



Language Lessons © 2011 Jay Bell

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Language Lessons

by Jay Bell

Clothes make the man. Whoever didn't believe that simply wasn't dressing right. Joey smirked at this thought as he traded his navy blue dress shirt for one that was pink and hugged his waist a bit tighter. His fingers nimbly took care of the buttons as he considered how even a different shirt could make him feel like a new person.

He had first discovered this phenomenon as a child while playing dress-up in his father's clothes. To Joey, it was as if he had stolen the crown from the king, the lightning bolt from Zeus. Dressed in an ill-fitting suit jacket and business shirt with sleeves twice as long as his arm, he had felt transformed into a powerful grownup. This discovery had somewhat stripped away his father's mystique, but the lesson had been worth the shattered illusion. As soon as Joey was old enough to escape the primary-colored nightmare that was children's fashion, he had taken to wearing slacks, ties, and sometimes even suits.

While in school he often toned this down. His sense of fashion attracted less attention in high school than it had in junior high, but it still made him a target. Now, on the first day of summer vacation, Joey was free to make himself the man he wanted others to think he was. There was no need to check his hair as he walked to the window. He had already spent twenty minutes making sure his dark locks were perfectly styled, before a sudden desire for a different hue had urged him to change shirts.

Now all he had left to do was wait, but that shouldn't take long. Joey flicked his wrist and checked his watch. A little past ten in the morning. He adjusted the blinds so he could better see the house across the street. Just a few years ago, he had found many excuses to glance up the long, concrete driveway, all in the hopes of seeing Bradley Tucker.

Ever since Joey had learned the joys of masturbation, Bradley had been his constant imaginary partner. Bradley was every bit the quintessential jock, at least by all appearances. As far as Joey knew, he wasn't on any teams in school. Instead Bradley was one of those genetically gifted bastards who never worked out but had bulging ox muscles anyway.

Joey had never spoken to Bradley. Not once, which wasn't as pathetic as it sounded since there was a four-year age difference between them. A twelve-year-old has nothing to offer someone who is sixteen and after two years of Joey's unrequited lust, Bradley had moved to college. Joey had simply moved on and was a different person now, since sex was no longer a fantasy. Occasionally he would pull Bradley out of the spank bank for old time's sake, but mostly Joey hadn't thought of him much.

Until last week, when Bradley's beat-up Ford Escort filled the driveway again. Back from college for a visit, Joey surmised. That very same morning, Joey spotted the big lug

standing outside, wearing a bored expression while the family dog did its business. The long forgotten lust reignited in Joey, but now, at least according to the rainbow sticker on the back of Bradley's car, there was something he could do about it.

People were like clockwork. Sluggish clockwork desperately in need of oiling and maintenance, maybe, but still reliable. Most people did roughly the same thing at roughly the same time every day, even if they weren't aware of it. Bradley was no exception. Soon enough, he strode barefoot out of the house, the fat family dog following behind like an earthbound balloon bobbing along at the end of its string.

Bradley was wearing terrible logo-emblazed sweatpants and a matching T-shirt, the kind every college managed to sell to their already financially burdened students. Half his hair was smooshed, the rest sticking up, as if he had just rolled out of bed. This suited Joey just fine. Just because he demanded impeccable hygiene and uncompromising style from himself, didn't mean the men he found attractive need do the same. Maybe it was that old "opposites attract" adage, or maybe it was because the sloppier the other person dressed, the sharper it made Joey feel. Then again, Bradley could probably wear an old potato sack and still ooze sex appeal.

His target absentmindedly scratched at his package, reminding Joey that he was there for a reason. Checking to make sure his tie was immaculate – something he could do by touch alone – Joey danced down the stairs and stepped out the front door. He didn't look at Bradley as he headed for the mailbox. Instead he considered the sky, smiling at the nice weather and glancing down the street as if he might be expecting visitors at any moment. Then he turned his back on Bradley to check the mail, but of course it was too early for a delivery. Only after he had shut the mailbox did he glance around, casually doing a double take as if he had only noticed Bradley standing there watching him.

"Oh, hello," Joey said, walking across the street in a few short strides. Like a predator, he kept his gaze locked on Bradley's green eyes that complemented his short golden hair so well. He couldn't let the bronze skin or sprinkling of country boy freckles, nor the fantasies of rolling around in a hayloft that these physical characteristics brought to mind, distract him. Joey reached his hand out as he neared. "I think we used to go to school together. I'm Joseph. Joseph Cooper."

This was something else he always did. "Joseph" just sounded so much more adult, and he liked very much for people to mistake him as such. Just last week, an old lady at the grocery store mistook him for an employee there. When he explained that he was the store manager, which of course he wasn't, she didn't even blink an eye.

"Brad," Bradley replied, perhaps having adopted a similar strategy some years ago. He accepted Joey's hand. Not a single callous marred his palms. He probably sat around all day stuffing chips into his mouth, but still had a physique that would make Hercules envious. Bradley's brow furrowed. "Sorry, I don't think I remember you."

"I don't believe we had any classes together," Joey said. "I just remember you from the bus all those years ago." He laughed as if this false memory was embarrassing, and Bradley joined him, showing off his perfect white teeth.

The conversation lulled, the silence filled only by the chirping of birds and a lawnmower off in the distance.

"Nice day for it," Joey said.

"Nice day for what?" Bradley asked.

"Oh, I could think of a few things." Joey let his eyes wander over Bradley's body, which had only improved over the years. The muscular arms, the thick fingers, and the hint of skin just visible between the shirt and sweatpants. He took it all in without disguising his interest, before returning his eyes to Bradley's innocent emeralds and giving him a crooked grin. "So," he asked, "your place or mine?"

A number of expressions played across Bradley's face, starting with confusion, followed by skepticism and amusement before settling on lust. Joey smiled encouragingly.

"Why not?" Bradley beamed. "No one's home at my place. Let's go."

Joey said a quick "thank you" to any gods who might be listening. He couldn't remember any of their names, but he knew a lot of the old ones dealt in fertility. He followed Bradley up the drive to the front door, looking over his prize and trying to subdue the reaction in his pants until they were out of public view.

Bradley held the door open for him, as if they were on a date and stepping into a ritzy restaurant. Joey's laughter was curtailed by the strange feeling of entering a house he had seen countless times from the outside, but never from the inside. That there were rooms full of furniture, knick-knacks, different scents, and history felt like a conjuring trick. All of this had been in plain view the entire time, but only now did the magician allow Joey to see it all.

"Uh, do you want a drink or something?" Bradley asked, obviously unsure how to proceed.

"I really don't." Didn't a hot guy like Bradley get propositioned all the time? Joey had imagined this would be routine for him, but obviously he needed to take the lead. "Where's your bedroom?"

"Down here," Bradley said, as if relieved that they shared the same idea.

At the bottom of the carpeted stairs was a door. Behind it was a furnished basement that functioned as a bedroom, but Joey barely looked it over. As soon as the door was

closed, he pressed Bradley up against it and began kissing him. Bradley was only surprised for a moment before his lips and other parts of him responded.

Sweatpants may be generous to expanding waistlines, but they do have other perks. When Joey stepped back and looked down, he found the fabric straining against the impressive rod beneath. The pants looked ready to rip through, so Joey reached for the waistband. Bradley's hands were there first as he unceremoniously pulled down his pants and ripped off his shirt. Then he kicked the sweatpants off and strode over to the bed, flopping onto his back.

So that's how it would be! Joey started unbuttoning his shirt while looking down at the bed. Bradley had one arm behind his head and a cocky grin on his face. His heavy muscles and thick torso prompted Joey to sigh as he moved his eyes down to the cock that was proportionate to the rest of the body. In other words, huge.

