

PROLOGUE

Five years ago

AARON was waiting in a hallway outside an apartment in Manhattan's Upper East Side. He had no idea how he'd gotten there, but there he was. He was waiting to be ushered inside with a string of other guys to see who would be chosen to be some photographer's next model for his new series. Aaron had no idea who the guy was—some weird last name—but that didn't stop him from waiting in line. He needed to eat just as much as the next guy.

Since moving from London to New York three months ago, he had basically taken any job he could find that would supplement his income and allow him some time to go on auditions and to sculpt or to throw an occasional pot on the wheel at the community school near his dreary flat. Apartment. Whatever.

This gig should be easy. In the door to stand around in odd poses and then out again. Two hundred dollars was two hundred dollars. He imagined he'd have to put up with a temperamental arsehole photographer, some diva who was probably extremely famous, judging from the swank hallway

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he was standing in at the moment. Fuck, he'd rather live in this hallway than in his own apartment. There was lovely soft carpet on the floor, and it was blessedly cool, a far cry from his sixth-floor walk-up with nothing but a rotating fan to move the putrid, humid air from his solitary window through his solitary room.

This place was fucking posh; if the hallways were this nice, he could only imagine what the inside of the bloody apartment looked like.

"You can come in now," a soft voice came from the now open door.

As Aaron followed the line of guys ahead of him and walked through the doorway, he looked at the person belonging to the soft voice. She was nearly as tall as him with dark hair and pale skin. She was quite lovely, and he noticed several of the others taking a quick peek as they walked by her.

"Thanks for coming. My name is Alyson, and if I can get you anything to drink or eat while you wait, just give me a holler. Jake should be ready to see you soon."

Aaron looked around and noticed no one was taking her up on her offer. Fuck, he hadn't eaten all morning. He'd have loved to have a go at whatever food the bird was offering, but since no one moved, he didn't want to act a ponce and be the only one asking for something. He frowned as he looked around some more, willing anyone to speak up and ask for something. Shit, they'd probably get champagne and caviar, or some smelly-arse cheese at least, by the looks of this place. Though food was fucking food, now wasn't it?

Dammit.

Aaron was shifting from foot to foot as he crossed his arms and began to put a pout on when the other door leading into the room opened and some kid walked through the door. Must be the diva's son, from the looks of him, Aaron thought, couldn't be much more than twenty-one, twenty-two.

"Jake, these are—"Alyson began before she was abruptly cut off by the kid's, "Yeah, okay."

He started walking quickly past the row of guys just standing there with their thumbs up their bums until he came to Aaron.

"That one. I want that one," he said abruptly before turning and walking quickly back through the door from which he had just entered.

Okay then.

"Well," Alyson said as she cleared her throat, "I guess that takes care of that. Thank you for coming, gentlemen."

Aaron watched as she efficiently herded the lot of them to the door while deftly ignoring their complaints and protests of time wasted, and, from those to the right of Aaron, of not even being looked at.

Once they were all gone and only Aaron was left, she turned back to him and said, "If you'll follow me, please?"

"Hold on a tic. What's up with all this? I mean, some kid wanders in and points at me in like ten seconds, and I'm supposed to go into the lair blindly? Jesus, you two could be fucking serial killers for all I know."

Alyson laughed. "I'm so sorry. I'm just used to him; I guess his abruptness doesn't even faze me anymore. You'll

get used to it."

"I don't think I'll be staying around long enough to get used to anything, much less some weirdo."

Alyson just smiled. "We'll see."

"No, I don't think we will," Aaron said, turning to leave. "Thanks for the... well, whatever the fuck this was. It's been... unusual."

"Wait," she said as she reached out to grab Aaron's wrist. "He really does just want to take your picture. Nothing odd, unless you consider his style odd... which it isn't," she hastened to inform him. "He just knows what he wants. He doesn't waste time. Give it a chance. Where else are you going to get a couple hundred dollars on such short notice?"

"Without dropping my trousers?" Aaron asked with a raised eyebrow. "Nowhere."

Alyson laughed again and gave his wrist a gentle tug. "Come on, if nothing else you can brag to all your friends in a few months that you're part of Jake's newest exhibition. You'll be the talk of Manhattan."

"Yeah," Aaron began with a scowl, "what parts of me will he be exhibiting? Because I like all of my parts, you know. I wouldn't want to be parted with any of my parts. Truly."

"He's not a serial killer," Alyson insisted with a grin.

"All serial killers say they're not serial killers. Do you think he's going to wear a badge that says *Hello, My Name is Psychotic Serial Killer of Young and Very Poor Men*? That's bad serial killer form, you know."

"Okay, fine," Alyson sighed. "Let's put it this way—if you don't get your cute little ass in there in about another thirty

seconds, he's going to chew my equally cute little ass out for not bringing you in to him. How's that?"

"What the fuck? Does he think he's the sultan or whatnot? Like I'm to be brought forth? Tell him to piss off."

"Come on," Alyson pleaded, "think of my cute little ass. Take one for the ass."

"Now if you said, 'take one up the ass', I'd be a bit more willing."

Alyson threw her head back and laughed. "Oh, he's going to love you."

"Yeah, love to *kill* me," Aaron muttered, following her to the door Jake had disappeared through.

Aaron's mouth dropped open when he entered the "room"; it was more like a huge open loft. No walls, huge floor-to-ceiling windows, shiny hardwood floors, perfect for a studio. He had no idea how Jake had acquired such a huge space in Manhattan.

As if reading his mind, Alyson leaned over and whispered, "He bought the place next door and tore down the walls."

"Perfect," Aaron replied, "and did he happen to find a treasure chest hidden in one of the walls as well?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, how the holy hell does he afford this place? He looks like he's twelve."

"He's twenty-two, and he happens to be quite successful."

"At twenty-fucking-two?"

"He was born with talent?" Alyson said questioningly.

"He's a lucky wanker who blew the right people?" Aaron suggested.

Alyson tried to scowl but grinned instead. "A child prodigy?"

"A deal with the devil?"

"Naturally gifted?"

"An indulgent sugar daddy?"

"How about 'c) all of the above'?" a third voice asked from behind the partition at the far corner of the studio.

"Does your sugar daddy mind when you interrupt conversations like that?" Aaron asked.

"Does yours like it when you talk shit about people in their own home?" Jake asked as he came out from behind the partition.

"Kind of, yeah, he likes my filthy dirty mouth."

"Oh, so he's one of those?" Jake asked, raising an eyebrow.

"One of who?"

"One of the kinky old bastards that ask you to talk dirty to them, call them 'Daddy', give you spankings...."

"Nothing wrong with the occasional spanking... or daddy issues."

"I doubt your friendly neighborhood psychiatrist would agree with you."

"My friendly neighborhood psychiatrist was my friendly neighborhood spanking daddy-issues sugar daddy."

"Figures."

Alyson was staring at them as they went back and forth

like a tennis match.

"Yep, it does," Aaron said happily as he began to wander around the room touching and picking things up.

"Don't touch my stuff."

"Sharing issues?" Aaron asked absently, picking up yet another thing.

"No, breaking issues."

"So you better make sure not to drop anything then."

Jake frowned. Alyson grinned.

"Where do you want me, Ansel? Naked? On all fours? Ready to get spanked?"

"Do you ever stop being annoying and irritating?" Jake asked. "You're like a herpes outbreak."

"Know a lot about that, do you?" Aaron asked, pushing buttons on the camera he was holding.

"Would you stop?" Jake practically yelled as he charged over to Aaron and grabbed the camera from his hands.

"Sharing issues," Aaron mouthed in Alyson's direction, who put her hand up to her mouth to hide her smile when Jake turned an angry face on her.

"You know, you can stop laughing at him any time, Aly."

"What?" Alyson asked as she shrugged. "You picked him."

"In an obvious fit of insanity."

"Obviously," she agreed with a knowing look.

Jake pulled a face at her.

"Come on, Mozart, what do you want me to do?"

"Mozart?" Jake and Alyson asked at the same time.

"Child prodigy...?" Aaron supplied helpfully.

"Your brain works in mysterious ways, doesn't it?" Jake commented.

"You'll never be able to fathom the deep recesses of my mind."

"Do I really want to? I have a feeling the fathoms of your recesses would make me cry."

"My recesses have been known to make grown men cry," Aaron said agreeably, picking up a different camera.

"God, you really are annoying."

"Yeah, lucky for you, huh?"

"Are you high? Because if you're high, I don't want any part of you."

"See!" Aaron hollered at Alyson, who jumped at the sudden outburst, "He *does* want my parts! What did I tell you? Serial killer!"

"Look at his pupils," Jake directed at Alyson, "and tell me if they're dilated or not."

"You two are idiots," Alyson said as she started to walk away.

"You're leaving me alone with him!" Aaron and Jake demanded at the same time.

"You picked him," she directed at Jake. "And you followed me in here," she said to Aaron. "Enjoy each other."

"Dammit, Alyson," Jake shouted, "I told you that you could quit, but he hasn't even agreed yet, so don't you dare walk out of here already."

"What is she quitting, and what am I agreeing to?" Aaron asked.

"Alyson wants to quit being my assistant to get married and have babies or some shit like that. Honestly, marriage." Jake all but shuddered. "And you're going to agree to take her place so she can go breed."

"Gee, thanks, Jacob, I love it when you compare me to a dog."

"Well, if I'm comparing you to a dog, and you're breeding, then obviously you're a pedigree, right? A perfectly perfect specimen."

"Yes, a perfectly perfect specimen. Of. A. Dog."

"Don't go all girly on me now, Aly."

"I wouldn't dream of it, you asshole."

"There's my girl back."

"You're making a real solid case on your behalf, acting like your lovely and charming self in front of the newbie. He already thinks you're a serial killer."

"Yes, well, I've found people can put up with a lot of shit, including serial killer behavior, if they're paid enough."

"Um, excuse me," Aaron interrupted. "I'm not fucking working for you, so I think this little conversation is over. Thanks for the brief moment of mildly disturbing entertainment, but I'm out of here."

"Wait," Jake said as he stood between Aaron and the door. "You wouldn't be here if you weren't short on cash. Desperate, maybe?"

"I happen to *like* posing for pictures in the homes of strange men. This is a typical Tuesday for me, I'll have you know."

"Whatever. I'm sure I can pay you a hell of a lot more

than whatever it is you're making now doing whatever the hell it is you're doing, which with all the talk of sugar daddies and spankings is probably prostitution or S&M work."

"So," Aaron said, "I'm to believe you want a person who you think is a master of pain, or Julia Roberts, to be your assistant after looking at him for about a half second in a line of wanks in your living room?"

"Yes."

Aaron shrugged. "Okay, then. I'm in."

Alyson mimicked a blessing as she moved her hand in the shape of a cross in front of Aaron and said, "God be with you, my son."

"I'm not that bad," Jake said, pushing Alyson's hand out of Aaron's face.

"He really is," Alyson said as she walked over to a desk and pulled open the top right drawer. "I'll give you my holy water. Just splash some on him and chant, 'The power of Christ compels you', and he should either stop or start smoking—either way, he stops."

"Does he spit pea soup too?" Aaron asked eagerly, "Because that would be fucking awesome. And gross. But more awesome."

Alyson rolled her eyes. "You two are perfect for each other. He's an emotionally retarded asshole," she said, tipping her head toward Jake, "and you're clearly insane and find emotionally retarded assholes amusing. This should work out smashingly."

"I thought he was the devil," Aaron said, scrunching up

his face in confusion. "Emotionally retarded assholes generally don't start smoking after being doused with holy water. They usually start smoking after fucking some random guy, then kicking him out of bed before the condom comes off."

"He has a point," Jake said as he gestured in Aaron's general direction.

"Yeah, I'm leaving now," Alyson said. "I'll be back to show Aaron the ropes. Or not. Maybe I'll just run far, far away."

"You couldn't leave me if you tried, Aly," Jake said confidently.

"Oh, that's right, I forgot. I'm madly in love with you. Leaving you and your three a.m. phone calls and demands for Ho-Hos only from the market on the corner of 78th is a pain I'm not sure I can bear."

"He only likes Ho-Hos from a particular market?" Aaron asked.

"Yes, along with a weird obsession with having me wait at the fucking crack of dawn every first Thursday of the month to get him that month's issue of *Field and Stream*—even though I suspect he's never been out of Manhattan, much less near a field or a stream."

"Yes, well, when our plane crashes in the woods and I save your ass from a bear and catch trout for you to eat instead of the dead pilot, you'll be appreciative of my *Field and Stream* obsession."

"Whatever, Jacob," Alyson said before turning to Aaron. "I'm running out for lunch; you want something?"

"Some trout sounds really good."

"What did I say? Crazy!" Alyson exclaimed as she walked out the door.

"She'll be back," Jake said, wandering over to his cameras.

"I should hope so," Aaron replied. "I want my fish."

"She's not going to get you fish, you know. She'll more than likely get you the chicken salad sandwich I always get on Tuesdays from the deli down on the corner."

"You eat the same thing every Tuesday?"

"And Wednesday and Thursday and Friday... do you see a pattern?"

"I think you and your Ho-Hos need to branch out more."

"And eat trout?"

"Maybe even bear."

"Yeah, uh-uh, I'm thinking 'no' on the bear."

"You gotta live dangerously, Mozart; there are only so few days each year bear is in season, you know."

"When exactly is bear season?"

"How the hell should I know? You're the one who reads *Field and Stream*, for chrissake."

"This conversation is going nowhere fast."

"It's not my fault you're a conversation killer."

"Is that in any way, shape, or form like a serial killer?"

Aaron grinned. "A little, only with slightly less body parts in your freezer."

"That's good, because then there would be no room for the bear." "Exactly."

Present day

"AARON!"

"What?"

"I'm out of film."

"Sucks to be you."

"Get me some more!"

"Hold on, I'm busy."

"Flip, I didn't get you that potter's wheel so you could fuck around on it when I need you," Jake whined.

"Flip? I thought his name was Aaron," said the guy waiting very patiently for Aaron to get up from his wheel and bring Jake more film.

"It is Aaron; I just call him Flip," Jake answered.

"Why?"

"Because he always flips me off when he should be kneeling before me waiting to do my bidding," Jake replied at the same time Aaron answered, "Because I flip his pompous ass off when he's being obnoxious and whiny."

"Oh, okay then...." The guy trailed off in confusion.

"Aaron, come on," Jake said, "could you at least *pretend* that you work for me and that I have actual control over your actions in said work environment?"

"I *could* do that, but it would throw our whole relationship off balance: you giving orders, me actually listening? Just doesn't work, Jacob."

"One day you'll actually want to humor me."

"I'll be looking forward to it, babe."

Jake scowled as he walked over to a nearby table to change out the film in his camera. "I'm going to take your wheel away from you one day, young man."

"No, you won't," came Alyson's voice from the open door. "That wheel's here to stay, along with the dink attached to it."

"Love you, too, Alyson," Aaron sang out. Then, "Milo! My man! Come on over here and get dirty with Uncle Flip."

Alyson's son, Milo, raced by her legs yelling, "Unc Fip! I wan sum mud!"

"Aaron, don't you dare get him dirty. That's the first time he's worn that outfit," Alyson hollered as she walked in the room.

"He's a little boy. He's supposed to get dirty."

"Yes, well, not when he's on the way to meet Grandma, who's the person who got him the outfit."

"Aw, Grammy Schmammy. We're men, and we do manly things and get full of manly dirt, don't we, Milo?" Aaron asked, wiping off his hands and grabbing Milo up to set him on his lap.

"Yes, you're very manly," Jake said, "what with all the pretty pots you're making over there. You're the manliest of the manly."

Aaron whispered something in Milo's ear who then yelled, "Unc Dake, you stink like farts!" before bursting into laughter.

Alyson tried not to laugh as she admonished, "Milo!

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That's not nice. You shouldn't tell people they stink, and you should *never* listen to what your Uncle Flip tells you."

"Always say no to Uncle Flip." Jake grinned.

"Just like you do, huh?" Alyson muttered under her breath.

"I say no to him," Jake answered back in a whisper.

"So that's why you're over here putting film in your camera and he's over there getting my son into trouble at his *very* expensive potter's wheel, then?"

Jake tried to scowl at Alyson, but his cheeks burst into flame, completely ruining the effect. Alyson just smiled and leaned over to kiss him on the temple. "You two will be so cute when you finally figure it out."

"Figure what out?" Jake asked in a huff.

"I have no idea!" Alyson said happily.

CHAPTER ONE

EVER since Aaron had walked into Jake's apartment on a Tuesday in July, his world had been turned upside down and inside out. Aaron breezed in and took over.

Everything.

His space.

His things.

His peace of mind.

His life.

The next day, when the first thing Jake did upon walking into his studio was trip over Aaron's sneakers because Aaron liked to "let my feet air and my toes roam free during the day," Jake knew he was in for it. Gradually, day by day, more of Aaron snuck into Jake's life, from changing his music, to a discarded T-shirt that mystified Jake since Aaron would have had to walk home topless, to a fridge full of weird British food concoctions and a cupboard full of tea.

Jake had no idea how it happened, but in a span of a few weeks, Aaron had become his best friend as well as the person he most wanted to impress and please, which was an odd concept for him since he had never given a fucker's fuck before about what anyone thought or felt. But here was an obnoxious little Muppet who was *always* in the way, *always*

loud, *always* opinionated, and *always* annoying; and yet Jake cared what he thought.

A lot.

It was fucking irritating and more than a little troubling. Troubling simply because if he were to choose a person whose opinion he'd value, it certainly wouldn't be a person who sang "I'm too Sexy" at the top of his lungs whenever Jake tried to photograph him or ate bananas with a knife and fork after making Jake peel them for him because they "taste yummy but feel icky and naughty" or laughed at the commercials for M&Ms.

So before Jake knew it, he had a stereo filled with CDs that weren't his, a closet missing half his shirts because Aaron decided they looked better on him, and a potter's wheel and kiln in the corner of his studio that got the most light. All because the thought of Aaron traipsing across his fucking dump of a neighborhood in the middle of the night to work on his pots because Jake kept him too busy during the day sent a stab of fear and worry through his gut so intense that only the purchase of said wheel and kiln could alleviate it. Alyson had been the first to see it, even before Aaron, and all she had done was stare at it, then at Jake, and back and forth until Jake had finally asked, "What?" in exasperation.

"How much did all of that cost?"

"Does it really matter? It's not your money, now is it?"

"No, but I was just wondering why you'd spend this amount of money on someone who's an employee. Allegedly," she added with a smirk.

"Do you know where he lives? And he's skipping around like Pollyanna in the middle of the night to go make ashtrays and kitty statues, or whatever the fuck he makes. He's going to get mugged or killed, for chrissake!"

Alyson just smiled. Jake fumed.

At least he fumed until Aaron showed up and saw the wheel and kiln and started yelling and jumping around like an idiot.

Then Jake just smiled.

He smiled even more, although he *tried* his damnedest to scowl at Aaron's stupidity, when he insisted on calling the wheel Wilbur and the kiln Charlotte.

"For the love of god, why must you give them names?"

"Why wouldn't I give them names?"

"Because they're a wheel and a kiln, not a trout and a bear."

"Why would I have a trout and a bear? Honestly, Jacob, you're ridiculous," Aaron answered happily as he fiddled with the settings on the kiln—no, correct that, on *Charlotte*.

"Why wouldn't you have a trout and a bear? You have a wheel named Wilbur and a kiln named Charlotte."

"Exactly."

"What does that even mean?" Jake asked in frustration.

"Exactly is a word, first of all," Aaron stated as Alyson grinned and Jake rolled his eyes. "It means 'precisely', often used to emphasize a point."

"I find it's a word often used to emphasize your psychosis."

Aaron shrugged and smiled.

Alyson stepped in and asked, "I take it you like them?"

At her question, Jake suddenly uncrossed the arms he had crossed while trying to decipher the intricacies of Aaronspeak to push his hands into his back pockets and ask, with an uncharacteristic insecurity, "Do you? Like them, I mean... Wilbur and Charlotte?"

Aaron stopped toying with the kiln and looked at Jake and answered with an uncharacteristic seriousness. "I love them. They're the best gifts I've ever gotten. Ever."

"Yeah?" Jake asked again as he pulled his right hand out of his back pocket and ran it through his hair.

"Yeah," Aaron said, walking over to Jake and hugging him tight. At first Jake stood there rigidly, his left hand still in his back pocket and his right tangled up in his hair, until he realized Aaron wasn't letting go anytime soon. He gave up and awkwardly wrapped his arms around Aaron briefly as he patted his back, then let go.

Aaron had teased him about hugging like a dude. "Awwww, we were having a moment here, and then you do the awkward guy-hug; you totally ruined the love-fest. Now, what could have been a Barbra Streisand 'misty water-colored memory' is just an unremarkable dude moment."

Aaron had laughed and gone stumbling after Alyson to get some "love from the willing," leaving Jake standing with his arms hanging at his sides.

Although Aaron had declared it an "unremarkable dude moment," Jake remembered it down to the minute. Even now, nearly five years later, if anyone asked him when he had first touched Aaron, he could say with certainty, "10:37 Monday morning, August 22, 2001."

Exactly.

