with you, I was able to put that fear to bed. So to speak.” Kieran started walking backward as if to keep an eye on Seth.

“I told my friend Stephen when we were fifteen. We stayed friends, but I think he was kind of freaked out by me.”

“Not your real friend.”

“There’s a reason we’re not in touch anymore.”

“So you knew you were gay before we met?”

“Yeah. Long before, I think. You wanted to go to your prom with me?”

Kieran laughed. “Well, sure. You were my boyfriend. Bergenfield High School had this strict policy of only selling prom tickets in pairs, so you had to bring a date. Ryan talked me out of asking you, and actually that was probably smart. The year after I graduated, another gay kid tried to bring his boyfriend to prom, and the whole town had a meltdown.”

“Yeah, I remember that.”

“Sometimes I wish I’d had the courage to cause a meltdown.”

Seth laughed now. “I never would have wanted that much attention thrown at me.”

“Yeah, but think of how trailblazing we could have been.”

“That’s cheesy. And it doesn’t matter now anyway.”

“No, I suppose it doesn’t.” Kieran grinned. “Maybe sometime we’ll rent tuxes and put on some Boyz II Men and pretend like it’s the prom again?”

Seth rolled his eyes and then drew his arm back and took the opportunity to launch his snowball at Kieran. It collided with his shoulder.

“So that’s how it is, eh?” Kieran said. He bent down and grabbed some snow and tossed it at Seth.

It devolved after that into a wild snowball fight, both men tossing half-formed snowballs at each other. A couple of the kids got in on it, too, and the parents seemed to appreciate the childish enthusiasm of grownups treating the day as it should have been treated, as an escape from everything that bogged them down in everyday adult life. Seth couldn’t help but think about how little things had changed in his daily life between high school and now. Had he and Kieran ever even had a snowball fight when they’d been teenagers? He doubted it; they’d been in too much of a rush to grow up. Seth launched another snowball at Kieran and wondered what the hurry had been.

They threw snow at each other until everyone was laughing and wet and cold and tired. Kieran had fallen onto his butt during one particular pelting by an eight-year-old who seemed determined to bring the man down. The kids had moved on to something else, leaving Seth to stand over Kieran, who giggled, then dropped back into the snow. He threw out his arms and

made a snow angel. Seth laughed and helped him up.

“You’re completely covered in snow.”

Kieran reached over and dusted some snow off Seth’s shoulder.

“You are too.”

“I think I’ve got hot chocolate back in my apartment.”

Kieran futilely slapped at his coat, trying to knock off the snow.

“Didn’t we pass a bodega on the way here? You think they have marshmallows?”

“So much for being adults.”

“It’s a snow day. I’ll be an adult tomorrow.”

They made their way out of the park. By then, someone had shoveled most of main sidewalks, making the streets a little easier to navigate.

As they walked, Seth felt sadness creeping in. It wasn’t regret, exactly, because he was pretty sure he’d done the right thing in throwing away the photo, but he still mourned it. He thought about the trip to Paris, how lovely it had been, how Evan had wanted to take pictures of everything. The frame in his pocket was empty now, and Seth couldn’t help but reflect on the fact that he’d let go of a part of himself that day. He turned his face away from Kieran so that he could pull on the old I’m-fine mask, not wanting Kieran to know he was bothered, needing for Kieran to think he really was okay.

THEY stopped at the bodega and bought a package of marshmallows and a six-pack of beer for later. Kieran liked that the beer implied he'd stick around a few more hours; he wasn't in any particular hurry to leave.

It was well into the afternoon by the time they got back to Seth's apartment, around the time that Kieran knew he'd have to decide when to leave, when he'd have to go home to prepare for the next day at work. But fuck it, he thought as they walked into Seth's living room. He started stripping.

"What are you doing?" Seth asked as Kieran peeled off layers of wet clothing.

"Even my undies are wet," Kieran said. "I figured I'd dry off faster if I got rid of these wet things."

He hadn't meant anything in particular by the display, besides that he couldn't wait to get into dry clothes. He thought he'd distract Seth a little too; he worried about how Seth was reacting to what had just happened. He was pretty sure that getting rid of that photo had been harder than Seth was letting on. Which was fine, but as the sun set, it was clear that they were running out of time. Kieran wanted Seth again before he left, if only so he'd have a positive memory to end this little interlude with. Would Seth be up for one more tumble before Kieran had to go back to New Jersey?