Joey carefully hung his shirt over the back of a chair and stepped out of his shoes. He took his time undoing his pants, facing Bradley and letting him watch. When Joey was finally nude, he crawled into the space left by Bradley's spread legs. Joey didn't mind a selfish lover. He was just as happy to serve as he was to be serviced. He took his time, enjoying how animated Bradley was, writhing and moaning as Joey went down on him.

By the time Bradley came he was bucking like a bronco, Joey holding on tight while keeping his fist pumping until the air was filled with the most glorious of explosions. Then he added to the mess by straddling Bradley's hips and shooting his own load all over the awe-inspiring chest and abs.

Everyone has a system for cleaning up, and after they had panted a few minutes, Bradley revealed his. He groped around with one huge paw, searching blind over the bed's edge until he found an old shirt on the floor. He used this to wipe his torso clean before flopping back onto the mattress, the springs groaning under his weight. Then Joey nestled against him, resting his head on one meaty deltoid.

"I never thought I'd say this again," Bradley chuckled, "but I'm so glad my parents aren't home."

"You were a little loud," Joey said, before reading further into the statement. "So were you sneaking a lot of action behind your parents' backs when you lived here?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, not a lot, but there was this one guy."

"Do tell, and don't leave out the details."

"I don't know if I should," Bradley said, but Joey could feel the boastful grin in his voice. "Then again, it's not like any of us are in high school anymore. Do you remember Scott Hammond?"

"Nope."

"Well, he was only a sophomore."

"Oh, a younger guy," Joey said, pleased with himself for passing as older.

"Yeah. I only had a semester left until graduation when the office noticed I hadn't taken my language elective yet. Most people get that over with in the first couple of years, but I didn't, so I took Spanish. There was some lame project we had to do, one of those things where you have to stand in front of the class. Scott and I were paired up, and we agreed to meet after school. The first time we met up, all we did was joke around. The second time too, if I remember right. Scott always cracked me up. Anyway, time was running out so we finally focused on the assignment the third night. One of the things we had to explain were the different words for love in Spanish."

Joey gave his memory a jog. "*Amar, encantar, and gustar?*"

Bradley shrugged. "Something like that. I remember one is for things you like, another could be a friend or family member, and one you only say if you really, really mean it."

"*Te amo.*"

"Yeah, that's the one. Anyway, we sort of debated what the different kinds of love were before our immaturity kicked in and we made it all dirty. One word for sleeping with someone you only kind of like, another for sleeping with a friend or family member." Bradley's chest rumbled with laughter. "Man, we were so dumb. Eventually we started talking about how bad we wanted to get laid. I don't remember how we got there exactly, but I told Scott he could blow me. I said it like an insult, but it was totally an invitation, too."

Joey pushed himself up on one elbow so he could watch Bradley's face as he told the rest of the story. "Then what?"

"Then he dared me to whip it out." Bradley grinned. "I have nothing to be ashamed of, so I did. He fell right down on his knees and went to work. That was my first time. I mean, I'd been with girls, but who counts that?"

Joey laughed and reached down, not at all surprised to find that Bradley was hard again. "So I'm guessing you studied a lot of Spanish together from then on."

"Yeah! Every opportunity we got. We never made a big deal out of it or put a label on anything. I think we were both worried about scaring the other one off."

"So did you ever tell him?"

"What?"

"*Te amo.*"

Bradley's ox chest rose and sank again. "No. I went off to college in Michigan, and he was still a couple of years behind, so there wasn't any way we could really be together. I met my first boyfriend pretty soon after that, and I knew I could be open with him, so I sort of lost myself in that relationship. Never stopped thinking about Scott, though. It's messed up how we lost touch. We were close."

"You could always look him up again."

"Nah, I'm sure he's moved on. Probably has someone by now."

Bradley chewed his lip, and Joey let him dream of the past for a while before he got bored. He turned Bradley's head toward his and kissed him, but it wasn't the same as before. The big guy's heart just wasn't in it anymore, which was fine. Joey wasn't the sort for puppy dog crushes, and if he had a jealous bone in his body, he hadn't found it yet.

Instead he found himself fascinated by the hold this Scott Hammond still had on Bradley after all these years. Maybe that's what love was like. So far the emotion had escaped Joey. He loved the thrill of the hunt, and he couldn't get enough sex, but he had yet to meet the right person to keep him allured physically and engaged intellectually. That Scott Hammond still haunted someone as smoking hot as Bradley was interesting. Maybe he was different from the others.

* * * * *

"Honey, I'm home!"

Joey always said this when he came home, and his mom always laughed as if it were still funny. He could smell something being fried, probably grilled cheese, and his stomach rumbled in response. After checking his hair in the hallway mirror, he ran into the kitchen to find that his nose had been right, with the added bonus of tomato soup.

"Just in time for lunch," his mom said with her back toward him. "Where were you? It's so early."

When he didn't answer right away she turned around, her brown eyes reading him like no one else could. "Joey!" she said. "I can't believe you!"

"What?" Joey laughed as he took a seat.

"You know what!" She didn't say anything more until the steaming food was on the table and she was sitting across from him. She blew a strand of dark hair out of her face and considered him again. "Your father would be spinning in his grave if he knew what you got up to."

"He's not dead, so stop talking about him that way," Joey said.

"He might as well be dead, considering how little support he pays. Who was it this time?"

Joey dunked a corner of his grilled cheese in the soup. "Just some guy," he said before taking a bite.

"Some guy you'll never see again or bring around the house?"

He shrugged.

"You know I want better for you," his mother continued, her food forgotten. "If you would just slow down and let people get to know you, then I have no doubt that they would fall in love with you. You're turning seventeen in a few months, and you've never had a boyfriend or been on a date. Does that sound right to you?"

"Plenty of people my age have never had a boyfriend. Besides, I leave all the dating to you." His mom was always looking for Mr. Right, and had left behind a long line of boyfriends in her quest. While he admired her persistence, he didn't find the game at all appealing. Except the way Bradley had described it *had* been kind of charming. "Speaking of which, what happened with that mechanic you went to dinner with. Any potential?"

His mom smiled and took the bait. For the rest of lunch, she focused on her own love life instead of Joey's. He scarfed his meal and promised her that he would do the dishes right after he checked his email. The truth was, he had some cyberstalking to do. He took the stairs two at a time as he ran to his room and booted up his computer.

Online social networking was a funny thing. At some point in history, society had decided it was perfectly acceptable to throw open the doors on privacy and tell the world absolutely everything that you were doing, from the mundane to the miraculous. More often than not, the information shared was trivial, but at times it could be useful.

Bradley might be one of the few still living off the grid, since even Joey couldn't find a profile for him, but he had Scott's entry pulled up within minutes. Joey sent him a friend request – after making sure to use one of his hotter profile pictures – and waited. The response came almost instantly.

In just a handful of minutes, Scott Hammond's life was an open book to him. Joey clicked through his profile with a critical eye. Scott was certainly cute, with dark brown hair and friendly eyes with a glint of mischief in them. Scrolling through his status updates wasn't terribly interesting, but they were mercifully devoid of the usual gaming messages and quiz results. Scott wasn't forthcoming with the details of his personal life, but one entry caught Joey's eye:

Thinking I'll take a year off before heading to college. Earn a little cash and kick back with my slacker friends.

Assuming Scott had gone through with this plan, he should still be living in the area. Joey was surprised by the sense of excitement this information instilled. He had a hard time understanding why, but he wanted to meet Scott, see him in the flesh. In a way, hearing Bradley's story was like seeing half of a TV screen when a really erotic film was playing. Joey could imagine Bradley's side of things, but Scott was still just a low-rez profile photo in his mind.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Joey clicked a few times and opened a window to send Scott a message.