SIX months later, Aaron came to work over three hours late. Jake was proud that he only called Aaron's place six times and Alyson three times during those three hours. When the door opened, he was ready to chew Aaron a new one but was instead tackled to the ground by a giant pile of mud and stink.

"Isn't he adorable?" Aaron asked.

"He fucking smells," Jake whined, trying to push an overly large, overly shaggy, overly slobbery dog off his chest.

"That's because I found him eating out of the Dumpster in the alley next to my apartment," Aaron said cheerily, like it was a *good* thing.

"Get him off me!"

"Come here, Harold... come on, boy... come on, Harry!" Aaron hollered as he patted his thighs and whistled.

The dog licked Jake's face one last time before bounding over to Aaron at the sound of his voice.

"That's a goooood boy! That's a good Harold! Aren't you the best boy there is?" Aaron cooed, letting the dog slobber all over him as he scratched him behind the ears.

"Harold? You named him Harold? What is it with you and naming shit?"

"Yes, Harold, Harry for short, and why *shouldn't* I name a dog?"

"We're not getting into this again—"

"It's not like he's a trout or a bear. He's a *dog*, Jacob. Dogs have names. It's the law of the universe: give thy dog a

name and it shall be good, or something like that."

"Okay, fine, whatever, but he's not your dog and he probably already has a name."

"What am I supposed to do? Ask him what it is? Has a dog ever talked to you, Moz? In actual people-talk? In English? Because if one has, you need to up your meds."

Jake huffed, crossed his arms and glared, which was all summarily ignored by Aaron, so Jake said instead, "I'm just saying don't get too attached to him. He probably has an owner, and you'll have to give him back, and then you'll be sad and mopey, which is annoying and irritating for me."

"Yes, and you're *never* annoyed or irritated, so those will be two new emotions for me to experience. I can hardly wait!"

Jake frowned and turned to walk away while mumbling, "I just don't want you to be sad."

Even though it was said under his breath, Aaron heard him and sprang up from the crouch he'd been in while playing with Harold to run over and hug Jake from behind. "Thanks... ya big girl," Aaron whispered, and he was gone.

Back to play with Harold.

Harry for short.

Jake stood still for a second before rubbing his neck and shaking himself out of his stillness. He walked over to his desk where he said in a louder, firmer voice, "Well, if that smelly-ass thing is going to spend another minute in here, you better wash it."

"He's not an it! He's a Harold!" Aaron said indignantly.

"Well, go wash Harold then. Harold fucking reeks."

"Come on, Harry." Aaron whistled, walking toward

Jake's bathroom.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"Washing him, you jackass. You know, that thing you told me to do about five seconds ago."

"Not in my bathroom!"

"Where, then? In the portable tub I carry around with me in my pocket in case of stinky Harry emergencies?"

"No. But not in my tub!" Jake whined some more.

"You're so cute when you think I'm going to listen to you," Aaron said as he pushed Harold through the bathroom door.

"I don't want fucking Dumpster dog hair in my tub!"

"It's only your studio bathroom; it's not like you actually bathe in this one. And besides, I'll clean the tub when I'm done. It's this magical concept that works wonders for keeping things shiny and bright."

"Bite me," Jake muttered from his desk.

"I'll have to be paid more for that!" Aaron yelled from inside the bathroom.

"Dammit! Are you fucking Spider-Man with the hearing everything I say shit?" Jake growled.

"Ew! No! Spider-Man's outfit? So not cute!"

"Name one superhero that does have a cute outfit."

"Wonder Woman!"

Jake grinned and shook his head.

"Are you grinning out there?" Aaron hollered, "'Cos I can hear you grinning, too, I'll have you know."

"Wow! Kind of like how I can hear you pout," Jake

answered.

There was a brief moment of silence before Aaron responded, "Did you hear that, too, cunt?"

"Yep, you're flipping me off again, aren't you?"

Jake chuckled when he heard a quiet "dammit!" come from the bathroom.

Later that day, when Harold was blessedly clean and non-smelly, Jake took his picture so Aaron could make Found posters. Jake insisted on printing his number on the posters so if anyone actually called about the damn dog, he could deal with them instead of Aaron, the man who had just found a piece of blue ribbon and tied it in a bow around Harold's neck. Yep, right decision. Definitely *hi*s number on the posters.

Every day for a week, Aaron showed up with a hopeful look on his face when he asked, "Anybody call?" And every day Jake was happy to report, "Nope, not a soul."

He never told Aaron that the owner had called on the third day and hung up five minutes later with his next month's rent paid in full in exchange for Harold.

Jake considered it a fair exchange when he saw the look on Aaron's face on the day he bought a dog bed to put in the corner of the studio for Harold and said, "I think you can stop worrying now, I'm pretty sure the damn dog is yours."

Definitely a fair exchange.

AROUND the third month was when the first of the boyfriends showed up.

Boyfriend Number One: Michael.

Michael was beautiful and tall and funny and brilliant.

Michael was a doctor.

Michael would come over on his breaks or shift changes to see Aaron because he "missed his boy."

Michael worshiped the ground Aaron walked on.

Michael was perfect in every possible way.

Jake hated him.

The only redeeming quality he possessed—or the only one Jake was willing to concede him—was the fact that he obviously adored Aaron, but then he ruined that by making Aaron adore him in return.

Jake hated him.

He hated him until Aaron dumped him because he said he was "too perfect" and that the combination of Michael's perfectness and his own imperfect strangeness would cause some sort of tear in the time-space continuum and would end the world.

After that, Jake liked Michael.

Very much.

He wasn't such a bad guy really, quite nice actually.

Then came Boyfriend Number Two: Nate.

Nate was a surfer dude who had somehow ended up in New York. Jake asked him how he wound up there, but suspected Nate was sufficiently enough stoned that his answer of "Man... I have *no* fucking idea" was the best he could muster.

Jake was duly unimpressed.

He was even more unimpressed when Aaron started showing up late for work on a daily basis reeking of pot and sex with eyes at half-mast.

He told Aaron that Nate was toxic, and Aaron got predictably pissed at him.

It was not a pleasant month.

Every day that Aaron came to work and hardly spoke more than two words to him made Jake sicker and sicker. When he didn't show up at all for three days, Jake stopped all pretense of carrying on with his life to sit by his phone day and night, willing Aaron to call and say he was sorry or that he was coming back to work.

Or just to say something, anything at all.

On the fourth day without Aaron, exhausted from sleepless nights and too much worrying, Jake fell asleep on the couch in his studio with the phone clenched in his hand. He only awoke when he felt a warm body pressed next to his and the weight of a curly brown head on his shoulder.

"You were right about him, Moz. He's bad news. I'm sorry," the head sighed.

Jake nodded to indicate he had heard him before his eyes slid shut again, content now and able to sleep the whole night through.

Neither one mentioned Nate again, and he was soon forgotten, but Jake *always* remembered that Aaron came back.

Boyfriend Number Three: Chris

Chris was as American as apple pie.

And as boring.

Chris ran a bookstore and was as predictably dull as one would imagine a bookseller to be.

Jake imagined Aaron needed a dose of boredom to alleviate the chaos left behind in the wake of Nate. He knew poor Chris wouldn't last very long.

Which still didn't make Jake like him, not one little bit.

The Era of Chris was short-lived and completely unremarkable.

Boyfriend Number Four: Mikos

Mikos was Greek.

And looked like a god.

Paired with Aaron, they were a sight to behold. If Jake hadn't disliked the asshole so much, he would have insisted they pose together.

That, of course, did not happen.

Mikos had millions, which he never hesitated to spend on whatever Aaron wanted.

Or thought he wanted.

Or might think he'd want in the future.

Aaron said Mikos's father was one of those Greek tycoons who made money just by being Greek. Jake told him Mikos was probably a drug dealer. Aaron laughed and asked for a month off so Mikos could sail him around the world.

Jake said no, then asked who the fuck did he think he was, a pirate? Aaron laughed again and then asked for two weeks off instead. Jake didn't have an excuse for two weeks so he had to let him go.

Jake had forgotten how long fourteen days could be.

Mikos lasted a long time.

But suddenly, he was gone.

No explanation from Aaron as to what happened or where he went.

Jake didn't care enough to ask; he just knew he was gone.

After Mikos came Jamie, then Connor, then Riley, then Lawrence... who Jake called Larry in an effort to annoy and irritate to which Aaron replied, "Awww, Larry... that's cute!" Jake stopped calling him Larry.

There were also Ben, John, and Paul.

Jake asked if Ringo was far behind.

Aaron assured him if there was a Ringo out there to be had, he'd find him just to please Jake. He said for him he'd fuck a Ringo. Jake told him to eat shit, which, as it always did, only made Aaron laugh.

So there they were, a string of boyfriends Aaron left behind. A string consisting of periods of time, anywhere from one month to seven or eight, that Jake growled and grumbled through. Periods of time with which he measured his life. The Month of Riley, the Stage of Connor, the Phase of Paul. All strangely upsetting to his equilibrium, all throwing him slightly off-balance until they ended and it was just him and Aaron again.

Until another period began.

Then it was back to the confusion. And the annoyance. And the displeasure that always simmered beneath the surface.

Jake complained to Alyson about each and every one.

Sometimes he pouted and complained. Sometimes, such as in the period of Nate, he raged and roared. Alyson sat and listened to Jake's endless list of character flaws and defects that he assigned to each of them. The countless, and baseless, reasons they should hit the road and never, ever come near Aaron again. Every time, Alyson would ask him why he had any say whatsoever in whom Aaron dated.

She asked him why it mattered to him.

Why it bothered him so much.

Why he cared.

That always shut him up because he *didn't* have any say in whom Aaron dated.

And he didn't know why it mattered to him.

And he refused to think about why it bothered him.

Or why he cared.

CHAPTER TWO

EVEN though Jake appeared calmer and saner than Aaron, in actuality he was just as insane; and Aaron knew it. Right from the beginning. Right from the moment Jake looked at him for all of two seconds and said, "That one. I want that one."

Aaron had gone into the whole situation with a surprisingly light heart. He'd had no idea why a weirdo photographer who never even bothered to interview him, much less ask him if he knew anything at all about photography or how to be an assistant, would trust him enough to ask him into his home. He simply had a good feeling about it and went with it like he did everything else in his life. Usually his penchant for never thinking things through and trusting his gut landed him in a shite-load of trouble, but this thing with Jake, this job, this friendship, so far had not led him astray. It was one of the few things in Aaron's life that he had managed not to fuck up by being random and careless.

Because he found that, with Jake, he could be random and arbitrary, but never careless.

Never careless.

He found Jake to be rather fragile beneath his gruff and

highly irritating exterior. He was brilliant and amazing at what he did. He was strong and bold in his studio, in his world; but take him out of that world and he was uncertain, almost shy. Aaron could never understand how someone could be so in control of their world, their own little environment, but be so out of control in the bigger world.

Jake very rarely left his apartment, and when he did, he never ventured far. Sometimes Aaron would be able to cajole him into a walk in the park with Harold, sometimes even a lunch or dinner out. It was like Jake was afraid he'd get lost and never be able to find his way back. Whenever they were out walking anywhere, he was constantly looking at the landmarks surrounding them, taking them in like his own version of breadcrumbs that would show him the way back. Aaron would always grin at him, hook his arm through Jake's and say, "No worries, Moz, I know the way home." But still Jake would usually leave only if he knew his destination or had a purpose for leaving.

Or if Aaron was with him.

Otherwise he was content to stay in his studio. Aaron could never figure out how someone could be so content just to stay in one place, to have such a small world. He had always craved being somewhere else, because somewhere else had to be better than the somewhere he was at. He wanted to see every place in the world and devour everything in those places. Swallow them whole. He realized his own restlessness and was completely aware of it; he just didn't know where it came from exactly or why it had come into being at all. He always figured his restlessness would collide and crash into Jake's contentment with tragic results. Instead, as Jake's studio and apartment became more of a

home than any place he'd called that word previously, he became less and less restless. He didn't quite know why that was, either. He just knew that, for some reason, curling up into a ball in one of Jake's window seats and falling asleep with his face pressed against the window as rain fell down in streaks along it was often more appealing to him than the idea of flying to far-off places that were wild and beautiful and more than a little bit like a dream.

He also found out that everything Alyson had told him about Jake was true.

Jake *did* make odd requests, but Aaron sometimes suspected he only did it to test him, to see if he could trust him, to see if he cared enough to actually do what he was asked. He suspected that Jake was so scared of people not caring that he invented crazy and unusual requests or missions simply to reassure himself that there was at least one person in this great big lonely city who cared whether he had Ho-Hos from the right corner market or had dish soap that didn't smell too "dish soapy."

Jake *did* try to run everything in his life, but again, Aaron suspected it was because Jake found everything outside of his world so massive and unrestrained that he needed some sort of way to manage the things and the people inside his universe.

Jake *did* get in a strop over the littlest things, but all Aaron ever needed to do was look at him and say "stop it," and he would. Simple as that. Alyson stared at him in amazement the first time he did it and later told him that it took her almost a year to figure out to just tell him to stop.

Aaron figured it out in three days.

Jake did, in fact, call him in the middle of the night. Sometimes at three, sometimes at four, sometimes at midnight. Aaron was never sure when it would be; there was no set schedule in that regard, but he was always sure Jake would. He'd maybe do it once every week or two or sometimes every night for a week straight. Whenever Aaron would pick up the phone and grunt, since he was fairly incapable of speaking when woken from a deep sleep—much to Jake's amusement since he insisted that Aaron was incapable of not speaking during his waking hours—Jake would seem confused, as if he wasn't quite sure why he had called in the first place. The first few times it happened, Aaron had thought Jake might have been drunk or high and had teased him mercilessly about it; but after getting to know Jake better. Aaron knew he wasn't drunk and would never be high, so it was something else altogether. As time went on and the calls coincided with Jake's foul moods, his odd-request moods, Aaron came to realize he only really needed to do one thing. Whenever the phone rang and he grunted his version of hello, Jake would say hello in a small quiet voice, and Aaron would simply say, "I'm still here."

And Jake would say, "Okay."

And Aaron would ask, "Can you sleep now?"

And Jake would reply, "Yes, now I can."

And then the phone would click, and Aaron would fall back to sleep again. Sometimes he wasn't even sure the next morning if Jake had really called or if it had been a dream, sometimes the only indication was the phone still clenched in his hand, because he had been too tired to place it back on its receiver after Jake clicked off. Instead of being irritated

with those late-night calls, Aaron came to expect them, and although they would wake him from sleep, they never caused him restless nights. In fact, he sometimes wondered if maybe he didn't need the reassurance as much as Jake did—that Jake calling to make sure he was still there actually made Aaron be there. He sometimes worried that if Jake stopped calling to make sure he was somewhere out there, maybe he would cease to be there entirely.

Maybe he'd just disappear.

Without a trace.

Gone in the night like he had never been there at all.

So he welcomed the calls and made sure to tell Jake he was still there, because by doing so, Aaron reassured himself he was still there as well.

THEIR working relationship was another thing that was alternately wonderful and strange.

At all of Aaron's other jobs, of which there had been many, he was expected to keep his mouth shut, or at least not call his boss a raging twat. He was expected to be on time. Be prudent and wise. Be dependable and reliable.

Be boring and dull.

Jake never minded when he was called a twat because he'd turn right around and call Aaron a fucker. He never minded that Aaron came in at nine-ish... or maybe ten-ish... or perhaps noon-ish. He didn't mind that Aaron would sometimes be walking across the studio and stop dead in his tracks because he completely forgot what he was doing or

why he was even walking anywhere at all.

Jake knew things about him, too, things no one else—especially a boss—had ever bothered to know about him before.

Jake knew he could talk non-stop but could also sit silently and listen for as long as he was needed. Everyone else always assumed he never listened to anything that anyone other than himself had to say.

Jake knew he was deathly afraid of elevators, and if it was one of those days he didn't feel like climbing up the endless number of stairs to Jake's apartment, Aaron knew all he had to do was buzz him, and Jake would come down in the elevator to ride up with him.

Jake knew he made up stories for every piece he sculpted, every pot he spun, and would ask him to tell them to him as he sat cross-legged on the floor and cleaned his cameras.

Jake knew about his weird relationship with bananas, and Aaron would only need to call out his name from the kitchen and Jake would put down whatever it was he was working on to come in and peel a banana for him.

Jake knew he had loved Harold from the start and had somehow gotten him for Aaron. Aaron knew who Harold had belonged to; he had seen the man yelling at the dog on the sidewalk outside his building. So when the opportunity presented itself, Aaron went ahead and *accidentally* lost the collar that was around Harold's neck before bringing him over to Jake's. He worried every day for a week until the day a dog bed appeared and Jake told him the damn dog was his. Aaron didn't know how Jake had managed to procure

Harold for him; Aaron only knew that he had.

There were some things, however, that Jake did *not* know about Aaron.

Jake didn't know that sometimes, as he was pretending to work at his wheel, he was actually watching Jake work. He'd sit at his wheel, for amazingly long hours for one not used to sitting still for any length of time at all, to watch Jake taking pictures. Picture after picture as his clay spun round and round on his wheel, his pots wearing thin and collapsing in on themselves as he forgot to mold them and coax them into the form they were meant to possess because he was too busy watching the way Jake moved with a camera.

Jake didn't know that the reason Mikos disappeared was because he had insulted Jake and given Aaron an ultimatum. He told Aaron that Jake was a worthless, talentless hack who tried to control him by being bitchy and whiny. He said Aaron would have to quit his job and toss Jake to the curb. It was either Jake or him.

Mikos was out the door before he even had a chance to realize where he had gone so deathly wrong.

Jake didn't know Aaron wondered endlessly about where all the pictures Jake took of him went. At least once a month Jake would ask him to sit for him, but Aaron never saw the resulting pictures, nor did anyone else. He always wondered if maybe he just didn't know how to sit properly for Jake, if perhaps the pictures Jake took were so awful that he didn't want to show them to Aaron for fear of hurting his feelings. Aaron was sure there was something wrong with them. Why else would no one but Jake ever see them? Why

else would Jake try again and again, session after session, if it weren't in an effort to get Aaron to finally do it right?

Jake didn't know that Aaron hated everyone of Jake's "boyfriends" as well, if boyfriend is what you could call a one-night stand. He hated the look Jake got in his eyes when he decided on a particular model. Aaron was never quite sure when the fancy would strike, but he knew the look and hated it. Jake would go for long periods of time disregarding every single model who came in to sit for him, but then one would come in, and he'd get a gleam in his eye and decide to make that particular ass his Fuck du Jour. The only thing that kept Aaron from punching each of the Fucks in the face was that they stayed around for one night only, and usually not the entire night, either.

AARON used his key to open up Jake's front door and came crashing in, dropping bags all over the entry and leaving his shoes in two different spots as he kicked them off.

"Jacob! Jaaaaaaaay-coooooob! Jacob!"

"Bedroom," came the faint reply.

"Get your lazy arse out of bed, you twat. I'm here on time for a change even though I'm still tired and sleepy and would much rather be in bed, so be duly impressed and bask in my promptness, for god sake!"

Aaron wandered down the hallway leading to Jake's bedroom and popped his head in. "Up you go, wakey-wakey Jakey-bakey... and you're not alone... oops," Aaron mumbled when he walked in on Jake pushing his current Fuck du

Jour out of bed with his foot.

"No, wait!" Jake called as Aaron turned to leave. Both Aaron and the Fuck stopped and turned. "Not you, you still need to go," Jake said to the Fuck. "I'm talking to him," he added as he pointed at Aaron.

"Jesus Christ, Moz, I don't want to see your bits and pieces this early in the morning," Aaron grumbled.

"I've got boxers on, you idiot."

"Still, ew," Aaron said, tipping his head in the Fuck's direction.

"He's leaving," Jake reassured Aaron before turning to the Fuck and saying succinctly, "Leave."

The Fuck finished zipping up his pants and reached down to grab his socks as he walked out mumbling under his breath. When he walked past Aaron, identical brown eyes stared each other down frostily before Aaron smiled brightly and said cheerfully, "Bye-bye! Don't let the door hit you on the arse on the way out!"

Jake grinned when Aaron waited until the Fuck was out the door and no longer in sight to make a face at him, pulling up his hands like claws and hissing at him.

"Down, Fifi."

"Man, you have *got* to stop doing that!" Aaron said as he walked over to Jake's bed.

"Doing what?"

"Letting the Fucks stay until I get here. I don't wanna see the Fucks. The Fucks are evil."

"The Fucks are fun."

"So say you."

Suddenly Jake leaned forward and grabbed Aaron around the waist and dragged him into bed with him.

"Sonofabitch!" Aaron screeched, laughing and kicking at Jake.

"Aw, come on, Flip, gimme some love!" Jake grinned, trying to hold down a flailing Aaron.

Aaron started to yell and curse even louder when Jake turned him toward the other side of the bed. "Don't you dare throw me on the other side of this bed, you tosser!"

"Why not? Huh?" Jake asked as he pulled at Aaron's waist and tried to flop him over to the other side.

"Why not? I'll tell you why not, you assfuck," Aaron hollered, digging his heels into the bed to try to stop Jake's momentum. "I don't want to land in Fuck spooge!"