Apparently not, because Seth had that blank expression on his face again. "Okay," was all he said.

"Are you upset about the photo?" Kieran asked.

"What? No, it's fine."

And that was maybe the most irritating thing Kieran had ever seen. It was like Seth had left the room. "You're not fine, and you don't have to pretend to be." Kieran shook his head.

“Sometimes you close up so tight. I’ve seen you do it a few times over the last day. But you forget, I know you. I’ve seen you. This face you’re giving me now, that’s not you. It’s some disguise you put on so that I think you’re calm and well-adjusted. But you become like a stranger when you retreat into yourself like that.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Seth said, turning away.

Kieran let out a frustrated grunt. “Is this how you get through life? By hiding?”

Seth pulled off his coat, then took Kieran’s. “I do what I have to.” Seth hung the coats and turned on Kieran. He looked angry, which Kieran thought was good. At least he wasn’t shut down. “Look, I’m sorry I can’t be all open and exuberant like you are,” he said, throwing his arms in the air.

Kieran sighed. “Nobody asked you to be anything other than who you are. I want you to be who you are with me, who you were this afternoon when we were throwing snowballs, who you are in bed.” At Seth’s wince, Kieran added, “Yeah, maybe it’s rare that you let all your defenses down, that you let anyone see your real face, but I’ve seen it when you stop thinking about hiding. Like in the moment right before you come.”

“You don’t have to be vulgar about it,” Seth said, putting on a prim-and-proper act.

“I’m just saying I’ve seen the real you. You don’t have to hide from me. I like the real you, without all the artifice.”

Seth’s body sagged against the wall, the tension and the fight going out of him. Kieran regretted picking the fight a little bit, not wanting to waste any of the precious time he and Seth had together on an argument, but he was frustrated too.

Seth said, “I’m so completely fucked up, Kieran. Why can’t I get over this? Why can’t I get over Evan? Why does it still make

me so sad when I think about him? And then you show up, and it starts to feel like maybe I can finally get over him, but I shouldn't depend on you to make that happen either. I don't want you to be a rebound. You deserve more than that. I should learn to be on my own, stand on my own feet, figure out how to be myself. But I want to be with you so much, and if I show you everything, you won't...." He looked down. "You won't want to be with me." He stopped talking and pressed his fist to his mouth.

"Seth," Kieran said, taking a step toward him. "You should let me decide what I want before you assume you know."

Seth let his hand drop and looked up at Kieran, his brown eyes betraying him, sadness apparent, finally a real emotion there. Kieran pulled him into his arms.

"I just want you to be honest with me. Can you do that?"

Seth pulled away slightly and looked up at Kieran. "Yeah," he said. "I can do that." His lips curled slightly in a smile.

Kieran kissed him. He became acutely aware of the fact that he was half-naked and wet and that Seth's living room was drafty. He said, "Good. Now let's get out of these wet things."

Seth nodded and walked toward the bathroom. Kieran followed, gathering up the wet clothes he'd already shed. They hung everything over the shower curtain rod or towel racks, so at least the melting snow would drip on the tiles. Seth stood in a tee shirt and his briefs as he pawed through the linen closet, producing a couple of towels. When he turned around, his gaze settled on Kieran's damp briefs, which Kieran knew were tight against his growing erection.

"Okay," Seth said, looking like he wasn't sure how to react.

Kieran looked down at himself and noticed his skin was red and blotchy. He pressed his palm against his thigh and felt how icy his skin was too. "You know what an excellent method for

warming up after a sojourn through the snow would be?”

“What?” asked Seth, a visible shiver going through his body. He hugged his arms to his chest.

“A soak in the tub. What do you say?”

Seth looked at his bathtub and appeared to consider Kieran’s suggestion. “Sounds like a good idea.” The tub was an old claw-footed affair, probably one that had been installed in the apartment originally. It looked rather grandiose in an otherwise bland bathroom, and it was larger than a normal tub. Seth leaned over and turned on the taps. He held his hand under the running water and turned knobs until he seemed satisfied with the water temperature. He pulled his shirt off over his head and tossed it into the corner of the bathroom.

Kieran, still wearing only his briefs, walked up to Seth and put his arms around his torso from behind. “You are so hot,” he murmured.

Seth chuckled. “Yeah?”