Hey! Don't I know you from high school?

Well, it had worked with Bradley. Of course Scott might actually know who he was, since there was only a two-year age difference between them. They could have passed each other in the halls countless times during Joey's freshman and sophomore years. He liked this idea, so he used it.

I know I passed you countless times in the hall because I remember checking you out. Your profile pic is really cute, by the way. Maybe we should hook up sometime and—

Joey alt-tabbed over to the page that showed Scott's hobbies and interests. Disc golf? That was played with Frisbees if he remembered right. Eh, why not?

—play some disc golf together. With school out, I'd be up for it tomorrow even.

He signed the message and sent it, thinking about how great it was to be gay. Anyone else would dismiss his invitation as creepy, but gay people often felt an immediate camaraderie. They didn't know each other, but already they had something in common. Being gay could make the rest of the world feel a little distant at times, but it made instant family of others like him.

By evening the plans were confirmed, and they traded a few more messages back and forth. While fun, such online communication never really gave a true impression of a person. Some of the wittiest emails come from the shiest people. Or the opposite. Joey had once met someone who could barely type who was as talkative as can be. Unfortunately.

So Joey allowed himself to feel a little nervous the next day, because he could be meeting just about anyone. A park was a hard place to pull off a tie, so he grudgingly went without, but he chose a rust-colored dress shirt with goldenrod stitching that always made him feel sexy, and left the top button undone. A little of his favorite cologne and he felt capable of getting anything he wanted. Already a few ideas and positions were coming to mind.

That there was a park for Frisbee golf surprised him, but he found the strange chain baskets far from inspiring. At least the game's goal was clear enough: Lob a plastic disc and try to get it inside the basket. The learning curve on this sport couldn't be much, which would leave Joey free to focus on his true goal. He loitered in the park's gravel parking lot until a Jeep pulled up next to his car.

Scott hopped out wearing a red tank top and a pair of gray cargo shorts. Pushing his shades up on his head, he gave a broad smile. Joey recognized that look. This would be easy, maybe even instant. Unfortunately, Scott held up a couple of Frisbees before tossing one to Joey.

"Thought you might not have your own," he said.

"Thanks. I totally forgot." He extended his hand. "Joseph. Joseph Cooper."

"So I gathered." Scott laughed, but he took advantage of the invitation for bodily contact, squeezing Joey's hand softly and holding on a moment longer than any businessman would dare. "You already know who I am, somehow."

"Honestly, I just stumbled on your profile." Funny how any sentence that started with "honestly" usually wasn't. "I was scoping out your photo when it hit me that I'd seen you before."

"Wild. I think I would have remembered seeing you."

"I'll take that as a compliment." Joey leaned against his car, a subtle hint that they could get straight to business if Scott wanted. Usually he liked a little more chase than this, but something about the summer weather and Bradley's story had him ready to go.

"Let's hit those pole holes," Scott said.

"Sorry?"

"Surely you have experience with pole holes!"

Scott's eyes reflected amusement, but Joey didn't know what to make of this. He stammered for a response, but for once his clever words failed him.

"That's what disc golf goals are sometimes called." Scott laughed. "Relax, it's just a brand name."

Joey did his best to recover. "I knew that."

"You haven't played before, have you?"

Joey's expression was guilty. "I'm in your capable hands."

Scott winked. "You got that right."

As it turned out, disc golf was a lot more complicated than Joey thought possible. The different throwing techniques, for instance, and the various tricks that were just for show. Scott knew his stuff and was going all out to impress him, rolling the Frisbee across his arms like a strange version of the Harlem Globetrotters. Soon they were laughing and finding excuses to brush against each other. Scott even pulled the cheesy "let me show you how it's done" move, coming up behind Joey to guide his hand. Joey made sure to press back against Scott as he did this, and was certain he felt something growing between them.

"So who did you hang out with in school?" Scott asked during a break.

Joey traced the old initials carved into the park bench with his finger and used them as inspiration for the names he made up. "Becky Hill, Larry Ward, Sherry Hobbs." He paused, suddenly tempted to play with fire. As usual, he gave into this temptation. "Bradley Tucker."

"Bradley?" Scott said. "Really?"

"Well, during his junior year we were pretty close. We lost touch after that. You know him too?"

"Yeah. Just for a little while. But, uh, yeah." Scott swallowed, his face vulnerable for a moment. "How well did you know him, exactly?"

"Oh, not like that," Joey laughed. "God, I wish! Wait. Are you telling me that you guys used to—"

Scott turned his head away, but Joey could just see the dopey grin that broke out on his face.

"No way! Man, you are so lucky. There wasn't a girl in school who didn't want a piece of Bradley Tucker. You have to tell me some details!"

"I don't know, man."

"Oh, come on!" Joey shoved him playfully. "I bet he was hung like a horse."

"He's big, yeah." Scott's grin stretched even further. "But more than that, I just liked who he was. He was the first guy I ever messed around with. I was sure I was going to get pummeled the first time I made a move, but for some reason I wasn't scared. It's like he and I just fit together."

"Hmm. Sounds like more than just a one-time thing. Were you guys in a relationship?"

"Kind of." Scott took the sunglasses out of his hair and fumbled with them. "I guess we were just friends in his eyes, but I had such a crush on him. Like the embarrassing kind where you scribble his name in your notebook and dream about getting married."

Scott snorted as if this were funny, but he was no longer smiling. "There was this one time, just once, that we were in his room and grinding against each other. Usually we'd do that a while to really get ourselves worked up before we'd even take our clothes off. Well, this time we were kissing, really kissing, and he pulled me down on top of him. I relaxed my weight and it's like we became one person. He'd breathe in and I'd breathe out. Our bodies were like the ocean and the sky, melded perfectly together. I thought then that maybe he felt the same way I did, that it wasn't just sex for him either. Or maybe he suspected how I felt and only did that for my benefit. I don't know."

"Sounds nice," Joey said, and for once he meant it.

"Oh man, listen to me!" Scott said ruefully. "You're asking for hot details and I'm over here getting all sappy. Tell me about your first time."

"Time!" Joey made a show of checking his watch. He knew exactly what time it was. He would set the mood again with some lurid details from his past, and soon he and Scott would head somewhere more private. Maybe they wouldn't even make it out of the parking lot. Wouldn't be the first time. Regardless of where, they would have sex and no doubt it would feel great. But at the same time, on the other side of the city, Bradley was probably sitting on his parent's couch and watching TV, looking hot without even trying as he vegged away. And maybe, on the commercial breaks, he would look away from the television and think of the one that got away.

"What about time?" Scott prompted him.

"I thought I'd have more of it. When we made plans, I mean. I promised my mom I'd help her with a few things, but maybe we can continue this tonight. Grab a meal somewhere? I'll send you a text."

"Yeah, okay." Scott was clearly worried that he'd said something wrong, but Joey was too busy fleeing the scene to comfort him.

What had he almost done? More important, what did he want to do now? Not just in the next few hours or summer vacation, but with the rest of his life. Education and career were easy. He'd had those planned out since junior high and knew he could accomplish any goal he set his mind to. But now Joey wondered where love fit in. Was it as important as Bradley and Scott made it seem, or were they simply being nostalgic?

After a moment's thought, he realized there was one way to find out.

* * * * *

The playing field of choice was a sports bar. Joey couldn't think of an environment less conducive to romance than that. Televisions begged for attention from every corner, the roar of the stadium audience white noise that filled the air, cut only by the occasional referee's whistle. The only thing anyone fell in love with here was the onion rings, which Joey had to admit smelled terrific.

