



Yorkie to My Heart

Author: Gabbi Grey

Category: Romance, M-m Romance

Description: Phillip

Devastated at being dumped by the guy I loved, I'm struggling to put my life back together. My social worker suggested a new start in an LGBTQ-friendly town where I might make friends and meet people like myself. A new town doesn't mean I suddenly become great with people, but Wally, an overweight Yorkie in need of love, prances into my life, like a dog version of me. Taking care of him is healing, and I want to forge a new future for us. Who needs men anyway?

Jeremy

When I nearly trip over my solitary new neighbor and his adorable dog, I'm smitten. But getting past his guarded aloofness won't be easy. Phillip could clearly use some friends, and I'm always happy to open my circle here in my hometown of Gaynor Beach. No one should be that alone. The guy's rescue of Wally the Yorkie makes my heart melt, and the more time I spend with the two of them, the more I find myself falling for the shy man. Will I be able to break through Phillip's walls, or are we destined to only remain friends?

Yorkie to My Heart is a slow-burn, age-gap, opposites attract, gay romance between a shy man with a heart of gold and the gregarious, outgoing man who might just love him.

CW: mention of previous suicide attempt.

Total Pages (Source): 118

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

Chapter1

Phillip

I glanced around the Safe Haven Animal Rescue lobby in awe. The stunning architecture and beautiful façade seemed impractical for a shelter, but also appropriate. Animals deserved the very best, and this place clearly gave them a lovely temporary home. I hadn't noticed them when I first walked in, but now I took in marble floors and crystal light fixtures. And yet, the space was made welcoming by rubber mats and wall posters and a corner with racks full of toys and beds.

Arthur, the man in charge, also had a welcoming quality to him. With his soft voice and calm demeanor, despite his size, he exuded kindness. His gentle handling of the animals as he'd introduced me to all the dogs in need of a forever home had also connoted a deep love of animals.

Much as I had. But had never been able to show before.

I lost all interest in marble and glass as Arthur emerged from the back area with Wally.

Wally was the cutest dog I'd ever met. His resemblance to me made him all the more likeable. Rotund. Rubenesque. Curvy. Gentle ways of saying fat. Really fat.

"Come on, Wally. You remember Phillip." Arthur coaxed the dog toward me.

I knelt as best I could, struggling to stay balanced.

“It’s okay.” Arthur started to move toward me. “You don’t?—”

I waved him off. “I do.” I held out my hand to Wally.

The Yorkie slowly advanced toward me. Once he sniffed my fingers, though, he launched himself at me.

“He remembers me.” I wasn’t certain why that surprised me, but it did.

“Of course he does.” Arthur offered a genuine smile, the light in the lobby illuminating his sparkling blue eyes. “You’ve been here twice and spent considerable time with him. He’s a clever boy, and you’ll need to watch him carefully. He’s a little escape artist.”

I eyed the little tan-and-black dog, meeting his curious gaze and laughing at his cocked head. “You’re going to be a good boy and do what I say, right?”

As if understanding, Wally licked my hand.

“He’s also a charmer.” Arthur eyed me. “He’s going to try to convince you that he’s starving. To be clear—he’s not. If you feed him exactly the amount of food that Dr. Louisa prescribed, he’ll slowly lose weight. Well, along with the exercise regime.”

Arthur had told me Wally arrived unneutered, with terrible teeth, a few mats, and zero vaccinations.

Dr. Louisa at the Gaynor Beach Animal Clinic was apparently the shelter’s vet, and from the paperwork Arthur had shown me, she’d given Wally a lot of care before they decided the little dog was available for rescue.

Rescue.

I wasn't certain I was capable of rescuing him. I certainly hadn't been capable of rescuing myself.

In the past. Move forward.

Easier said than done.

"You okay?"

I met Arthur's worried gaze.

And put on my bravest smile possible. "Of course. Just thinking of all the things I'll have to manage. Also grateful to whomever paid for all his care. That was a lot of work."

"We have a good fundraising team." He scratched Wally between his perky ears.

The dog's eyes closed in bliss.

"You've got everything you need to take care of him, right?"

Since my last visit, when I'd decided for certain that Wally was coming home with me, I'd gratefully accepted a care package from the shelter with almost everything I'd need. Again, generous souls helping out. "I bought the food, and you provided the bowls. You're giving me the leash, the harness, and a raincoat."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

“It doesn’t rain much here in SoCal, but you’ll be glad for the coat when those atmospheric rivers come.”

I nodded. Coming from eastern Oregon, I knew about rain. But I’d lived in California for the past six years. First as a student, and then?—

For fuck’s sake, get over it already.

But I knew I wouldn’t. I drew in a deep breath. “You also gave me some toys he likes, and Dr. Blair has approved a couple of tr—, uh?—”

“Yes, don’t say that word. He’s very familiar with that word.” Arthur grinned. Sometimes he came across as almost shy—like when I’d filled out the paperwork. In the presence of the animals, though, he was confident and forthright.

Or maybe those perceptions were me projecting onto him.

“I’ve also provided you with a map of all the dog parks. You need to wait a couple of weeks before letting him off-leash even inside a fence, though.”

“But after that?”

“Once you’re certain he’ll come when you call and obey your commands, then yes, you can absolutely take him to a leash-free dog park. He likes other dogs. Stay in the small-dog section, though, and if you meet other dogs while walking him, always be cautious. He’s fearless about rushing up to big dogs.”

We'd been over this, but I didn't blame Arthur for going through it once again. He'd clearly come to care for Wally in the few weeks he'd been here.

"I have your number on speed dial. And Dr. Louisa's."

"You have an appointment with her the week after next for a dental recheck, a vaccine booster, and the weight-management stuff."

"Noted in my calendar."

"Oh, are you the one adopting Wally?" An excited voice came from the entrance.

I'd been so focused on Arthur and Wally that I hadn't heard whomever it was, and I startled.

And fell flat on my ass.

Great. No dignified way to stand.

My knees had been protesting after crouching for so long, but at least I would've been able to get up without looking like a dork.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry." The man gazed at me in horror.

His dark-blue eyes were stunning and his short, dark-brown hair suited him. He was a very attractive guy.

Out of my league. All the guys I met these days were out of my league. And why did I care? There was no reason to imagine he was gay.

"Hello, Neil." Arthur rose gracefully. "Will you take Wally's leash for a moment?"

Wally gazed excitedly at the new arrival.

Arthur stepped toward me, blocking Neil from my view. “Neil’s a volunteer.” He reached down subtly with his hand.

Well, I either get on my hands and knees and struggle, or I accept the offered hand. He looks strong enough to help. And he wouldn’t offer if he couldn’t...right? His arm muscles didn’t bulge, but I’d sensed Arthur’s strength—both inner and outward.

Two things I sorely lacked.

It’ll be fine. Just get on with it. I held out my hand.

Arthur grasped mine and braced me, and yep, he had some muscle hidden under that soft exterior.

Somehow, we got me back onto my feet.

I dusted off my ass even though the floor shone pristinely.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

Everything gleamed in this place. Like Arthur wanted the animals to have the very best.

Together we turned to find Neil crouching easily, and playing shake a paw with Wally.

Who appeared reticent.

Arthur leaned toward me. “He knows how...but he’s waiting for a, you know...”

I remembered.

Wally knew all kinds of tricks—but would only trot them out if he was being rewarded with food. His previous owner had trained him well. But had rewarded everything with food. And had left his food bowl out all day. Some dogs could handle grazing. Wally was not that dog. He hoovered up every scrap of food he came across. Which was why his weight was so high and his health precarious.

Dr. Blair worried about a myriad of ailments.

I’d diligently read up about each and noted the signs to look out for. I also had regular appointments set up with Dr. Blair to monitor Wally’s health.

Arthur had told me the visits were part of the adoption program and I wouldn’t be charged for them.

I didn’t believe him. I also wasn’t in a position to pay for the visits myself—yet—so I’d take the kindness offered by whoever was doing it.

Neil rose gracefully and handed the leash back to Arthur, then met my gaze. "I'm so happy Wally's got a new home. He's a favorite of mine. Of everyone's. Anyway, I need to head to the back. I hope to see you around. Oh, where do you live?"

My cheeks heated at the thought of my out-of-my-budget, favor-I-can't-repay temporary residence. "Riverside."

"Oh great. I make my way over that way sometimes. And I'm sure you'll walk the boardwalk. Wally would love that. All the other dogs and kids. You know he's great with kids, right?"

"Uh, yes."

"Well, nice to meet you."

Arthur gestured. "Apologies. Neil, this is Phillip."

Neil held out his hand.

After a fraction of a second, I took it. And offered the best smile I could.

"Your hair is so like my boyfriend Sawyer's." Neil grinned, released my hand, nodded, and headed into the back.

Of course he has a boyfriend. The cute man struck me as kind as well. Much like Arthur. And everyone else I'd encountered in town. Well, the half dozen, anyway.

Arthur handed me Wally's leash. "It's okay to ask questions. No one expects you to know everything right away."

"I've made an appointment with Jordan. The trainer? He's coming over Thursday

night.”

“That’s great.He’s the best.You’ll do great with him.”

I glanced down at Wally.“Are you ready to go?”

Wally grinned up at me.

“Uh.”I gazed around.“I just have to call a cab.”And panic set in as I realized I would have to cut back on something in order to pay for that.

“No need.”Arthur pulled his keys out of his pocket.“I’ll get Neil to watch the front, and I’ll drive you both home.Riverside, you said?That’s not far.”

Close enough to walk.For someone who was vaguely in shape.

June was pretty brutal in Southern California.The sun was strong again today, and Gaynor Beach was enjoying nice, high temperatures.Despite living in LA for six years, the searing heat was something I had yet to acclimate to.All that a/c had spoiled me.

Plus, even if I managed to make it back in one piece, Wally would likely not survive the trip.Arthur and the other volunteers had been walking him a bit more each day, but between his weight issues and the fact he’d never been on a real walk, he was still struggling.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

Oh well, we'll struggle together."That would be amazing.But only if I'm not putting you out."

"Not at all."He held up a finger, clearly indicating I should wait.

I did while he went to the back.

He emerged a few moments later with Neil.Who offered another wide smile.

I managed to smile back.

Arthur grabbed the bag of Wally's toys, and we headed out.

The drive to my place was tough for me.Was I supposed to make small talk?Be unobtrusive?I didn't do people, and I wondered about Arthur as well.Neither of us spoke—which was fine—and soon he arrived at the address I'd provided.

My house was the smallest on the street, but well-maintained.Notmyhouse.The one I was residing in.Thanks to some nice guy, James, whom I'd met for the first time yesterday, who rented out this house at below-market rates to people who needed help.I hated that I needed help, but was no longer too proud to ask for it.

"You live in James's house."Arthur grinned."He's my best friend.I was his very first guest."

Aw shit.If the men were best friends, then chances were Arthur knew of his friend's benevolence."He's been very kind."I might've been shy yesterday, but I had been

grateful and expressed that gratitude to James in an embarrassing torrent of words.

Anthony, my social worker, had sort of ended my rambling thanks.

And didn't it suck ass that I needed a social worker? Pride goeth before the fall. Wasn't that the expression? I'd never been overly prideful. But I had fallen.

Badly.

"Thanks so much for the ride."

We exited Arthur's vehicle, and he removed Wally from the crate he'd been secured in.

Arthur put him gently on the ground and handed me the leash.

Wally squatted to pee and then, without warning, crouched and pooped.

"Oh crap." Literally. And heat flooded my cheeks.

"Never fear." Arthur pulled a doggie bag from his pocket and, before I could do anything, had Wally's impressive poop scooped. He tied off the bag.

I took it from him.

"Always take three on your walk. If not more. You never know when you might need one. Or four." Arthur eyed Wally. "And I've also met people who ran out or forgot. So you're their hero."

I was no one's hero. Never had been. Never would be.

I told him, “I have one of those things that attaches to his leash. That has the bags in it.”

“Brilliant. You’re all set.” Arthur met my gaze. “Are you going to be okay?”

Man, my nervousness must really be showing. I drew in a deep breath. “Yeah, we’re going to be okay.”

Because we had to be.

Arthur nodded, rounded the hood, and was soon in the van and driving away.

I gazed down at Wally.

He looked up at me with the most trusting dark-brown eyes. His last owner had loved him so much but only managed to express that with food. Well, she was gone, and I was his human now.

“It’s just you and me, buddy.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

He blinked.

We headed inside to start our new lives.

Chapter2

Jeremy

Mornings weremy favorite time of day.Mornings in SoCal were glorious and, to my delight, this stunning sky was streaked with pink, purple, and orange light hitting the clouds in that stunning way that always stole my breath.Mornings where I was on my own were the best.

Naturally, I had to stop and take a picture of the sky.Because what else did one do when presented with such majesty?With nature in all her glory?

I checked my smartwatch stats for running distance, average pace, and heart rate.All looked great.I resumed my run toward the corner of the walkway in the park and...barreled right into the leash of a dog.I barely caught myself—but managed.My first concern was for the dog which appeared terrified as I nearly fell on it.

I crouched.What an adorable little dog.“Hi, sweetheart.Are you okay?”I held out my hand.

The dog sniffed, then launched herself at me.

Herself?

Himself?

I had no idea.

She planted herself against my chest and began a thorough licking.

Her body felt heavy for her size, and as I petted her, I noted she was pretty round and chubby. None of my concern, though.

I should probably look up for her human, right? The owner might not want some stranger loving on their dog.

So I ran my gaze upward. Sensible walking shoes. Worn jeans. A USC sweatshirt.

An adorable man. Clean-shaven. Dark-blond hair. Sunglasses that hid his eyes. A sweet face. Just...perfection.

Slowly, I disentangled myself from the dog. "Okay, sweetheart, let me say hi to your daddy." Just as slowly, I rose. I was taller than the guy—who appeared so young that he might still be a USC student. I held out my hand. "Jeremy. Apologies...I sort of love dogs."

After a long hesitation, the young man stuck out his hand while staring at the ground. "Phillip."

His shyness spoke to me. "And your dog?"

"Oh, right." He stammered that out. "Wally. His name's Wally." He drew in a breath. "I only rescued him yesterday. So, like, less than twenty-four hours ago. So he came this way, right? Fat? I didn't make him fat. He's not following after me. I mean, I'm obviously overweight. And I didn't always used to be. So we're, like, walking. We're

going to do that every day—rain or shine.And a diet.We’re both on a diet.Well, he’s on a reduced quantity diet.With diet food.Me?I’m just trying to eat healthier.And less, right?”He pressed a hand to his forehead.“And you didn’t need to know any of that.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Phillip.”I gazed down at a clearly adoring Wally.“I think it’s great you rescued Wally.He’s damn lucky to have you.”