“Mmm. I like this you much more than the old you, if that makes sense. I mean, I like the adult model more. More substantial, more masculine.”

“Same goes.” Seth turned around in Kieran’s arms and ran his hands up Kieran’s chest. “I don’t remember you having this much body hair before.”

“Blame my hairy Irish ancestors.”

“No, I like it.” Seth bent his head and pressed his face against Kieran’s chest. He slid off Kieran’s briefs. Now it was Kieran’s turn to shiver.

“I’m cold. Let’s get in the tub.”

Seth stood up and took a step back. “Oh yeah.”

He turned off the water. He shucked the rest of his clothes and stepped into the tub. He lowered himself slowly into the middle of it, facing the taps, wincing as the hot water washed over his

cold skin. Kieran got in behind him. He carefully maneuvered his legs so they wrapped around Seth's body. Then he pulled Seth back so that his back rested against Kieran's chest.

Once their bodies had adjusted to the temperature, Seth said, "This is nice."

"I live in a cookie-cutter one-bedroom apartment," Kieran said, "but its one redeeming trait is that it's got a spectacular bathroom. Long baths are kind of my secret vice."

"Not so secret if you told me." Seth turned his head and nuzzled his face into Kieran's neck. "Maybe we can take a bath together there sometime."

"I'd like that a lot." Kieran wrapped his arms around Seth.

Kieran was half-hard, though not in a hurry to do anything about it. He liked the pressure of Seth's body leaning against him, liked the feeling of Seth's hair tickling his neck. The water was hot and stung his cold thighs, but it felt good, too, felt like it was helping his body thaw. He settled into the water and wondered if he'd be able to sleep, lulled as he was by the water and Seth's breathing.

"I think," Seth said after a long silence, "that maybe the past and the present can't be separated."

"Hmm?" Kieran said. He didn't feel especially sleepy, but he did feel content, his muscles relaxing.

Seth shifted a little. "Your past, our past, is just as much a part of who we are as the present."

"That's true."

Seth shifted away, and Kieran's arms felt empty without him. He turned slightly so that he could face Kieran. Kieran wasn't sure where Seth was going with this speech, but he considered his past and how it affected him. He thought of his ex, Tony—a man he'd gotten together with and broken up with three or four times before finally putting an end to it for good just over a year

ago—and he thought of Mike and Andrew and Ted and a handful of men whose names he couldn't really recall. He could concede that every experience projected a shadow on how he behaved now, that he knew what to do with Seth's body because he'd accumulated that experience, but it wasn't like he was nursing a broken heart in the same way Seth was. He'd been sad when he and Tony broke up the last time, but he saw the wisdom in ending their relationship, too, saw how much better off he was. Hell, being single had been a hell of a lot more fun than the last few months with Tony.

"Anyway, just saying," Seth mumbled.

Figuring it was safe to change the subject, Kieran said, "Do you want to know the moment I knew I was gay?"

"Tell me."

"Would you think me an incurable romantic if I say it was the first time I laid eyes on you?"

Seth rolled his eyes. "Hokey," he said, though he smiled.

Kieran put his arms around Seth and pulled him back toward him. "It's true. Or maybe not the first time I set eyes on you, but once I noticed I had a crush on you. I had an inkling before that, but it was more a question than a conviction, and then one day you walked into work and I thought, 'I want him', and I knew for sure." He looked down at Seth, who gazed at him, a smile playing on his lips. Kieran dropped a kiss on his nose. "Then it turned out you were just as attracted to me. That was amazing in itself, but it also meant I wasn't alone anymore. I wasn't the only gay kid in North Jersey. That helped me accept who I was a lot sooner than I might have otherwise, and regardless of what happens with us now, I'll always be grateful for that."

"Oh," Seth said, like he wasn't quite sure how to react to that. He laid his head against Kieran's shoulder.

Kieran worried he'd said too much, that maybe he'd crossed

some line into forbidden emotional territory when he should have been concentrating more on keeping things light. But then Seth twisted around and kissed him. Seth's mouth was hot against his, making him realize how cold his face still felt. Seth pulled away long enough to turn around so that he was kneeling in front of Kieran, between his knees. Seth was hard, making Kieran figure that maybe the conversation was about to shift in a different direction anyway.