Scott was there already. That had been easy to arrange, since he had agreed to meet him for dinner, but his expression was uncertain as he waited for Joey's arrival. The truth was, Joey had been there all along, hiding behind the waiters' station where the stench of cigarettes slowly invaded the non-smoking section.

"Are you sure you don't want to be seated?"

Joey waved the waiter away without looking at him. "I'm fine. I'm supposed to meet someone at this very spot, and then I'll be out of your way."

"Suit yourself."

The power of the tie, Joey thought. No one argues with a man in a tie.

He felt better now that he was wearing one again. He ducked a few more times to avoid being seen when the front door finally opened and Bradley squeezed through. This had been trickier to arrange, since Joey didn't think Bradley had any romantic inclinations toward him. Still, the offer to knock back a couple of beers at the restaurant his uncle owned had seduced him well enough. More lies, of course, but the promise of underage drinking was irresistible. Who knew, this little trap of Joey's might lead to love.

Or it might lead to an awkward conversation and at most a one-night stand before they went their separate ways again. Joey told himself he was putting love to the test, scientifically observing the combination of two chemicals for any sign of reaction, but deep down he wanted them to succeed. He wanted the unfriendly atmosphere to drive them out into the night where they would walk together hand in hand, discovering for the first time that they had both felt the same way all along.

Bradley and Scott spotted each other at the same moment. The magic began to build. Scott stood, as if standing at a formal dining table so a lady could sit, and Bradley rushed over. Then . . . a kiss? A hug? But no, not even a handshake. There was some low conversation and awkward body language before Scott gestured for him to sit. Bradley did, and it soon turned worse when they both began scouring the menus. The magic withdrew, defeated by greasy laminated photos of artery-clogging food.

"Forget the stupid barbeque ribs," Joey hissed to himself. Why had he set them up for failure? He should have chosen a romantic restaurant or arranged a chance meeting by a lake. Anything but this miserable dive that would witness the undignified death of a high school romance.

"*Te amo!*"

Bradley's voice boomed through the restaurant as he pushed his menu away. The magic was back! Scott appeared confused for a moment before the old Spanish lessons kicked in.

"*Te amo*," Bradley repeated, but this time his voice was gentle, and Joey was forced to read his lips. Then they were all smiles and flushing faces as they spoke soft confessions. Soon enough, they gestured to their surroundings and laughed before Bradley stood and offered his hand. Then they let the magic carry them away from the horrible little sports bar to a place where their hearts could be made one.

Joey watched them walk out the door, hand in hand, and allowed himself an uncharacteristic sigh. Then he pictured where the evening would take them. "Maybe I'll be peeping in a window tonight," he said to himself before chuckling madly.

"Sorry? Did you say something?"

Oh, god, not the stupid waiter again! Joey spun around to find someone about his age with a shock of blond hair, ivory skin, and intense blue eyes. Eyes that had been trained somewhere down below but now rushed to his face. The eyes widened, not unlike a deer caught in headlights, except in this case the headlights had been Joey's rear end.

What the hell. The night was still young and love was in the air. Or was it only the tang of expired barbeque sauce? Either way, he extended a hand.

"Joseph. Joseph Cooper."

The waiter nodded and ignored the hand. "I know who you are, Joey. We were in the same chemistry class."

"We were?"

The waiter raised an eyebrow. Oh, great. He had hurt feelings. Joey wracked his brains, trying to remember who this person was. He was attractive, which made it all the odder that Joey couldn't remember him. He was just thin and small enough to make Joey feel big and masculine, a feeling he enjoyed, so why hadn't he noticed him before?

"I remember! Phillip! The one with horrible glasses and the zits."

The raised eyebrow shot down, joined by the other in a scowl. "Thanks."

"I don't mean it in a bad way. You're cute now. Who cares if you were a walking pimple back then?"

"If you aren't going to order something, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Phillip's intense blue eyes smoldered, the anger sparking a flame in Joey. This could be fun. Joey adopted his best cocky posture and gave a lazy grin. "I'm not really hungry to be honest, at least not for food. What time do you get off? Maybe we could meet up and have some fun."

Phillip blinked at him, grabbed a couple of menus from his station, and walked away to serve a table. Okay, so they had gotten off on the wrong foot. Joey would let him steam for a moment, but by the time he came back to the waiters' station, they would have a laugh over the whole debacle before making plans for the evening.

Except Phillip didn't come back. Instead he shot a few glares in Joey's direction, and later sent a coworker over to fetch things he needed. Shortly after that, Phillip disappeared into the kitchen and didn't come out again.

"I have better things to do with my time," Joey muttered as he headed for the door. The guy was probably a closet case or something. No big loss. Joey had accomplished what he'd come here to do. Bradley and Scott were probably grinning stupidly at each other at this very moment and exchanging tender words, so his good deed was done. Love was sweet, but what Joey needed was fun, not complications. As he stepped out into the night air, he decided to put the entire matter of love behind him.

* * * * *

"What in the world possessed you to bring me here?" Maggie frowned at the sports-related décor, before turning her attention to the sloppily dressed men at the bar and wincing. "Seriously, what did I do to offend you?"

"They have good onion rings," Joey muttered, his attention locked on the menu.

Maggie shrugged and dug in her purse until she found some nail polish. "I'll just watch you eat. I'm trying to watch my figure for Dave."

Joey loved her too much to scoff. Maggie had been his best friend for years and was his equal in her appetite for men. No one they went to school with appreciated her vivacious curves, so Maggie had long ago turned to older men with a shameless interest in big, beautiful women. She wasn't as fond of one-night stands as Joey was, but her wandering heart ensured that none of her relationships lasted very long.

"You have to order something or it will look weird," Joey said.

"Since when do you care what anyone thinks?" The nail polish froze in mid-stroke. "Oh, I get it. What's his name?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Joey could see the waiter approaching from behind. "Not now," he hissed. "Please!"

Maggie shrugged, a smile lifting her cheeks as she resumed painting her nails.

"Can I get you some—" Phillip noticed Joey for the first time and recognized him. No surprise since it had only been yesterday that he asked Joey to leave. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Just a Coke for me," Joey said.

Maggie glanced casually at the menu. "Vanilla malt. With a cherry on top." She crinkled her nose at Phillip and winked. Joey would kill her, but later, when there were fewer witnesses around.

Phillip spared a glare for Joey before wordlessly stomping toward the kitchen.

"Oh, I think he likes you!" Maggie said.

"He does, doesn't he?" Joey shook his head. Why was he even here? He didn't need to put himself through this again. Joey could go home right now, login to a gay chat room, and in a couple of seconds, countless guys would be sending him private messages and asking if he wanted to hook up. Guys hotter than Phillip even, although he would probably have to look awhile before finding one quite as delicate and fair.

"This is different for you," Maggie said as they waited. "Usually you don't bring me along. Am I supposed to watch or something? Or I could film it all. You know I love my gay porn."

Joey smiled. "I just wanted to scope him out. It's nothing really."

But when a perky waitress brought them their drinks and Phillip failed to return from the kitchen, Joey realized that it *was* something. At the very least he should be given a chance to explain.

"Are y'all ready to order?" the waitress asked.

"Excuse me." Joey stood and pushed past her, marching toward the kitchen. Who was Phillip to treat him like this? At the very least, he was a paying customer and deserved a little courtesy. He was leaving, but not before he gave Phillip a piece of his mind! The waitress called after him, but Maggie had his back by "accidentally" knocking over her malt. Joey swore to take her somewhere nice to make up for all of this, but first he had business to tend to.

He exploded through the kitchen doors, temporarily disorientated by the noisy bustling world beyond until he spotted Phillip. He had that same deer-in-headlights look again, which was so adorable that Joey's anger slipped through his fingers and scurried away.