Jake was laughing so hard he lost his grip on Aaron, who took advantage of the situation to roll off him and stay on his side of the bed. Jake remained lying on his back, laughing until his sides ached and he could barely breathe. Once he managed to calm down, he flopped onto his side and wrapped his right arm around a pouting Aaron, who was still beside him on a precariously small piece of mattress. Jake scooted back and pulled Aaron with him.

"You're gonna fall off, Flip."

"Yes, well, the floor is less likely to be contaminated."

"Ah, there's where you're wrong. My floor is quite the slut: you have no idea where it's been."

"Jaaaaake!" Aaron whined.

"What?"

"Quit being so fucking gross. I don't want to hear shit

like that."

"You don't want to hear about my slutty floor?"

"No," Aaron answered in a near pout as he turned to face Jake and ineffectively pushed at his chest with his hand. "And I don't want to hear about your slutty Fucks either."

Jake saw the look on Aaron's face and stopped teasing instantly. "No, I don't either," he whispered into Aaron's hair, pulling him closer.

Aaron pressed his face into the curve where Jake's neck met his shoulder and closed his eyes. Jake followed suit when he felt Aaron's breath brush across his skin. They lay there in silence for a while before Aaron suddenly inhaled deeply and let out a near sigh.

"What?" Jake asked quietly.

"I don't like it when you don't smell like you," was the equally quiet reply.

Jake's hands clenched into fists briefly before they curved back around Aaron, one coming to rest flat against his back, the other winding tightly in his curls. "It won't happen again, Flip. I promise."

"Okay," Aaron muttered.

Jake shivered when he felt Aaron's eyelashes brush against his skin as he closed his eyes again. "Go to sleep," Jake whispered. "It's too early in the morning, I think."

Aaron didn't respond other than to snuffle slightly as he settled down into sleep, his fingers curled against Jake's chest.

CHAPTER THREE

FOR all they knew of each other and all they didn't know, there were still a few truths that existed between them that both took for granted because they just were. There was never an explanation, never a mention of them. They were the things that happened nearly every day between them that never faltered or changed.

Almost daily, Aaron would get so lost in his work, in his wheel or sculpture or kiln, that he wouldn't notice Jake stopping his own work to click his camera in his direction.

Almost daily, Jake would take a break during which he'd lie on his back near Aaron's feet, letting the whirl of his wheel hum him to sleep.

Almost daily, Aaron would move his left foot ever so slightly so it would rest against Jake's shoulder as he slept a half hour away while Aaron let the clay spin and form in his hands.

Almost daily, Jake would ask Aaron a random and completely unnecessary question simply to hear him speak.

They had their schedule and their routine, which was so ingrained in them that they never even noticed they had one until Alyson would make fun of them or point out what they were doing. Jake would cuss her out, and Aaron would laugh and try to break up the moment by turning to Milo to swing him about by his hands, his childish giggles obliterating the moment when things got too close to truth.

"I KNOW you hate them, but do you ever stop to look at what the Fucks all look like?" Alyson asked as she and Aaron went on a shopping trip to fill Jake's nearly empty fridge. They had left Milo behind to hopefully drive Jake insane.

"Why would I bother looking at them? They're always gone before I have a chance."

"Except the ones who aren't, the ones that make you pick up the phone and bitch me out like I'm supposed to do something about it."

"You should be able to, you know."

"Should be able to do what?"

"Talk some sense into him."

"Sense and Jake do not go hand in hand. Besides, what makes you think I'd have any influence over him?"

"Because you've known him longer. You know how he is."

"So do you. And that is bullshit about me knowing him better just because I've been cursed with knowing him the longest. You knew more about him in a month than I did the entire three years I worked for him."

"But you're Alyson."

"Meaning?"

"He'd listen to you."

"That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

"Hello! Look who you're talking to," Aaron said emphatically as he waved his hands in front of her face. "It's me, Aaron, the dumbest things say-er!"

"Say-er isn't a word."

"See! Dumb! I just proved my point!"

"So what am I supposed to do? Go, 'Hey Jake, would you mind not fucking the boys so Aaron isn't thrown into a tizzy?' Because I'm sure that would work and make everything all right."

"But you could talk to him and explain how these onenight stands aren't doing him any good and they never will. He's never going to find what he's looking for if he keeps up with the Fucks. They don't know him; they don't care about him; all they know is that people in this city know his name and his pictures are in magazines and galleries. They're fucking groupies... literally, *fucking* groupies. They're just going to drag him down. He's already lonely enough. He needs someone who will be there in the middle of the night, someone who will make him get out of his little self-imposed prison. He needs someone to look after him."

"Like you do."

"Exactly, he needs...."

"You."

"Yes—no! I mean, yes, he does, but not like that. We're just friends, and he needs me as a friend. A friend. What he needs is someone to take care of him as more than a friend. He needs someone that will love him because he's amazing and strange and beautiful, because he's... Jake, not because

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they like the sound of their name said after his. He doesn't need hangers-on, he needs something true, something real."

Alyson stared at Aaron's reddening face as he stuttered out his ramblings, and when he was finished, said, "You are infuriating, Aaron."

"Why? What did I do?"

"Everything. You do everything and you are everything to him, and both of you know it, but neither of you will see it. You're both so fucking stupid and infuriating that I want to stab the two of you in the head sometimes. You're absolutely fucking perfect for each other because you're the only person I know that could possibly tolerate him for more than a fifteen-minute interval of time, and he's the only one that understands everything that comes out of your mouth; he's the only one that understands and speaks fluent Aaron, yet neither one of you will see it!"

Aaron looked completely flabbergasted. "We're not like that! Jake doesn't think of me as anything more than a friend. I mean, why would he have all his Fucks if he wanted to be with me?"

"He has his Fucks to try to make you jealous, you stupid shit. To counteract all your ridiculous boyfriends that you parade around in front of him—you're lucky you don't see more of his Fucks than you do."

"You're seeing things, Aly, or you're seeing what you want to see."

"Fine, you know what I see? I see a man who has onenight stands so randomly as to be laughable until you see what they look like. Have you not noticed what they *all* look like?"

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"I'm not checking them out; they're not my type."

"Well, I should hope not or you'd be completely narcissistic!"

"The fuck?"

"They all look. Like. You. Every single one of those assholes that you despise so much looks exactly like you. They're carbon copies of one another... tall, lean, dark curly hair, brown eyes, big smile. They're all you. Why do you think they're so random? Why do you think you can never figure out when he's going to fuck one? Because he doesn't either—not until he sees what they look like. He's trying to get as close to you as he can, and the reason none of them stay around longer than a night is because that's all it takes him to realize they're a poor substitute for you. But he keeps trying to find an acceptable substitute, because the real thing is too fucking dense to figure it out."

Aaron looked at Alyson with what could only be fear in his eyes. He shook his head violently. "No. No way. If he really felt that way about me... if he... if he loved me, I wouldn't... wouldn't know what to do. Everything would be thrown out of whack. I wouldn't know him anymore... I mean, I wouldn't know what was going on in his head, and I've *always* known that. I don't want to not know what he's thinking. I'd lose him," he said in a panic.

Alyson reached out to grab hold of one of his wrists as he paced back and forth in front of her. "You'll lose him eventually if you don't figure this out; and I'm telling the same thing to him. You'll lose each other, and then where will you be? Don't use that as a cop-out, Aaron, because you know damn well if you ever lost him, he'd find his way back

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to you, but if you both lose your way, then you're just lost."

Aaron pulled his wrist out of Alyson's grip and started walking down the sidewalk again. "I've got to go get Jake's food; it's a long list and will take bloody forever. You don't want him locking Milo in a closet before we get back, do you?"

Alyson started following him, reaching out with her hands as if to strangle him before shouting "Aaahhh!" and running her hands through her hair instead.

ONCE Jake realized Aaron knew exactly what to say to him when he called in the middle of the night, he came to depend on it, and when he wasn't there to say the things that needed to be said, when he wasn't there, Jake would get out of bed and go in search of him. He'd throw a jacket over his pajama pants and slip his feet into his shoes and walk toward Aaron until he spotted a cab that would take him there faster.

Aaron had given him a set of keys to his place, which Jake kept on his keychain next to his own house keys. Once the taxi dropped him off in front of Aaron's building, he'd look up to the sixth floor and the windows on the right to see if there were any lights on. If there were, he'd sit on the curb and press the button for Aaron on his cell phone and wait until he answered. If he answered, he'd turn right around and start walking back toward his place in search of a cab that would take him back home. If he didn't answer, Jake would let himself in with his key, kick off his shoes, drop his jacket in a pile on the floor, and crawl under the covers of

Aaron's bed.

Even if Aaron wasn't there to tell him so, Jake would know Aaron had been there, and it would only be a matter of time before he was back there again.

So Jake would wait.

Until Aaron was back again.

THE door slammed open as Aaron was pushed through it by the most recent of his phases, Matt. He stumbled backward until his back slammed against the wall as Matt barreled into him. It was all tangled limbs and heated kisses from Matt, and Aaron was trying to focus, trying to bring himself to participate wholeheartedly, when the voice that was the source of all his distraction called sleepily from the corner of the room.

"Flip?"

Aaron instantly pulled his lips away from Matt, who sighed and dropped his forehead against the wall near Aaron's shoulder. "Yeah, it's me. I'm home," he called back.

"You weren't before."

"I am now."

Aaron pushed Matt off of him and wiped his mouth before asking him, "Can we do this tomorrow?"

"This is fucked up. You know that, don't you?" Matt asked.

"I'm sorry, but I wasn't home when he called; he likes me to be home when he calls." "It sounds like he likes to keep you on a short leash."

"He needs me."

"I need you."

"Tomorrow, I promise."

Matt sighed again and rubbed his eyes, "You know what, babe? You're going to have to decide what this really is between us sooner or later. I know he's your boss and your best friend, but I'm your boyfriend, Aaron. Me. Not him. I understand that he's an important part of your life, but you're going to have to realize sometime that he's not always supposed to be first. There are other people in your orbit."

Aaron smiled up at Matt and, in an effort to try and lighten the situation, asked, "So I have an orbit, huh? Is this your subtle way of telling me I'm from outer space?"

Matt cracked a slight grin as he leaned in to kiss Aaron on the cheek. "No, it's my not-so-subtle way of telling you you're the fucking sun," he whispered before pulling away and walking through the doorway.

"Tomorrow. Promise."

"Tomorrow," Matt agreed as he quietly shut the door behind him.

Aaron pushed away from the wall and ran his hands through his hair. He was so stupid. Why was he tossing Matt out when what he should really be doing is putting Jake in a cab to take him back home? Matt was right; he was his boyfriend for chrissake. *He* should still be here.

"Flip?"

"Coming." Aaron sighed as he toed off his shoes and started shedding clothes on his way over to his bed. He grabbed a T-shirt and pajama bottoms to sleep in before slipping into bed behind Jake, who reached back and pulled Aaron's arm around his waist. Aaron muttered "lift," and Jake lifted his head so Aaron could snake his other arm under it and the pillow, bending his elbow so he could bring his hand up and rest it against Jake's chest. Their breathing soon synchronized, and Aaron thought Jake had fallen asleep, so he was slightly startled when Jake's whispered question pierced through the quiet darkness.

"Why have you been so far away the last couple of weeks?"

"I've been right here."

"Your body has, but your mind is a million miles away, which it usually is because you're crazy and all that." Jake grunted faintly when Aaron pulled his hair. "But this is different."

"I guess I've just been thinking."

"Dangerous undertaking, Flip."

Another hair tug.

"Alyson said some things to me that day we went grocery shopping for you, and I haven't been able to get them out of my mind."

"What did she say to you? You know I could hire her again just so I could fire her, if that would make you feel better."

"Awww," Aaron sighed, "you'd do that for me?"

Jake just laughed. "I'd like to say it would be just for you, but I think I'd enjoy it too."

"You're so mean to poor Aly."

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"Ah, she still loves me."

Aaron grew quiet. "That she does, Moz; she's always looking out for you."

"Just like you," Jake added in a whisper, wrapping his hand around Aaron's, which was resting at his waist.

"Just like me."

It was quiet for a few minutes as Aaron concentrated on Jake's smell as he pressed his face against the back of Jake's neck.

"Why are you so far away?" Jake asked.

"I don't know, Moz. I'd tell you if I could explain it myself."

"Well, come back soon, will you?"

Aaron squeezed his arms extra tight around Jake. "I'll try."

THEIR nighttime assignations didn't merely go one way. There were nights Aaron traveled the many blocks uptown to Jake's apartment to let himself in with his own set of keys so he could sit at his wheel, the light coming through the window his only illumination.

He never knew when the mood would strike him, but it would come over him in a powerful wave when it did, and the only rest he'd get would be after he found his way back to Jake's. He'd sit down at his wheel, trying to be as quiet as he could, so the mild humming from the turning of the wheel was the only sound to cut into the night. But no matter how quiet he tried to be, Jake always wandered into the studio to

find him. He'd never say a word to Aaron, not even a brief "hi"; he would just walk over to the window closest to Aaron, but not the one providing him his only light, and sit down on the ledge, pull his knees up to his chest, and simply watch him.

Watch as Aaron's hands moved over the malleable clay, smoothing it, forming it, guiding it into what it was meant to he.

Jake would watch until his eyes drifted shut and he'd fall into that world of half-sleep, oblivious yet aware, asleep but not. He swore he could still hear the humming of the wheel and the movement of Aaron's hands over the clay even though he knew the last part was impossible. He swore he wasn't asleep, but inevitably he would wake up the next morning tucked in on the couch in his empty studio, Aaron gone. The only evidence of him even being there was the light flashing on the kiln as it worked away to harden the clay into something stronger than what it started out as. Aaron would come back later in the morning and go about his business until he could pull his creation from the kiln and begin glazing it, usually in the most brilliant and beautiful shades of blue Jake had ever seen.

Every other pot or bowl Aaron made would leave the studio soon after it was properly glazed and fired, but not the nighttime ones. Those stayed on the shelf Jake had decided to build on a whim one day. It ran around the entire studio at just the right height so Aaron could reach up and place his pots and bowls on it.

One right after the other.

Blue as the sky.

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Blue as the sea.

Blue as twilight.

Blue as Jake's eyes.

Those were the ones that never left the studio.

Never would leave the studio.

Not as long as Jake had any say.

And not as long as Aaron continued stealing over in the night to make them.

As ALYSON let herself into Jake's apartment, all she could hear was the thump, thump, thump of the bass on a stereo turned up far too loud. She wandered through the living room to the door of the studio, the music getting clearer, more distinct, as the pounding of the bass rattled the pictures on the wall near the studio door. She opened the door and was assaulted with a blaring wave of Rolling Stones washing over her and nearly blowing her eardrums out.

Jake was busy photographing a man and woman in a most interesting position. Alyson cocked her head to the side and shrugged. Both of the models were fully clothed and not in a sexual position, per se, but the way they were positioned made it somehow more erotic than if they had been posed in a blatantly sexual way. She had never pretended to know exactly what Jake's photographs meant or what he was trying to do, she only knew that she liked them, and that was enough for her and Jake both.

Aaron was curved over a spinning pot, his long fingers bringing up its lip. He was almost writhing as he moved with

the pot, his back bent, the painfully thin cotton fabric of the T-shirt he wore showing every movement of his back muscles. His foot tapped a steady beat with the music, causing his entire leg to shake and jerk. He had what looked to be an even older and more worn T-shirt somehow tied around his head to keep his hair out of his face. She could almost feel the wave of energy coming off of him as he moved with the wheel and thought if Jake wanted to photograph blatant sex, all he had to do was turn to his right and snap a few of Aaron.

Neither one was paying the slightest bit of attention to the other, but Alyson was certain she could see a strand of nearly invisible light connecting them. She stared at them and thought that if she had a pair of those giant novelty scissors they used to cut red ribbons at the openings of new businesses, she could walk over and sever that connection with one snap of her shears and Jake and Aaron would crash to the floor like puppets shorn of their strings. Both would falter and fall without that rope of support holding them up. But instead of finding scissors to cut them apart, she chose to walk over to the stereo and shut off the Stones.

The second the music stopped and silence exploded through the studio like a bomb, both men stopped what they were doing to look around in flushed confusion. Jake stumbled as he changed positions and nearly dropped his camera. Aaron jerked so violently that his hands closed up and smashed the pot through his fingers. Twin sets of startled and somewhat glazed eyes turned toward her, one brown, one blue.

"The fuck, Aly?" Jake finally asked as he blinked a few times.

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"Yes, dear?"

"You scared the shit out of me, and I think you broke Flip's pot."

"Well, he'll make another one. Besides, I think I just spared you both from inevitable deafness in your very near future."

"We always have it that loud when we work," Aaron supplied helpfully from his corner.

"And I always smoke after meals; doesn't mean it's good for me, now does it?"

"No, but it's pretty fucking great, isn't it?" Aaron grinned. Jake laughed under his breath as he rearranged his models. "So," Aaron continued, "what brings you to the humble abode? A dying urge to annoy?"

"The urge is always there, but this time, that's not my sole purpose, although what I have to ask may annoy you anyway, which is surely just an extra bonus."

"I'm sure it'll annoy that one," Aaron said, jerking his elbow in Jake's direction as he tried to salvage his pot somehow, "but I'm too mellow to be—hey, Moz, move her arm down, otherwise she's a little teapot except tall and svelte and not short and stout, but you get me—annoyed by you."

Jake adjusted the woman's arm, muttering a "thanks" over his shoulder. Alyson just laughed and said, "What part of that conversation was directed at me exactly?"

"Ah," Aaron said absently as he fiddled with the clay, "most of the beginning words and all those fun ones at the end."

"Yeah, okay."

"He said I'll be annoyed by whatever you have to say, but he won't, because he's mellow, much like a pothead," Jake provided as he started to snap pictures again, stopping abruptly to raise his hand and say without turning around toward Aaron, "and don't even say what you were going to say, Flip."

"I wasn't going to say anything!" Aaron whined.

"You were going to say like a fucking Beavis, 'you said pothead', and then do that laugh that you *think* sounds like Butthead but what really sounds like you're in the throes of a stroke."

"I was not, you tosspot!" Aaron yelled at the back of Jake's head before turning to Alyson and mouthing "Yeah, I was" and grinning like an idiot.

"As much as I would love to continue this mentally stimulating conversation, I need to know if you two can watch Milo tonight. I know it's last minute, but our regular baby-sitter had something unexpected come up, and I'm fairly desperate."

"Well, yeah, you would be to ask us," Jake said.

"Why do we both have to watch him? I was thinking about how later I was going to think about having plans tonight."

Alyson sighed. "What in the hell does that mean?"

"It means he doesn't have plans yet, but he's seriously considering coming up with something later on today," Jake said.

"Thanks for the translation." Alyson saluted in Jake's

direction. "But to answer your question, oh Indecipherable One, I need you both to watch him because the two of you together are fairly close to one very nearly competent human being."

"She called us competent, Moz!"

"She said *very nearly* and that was *together*, not on our own."

"Still," Aaron said happily, "the word was in the same sentence as us so that works for me!"

"I need you there," Alyson said to Aaron, "to play with Milo and entertain him and make sure Jake doesn't tie him to a chair and forget about him because he finds him small and troublesome, and I need Jake there to make sure the two of you don't fall out of a window while you're playing or drink whatever blue shit you find under the kitchen sink."

"I do like to drink blue shit," Aaron agreed.

"And I do like to tie your tiny and problematic child to stable and immovable objects," Jake said.

"Fantastic," Alyson said in false cheer, "I'll come back to find Aaron dead on the floor clutching a bottle of Windex and Jake tied to the bathroom sink and Milo sticking forks in electrical outlets."

"Probably not, Aly," Aaron said. "I'm sure Milo will be calmly reading or playing with his toys and all perfectly fine, but you're probably right about me and Jacob."

"Yes, sadly, I probably am."

CHAPTER FOUR

ALYSON let herself into Jake's apartment later that day and got Milo settled down with some crayons and paper before going in search of Jake. Naturally, she found him in his studio. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of a little stool where Aaron had put his most recent nighttime blue, as Alyson liked to call them. He was doing nothing but looking at it with an intent, almost piercing, stare.

"That blue is particularly close to your eyes."

Jake jumped a bit before turning to Alyson and muttering, "Huh?"

"The blue. Of the pot. It's close to the blue of your eyes. He keeps trying... I think he's getting closer."

"Closer to what?"

"The blue of your eyes, asshole."

"Bitch."

"Cunt."

Jake laughed. "Why is it you can call me a cunt, but if I call you one, you kick me in the fucking nads?"

"Because the word 'cunt' is degrading, you fucking cunt."

"That's what I thought."

"Stop trying to distract me from my blue conversation."

"I'm not sure I was a willing partner in this blue conversation of yours."

"Maybe not, but I'm going to make you one."

"Make me willing?"

"Yes."

"Go for it, then."

"You sound all put out, like you have anything better to do, when you were basically just sitting here in the neardark spanking it to one of Aaron's pots."

"I wish I had that on tape because you know he'd put you saying 'spanking it' on a loop and play it repeatedly."

"Whatever. The point of my conversation is not what would entertain Aaron's feeble mind but what you're going to do about the fact that you sit by yourself and stare at things that remind you of him."