Seth bent forward and kissed Kieran again. There was a limit to how much maneuvering Kieran could do in the tub, particularly as he was a little bigger than Seth, a little less able to twist his body without running into the edge of the tub or the wall. Still, there were Seth's hot kisses, and Kieran ran his fingers through his brittle blond hair. He felt Seth's cock poking at his belly, which made heat pool in his groin.

"This is one way to warm up," Kieran said.

Seth ignored him and trailed searing kisses from his mouth down to his chin and across his jaw line, then down his neck and across his collarbone. The position was a little awkward, and Seth slipped, but Kieran reached out and caught him. When Kieran pulled him back against him, when their warm, wet bodies slid together, Kieran moved to kiss Seth again, and Seth said, "I want you to fuck me."

That took Kieran by surprise. "Here in the tub?"

"There are condoms under the sink."

The damp air in the bathroom was sultry, steam seeming to rise out of the tub. Kieran became acutely aware of the slick, wet man in his arms in a way he hadn't quite been up to that point. He felt feverish and dizzy with lust suddenly. He nibbled at Seth's collarbone, then moved his hands down to cup Seth's smooth ass, moving his fingers toward their inevitable destination. Bathtime hadn't involved much soap, which Kieran

appreciated now as he inhaled, taking in Seth's scent, not something easily catalogued, but strong and raw and masculine, sweaty and musky.

Seth squirmed away and reached toward the cabinet under the sink. He managed to at least knock a box of condoms on the floor. The contents spilled everywhere, but one foil-wrapped packet slid close enough to the tub that Seth could grab it without moving much. Kieran watched Seth's body and loved the way his muscles moved under his skin. Seth's skin was marred by birthmarks and a small scar on his left pec, tiny details Kieran knew he never would have appreciated as an anxious teenager but was memorizing now.

Seth slid back in the tub. He tore the wrapper off the condom and motioned for Kieran to move. Kieran pivoted up so that he was sitting on the back edge of the tub. Seth moved fluidly, seeming to swim as he closed the distance between them. Kieran could only watch as Seth approached him, then as Seth ran a hand down his chest, then as Seth closed his mouth over his cock. Kieran's back arched and his skin tingled.

Seth pulled away slightly and rolled the condom on Kieran. He kissed Kieran's stomach all the while, his teeth grazing Kieran's skin. He stroked Kieran's cock as he trailed his mouth around Kieran's body, across his hips, down his thighs, his mouth scalding Kieran's skin wherever it touched. Kieran felt so hot he thought the water might start boiling. Seth started moving back up his chest until he was kneeling, and they kissed again, Kieran pulling Seth into his arms, running his hands down Seth's back, cupping Seth's ass again. Seth's skin was flushed and damp and so smooth under Kieran's hands, and he grunted and groaned as Kieran's fingers started to probe.

He nibbled at Seth's neck and asked, "Lube?"

"I think there's some of that under the sink too. Get back in the

water.”

The water had been seeping out of the tub all through the bath—the drain plug didn’t seem to be working so well and, Kieran noticed, a good amount of water had sloshed out of the tub—and was down to only maybe eight inches. Kieran slid back into the water and watched Seth lean out of the tub to reach under the sink again. Kieran ran a hand over Seth’s shoulder, then bent and nipped at the soft skin. Seth made a sound that was a bit like a giggle. He tossed something into the air, and a bottle of lube landed in the tub with a plop.

Kieran grabbed it and poured some on his fingers. He used his other hand to pull Seth toward him. Seth rose up on his knees. Kieran ran his hand down the crack of Seth’s ass, and his fingers found what they were looking for. Slowly he pushed one finger inside Seth.

Seth hissed and sighed and said, “That’s good. More.” Encouraged, Kieran kept probing, trying to memorize the line of Seth’s collarbone, the planes of his chest, wanting the sounds he made to make an impression in his mind. He pushed in a second finger, stretching Seth out, loving the moans coming from his mouth. Kieran felt like his whole body was straining toward Seth, toward that hot, slick body, toward whatever ecstasy might await him there.

Seth pushed back on Kieran’s hand, then moved again, straddling Kieran. His skin was red and splotchy, flushed with arousal, and his hard cock bobbed as he positioned himself over Kieran. He kissed Kieran, thrusting his tongue inside, his mouth hot and delicious and soft and smooth and hard. “Inside me,” he murmured against Kieran’s mouth.