"What do you want?" Phillip said. "You're going to get me in trouble."

"I'm sorry." The words felt strange and unfamiliar to Joey's lips. Had he ever muttered them to anyone but his mother? "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings yesterday."

"Okay," Phillip said as if this concluded their conversation. Didn't he get it? Joey had just apologized.

"Look," Joey stepped closer, speaking in a whisper. "If you're still in the closet then I understand."

Phillip laughed. Joey would have liked to bottle the sound up and save it for later, taking it out occasionally so he could listen whenever the mood struck. There wasn't a malicious chord in that laugh. It was the pure amused laugh of a child.

"I'm not in the closet," Phillip said. "Everyone knows."

"Me, too!" Finally, they were on stable ground again. "Like I said, I'm sorry I was an ass. It was a very weird night for me, and I didn't mean the things I said."

"Including that I'm cute?"

"No! I meant that," Joey backpedaled. "I definitely meant that."

Phillip's pale cheeks turned pink, and not from the heat of the kitchen.

"So look, why don't we hook up later?"

Phillip's smile faltered. "Are you asking me on a date?"

"Sure!" Call it what you like, but after yesterday's mishap, Joey couldn't be more in the mood. Who knew that arguments could be so hot?

"To be honest, I'm working kind of late and I have someone picking me up."

Joey's stomach sank. "Another guy?"

"Yeah," Phillip said and laughed, "but just my dad."

"Well, call him and tell him I'm picking you up."

"I don't know. I'll be tired."

"Just let me drive you home," Joey said, trying not to beg. "That's not so bad, is it?"

"Okay. Twelve o'clock then."

Joey grinned. "See you at midnight."

* * * * *

The hour couldn't come quick enough. Joey passed the time by taking Maggie out to eat. Staying at the sports bar would have been awkward, and she had definitely earned a better meal. She enjoyed that, even though she didn't need Joey to be taken out. She was always making her men wine and dine her and once confided that she liked it better than sex.

Afterwards Joey came home and took a shower, resisting the urge to play with himself since he was counting on plenty of action tonight. Then he stood in front of the mirror and tried on almost every dress shirt he owned. Suddenly none of them seemed good enough.

He was wondering if any department stores were open this late when he looked at the clock. Joey only had fifteen minutes to make it back to the sports bar, so he ran for the car. He made it just as Phillip stepped out through the glass doors.

"Talk about timing," Phillip said as he climbed into the car.

"That's what you think. I had to circle the block twenty times to make it look that casual."

Joey's joke earned him another laugh. This was going to be a good night.

"So where do you live?"

Joey nodded along to the directions, noticing how thin Phillip's fingers were when he pointed. Everything about him was like a fine china doll. He looked good, despite the horrible striped shirt he had to wear for his job. Phillip's blond hair was perfectly sculpted. A street light illuminated a bead of water in his hair, meaning that Phillip had been primping himself just before Joey arrived. This realization made him ridiculously happy.

"Kind of a bummer that you have to work during summer vacation," he said, making small talk.

"Tell me about it," Phillip moaned, "but I'm saving up for a car. You don't work?"

"No. My dad sends his child support occasionally and Mom doles it out to me like an allowance. So, why a sports bar? Do you have a deep abiding passion for barbeque ribs or something?"

"No. My uncle owns it."

"Ha! I was just telling this guy the other day that my uncle owned it. I was lying, obviously. I was just trying to hook him up with another guy because I'd slept with one of them and—" He glanced over to see Phillip looking at him as if he were crazy. "Oh, never mind. It's a long story."

"Turn here."

When had this game become so difficult? Joey tried to calm himself, to find his center. What did he usually say at times like these? For the life of him, he couldn't remember. Luckily Phillip spoke next.

"I'm sorry to hear your parents are divorced."

"Oh, it's for the best, believe me. All they ever did was argue. I was really young, so it's not like I remember much. How about you? Are your parents still together?"

"Yup. In fact, I think that's my dad on the porch right there. God, how embarrassing!"

Joey gave a commiserative chuckle as he pulled in the driveway. "Does this mean I can't come in?"

Phillip appeared taken aback. "I didn't know you wanted to."

"Yeah. Of course I do."

"Okay."

Joey unbuckled his seatbelt, unsure about the sudden hesitation. Rather than worry about that, he turned his attention to Phillip's dad. If there was one thing Joey was good at, it was charming the pants off parents. Literally, in the case of one dad he had met.

"Hi, boys!" Phillip's father said. "I just remembered that I had forgotten to water the lawn."

Phillip rolled his eyes. "Yeah, right."

Joey extended a hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, mister—" Oh god! He didn't even know his last name! "I mean, sir."

"Mr. Anthony, but that's all right. I don't know your name either."

"Joseph. Joseph Cooper."

"Except everyone calls him Joey," Phillip added. "Aren't you going to bed?"

"Of course. Of course."

"We'll keep it down," Phillip added when his father failed to leave.

Mr. Anthony looked meaningfully toward Joey. "It is rather late."

"I know," Phillip said.

"Well... all right then."

Mr. Anthony finally went back inside, leaving them alone.

Phillip sighed. "You know what? It really is late, and I smell like someone poured a tub of frying oil over me. I just want to get cleaned up and go to bed."

Joey stepped closer. "We could take a shower together. You stand under the hot water and relax, and I'll wash every inch of you."

For a moment, he could see that Phillip was interested. He was sure of it! But then Phillip frowned.

"I don't know how to tell you this, but I think you and I aren't looking for the same thing."

"I'm pretty sure we are," Joey said.

"It's a nice idea. A very nice idea, but it's the kind of thing I would only do with someone I was in a relationship with."

Joey just stared. Was he saving himself for his wedding night or something?

"Anyway, thanks for the ride. Good night."

Phillip pecked him on the cheek like something out of an afterschool school special before he slipped inside his house and closed the door.

Joey walked stiff-legged to the car and sat there a couple of minutes, completely dumbfounded, until he came up with the only possible conclusion. "I knew I should have worn the other shirt."

* * * * *

Joey stared at himself in the mirror. This wasn't an unusual activity for him, but now he was doing so with a critical eye. Wasn't he good enough? His brown eyes and hair weren't to everyone's liking, he supposed, even though he had been complimented on them many times. He had what his mother called a Mediterranean skin tone that she claimed came from Greek ancestors. All Joey knew is that he tanned nicely, and he currently had a good amount of sun. As for his body, it wasn't thin enough to be called skinny nor big

enough to be muscular. If Joey had been a porridge, he would have been just right. Maybe that was the problem, but no one had complained before.

There was a knock on his bedroom door.

"Yeah?"

"Laundry service!" his mom called.

"Okay."

His mom came in, lugging a basket of laundry that she set on his bed before starting to put clothes away in his dresser. "Everything okay?" she asked when he continued to stare at himself.

"You don't put out on the first date, do you?"

"Joseph Cooper!"

"Sorry." He turned around to face her. "It's just that, well, there's this guy."

"You met someone?" she asked, already much too enthusiastic. "Like a real person and not just a fling?"

"I guess so."

His mom sat on the edge of his bed, eyes eager for more information.

"We kind of had a rough start," Joey explained, "but I could tell he was interested. Then, out of the blue, he shot me down."

"As in he didn't want to have sex?"

"Right."

"Honey, everyone moves at their own pace."

Joey looked skeptical. "Girls, maybe. I've been with enough guys to know that we're all the same."

"You'd be surprised."

"I guess I am. Maybe he's more like a girl or something. Now I need to figure out how to really make him like me. This is probably going to gross me out, but what do you want from a guy?"