"I do not sit by myself and stare!"

"Then what are you doing right now?"

"Doing my breathing exercises so I don't go out there and kill your child."

"Yeah, okay."

"Okay."

"Between you and Aaron, I'm in a stupid sandwich."

"If you were between me and Aaron, you'd be in porn."

"Well, that could be fun, too, but I have a mission here, and it's not breaking into porn... although, don't you think Aaron would be perfect in a porn? He could make a *lot* of money."

Jake scowled at her.

Alyson raised an eyebrow and starting walking around nonchalantly picking up things and setting them down as she began talking again. "Seriously, he's gorgeous, and the gays love the pretty boys. I bet he's pretty bendy, too, with that long lean body. Yep, I bet he's bendy. And the mouth on him, I bet he can talk dirty with the best of them. I mean, he talks dirty in everyday conversation; could you imagine him in the bedroom? Fuck me. Oh, and those legs, those are perfect and long and could wrap around you and pull you down and... mmm, yeah, perfect for porn. I'll have to ask Matt his opinions, you know, since he's sampled the goods. And repeatedly, from what Flip has told me."

Jake's eyes took on a dark look at the mention of Matt. He got up from where he was sitting on the floor and tried walking away from Alyson as he threw over his shoulder sarcastically, "Well, if Flip says... what else does Flip say? I'd really love to fucking hear every minute little detail. I can't get enough of how Flip moons about Matt to you. I'm at the fucking edge of my fucking seat."

"I think he's in love with him."

Jake turned on her instantly and practically yelled, "He's not!"

"How do you know he's not?"

"He's not," Jake growled.

"Yes, but *how* do you know Matt's not in love with Aaron?"

"Matt? Matt... I thought you meant Aaron."

"Yeah, I know that's who you thought I meant," Alyson

said, "and do you want to know how I know you thought that?" Jake turned away from her again to fiddle with a camera. "Because whenever anyone gets within a ten-foot radius of him, you go insane. Any time someone even dares to suggest there's anyone in his life other than you, you go insane. Any time he's not within touching distance, you go insane. And any time you think he's falling away from you, that he's not there, you go insane. You've put your whole life into him; what do you think that means, Jacob? How can you possibly explain that and not make it sound like he's the axis your world spins on? Because if you can explain him away, and everything you feel for him away, then I'd like you to tell me how you function without a heart."

"I don't function without a heart," he said angrily and then added under his breath as he grabbed at the front of his T-shirt, "He's right here."

"What was that?" Alyson asked as she crept closer.

"I don't function without a heart."

"I heard that part."

"That's it; that's all I said."

"Fine. That's all you said," Alyson said in frustration, "I'll let you believe that's all you said."

Jake watched Alyson as she stomped out of his studio, and he began to absently rub at the spot in the center of his chest that suddenly felt as if it were on fire and was slowly caving in on him.

"Momma! Unc Dake!" Milo yelled from the kitchen.

Alyson was already on her way to the kitchen when she heard Milo call. "What is it, honey?"

"Unc Fip's wants Unc Dake to come get him in the eletator," Milo said as he pushed himself off his chair and walked the phone over to Alyson. She was about to take the phone out of Milo's hand when she heard Aaron yelling through the receiver.

"Moz! Come and get me!"

Milo giggled. "Unc Fip said to hold the phone at Unc Dake and he yell real loud."

"Your Uncle Flip is a moron, Milo; remember that."

Before Alyson could grab the phone from her son, he put it back to his ear and said, "Momma says you a moron." Alyson watched as a smile broke out on Milo's face, and then he turned to her and said, "Unc Fip says you a vewy bootafull lady and he gonna hug and kiss you when Unc Dake brings him the eletator."

"Yeah, I bet he said that." Alyson grinned as she took the phone from Milo's hand. "Quit telling my son to lie to his mother."

Jake chose this time to shuffle into the kitchen, still rubbing at the center of his chest. Milo came over and hugged his leg, and Jake reached down to pat him on the head. "Is that your Uncle Flip on the phone?"

"Yep, you gotta get him in the eletator."

Jake smiled at the "eletator."

"Tell him I'm coming," he mouthed to Alyson as he walked out the door.

"Your hero is coming to get you, ya wuss. ... No, the elevator cable will not snap halfway up, that was a movie, Aaron. ... No, you won't go crashing to the bottom of the

elevator shaft with Keanu Reeves and Dennis Hopper with an ugly hand. ... Trolls do not live in elevator shafts; there's no such thing as trolls. ... Because I know. ... No, there aren't—... I will not ask Milo if he believes in elevator trolls."

"Are there eletator tolls, Momma?"

Alyson sighed. "Great, now you've scared my son." Alyson listened to Aaron for a second, then turned to Milo and said, "They make cookies, honey. They're like the Keebler Elves on TV."

"Oh. Okay," Milo said agreeably and went back to his chair to color.

Alyson walked out of Milo's hearing range. "Where the fuck do you come up with this shit? Elevator trolls that make cookies? Honestly Aaron, I worry about you. ... Yeah, I do, you're seriously insane. ... I said *insane*, not *in pain*, you dumbass. I could make you seriously in pain. ... No, kicking me first will not help. Isn't your bitch down there yet to get you? I'm tired of having this conversation; your mind is draining mine of all its smart cells. ... Yes, I do have them. ... No, you don't. ... He's there? Fucking finally! ... No... no... no... hang up now, Aaron. ... Hang up. ... Yes, I'll see you in two minutes. ... Yes, hang up. ... Okay, fine. ... Bye. ... Hang up!"

Alyson laughed as the phone finally clicked off, courtesy of Jake and his impatience. She could only imagine how Aaron would chew him out for that on the way up. She walked back over to Milo to sit down at the table and color with him until the whirling dervish and his sidekick got back up.

"...I was talking to Aly! How many times do I have to say

this before you understand?" Aaron's voice drifted through the door he was pushing open, obviously still chewing Jake a new one. "It's just not right, hanging up the phone when someone else is on it; it's bad manners, you Neanderthal."

"Well, seeing as how you'd still be down there talking to her right now if I hadn't hung up the phone instead of standing up here in the same room as her face to face, I see only positive results to my actions."

"You would, you goombah."

"Hello, Tony Soprano."

"I *know*," Aaron said excitedly, totally forgetting his beef with Jake. "I heard it on *The Sopranos*! I love that word!"

"Does it bother you that you're only now watching *The Sopranos*, years after everyone else?"

"I don't like to be rushed into things—you know, the whole tortoise and the hare bit?"

"That doesn't make any sense."

"That very well may be, but it doesn't make it any less true."

Jake rolled his eyes and walked over to the kitchen table and sat down. "What're you drawing, Milo?"

"Unc Fip and the eletator tolls."

"Ooooh!" Aaron exclaimed as he smooshed in next to Jake on his chair, "are there cookies, too?"

"Yep."

"What kind?"

"All kinds."

"Like chocolate chip and peanut butter and

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gingerbread?"

"Yep."

"How about worm ones and booger ones?"

Milo giggled, "No one makes booger cookies."

"Yes they do, they're my favorites!" Aaron grinned. "They're green and filled with big slimey boogies."

"Jesus," Alyson muttered as she got up and turned to Jake, "remember to keep them out of the cupboard under the sink."

Jake looked back over his shoulder and grinned at her as Aaron and Milo went into great detail about the grossest things one could make into a cookie. She walked over to Milo and placed a kiss on his head and said, "Be good and make sure your uncles behave themselves."

"I will, Momma."

"Excellent, see you boys later." She walked out the door as a chorus of good-byes followed her.

Aaron slapped his hands together and started rubbing them. "All right, she's gone. What kind of mischief can we get into now?"

Jake got up from his chair to start making them some popcorn and smacked the back of Aaron's head as he walked behind him. Aaron squeaked and started rubbing his head as Milo's giggles floated through the kitchen.

JAKE looked around him at the mess spread throughout his studio. Aaron had decided it would be the perfect place for him and Milo to make an obstacle course that ended in complete and utter chaos. Chairs, blankets, sofa cushions, a skateboard, and ski poles-which Jake claimed were too dangerous because of the sharp tips, so Aaron found marshmallows to stick on the ends, which then prompted him to want to make S'mores and start a fire in Jake's metal trash bin-were strewn across the floor. Thankfully he had held Aaron back from tossing a match into the trash can and setting off the sprinkler system. He had not, however, managed to rein him in anywhere else.

They had started the night by making popcorn to watch a movie. Aaron had insisted on adding gummy worms to the popcorn, telling Milo they were the worms he was saving to make worm cookies but that he'd sacrifice them to the popcorn. Milo thought popcorn and worms was the best thing he'd ever had to eat in his whole entire four years of life.

Jake thought he might vomit.

They ended up watching about half of a movie with talking fish before Aaron's ADD kicked in and the idea of the obstacle course popped into his head.

Milo was all about the obstacle course.

Jake took about six aspirin for his headache.

Once the obstacle course had run its course, so to speak, Aaron had moved Milo on to his clay and wheel. He had marched himself into Jake's closet and pulled out a vintage T-shirt Jake was pretty sure had cost him about a hundred dollars to put on Milo so he wouldn't get his clothes dirty and Aaron wouldn't get his ass handed to him by Alyson. They spent the better part of an hour making an unholy mess on and around Aaron's wheel.

Jake thought he'd get mad when Milo clapped his hands suddenly, sending splatters of watery muck all over the window and floor, but he didn't; the ache in his chest simply flared up again as Aaron threw his head back and laughed at Milo's delight. It pulled and constricted as he looked at Milo sitting on Aaron's lap and Aaron holding him and guiding him so patiently yet with such joy.

Jake took several pictures of that part of the evening.

Jake thought that might be his favorite part of the night until he walked in on Aaron brushing his teeth with Milo standing on a chair next to him so he could see into the mirror. Both turned to him at the same time with foamy grins. His finger crooked involuntarily as if he were taking a picture.

Jake was positive *that* was his favorite part of the night, until story time.

Milo, decked out in his Bob the Builder pajamas, hopped into Jake's bed, and Aaron tucked him in, then beckoned to Jake, who was standing in the doorway, to come and join them. Jake got into bed on the other side of Milo, who had curled himself up into Aaron. Jake moved over as close as he could as he, too, lay on his side and curled himself into Aaron.

Jake almost fell asleep to the sound of Aaron's voice.

"In the great green room there was a telephone and a red balloon and a picture of the cow jumping over the moon...."

"I wuv this book, Unc Fip." Milo yawned.

Jake smiled as he watched Milo's eyes began to droop because of the soothing tone of Aaron's voice.

"...goodnight room, goodnight moon, goodnight cow jumping over the moon...."

Jake could hear and feel Milo's breathing even out as the little boy slipped into sleep.

"...goodnight nobody, goodnight mush, and goodnight to the old lady whispering 'hush', goodnight stars, goodnight air, goodnight noises everywhere." Aaron's voice trailed off as he gently closed the book and looked up at Jake.

"I like this part best," Jake whispered.

A faint smile spread across Aaron's face. "Yeah, because we're both quiet and far away from your closet and ski poles."

"Well, yes... obviously." Jake rolled his eyes in mock exasperation.

They lay in silence for a while, Jake's hand running gently up and down Milo's back, purposely brushing against Aaron's fingers, which were resting against one small shoulder blade.

"Do you want kids?" Jake asked suddenly, raising his eyes to look at Aaron.

"Yes, very much so."

"You do?"

"Yeah, I do. Although, what I'd like first is someone to raise them with, someone who will look at me and say, 'That one. I want that one'. You know what I mean? I want someone who will know right away that he wants to be with me and raise kids with me and just... love me."

"That isn't hard."

"What isn't hard?"

"Loving you," Jake said without thought. "Uh, I mean finding someone to love you... it shouldn't... it shouldn't be too hard to do," he amended quickly.

"Oh yes, not hard *at all*, because it's been soooo easy so far, and I've been soooo very successful at it." Aaron smirked.

"You'd make a great dad, you know," Jake added, hoping to draw the focus away from the topic of Aaron and anyone else.

"You think so?"

"I know you would."

Aaron grinned. "You're just saying that because I have the mental capacity and the attention span of a small child."

"That, too, but you would be amazing. Absolutely amazing. I have no doubt about it."

"But I'd need someone to balance me out, someone to make sure me and the kid don't drink the blue stuff and make sure I put the marshmallows on the ski poles. You know, the usual."

Jake smiled. "Nah, I think you could handle it. You only pretend to be as stupid as you are."

"Yeah," Aaron sighed, "I'm not nearly as naturally stupid as I would hope to be."

"But you're still very ridiculous, if that helps at all."

"Aww, thanks, Moz."

"Welcome."

Quiet descended on them for a few minutes until Aaron asked, "Do you want kids?"

Jake sort of shrugged and said, "I don't know. They

don't really thrill me all that much. They just seem to annoy me is all, and they're always loud and hungry or crying about something and sticky. They're always sticky."

Aaron laughed quietly. "You just described me, Jacob."

Jake grinned. "This is true."

"But you keep me around, so I think you'd do just fine."

"Possibly."

"Definitely. You'd be a great dad."

"I'm not sure I'd know how. I didn't really have a dad around much, and when he was, he pretty much wasn't all that great at showing what a good dad should be."

"So you'll just do the opposite."

"But what if I don't do it right? What if I fail?"

"You've never failed at anything in your life. Besides, don't you think every other person who's ever become a parent feels the same way as you? You just never know what's gonna happen; you just have to believe."

"You know how hard it is for me to do stuff like that. I'm not you, Aaron. You do whatever you want without fear or hesitation. You live. Me, I'm just the guy that never leaves his apartment and has to think everything through a thousand times before he does anything. I'm the stick in the mud."

"Yeah, well, you don't want to take life lessons from me either. If you do, you'll end up in intensive care or on medication of some kind. I think it's better to find a middle ground."

"Maybe Alyson is right. I think someone should mix us up in a blender, and then maybe we'd have one whole normal person."

"Or a very successful serial killer."

Jake laughed. "You still haven't let that go yet, have vou?"

"No. I still maintain that there's a touch of the serial killer in you."

"And yet, you're still here bugging me day after day, egging me on closer and closer towards murdering you."

"Yep." Aaron grinned.

"As long as you know it. I think I'm going to have you sign a waiver of some sort that will get me off the hook in case I actually do decide to murder you."

"If you do murder me, please promise to make it kinky or horribly strange—don't be boring, Moz, because then nobody will watch the special on Court TV."

"I promise."

"See, you're always doing things to make me happy and to please me; you'd make an excellent dad."

"I worry about you, Flip. You endorse my parenthood in almost the same breath as you declare me a serial killer."

"A kinky serial killer."

"You do realize that Milo is probably soaking this all in subliminally in his sleep and will start asking Aly what kinky means and what a serial killer does, and when he does, you're the one that'll have to answer to her. I was never here."

Aaron started looking around in confusion, "Huh? What's that? Is someone talking to me? Who's there?"

"Retard."

"Did someone just say something?"

Jake grabbed one of Aaron's fingers and pulled on it.

Aaron looked at him in surprise. "Oh, Jacob! You're here! When did you come?"

"About the same time you lost your mind."

"Why didn't you grab it as you passed by it, then? Would've saved me a crapload of trouble."

"It was going too fast, and it looked scared."

"Yeah," Aaron said sadly as he shook his head, "I often have that affect on it."

"Shut up, Aaron."

"Shutting up."

Jake watched as Aaron played with Milo's hair.

"You really think I'd make a good dad?" Aaron asked.

"Absolutely."

"Moz?"

"Hmm?"

"There's something I wanted to tell you all night."

"You're pregnant, aren't you?" Jake grinned.

The corner of Aaron's mouth curled up. "Be serious."

"But you're not pregnant, right?"

"No, I'm not, you tosser."

"Then what's up with the serious?"

"Dunno... just couldn't think of a good way to tell you."

Aaron's tone of voice made Jake's stomach start to churn. "Just tell me it, then. Don't piss around about it."

"Matt asked me to move in. I said yes."

CHAPTER FIVE

JAKE suspected he had heard wrong. Aaron couldn't have said he was going to move in with Matt. That was impossible. It simply couldn't happen.

It couldn't.

As all the blood slowly froze in his veins, as he felt them hardening beneath his skin, Jake was sure he could see frost beginning to form and cover his hands and his arms; and surely it must be climbing up his neck because he was so fucking cold he could hardly draw in breath.

He was so suddenly, so overpoweringly cold to the bone that it physically hurt.

He ached.

And felt brittle.

He saw Aaron's fingers inch over Milo's back toward his, and Jake quickly snatched them away for fear that if Aaron touched them they would shatter into shards of broken ice.

And then where would he be?

He looked up and saw Aaron's lips were moving, but for some reason no sound was coming out, and his eyes looked sad. Jake hated it when Aaron's eyes looked that way. So many of the things Aaron got away with were because of those eyes. Now, however, he wasn't so sure the eyes alone would be enough to let Aaron get away with what he just said.

There were only so many times Jake could indulge Aaron.

There was only so much he could take.

Before something twisted.

Before it broke.

Jake jumped when the phone next to the bed rang. There appeared to still be sound in the world, and Jake couldn't figure out how or why none of it was coming from Aaron's mouth.

Aaron made an annoyed face and reached over and picked it up before the ringing could wake up Milo. Even when he answered it, his mouth continued to move, but Jake heard nothing at all. He saw Aaron's hand come up to the mouthpiece to cover it as he mouthed, "It's Alyson." Jake hadn't a clue why he even bothered trying to mouth the words, since even if he had screamed them at the top of his lungs, Jake wouldn't have been able to hear him anyway.

Aaron rolled off the side of the bed and walked out of the room so he could talk without disturbing Milo's sleep. Once Aaron was gone, a strange whoosh of sound entered the room in his wake. Jake could hear Milo breathing deeply beside him. He could hear his joints creaking and cracking as he curled his fingers into tight fists.

He could hear his heartbeat.

He could also hear his stomach roiling and churning.

Jake rolled off the bed and rushed out the door and down the hall in a panic. He had to get to his studio bathroom, far away from where Aaron was at the moment.

With shaky hands, he managed to get the doorknob to turn, and he stumbled inside the small bathroom nestled within the safety of his studio. He turned on the water in the sink to try to mask the sounds, then fell to his knees in front of the toilet and puked his guts up.

Hacking.

Coughing.

Gagging.

Choking.

He threw up absolutely everything that was foul and sad and lonely inside him. He felt the sweat break out in a sickly film on his forehead.

His sides ached.

His throat burned.

He shook from head to toe.

And still, he couldn't stop. There was so much in him he wanted to flush away, so much that blackened his insides that he just couldn't stop.

He was afraid if he didn't stop soon, his heart would come up with everything else and he'd lose what little there was of it left. So much of it was gone already; he just couldn't spare any more and still stay alive.

When he finally stopped choking and gagging, he pushed away from the toilet and leaned forward until his face was pressed into the cool tile of the floor. The hands that had fallen away from their grip on the toilet now lay flat on the floor, slowly sliding up until they were resting on either side of his face.

And then, there was this noise. This strange broken noise. Like something cracking or shattering. It wasn't until he felt the burning tears fall down his cheeks and drop to the floor beneath him that Jake realized the noises were coming from him. His mouth was open as if he were wailing, but no sound other than choked and splintered noises and crackles were coming out.

Nothing.

He wanted to wail and sob and howl, but nothing would come but the scorching tears.

Everything was still stuck in his throat, in his guts. He had been so sure he had thrown everything up he could possibly have inside him, but there was still enough bitterness and hurt in there to tangle up and block his cries from falling from his mouth.

All that was left were the hot tears and silent broken wails.

"Moz?" Aaron whispered when Jake's face turned white as the sheets. "Moz? ... Jake?"

Aaron's voice kept getting smaller and smaller and more unsure the longer Jake stared at him without seeming to see him. He was looking at him with those eyes Aaron hated. The eyes that were far away and lonely and lost.

Aaron hated those eyes.

Why had he even said it? Why had he told him? Aaron had no idea why the words spilled from his mouth, and he burned to take them back.

Anything at all to get rid of those eyes.

Those eyes ripped him to shreds.

He realized Jake was shrinking in on himself, was curling away from him, so Aaron reached out his fingers towards Jake's. Aaron almost jumped out of his skin when Jake quickly snatched his hand away. That little involuntary reflex, that split second when his mind told his body to pull away from him shattered Aaron. Jake had never pulled away from him before.

Never.

Aaron didn't know what to do.

But before he could do anything at all, the phone rang, and he had to quickly answer it before the ringing woke up Milo. He broke eye contact with Jake to answer it. When he heard Alyson's voice on the other end and turned back to Jake to let him know who it was, he saw the same far off look in his eyes. It was as if he were frozen in place.

"It's Alyson," he mouthed.

Jake didn't make any indication that he had heard him at all. He was still frozen.

Aaron decided to leave the room while he talked to Alyson so as to not disturb Milo. And, if he were to be completely truthful, to get away from those eyes just long enough to gather his thoughts.

To come up with a plan.

A way to make the eyes go away.

Or at least construct a crude time machine that could take him back about five minutes to the time when he still had his foot out of his mouth. And this ache out of his gut.