“I think...maybe so.”

His expression was so damn uncertain—what with the furrow in his brow.I didn’t know how to reassure him.Or maybe Wally wasn’t lucky.Maybe they wouldn’t be a good fit.“Would you like to walk for a bit?”

“You were running.”Again with the uncertainty.

“I need to cool down now.I’m not far from my house.Today’s a short run.”

“Uh, sure.”He slowly guided Wally to him.“We’re not far from home either.I wanted to, uh, get the lay of the land.Figure out where everything is.”

“You’re new to Gaynor Beach?Or just to Riverside?I grew up in Marina Park but wanted to get away from my family.Which is like a whole mile away.”I laughed.“And although I’m somewhat successful, I’m not Marina Park successful like my dad.”

He cocked his head.

“A more-expensive part of town.I might buy there eventually, but I really like the Riverside community.Lots of working families.Tons of kids.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

“You like kids?” More of that knitted brow.

“Well, sure. Who doesn’t like kids?” And shit, that was the wrong thing to say because a lot of people didn’t like kids. Like all the people who chose not to have them. Absolutely a decision I respected. If you didn’t love them, then you sure as shit shouldn’t be having them. Still, I persevered. “My sister Marcie has two beautiful kids. I mean, like super cute and super healthy—which is all you can really ask for, right? She considers herself blessed.”

“Yeah.” Phillip scratched his chin. “Lucky.”

I desperately wanted to ask him about himself. None of my business, of course, but I was still intensely curious.

Finally, he pointed across the park. “That’s the way we’re going. You don’t have to?—”

“No, I’d love to. If you don’t mind.” I checked my heart rate. A good cooldown range. I didn’t like to stop running abruptly, and if I had a cramp, I’d be forced to stop, but this should be fine. I planned to drink plenty of water when I got home.

We headed in the direction he’d pointed.

The direction that led to my house.

“Uh, which street do you live on? If you don’t mind me asking.”

Wally continued his adorable waddle.

He didn't pull on his harness, which I considered a bonus.

I'd had a dalmatian growing up, and she'd been forever yanking on her leash. Years of training and we'd never broken her of the habit. Wild and wonderful Spot. Completely unoriginal name for a dalmatian, and most people wound up misgendering her. Still, I'd loved her from the day my parents brought her home until the day she passed. By then, I was away at university and Marcie had almost finished high school. My parents wanted to travel, so they'd never gotten another dog.

Somehow, in my crazy and insanely busy adult life, I'd never gotten one either. As I surreptitiously glanced at Phillip, it occurred to me that I should consider it. I was getting older. That didn't have anything to do with the hankering...kids weren't in my future, and having a companion might be a good idea.

As we exited the park, I considered. "Which street do you live on?"

"Uh..."

"Sorry, asking too many questions. Making too many assumptions. You know what they say about assume..."

"Sure..." Phillip scratched his nose. "Well, actually, no."

"Oh. It makes an ass out of me."

I slowed down a fraction. Should I spell it out to him? Not everyone gets the joke. Just because I use it all the time—

"Okay, yeah." He chuckled. "That's a good one."

Relief washed over me. Despite his solid body, his apparent fragility called to me. His words were often tentative—as if he worried about how I would react.

“I, uh...” He kept walking. “I live on Hummingbird Lane.”

“Oh, wow, that’s so cool. I do too.” I matched his stride. Slower than I would normally do, but still at a good pace. “I’ve never seen you before.” Too obtrusive? Too nosy? Yeah, probably.

“I just moved in. Like the day before yesterday.”

“Oh.” I snapped my fingers. “I passed a furniture truck as I was getting home on Monday. I’d run down to see a client in Costa Mesa.”

“Yeah, that would’ve been the furniture people from San Diego. Nikki and some guy whose name I don’t remember. Ralph? Fred?” He ran his hand through his damp hair. The morning wasn’t particularly warm and our pace wasn’t that fast, but he was sweating.

I cut my stride length by a bit more.

He immediately matched it and let out a little sigh.

Damn. Be more attentive. “New furniture?” Now I thought about it, I’d seen that truck before. “Do you live at number thirteen?”

He cast me a sharp glance and nearly tripped.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

I nearly reached for him, only stopping when it became clear he wasn't going to fall. "Sorry. Intrusive."

"No...I just wondered how...?"

"Well, possibly because I know everyone on Hummingbird Lane and no one mentioned moving. No for sale signs recently. No scuttlebutt around the neighborhood."

"Scuttlebutt?"

"Sorry. My grandfather was in the navy. He had a huge influence on me, and sometimes I use odd expressions." I shrugged. "People look at me funny, but it keeps him alive for me, right? He was a veteran of the Second World War. Married my grandmother later in his life. She was older too, and they only had my mom. I didn't have a ton of time with him, but I used to sit on his knee and listen to all his stories." I laughed. "And learned his salty language—much to my mother's horror. My father just chuckles. He grew up in the hippie days. Well, his impressionable years, as he likes to refer to them."

"Uh, wow."

Phillip's color appeared a little less hectic. I hadn't noticed how red he'd gotten until it improved. "Right. And here I am rambling on. So what I'm trying to say is that I hadn't heard about anyone leaving. But the house next to me always has people moving in and out. I know the owner, James Reynolds. Nicest guy. Lovely husband, fantastic dog."

“Uh...” He frowned.

“Widget.I just adore her.Almost enough to make me want to get a Frenchie of my own, but they’re so much work.So many health problems.I would never buy one.Well, I’d never buy any dog.Did you get Wally from the shelter?”

“Yeah.”

“Right.So you met Arthur?He’s James’s best friend.I met them both just after James moved in.Then James met Colin and moved out.Another nice man and his two kids moved in.Rob.With Hallie and Thomas.Oh my God, the cutest kids.And they stayed until they moved into James and Colin’s old house over in... Oh God, I’m doing it again.”

We left the park and stepped onto Fern Avenue.

“Doing what?”Phillip wiped his brow.

“Talking.You don’t need to know who all has lived in the house.”

“I don’t mind.”

Wally glanced back at us, panting hard.

I slowed another little bit.“Well, that’s good of you.Rob started dating Danny, James’s younger brother and, like I said, moved into James and Colin’s old place when they moved to Marina Park.”

“The expensive place.”

“Yeah, that’s right.Colin has money.Rob works at the vet clinic, and Danny’s in

school.I think, studying to be a psychologist...?That's so cool.They have a dog, too.A husky.Named Trouble."

Phillip chuckled.

"Right?I think the dog has a different real name, but everyone knows her as Trouble.I see her on the boardwalk sometimes.With Rob, Danny, and the kids.I've run into James, Colin, and Widget as well."As we neared Hummingbird Lane, I picked up the pace of my rambling."So then a nice young woman moved in, and she stayed a bit.Then a woman and her teenage daughter.Come to think of it, I haven't seen them for a bit.I suppose they moved out."

"Yeah?"

"As far as I know, James still owns the house."I slapped my forehead with the palm of my hand."And you must know that.Oh, unless you bought the house."

Phillip snickered.

The sound almost didn't register because it didn't fit the little I knew of him.Right, like you've somehow got the measure of the guy...you've done all the talking.

"I can't afford to buy anything."He scratched his nose."Well, I can afford all the stuff Wally needs."

No missing the defensiveness in his voice.As if his situation would lead me to judge whether or not he could take care of his dog.I had no doubt he could.Anyone who rescued a dog had a good heart, as far as I was concerned.Clearly he had Wally's health in mind as well.

We turned onto Hummingbird, keeping to the nice wide sidewalk.

Only one house to pass, and then we'd be at my place. The lane only had eighteen houses. Phillip's was the smallest. Mine was the biggest. I probably didn't need three bedrooms, three bathrooms, a massive kitchen, and a decked-out finished basement. I'd chosen the house thinking I might eventually have someone to share it with. Ten years on, and that hadn't happened.

"Do you want to come in? For a glass of water? I can put out a bowl for Wally." I added as much cheer in my voice as I could manage without making it saccharine.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

“No, that’s okay.” Phillip wiped his brow again. “But, like, thanks.”

“No sweat. I’m a friendly guy, and I love dogs. Just in case you couldn’t tell.”

We’d come to my house, and so I stopped.

He didn’t. He just kept going.

I tried to nonchalantly stretch and not watch as he unlocked his front door and went inside.

As far as I could tell, he didn’t look back.

I considered doing a fast walk around the block, but nah, too much effort. Plus, I didn’t want Phillip to think I’d curtailed my exercise because of him. No rational reason for him to think that, of course. I entered my house, then plopped down on the bench by my front door to untie my laces. After toeing off my shoes, I hotfooted up the stairs and shed my clothes in the main bedroom as I made my way to the shower. I was well ahead of schedule for the day, but starting work a little early wouldn’t hurt.

Another busy day.

Like all the ones before and probably those ahead of me as well.

When I’d finished business school, I’d stayed in Los Angeles and gone to work for one of the biggest public-relations firms on the west coast. I’d been a cog. Had busted my butt for six years, but made little progress in the echelons of power within the

agency. I'd only been assigned a couple of bigger clients, and all under the supervision of a man I didn't respect. Who cut corners and wasn't always ethical. But he brought in tons of money, so everyone looked the other way.

One weekend, I had a call about a client on our roster. She was in trouble, and my boss wasn't answering her calls. Not her fault, but things looked bad. I raced to her side and helped her navigate the tricky waters of tabloid presses.

She told me I should start my own firm. That she'd be my first client.

I pointed out the non-compete clause in my contract.

She said she knew the head of the agency, and if she told the truth about my asshole boss—that he'd planned to leave her hanging—she'd get me out of my contract.

In all honesty, I hadn't known about my boss's decision to not help her.

Apparently she'd turned him down when he propositioned her, and he'd made it clear this was payback.

All very sordid. All very nasty. All very helpful in extricating me.

She was my first client. And she helpfully brought plenty more.

Maybe I should've stayed in Los Angeles. By then, though, the most important promotional interactions were online, and the internet worked at warp speed. Everyone had a smart phone. I could operate just as well from my house in my small town as anywhere else. And be near my parents who were aging.

Gracefully, my mother would say.

Too quickly, my sister Marcie would point out to me. Confidentially.

We wanted our parents to be around forever.

I stepped under the steaming-hot spray and let the water run over my sore muscles. My last marathon had been two weeks ago, and I was easing back into training for the next one. As I scrubbed up, though, I tried to parse out my thoughts.

Mom and Dad getting older.

Marcie with her two beautiful kids.

The work piling up on my desk.

Phillip...the enigmatic new neighbor.

The thing was...I'd always sort of wondered if the house was used for people fleeing abusive situations. Rob had arrived with a black eye and a broken nose. The young woman after him had seemed okay, but the woman after her—the one with the teenage daughter—had arrived with her arm in a cast. None of the occupants had stayed for long. Almost like the place was some kind of transitional housing.

Oh, and I spotted our local social worker, Anthony Rodrigues, coming and going frequently. Which was the other big clue.

I'd been attracted to Anthony when we'd first crossed paths about eight years ago—when he'd first come to town. We just hadn't clicked. He'd been almost a dozen years younger and clearly not looking for anything serious. Now the guy was married, with twin toddlers, a six-year-old foster daughter, and an adorable librarian husband.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

I scrubbed the shampoo into my hair.

Okay, huge detour leading me back to my neighbor. With his dark-blond hair, eyes a color I could only guess at, and... Well, he was overweight. That didn't bother me in the least. I liked guys on the bigger side. When they commented on their weight and weren't happy, though, I didn't say anything they might take the wrong way. If they were confident in themselves and clearly healthy, I was happy to tell them how sexy I found them.

Phillip hadn't been confident or comfortable in his own skin. That much had been plain as day. And for him to show that much vulnerability to a stranger unasked? Way more than most of the guys I met, who focused on only showing their best side. Gaynor Beach had a lot of sexy guys of all sizes. Slender guys. Muscular guys. And some beefy ones too. To me, everyone was attractive. When they showed their true colors, in words and deeds, that's when I passed judgment on whether I wanted to spend time with them. There had to be...compatibility. I was too damned old to befriend someone who wasn't at least a good person. Life was too short.

Which made me picky about my friends and my clients. My reputation was such I could now choose whom I worked with and whom I associated with.

I rinsed out the last of the shampoo, made sure all my bits were clean, and shut off the water.

My busy day started in six minutes, and I'd have to save ruminations about Phillip for another time.

Chapter3

Phillip

“I’m okay.” I fidgeted with my hands on my lap. “Really.”

“I’m sure you are.”

My social worker Anthony’s tone was soft. Soothing. Almost like he was talking to a child. In some ways, he kind of was.

Stop it. You’re twenty-four fucking years old. You can stand up for yourself.

“I don’t need extra—” I scratched my nose. “—therapy.”

Anthony smiled.

He had gleaming white teeth. They contrasted with his tanned skin nicely. His long hair made him look sort of sexy and his trim beard reminded me of Jeremy’s. Although Jeremy had some gray in his, Anthony had none. I pegged the social worker to be somewhere between my neighbor and me in age.

But that was just a guess. I wasn’t great at guessing people’s ages.

Probably because you don’t interact with people much.

My inner voice had a point. I took a breath. “I’m okay.” I was pretty certain I’d said that about ten times since Anthony had arrived.

Each time I did, he appeared less convinced, with a little furrow appearing in his brow.

His smile continued, though. “You’ve been through a lot, Phillip. It’s okay to not be okay.”

“But I am.” And my protesting wasn’t getting me anywhere.

“Be that as it may—” He tapped his notepad. “—part of my agreeing to put you here, alone in this house, was with the understanding you’d get help. Now, you and I can do counseling, but I can’t do your prescription renewals. We need to set you up with a family doctor.”

“Okay.”

“And I’d like you to see Dr. Martin.”

“They’re a family doctor?” I didn’t want to try to gender Dr. Martin. What had Jeremy said about assumptions? Inside, the reminder made me smile.

“No, Dr. Xavier Martin is a psychiatrist at Gaynor Beach Memorial Hospital. He’s a great guy, Phillip. Really empathetic. But tough. Both things I think you need right now. Your psychiatrist in LA can continue your care over the phone for another few weeks, but she doesn’t want to treat you from such a distance.”