Kieran moved one hand to Seth’s lower back while he took himself in hand with the other, guiding their bodies together until they met. He watched Seth’s face as he pushed inside, saw

Seth wince, but then he saw the tension on his face ease into something more pleasurable. Seth was tight, and his every movement seemed to reverberate against Kieran's cock, against his whole body.

It was a revelation to be inside this man, to be a part of him in this way, in the way he'd wanted when they were teenagers. He was grateful they'd waited until now, grateful he could do this right, that he had the experience to make this good for Seth, that Seth could make it good for him. He slid in and out of Seth's body, slid against his skin, and Seth threw his head back and moaned as he moved his hips, as he rode Kieran's cock, as they took each other to new heights of pleasure. Kieran had loved being fucked by Seth the night before, had loved the intensity in Seth's eyes. This seemed an entirely new experience. Now Seth rode Kieran with abandon, clutched at Kieran's shoulders, at his neck, at his hair, completely lost in the sensations, and Kieran loved watching him, loved getting off on Seth's rapture.

Kieran ran his hand down Seth's chest before wrapping it around Seth's cock and stroking him. Seth gulped as if he were having trouble breathing. He looked down, pain and ecstasy mixed on his face, everything laid bare, everything Seth was and wanted to be, everything he wanted and needed from Kieran, everything was right there in his eyes. He blinked, looking like he might cry, but instead he put his arms around Kieran's neck and hugged him close. He pressed his face against the side of Kieran's, laid kisses on Kieran's ears, his cheeks, then mumbled, "Fuck. Kieran," and came in hot spurts against Kieran's chest and stomach.

Kieran put his arms around Seth and held him close, felt Seth's body shaking and vibrating as he jerked and came, every twinge and movement sending electric currents through Kieran's body, the smell of sex and Seth surrounding him, the feeling of Seth's

body around him intense and exquisite. He clutched at Seth as he felt his resolve giving way, as he felt sweet release clobber him, everything but this man in his arms vanishing when he came. The orgasm felt like it was pulled from him. His vision blurred. He held Seth as he rode it out, and Seth covered his face with kisses and murmurs of affection, and Kieran wanted to cry, too, but mostly out of joy.

When his breathing had resumed a healthy-seeming pace, Kieran put a tentative hand down on the bottom of the tub. "There's very little water left."

"Mmph," Seth said against Kieran's neck. He picked his head up and looked at Kieran, a smirk on his face. "That's no way to get clean."

They managed to help each other into standing positions, and though their skin was starting to wrinkle from sitting in the tub so long, it seemed prudent to shower. Seth drained what little water was left in the tub then turned the shower on and they washed each other. Afterward, Seth loaned Kieran some pajamas and they padded into the living room. "I'll make hot chocolate," Seth said. "Sit on the couch."

"Bossy," Kieran said, though he was content to lounge, sinking into the overstuffed cushions. The tee shirt he was wearing smelled of Seth, which was a delight. He tried not to think too hard about having to put his own clothes back on, about having to go outside, having to leave Brooklyn, having to go back to Jersey.

A few minutes later, Seth placed two mugs of hot chocolate on the coffee table. Kieran ripped open the bag of marshmallows and dropped a handful into each mug, watching them expand.

Seth plunked down on the couch with a sigh. He threw an arm behind Kieran and played with the hair at the back of Kieran's head while he waited for the hot chocolate to cool. He seemed

content.

“The PATH is probably up and running again,” Kieran said, feeling sad that he’d have to leave the warm comfort of Seth’s apartment soon. “Did the snow stop?”

Seth looked toward the window. “Looks like it.” He shifted a little so that he was leaning into Kieran, who snuck an arm around Seth’s back and pulled him close. “I wish I didn’t have to go back to the real world tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I know something about that,” said Kieran.

Seth eased away a little. “You know, we’ve spent all this time together, and I still know very little about what you do by day. You were in Manhattan for a tech conference?”

“Yep. I’m reporting on some of the new gadgets introduced at the conference for my magazine.”

“I’m an account manager at an ad agency.”

“Yeah, I think you mentioned that. I have a hard time picturing you as an advertising type. Of course all I really know about advertising I learned from watching TV.”

Seth smiled. “I think sometimes that I’m maybe not really cut out for it, but it pays the bills.”

Kieran nodded. “I like my job most days, but it’s been stressful lately as the magazines start folding. My company has already laid off a bunch of employees. I’m kind of amazed that I’m still working, in fact, but I guess the powers that be like my stuff.”