He wandered into the kitchen, not really listening to Alyson at all, merely remembering Jake's pale skin and lost eyes.

"Aaron! Hello! Are you listening to me, you little cocksucker?" Alvson velled on the other end of the phone.

"He didn't say a thing," Aaron mumbled as he walked over to a corner, turned his back to the wall, and slid down to the floor.

"Who? What are you talking about?"

"I thought he'd fight for me. I thought maybe... after what you said.... He didn't. He didn't say anything at all. Why didn't he?"

"Why didn't who say what? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Jake. He didn't say a thing. He didn't argue. He didn't tell me 'no, you can't'. He didn't say anything at all."

"What did you tell him, Aaron?" Alyson asked in a low voice.

"I told him I said yes."

"Yes to what?"

"He didn't fight for me, Aly. I thought maybe he would."

"Goddammit, Aaron, tell me what the hell you're talking about. What did you say yes to and why isn't Jake talking to you?"

"Matt asked me to move in with him. Three nights ago. He told me he loved me and wanted me with him all the time because he missed me when I wasn't. No one has ever told me that; no one has ever wanted to be with me all the time."

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"No one? You honestly believe that? What then do you call Jake calling you in the middle of the night because he needs to know you're there? What do you call him coming to your place when he barely goes anywhere at all because he knows you'll be there? What the hell is that if not missing you and wanting to be with you all the time?"

"I *know*, but he's never *told* me. He's never said the words like Matt did. I never know with him. One minute I think maybe, just maybe... but then he'll turn it off, and I'm left standing there like an arsey little girl waiting for her crush to bring her chocolates and flowers and sonnets."

"But you know Jake isn't like that. He's not going to tell you outright because he's a fuckwit. A scared little boy, but mostly a fuckwit. And he's only going to give you chocolate because he knows you'll let him eat half. And the only kind of flower he'd ever give you would be the O-U kind because he wants you to bake him a fucking cake or something because he has no idea how to use the oven or measure anything. And if you don't think he gives you sonnets, then you're not paying close enough attention. Every photograph he takes of you is a sonnet. And every day he writes you one, whether you know it or not. Five years' worth, Aaron. Thousands of sonnets just for you."

"But he didn't say a thing. I told him, and he never opened his mouth. He never fought. He *always* argues and fights with me when it matters. He *never* lets anything go." Aaron stumbled and choked on his words as his throat closed up on him. "He let me go, Aly."

"He didn't say a thing because you probably didn't give him time. If I know you, you probably just blurted it out because you're the stupidest person I know, and he couldn't possibly take it all in. How do you expect him to process the fact that his world is falling down around him so he can open his mouth and argue with you quick enough for your liking?"

"I just wanted him to tell me no. He's forever telling me no whenever he thinks he has a say in the matter, which he never does, but he still says it. He could have just said no."

"Oh honey," Alyson sighed. "I give up. I'm done. I don't know what else I could possibly say or do to make either one of you understand. I just don't know."

"Would it be all right if I just went home, Aly? Milo's asleep; Jake can take care of him. I want to go home."

"Just go. I'll be there soon anyway. I'll be there to pick up your mess."

"I'll come back and pick it all up in the morning. I promised Moz I would."

"That's not the mess I'm talking about, sweetie, and I think you know it," Alyson said as she hung up the phone.

ALYSON let herself in with her key and walked into Jake's bedroom to check on Milo. He was sound asleep, oblivious to the world.

Jake was nowhere in sight, but she knew exactly where to look.

She opened the door to the studio slowly, fully expecting it to be disaster area. It was, but not in the way she suspected; instead of broken pottery and torn pictures there was the usual detritus that followed in Aaron and Milo's wake.

There was no evidence that Jake had been through here.

Carrying a shattered and partial heart.

She did notice that the bathroom door was closed and there was light peeking out from under the door.

"Jake?" she whispered, knocking quietly on the door.

There was no answer so she tried his name again. "Jake?"

Nothing.

"Open up, it's Aly."

She reached out tentatively to try the doorknob, and it turned in her hand. She opened that door slowly as well and looked down to see Jake curled up and asleep on the floor.

"Oh sweetie," she sighed as she knelt down beside him and shook his arm. "Wake up. I'm back."

Jake muttered something she couldn't hear then asked in a small voice, "Flip?"

Alyson wanted to cry and beat Aaron at the same time, and she briefly wondered if she could do both. "No, sweetie, it's Alyson."

Jake opened his eyes. "Did he go?"

"Yes, he did."

"Good," he said as he turned away from her.

"No, it's not good. It's terrible. Horrible. No good."

"A very bad day," Jake finished with a sad laugh.

"Don't joke, Jacob. This isn't a children's book, and it

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isn't going to be all right in the end if you don't do something about it. I've tried with Aaron, and I'm done with the stupidity; I'm counting on you to let go of the dumb."

"He said yes. Just like that, he said yes."

"And you don't find that strange? He's never been anywhere close to moving in with one of his phases before, why now? Why Matt?"

"Because Matt's good to him and loves him."

"There have been a lot of others that were good to him and loved him. He always came back to you, though. Always."

"Maybe he just got tired of coming back."

"I think he got tired of having to come back unasked."

"It's not my place to ask him to come back; he needs to do that on his own."

"Oh, but it *is* your place to tell him over and over again, with every single one, that they weren't good enough for him and that he was better off without them."

"Well, they weren't and he was."

"Better off with you," Alyson said quietly as she curled up behind him, wrapped her arms around him and put her chin over his shoulder.

"Then why would he leave me?"

"Because he wants you to tell him he can't. He wants you to bring him back home. This home, right here, where he belongs."

"But what if his home really is with Matt? What if, in the long run, that's where he belongs, where he'd be happiest? I want him to be happy more than I want him with me."

Alvson tightened her hold. "Honey, hearing you say that is exactly what would make him happy. He's happiest with you even though you drive him mad, and he drives you fuck, I don't know where he drives you-most likely off the road and through some poor unsuspecting old couple's front porch like those drunk or senile old people you see on the news."

Alyson could feel Jake's mouth turn up in a smile against her cheek where their faces were pressed together. "You make him happiest. You. Make. Him. Happy. And the most astounding thing of all is that he makes you happy in return. I've never seen anyone make you truly happy, but he does, crazy porch driving and all."

"Could you imagine if we ever let him behind the wheel of an actual car?"

"I'd rather Milo drive."

"So would I," Jake agreed readily. "The only thing Flip has going in his favor is that his feet reach the pedals."

Alyson gave Jake another squeeze. "I love you, you know"

"I know, and I love you too."

Alyson laid her forehead against the side of Jake's head and whispered in his ear, "You have to tell Aaron the same thing. Tell him you love him."

Jake's only response was the sound of his breathing.

"You do love him, don't you?"

Again, there was silence, and just as Alyson was about to give up hope on Jake figuring things out either, she heard the word she had been dying to hear for such a long time.

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"Yes."

"Say it," she whispered as she tugged him toward her chest and held him fast, "out loud."

And finally, in a louder, clearer voice than before Jake said, "I... love... him."

CHAPTER SIX

JAKE awoke the next morning in a funk to end all funks.

He had said it.

Out loud.

To Alyson of all people, the only person other than Aaron with a mouth bigger than the Grand fucking Canyon. He was sure she would just love to run off and tell Aaron everything he said, but he also knew without a doubt that she would never betray his trust that way. She would keep it to herself even if it killed her, just as he would for her. It didn't make it any less painful and shocking, however.

He couldn't believe he had said it, said he loved Aaron.

He knew he did. He *knew* it, like how he knew the sky was blue and grass was green; he knew he loved Aaron. But to say it and mean it with every piece of his heart was something so frightening that he was surprised he still wasn't curled up on the bathroom floor too paralyzed with fear to even move.

It had always just been him. For the longest time, he'd had to depend on himself. For a while Alyson had been there every day to hold him up and keep him functioning, but then came Aaron, and within five minutes of meeting him, he became all Jake ever needed. End of story. Jake was gone

from the word "go," and he had tried to deny it-for five fucking years he had tried to deny it—but he was no longer able to play dumb. The words had fallen from his mouth, and even though the fear sizzled through him like a lightning strike, there was no way he was going to take the words back.

He was done pretending Aaron wasn't his entire world. That Aaron wasn't the reason he got out of bed every morning or was able to fall asleep each night. He was no longer going to deny that Aaron had pushed his walls farther away from him than they had ever been. Before Aaron, the walls were so close around Jake that he only had to spread his arms out and he could touch all four of the solid walls that formed his cage. Now that Aaron had tunneled in, creating an escape route, Jake had found there was a sun and stars and fresh air all around him. Some days he couldn't even see the walls for how far away Aaron had pushed them. Because of Aaron, he could stretch his arms out and spin and spin like a top and never once touch anything other than life and warmth. Gone was the cold. Gone were the ever-present walls. And in their place was Aaron.

But now Aaron would be gone, too, and Jake knew that without him there to protect him, the walls would sneak back and close in around him like a coffin.

Oh-so-slowly suffocating him.

Burying him alive.

But hadn't he known all along that would happen? Hadn't he known he couldn't keep a bright someone like Aaron trapped in his tiny world forever?

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He had.

He had known.

Known it was too good, too real, too much life for him to ever keep.

How he had managed to keep Aaron contained within the confines of his world for so long would forever remain a mystery to Jake. He would always wonder what spell he had managed to cast that had kept Aaron there to stand guard for so long. Something so beautiful was not meant to stay hidden away in a box. Jake had tried; he had kept every single picture he ever took of Aaron in photo box after photo box in an effort to somehow restrain the real one from wandering away from him. For some reason, he'd thought he could keep him tethered to him if he kept all those pictures of his face, his body, his brilliant soul close to him. Like some form of voodoo: trap the soul, the image, and you trap the man. But Aaron could never fit in such a small place, could never be confined to a box of flat two-dimensional false images. That was why he wasn't going to say a thing to him.

Not a single word.

He'd let him leave, let him out of the box, to go where he would.

Jake owed him that much. For how long he had trapped him, he now owed him his freedom.

He knew Alyson would all but kill him and throw him in the East River.

He knew it.

He also knew he'd probably never be able to breathe again, but it would be worth it just to see Aaron outside of Jake's stunted existence.

Worth it to see him never grow dim, never fade away.

As Jake wandered out of his bedroom and down the hall, he realized he could hear noises coming from the studio. He walked over to the open doorway and looked inside. He stood still for a moment as he watched Aaron pick up the mess he had made with Milo the night before. He watched as Aaron suddenly stopped and sat down cross-legged in the middle of the floor and looked around him like he was completely bewildered as to where exactly he was.

Jake had never seen him look so small.

And lost.

To Jake, Aaron had always been larger than his physical presence, and seeing him sitting by himself amidst the mess of the studio, unknowingly clutching a blanket to his chest, was a shock to his system. He couldn't quite handle the lost look, either. Aaron *always* knew exactly where he was and what he was doing.

Always.

Jake had always been sure Aaron had all the answers to all the fucked-up questions he had floating around in his mind. Almost daily he'd let one of those asinine questions slip from his lips, and Aaron would laugh or smile and give him what Jake believed to be a completely plausible answer, never mind that it was more than likely bullshit—it was coming from Aaron after all. But he believed him, and that was what mattered. It was foreign to him to see Aaron

looking lost.

Adrift on a wooden sea of blankets, toys, and skateboards.

It didn't fit, didn't feel right, and it made what he had to do all the harder, because what he really wanted to do at that moment was let go of his life preserver and float out to Aaron and drift away.

"Hey, Flip," he whispered from the doorway.

Aaron actually jumped at such a small sound. He turned to look at him sheepishly. "Hey, I didn't hear you come in."

"I'm not technically in though, am I? I'm still in the doorway."

Aaron smiled at him faintly. "Hmmm, An Arse in a Doorway. Could be the name of your next series."

"Maybe, or perhaps I could do one called *The Whore on the Floor*. That might make more of an impression."

Aaron snorted. "Yeah, how much are you gonna charge for admission to that one? I don't come cheap, you know."

"No, you don't," Jake said quietly as he leaned his head against the doorjamb.

Aaron picked up the ski pole that was next to him and started pushing the skateboard around with it. Jake listened to the sound of the wheels rolling across the wood of the floor.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

Jake suspected Aaron didn't know what to do or say so he was dinking around in an effort to give himself something to do.

"When are you going to move?" Jake finally asked.

"Huh?" Aaron turned a confused face to him. "I don't want... I... what do you...." When Jake didn't say anything, he sighed and added, "Friday, I guess."

"Is that your last day here, too, or are you doing the actual moving on Friday during the day and will be done here Thursday? I need to know so I can ask Aly to take over until I find a replacement."

Aaron sprang up from the floor, "A replacement? I'm not... why do you need Aly? I'll be here. I'm right here."

"But not for long."

"Yes, for long. Where would I go?"

"To Matt's."

"I'm just moving in with him. Across the fucking park for fucksake—it's not like we're moving to Timbuk-fuckingtu!"

"But don't you want a fresh start? Moving in with someone is a big step."

"Yeah, it is, which is why I need everything else in my life to stay the same. How am I supposed to adjust if you're not there?"

"I'm not going to be *there* there, so why do you need me to be here there?"

"Because I do! And that sentence didn't make any sense."

"You understood it, though, didn't you?"

"That's not the point. Quit speaking in circles."

"You don't need me anymore, Flip."

"Yes I do!"

"To do what? Make your life miserable? I don't think Matt will welcome the three a.m. phone calls or the two a.m. visits. I think it's best if we just cut the cord now, so to speak."

"You're such a fucking asshole, Jake. Why won't you fight with me?"

"I thought that's what we were doing. A mild fight, but a fight nevertheless."

"We are *not* fighting! You're standing there like a fucking lump and telling me to go away and never come back, you arse!"

"I just think it would be easier if we didn't work together."

"When am I supposed to see you, then?"

"I don't think you're supposed to. I think you should focus on your new life with Matt."

"And never see you again?"

"Yes." Jake's fingers curled into the doorjamb so hard when he said that one word that he could feel his nails breaking as they dug into the wood.

"Never? Never? Well, fuck you, then!" Aaron yelled at him as he threw the ski pole he was still holding across the room. "Fuck you, Moz! Fuck you and all your stupid boring insecurities and your stupid boring life! Fuck you and the five fucking years I spent putting up with you!"

Jake watched as Aaron stomped around the room, kicking everything in his path.

"You fucking fight with me every damn day and try to

run my life for me, and just like that, you're going to fucking stop? You're done with me now? Am I too fucking much work for you?"

Jake remained silent as Aaron answered his own rant.

"Apparently. Apparently I'm not worth the effort. Have I ever been?" he asked as his arms flailed and his feet continued to kick things. "Have I ever been worth it?"

Yes. Yes. Yes.

God, yes.

Jake closed his eyes to Aaron's angry face and sad eyes.

"I give up! I give up. I'm done. No more of this. If you don't want me here, then fuck it. I don't care anymore. I'll fucking move in with Matt and live happily ever fucking after, and you'll be the fucking footnote I left back on page five, way the fuck at the beginning that everyone has forgotten about by the end."

Leave. Leave. Leave.

While I'm still able to stand.

Leave before I tell you to stay.

Leave before I ruin you more than I already have.

Leave.

Jake's eyes shot open when he heard a loud crash. Aaron had picked up Milo's baseball and thrown it at the last nighttime blue on the shelf. The last one. The one Alyson had said was the closest to the color of his eyes. So shocked was he at the shattered blue pieces on the floor that Jake didn't even register Aaron running out of the room until Aaron shoved him out of the doorway to get past him.

Jake jumped when the front door slammed shut, and

then he stood still, trying to remain on his feet, breathing in and out as he swayed.

Just when he thought he was going to lose the battle, the front door slammed back open, and Aaron was running toward him again. The force of Aaron's punch sent him slamming into the wall. He wobbled a bit, thrown off by the strength and suddenness of it, and then Aaron's arms were around him.

Pulling him back upright.

Holding him in a near stranglehold.

Like he was never going to let him go.

His nails digging into the skin of Jake's back.

"I hate you! I fucking hate you!" Aaron yelled and wept at the same time into the crook of Jake's neck where he had buried his face. "I hate you!"

I know. I know.

Jake winced as Aaron's hands tore at his shirt and scratched him as if he were trying to rip him open.

"I hate you!" Aaron sobbed one last time before violently pushing Jake away from him and running back out the door.

The door slammed one last time. Jake waited for it to open again, but it didn't; so instead, he said to it what he had wanted to say to Aaron all along.

"I love you."

FOR days on end Jake put up with Alyson's haranguing. She yelled at him over and over. Asking him what the hell did he

think he was accomplishing by pushing Aaron away. And over and over again he insisted he was doing what he thought would make Aaron happiest in the long run.

"But what about *you*? What would make *you* happy?" she had asked.

"Him being happy," he had answered.

After the first week he had asked her kindly, but firmly, to just stop. Stop asking him why. Stop telling him he was a fool. Stop saying how much he had hurt Aaron and himself.

Stop.

There must have been something in his eyes or the tone of his voice that reached her, that told her he'd had enough, because she stopped. She never brought the situation up again. Not once. She simply and quietly resumed her job as his assistant, telling him that since Milo was older and in preschool most of the day and since Aaron had managed to temper and mellow Jake in the years they were together, that she could come back to work for him. He needn't find a replacement for Aaron. Jake was thankful she didn't say it outright, but the truth was there, floating between them.

There was no replacement for Aaron.

There never would be.

There would merely be an inferior substitute.

So instead of inflicting that trauma on an unsuspecting victim, Alyson very quietly moved all of Aaron's things to a box and put hers in their place and tried as unobtrusively as possible to take over his duties, but never his place.

The box full of Aaron's things that he had left behind sat sullenly in a corner like an elephant in the room. Alyson never commented when she saw Jake looking over at it more frequently than he looked at anything else. She also didn't comment when she'd see him walking over to the box and picking up something just to hold it in his hands. She let it go when the thing sometimes didn't make its way back into the box but instead went into Jake's pocket or was put back in its "place." She suspected Jake didn't even realize he was slowly putting all of Aaron's things right back where they belonged because the room was somehow wrong without them there.

This little dance with the box went on for almost three weeks before Matt showed up out of the blue to collect it. Alyson felt sorry for him because he looked so horribly uncomfortable. He seemed so apologetic. Over and over he said he didn't mean to interrupt, but that Aaron just couldn't find the time to make it over to pick his things up, so he was there instead.

Everyone in the room knew that was a lie.

Once he had the box in his hands he didn't leave immediately but suddenly flushed red and tried to say something. "I was wondering if I could—" He stuttered as he pointed at the nighttime blues all lined up in a row. "He wanted... can I take two?"

"Of course you can; they're his anyway. You can take them all." Jake feigned disinterest. Alyson knew he could do so only because Aaron had just asked for two and not all of them. If he had asked Matt to take them all, Jake would have choked.

Matt nodded and smiled a bit as he muttered, "Thanks." Both Alyson and Jake watched as he looked up at the shelf and started counting them to himself, his finger following the path of his counting. About a third of the way down the line he reached out to pick up a pot. He placed it gently in the box, then continued with his counting.

Jake looked at Alyson questioningly. Never one to hold herself back, Alyson asked, "What are you doing?"

Matt looked back at her and flushed red again. "He only wanted certain ones. He said he wanted the eleventh one and the thirty-sixth one." He shrugged. "I don't know why, but that's what he asked for."

Alyson somehow suspected Matt did a lot of things just because Aaron asked for them. She wouldn't be surprised to see him do an Irish jig as he counted them if that was how Aaron told him they would be best collected. After Matt left with more embarrassed smiles and muttered apologies, Jake said, "Well, that's done, then."

Alyson didn't comment, only noticed how Jake's attention was now drawn to the empty spaces on the shelf rather than the box in the corner. A couple of days later, when Jake was in the darkroom, she rearranged the nighttime blues so there were no longer any gaping spaces for him to focus on.

When she came back the next morning they were put back exactly where they had been.

Gaping holes and all.

Alyson left them alone after that.

And she continued to help him set up all the photographs he had chosen for his next showing, even though they tore out her heart and she ached to know what they were doing to Jake's.

JAKE had taken to going on walks in the evenings, about the time the sun set and the lights in the homes went on. He'd walk through the park until he came to the row of brownstones that Aaron now called home. He'd walk back and forth along the street until either Matt or Aaron would turn on a light so he could see inside. He didn't know if he hated or loved the fact that they tended to leave their curtains open and blinds pulled up.

He hated it on the days when he'd see Matt pulling a laughing Aaron across the room.

He loved it when Aaron was home alone, reading in the chair by the window, Harold sleeping on the ottoman at his feet.

He hated it when he knew Matt had said something from the other room because Aaron would smile and say something in return.

He loved it when it rained and Aaron would sleep in the window seat, his face pressed to the window, just like he used to do in Jake's studio.

He hated it when it rained and Aaron would sleep in the window seat, his face pressed to the window, because the raindrops looked like tears streaming down his face and those moments made it all too easy for Jake to get up from the bench he was sitting on to walk over to the door of the brownstone and almost press the buzzer before he could stop himself.