His mother looked pleased but soon calmed herself for his benefit. "Well, it's important to me that a man takes an interest in what I like and that he respects my opinions. That makes me feel important to him. What do you know about this boy?"

Joey hesitated. "I know where he works."

"Good. And?"

"Okay, so I don't know much."

"Start there, then. Call him and get him talking about what he likes."

The idea wasn't bad. Joey was genuinely curious to learn about the person who could so effortlessly drive him insane. He supposed that he could do some more online stalking to find the answers, but from the way his mom said it, actually listening to what Phillip had to say was an important part of the process. He didn't have Phillip's phone number, but this gave him a good excuse to see him again.

The hour was early enough that Joey didn't think he would be at work, so after fretting over his appearance, he drove straight over Phillip's house, feeling more nervous than ever as he ran the doorbell. Mr. Anthony answered.

"Hello, Joey!"

"Hey, Mr. Anthony. Can Phillip come out and play?"

Mr. Anthony laughed appreciatively. "Sorry, he's not home. I'll tell him you dropped by. See you around!"

"Wait!" Joey said as the door began to close. "Uh, I know this is kind of weird, but what does he like?"

"Phillip?"

"Yeah. What are his hobbies and stuff."

"Well, he likes animals. He volunteers at the animal shelter walking dogs. His mother has terrible allergies, so we can't have one, but he enjoys taking care of them. That's where he is now."

"The animal shelter? Right now? Got it! Thanks!"

Joey ran for the car, using one hand to dial information on his cell phone as he turned on the ignition. After making mental note of the address, he gunned it all the way to the animal shelter. How long did it take to walk a few dogs? He hoped Phillip was still there.

Joey tore into the parking lot, choosing a far-away space instead of wasting time trying to find one close up, and ran to the front door.

He reached the front desk, panting like an animal himself. "I'd like to volunteer," he told the woman stationed there.

"That's great! We have training classes every two weeks. Just come to the next orientation which is... next Sunday I believe. Let me check. No, it's the Sunday after that."

"I have to take a class?" Joey asked in disbelief.

"Yes. Everyone does. It only takes a couple of hours."

Two weeks from now! Joey wanted to scream. "Actually, can I just look around? Maybe I'll adopt a dog instead."

"Okay. Well. Go right ahead!"

The shelter wasn't the happiest place on earth. Joey had expected the dogs to each have a little room to themselves, where people could come in and interact with them. Instead there were walls and walls of cages, all with miserable faces behind them. What a depressing place to volunteer. Then he passed by a window and saw a dog running gleefully over green grass, Phillip barely keeping up as he jogged behind it.

Joey smiled and searched for a backdoor, having to sneak into an employees-only area before he did. He made it outside just as Phillip was returning with the dog.

"Hey!" Joey said. "Fancy seeing you here!"

Phillip appeared surprised but not displeased. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to volunteer."

"Really? That's great! Let's get a couple of dogs!"

The next few minutes were nerve-racking. Phillip chatted idly, putting one dog away and getting two more, while Joey was sure the lady from the front desk would come back at any moment, ending his charade. Luck was on his side. They made it outside with a pair of bull terriers.

"What made you decide to volunteer?" Phillip asked.

"Forget about me!" Joey said desperately. "What about you? Are you an animal lover?"

"Oh, totally. We used to have cats, but my mom's allergies got worse over the years to the point where even the medication didn't help. Once the cats had all passed away, I could tell she was a little relieved. My best friend Jason had a dog I used to walk all the time before his family moved away. I missed it afterwards until someone suggested I come here."

"Yeah, it's fun!" Joey said, trying not to look as his dog squatted and took care of business.

"Plastic baggie?" Phillip offered.

"Right. Of course."

Joey struggled to find a way of pinching his nose shut while picking up the poop, but finally had to give up and just get the job done. "We don't have any pets at home," he said. "Maybe I should talk to Mom about getting one."

"You should! They are a lot of responsibility, though."

Joey listened to Phillip go on and on about what an animal needed, the various temperaments of different dog breeds, and the benefits of having cats. To Joey's surprise, he didn't need to pretend that he was interested. Just the fact that Phillip cared about this subject made it important to him. By the time they were heading back for more dogs, getting into Phillip's pants wasn't even on his mind.

"Excuse me! Sir!"

Oh god! The lady from the front desk had finally noticed his disappearance.

"I have to go," Joey said, handing the leash to Phillip, "but I'd love to take you out somewhere. A real date, not just a ride home. Say tomorrow? Seven o'clock?"

Phillip was clearly puzzled by his need to leave, but he smiled. "Yeah, I'd like that."

"Great!"

Joey ran, and after he made it out of sight, he punched the air in victory. He was going on a date! There was just one problem. He had never really been on a proper date before. Oh sure, he had been out with guys plenty of times, doing things like playing disc golf with Scott, but that was just an extended version of foreplay. His date with Phillip actually *meant* something. If their previous encounters had taught him anything, it was that Joey's tried and true techniques wouldn't get him anywhere. He was going to need help on this one.

* * * * *

"I don't know what to do!" he whined.

Maggie pulled the lollipop out of her mouth and rolled her eyes. "You'll do fine."

"I won't! Besides, you promised to tell me all of your secrets if I paid for your pedicure."

The Asian woman working on Maggie's feet looked up, as if verifying that she would indeed get her money. She should know that Joey was good for it since he was a client here at least once a month.

"Of course I'm paying," Joey said from the chair next to hers. "Now make with the advice. What's a guy have to do on a date to get you in the sack?"

"Not much," Maggie snorted before getting serious. "It's the little things that count. Holding the door open for me, listening to what I have to say and at least pretending I'm the most interesting person in the world. Not looking at other women, or men, in your case. That's a big one. You want to make him feel special, like he deserves to be treated well because of who he is to you."

"That doesn't sound hard. So basically I just need to play the gentleman and listen to him talk."

"Well, no. Believe it or not, women do get tired of hearing their own voices. I mean, a girl has to eat sometime. That's when you need to be entertaining. Talk about yourself but not too much. Anything impressive you can think of, but for god's sake, don't start telling him your sexual history. Throw in some compliments but don't go overboard. Read up on some current events in case you get nervous and there's a lull in conversation. But always be sure to bring it back to him. What does *he* think of the food. What are *his* thoughts about the latest news story."

"Right," Joey sighed, wishing he was taking notes. "So basically I just walk a thin line the whole night and hope I magically do it the right way."

Maggie batted her eyelashes. "You got it."

The pedicurist pointed a nail file at Joey. "If none of that works, just get him drunk. Then he'll put out!"

* * * * *

Joey hopped out of his car when he saw Phillip coming out of his house and trotted around to the passenger door. He opened it, looking his date over as he neared. Phillip was wearing a pale grey dress shirt with jeans, but best of all was the charcoal tie. Joey could have ripped that tie off and kissed it, especially since it contrasted so well with the ivory tie he wore, set against a navy shirt and black slacks. There was a matching suit jacket,

carefully folded and placed on the back seat, but Joey would leave it off for the night. He didn't want Phillip to feel underdressed.

"You look stunning," Joey said as he held the door open.

Phillip blushed, murmuring a thank you as he took the passenger seat and smiling as Joey carefully shut the door after him. The restaurant Joey had chosen was low key, not too fancy, because frankly he couldn't afford it. He decided on Italian, figuring that even the pickiest eater could make peace with that cuisine. Despite the affordable price, the lighting was low and the booths private and comfortable.

The waitress came and took their drink orders, both of them choosing cola. Joey couldn't wait until he was old enough to order wine. He didn't have a taste for it, but there was something sophisticated about the different vintages and the cork sniffing rituals.

"Lois wasn't happy with you," Phillip said. "Or me, for that matter. I think she thought we knew each other and we were having a joke at her expense."