Gaynor Beach was almost two hours from LA. And since I didn’t have a car and would’ve had to take a bus, I could almost double that length of time.

Each way.

Which made it impractical to continue to see her. She was great...but not worth staying in LA for, and she didn’t offer telehealth visits.

She’d also been the one to help me find Anthony—a social worker with a strong

reputation for being able to help people. Such as those who might want to get out of LA.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

I sighed. "It's not that I'm not grateful..."

"I don't need your gratitude, Phillip. I need you to stay healthy. You're doing so well, and we need to make certain you stay on the right track and not...slip."

Ah. So that's what they're calling a suicide attempt.

I was lucky. My landlady had found me in time.

Or not lucky. That totally depended on one's perspective.

I'd apologized to her.

She'd accepted that apology. And also made it clear I couldn't come back. Aside from the bad associations, I had also been three months late on rent. I'd been lucky she hadn't just called the sheriff to evict me.

"I'm not going to slip." I pointed to my pill bottles. "Every day. I take them every day. Jermain, the pharmacist, keeps me on track."

Anthony's smile didn't waver. "That's great. But it's only been three days since you got here. I believe you can sustain this...but I also believe in putting as many people in our corner as we can. I think Dr. Martin is the best person to help."

I blew out a long breath. "If I say no, do I get kicked out?"

He shook his head. "As long as you're doing the work and staying healthy, you're

good to stay here. This is a place for you to get your feet back under you. There are no timelines.”

“Look, Anthony, I know you’re a nice guy.”

His head tilted.

“I haven’t had my feet under me since I was, I don’t know...five? Between my mom being sick—and then eventually dying—and the...bad situation I got myself into back in LA...” I winced. “I’ve not had a good run.”

“I know that.” That smile slipped a bit. “Phillip, I’m not going to sugarcoat it—you’ve had a rough go for most of your life. But you’ve kept going. Against incredible headwinds. You’ve had a setback, but you can recover from this. You are recovering from this,” he quickly amended. “So why not do everything we can to ensure you have the best chance of success? Leaving LA was a brave thing to do. Starting over somewhere fresh is great—but it can also be daunting.”

“I’ve got Wally.” I scratched my dog’s ears. He sat on the couch next to me. “I organized his adoption while I was still living in the shelter. That took planning.” And I was grateful to be out of the shelter. I hadn’t needed it for protection from an abusive ex, like most of the residents. I’d needed it in order to be under supervision while Anthony worked out the details of me coming here.

“Rescuing Wally was a great idea, Phillip. I was happy to sign off on the venture. But you agreed taking care of him means also taking care of yourself.” Anthony shifted, crossing his legs. He looked too elegant to be sitting on a worn recliner. He’d assured me that he’d visited plenty of clients here over the last few months. That James would welcome me—which he had. That I’d settle in—which I was trying to do.

“I...uh...” I wracked my brain. “I met a neighbor. While walking Wally in the park.”

“Oh, who?”

“Jeremy.” I tried for a smile. “He lives next door.”

“Oh, I know Jeremy. Great guy.” That megawatt smile was back.

For my cute neighbor, for delight in me proving I wasn’t a loner loser, or both?

I couldn’t tell. “Yeah. We, uh, walked together. Like, well, I was walking Wally. And he joined us.” I scratched Wally’s ears. “He talks. A lot.”

Anthony laughed. “I agree Jeremy can be very friendly. He’s a good guy. I didn’t realize he lived close.”

I pointed to the next house. “Right there.”

“Oh.” Anthony cocked his head. “You would think I’d know that. Heck, maybe I did.”

“You’re busy.”

“I am.” For just an instant, his face took a solemn expression. About his life? About his clients?

About me?

“I’m planning to come back five days from today—on Monday. You’ll be okay until then?”

I nodded.

“I’m on call this weekend, so if you need me, don’t hesitate to reach out. You’ve also got the list of emergency numbers to call?”

The ones that include the suicide hotline? I nodded again. “Yeah, I’ve got everything.”

“Great.” He finally rose. “Let’s get you scheduled with Dr. Martin.”

I wanted to argue. I didn’t want to start fresh with a new psychiatrist. Haven’t I done enough already? Except my shrink in LA had said she’d only write one more script. Since even I knew I wasn’t ready to go off the meds, I understood the direness of my situation. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Great. In fact, why don’t I make it right now? Do you want to get out your calendar?”

“Only to mark the date. I don’t have a single thing booked.” I might’ve mumbled that response.

“Yet.” Anthony smiled. “That will change. Didn’t you say something about Jordan the trainer coming over?”

“Uh, yeah.” I’d shared that right off the bat at our meeting—to prove I was interacting with people. Of course he’d remember.

He put the phone to his ear.

I sort of tuned it all out.

“Cancellation? Friday at nine am?” He met my gaze.

I nodded. Then I yanked my new phone from my back pocket of my jeans, opened the calendar app, and made a note. I set an alarm for eight that morning. Hopefully all those reminders would get me wherever I was going. Gaynor Beach was so small that I could walk just about anywhere.

Well, that might’ve been an exaggeration—although not much.

“That’s great. His name is Phillip Kaye. I’ll fax over a referral this afternoon with his previous provider’s contacts and a signed release. Thanks, Violet.” He hung up the phone and met my gaze.

In turn, I held up mine to indicate I had the appointment noted.

“Dr. Martin’s office is in the Gaynor Beach hospital. Will you be able to figure that out? It’s not too far...”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“I can arrange a ride or money for a cab?—”

“I’ll figure it out.” I might’ve said that with more force than was strictly necessary.

“Of course you will.” He cocked his head. “I have every faith in you, Phillip. But I’m here to make things easier for you. So you can succeed.”

“What does success even look like?”

Anthony started to sit again.

I waved him off. “A conversation I should have with Dr. Martin, right?”

“That’s a very sensible idea.”

“And you probably have to go.” Part of me wanted him to go, and the rest of me wanted him to stay. I really was lonely.

“Keep my number handy. Enjoy your time with Jordan tomorrow, and be as honest as you can with Dr. Martin.”

“Uh, sure.” I fidgeted.

He held my gaze. “I should probably tell you that Dr. Martin is Black.”

Oh Jesus. “I don’t care. Truly. Just because my mother was a white supremacist and I grew up with her, doesn’t mean I subscribe to her ideology. I don’t.” And yet you picked a boyfriend with the same tendencies. What does that say about you? Yeah, my inner voice could be an accurate bitch.

“I just wanted to let you know.”

“And if I wasn’t who I am, would you have told me?”

He considered. Or what I assumed was considering. He let out a long breath. “No. Probably not. I don’t think in terms of race, but I know a bunch of people in the world still do, and I need to remind myself to be aware of that. Gaynor Beach is mostly an open and welcoming community. Full of love. But there are still a few people—bigoted, misogynistic, homophobic, and racist.”

“Being homophobic in a community so welcoming to queer people seems weird to me.” Hank would’ve hated it for that exact reason. He hated queer people. Although he’d lived with me for four years, he’d never seen himself as queer.

Anthony let out a little laugh. “Well, there is that.” He tucked his phone into his back pocket. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah.” I let out a little laugh. “I’ve been saying that since you got here.”

“Sure.” He smiled. “Maybe text me after you see Dr. Martin?”

“Aren’t you going to talk to him?” I resisted the urge to narrow my eyes.

“Yes, I will do a debrief with him. But if nothing’s urgent, it might not happen until next week?”

“And if it’s urgent?”

He cocked his head. “Dr. Martin would contact me immediately, and either I or someone in the office would deal with it right away.”

“Deal with me?”

“Yes.” He continued to hold my gaze.

I waved my hand, almost as if I could swat away the notion. “I’m fine. I’m fine now, and I’ll be fine after I see Dr. Martin. I promise.” I couldn’t really make that promise—but that wouldn’t stop me from saying it anyway.

“Right.” His phone buzzed. He winced.

I gestured for him to take the call or look at the text or whatever he needed to do.

He yanked the phone from his back pocket and checked it. “Oh, uh...”

“Crap?” I offered that helpfully. “Or shit?” I would’ve offered up the f-word but he laughed.

“I don’t normally talk about my personal life, but my husband and I are known in the community—especially for our toddler twins.”

“Oh?” Okay, color me interested. Not really in kids per se... more of in a gay couple having them. I hadn’t seen any of that in my isolated world back in Oregon.

“They’re... they get into mischief. The daycare operator just texted me, and I won’t get into details, but I need to drop by to see what my daughter Alicia got into.” He rolled his eyes. “I adore her. Don’t get me wrong.”

“But...?”

He grinned. “Hell on wheels was an expression created for her.” He grabbed his messenger bag. “I’ll leave you. You’ve got everything you need?”

I rose and nodded.

Wally stirred, gave the situation a once-over, decided nothing interesting was happening, then went back to sleep.

I smiled.

So did Anthony.

We walked to the front door.

“Oh, you might want to check out the library. My husband is the head librarian. He can get you set up with a library card. You can then access a huge amount of digital material—e-books, magazines, and audiobooks. Plus lots of other stuff. You can’t take Wally to the library, unfortunately, but he’ll be okay if you leave him alone for a bit, right?”

I was uncertain, but Arthur had said if I put Wally in his crate that he should be okay. What had he said? Crate trained? I cleared my throat. “Maybe I can drop by after I see Dr. Martin on Friday.” Because that’s what adults did, right? They planned things. Used logistics.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

“That’s a great idea. Let me know how it goes.” He gave me a wave and headed to his SUV.

I closed the front door and leaned against it.

Peopling really exhausted me. Truly. I eyed the laptop on the coffee table. Then I grabbed Wally’s leash. “Time for a walk.”

He didn’t appear impressed, but he did eventually walk down the stairs I’d bought for him because he couldn’t jump on and off the couch.

“One day, boy. One day we’ll both be able to jump.”

I wasn’t certain I believed that, but at the very least we could walk.

The rest of my problems would still be here when I got back.

Chapter4

Jeremy

Persistent scratching pulled me from the brilliant email I was composing. A way to tell a journalist to fuck off without actually using those words. And journalist was a generous term. Tommy Tucker was a guttersnipe who dragged everyone down to his level while claiming he was just telling the truth to the masses.

Whatever the fuck that meant.

He'd been poking around my client's personal life in intrusive ways that bordered on harassment. If I thought his boss might rein him in, I would've tried that. But Karen Mixer was as bad as her top reporter.

And still the scraping noise continued.

Squirrels? Rats? Oh God, I hope not.

I saved the email. I wouldn't send it now anyway, given how angry I was. I'd learned, unless the situation called for immediate action, waiting a few minutes—or hours—before hitting send could save a ton of headaches. Cooler heads prevailing and all that.

My journey through the house took me from the front parlor where my office was, through the kitchen, and to the back door. Which I opened.

And looked down.

Way down.

Wally stood there with a huge grin on his face, as if expecting to be let in.

Panic seized me. "Is Phillip okay?" I grabbed my spare key off the rack and headed outside. "Okay, boy, you need to go home."

I would've sworn to God that the dog arched an eyebrow.

He didn't have a leash, and I didn't have anything that I could cobble something together without wasting precious time.

"Okay, buddy, hold still." I angled myself to scoop him into my arms.

Even as I settled him, he licked my face.

“Uh, your breath is...gross.” I loved doggie kisses, but he definitely needed a breath mint.

Figuring going around the side of the house and using the gate to get to the front yard was about as quick as booting through the house, I headed that way. “Phillip?” I didn’t want to yell, but I was concerned. I didn’t know the guy, but he hadn’t seemed like the type to let his dog just wander about.

“Huh?”

The quiet word caught my attention. “It’s Jeremy. I have Wally. Uh...where are you?” I stood on the little grass strip between our houses.

“Backyard.” He sounded...sleepy?

“Phillip, I have Wally. So don’t worry, okay?”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

“Wally? Oh my God, where is he?” Pure panic.

I stepped to his gate, wiggled the loose latch, made a mental note to fix it, and pushed into the backyard.

He met me and held out his arms for Wally when he spotted his pooch.

For just an instant, I hesitated. Then gingerly, I eased Wally into his arms.

Wally promptly licked him continuously.

Some of Phillip’s high color started to recede. “I don’t...” He swallowed. “How did he wind up with you?”

I shrugged. “He showed up at my back door. I was worried about you.” I gave him a once-over. “You’re okay?”

“Yeah.” He rubbed his nose against Wally’s ruff.

The dog was still trying to give many, many kisses.

“Well, I should?—”

“Stay?” He snapped the word. “Sorry.” He winced. “I’m sure you have other things to?—”

“I don’t.” Certainly the email could wait a few hours. “Why don’t we try to figure out

how Wally got from your house to mine?”

“Sure.And can I offer you a drink?I made a pitcher of sugar-free lemonade.”

I wasn’t a huge lemonade fan...but I had the impression Phillip didn’t have many visitors.Not that I’d been watching.Just...I’d only spotted Anthony so far.Well, that I’d noticed.Out my front window where I’d placed my desk.

But not to spy on my cute new neighbor.

Because that would be creepy.

No, I just liked looking out at the neighborhood.At all the houses with families.The trees.All the other stuff that could be found in a little subdivision.“Lemonade is perfect.Do you want me to take Wally?”

Phillip gestured with his chin.“Maybe close the gate?”

“Absolutely.”I showed him how the mechanism jiggled.“I can tighten that up for you.Or you could ask James?—”

“I don’t want to bother James.”

I was pretty sure James wouldn’t see it as a bother.Except he and Colin were deep in the process of getting approved to be foster parents or even to adopt.The love they had to offer any child lucky enough to have them as parents—either foster or adopted—was boundless.I wished them well.“Then let me fix it.My dad taught me about every tool imaginable—because most professionalsnever do anything right.” I tried to use my dad’s slightly worn voice.

Phillip cocked his head.

I waved him off.

He slowly lowered Wally to the ground.

The dog waddled off toward the yard.

We followed.

“Why don’t I see if I can figure out how he got over to my place while you get our drinks?” I met Phillip’s gaze.

He scrubbed his face. “For just that second...”

I put a comforting hand on his left biceps. “I know. I really do. I can only imagine.”

Realizing the forwardness of my action, I started to pull my hand away.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

He moved his right hand to cover it. Then he met my gaze again. "Thank you."

"My pleasure. Anytime, okay? We're neighbors." I injected as much enthusiasm into the word as I could.

His grin was wry. "Yeah, neighbors." He moved his hand away, and I dropped mine. He gave me one final look before he headed inside.