One day he wondered if Aaron had a new Wilbur and

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Charlotte. He longed to know if Matt loved him enough to know he needed to create, that he needed to draw pots and bowls and vases out of the lumps of clay that looked like nothing at all to those who didn't know any better.

He couldn't tell since the only room he could ever see into was their living room; so he decided to pack up Wilbur and Charlotte and send them over. He was both disappointed and relieved when, not more than a couple hours after they left, the men who had picked them up returned with them still in tow and shrugging their bewilderment.

"When we told him what they were, he just said he didn't want them and closed the door," said the burly and somewhat smelly man in Jake's doorway.

"That's fine," Jake said quietly. "Could you just put them back in the studio where you picked them up?"

So they did.

And Jake went back to wondering whether Aaron had a new Wilbur and Charlotte and whether Matt loved him enough.

He also went back to walking the sidewalk across from their brownstone just waiting for a glimpse of anything that would make him even remotely happy.

One evening, as it was drizzling just enough to make a person damp and bring out the smell of the earth, Jake was sitting on the bench across the street when the door of the brownstone opened and Matt walked out with an umbrella. Jake didn't know whether to get up and walk away or sit there and hope he wouldn't be seen. As he sat there in indecision, Matt headed purposefully across the street and

sat down next to him.

"Hey."

Jake was confused and disoriented by Matt's sudden appearance and such an ordinary greeting, as if they had planned to meet all along. Like it was just an ordinary day.

"Hey," Jake said in return.

"I have a few things I want to say to you," Matt began.

"Look," Jake interrupted. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bother you. Let's just forget about it. I'll go home, and I promise not to hang around anymore."

"I know why you do. Hang around. I understand it. I don't particularly like it, but I understand it."

"I'll stop. You won't see me again after today."

Matt ignored him for a few moments before saying, "I think I know I'm not his first choice, but he did choose me, and I'm working on that being okay because I want him here more than I don't. It's fucked up, but it's what works for me."

Jake knew about being fucked up. He had mastered the fucking up a long time gone.

"I don't know whether to tell you to never come back here because I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop and if you're out here waiting it'll make it easier for him to walk out the door and never come back, or if I want you to stay because I couldn't stop you anyway. Regardless of what you promise."

Jake was going to protest but decided against it because he figured Matt was probably right. Even if he did promise not to come back, the temptation of that lit window was too vast to ignore. "I'm taking good care of him," Matt added awkwardly. "In case you were wondering."

"I was and I wasn't," Jake answered.

There was an uncomfortable silence before Matt got up and turned to him, with the umbrella held in his outstretched hand. "Here, take it."

Jake looked at him questioningly but took hold of it anyway.

"He said since you were too stupid to bring your own, you might as well have this one or else you'll catch pneumonia or malaria, and he doesn't want it to look like an old hobo has died on the bench in front of his house. Might bring the property value down," Matt said with a slight grin and a shrug of his shoulders.

For the first time since Aaron left, Jake smiled. A genuine smile as he looked up and saw Aaron looking down at him from the illuminated window, shaking his head and scowling at him but then turning away before Jake could catch the corner of his mouth turn up in one of his crooked off-balanced grins.

"Tell him thanks," Jake said quietly as he tightened his grip on the umbrella, the metal beneath his hands turning from clammy cold to softly warm.

Matt stepped off the curb, ready to walk back across the street. "Maybe you should keep coming by," he said over his shoulder. "He's calmer, happier, on the days you come by."

"He knows I'm out here?"

Matt looked at him like he was a simpleton. "He always knows where you are."

100 Take My Picture | Giselle Ellis

Jake watched as Matt jogged across the street and loped up the steps leading into the brownstone and disappeared.

And even though the rain had stopped by the time Jake got up from the bench, he kept the umbrella up as he walked home.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AARON stood at the window and watched Matt talk to Jake. He watched as Matt handed Jake the umbrella he had insisted Matt take. He couldn't believe how often Jake would sit out in the rain with no coat or umbrella to keep him dry. It was like he was completely unaware of what was going on around him.

Aaron understood that feeling.

Without Jake, he sometimes wondered what it was he was supposed to be doing. He'd start one thing and halfway through think of something he used to do for Jake. At those times, he would often find himself halfway out the door on a film run or grocery trip before he realized, yes, it was Tuesday, but no, Jake wasn't in the other room waiting for his chicken salad on wheat.

He didn't know how to spend his days without Jake there to fill them.

When he had moved in with Matt, he had been able to sell a few of his pieces to a local gallery, so there wasn't a pressing need for him to go out and find another job. The money he earned from the sale was enough to get him through a couple of months. Matt never pressured him to find actual employment, only suggested he try focusing

solely on his work and making his living off of that.

Aaron loved and hated Matt in equal measure in moments like those. He loved him for loving him and knowing exactly what he wanted. Aaron had always wanted to create, nothing more complicated than that. He had been lucky in finding Jake, the one person who would pay him to "work" while really letting him piss away hours on end at his wheel. Jake never interrupted him, and there were days when he'd get up to leave and realize he hadn't said a thing to Jake all day nor had he done a single minute of actual work for him. Aaron also hated Matt for being so good, so loving. He hated Matt because Aaron knew he was using Matt, knew Matt knew Aaron was using him, and Matt let him keep doing it. He let him live in his home. He let him bitch about everything, knowing all the while it was actually Jake he was bitching about. Aaron hated Matt for being nice to him, for letting him walk all over him.

He hated him.

He loved him.

But not like he loved Jake.

He loved Matt like you would your favorite T-shirt or movie or book. You just did because they made you feel like you were home and safe.

He loved Jake because he *was* his home, and no matter how much Matt *felt* like home, he simply was not.

Jake was Aaron's home.

His stupid, fucked-up home.

And Aaron was achingly homesick.

Painfully.

Achingly.

Homesick.

But now he didn't know what to do. When he'd first told Jake he was going to move in with Matt, he thought he'd throw a fit and tell him he couldn't. He readily admitted he'd used the statement as bait to try to trap Jake into saying something, anything really, just something to show he cared... maybe even loved Aaron. But instead, Jake had all but fired him and told him to have a nice fucking life; and Aaron was left no other choice but to actually move in with Matt, which he had never had any intention of doing in the first place. Now he hadn't only ruined his own life, but he'd ruined Matt's as well.

He had no idea why Matt even accepted his yes in the first place. It was an angry impetuous yes, nothing even close to the lovingly excited yes it should have been. Yet Matt had smiled his Matt-smile at him and said, "Okay, then," and that was that.

Three days later, he was out of his flat and into Matt's.

Three days and he was severed from Jake, although admittedly that had happened the day after Aaron told him, when Jake had been all sad, quiet resignation and Aaron had been the screeching angry harpy.

For the first week, Aaron sat all day long in the apartment, only venturing outside to take poor Harold for a walk in the park, and even then he sometimes finagled Matt into doing it for him. He just didn't want to be out *there*. He was afraid of it. He was afraid of stepping outside his doors and getting lost. The city he had come to know, the New York that he'd grown to love, had disappeared for him. The city

was now strangely empty despite its millions of people. It was too quiet and too noisy both. It was too fast and too slow. It made him want to scream. Not even that first day he had stepped foot in Manhattan had he felt so lost. Then he had had a silly little map to tell him where to go, which bus to take, which subway line would take him where he needed to go.

After that he'd had Jake.

Jake told him where to go to buy film.

Jake told him where to go to buy food.

Jake told him where to go to find the book he had mentioned he wanted in passing but that Jake remembered for weeks after.

Jake mapped out the city for him in a way no real map could. The map Aaron had held in his hands that first day was only a two-dimensional outline; you couldn't breathe it in, you couldn't live in it. The city Jake mapped out for Aaron he could live in... he *did* live in. For five years, he lived in it, breathed it in, and now it was gone.

The shock kept him holed up like a hermit for an entire week until he spotted Jake for the first time out on the sidewalk across the street. He watched with elation as Jake walked back and forth, seemingly lost in thought and only occasionally glancing up to his window. He thought for sure Jake was trying to figure out what to say to him before ringing his buzzer. He was absolutely positive Jake was thinking over the best way to say he was sorry and to ask him to come home.

Home.

Aaron nearly wept; he wanted to go home so badly. If

Jake would just come up the fucking front steps, he'd even make some ridiculous Dorothy joke about it, would call him the Wizard of Moz and tap his heels three times once he asked him to come back.

And he'd definitely bring up the flying monkeys.

Jake fucking hated the flying monkeys.

There's no place like home.

There's no place like home.

No place.

Aaron waited patiently for half an hour as Jake paced. He waited with a smile on his face and his heart pounding. He practiced saying yes over and over again.

Yes, I'll come back.

Yes, I forgive you.

Yes, I love you.

Didn't you know?

Didn't you?

He was so busy reciting his yeses that when he next looked out the window, Jake was gone. He had cried out in panic and run down the flights of stairs to the front door, looking up and down the street for Jake's retreating back. He ran blindly out onto the street and then into the park. Running down the path he knew would lead him across the park the quickest, the one that ended a block down from Jake's building.

He ran and ran and ran until he realized he was no closer to finding Jake than he had been standing still way up in his ivory tower.

So he stopped.

And looked around him in a daze.

Truly lost.

He had to ask a police officer patroling the park on horseback where to go to get back home. The officer looked at him funny but had pointed out the way. It was only after he had made it back to the brownstone and walked up through the still-open door he had left flapping in the breeze on his mad rush out that he realized he looked slightly crazed, his hair uncombed and his eyes wide and shocked, pupils dilated. No wonder the officer had looked at him the way he did. How else would one respond to a grown man asking, "How do I get home?"

So stupid.

So very stupid to leave home without your breadcrumbs.

All he wanted was a sign, any slight indication that Jake wanted him back. Anything at all. If only *once* Jake would look up at his window and then come to the door, Aaron would rush down the stairs and be there in an instant. Right there in front of him, reaching out to him, grabbing onto him.

Never letting go.

He would watch from his window, euphoric with hope, dizzy and out of control, breath and heartbeat far too frighteningly fast.

Until Jake turned and walked away again.

Then it was the crash, the inevitable crash back to earth, where his legs gave out under him and he'd drop to the floor because he no longer had the rush that the sight of Jake shot through his system to keep him upright. He would shake like an addict bereft of his drug.

That lasted for two weeks.

It lasted until Matt came home one day and found him crouched down by the window. He had asked what was wrong, and Aaron couldn't say a thing, couldn't form a word that wasn't crazy. He couldn't say anything other than "Jake walked away again," so he stayed silent.

After that, he vowed to no longer let Jake affect him that way. He didn't want to run the risk of Matt finding him like that again and asking more questions he couldn't, and wouldn't, answer. So instead of the burning mania that had consumed him before, he tried seeing Jake's visits for what they were: glimpses of the world he used to know. He tried replacing the hope with calm resignation, with that sad yet fond remembrance one bears for days long gone, days that won't ever return no matter how many stars you wish upon.

He tried turning Jake into a fond memory, like Sunday dinner at Gran's or jumping in puddles on your way home from school. Something that made you ache inside to remember but also smile and be happy from the sheer fact that it had happened at all.

He tried being happy he had splashed through the puddles at one time in the not-too-distant past.

He tried because he didn't want Matt wondering any more about why he found Aaron crying at the window when he came home from work. One time was enough. It had to stop.

He had to make it stop.

So each time he'd see Jake across the street in the park,

pacing the sidewalk or sitting patiently on the bench, he'd try to remember something good about him, something that would make him smile instead of cry. There was so much that could make him smile, so much he had loved, that it wasn't nearly as hard to hide the tears behind a grin and a happy façade as he had thought it would be.

There were still days when he'd forget his resolution and would lose it watching Jake do nothing to come closer to his door. Those were usually the days it rained and Matt was gone and there was no one home to fool. Those days, Aaron would lay in the window seat and press his face against the window and let himself cry, all the while telling himself it was only the rain sliding down his cheeks in the reflection of his face in the window and not the tears he tried so hard to hide.

The rain made it so much easier to be melancholy.

So much easier to forget what it was he was supposed to be pretending to do.

The rain made it so much easier to care for Jake as he sat without his coat or umbrella, soaked to the skin and alone.

So much easier to want to run out the door and sit beside him on that bench, soaked to the skin and together.

So it would stand to reason that on one of those rainy days he had let it all slip again and had asked Matt to take an umbrella out to him. Of course Matt had done it, yet another reason to hate him and love him all at once. He watched as they talked, and his gut churned just thinking about what they could even be saying to each other. When Matt handed Jake the umbrella and he had looked up at

Aaron with one of his confused and beautiful "Jake" looks, Aaron scowled at his stupidity like he would have done at any other time. But then he had to turn away when the familiarity of it and the happiness of looking into Jake's eyes rather than simply at him made the corners of his lips turn up in a grin. He was waiting in the entry when Matt came back upstairs and through the door.

"What were you saying to him?"

"I told him you said he'd get malaria and die like a hobo."

"Funny."

"It's what I said."

"You said a lot more than that. That would have taken two seconds. I know it only used to take me two seconds to tell him he was a dumbfuck. You were out there more than two seconds."

"I told him to keep coming around."

"Why? Why would you ever do that?" Aaron asked in alarm.

"Because it makes you happy when he does."

"And you see nothing wrong with that statement."

"Nope."

"Are you retarded?"

"Not that I know—"

"Why would you tell someone to keep stalking your boyfriend?"

"Because my boyfriend is stalking him too... albeit from a window. A kind of stationary stalking, but stalking all the same." "What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing. I'm just wondering when I'm going to get my place back to myself."

"What?" Aaron all but shouted.

"Well, I figure if he keeps coming around long enough, one of you two idiots should finally crack and do something about the fact that you're both crazy and in love with each other and crazy and lost without each other and crazy. Did I mention crazy? Because you are. Crazy. Very, very, very crazy. Like 'all work and no play makes Aaron a dull boy' crazy."

"Me? Crazy? I think you just bought yourself a straight jacket with that little speech, Matty."

"What? You think I don't know you're in love with him? I'd be crazy if I *didn't* know that. How dumb do you think I am, Aaron? I've got two eyes and a relatively perceptive brain. It didn't take me too long to figure it all out."

Aaron stared at him, flustered and confused. "Well, how long, then?" he demanded. "How long have you known, oh wise one?"

"A while."

"A while? A fucking while? Since before we moved in together?"

"Yeah."

"Then why the hell did you ask me to move in with you, you tosspot?"

"I thought asking you to move in would be a big enough shock to light a fire under your ass, but apparently I vastly overestimated your intelligence." "Duh! I'm stupid! Hello, arsehole! Where have you been?"

"Being stupid too and completely infatuated with you. Must have been our stupids calling out to each other."

"Oh my God! Where the hell is this conversation going?" "Certainly nowhere intelligent."

"Obviously."

"Listen," Matt said, reaching out to grab Aaron's arm and drag him over to the couch to sit down. "I know you love him. It's been obvious to me for a long time, but I wasn't sure if he felt the same way, so I talked to Alyson about it, and she told me that Jake did. Love you, I mean. That's when I gave up. Before that, I thought maybe if it was only one-sided, I could charm you away from him, which was a stupid idea all around, but since we just recently established our own stupidity, that was to be expected, yeah?"

Aaron nodded but continued looking at him blankly, not quite knowing what to do with the information overload.

"So I figured the quickest and easiest way to scare you away would be to ask you to move in with me, because that way you'd run, and it would be *your* fault and not mine. You'd be the one that ran away from me, and I could try to believe I wasn't the one that ended it, that I wasn't the fool who loved someone more than he loved me."

"Matty," Aaron quietly pleaded as he reached out to take his hand.

Matt curled his fingers around Aaron's outstretched hand and bent down to give it a quick kiss. "But you threw me for a loop by saying yes. Although I guess you didn't really say it, more like angry yelled it, but it was still a yes."

"You fucker," Aaron whispered as he half-heartedly shoved at Matt's shoulder. "Why in the hell didn't you tell me to fuck off?"

Matt shrugged. "Can I claim stupidity again?"

"No," Aaron said stubbornly.

"Fine, I didn't tell you to fuck off because you were so angry and sad and you looked like you really needed a place to go."

"Yeah, like my own home. You could have sent me on my merry fucking way."

Matt set his arm on the back of the couch and bent it so he could rest his head in his hand as he smiled at Aaron.

"Quit giving me the Matt look."

Matt kept looking at him.

"Stop it."

Matt raised an eyebrow.

"Quit being a penis!"

Matt's smile widened.

"I hate you. You always think you know exactly what's going on, but that's just stupid to think you know everything. No one knows everything. Not even Stephen Hawking. Or the Pope. Well, that's not a very good example because on the whole, popes are rather oblivious to what's going on in the actual world. Like in the year 2006, you know, because the way they talk, it's 1206, and we're all serfs harvesting wheat for the Lord or whatever. And now that I think about it, you're the Pope. Pope Matt the First. Wearing your big pope hat and waving to the crowd and

telling people what to do even though you're stupid and way behind the times. You're the Pope."

"I love you, Aaron."

Aaron scowled, then leaned forward until his forehead came to rest in the center of Matt's chest. "I love you, too, Matty."

"I know you do."

"Which makes me an even bigger fucker who should be kicked out and forced to catch malaria and die like a hobo on Jake's bench."

"Probably, yeah," Matt agreed, reaching up to run his hand through Aaron's hair.

"Uhhhhhhh," Aaron moaned dramatically. "I'm a hobo."

"But a hot one. Take some consolation in that."

"I'm only hot on account of the malaria."

Matt laughed, then yanked Aaron's head up by his hair so he was looking at him. "Okay, you malaria-soaked hobo, I let you move in because I wanted to and it's what I thought you needed at the time."

Aaron's lips turned down as he whimpered an ouch and rubbed his head where Matt had tugged on his hair.

"Baby," Matt muttered before continuing. "Now, however, I'm beginning to wonder at my decision. I thought you two would be quicker about it. I didn't take into account your stubborn streaks."

"And our stupidity, don't forget that streak... it's Aly's favorite."

"Yeah, speaking of Alyson, seeing as how you've appointed me Pope, I think I'm going to grant her sainthood."

"She deserves it," Aaron agreed.

"That she does. But we'll talk about her shrine and crying statue later. Right now we need to focus on what you're going to do to get the hell out of my apartment and back into Jake's where you belong."

"I was never in Jake's apartment," said Aaron mulishly.

"Quit being literal. I'm done with the pouting and the denial and the stubbornness. I'm done being nice when all I want to do is kick Jake's ass and take you away so I can keep you for myself; but since that ain't gonna happen, I'll have to settle for getting your mess straightened out."

"Why are you doing this, Matty?"

"First of all, because I love you—and don't get all sad looking about it because I know the way we work and I think we work better as friends, don't you?"

"You deserve a better friend than me."

"But I want you as one anyway, so let's just leave it at that," Matt said. "Secondly, you and Jake belong together, no matter how fucked up the two of you are. You're absolutely volatile together, like a damn match and a can of gasoline, but I know you belong together. Nobody else could, or should have to, put up with your toxicity. You're each other's poison, and there's no way around it."

"Yeah," Aaron sighed, "we're kinda like Pamela and Tommy Lee."

Matt laughed outright. "Jesus fuck, trust you to say something like that."

"Well, we are!"

"Does that make me Kid Rock in this scenario?"

"Fuck, no, you're way cuter than Kid Rock. Besides, you don't even own a cowboy hat and you don't like beer. It just doesn't work."

"But Kid Rock and Pamela just got married, didn't they?"

"Pfft! Like that'll last. Pam and Tommy belong together."

"Now I'm picturing you in a halter top and blond wig."

"Why am I Pamela?"

"Because you've got the best tits I've ever seen?"

Aaron squeaked as Matt reached out and pinched a nipple. "You fucker!" he laughed.

"See, best tits in town."

"That was my nipple, thank you very much, you barmy sonofabitch."

Matt just grinned again as Aaron rubbed his chest with a pained expression on his face. When Aaron stopped, he looked up to see Matt smiling at him.

"I love you, Matty, even if you give me titty twisters."

"I'll keep that in mind," Matt said thoughtfully. "I need to digress, though, and ask you what you're doing Friday night."

"I don't know; you tell me."

"Well, there's this photography exhibition that Alyson told me you might like...."

AARON took Matt's hand and walked into the gallery. He had no idea what to expect. He only knew that he was nervous about seeing Jake again. He knew Jake wouldn't be mingling with the crowd; he hated crowds. He would probably be hidden somewhere, trying to stay away from his admirers. That knowledge was the only thing that allowed Aaron to have enough courage to step inside.

He knew Jake had called his exhibition *The One I Want* but nothing else. He didn't get much further than the doorway, however, because the moment he entered the gallery, all he saw was himself. Dozens and dozens of photographs of him staring back at him. They lined every wall, every pillar; every possible spot contained his face or his mouth, his eyes or his neck, his hands on a pot or a curl tucked behind an ear. Every photo was some part of him.

"He kept them," Aaron whispered. "I thought they were all gone. I didn't think they were good enough."

"Of course he kept them, you shithead," Alyson said casually as she handed Matt a drink and started to pull him away. "Jake's outside, through those doors. You know him and crowds."