Joey made a couple of logical leaps to find the conversation. "You mean the lady at the animal shelter? Yeah, not the best execution on my part. I hope I didn't get you in trouble."

"Not really. She just said that you should come to one of the orientation classes if you want to volunteer. You really should. I mean, if you want to."

Joey grinned. "I don't suppose you teach them?"

"No, but we could walk dogs together."

Somehow the way Phillip said this made it sound like the offer of a lifetime. Joey watched the cute way he played with his straw, taking little sips occasionally, while completely oblivious to how suggestive this was.

"So what do you want to be when you grow up?" Phillip asked.

Joey blinked, having forgotten that he was supposed to be maintaining the conversation. "A lawyer," he answered finally.

Phillip raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Well, I know you might not believe this, but most people consider me a smooth talker."

"Really?" Phillip asked with just enough disbelief to make them both laugh. "I'm sure money is part of your motivation, too."

Joey tried to remember if Maggie said he should be honest or not. "Yeah, money is the main factor. I want to be able to enjoy life, see the world, that sort of thing. What about you? What do you want to do?"

"Guess."

A challenge? Luckily the waitress came back for their food orders, buying Joey a bit more time. "I don't know," he said once she had gone. "Probably something with Green Peace."

"No," Phillip snorted. "Not even close."

"What then?"

"A tax accountant."

"Really?" Joey chuckled. "You? I thought it would be something more philanthropic. You do the whole animal shelter thing and even chose the vegetarian option on the menu."

"Like you said, money is important. Besides, outside tax season, I'll have lots of free time spoon feed starving orphans and ride around on the whales I've saved."

Joey's cola almost shot through his nose. Phillip kept him on his feet the rest of the meal, Joey enjoying every minute of it. He usually only had this much fun with Maggie, except he could actually take Phillip home afterwards for some horizontal extracurricular.

"Are you sure you don't want dessert?" Joey pleaded, not wanting the meal to come to an end.

"I'm sure! I'm stuffed, honestly. Uh..." Phillip bit his lip. "How does paying work? I mean, usually the guy pays for everything, but we're both guys."

"I invited you, so it's my treat."

"So I would get the check next time around? Sorry. I haven't really been on many dates. Have you?"

Joey smiled. "Not really, but I'm glad that you want to do this again."

They didn't have plans for afterwards, so Joey drove them around aimlessly while they continued to talk. He was tempted to head for the city limits and take Phillip hostage, but the evening was getting on and he was becoming tired.

"Come home with me," Joey said. "I don't want our night together to end."

Phillip's smile was uncomfortable, causing Joey's stomach to twist up. Somehow he had lost again.

"It's been a wonderful evening, but let's not complicate it. There's no rush, right?"

"Of course not," Joey replied.

When he pulled up to Phillip's house, he was expecting another peck on the cheek. When even that didn't happen, he looked over just as Phillip's lips mashed into his. The kiss was clumsy and fleeting, but Joey went from despairing to rock hard in two seconds.

"Call me," he stammered as Phillip exited the car.

Joey raced home, not feeling much of anything but desperation. When he made it up to his room, he hopped into bed, shoved his fist down his pants, and lost himself in wild imaginings of pale white skin and searching blue eyes.

* * * * *

Joey woke up the next morning feeling anything but content. If this was love, even just the beginning, he wasn't sure he wanted any part of it. After relieving himself sexually last night, he had tossed and turned in bed, replaying every aspect of the date in his mind and looking for anywhere he had gone wrong. He had always heard love was the greatest high, but for the first time in his life, Joey felt insecure and vulnerable. Part of him was tempted to get online and find an easy fix for his ego, but that sounded too damn easy.

He spent the rest of the day in a foul mood, and was cleaning out his car when a familiar engine noise came pattering down the road. He looked into the rearview mirror just in time to see Bradley hop out of his old Ford Escort with Scott in tow. They appeared to have just gone swimming, since Bradley was wearing nothing but swim trunks, the sight of which only made Joey feel more frustrated. They looked so ridiculously happy together. Acting on a whim, he climbed out of his car and sprinted across the street.

"Hey, Bradley! Quick question!"

"Hey, it's you!" Scott said. "You live around here?"

"You two know each other?" Bradley said, his face wearing its all-too-familiar confused expression.

"Yeah. Look, I hooked you guys up. That's why I had you both come to the sports bar. Jesus, didn't you figure that out yet? Anyway, I need your help."

They needed a couple more minutes to get up to speed. Scott was there soon enough and promised Bradley he would explain it to him later. Thankfully, he appeared more amused than insulted.

"What's up?"

Joey turned to Bradley. "Why him?" He jabbed a thumb in Scott's direction. "You're one of the hottest guys in the world, but you're head over heels in love with him. Why not any other good-looking guy or even me?"

"Sorry," Bradley said, "but I'm just not interested in you."

"No, I don't mean it like that. I mean that you could have anyone in the world, but Scott means something to you. Why?"

The big lug thought it over for longer than anyone should have to. Joey was sure he wouldn't answer at all when he finally said, "Without Scott, I just sit around wasting my life. But when we're together, all of a sudden every minute feels too important to waste, so I try to be the best person I can for him while trying to make him feel as special as he makes me feel." Scott was clearly moved by this outpouring, until Bradley added, "Of course, most of the time, we just joke around or screw, and I like that, too."

Scott pinched the bridge of his nose and allowed himself a discrete smirk. "Look," he said, "I'm guessing you're asking this because you're trying to find that magic formula. There's some guy out there you want wrapped up in Cupid's chains? Well, there is no right answer. You just have to give it your best, but at the end of the day, some people get along with each other and others don't. I like Bradley because he's easy-going, drop-dead gorgeous, and in his own clumsy way, romantic as hell. He's what I need. If this guy is what you need, it'll click. Simple as that."

Joey nodded, mumbled his thanks, and walked away. As much as he hated to admit it, sex was still important to him. He wanted nothing more than to spend his summer vacation with Phillip, but getting laid was the butter and bread of his day. If they could have that together, he would be in seventh heaven, but if not, then maybe Phillip wasn't the right guy for him. Perfect in every other way, except in that one essential area that drew the line between friends and lovers.

The phone in his pocket vibrated. Joey sighed, pulled it out, and halfheartedly read the text message.

My parents just left to see my grandma, meaning they'll be gone a few hours. Couldn't stop thinking about you last night. I should have said yes. Is it too late?

Joey reread it twice just to be sure. Then he broke every traffic law in the book, even committing manslaughter on a garden gnome as he cut across a lawn, getting to Phillip's house in record speed. When he opened the door, Phillip appeared sheepish more than horny, but he smiled when Joey did and invited him inside.

"Should we go to my room?" he asked.

"Sure."

Joey followed him up the stairs, feeling as uncertain as ever. He couldn't shake the feeling that Phillip was going to change his mind again. As soon as Joey entered his room, all thoughts of sex vanished from his mind. Here was Phillip's inner sanctuary. Joey drank in all the details – the Broadway musical posters, the little model of the solar system on his desk, and the old framed map of Indian territories on the wall. He was moving toward the bookshelf when Phillip said his name.

Joey turned to find him sitting on the edge of the bed, cheeks flushed, but whether from embarrassment or desire he wasn't sure. Joey sat next him, the smell of Phillip's cologne making him hungry for his neck, so he began there, leaning forward and kissing his soft skin. Then Joey moved to his lips. At last, familiar territory! Here was an area where Joey didn't need the advice of others.

Phillip's lips were sweet, as if he had sipped a glass of apple juice just before Joey arrived. Joey let his tongue brush against his lips before moving gently inside. Phillip turned more toward him, placing a hand on his shoulder and letting Joey lead.