I eyed Wally who'd settled on a dog bed.

He licked his paw before settling his chin on it. He gave a little snuffle, then closed his eyes.

I was glad to see the bed and the recliner Phillip had clearly been lying on were in the shade. The brutal summer sun could burn someone easily. I hoped Phillip had applied sunscreen on his exposed skin, but that was none of my business.

Too much time around my sister's kids.

My nibblets.

I worked my way along the fence, looking for anything that might indicate how the escape artist had succeeded in getting to my yard. He couldn't have gotten through the closed gate despite the unreliable latch, so that left the fence.

Although I expected to see he'd dug a hole or something, I found nothing. I glanced back at Wally.

He'd stretched out on his side with his big belly stuck out. Must be hard to find a comfortable position.

Speaking of comfortable...

Phillip slipped out of the house and quickly shut the sliding-glass door. "Need to keep the cool air in." He glanced toward the sun, hesitating for a moment. He now wore sunglasses.

Then he shook his head, as if shaking off a thought, and headed my way. He held out the glass.

I took it gratefully, already feeling a drop of sweat go down my T-shirt. Unless I had a videoconference call, I dressed casually. When I visited my clients, though, I was all about the tailored suit and expensive tie. Quiet elegance. Subtle. Well, once in a while, flashy was required. I could do that too. I didn't consider myself a chameleon because, to me, that implied not being genuine. Although chameleons weren't likely conniving, and wow, had my mind ever gone on a tangent. I sipped. "This is delicious." Tart, for certain, but not as bad as I'd expected.

"Did you figure out how he got out?" Phillip gestured to my place. "Front door or back?"

"Back."

"So he didn't escape through the gate." Phillip met my gaze.

His glasses were shaded, but not strong enough that I couldn't see his eyes.

I smiled. "I guess he's an escape artist."

“Arthur warned me.” Phillip gazed over at the little creature we were talking about.

The tiny guy was snoozing—completely oblivious to our contemplations of him.

Phillip shook his head. “I don’t know. I wasn’t asleep that long.”

I walked along the fence again, gently pushing each board with my foot. None moved.

“That’s weird.” He sipped his lemonade and winced. “Sorry.”

“For what?”

“It’s bitter.”

“Tart.” I offered a smile. “Nothing wrong with that.”

He didn’t appear convinced.

“Is anyone here?” A disembodied voice came from the other side of the gate.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

“Shit.” Phillip hustled over to the side table, put his glass down, and hustled to the side of the house.

His cute butt jiggled in his khaki shorts when he did. He also wore a bright-blue T-shirt that sort of suited him. He still appeared reticent around me, but then why wouldn't he? I was a total stranger to him. Just someone returning his wayward dog.

“I'm so sorry.” Phillip rounded the corner. “I completely forgot.”

“No worries.” A young man followed Phillip into the backyard. He was a couple of inches shorter than Phillip—who was a couple of inches shorter than my own six-one.

The guy appeared to be in his late twenties or early thirties.

So, a couple of years older than Phillip.

The newcomer's medium-blond hair was a shade lighter than Phillip's. He spotted me and waved. “I'm Jordan. The dog trainer.”

I stepped over. “Jeremy. The neighbor.”

“Oh great.” His smile didn't waver.

“I should get?—”

“Can you stay?” Phillip fidgeted, his hands clasping and unclasping.

What's going on?Is he not comfortable with the guy?With strangers?Yet he's comfortable with me...Except we'd met on neutral ground.And I'd just rescued his dog from being landed on...by me.Was I more familiar?Safer?"Of course I can stay.I'd love to observe, if that's okay."

"Yeah, that would be great."Phillip glanced over at Jordan."Is that alright?"

"Naturally.The more people who know how to handle Wally, the better off we all are."

I wasn't certain why I needed to know how tohandleWally, but Jordan's logic was sound.Plus, I wanted to see if Wally was going to give us any clue as to how he snuck over to my place.

Jordan crouched by Wally's bed.

Huh.Dog hadn't stirred when the man had come into the backyard.I'd assumed all dogs would, like, bark or something.Or at least be curious.

"Wally?"Jordan's tone was soft.

The dog stretched but didn't open his eyes.

Jordan gazed up at Phillip.

Phillip shrugged."I've never had a dog.I assumed they all slept like the dead and never roused.I have to wake him up to go for a walk.Now, if you say the wordtreat?—"

Wally's eyes snapped open, and he struggled to roll onto his belly so he could stand.

Jordan smiled. "Okay, so we know he's okay. Maybe playing possum?" He held out his hand for Wally to sniff.

The dog did just that. Licked it. Then turned his attention to Phillip.

"He's expecting, a..." Phillip winced. "But he doesn't need them."

"Well, he's going to get them." Jordan slowly rose. "Does he have any food allergies or sensitivities?"

"I don't think so? Not that anyone told me."

"Good. So you have two choices. You can cut his food to compensate for the, uh, things you're going to give during training. Or you can take part of his kibble and use that. Training requires something to be given as a reward. At least for now. We need to give him all the positive reinforcement we can while not increasing his caloric intake."

"He's fat." Phillip scratched his stubbled jaw.

"We can work on that. Your vet can give you a nutrition plan."

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

“I’m fat.”

My heart ached.

“I’m not an expert on humans.” Jordan offered a smile. “But Wally needs plenty of exercise.”

“And I need to take care of him.” Phillip jutted his chin. “So I have to do better.”

I was working off the assumption that Jordan knew Wally was newly in Phillip’s care. That Phillip’s neglect wasn’t the reason the dog was overweight.

When Wally stood, he looked a little less...rotund. When he flopped on his side and his belly settled, though, I couldn’t miss the bulk.

“Do you have some kibble?” Jordan eased his gaze to Phillip while remaining turned toward Wally.

“Yeah, I do. Let me go get it.” Phillip headed back to the house.

Wally made to follow.

“Wally, sit,” Jordan said firmly.

The dog stopped and cocked his head.

Jordan chuckled. “Either we need to go back to basics, or he’s not sure I have the

authority to tell him what to do.”He glanced over at me.“I brought some high-quality you-know-whats, but we may as well wait for Phillip.”

I wasn’t certain what high quality meant.

Phillip reappeared with a handful of kibble.

Jordan held out his hand and Phillip dropped the kibble into it.

One piece fell.

Wally lunged.

“Leave it.”Jordan snapped the order.

Wally slowed.He gazed back and forth between the two men, probably calculating his chances.

Jordan pocketed the extra kibble, then slowly crouched, never breaking eye contact with the dog.“Good dog.”

Said dog rocked back into a sitting position.Jordan passed him a bite of kibble from his pocket in reward.

“Why is he good?I mean, I guess it’s because he didn’t pick up the fallen kibble, right?”Phillip brushed his hair from his sweaty forehead.

Will Jordan notice he’s overheated?They should be in the shade.Or better, inside.

“Yes.Why don’t we head inside in a minute?”Jordan set down another piece of food beside the first.

Wally lunged.

“Leave it.” Jordan put his hand over the kibble. “Sit.”

Wally plopped back onto his butt.

“Good boy.” Jordan held out a reward from his pocket.

The dog gently snagged the bite of food from his fingers.

The trainer picked up the two bits off the grass and rose. “This is really good, Phillip. I have to be honest, I wasn’t certain what to expect. But he’s got an understanding of some commands. We can go inside where he won’t be distracted. I can take him through his paces, and we’ll create a training plan from there.” Jordan offered a beaming smile. “I think you two will be in sync in no time.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

“You’ll come with us?” Phillip gave me what I could only describe as a pleading look.

“Of course.” Again, no idea why he wanted me, but it made me feel like I’d done something right. I’d take that trust and run with it. So three adults and one clearly eager dog headed inside.

Chapter 5

Phillip

“Are you sure you don’t mind watching Wally? Jordan says he’ll be fine in his crate.” I eyed Jeremy. My gorgeous neighbor who hadn’t asked any questions when I’d practically begged him to stay with me yesterday during the training session now offered me the same reassuring smile today.

“I don’t mind. Honestly, Phillip. If I had a problem, then I wouldn’t have offered.”

“Okay, but...” But no one ever does nice things for me. No one does generous things without having ulterior motives. The shrink might decide to keep me in the hospital, and I’ll never come home... Yeah, that notion, of all three, was the least likely.

Still didn’t stop my mind from going there.

Jeremy held Wally’s leash as the dog tried to bolt past him and into his house.

The house I was very curious about. So not the time. Speaking of time... “Okay, well, I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

He offered that benevolent smile that wasn't condescending. It could've been...but it wasn't. "I literally have nothing to do all day."

I arched an eyebrow.

He held up his hands. "Outside of the house. All my work today is virtual, and I don't even have any meetings, so if Wally happens to bark, the noise won't disturb me."

"He won't bark." I rushed to reassure Jeremy. "He's not a barker. He's, like, the opposite of a barker." I indicated the dog bed in the huge carryall I'd brought with me. Every conceivable thing Wally might need was in there.

I might've gone overboard. But this was going to be the first time we were apart.

"Phillip?"

"Mmm?"

"Go." Jeremy indicated the cab that had just pulled up.

"Oh shit, right." I dropped the bag, petted Wally quickly on the head, and sprinted to the cab. I was only a little out of breath as I slid into the back seat. "Uh, hi." I glanced out the passenger window as Jeremy waved, picked up the huge bag, and coaxed Wally inside.

The dog didn't even look back.

Not that he had any reason to. If I could pick between myself or Jeremy, I'd pretty much pick Jeremy every time.

"Where are you going?"

I met the cabby's soft dark-brown eyes in the rearview mirror. "The hospital."

He flipped on the meter and headed out. "I'll have you there in no time."

"It's close. I should've walked."

"In this heat? Nah. You want to be fresh as a daisy when you show up there." The older man with tanned skin offered me a smile. "You okay? I mean, none of my business, and people have lots of reasons?—"

"I'm seeing Dr. Martin." Realizing I hadn't done up my seat belt, I did so now. I needed to be safe and healthy. Wally was counting on me. Then it struck me what I'd said, but the time to snatch the words back had passed.

"Oh, Dr. Martin is the best. My Juliana went through a rough time in high school. She had a bad breakup with her girlfriend. We thought she was just sad, but her social worker thought she needed to see a doctor."

"Social worker?" What were the odds...?

"Anthony Rodrigues. Good man."

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

My taxi driver made the sign of the cross which struck me as both odd and comforting.

“Anthony and Dr.Martin helped Juliana.She’s in college now, down in San Diego.Studying to be a doctor.Well, she’ll be applying next year for med school.She’s so smart.I’m sure she’s going to get in.”He turned right, and the appearance of the houses changed.

Were we leaving Riverside?Of course we were—the hospital was beyond the borders of my little part of Gaynor Beach.“You’re very proud of your daughter.That’s...nice.”

He caught my gaze in the mirror.“Every parent should be proud of their child.Well, unless their child is a criminal or something.”He waved the hand not gripping the steering wheel.“We can debate whether nature or nurture is a thing, but we’re almost there.”

Can we?Debate about nature versus nurture?Because I sure didn’t turn out the way anyone in my world had wanted me to.

But that was a conversation for another time.We pulled into the parking lot and he cut the meter as he came alongside the main entrance.“That’s five dollars.”

I pointed to the meter.“That says nine.”

“First-time discount.”

I was one hundred percent certain that wasn't a thing. But four dollars I could spend on something for Wally had me handing him a five-dollar bill and four quarters for a tip.

"You're a good young man." He snagged a card from a holder. "You keep this. Call anytime you need me. My name is Carlos." He held out his hand.

I shook it. "I'm Phillip."

"Good name. And your boyfriend?"

"I...uh..."

"Oh, sorry. Assumption on my part." He pressed a hand to his chest. "Sorry."

"His name is Jeremy. He's not my boyfriend. Just a neighbor taking care of my dog."

"Nice neighbor. Gaynor Beach has lots of friendly neighbors."

"But I am gay, though." Somehow, despite that being very personal information, I was compelled to say it out loud. If this obviously religious man had a lesbian daughter he adored and spoke glowingly of, then the least I could do was own my queerness.

"Good town to be gay in." He grinned. "You'll be fine."

"How do you know I'm new?"

"I know everything. Now, go see Dr. Martin. Very good man."

I exited the taxi feeling slightly disconcerted, but quite reassured. I didn't want to make a ripple in town. Just quietly settle in and do...whatever I was meant to do. The

problem was that I didn't know what that was.

As I entered the hospital, I nearly barreled into a blond god wearing the most adorable pink scrubs.

“Oh, hey.” He offered a lopsided grin. “I was hustling to get outside on my break and wasn't watching where I was going.”

Stepping from the bright outside to the dark inside had skewed my vision as I'd headed in. “Also my mistake.”

He gave me a huge smile. “I'm Jay.”

“Uh...Phillip.” I frowned. “You always just randomly introduce yourself?”

“To nice people I almost knock over? Yes, absolutely. I'm a nurse in the ER, and I work with a Canadian doctor. His friendliness, and his penchant for apologizing all the time has rubbed off.” He cocked his head. “You know where you're going?”

I winced. “That obvious?”

He shrugged. “Not everyone's been here before. And not everyone comes through the ER, so I shouldn't assume?—”

“New in town. First time here. Seeing Dr. Martin.” Because why not tell everyone I met that I was off to see the resident psychiatrist?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

“Oh, he’s fantastic. Follow the yellow arrows. You’ll be great. Gotta run.”

And with that, Jay headed into the brilliant-and-brutal California sunshine. The heat hit me again in the brief moment the door was open, and I was very glad I hadn’t walked because I would’ve been soaked in sweat. Not a way to make a good first impression.

I smoothed my shorts, then set about searching for the yellow arrows.

As it turned out, the colored arrows were on the floor along with signs on the walls. I imagined being color blind would make the world of colored arrows more challenging, but they made it impossible for me to screw up.

Soon enough, I arrived at the mental and behavioral health department.

A lovely woman in a pale-blue pantsuit with pearls around her neck and in her ears greeted me. “I’m Violet, the administrative assistant. And you are?”

I took in her vibrant-red hair and soft-green eyes. Empathetic eyes. If I was judging correctly. God knew, though, I’d misread people in the past. “I’m Phillip Kaye.”

“Oh, you’re here to see Dr. Martin. I’ll let him know you’re here.” Her grin lit her eyes. “Thank you for filling out the questionnaire online. That makes things easier for everyone.”

“I don’t have insurance right now.”

She waved me off. “All taken care of. Anthony said he was working on something for you, right?”