Aaron looked at Matt in a panic as Alyson dragged him away. "See you on the Flip side," Matt said as he grinned, saluting Aaron with his drink and disappearing into the crowd with Alyson.

"Stupid Matt and his stupid puns," Aaron mumbled as he stomped over to the door leading out to a courtyard lit with Japanese lanterns. He was so caught up in his petulant scowling that he almost missed Jake sitting by himself on a bench, his back to Aaron. Aaron stood stock-still for a full minute before putting his head down and purposefully heading over to the bench where he sat down next to Jake,

but facing the opposite direction, looking back in at the party instead of out at the courtyard. His fingers curled over the edge of the bench and held on for dear life.

Jake didn't move, didn't turn to him, didn't give any indication he even knew Aaron was sitting beside him. Aaron wanted to say something, but the words clogged his throat and he sat silently.

"Just so you know," Jake said suddenly but quietly, "I love you, Flip."

And just like that, Aaron could suddenly breathe again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

JUST so you know, I love you, Flip.

The words echoed in Aaron's head and filled his body with a wave of calm that covered and washed over him slowly like a warm, clean summer rain. Nothing had ever compared to this moment.

Right now.

Here.

With Jake.

Jake who was in love with him.

Aaron exhaled the breath he had been holding for longer than it should have been possible and turned to wrap both his arms around Jake's upper arm, holding it to his chest and his peaceful and contented heart as he pressed his face into Jake's shoulder. Breathing him in. Holding him still.

Jake's body jerked at the contact, as if it wasn't prepared to feel Aaron's touch again, but as soon as Aaron's arms wrapped around his own and Aaron's nose press against his shoulder and Aaron's warm breath weave its way through his shirt to his skin, he relaxed. Jake was finally was able to give up and let go as he slumped against Aaron and was warm again.

Although his body relaxed and slid into Aaron's, Jake

kept his gaze on the courtyard as he gathered more of his words.

"I wanted you to know that," Jake continued in the same quiet voice with which he had said those miraculous words. "I wanted you to know I loved you all along. You told me once you wanted someone who would love you from the start, someone who would look at you and say, 'That's the one I want'. That was me, Flip. I'm the man that's wanted you from the start. You're the one I want, and if you never come back to me, never see me again, I wanted you to know that."

Aaron let the words flow over him as tears dropped from his eyes onto Jake's shoulder.

"Even if you stay away from me, even if you give up on me, just know there's someone across the park who loves you and wants to have kids with you and sleep beside you and argue with you and see you smile and all those things you said you wanted. I want them, too, but only with you. Only with my Flip."

Jake finally turned his head toward Aaron, leaning over and pressing a kiss to the top of his head. "I'll always be right across the park waiting for you, loving you, whenever you need me."

A happy sob broke past Aaron's lips as he let go of Jake's arm with one of his to reach up and wrap his fingers around Jake's neck, pulling his head forward to meet his own. Their lips almost crashed together, Aaron surged toward Jake so suddenly, but Jake reached out for Aaron's face at the same time Aaron pushed forward, and Jake's hand on Aaron's cheek held him in check. Jake's lips parted

and were soon covered by Aaron's. Both marveled at the taste of the other and wondered in the back of their minds what had taken them so long, why had they bothered to wait when this, *this* kind of taste, feel, touch awaited them.

Jake's thumb ran along the top of Aaron's cheekbone, his fingers slipping into the curls surrounding his face. Aaron's thumb was resting in the hollow of Jake's throat, feeling every beat of his heart, which instead of being erratic and fast was steady and strong as his fingers and palm curved around his neck. The kiss was an odd mix of tender and fierce with both wanting more while still savoring that first taste, that first kiss. Lips were gentle until one pushed forward, and teeth clashed, noses collided. Tongues, warm and determined, tangled. Both were losing every ounce of breath in their bodies but were unwilling to part.

Not when they had finally found the path to each other's lips.

Aaron was the first to pull away, but Jake kept his bottom lip firmly between his teeth in an effort to pull him back into the kiss. Aaron gave in immediately and reclaimed Jake's lips with a long, deep kiss. Aaron's hand slipped from Jake's neck to grab at the collar of his shirt, he pulled the shirt into his fist as he used it to drag himself closer to Jake, pressing them together until their foreheads bumped and their teeth once again clashed.

Aaron tried pushing Jake away from him with the hand that was tangled up in his shirt as they both struggled to take in air. Jake reluctantly pulled away and looked at Aaron with glassy eyes. Aaron smattered kisses all over Jake's face and then wrapped the arm that was still holding Jake's arm

around his neck instead, tugging him close in a frantic hug and pleading in an almost desperate whisper, "Take me home, Moz. Please take me home."

"I will. I promise," Jake said, turning to the side to wrap his arms around Aaron's waist and lift him onto his lap.

Once Aaron felt Jake move, he all but scrambled into Jake's lap. "I love you, too, Jake. Please," he sobbed, "I just want to go home."

Jake's heart started to pound madly as he cradled Aaron in his arms. Aaron had always been the one to take care of him. Always. And now Aaron was clinging to him like a lifeline, and Jake was determined to never let go.

Never.

He was going to do right by Aaron. Give back to him all the love and shelter he had shown him for the past years. He was going to give back to him every late night phone call, every reassuring smile, every single word of his belief in him, every time Aaron had held on to him in the night when he needed someone to keep him from drowning. He was going to do the same for Aaron, no matter how long it took.

Jake hoped it took forever.

Aaron's breath hitched as Jake tightened his hold and nearly crushed all the air out of him, but instead of trying to push him away, Aaron only clung tighter, drawing in air in long stuttering breaths as he repeated over and over, "I love you. I want to go home. Please."

Love.

Home.

Please.

Please.

And over and over as he held Aaron and almost rocked with him, Jake repeated, "We're going home. I could never leave without you. I love you."

I love you.

As Aaron's breath slowed down and returned to normal, he pressed his face one more time against Jake's neck before pulling away and looking at him with tear-soaked eyes. "I'm sorry," he whispered as he brought his hands up to Jake's temples before stroking them slowly down the sides of his face and touching their foreheads together. "I'm sorry for... it's... too much, you know. Too much."

"But not enough," Jake said as he captured Aaron's hands in his and brought them to his lips. "Never enough."

"I know," Aaron said after kissing Jake's temple.

Even though they were curled around each other, it was as if they couldn't touch each other enough, couldn't possibly be close enough. Fingers roamed and warm breath left lingering trails across overly heated skin that were soon followed by slow careful kisses.

Suddenly Aaron burst into one of his heart-stopping laughs. Delighting in the sound but wanting to know why he was laughing, Jake smiled. "What?"

Aaron smiled back brightly and pointed behind Jake's head to the crowd inside. "We're putting on quite the show if anyone is interested in looking."

"You mean Aly's not standing in the doorway waving her pompoms and chanting, 'Go! Go!'? Because I thought she might be."

Aaron grinned. "Oh, she was, but now I think she's around front getting a car ready for us so we can hop in and speed away to save the world and have sex."

Jake laughed for the first time in a long while. He laughed and it lit him up from the inside out. "I'm all for the sex part of your scenario, but I gotta tell ya, saving the world can fucking wait."

"Fuck yeah, it can wait!"

Jake stood up with Aaron. Once he was upright, Aaron let his legs slide from Jake's hips until he was standing on his own.

"I love you, Aaron," Jake said gruffly, pulling him towards his lips for a quick kiss.

Aaron beamed. "I know. Isn't it great?"

"Pretty much the best thing ever."

Aaron laughed as he grabbed both of Jake's hands in his and started dragging him back into the party. Jake scowled at him when he saw where they were heading.

"It's the only way out!" Aaron sighed dramatically. "It's either the front door or we jump the fence."

Aaron's laughter crackled through the night air again as Jake broke away from him and made a beeline for the fence. He watched as Jake took a running leap over the sad excuse for a barrier.

"I can't," Aaron whined, holding his sides. "I'm laughing too hard!"

"Get your ass over here right now, Flip," Jake whispered loudly as he waved his hand. "I'll lift your laughing ass over the goddamn fence if I have to!"

"Oh fine!" Aaron said, jumping over the fence easily.

"Hey, I thought you said you couldn't do it," Jake said in mock indignation once Aaron was with him on the other side.

"For god sake, Jacob, the fence is like four feet high. Besides, I was being contrary. Have you ever known me *not* to be uncooperative?"

"No, not really. But I still hold out hope," Jake said brightly.

Aaron smirked, then grabbed Jake's hand again, pulling him along behind him. Jake was surprised a cab even stopped for them since Aaron was all but running down the street, dragging him behind him and waving his arm like a bedlamite to hail it down. Once it came to a complete stop, Aaron opened the door and shoved Jake inside, practically shouting the address to the cabbie. Jake was laughing as he sprawled across the backseat, and Aaron dove in after him, halfway sitting on him in the process.

"Jesus, Moz, get up! Don't you know how to get in a cab?" Aaron asked with exasperation as he pulled Jake by his arm into a sitting position. "Do you need a child seat or something? I could buckle you in and give you a juice box."

"And animal crackers."

"Yes, those too."

Jake laughed and grabbed Aaron's face in his hands to plant a big sloppy kiss on his lips. After the kiss, Aaron dropped his head back to rest it against the seat, smiling at Jake.

"Pinch me," he said, raising his arm up in front of Jake.

"Is this some kind of kinky sex game?"

"Yes, Jacob, it's my kinky pinching game. Nothing says sex like pinching, I always say!" Aaron suddenly yowled when Jake pinched him... hard. "You fucker!"

"You just told me to pinch you!"

"Not so hard, asshat! I only wanted to make sure I wasn't dreaming."

"Awww, that's sweet, Flip!" Jake said with a goofy grin. "Here," he said as he stuck out his arm, "do me."

Aaron rolled his eyes at Jake's "do me" comment but let it slide so he could concentrate on pinching him as hard as he could.

"Motherfucker!" Jake howled.

"Hurts, don't it?"

"Did you take some skin with you too, you little shit?" Jake asked mulishly, rubbing his arm.

"Possibly. Now, do you still think you're dreaming, sweetheart?"

"No, I'm very much awake... pookie."

"Snookums."

"Darling."

"Honey bun."

"Boo-bear."

"Oh my God, I so thought you were going to go for the 'boo-boo-kitty-fuck' from Jay and Silent Bob!"

"Shit," Jake laughed. "I forgot about that one! I could call you that though; you're so a boo-boo-kitty-fuck."

"If you call me that, I'm going to call you dumb-ass-

Jakey-fuck."

"That's fine by me, boo-boo-kitty-fuck."

"Don't call me that!"

"Come on, you like it," Jake cajoled as he nuzzled at Aaron's neck.

"How could I *not* like it when you're doing that to my neck?" Aaron asked, scrunching up his shoulder to try to catch Jake's face between it and his chin.

"Dunno," Jake mumbled as he continued nipping at his neck.

Aaron's mouth fell open slightly, a sigh escaping his lips. His hand moved from his lap and into Jake's, starting at his knee and working its way north, slowly up the inside of his thigh as Jake scooted closer and spread his legs, allowing Aaron's hand to slip higher. Jake's hand rested against Aaron's stomach for a moment before it wormed its way under his shirt to touch the heat of his skin underneath. As Jake's hand slid across his stomach and around his side, Aaron nudged at Jake with his forehead for him to lift his head so he could get at his mouth again. Jake raised his head and leaned in to kiss Aaron as his free hand slipped around the back of his neck. Aaron opened up to the kiss, letting his tongue snake between Jake's lips while his hand moved high enough to cup the bulge in his pants. Jake grunted into Aaron's mouth at the slight squeeze.

He lifted his mouth from Aaron's and breathlessly asked, "Where are we? How close are we to home?"

Aaron looked out the windows in a daze, trying to figure out exactly where they were and how much longer they'd be trapped in the smelly cab. "I don't know. I think we're close."

TAKE MY PICTURE | GISELLE ELLIS

"Not close enough."

Aaron turned in the seat so he could drape his left leg over Jake's lap and continue to stroke the hardening cock while his lips returned to Jake's mouth. The hand Jake had at Aaron's side dropped to his ass when he hooked his leg over him. He ran it down the crease until he could hold one cheek firmly in his hand and pull Aaron toward him. Jake's insistent tugging caused Aaron's own aching cock to brush up against the outside of Jake's thigh. Aaron started rubbing up against him in an effort to alleviate the strain that was sending all his senses on high alert.

Their kisses were sloppy and wet as they pushed against each other and tried to relieve all the pent-up ache in their bodies.

"I love you, Jake," Aaron whispered against the corner of his mouth.

"Love you too," Jake answered as the hand that was at Aaron's neck came up to brush away the errant curls from his flushed face.

They stared at each other in between slow kisses, just biding their time until the cab finally got them home.

Once the cab finally stopped at his building, Jake threw a wad of money at the cabbie as Aaron all but fell out of the backseat in his rush to get out. Jake came tumbling out behind him and had to do some quick steps to right himself while Aaron laughed at him in delight. Once he had gained his footing, Jake wrapped an arm around Aaron's waist to pick him up and swing him to the side, kissing him right there on the sidewalk in front of all the people passing by. Aaron wrapped his arms around Jake's neck and kissed him

back as they stumbled toward the door of the building. They laughed as Barry, the night doorman, looked at them strangely before rolling his eyes at their antics.

"Hey, Barry!" Aaron grinned as Jake dragged him through the open door.

"Mr. Bennet." Barry nodded formally to Aaron while trying to keep a straight face before turning to Jake and adding, "Mr. Wyzchek, good evening, gentlemen."

"Good evening indeed, Master Barry!" Jake yelled over his shoulder, preparing to run across the lobby with Aaron to the waiting elevator.

They crashed into the elevator, and Jake almost missed the button as Aaron's wandering hands snuck around his waist and down over his ass. "Stop that, I almost pushed the wrong floor."

"Eh, small price to pay." Aaron gave Jake's ass another squeeze and kissed the curve of his jaw.

Aaron yelped when Jake suddenly grabbed him behind his knees to lift him up and slam him against the elevator wall. Jake set his ass down against the railing running along the back wall, his mouth colliding with Aaron's as his legs wrapped themselves tightly around Jake's waist. Aaron's arms slipped under Jake's armpits to slide along his back. When they heard the bell ping for Jake's floor, he leaned away from Aaron just long enough to press a random button on a higher floor so the doors once again slid shut.

Trapped within the heat of Aaron's thighs, Jake rubbed against him, forcing their cocks into contact. The rough heavy denim stretched painfully across both their cocks. Aaron hissed as Jake pushed against him, and his head

dropped back against the slick, shiny surface of the elevator wall. He hitched himself up higher in Jake's arms and arched his neck to offer it up to searching lips. Jake's tongue trailed down his neck to suck at the hollow at the base of his throat. Aaron moaned, and the vibrations passed through Jake's lips making them hum and shiver.

The ping of the elevator opening interrupted them yet again and both groaned in frustration. Jake leaned back to push the button for his floor, and the doors closed with a whoosh.

"Gotta get you somewhere," Jake said between kisses, "with no interruptions."

"Gotta get me home," Aaron emphasized.

Jake ran his thumb over Aaron's lips and looked into his eyes as he whispered, "Where I'll keep you forever and ever and ever...."

"And ever and ever and ever...." Aaron finished.

"And ever," Jake added with a grin, kissing right above the arch of his eyebrow.

They held each other until the ping of the elevator sounded again. Jake kept his hands on Aaron's hips as he backed away from him, and his feet slipped back to the floor. Aaron curled his fingers around Jake's wrists, following him as he walked backward out of the elevator, seemingly incapable of letting Aaron out of his sight even to turn around and walk to his door.

Jake's back bumped the door, but still he didn't turn around. Aaron smiled at him and reached down into his front pocket to pull out his keys and unlock the door. Aaron broke eye contact with Jake to look inside the apartment as

the door swung open. His eyes filled with tears, and he whispered, "I missed... so much, Moz... so much." Jake shushed him as he held his head in his hands and ran his thumbs over his cheeks. Once the tears cleared from Aaron's eyes and he looked back at Jake, he let go of Jake's wrists to wrap his arms around his neck. Jake let his own hands move from Aaron's hips to encircle his waist in a tight hold that he used to pick him up, just enough to lift his feet off the ground as he walked backward through the doorway and into the apartment.

"You're home now, Flip."

CHAPTER NINE

AARON'S hold on Jake tightened. "I am," he whispered into his neck, "finally."

Jake set him down and pulled away from him, only to take one of his hands in his own and start walking with him toward the bedroom. Aaron gripped Jake's hand and followed. Jake's scent permeated the apartment, and Aaron closed his eyes in relief as he let Jake lead him down the hall. Jake looked back at him as they walked through the bedroom door. Once Jake's eyes connected with his, Aaron started to shake uncontrollably, so much so that his teeth started to chatter. Jake stopped to look down at Aaron's trembling hand.

"What's wrong?" he asked in quiet confusion.

He looked so much like a little boy asking that question that Aaron wanted to smile, but the only thing he could say in response was, "It just started. I don't know why. Maybe I want this too much."

Jake did the only thing he could think of doing. He walked up to Aaron and wrapped his arms around him, trapping his arms firmly at his sides. Jake tried to surround him completely, tried holding him still through the tremors. "Does this help?" he asked.

Aaron nodded. "Don't let go just yet."

"I won't."

Aaron stood there breathing in Jake's scent and remembering all the reasons why this place, why *Jake*, was his home. All the reasons why he belonged exactly where he was.

He drew in a deep breath and stepped away from Jake.

"Better?" Jake asked quietly as his fingers stroked his

Aaron nodded and smiled as he reached out and curled his fingers over Jake's belt buckle, "I have a feeling it'll get even better really soon."

"You think?" Jake's eyebrow arched. "I was actually just bringing you back here to watch a movie or something. Then maybe take care of some stuff in the studio. You'd think Alyson had never worked for me before; she's messed so many things up. She just does *not* know how to do them properly."

"Tosser!" Aaron laughed, tugging on Jake's buckle to yank him forward. "And you know Alyson does everything perfectly."

"Nuh-uh. She does things in her Aly way. I prefer the Flip way of doing things."

"You mean letting everything pile up until the desk collapses under the strain? Because I think the Aly way may be more efficient."

"But it doesn't have that Flip flair."

"I'd think you'd enjoy an assistant that actually assists."

"You would think that, wouldn't you? But you see: I've

grown accustomed to the Flip way. I'm kinda in love with it, in fact. I found I can't live without it."

"It can't live without you either."

"That's good to hear."

"Hmmm-mmm," Aaron hummed as Jake's lips took control of the situation.

Jake's hands slid down Aaron's sides until they came to his waist and his fingers could curl around the hem of his shirt to pull it up and over Aaron's head. Aaron stopped kissing Jake for a minute so he could raise his arms and let the shirt come over his head. He let Jake slowly and carefully unbuckle and unzip his pants; he waited patiently as Jake dropped to his knees in front of him, pulling the pants down with him. He let Jake lift one foot, then the other, to ease off his socks and shoes. He closed his eyes when Jake's hand came around the back of his leg to gently squeeze his calf before it continued downward to wrap around his ankle and lift his foot up at the same time he freed it from his pant leg.

Aaron had to open his eyes again when he felt Jake's lips, hot and wet, against the inside of his leg. He had to be able to look down and see Jake on his knees in front of him, pressing kisses again and again down his leg until he got to his ankle and the process was repeated, the warm caress of his fingers circling his ankle to pull the other pant leg off. He sighed as Jake laid his palms flat against the front of his calves and ran them up his legs until they were fanned out on his hips, so close to his cock as to be almost painful. He sucked air into his lungs when Jake rose up on his knees so his face brushed across the thin fabric of Aaron's boxer

shorts, his nose gently bumping the head of his cock, and then again, the hot wet of his mouth ghosting across it. Aaron's fingers knotted themselves into Jake's hair when Jake's tongue licked its way across his stomach, along the skin at the edge of his waistband. And he moaned when Jake's hands finally pulled his boxers off as well.

Jake sat back on his heels and simply looked at Aaron. From head to toe. With that intense and unbreakable stare he used when focusing in on a subject, an idea, an inspiration. Aaron stood there, knowing he should be embarrassed to be completely naked, cock bobbing and hard as a rock, in front of a still fully clothed Jake, whose eyes were capable of burning holes through him. But he wasn't. Not even a little bit. He felt beautiful and strong. Like a wild thing Jake would never want to let from his sight for fear it would run away into the night. He felt powerful and in control. He knew he was like liquor running through Jake's veins and slowly bringing a flush to his skin. He knew he was Jake's addiction. Knew it and it coursed through him. He looked at Jake as he ran his hands over his chest and stomach, down to his hips.

Teasing.

"You're taking my picture, aren't you?" Aaron asked quietly, the fingers of his right hand sliding through the trail of curls paving the way to his cock.

"Yes," Jake breathed, his eyes following the path of those fingers.

"How many have you taken?"

"Hundreds," Jake answered, sweeping his tongue across his lips, "a day. Every day I take hundreds of you." "Take one now," Aaron ordered as he took hold of his cock and started stroking it.

"No."

"No? Don't you want one?" Aaron asked, momentarily uncertain.