"Sorry about the other night," Phillip said, pulling away for a break.

"You're more than making up for it now." Joey grinned and leaned forward for more. A couple more kisses and he would move that hand on his shoulder somewhere lower.

"It's just that I was a little nervous," Phillip said, pulling away again. "I really wanted to, but it's my first time, so I guess I panicked."

"First time?" Joey stared at him, but Phillip's expression was earnest. He wasn't kidding.

"Yeah. To be honest, last night was my first kiss."

And Joey hadn't done anything to make it special. God, this explained everything. Joey had been coming onto him like a horny old goat, when Phillip hadn't made it to first base yet. Hell, he hadn't even been up to bat! Joey couldn't remember his first time very well, since he had been drunk. The other guy had been older and most of it was a blur. Nothing about the experience had been worth remembering.

"I'm ready, though," Phillip said, leaning forward.

Joey kissed him briefly, but the hazy memory of that first drunken encounter, rushed and meaningless, was still on his mind. Phillip deserved more than that. They had barely exchanged more than a few sentences today. Before long, his parents would return, and even if Joey managed to make the time before then special, it wouldn't stay romantic. Not for long.

"You know what?" Joey took the hand off his shoulder and held it. "Let's not rush this. I don't want to worry about your parents coming home or anything like that. I think my mom is going on a date tomorrow night. She always stays out late. How about you come over then?"

"I really am ready," Phillip said, but he appeared relieved.

"So am I, but we can wait one more day. Trust me. It'll be better this way."

Phillip paused. "Does this mean we have to stop making out?"

Joey laughed and answered him with a kiss.

* * * * *

Peeking through the upstairs blinds, Joey could see Phillip's father dropping him off. If only Mr. Anthony knew what was in store for his son that night. Really, it was best that he didn't. Phillip walked up the driveway, and Joey let the blinds snap shut. He rushed to his room, readjusting the volume on the stereo. A little Barry White in the background, just smooth enough to be sexy and cheesy enough to make Phillip laugh and relax.

By now he would be at the door, reading the note that told him to come inside. Once he did, he would find tealight candles lighting the way and, on each step, a fresh red rose. Joey waited, sometimes holding his breath, until Phillip finally appeared at his bedroom door, holding the bouquet of flowers he had collected along the way.

Joey went to him, his grin matching Phillip's as he took the roses from him and put them in a vase he had waiting. Phillip glanced around the room, noticing the subtle candlelight and taking in the details of Joey's room just as he had done in Phillip's room the day before.

"This music—" he said before he laughed.

"I know," Joey said. "Should I turn it off?"

"No. Let it play. Thank you for the roses."

"My pleasure," Joey said with a smile, but he could see that Phillip was getting nervous again. He was wearing shorts due to the summer heat outside and Joey couldn't help but think about sliding his hand up his leg, past his thigh... But he would have to take it slow. He leaned forward and kissed Phillip tentatively. Nothing too aggressive. Then Joey nuzzled his ear with his nose.

"Come get in bed with me," he whispered.

"Should I take my clothes off?"

Joey shook his head. "Just your shoes."

"Okay."

Joey sat in the bed, back against the headboard, as he watched Phillip take off his shoes. Then those blue eyes looked to him again, questioning.

"Come lie next to me. Tell me about your day."

Phillip nodded, climbing into bed and trying a few different positions. He hadn't even cuddled with a guy before! Finally, he rested his head on Joey's chest and draped an arm across his waist.

Phillip talked. Nervously at first, but slowly he relaxed. They talked for a good half hour, laughing at each other's stories while learning more about each other. Phillip's hand began to move idly across his Joey's stomach as he spoke, eventually moving up to stroke the ribs with his fingers. Joey could only guess how often Phillip had imagined doing any of this with another guy, simply being allowed to be so close and to touch. The idea made him harder than the actual physical contact did, and he knew his own shorts were doing a poor job of hiding his arousal. Finally Phillip's hand moved to Joey's belt and stopped there.

"Go ahead," Joey prompted.

Phillip fumbled and struggled, but soon he had the belt open and the buttons undone. All signs of hesitation were gone as he pulled back Joey's underwear and gasped, actually gasped, when he saw what was below. Phillip's hand was warm as it wrapped around his cock. Joey closed his eyes and sighed contentedly. God, this had been worth waiting for!

He let Phillip explore, basking in the waves of pleasure that were rolling through his body. Then he reached down to touch Phillip's hair. He had only wanted to stroke him affectionately, but Phillip must have thought it was a hint and moved his head down.

Joey moaned a few times before he began wincing. "Teeth!" he hissed. "Watch the teeth!"

Phillip pulled back and looked up at him, face red in embarrassment. "Sorry."

"It's okay. Let me show you how it's done."

Joey moved over so Phillip could lie, kicking off his shorts and twisting out of his shirt. Phillip started to do the same when Joey stopped him. He wanted this pleasure. Joey undid the first button, folding the cloth to each side and kissing the newly revealed skin. He repeated this process for each button. By the time he reached his belly button, Phillip was squirming, his hands occasionally betraying him by tugging at his shorts.

Joey grinned and undid Phillip's belt with his teeth. He could handle buttons or a zipper in this same fashion, but now he was becoming too impatient. Phillip sucked in as Joey pulled, shorts and underwear coming off in one fell swoop. Phillip's cock was just as pale, beautiful, and delicate as the rest of him. Joey slowed his pace again, licking and kissing before finally taking him in. This was his arena and it didn't take long before Phillip was on the verge.

"Wait," Joey said. "There's one more thing I want us to do."

Phillip look positively frightened. "I was wondering about that. Uh, how do we decide which one of us is the girl?"

Joey laughed. There was no question about the roles in his mind, but now wasn't the time. "There's plenty we can do besides that."

He squeezed lube unto both of their cocks, grinning when Phillip shuddered with the cold, before rolling on top of him and pressing them together. He held them together and pumped a few times before moving Phillip's hand down so he could do the same.

Phillip's eyes widened and Joey nodded. What a wonderful feeling it was to have more than a handful. Neither of them lasted long after that. Joey had phenomenal control and made sure they came at the same time, but pleasure soon gave way to worry. This was the moment Joey had been dreading. Now he would see if his desire for Phillip would flee, as it had done with all the others after sex.

He looked down into Phillip's eyes, the place that betrayed his every emotion. At times, Joey found a shrewd sense of humor there, other times vulnerability. Right now all Joey saw there was love and to his surprise, the feeling was echoed in his chest. He still desired Phillip. More than ever in fact, except Joey wanted more than just sex. He wanted time. Lazy days spent together, or more passionate nights... anything as long as he was near.

After Phillip had cleaned up, Joey pulled him close and held him tight, nearly moved to tears by the feelings stirring inside. He had wanted Phillip's first time to be special, but Joey had never expected that it would be special for him as well. Tonight had been a first for them both.

"Are you my boyfriend?" Phillip murmured sleepily.

Joey thought of all the hot guys out there, all the conquests he would miss out on if he said yes. There was no contest. He would rather talk to Phillip, experience that feeling of pride every time he made him laugh, hold his delicate hand through movies and keep him warm at night. There wasn't anything a casual encounter could offer that could compare to these fantasies of being comfortable with someone.

"Yeah," he answered. "I'm yours."

As they dozed off together, Joey imagined that Bradley and Scott might be across the street, wrapped in each other's arms as well. Somewhere across town, his mother was probably falling for her romantic mechanic, and maybe a few tables over, an older man was showering Maggie with food, gifts, and compliments in a desperate attempt to win her heart. The world was full of love. Joey hadn't realized that until recently and now there was no turning back.

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