“Uh, yeah. I just... this is all new to me.”

My mother hadn't had insurance. Hadn't trusted doctors despite needing the meds to keep her chronic condition manageable. Might she still have been alive if she had? I didn't have a good answer to that question. In the end, what did it matter? Everyone died. Maybe she'd died earlier than she'd needed to. Hard to say. But that didn't change my reality.

“Dr. Martin is ready to see you.”

Violet pulled me from my reverie and gestured for me to follow her down a hallway. She pointed to a door and, following her lead, I entered.

The man behind the desk moved forward and offered me his hand. “I'm Dr. Xavier Martin.” He shot a glance over my shoulder. “Thanks, Violet.”

“Sure thing.” She closed the door.

I shook the doctor's hand. “I'm not a racist.”

He cocked his head as we let go of each other's hands. “Why would you say that? We've barely met.”

“Because of where I'm from.”

Dr. Martin gestured for me to take a seat in an area off to the side.

I'd thought he'd sit at his desk, but he took a chair close to me.

I wanted to squirm, but I managed not to.

He offered a measured smile. “Phillip—you don’t mind if I call you Phillip, do you?”

“Uh, no. Of course not.” Because Mr. Kaye was my grandfather’s name and he was another man I wanted nothing to do with.

“Right. Phillip. I work very hard not to make any assumptions about my patients. I look at referrals, intake forms, and anything else that might arise, but I reserve impressions for when I meet them in person.”

I wrung my hands. “You know where I’m from.”

Slowly, the Black man nodded. “Not everyone from eastern Oregon is a racist.”

“We lived near the Idaho border in one of the last sundown towns in the US.”

“Okay, but I’m not?—”

“They were all racists. All of ‘em. Like, you just have no idea.” I gazed at him. “Or maybe you do. Maybe you’ve met tons of racists. Well, I grew up surrounded by them. And I know our little town. Not everyone out there was raised like I was, but trust me, you’d have been run out of that fucking place.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

He offered a small smile. “I’ve been Black my entire life.”

I closed my eyes and tried to remember to breathe.

“Yes, Phillip, I’ve faced racism. That’s a fact of life in my world. My wife was a ballerina and faced plenty of prejudice as a Black dancer. I went to medical school, and some classmates assumed I’d only been admitted because of the color of my skin. The truth is, I was at the very top of the admissions because of my grades and my tenacity.

“I worry about my daughters and what they face. But I don’t let this one aspect of my life dominate my life.” He held my gaze with fathomless dark-brown eyes. “So you don’t have to define yourself by where you come from. You left there almost six years ago.”

“Well, I certainly haven’t done anything to distinguish myself since.”

His gaze didn’t flicker. He knew. I’d written it all down.

“Why don’t we talk about this?” Again, he offered a small smile. “You’ve been through a lot in your twenty-four years. I’m here to listen. To help you work through some of the pain. I’ll start with, how are you feeling right now?”

“I’m okay.”

He held my gaze.

I squirmed.

He scratched his clean-shaven cheek.

“I say that a lot.”

“Anthony did mention that.”

“Uh...” I scrubbed my face. “I loved my mom...but she wasn’t well.” I pointed to my head. “I mean she was mentally unstable and she had a chronic health condition.” I didn’t like to talk about that. “I didn’t see the psychological problems as a kid, of course. I assumed everyone’s parents were...unhinged. She kept me close to her. I didn’t play with the other kids. I went to school, came home, and took care of her. She had other health problems, like I said, but she didn’t believe in modern medicine for most stuff anyway. She’d take the meds, but that was it. She was all about God’s healing and, uh, stuff like that.”

Dr. Martin nodded.

“And I didn’t know any better. I just lived my life completely consumed by her and the church.” I closed my eyes. “They didn’t condone homosexuality, of course. I got it. I never breathed a word to anyone. Not worth it, you know?”

“Yes, I do.”

I opened my eyes, meeting his gaze. I believed him. “So I thought I’d be there forever. When I was old enough, I went to work at the gas station. I studied hard, though, you know? And my English teacher suggested I might consider college.” I rubbed my sweaty palms against my pristine-clean shorts. “I knew what that meant. Leaving. And as long as my mother was sick, I didn’t see any way I could go.” I cleared my throat. “Then she got super sick, refused to go to a hospital—which was

about an hour away—and she died.Just...died.”

“That must have been difficult.”

“Yeah.”I rubbed my forehead.“But like, I was glad.That sounds terrible, I know.I don’t mean losing her didn’t tear me up.But she’d had a rough life and was suffering, and then, poof.”I made a fist and then opened my hand suddenly.“Her suffering was over.I was free.”I shrugged.“My English teacher helped me get a scholarship to UCLA.”

I took a moment to remember.I hadn’t shed tears at the funeral.I’d been...angry.For the neglect.For the lack of empathy from her.For the downright cruelty at times.All because of that damn illness.

Or so I told myself.I’d never seen another side of her and so maybe she’d been that bitter before I was born.In the end, though, I’d decided I wasn’t going to live my life in the past.I sold or gave away all Mom’s stuff except for a few photographs, packed a bag, and left the day after graduation.

“No one tried to stop me.No one tried to indoctrinate me back into the church.It’s like they knew.That I didn’t fit in.That I wasn’t one of them.And they were right.”I sighed.“But LA wasn’t the right place to wind up at.Maybe if I’d gone to Portland or Seattle...I dunno...stayed in the Pacific Northwest.I mean, I get that I had to go away, but California’s like a different planet.”

Dr.Martin chuckled.“Yes, that’s true.”

“Right?So I got a room in a house with a bunch of guys and tried really hard to study.But all this stuff was before me—booze, drugs, women... And I sort of lost myself.I mean, I didn’t even want the women, but I wanted to fit in.I didn’t, like, do anything, you know?With women.””

“Yes, I know.”

“I didn’t want to get anyone knocked up. Because I would’ve married any woman I knocked up.”

“That was very sensible of you. And abstaining kept you safe from diseases, too.”

“Right.” I wrinkled my nose. “I didn’t get much of an education, but the other students were friendly. I never had friends before. And then...” After a long moment. “I met Hank.”

Dr. Martin’s gaze never wavered. “Do you want to tell me about Hank?”

“How long do you have?”

“An hour today, unless you really need more. I won’t push you out if you have to get stuff off your chest.”

I doubted that was true. Psychiatrists were always busy. Still, I’d promised Anthony I’d do my best, and that meant being honest with the man who possessed truly kind eyes.

"I want to tell you, but I can't. I'm not ready."

"That's okay. We have lots of days ahead. What would you feel comfortable discussing? Maybe how it felt to arrive in LA at college from your small town?"

“It’s a long story...but I’ll try to keep it brief.”

Yeah, like that was possible.

Chapter 6

Jeremy

I loved my sister.

I loved my nibblets.

I loved my neighbor’s dog.

I even loved chaos.

Which was a damned good thing because as Wally played with Raphael and Thaddeus, general insanity ensued.

I'd assumed Wally would be placid. Would just want to sleep on his bed. I'd even fashioned stairs for him so he could mount them and sleep on the couch.

Raphael and Thaddeus had strict instructions to leave the dog alone. Give the little guy time to settle.

Wow, had I ever been wrong on every account.

When Marcie and her crew arrived, Wally had barked excitedly and turned little circles in obvious delight. When we moved en masse to the solarium at the back of my house, Wally was the first to pounce on the toys I'd placed around for the kids. As if to say I know you're here to play—so let's play!

And they had.

Even Raphael, who tended to be shy around the unfamiliar, broke out of their shell and got down on the ground to...accept doggie kisses? Give doggie hugs? My nibblet was all about tactile sensory experiences—once they settled into their space. Today they'd only removed their sandals and shorts. Their underwear was still in place.

“A win.” Marcie clinked her glass of iced tea with mine as we sat in wicker chairs and watched the general merriment..

I knew what she meant. Raphael was free spirited. I called them my nibblet because I didn't want to misgender them. Most kids weren't strident about their gender at five. At least from what I'd seen. Raphael was. They were nonbinary in a way I could

only begin to understand. Sometimes they wanted frilly dresses. Sometimes the choice was dungarees. Most of the time they chose a long T-shirt and underwear—when they were required to wear clothes. Any fabric could set off their sensory overload. Marcie let Raphael run around naked in the house with the understanding they had to wear clothes when they left the house or when guests came over.

That edict had garnered many, many, many meltdowns. Still, my nibblet had so far survived a special-needs preschool and was now in full-day kindergarten.

Linda, the owner, had been respectful of Raphael and only ever used their full name. The owner had instructed her staff that kids were no longer to be separated by genders or praised as good boys and girls. Everyone had a name, and the teachers were going to use them, along with collectives like “kids” or “peeps” or “friends”.

Some parents applauded. Some parents misgendered Raphael intentionally. Okay, one bitch, who’d been told off by two other parents. Marcie hadn’t even had the chance to intervene. Two parents threw a very public shit-fit and pulled their children from the preschool only to find they weren’t welcomed at the other ones in town either. Seemed people talked. Should the kids suffer because of their parents’ prejudices? Will they learn those same attitudes and carry them for life? I just didn’t know. But hurting genderfluid children ranked high on my list of sins.

Kindergarten this year proved a bit harder, but Raphael survived.

Mr. Thorncliffe had a way of respecting Raphael. Understanding them. Giving them space to thrive. He used their gender-neutral pronouns.

Just like I did.

Hence nibblet.

Many people didn't understand.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

And I was happy to enlighten them.

Thaddeus lunged for Wally and tried to wrap him in a hug.

“No!”

Raphael snapping at Thaddeus had Marcie and me shifting to intervene.

Raphael was a gentle soul who rarely spoke loudly. Actually, in new circumstances, they were a child of few words. Unless one got them talking about something they were passionate about.

Thaddeus rocked back, clearly stung by their sibling’s command.

“Gentle.” Raphael held out their hand to an equally stunned Wally.

Wally, bless his little heart, accepted the gesture as the kindness it was intended to be. He allowed Raphael to pet his fur and soon was leaning against my nibblet.

Slowly, three-year-old, normally exuberant Thaddeus approached. He mimicked Raphael’s gentle movements.

The dear dog, had he been a cat, would’ve been purring. Of that I was quite certain.

Marcie grasped my hand.

An unspoken thought passed between us.

She wanted a dog desperately—almost as much as the kids did—but she struggled enough as things stood. Her husband, Darren, worked on the military base and put in long hours so Marcie could stay home with the kids.

Thaddeus's daycare costs weren't unreasonable, but still tough to pay for on just one salary. Instead of keeping Thaddeus at home, his parents wanted him to be with other kids. As Raphael had been before.

Marcie was planning to get back into the workforce once Thaddeus was in kindergarten. Her former work as an event planner often had her working evenings and weekends. With the kids needing her so much, returning to the work she loved might prove impossible. What she needed was a good babysitter whom Raphael could trust to take care of their needs. Marcie had found a few over the past couple years, but none had been the right fit.

Adding a dog to that mix would be more trouble than benefit. Plus, Darren was allergic to fur, so that had to be taken into consideration.

Wally licked Raphael's cheek.

My nibblet laughed.

Inside my previously tight chest, my heart soared. I hadn't been certain how today would go. I knew, in my soul, that the kids would love Wally. But even though the shelter owner had told Phillip that Wally loved kids, I just hadn't been certain the dog would reciprocate.

He had.

In spades.

His joy couldn't be understated.

Phillip was an enigma—no question about that.

Wally truly appeared to be an open book, as sweet and friendly as Phillip had promised.

I glanced at my watch. "Okay, I think it's time to walk Wally."

Wally perked up at that. At my tone or at the word? Perhaps excitement at getting a reprieve? Or maybe he enjoyed walks. I was under the impression—whether accurate or not—that the little guy hadn't been exercised a lot. He was such a sweetheart.

When the kids had first arrived, Marcie and I had sat on the floor and gently introduced the dog to the kids. Most of my worries evaporated as the mutual love fest had been so obvious.

Wally wasn't hesitant.

The kids were, for the most part, gentle. I hovered nearby to intercept any inadvertent mishandling.

Raphael was also now protective of Wally and ordering Thaddeus around. Which happened. Other times, the younger one took the lead as only an imperious child who understood they didn't get all the attention they felt they deserved would.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

“Pants, Raphael.” Marcie’s voice carried as Raphael was already headed toward the front door.

They turned back, ran to their clothes, and put them on. Then they hurried over and had the leash in their hands before Marcie and I had even put our drinks on the counter.

Thaddeus, not to be outdone, barreled up to us as well.

“Sandals.” Marcie put her own on.

I wrote a note to Phillip, letting him know we were headed to the park. I’d stick it on the door when we left. I glanced at my watch again. For a moment I worried, then I remembered he said something about the library after his appointment. Hopefully he’d go. I had the impression he didn’t get out much, and a bit of socializing would be good for him.

Scott, the head librarian, was a great guy.

And married to Anthony.

Another great guy.

Whom I’d spotted going into Phillip’s house two days ago. Which confirmed my suspicion Phillip wasn’t just an ordinary neighbor. Although that didn’t matter to me, I liked the idea Anthony was watching out for the young man.

I grabbed a piece of tape and joined everyone outside.

Much to the kids' obvious consternation, Marcie held the leash. "When we're in the park inside a fence, you can take turns."

"Aw, Mom..." Thaddeus crossed his arms.

Raphael spread their arms wide in the air and spun around several times. This was their way of coping with change.

"Let's go." Marcie herded everyone toward the sidewalk.

I taped the note to the door and locked said door. I wasn't really worried. And I'd exchanged phone numbers with Phillip this morning, so he could always call or text if something came up or if he was worried.

We walked down Hummingbird Lane toward the park.

Fern Avenue was marginally busier, and I let Marcie organize everyone to cross the street.

All the while, Wally kept gazing at all four of us. Almost as if he couldn't believe his luck—having four humans at his beck and call. Four of us willing to do whatever he wanted.

"Dog park?" Raphael pointed to the park.

"A park where dogs are allowed," I corrected gently. "The next park over is a dog park with an enclosed area where the dogs can run free. You understand Wally has to be on his leash at all times out here, right?"

“Duh.”Raphael rolled their eyes.

I smiled.Every word brought me joy, because they sometimes struggled with language.Whether because they couldn’t find the word or didn’t want to talk wasn’t always clear.

“Going to be another hot day.”Marcie eyed me through the sunglasses she’d donned.

“This is SoCal in the summer, hun.”I nudged her with my shoulder.