"I always want one. But now," Jake answered, looking away from Aaron's hand and up into his eyes, "I want the real thing. I took pictures because I couldn't have you. Thousands filled with my want, my need for you. I want to stop for a while so I can touch what only my film has been able to touch up until now."

Aaron took his hand away from his cock. "Touch it then."

Jake tentatively reached out and pressed his palm flat against Aaron's stomach, his fingers fanning out then staying still, letting the heat soak into them. He was deathly afraid to move them any further. Aaron stayed still as well, unnaturally still for him, letting Jake simply touch him. The only thing moving either of them was Aaron's steady breathing as his stomach rose and fell slightly under Jake's hand.

"Beautiful," Jake whispered. "The pictures could never hold you. This is mine; this is what I was trying to find."

"Now that it's found," Aaron replied as his fingers combed through Jake's hair, "don't lose it again."

Jake shook his head, moving his hand along Aaron's stomach to his hip and then around to the small of his back where it met his other hand to hold Aaron around his waist. Jake laid his head against Aaron, his cheek brushing the smooth skin at his hip. Aaron shivered as Jake's stubble

prickled his skin. Jake immediately pressed his lips to the delicate skin covering his hipbones, trying to capture the shudder in his mouth and let it slide down his throat so it could live inside him

Jake turned his head so his cheek scraped against Aaron's cock, and he smiled softly when he heard Aaron's sharp intake of breath at the contact. He moved his fingers from Aaron's hips to hold his cock, his other arm still around his waist, hand resting at the top of his ass. He did nothing but hold Aaron's cock in his hand as he felt it pulse with heat.

"Jake, please...."

Unable to ignore such a plea falling from Aaron's lips, Jake ran his tongue across the slit, teasing the tip of his cock before taking it in his mouth. As he let his tongue roll around Aaron's cock, he slid his fingers down the crease of his ass, just brushing across his hole. Aaron's hips jerked forward at the touch and forced more of his cock into Jake's mouth. Jake simply relaxed his jaw and let Aaron slowly fuck his mouth. Aaron's taste filled him, and his scent wrapped around him.

Aaron pulled Jake's mouth away from his cock and groaned, "I can't stay in your mouth and not come."

"So come," Jake said as he tugged Aaron's hips forward and tried to take him back in his mouth.

"No," Aaron said, dropping to his knees in front of Jake. He wrapped his arms around his neck and whispered hotly in his ear, "I want to come all over you when you're inside me."

Jake moaned when he heard those words and abruptly

dragged Aaron up from the floor and kissed him, pushing his tongue into Aaron's mouth as he stumbled backward with him to the bed. Aaron shoved at him, and Jake fell on his back across the bed, bringing Aaron down on top of him since he refused to relinquish his hold on him.

Aaron straddled him and cried out when his cock pushed against the rough denim of Jake's jeans. As Aaron kissed him, Jake almost wanted to stop him just so he could push him up into a sitting position and look up at him, take him all in. It was driving him insane to have Aaron laid out naked on top of him while he had yet to remove a single item of clothing. Jake knew he wanted his skin against Aaron's, but the way Aaron's bare skin looked pressed against his clothing was gorgeous and dizzying all at once. Jake could barely breathe from the sight of it, and he wanted it to go on forever. He wanted to keep holding, keep running his hands over every inch of Aaron's skin he could reach, and when Aaron cried out, Jake moved his hands to his hips and held on so tightly as he thrust up against him that it must have been painful for Aaron. But instead of pushing his hands away or telling him to let go, Aaron dug his fingers into the fabric of Jake's shirt and pushed himself up off his chest to writhe against him. He moved his hips as if he were riding Jake's cock, as if there were nothing between them. Jake wanted to sob; he ached so much.

It was almost violent the way they held and moved and pushed against each other. Aaron's head was hanging down, and he was shaking it as if he couldn't let himself go further. A couple of times, he raised his right hand, Jake's shirt still bunched up and held in his fingers, and brought it down hard, beating Jake's chest with his fist. Jake gritted his teeth

and closed his eyes and knew that even though his nails were short and blunt, they were scratching burning red lines down Aaron's hips and the outsides of his thighs as they flexed and moved against him.

It was harsh and desperate.

It was like they were trying to fuck through Jake's clothing, fuck through all those years they had been without this kind of contact. This kind of heat.

Finally, Jake could stand it no longer and literally threw Aaron from him, but since Aaron's hold on his shirt was firm, it pulled at his neck, nearly strangling him as it dragged him toward Aaron. He ruthlessly shoved Aaron's hands from his shirt so he could pull it off. He flopped onto his back and fought with his belt and zipper, thrashing against the bed as he tried to squirm out of his jeans at the same time he was kicking off his shoes. He could barely get his jeans and boxers past his cock, it was so rigid. As he struggled with his clothes, he noticed that Aaron had crawled on his hands and knees to the side of the bed where he vanked open the nightstand drawer so forcefully he almost pulled it all the way out. The lamp wobbled on the stand and came precariously close to falling off it. Aaron was frantically digging through the drawer and throwing things across the room.

A book.

The remote.

Jake's glasses.

All thrown out until he finally found what Jake knew was in the very back. Shoved there so long ago after one of his Fuck du Jours, when he had at last given up all hope of ever finding anyone who could come close to being his Aaron. Shoved there when he had come to the realization that he would rather die than fuck one more guy who wasn't Aaron.

Who didn't smell like him.

Or feel like him.

Or taste the way Jake knew he would taste if ever he would get the chance to drink from him.

Jake had managed to pull off everything down to his socks when Aaron crawled back to him. With eerie concentration and focus, he coated Jake's cock with lube, then swung his leg over him. Before Jake could even mention a condom or argue that he wasn't ready, Aaron reached back, took Jake's cock in his hand, and shoved himself down on it, taking him in as sweat and tears rolled down his face. Jake cried out in alarm, was nearly sick at the thought of how painful the act of taking him without preparation must have been. He shook with the tremors going through his body at the sight of Aaron's tears. He reached out clumsily to wipe them away.

He could take anything, anything, but sad, aching tears falling from those brown eyes.

Aaron slapped his hands away and started moving up and down on his cock. Jake hissed "stop" and tried to lift him off, tried to stop him. Aaron shook his head and grunted "no," fighting Jake, hitting at his arms, scratching at his chest as he tightened his thighs against Jake's sides and continued to ride him. Jake didn't realize tears were falling from the corners of his eyes as well until Aaron finally trapped his arms against his chest and leaned down to lick

them away, even as his own left the bridge of Jake's nose wet when his cheek slid across it. Jake was unaware he had started pushing up into Aaron, rocking his hips with him, until Aaron's hands slipped up into his hair as he held his head still and sighed against the side of his face, "Yes, like that... more... give me more."

Jake tugged his arms out from between their chests and reached down to grab Aaron's ass to hold him still while he fucked up into him. As he bucked and rocked against him, Aaron was kissing Jake, wet and fierce, biting and tearing at his lips.

They couldn't get enough.

Fast enough.

Hard enough.

Close enough.

Deep enough.

Just not enough.

Jake broke away from Aaron's biting lips to bite his own way down the side of Aaron's neck, leaving angry red marks behind. Aaron was moaning and gasping above him, his hands moving everywhere he could reach in a frantic search for more skin to touch, his cock trapped between their bodies, rubbing against the hairs in the trail down Jake's belly. Jake could tell Aaron wanted more, and it wasn't long before he pushed Jake's face away from his neck and sat up, burying Jake even deeper inside him. He worked himself on Jake's cock faster and faster until all his moaning cries blended into one long, broken, stuttering wail. Jake kept reaching out for him, fighting with him to pull him back down onto his chest. He needed Aaron closer. Aaron was too

far away. Finally, he got a grip on Aaron's biceps and was able to anchor his feet firmly enough against the bed to throw Aaron to the side as he rolled with him. Aaron started to kick out with his feet, trying to roll them back over, trying to take back control but Jake hooked one arm under the knee of a thrashing leg and pushed it back until Aaron was flat on his back and spread beneath him.

Once Jake started fucking him again, started pumping his hips at an almost obscene pace, Aaron stopped fighting for control and instead clung to him like he was the only light in the dark, the only safe place he would ever find. His free leg wrapped around Jake's lower back while the one he was holding curled around his upper arm and back. His arms went around his neck and back until their bodies were nothing more than a tangle of limbs that were too entwined to claim a single owner but were rather an extension of this new sweating, grunting, fucking creature they had created.

Aaron screaming for more.

Jake claiming him in a growling, scratchy voice.

More.

Mine.

More.

Mine.

Both were breathless and gasping for air as Jake continued to fuck Aaron hard and fast. All his muscles burned from the strain, but he kept pumping his hips, kept pushing in and pulling out of that divine heat, that tightness that was consuming him and swallowing him whole. Only the feel of Aaron around him, the sound of his moaning breaths, and the taste of him that still lingered in his mouth

kept Jake moving long after he should have collapsed. He was overwhelmed by desire and need. Possessed by Aaron. By his ass, his hot breath, his strong arms and hungry thighs clutching him close, his heels digging into his back to the point of pain.

Possessed.

Crazed.

Never once wishing for an exorcism, for he'd rather be filled by Aaron, controlled by him, bound and tied to him, than be without him or be free of such burning, all-consuming love.

He wanted to burn.

Suddenly Aaron's arms unwound themselves from around Jake's neck, and his hands moved up the back of Jake's neck and forward to the sides of his face where they held on firmly and forced him to look down into his eyes. Jake knew Aaron was about to come; he could feel him tightening, constricting around him. He could feel it in the way Aaron held him, in the way his breath hitched, and it relieved him to know that they were already in tune with each other's bodies. They were already living inside each other.

"Look at me," Aaron whispered as his fingers dug into Jake's scalp, holding his head in place.

Jake unhooked his own arm from under Aaron's leg to join his other so that he held Aaron's head firmly in both his hands and answered in a ringing chant that matched the movements of his hips, "Yesyesyesyesyesyes...."

And before either one could breathe another breath or utter another "yes," Jake finally found out how Aaron looked as he came, finally saw the glazed look that slid over those brown eyes, finally saw the beauty that he had always known existed in this world but had never been able to find.

Finally knew *his* Aaron. Bare, flushed, breathless, and slick beneath him.

It was enough to send him bursting inside Aaron. Spilling and spilling as if he'd never stop, the pleasure so intense, so profound that it brought forth exhausted and painful sobs. Sobs that were the buildup of five years of wanting and waiting to have what he finally possessed.

Aaron.

He fell to Aaron's chest and cried. Cried into the hollow at the base of his neck where the smell of the two of them combined was so concentrated that it brought forth even more sobs. Aaron brought the leg Jake had dropped up and around his waist, pulling him in further, making him sink deeper. One of his arms slipped back around his shoulders as his other hand combed through Jake's hair.

"Shhhhh, I've got you. I've got you," Aaron hushed.

Jake continued to cry as he whispered into Aaron's skin, "You can't leave me now, not after... you can't... you can't leave again."

"No, I can't," Aaron agreed.

"I love you, Flip," Jake stuttered.

"I love you too."

Jake raised his head and started to wipe away his tears as he gently rolled away from Aaron, who winced as they separated. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Aaron asked as his fingers gently joined Jake's to wipe at his cheeks.

"For everything. For not appreciating you enough, not telling you I loved you every day I was with you, for keeping you out, for crying like a baby just now... and for hurting you," he added, reaching out his hand to slide it down Aaron's side and back over the curve of his ass.

"You don't need to apologize for those things. I did all of them too," Aaron said, touching his forehead to Jake's. "And you didn't hurt me."

"But, you didn't even let me prepare you... you just... I had to have hurt you."

Aaron shook his head. "You didn't hurt me. Besides I was the one that did it, now wasn't I?"

"Yeah, but why? Why did you do that?"

"Because," Aaron said as he pressed his chest against Jake's, settling himself in his arms, "I couldn't wait one more moment. I couldn't. I would have split into a thousand pieces if I had to wait one more second."

"You have to be sore now, though."

"I guess that means next time it's your turn then." Aaron smiled as he spoke.

"Guess so." Jake shrugged in feigned boredom.

Aaron scowled at him and bit his chest.

Jake yelped. "Ouch! Fucker!"

"What? I slipped."

"I love how you can pretend that you *accidentally* bit someone." Jake laughed, pushing at Aaron's shoulder. Aaron pushed back and soon they were tussling and rolling around the bed in a pile of naked limbs, laughing and swearing at each other until Jake stopped Aaron's curses with a strategically placed kiss. "Stop fighting and start kissing me, you little bastard."

"Well, since you put it like that, let's make out all night long, Mr. Dreamypants," Aaron said with a grin.

"Sounds like a plan, Mrs. Dreamypants." Jake smirked. Before Aaron could start bitching about being called "Mrs.," Jake started kissing him again, and all protests were forgotten.

For a good long while.

BY THE end of the second day, Alyson had called a total of eleven times. Each time she called, Jake swore and growled that he'd throw the motherfucking phone out the goddamn motherfucking window. On the twelfth time, he did throw it, but at the wall instead of out the window because he was too busy getting fucked by Aaron at the time to do anything other than reach out, grab it off its receiver, and smash it against the bedroom wall. Aaron had only laughed at him and said she'd start calling their cell phones sooner or later, which prompted Jake to throw *those* out the window instead, once he was able to get up off his hands and knees. Aaron sat cross-legged on the bed, laughing hysterically as Jake dug the phones out of their pants pockets and tossed them out the window while yelling "Watch out below!" and then

swearing up and down as he pulled his head back in from the window that Aaron's phone had started ringing on the way down.

"I heard it, Flip!" Jake insisted. "Tiny little strains of 'It's Raining Men' as it fell to the ground."

"That's not my ringtone, you asshole!"

"Okay, fine then, tiny little strains of 'I Will Survive'."

"Douchebag!" Aaron shouted, reaching out to grab a pillow to throw at Jake's head before realizing there were none there.

A few hours before, when they had awakened from one of their brief naps between fuckings, Jake had suddenly pushed all the pillows, blankets, and sheets to the floor, insisting that they hurt, claiming he could only stand the feel of Aaron's skin against his own and nothing else. Aaron knew exactly what he meant, because he felt the same way. It was like all his nerve endings were exposed, all lying just below the very uppermost layer of skin, and anytime he brushed against anything, his skin would spark and burn. The only time he could stand the burn was when his skin was touching Jake's. Hour after hour, they had fucked and kissed and fucked and kissed until there was almost nothing left to them but the little blue electrical shocks that crackled across their raw and brittle skin as they slid along each other's bodies.

Sometimes it was gentle and slow, other times it was frenzied and harsh and brutal. They just couldn't stop. Every muscle ached and their arms and legs could barely hold them up, they kept fucking. Even though they were dizzy and lightheaded, wasted and weak, they kept fucking.

Over and over again.

They became ravenous and would have to stop and stumble to the kitchen where they'd simply open up the refrigerator door and sit in front of it, pulling out whatever was edible and eating it with their fingers. They devoured everything in sight. It was like their stomachs were bottomless, and they couldn't consume enough food to keep them going. They soon emptied the fridge and had to move on to the cupboards, eating everything they could get their hands on.

And the thirst. They were always thirsty, their throats dry and screaming for water. It wasn't long before they had gone through every bottle of water Jake had and simply had to stand at the sink and gulp down water straight from the faucet, so hot and thirsty and dry that they couldn't even be bothered to fill a glass, because it took too long. They felt like they were drinking gallons and gallons and gallons of water, but they also felt as though they were burning alive, and no amount of water seemed able to douse the flames.

It got so bad that at the end of the third day, Aaron had to actually stumble into the studio and use the phone in there to call Alyson and ask her to drop off more food, since they had eaten every last crumb of food in Jake's fridge and cupboards both. She had tried to ask questions and be nosy, but Aaron had abruptly mumbled "Bring food," and hung up. When she brought it over, she pounded on the door until Jake yelled: "Leave it at the fucking door and go home, dammit!" and Aaron came to the door to ask her more kindly to: "Leave it at the fucking door... please." She said she wouldn't leave it until he opened the door and she could see with her own eyes that he was still alive and that his voice

wasn't a cleverly procured recording used to distract and divert her. He had scowled and cursed but went back to the bedroom to grab the sheet off the floor, wrapping it around himself so he could answer her without the fear of frightening Jake's old neighbor into a heart attack if she happened to be walking down the hall when he opened the door.

When Aaron flung the door open, Alyson stepped back in shock, her mouth hanging open as she clutched the bag of groceries to her chest and stared at him, taking in his crazy matted curls, his chapped and bruised lips, the faint purplish marks in the shape of fingers wrapping around his biceps, the scratches up and down his chest, the bite marks at his neck, and the utterly glazed look in his eyes. She wrinkled her nose as the overpowering smell of sweat and sex wafted out the door and over her. She shoved the bag of groceries at Aaron, then threw her hands up in the air, and hollered in relief, "Fucking *finally!*" before simply turning away from Aaron without another word and walking back down the hall toward the elevators.

FOR five days, they never once left the apartment, and it wasn't until Alyson came back over on the fifth day and let herself in to throw open windows and push them out of bed that they finally took showers and got dressed. Alyson told them she feared for their lives—that they might fuck themselves to death if she didn't intervene. Jake had rolled his eyes and shot her the finger but got up nonetheless. Aaron just smiled at her lazily until she shook her head and

walked away to see what she could do about the damage throughout the apartment.

But after Alyson's intervention, they settled down into the life they'd have together. Both had voiced their concerns to each other about how they were going to adjust to living together, but they soon found that there really wasn't any adjusting to do at all, because whether either one knew it, Aaron had been living there all along. The only change this time was that he had all his things physically there as opposed to across the city; the apartment itself had always been his true home.

They soon became the old married couple they had always been but never acknowledged.

Aaron found that he didn't really mind all that much anymore when he'd snuggle up next to Jake in bed and breathe in the scent at the curve of his neck and find that it didn't smell like him.

Because now it smelled like Aaron.

Jake found that he was a happy person at heart. He had never known it before. But now that the weight and stress of losing Aaron, of not admitting he loved him, had been lifted from his shoulders, he found he was actually happy instead of cantankerous and crabby. And he found he actually *enjoyed* being so, much to Alyson and Aaron's amusement.

One night when he awoke to an empty bed, he wandered into the studio and found Aaron busy at his wheel. The brightness of the moon was the only illumination in the room. He sleepily shuffled over to where Aaron was sitting. Without a conscious thought or even stopping what he was doing, Aaron automatically scooted forward in his seat so

Jake could slip in behind him. Jake swung his leg over the stool and sat down behind Aaron, wrapping his arms around his waist and resting his head against the silky skin of his back between his shoulder blades. Aaron kept working, and Jake could feel the muscles of his back moving under the skin beneath his cheek. The steady hum of the wheel, as well as Aaron's own humming, was quickly lulling him back into sleep. He blinked a few times and looked at the moon through the window. As his eyelids became too heavy and his eyes dropped shut again, he thought about a book he had read to Milo and Aaron one day. He remembered how Aaron had been so excited when Milo requested it because it was his favorite of all Milo's books. He smiled faintly to himself as he also remembered how he had made him repeat his favorite lines over and over again until Milo told him, "Unc Fip, let Unc Dake read the story. Stop 'rupting him." Aaron had smiled at Jake over Milo's head and let him continue with the story, but Jake knew why he so loved the book. It was all about acceptance and the overwhelming power of love and about how you can give and give and give even after you think you have nothing left because there's still love, and that's really what you were giving all along. The thing you were always left with.

So as Aaron hummed and Jake fell back asleep, wrapped around him by the moonlit window, he repeated over and over what he had repeated for Aaron that afternoon.

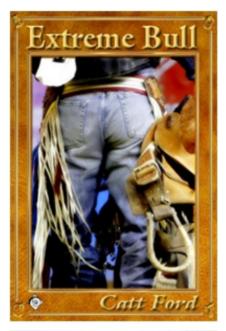
And the boy loved the tree.... very much.

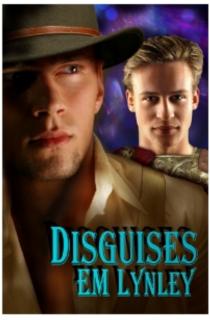
And the tree was happy.

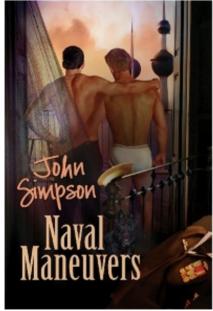
GISELLE ELLIS grew up on a farm thoroughly convinced she was Laura Ingalls; she was quite displeased to find out she was not. Giselle now lives just outside of Minneapolis, Minnesota. She spends a great deal of time roaming around the Twin Cities looking in bookstores, museums and any odd spot she can find. She also teaches, reads voraciously and obsessively watches movies, which in turn has created an enormous font of useless knowledge of which she is quite proud. If it were up to her, she would spend all of her time traveling the world, writing fiction and trying to convince Major League Baseball that baseball should be played 365 days a year.

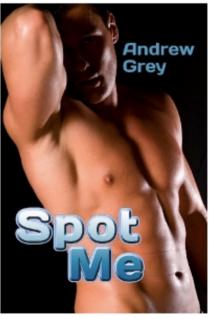
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