Seth picked a piece of lint off his shirt. “So I could go to a newsstand, pick up your magazine, and see your byline?”

“My name is on the masthead, yeah.”

Seth nodded. “That’s cool.” He turned his head and looked unfocused at something in the distance. “I think about quitting sometimes and going to do something else. Something creative maybe. I’d move to Italy and pick up painting or write a novel or something, you know? On the other hand, I’m good at my job,

the firm is fairly successful, and the work is interesting. I don't know. I feel restless there sometimes."

"Yeah, I know something about that too. I've felt that way a lot lately."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I thought it was just, I don't know, turning thirty. I'm settled, I guess. Or stuck in a rut. I don't know. I think that's why I've been having trouble sleeping lately. I'm literally restless."

"It's kind of nice to have a break in the routine."

Kieran nodded. He leaned forward and picked up one of the mugs. After blowing over the top, he took a sip. It was at the ideal temperature, hot but not so hot it burned his tongue. The marshmallows were melting into a floating froth.

He replaced the mug on the coffee table. When he looked at Seth, Seth was grinning. "What?" Kieran asked.

"You've got some marshmallow...." He gestured to his own mouth. Then he laughed and leaned over and kissed Kieran, licking his upper lip. He pulled away and said, "There, I think I got it all."

Kieran hooked a hand behind Seth's head and pulled him back for a deep kiss. He could go on kissing Seth for days, he thought.

“SO, YOU’RE spending the night, right?” Seth asked as he snuggled with Kieran on the couch, feeling content, wrapped up in flannel pajamas and Kieran. They were watching the news to verify that all public transportation was back up and running. It was. The reporters also confirmed that, except for a few outlying neighborhoods in the Bronx and Queens, all the streets had been plowed, and the city was ready for life to resume as normal.

“Yeah, I’ll stay the night,” Kieran said, though he didn’t sound happy about it.

Seth pulled away so he could see Kieran’s face. Kieran looked sad. “Are you sure?”

Kieran smiled ruefully. “It’s not that I don’t want to stay, because, lord, do I want to stay, but it feels like prolonging the inevitable. I’m going to have to get up early tomorrow so that I can get the train home with enough time to change clothes and make it into the office on time.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“But it’s not like we’re never going to see each other again, right?”

That didn’t seem possible. Seth had already decided that he wanted Kieran in his life for the foreseeable future. It seemed a waste to have spent the last twenty-four hours together only for it not to go anywhere. “What are you doing tomorrow night?” he asked.

Kieran laughed and leaned over to kiss Seth.

Seth had a flash of memory, at first a series of images, then a more solid event, a shift at the ice-cream parlor. He remembered an afternoon when a Girl Scout troop that was trying to earn some kind of career merit badge came to visit the store and learn

how to make ice-cream cakes. That was one of Kieran's specialties, so he'd led the troop in a demonstration of how to make little frosting roses, all eight girls completely in awe of his skill. Seth had thought it such a silly thing to get excited over. After the troop left, he sidled up to Kieran and asked him to demonstrate how to frost a cake. Kieran had cocked an eyebrow, but he obliged. All of Seth's roses had looked tortured and deformed. When Kieran guided Seth to write "Happy Birthday" on a cake, it came out looking like he'd had a seizure in the process.

Seth had never quite gotten the hang of frosting flowers, just as he hadn't, as a teenager, gotten the hang of being with Kieran, of having a boyfriend, of having this whole relationship he couldn't really tell anybody about.

Seth had been with several men over the years, but it hadn't been until he'd met Evan that he'd been so forcibly yanked out of his safety zone. Evan had been a proud man, comfortable in his own skin, and he'd wanted Seth to have that too, had wanted them to hold hands in public and kiss in darkened bars, but Seth never felt ready, never felt like he could expose himself, could never take off the don't-look-at-me mask or the I'm-not-gay mask, could never let himself go completely in Evan's presence. And he knew that was a big reason why Evan had left.

Having come to that conclusion, Seth felt somewhat less burdened. He could explain away Evan. Maybe he could finally start to let him go.