“I want to walk the dog.”Raphael could easily match their brother’s imperious tone.

Marcie glanced at me, and I said, “Only if your mom holds the end of the leash.Sorry, we don’t know Wally well enough yet for you to walk him solo.”

Raphael stuck out their lower lip, but took hold of the leash between Marcie and Wally, steering the dog along while ignoring their mother and clearly pretending she wasn’t there.

Raphael was an incredibly responsible child.If left to their own devices, they’d cook every meal.They adored cooking—especially baking.While naked and wearing an apron.They weren’t able to interpret the feeling of hunger.Hence needing to eat at the same time every day.Cooking was the part of routine they loved the most.

Wally walked placidly beside Raphael, always keeping his eyes on the child and matching their stride.Phillip would be so proud of his dog.

Marcie caught my gaze.“He’s wonderful.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:13 am

“Yeah. You haven’t met him, but he’s...I want to say, sweet, you know. But can you say that about a guy in his mid-twenties? He doesn’t seem like the other young guys I’ve met.”

I’d turned down representing two clients who were so steeped in the bro culture that I honestly believed they weren’t going to take my advice—which would’ve been to stop talking before they got into even more trouble. I was a problem solver. A fixer. They were...almost unfixable.

“I meant the dog.” Marcie chuckled. “But now I’m intensely curious about his owner.”

“He’s...really sweet.” I knew I was repeating myself, but I didn’t want to say anything that might reveal what I’d observed. Overly cautious. Wary. Damaged. I couldn’t quantify those things...and so they remained unsaid. Too personal to share. Marcie had always been a good sounding board, though. If I needed help, she’d offer advice and be discreet. I helped her with the kids—she returned the favor with suggestions on how to improve my love life.

Joining dating apps was her go-to suggestion.

I was on a couple and hooked up on occasion. But I wanted to meet a guy the old-fashioned way. In person. Like while I was jogging and sweaty and he was walking his adorable dog. That was a meet-cute I wanted. A term I’d learned from Marcie, the incurable romantic. Even after coping with the hard life she’d dealt with, she never wavered. Never stopped believing in the power of love.

“My turn.” Thaddeus stood with his arms crossed against his chest.

“No.”Raphael tugged Wally toward them.

“Why don’t we try training?”I took the leash from Marcie and snagged a piece of kibble from my pocket.

Phillip had given me several pieces so I could continue the training we’d received yesterday from Jordan.

I wasn’t convinced we’d get far with two nibblets leading the way, but I was certainly willing to try.

And Wally, having spotted the kibble and dropped onto his butt, was clearly willing to give it a go as well.

Chapter7

Phillip

“This is your new library card.”Scott Wexler grinned at me.

His southern accent wasn’t too strong, but I couldn’t help but notice it.I’d learned about accents in different regions of the US by watching tons of television.More information than I could possibly absorb, but anything beyond what I’d been taught in that school in Oregon was a blessing.Knowledge was a gift I would never take for granted.“This is perfect.”I held the card in my hand.

“Now, you’re going to want to get a California ID card.”The redheaded librarian with the pretty green eyes smiled.“Or do you have a driver’s license?”

I cleared my throat.“I’ve, uh, never driven.”

“Okay. Then you’ll need lessons. Elyse, at the driving school, has her cars set up for instruction, so she’ll give you lessons. I’ll ask her about the friends-and-family discount.”

“Uh...” I scrunched my nose. “I don’t have any friends or family.”

Scott’s megawatt smile could’ve lit a stadium. “We’re friends.”

“I don’t own a car. I’ll likely never own a car.”

“That might be true, but you never know when you might need to drive. I didn’t own a car when I lived in LA, but one time my friend got a little too tipsy and I took the keys and drove us home. Emergencies might come up. Plus, having a license just looks good. You might get a job that involves driving. With lessons from Elyse, anyone in town will hire you.”

Another wince on my part. “I don’t have a job.”

“When you’re ready to look for one, I can help you. I lead a résumé-writing class once a month. In fact, I’m running it next week. I’ll save a computer for you, and we can get you organized. You might not need to use it right now, but?—”

“I used to work in a gas station pumping gas when I was sixteen. That’s it. I’ve never had another job. I never finished college. I don’t have any skills.”

He eyed me. “Do you know how to type?”

“Well, yeah.”

“That’s a skill. Do you know how to use a word processor?”

“Sure, but?—”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“That’s a useful thing to know. And we have various free classes here, including website design, basic audiovisual skills, business writing...you name it. And if we don’t have anything that interests you, but you can think of something else, just let me know. Gaynor Beach is full of people who want to share their knowledge with their neighbors. There’s a career fair next month?—”

I held my hands up. “I don’t know where I’ll be next month.”

He cocked his head. “You’re thinking about leaving Gaynor Beach?”

“I...uh...”

Curiosity moved to concern with a knit brow.

“No, not like that.” I had no idea what his husband, my social worker, had told him. Likely nothing, but I couldn’t be certain. “I just...a month is a long time, you know?”

“I do.” His eyes softened. “And life can be overwhelming. I remember when Anthony showed up on my doorstep with two infants and told me I was a dad.”

“What?” Okay, this I couldn’t fathom.

“Right? I’d donated sperm and, very long story short, I was the biological father to two children, and I’d been named their guardian. Tons of legal stuff that doesn’t matter—they were now my responsibility. My world changed forever that day. No regrets, but wow, did I ever move into taking things one day at a time. Sometimes one

hour at a time. And Anthony was there to help me—through all of it. I couldn't have done it without him.

“Lots of people do make it on their own, but I always say that having a village on your side makes life easier.”

My mind flashed to Jeremy. How he was slowly becoming a member of my village. And Anthony. And maybe Scott?

“Career fair?”

“Yes. And since you'll have a résumé, you'll be good to go. If we don't find you something sooner. Now, let me give you a tour of the library, and I'll show you how to log into our digital collection. You've got a phone, right?”

I nodded.

“Perfect. We can set that up so you can read e-books or listen to audiobooks on the thing. Isn't that the coolest? I mean, you probably do all kinds of things?—”

I shook my head as I took my phone out of my pocket. “I've never had a smart phone like this. Before...” I gulped, thinking about how I'd spilled my guts to Dr. Martin. “Well, moving forward, right?”

Scott beamed. “My motto in life. And love.” His cheeks pinkened a little. “I'm the luckiest guy around.”

And Anthony is as well. To have found you.

I could only hope I might be that lucky.

And as I walked back to my house, listening to an audiobook, I tried to find all the positives from today.

New psychiatrist who would write a script for my meds and who knew about my crappy past?Check.

New friend in the form of a librarian who could talk someone's ear off and yet make them feel at home in a building where they'd never been?Double check.

New neighbor willing to watch my dog while I did all that stuff that took bravery I hadn't been convinced I had?Triple check.

As I neared Jeremy's house, I caught sight of a note taped to his door.Oh God.What if he had to take Wally to the vet?What if he had to go out, and he left Wally alone?What if...?I couldn't conjure another panic scenario at that moment, but given enough time, I could likely come up with another twenty.

We're at the park.

At least I knew which park.Remove the note?What if he wants someone else to meet him as well?What if I'm going to be a third wheel?Then, like, I'll take Wally and?—

Jesus Fucking Christ.Just walk to the goddamn park.

I was already sweating and for a brief moment, I considered going home to shower and change.For what?It's not like he'll notice you.

Except maybe the sweat stains.

If you change, he'll know you changed, and he might think you've been up to something.Like maybe sex with someone, and?—

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

I could spiral a million different ways going down that track. So I wouldn't. Instead, I turned off the audiobook and tried to enjoy nature as I headed to the park. Not too fast—because I didn't want to appear panicked. Not too slow—because I really did want to see Jeremy and Wally.

What I didn't expect, upon entering the park, was to find about eight kids surrounding Wally under the shade of a jacaranda.

Wally had the widest grin on his face. Truly just doggie heaven.

Jeremy stood close—clearly ready to intervene.

Four people stood off to one side, having some kind of discussion. I couldn't figure out who might be a caregiver to each child, but one of the men held an infant with a baby stroller by him.

“Hey, Phillip, great timing.” Jeremy waved.

Wally poked his head up, spotted me, and tried to take off running.

A kid yelled. “Stop.”

My dog halted in his tracks.

Before I could move, Jeremy started to move toward me. “Great job, Raphael. Thank you for taking care of the dog.”

Raphael nodded. Then pointed to me. “Stranger.”

Oh crap.

“He’s not a stranger.” Jeremy beckoned me over.

I eyed the pile of children who all stared at me. I waved.

Several waved back, and two scurried over to the adults.

“Kids, this is Phillip. Phillip is Wally’s dad. Can we all say hi to Phillip?”

A couple of the kids waved back.

Raphael advanced toward me.

I held my ground. They’re just a kid. She? He? Them? I couldn’t get a read on the kid. With the short hair, my instinct was a boy. With the extra-long bright-pink T-shirt that looked like a dress, I thought maybe a girl. Does it matter? Stop thinking in the binary. Except that was the way I’d been raised. Genderfluid, enby, and transgender were three words I’d never even heard of before I moved to Los Angeles. More proof of how isolated I’d been. Although gay, hellfire, damnation, and homosexuals were ones I was very familiar with. I hadn’t known about the reclamation of the word queer. I’d been a babe in the woods. Easy pickings for Hank.

Oh God, do not go there now.

“Hello, Raphael.”

They narrowed their eyes. “Wally’s dad is a dog.”

“That’s absolutely true.I rescued him.I’m adopting him.So I’m his adoptive dad.”

“You’re not a dog.”

Despite the strong desire to laugh, I didn’t.“Yes, I’m not a dog.”

“So you can’t be Wally’s dad.”The child crossed their arms against their chest in the universal defiance stance.

“Well.”

“You can’t.”They stomped their foot.

In panic, I gazed at Jeremy.I really just wanted to get my dog and get the hell out of there.Kids scared me.Even when I’d been a kid myself, they’d intimidated me.As an adult, I should’ve been able to handle myself.

But I wasn’t.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“Raphael, why don’t we let Phillip see Wally? They’ve been apart, so I’m certain they want to reunite.”

“But he can’t be Wally’s dad.” A bit of a plaintive whine crept into the child’s voice.

That made me wince.

“Raphael, you know that sometimes language is used in picturesque ways. The person who protects and takes care of you is often a dad, so the person who protects and takes care of a dog can be called their dad from that standpoint, not a biological one.”

The kid glared at Jeremy. “I don’t control anything. I am not a remote controller.”

Jeremy covered his mouth with a cough that was so clearly fake that I laughed.

Raphael glared at me.

I held up my hands. “I’m not laughing at you. I would never laugh at you. I’m just laughing at your...”

“Uncle.” Jeremy managed to get out the word.

“It’s not nice to laugh at anyone.” Now the kid had their hands on their hips.

God save me from smart children. “You’re absolutely right. Making fun of someone isn’t nice. And I’m usually very careful. So I’ll ask your forgiveness and promise to do better in the future.” I wasn’t so crazy as to promise to never do it again. I was

good...but I wasn't that good.

Finally Raphael nodded and headed toward the group of adults.

A tall, willowy woman with dark-brown hair and sunglasses crouched down so her eyes were level with the child. The mother? The woman bore a slight resemblance to Jeremy, so that was possible.

Finally, Jeremy approached with a straining Wally.

I crouched. I didn't have proper balance, though, and fell flat on my ass.

Again.

In front of the cute guy.

Fucking hell, can I never catch a break?

Do you really need to ask...?

Wally leapt onto my lap and proceeded to give me a thorough tongue bath. I laughed. "Okay, dog, I missed you too." I pulled back to meet his gaze. "Did you miss me?" I added a bit of the sing-songy voice I'd seen connect with him.

He cocked his head, then moved in for one last kiss before settling onto my lap.

"I would say he did miss you." Jeremy crouched to my level and scratched Wally between the ears. "We did our best to keep him occupied. Is that okay? My sister's decision to come over with my nibblets was last minute, and then we wanted to come to the park, and my sister recognized one of the women from the daycare, and..." He shrugged. "You know how it goes."

Yeah.Except I didn't.I had no idea how people made connections and friends and ran into each other.I couldn't imagine Jeremy shopping at the discount-food store.Or checking out the rack at the charity store.Or going to the library to learn how to prepare a résumé so he could try to apply for jobs he wasn't even remotely qualified for.Nope Jeremy had the best of everything.He might not be super rich, but he also wasn't living off the charity of others, that was for certain.

“You okay?”He cocked his head.

“I'm fine.”Don't let him see you feeling sorry for yourself.That's just pathetic.

“Do you want to head home or stay here?The kids would love to spend more time with Wally.You'll be happy to know he's done all his business.”

“All his...?Oh.Right.Good to know.”Wally snuggled against my leg.I leaned forward.“I don't really understand kids, if you know what I mean.I don't even know what a nibblet is.”

“Ah.Well that's an easy one.I call my sister's kids my nibblets.Instead of niece or nephew.I've learned to try to not gender people.At all, if possible.”

“Right.We'll, I'm he/him.”

Jeremy smiled.“So am I.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“Raphael is a nibblet?”

“And their younger sibling, Thaddeus. Although Thaddeus proclaims to the world that he’s a boy. He’s learning not everyone works under the same paradigm.”

“Ah.” I didn’t really see. But I wanted to see. How could a child know they were the wrong gender? Or not any gender. Because that appeared to be a thing as well.

“How did your appointment go?”

I glanced around.

He winced. “Sorry. I wasn’t?—”

“It went fine. Everything’s fine.” I didn’t truly care if everyone knew I’d gone to a shrink.

Okay...maybe I cared a little bit. But I didn’t feel the shame some people might associate with getting help. I needed help. I might fight against it...but I needed it.

Jeremy looked around. “You feeling overwhelmed?”

I wanted to bristle. That I didn’t need him looking out for me. Except I kind of was overwhelmed. I was facing more people than I had in a very long time.

“Why don’t we walk home?”

Home. Did he mean his home, my home, or just Hummingbird Lane in general? “What about your sister?”

He chuckled. “My sister is quite capable of finding her own way. She’s got a key to my place if she needs to get inside. Otherwise, she’ll just take the kids and drive home.”

“Do you need to say goodbyeto them?”

He cocked his head in a way I was finding endearing. “Yeah, I should. Let’s get up first. My knees are killing me.”

I didn’t believe him, but I needed to get up because sitting on the ground wasn’t a flattering look

Jeremy rose gracefully, then surreptitiously offered me a hand.

I worried I might pull him over, but his grip proved strong, and he was able to get me up easily. Better than the hands and knees approach I would’ve had to take. That inelegant mess was the reason I never got down on the floor with Wally—even when we were alone. Instead, I coaxed him onto the couch for cuddles. Or threw the ball, which he was slowly learning to return. He was making progress.

And so was I.

Jeremy stepped away to give both his nibblets hugs.

Raphael stared at me for a long moment. Almost like they could see right through me to my soul.

Hold your ground. They’re just a kid.

In the end, Jeremy kissed Marcie on the cheek and made his way over to me.

Then we headed home with Wally.

Chapter 8

Jeremy

“Wally is truly a remarkable dog. He was brilliant. Just...perfect.” I grinned as the pooch eyed me. Almost like he didn’t believe I could be so effusive. And he wasn’t wrong in his skepticism. I wasn’t used to heaping praise on anyone, let alone a canine.

Well, maybe Raphael and Thaddeus. I was capable of complimenting them even when they might not be entirely worthy. The marker incident last year came to mind. Thank God for steam cleaning.

“Yeah.” Phillip said the word quietly.

“What’s wrong?” I cocked my head.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“Just...” He gestured between Wally and me.

We stood outside my front door as I removed the sticky note and unlocked the door.

“Just...” I prompted him, hoping he’d open up.

“He was so happy with the kids.I can’t give him that.I mean, I can’t even crouch down, let alone locate multiple children who will want to play with him.”

He entered my house with Wally after I beckoned him in.He bent over to unclip Wally.

Who promptly made a beeline for the water bowl in the kitchen.

And I was willing to admit, only to myself, that I might’ve checked out Phillip’s ass.He looked at himself in the mirror and saw someone very different from whom I did.Clearly.Because where I saw plenty to hold on to and run my hands all over, he made it clear he saw only someone who didn’t meet society’s stupid standard of perfection.Of beauty.Or even acceptable.Fat shaming was one of the final acceptable prejudices.Some people liked looking down on overweight people and would congratulate themselves on not lookinglike that.That attitude made me so angry.

“Did you say something?”Phillip met my gaze.

“No.”I toed off my sandals.

“You...sort of growled.”

I chuckled. “That was my stomach—I’m hungry. I was going to grill up a couple of burgers. Can I convince you to join me?”

Uncertainty crossed his features as he squinted his nose. “I better not.”

“Because of the company or the food choice? Because I’ve got asparagus I plan to grill, bean salad, and fresh strawberries.” Laying it on too thick? Seeming to be judgmental? I just didn’t know.

“Well...maybe a small burger?”

“Great. I have ground beef, and you can tell me the size you want. It’s lean and I tend to mix it with an egg and garlic. Any problems with that?”

“Not great for my breath.”

No, you can’t make a kissing joke.

“Well, as long as you’re not a vampire, I think we’re good.” I gestured toward the kitchen.

He headed that way.

A clearly exhausted Wally had made his way to the solarium and flaked out on his bed.

Phillip finally grinned. “He did awesome, didn’t he?”

“Yes. Look, if you take him for a walk in the park during the day or early evening, I know he’ll meet kids and adults and other dogs. He’s got such a great smile and a clearly pleasant disposition. People can’t help but be drawn.”

“But I’m a stranger in town.”

I headed back into the kitchen. A low wall partitioned it from the solarium—my favorite room in the house. The dome of windows was lovely in every season. Nothing like sitting there reading a book on a stormy afternoon with the rain pelting the glass. “You’re a stranger today. Well, you were this morning. How many people met Wally?” I counted quickly. “We were there for almost an hour, so I’d say a good twenty or twenty-five. Some who just waved while others stopped to greet him. You’re right, he did awesome. Next time, some of those people will approach. They should ask permission before petting Wally, of course. And it’s always up to you whether you’re okay with it or not.”

“Why would I not be okay with it?”

I scrunched my nose as I considered his question. “In this town? I can’t imagine...but that doesn’t mean Wally might not react out of character for him. Not every dog loves every person. My Dalmatian had a guy she couldn’t stand. Turned out he was beating his wife. Did the dog know that? Of course not. Did they sense the menace? Possibly. If Wally ever shows and sign of discomfort, you just say it’s not a good day and you move on. You never owe someone an explanation.” I glanced at the dog who was fast asleep. “He’s really chill. The little kids poked his stomach a couple of times. I mean, we watched closely, of course, but a stray finger escaped. He would just lick them.”

Phillip chuckled. “Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me.”

I pulled everything I needed out of the fridge. Then I washed my hands and pulled out a separate cutting board and bowl to prepare the raw meat. “Are you okay with well-done burgers?”

“Yeah.”

I startled as he'd come up beside me.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“I want to help.I...” He winced.“I don’t know much about food...stuff.”He waved his hand around.

“Sure.”Make sure he knows it’s no big deal.“I’ll get out of the way so you can wash your hands.And if you pet Wally, feel free to wash them again.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

He squirted some liquid soap into his hands.

I showed him how to use the touchless faucet.“I renovated this place two years ago.I could’ve upgraded houses, but I love the charm of this house and the friendliness of the neighborhood.”

“I thought everywhere was friendly in Gaynor Beach.”

I placed a cutting board in front of him, added a package of fresh strawberries, a colander, and a knife.“You want to wash the fruit thoroughly.Then you call pull the green stems off.Finally, you chop.”

He eyed the knife as if the thing was going to jump up and attack him.

“Why don’t you do the washing and then I can show you how I chop?There’s no wrong way, okay?I mean, we can eat the berries whole.They just happen to be a little big.Although I don’t care if juice runs down my chin.”And I’d so love to lick it off your neck if it happens to run down.God, I had to stop thinking of him this way.We’d barely known each other three days.He hadn’t shown the least sign of being interested

in me as anything other than a friend. Also, given he was clearly one of Anthony's clients, he might also be in a precarious position. Finally, being a patient of Dr. Martin's usually meant some kind of issues. He needed space, not me wanting to take him to my bed.

"I'm not really into making a mess with my food." He met my gaze with uncertainty, his green eyes appearing a shade darker than I remembered.

"Then we chop." I grinned. "Now what size would you like your hamburger?"

"Not too big?"

"I can do that."

And I did. I showed him how I made the burger, explained—when he asked why I used a different cutting board for the garlic—about cross-contamination and foodborne illness. I showed him how to chop strawberries and how to make a three-bean salad. By no means was I a gourmet chef, but I realized immediately he had no idea about any of this. Had he never cared for himself? I supposed plenty of people made it into their twenties without knowing how to cook, but I worried about him over next door by himself. If he needed help, I was all about offering it.

I just had no idea how to figure out what he needed and not seem overbearing.

We enjoyed our meals in the solarium with the nice air conditioning. The day outside was quite humid and really hot. Not a breath of wind off the ocean. Conversation meandered through very innocuous subjects. I didn't ask any pointed questions, much as I was dying to.

He didn't offer up any great insights as to why he was living in James's house. No clues as to where he'd been before or even what his plans were now. He'd mentioned

a visit to the library—and meeting Scott.

Clearly Scott had made a positive impression on Phillip, for which I was glad. The man needed to know people would be there to support him if he reached out for help.

I would be there to support him, if it came to that. I could only hope he'd have the willingness to reach out.

We washed the dishes together, and then Wally rubbed against Phillip's leg.

"Does he need to go out?" I eyed the dog who'd snored throughout entire meal, not even rousing to the scent of well-cooked burgers when I brought them into the house after grilling them on the barbecue.

"Yeah." Phillip placed the last plate in the dishwasher. "We need to get going. We've imposed enough."

"No imposition."

"It's a workday."

"It's a Friday." I corrected him with a smile. "I'm the boss, and I make my own schedule. I have my phone on me at all times in case of a crisis and, as you can see, there hasn't been one. Look, I know it's still hot out, but how about a stroll down to the boardwalk? We can even go to the beach."

Phillip glanced out the window. "I really don't...not today. I'm super tired."

Having no idea what he'd done before meeting us at the park, I couldn't even begin to argue. "Tell you what, why don't we go early in the morning? Before the sun's too high. I'd enjoy that."

He eyed me. “Don’t you need to run?”

“I can go for a run tonight when the heat dies down. My training is flexible right now because I don’t have any marathons in the next month.”

“Right. A marathon. I couldn’t walk a mile, let alone run twenty-six miles.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

My knee-jerk reaction was to tell him I'd show him how. Fortunately, I reined that instinct in. I didn't know his health status. I didn't know his physical or emotional state. And becoming a marathon runner was grueling. I barely managed, and I'd been doing this for years. "Yes, twenty-six miles is brutal. But...do you want to walk a mile? We can see how close you get to that tomorrow. You have good walking shoes."

He bit his lip and color crept into his cheeks. "Anthony helped me buy a high-quality pair. I told my doc back in LA I'd start walking. I told Arthur too. He made me promise to exercise Wally regularly. But I don't know if Wally could walk a mile."

"Good point. Why don't I calculate one mile—so half a mile there and back. We'll head out, and if you or Wally starts to tire, we turn around and come back. And if Wally can't make it, we call a cab. Or I come home and grab my SUV and scoop you two up."

"I don't..." He sighed. "I don't even really have a concept of what a mile is. I mean...no, I don't. Where I grew up? Everything was in eight square blocks. Our house, the grocery store, the school, and the gas station where I worked. Sometimes I would go to the next biggest town, but we always needed a car because it was almost an hour away. I have no conception of what that is in miles. And in LA..." He winced. "I didn't get out much. Or at all." He whispered that final sentence.

"Okay." I wanted to pull him into a hug at his expression of misery. "Why don't you take Wally outside to do his business, and then we can hop into my SUV and drive half a mile? So you can get a sense?"

"I walked home from the library."

I did some quick calculations in my mind. “Okay, so let’s drive that as well to see how far that was. More than a mile, I promise. And you’re still in one piece.”

He appeared to perk up at that with a little smile teasing his lips. “Really? Yeah, okay.”

“Let’s get Wally out first. We can gauge how you two are doing in the time it takes him to poop and go from there. Let’s take a bottle of water. Plenty of the vendors along the boardwalk have bowls of water for dogs.”

Wally perked up. Apparently he understood he was a dog.

I snagged my water bottle, filled it with cold water, and headed for the door. “Oh, we should wear baseball caps. Do you have one?”

He shook his head.

“Well, I happen to have quite a few. Do you mind wearing a Dodgers’ cap?”

“Nope. We didn’t have a team in Oregon, and since I never watched television, I didn’t even know about the Mariners.”

Although I continued to make my way to the front hall—because my caps were in a basket in the closet there—that brought me up short. What kid wasn’t raised on baseball? And didn’t know the closest team? And never watched television? None of your business. Let him come to you...if he wants to.

“Ah. Being halfway between San Diego and LA, I always had divided loyalties. In the end, my dad convinced me to side with LA.” I yanked two caps out of the basket. “I should’ve offered you a choice—LA or San Diego?” I dug a little farther. “I also have LA Kings, San Francisco Giants, and Oakland Athletics...”

“The Kings?” His eyes flashed bright. “I love hockey.”

“Great.” I handed him the cap and plopped the Dodgers one onto my head. I eyed his glasses—which most of the time I didn’t even notice since they fit his face perfectly.

And man, I found glasses super sexy.

“Do you have your sunglasses with you?”

He shook his head.

“Let me see...” I dug around in the basket and retrieved a pair of clip-ons. “Maybe not the best, but my mom’s always forgetting hers. The glasses she wears are a highly specific and very expensive prescription, and she doesn’t want to spend the money getting a pair of sunglasses made as well. So she keeps clip-ons. Except she often forgets them.”

“So these are your mom’s?”

I hesitated, but only for a moment. “I have three of them. So I’m gifting one to you.” I hadn’t intended that...but it made all the sense in the world. One couldn’t live in SoCal without keeping sunglasses handy.

“I didn’t mean?—”

“Well, I did. Mom will be tickled pink.” One of her traditional expressions she liked to trot out. “I can pick up another five at the store the next time I’m there.”

When he hesitated, I indicated his glasses.

He removed them and handed them to me.

I affixed the clip-ons, pleased to find the fit just about perfect.

Or so you tell yourself.

“You ready to go?”

Phillip nodded.

I eyed his pasty-white skin. And came to a quick decision. “We need sunscreen. I’ll apply some while you get Wally organized and then we swap.”

He didn’t appear convinced, with a little furrow in his brow.

“Skin cancer is a thing. So’s a bad burn. The sun is full force right now. I rarely run when it’s this hot—unless I’m training for a hot-weather location. And I always wear sunscreen.”

“Don’t you sweat it off?”

“Waterproof.” I snagged the bottle, squeezed out a large dollop, and started slathering myself.

Phillip licked his lips.

I tried not to read too much into that gesture.

He put on his sunscreen.

I tried not to ogle.

We headed out.

Chapter9

Phillip

I'd thought the clip-ons might be lame, but the ability to see without squinting negated any dorkiness I might've felt.

And when you have cared about dorkiness?

Okay, rarely. In Oregon, I'd been too focused on keeping us alive. We hadn't been able to afford fancy food. Or even fruits and vegetables unless the neighbors gave us some. My cooking abilities lay in pasta, rice, and cold cereal. Our pharmacist used to give me multivitamins along with mom's meds. So I didn't get scurvy, she used to say. I hadn't known what scurvy was. As an adult—with access to a search engine—I'd looked it up one day. Out of idle curiosity.

And had mentally thanked the pharmacist for her forethought. Many of our neighbors had eschewed modern medicine. Even they, though, could admit my mother was much better off with her meds rather than just prayer.

As we headed toward the boardwalk, I tried not to stare openly. I'd lived in LA for two years before meeting Hank, as a college student who rarely left my dorm on campus. Without a car, I never felt comfortable leaving the safety of campus. I'd even stayed during the summer, taking classes, so I didn't have to deal with the real world.

I should've been accustomed to seeing attractive men and women with their tanned, toned bodies wearing only minimal...clothing. Should've been able to walk along without my mind stumbling every time I saw a gay or lesbian couple holding hands. Especially those pairings with kids. But I did stare. I hadn't even known such things were possible back in Oregon. Well, the pastor had railed against the sin of sodomy—which I'd eventually figured out. Actual same-sex couples? I hadn't

understood such things could exist.

Hot sun beat on the back of my neck, and I was already sweating. Because of the heat. Nothing else. Nothing to do with the men walking past holding hands, or Jeremy at my side.