But then he had a clear vision of Kieran leaving him for the same reason. He wanted to try to let his masks go, but it wasn't as easy as just destroying them, as tossing them all in the lake. He knew that, over time, he'd probably repeat his mistakes. And Evan he could let go, he'd be okay with what happened in time, but the prospect of losing Kieran after they'd reconnected this

time was almost too much to bear. They'd only just found each other again. And already Kieran meant more to him than anyone he'd ever known.

He said what was foremost on his mind: "I don't want you to leave."

"Yes, I know." Kieran was silent for a long moment. Then he said, "Wait, what are you talking about?"

Seth sighed and pressed his face into Kieran's shoulder, clutched at Kieran's back. "You left the first time."

"*You* left for college. Besides, we both knew that, with all that distance, we never would have—"

"And Evan. Three years, and I loved him, I really did, he was my whole world, and then he just left one day. It wasn't enough. I wasn't enough for him. I'm not enough to keep you."

Seth felt Kieran's arms come around him. He hated to lose it like this, but he could see, clear as day, Kieran walking out the front door of this apartment in the white light of the morning and never coming back.

"Seth," Kieran said. "Stop. You're enough. I could easily fall in love with you again." He sighed, his shoulder moving under Seth's forehead. "I was in love with you all those years ago, but it was this pure, beautiful thing, almost not real, magical in the way it only can be when you fall in love the first time. And I was heartbroken when you left for school, but I figured it was just how life went. It's called 'first love' for a reason. But now... now we have a second chance. Now we're complete people instead of half-formed, yet I'm still just as caught up in you as I was back then. Can you believe that?"

Seth believed it, because he felt it too. "Yeah," he whispered.

"So stop worrying. I want to be with you just as you are. Okay? All I ask from you is honesty. This is far from over."

Seth sighed and sank into Kieran's arms. "I could fall in love

with you again too.”

Kieran yawned, his chest expanding beneath Seth’s cheek. “God, I’m tired,” he said.

“We did a lot today.” Seth twisted around so he could see Kieran’s face. He remembered what Kieran had said that morning about chronic insomnia.

Kieran closed his eyes. “Yeah,” he said.

Seth grabbed the remote and settled back against Kieran’s chest. He flipped through the channels, settled on some cop show, decided he’d watch it while he figured out what to do about dinner. His stomach growled as he thought about what might be in the cabinets in the kitchen. Probably there was pasta. Maybe he could heat up some soup. He wondered if Kieran cooked and started realizing there was so much to this man that he still had to learn. And Kieran wanted to stick around long enough for Seth to try.

He eased away from Kieran and sat up. He stood, intending to go to the kitchen to see what there was to cook. He looked down at Kieran and was about to ask if he had any special requests. The question died on his tongue.

Kieran was fast asleep.

EPILOGUE

SETH paused with his hand on the door to Lachlan's. It felt like a habit to take stock before going inside, to evaluate which mask to put on, to plaster on a smile. But no plastering seemed to be necessary today. He'd had an okay day at work and, more to the point, he felt pretty good, happy to face whoever was waiting for him inside.

And sure enough, Kieran and Marty sat at the bar, their heads bent together conspiratorially. Then Marty backed away, saying something Seth couldn't make out, and Kieran laughed.

Seth approached the bar, his smile genuine. Kieran saw him first and grinned. He hopped off his bar stool and threw an arm around Seth, giving him a wet kiss on the cheek. "Hey, Seth," he said.

"Hi." Seth blushed, nervous about the public display, but no one in the bar was really paying attention to them anyway. He took a deep breath and said hi to Marty.

"I like your shirt," Marty said.

"Thanks. It was a present from Kieran." Seth liked the shirt too. It was a deep red, a shade lighter than the color of the walls in his living room. Kieran told him it made his skin look great, but in the end Seth had just liked the color. It was kind of nice to have something eye-catching in his wardrobe, which for so long had been the sorts of muted colors intended not to draw attention. That day he'd caught people looking at him on the street and was astonished not to feel it bothering him.

"Whatcha got there?" Kieran asked, gesturing toward the tiny shopping bag in Seth's hand.

"Oh, there's this little photography store near my office. I stopped by earlier this week and dropped off a flash drive with a bunch of digital pictures I wanted prints of."

“Anything good?” Kieran asked, motioning for Seth to hand over the bag, which he did.

“We live in strange times,” Marty said as Kieran pulled an envelope out of the bag. “Remember film?”

“Hey, I still have a film camera,” Kieran said, pulling the prints out of the envelope. He flipped through the small stack slowly, as if he were examining the photos for their artistic merits. “Uh, Seth, honey, all of these are of us.”

“I know,” Seth said. He moved next to Kieran and slid onto an empty bar stool. “I was hoping one of these would turn out well enough to put in that empty frame.” He knew he didn’t have to clarify which frame.

Kieran blinked. “Oh, sure. But we’ve never been anywhere that interesting together. It’s not like it’s us in front of some big landmark in Europe. Most of these were taken in the city.” He paused on a photo of them on the Brooklyn Heights Promenade, their arms thrown around each other, with the Brooklyn Bridge in the background. In the photo Seth’s smile was wide, and Kieran’s hair was caught up in the wind. “Okay, I kinda like this one.”

“You said yourself,” said Seth. “Make some new memories. So that’s what I’m doing. Who needs the Eiffel Tower? The photo is of you and me, and that’s what’s important.”

“Aw,” Marty said, sounding a little sarcastic.

“Besides,” Seth went on, “I’m sure we’ll have plenty of opportunities to get our picture taken in front of some silly landmark. I’ve always wanted to go to Italy. But in the end, what does it matter if we’re standing in a piazza or we’re on the Promenade? The photo is of us. That’s why I’d frame it.”

Kieran looked at Seth with awe. He put his hand on the back of Seth’s head and pulled him in for a kiss. It was brief but heartfelt. And that was what was important, Seth thought. He

had a fleeting, treacherous thought about Evan, remembering how ashamed he'd been to express his affection for Evan in public. Kieran was different: easy to love and easy to be with, never pressuring Seth to do anything he hadn't been ready for, until that one day when Seth had thought, *Fuck it*, and kissed Kieran in the middle of a crowded sidewalk.

"You're a sweetheart," Kieran said. "I love you."

"I love you too," Seth said, smiling.

Marty made gagging sounds.

Seth took the photos back from Kieran and slid them back into the envelope before putting the envelope back into the bag.

"You want a beer?" Kieran asked, flagging down the bartender.

"Sure," said Seth.

He watched Kieran order and examined his profile, liking it immensely, feeling content in his life. Kieran turned around and winked at him as he reached for his wallet to pay. He was looking forward to going home with Kieran that night. He always slept better when Kieran was in bed with him. The same seemed to be true of Kieran, who had lately slept like the dead anytime they spent the night together.

The trip between Hoboken and Brooklyn was getting to be a little much, making Seth think maybe it was time to broach the topic of getting a place together. Kieran had mentioned it once a few weeks before, kind of in the abstract, and Seth had bristled at that level of commitment so soon, but the more Seth thought about it, the more it seemed like a good idea.

But one thing at a time, he thought. Kieran handed Seth his beer, and Seth liked the sensation of the frosty glass against his hand.

"Let's have a toast," Kieran said, motioning to Marty to join in. "To the first spectacular week of spring! I mean, how great is the weather outside?"

Marty laughed. "It's pretty great. I forgot what it was like to go outside without a jacket."

"Yeah," Seth agreed. He clinked glasses with Marty, then Kieran. "So let's toast to nice weather."

"To women in bikinis in Central Park," said Marty. He eyed Seth and Kieran, then added, "Or shirtless men, if that's your thing."

Kieran laughed. "To ice-cream trucks and iced coffee," he added.

"To the cherry blossoms in Brooklyn," said Seth.

They all clinked glasses together again.

"To new beginnings," Kieran said, looking at Seth.

And that seemed about right. "To new beginnings," he echoed, clinking his glass against Kieran's one last time. Kieran smiled.

"You guys are awful," Marty said with a groan.

Seth just smiled. He leaned over and kissed Kieran, a long, lingering kiss. When he pulled away, Kieran looked at him, astonished.

"Not that I don't appreciate it," he said, "but what was that for?"

"New beginnings," Seth said. "New possibilities. New love. You pick."

Kieran grinned. "And here I thought I was the sappy one."

About the Author

Kate McMurray is a nonfiction editor by day. Among other things, Kate is crafty (mostly knitting and sewing, but she also wields power tools), she plays the violin, she has an English degree, and she loves baseball. She lives in Brooklyn, NY.

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Published by

Dreamspinner Press

4760 Preston Road

Suite 244-149

Frisco, TX 75034

<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

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Released in the United States of America

October 2010

eBook Edition

eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-682-8