A bark drew my attention.

Wally's ears perked up even farther than they normally did.

"Kevin!" Jeremy waved, then turned back to me. "Kevin and Zelda are safe, okay? But if you don't feel that way, let me know." He whispered the words in my ear even as he waved to the young man and his dog.

A dog who, in my eyes, appeared rather large.

Although maybe not. Much smaller than the protection dogs I'd grown up around. The ones that'd always scared the shit out of me.

"Hey, Jeremy." Kevin waved as he made his way over to them.

Jeremy guided us toward the beach so we weren't blocking the boardwalk.

My feet sank into the sand. Something I wasn't accustomed to, and I found it vaguely concerning.

Zelda approached Wally.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

Wally strained against his harness—clearly trying to get to the larger furry brown-and-white dog.

Cute dog, with her big brown eyes and tan eyebrows that gave her face almost a worried look.

Adorable kid.Maybe—I don't know, twelve?Thirteen?Short dark hair, snub nose, all arms and legs and happy, animated gestures as he talked to his dog.Just...very non-threatening.Much as Marcie and those kids had been this morning.

I wasn't certain I was becoming a better judge of character.Or maybe just letting go of a touch of the vigilance that'd been a part of my life for the past four years.Oh hell, who was I kidding?Since I'd been old enough to understand the world was a dangerous place.Four?Five?

A child without a childhood needed vigilance.

"I'm Kevin."The boy waved."This is Zelda.She's super friendly around other dogs and a little wary around strangers."He smiled at Jeremy."You're a friend."

Jeremy grinned, catching my gaze."Kevin often walks Zelda up by the lighthouse, and I'll admit to taking a break during my training to visit.I love dogs."His grin was damn infectious.

So I smiled as well."This is Wally.He's new to me, so I have to be careful."

"Oh, you rescued him?"Kevin ran a hand through his hair."With Arthur?"

“Yes.”

“That’s so great. Rescuing dogs is the best. Zelda’s a rescue. My dad, Alec rescued her. And by then my dad Joe was sort of falling for him. And I was getting pretty attached myself. Zelda sort of sealed the deal. If Alec could rescue her when he was barely keeping it together, then he had to be a good person.”

“Alec is a good person.” Jeremy’s grin didn’t diminish. “Joe, Alec, and Kevin are newer to Gaynor Beach.”

“Hey.” Kevin squinted.

“Relatively new,” Jeremy qualified. “Not an old-timer like myself.”

That appeared to appease Kevin as his easy smile returned.

Zelda and Wally kept sniffing each other.

I kept a vigilant eye on them. Arthur assured me that Wally had been socialized and was good with other dogs. That being said, he and Jordan had both warned me about being super careful around strange dogs in case they weren’t friendly. If Jeremy vouched for Zelda, though, then I figured a lessening of the ever-present panic might be okay.

“Do you want to walk?” Kevin pointed down the boardwalk. “I was headed home. It’s too hot to go far today.”

Jeremy cast me a look.

“We’d love to, for a little bit.” I eyed Wally, whose tongue already lolled. “Maybe we can find some water first?”

“Sure, over here.” Kevin guided us toward a bowl of water on the shaded sidewalk before a food vendor. He pressed his hand to the side. “Nice and cool.”

I glanced at the vendor. Popcorn.

Before I could speak, Jeremy had his wallet out. “I plan to watch a movie later, so I’ll grab a bag. Would you like one?”

“I...uh...”

“Well, we can share.”

Just like that. Like we might watch the movie together. Or maybe share popcorn on the way back?

I’d been worried about cost. Everything was always about cost. I had a few dollars in my pocket, but I could never predict what might come up. What I might need money for. And asking for help didn’t appeal. Like, at all.

After the dogs had each drunk plenty of water, we headed out. Wally tried to keep up with Zelda’s strides.

Before I could say anything, Kevin gently pulled Zelda back. “We’ve walked a fair bit today and I think we need to take it easy.”

Zelda didn’t appear the least bit bothered. She kept glancing down at Wally as if quite intrigued by this little guy.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“I don’t think I’ve seen Wally before.” Kevin continued with his gentle speaking.

“Wally...” I cleared my throat. “His old owner didn’t walk him. He only ever went into the backyard. So this walking thing is new to him.” And to me.

“Really? He’s great on the leash.” Kevin’s enthusiasm couldn’t be overstated. “He’s not pulling or anything.”

“Jordan’s good.” Because he was.

“And Phillip is great with applying that training.” Jeremy glanced my way. “Oh, jeez, Kevin, we didn’t even introduce you properly. This is Phillip. He’s new in town.”

“Welcome.” Kevin grinned. “I like having new people in town. They always have a story. Do you have a story?”

I chalked up his casualness with me to the fact Jeremy had clearly vetted me. Because he should be careful around strangers. I might not be a good guy.

Hank hadn’t been a good guy.

And no one had warned me.

Babe in the woods. An expression I’d learned. I’d learned many things—most of them too late.

“Phillip’s shy.”

Jeremy's words jolted me.

What...? Oh, right. Kevin's question.

"My story's pretty boring. I went from Oregon to LA, spent a few years there, and..." I swallowed. "Things didn't go well."

"I'm from Ohio. Things weren't always great there, but my mom's there, and she's not so bad. Just..." He squinted. "I prefer Gaynor Beach."

Ohio? I'd prefer Gaynor Beach as well. "Everyone here has been really friendly." I glanced at Jeremy. "Especially my neighbors."

"Oh, that's cool. I've lived in two houses here, and I loved both. Really, though, I prefer checking out the marine life out by the old lighthouse. And down by the old pier. Oh, maybe we can go out there." He pointed.

I squinted.

"Sometime, sure, if we're in the area." Jeremy nudged me. "That would be a lovely drive over, and then we can walk up and down that side of the beach."

Because walking there would likely kill me...and probably Wally as well. That being said, we were hanging in so far. "Right. Sounds great."

"Oh, hey!" Kevin waved frantically. "My dads. They must've finished up work early." He nearly vibrated with excitement, and Zelda clearly perked up at his enthusiasm.

Wally glanced at me as if asking, what's all the fuss about? Should I get excited too?

I lowered my hand in a gesture I hoped conveyed stay calm. We hadn't learned anything like that from Jordan yesterday. Possibly because the odds of Wally getting excited about anything were slim. He just...went with the flow.

"Hey, back." The larger of the two men chuckled. "Have you made new friends?"

Jeremy stuck out his hand. "I'm Jeremy. Kevin and I have conversed quite a few times. Zelda and I are good friends. Usually in the early morning when I'm out for my run."

"I'm Joe." He shook Jeremy's hand.

"I'm, uh, Phillip." I held out my hand.

He grasped it firmly. But not too tight.

I was grateful.

Then he eyed Kevin and raised an eyebrow. No question the two were related—what with their matching noses and hair, although Kevin was wiry where Joe was solid.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“I told you about the marathon runner.”No defensiveness on Kevin’s part.Just a wide grin.

“So you did.”The slender man offered his hand.“I’m Alec.”He shook my hand first, then Jeremy’s.“Nice to meet you both.”He crouched in front of Wally.“And who is this?”

I appreciated he kept a bit of distance.

Zelda nudged against his hip, then made her way over to Wally.Almost as if saying,check out my new friend.

After a moment, I stepped forward so Wally could advance.

Alec held out his hand.

Wally sniffed.Then licked.Then lunged happily.

The man caught my dog easily even as I winced.“Wally, no.Um, sit!”

Too late.Jordan had told meNowas kind of a useless command, but it came automatically.We were a work in progress, for all of Jeremy’s praise.

“I don’t mind.”Alec grinned and set Wally down.“If you’re training him not to do that, I respect that.Overly affectionate dogs are common around here.”

Alec, Joe, and Kevin all said, “Widget,” at the same time.

Jeremy laughed. “The French bulldog.”

“Yep.” Kevin chuckled. “Oh, James told me she’s going to train to be a pet therapy dog. Colin said they want to take her to the pediatric wing of the hospital when she passes her test.”

Joe whistled. “Well, she’s certainly friendly enough.”

“And becoming well-trained.” Alec petted Zelda. “You’re still shy of strangers. That’s okay.”

Did he mean that might be why she wasn’t a therapy dog? She hadn’t been shy with Jeremy, and I hadn’t approached her. I told myself I was being respectful. In truth, dogs I didn’t know still intimidated me.

Alec rose, gave Zelda and Wally final scritches, then offered a broad smile. “We were thinking of hot dogs for dinner. Not all that healthy, but...” He caught Kevin’s grin. “A favorite. Want to join us? We know the best vendor.”

I considered. We’d eaten quite some time ago. My stomach instantly made me know how much it would welcome more food.

Jeremy glanced over at me.

I nodded.

“We’d love to join you, but I might only have half. Those dogs are filling.” Jeremy grinned.

“Oh, especially with chili and cheese.” Kevin rubbed his stomach.

Joe ruffled his hair. “Yes, you can have fully loaded.”

“Where is the place?” I gazed up and down the boardwalk.

“Back the way we came.” Jeremy grinned. “You must have been so enamored with my company that you didn’t notice.”

Not notice food? That seemed highly unlikely. Still... “Sounds great.” I gazed down to Wally. “You’ll survive.”

“There’s a place that sells healthy dog treats. Of every size.” Joe hesitated. “Unless...”

Wally perked up at that word. “It’s okay. He can have one if we give him less kibble for dinner.” I eyed my pup. “And you’ll survive.”

His tongue lolled. Clearly he liked the idea of spending more time with this cute family. Most especially Zelda.

Yeah, he’d be okay.

I might even be as well.

Chapter10

Jeremy

“We had such a great time, Marcie.” I sat at my desk, talking to my sister on speaker phone. I wore my running shoes and shorts as well as a rainbow T-shirt—ready to go for a run.

As soon as I spotted Phillip and Wally.

They hadn’t gone for their walk today—so far. Or I hadn’t spotted them.

I planned to oh-so-casually catch them and offer to walk instead of run. I’d hit the treadmill after we’d made our way home last night. I’d invited Phillip, and by extension, Wally, to stay for a movie. So we could share the popcorn.

Phillip had given me a funny look.

Because of the invitation or the food?

I couldn’t be certain.

He’d said he wanted to go home. So we packed up Wally’s things, and the two headed out.

Instead of watching a movie, though, I hit the treadmill with my tunes cranked high. Mostly to keep myself from pondering Phillip.

Hadn't worked.

I worked out my feelings. My attraction. Yes, I tended to like bigger guys. But if Phillip succeeded in losing weight as he clearly wanted to, would I still be attracted?

Yes.

Absolute yes.

Something about him called to me. Not just his vulnerability—although that was certainly part of it. He also had an inner strength.

Evidenced by his dealing with the unfamiliar family last night.

I'd spotted the hesitance with Zelda. Strange dog...appropriate reaction.

I'd sensed his unease with Kevin. Same thing. Unknown kid...trepidation.

Then Alec and Joe had appeared.

I'd nearly suggested we bail. Found some excuse to leave. Perhaps my oversensitivity, but I'd gotten the feeling Phillip had been a little overwhelmed. Or maybe that had just been an echo of his earlier comments about Marcie and all the other parents and kids.

Again, I couldn't rationally explain why I sensed Phillip didn't like crowds.

I just believed my gut feeling.

“I asked your plans for today.” Marcie’s voice cut through. “Sheesh, brother dearest. You called me, remember?”

“Right.” I chuckled. “Just...what did you think of Phillip?”

“In what way? He seemed like a respectable young man. Emphasis on young.”

“He’s twenty-four.”

“And you’re thirty-nine.”

“I wasn’t thinking of him in that way.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“Oh bullshit.”She snickered.“Do you even know if he’s gay?”

Oh holy hell.Did I?Had he said something or was I just inferring?Hoping?“I...uh...”

“Does he know you’re gay?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“Not the question I asked.”She clucked her tongue.

In my mind, she wagged her finger at me.Which made me smile.“Look, I don’t know.He’s...easily spookable.You know?And I don’t want to spook him.I’m just being friendly.Upbeat and positive.Offering to help take care of Wally.”

“You adore that dog.”

“What’s not to adore?”

“You like the owner.”

“What’s not to like?”

She tsked.

“You don’t know him, Marcie.He’s the sweetest guy.”

“Which is catnip for you.”

“Not really seeing the problem.” I frowned. “Is this the age-gap thing?”

“You’re of two different generations. If Raphael was just finishing college, would you want them to date someone almost double their age?”

“Hey.” I frowned. “Fifteen years difference and twenty-four years separation are two totally different things.” Or so you tell yourself. Because no, I didn’t like the idea of my nibblet dating someone so much older.

“Right...because it might be two generations...?”

“What is this talk of generations? You’re making me sound ancient. I’m fit, healthy, and damn attractive.”

“You have gray hairs in your beard.”

“Do you think I should color it?”

“Not the point.”

“I could...” I scrounged for something to snap back with. “I might be a silver fox soon. Phillip might find that attractive.”

“Or you might remind him of his father.”

Which could be either a good thing or a bad thing. I was well-aware that not everyone had a father as amazing as mine was. Thinking back, I couldn’t remember Phillip mentioning his father at all. Time to change the subject around my nosey sister.

“How is Raphael doing? And Thaddeus? Did they get enough of a canine fix or?—”

“Begging me every other hour for a dog of their own? Like Uncle Jeremy’s new dog?”

“You did explain?—”

“Of course I explained. How you were just dog-sitting Wally. How maybe the next time you do it, we might be able to go over and visit, but that we were not, under any circumstances, getting a dog?”

“You’re always welcome?—”

“Not the point, Jeremy.”

I smiled. “Yeah, that’s rough.”

“Don’t you mean ruff?”

“Ha. See, I knew you had a sense of humor. Oh, gotta go. Love you.” Phillip and Wally had just emerged from their house. I hit the red button, rose quickly, and headed for the door. As I snagged the handle, though, I had second thoughts.

This makes me look like I was waiting for him. This makes me look desperate.

Or he won’t think anything of it. He might not even notice me.

Fuck. Was I going about this the wrong way? I could just wait until he got home, and?—

Nope. I was going for it. I opened the door, caught sight of Phillip and Wally crossing Fern Avenue, locked my door, and started a light jog.

Belatedly, I hit the timer on my watch.

Then turned it off. At the very least, I hoped to spend a couple of minutes walking with Phillip. If he wasn’t interested, or if I sensed he wasn’t happy, I’d hit the button and take off. I hadn’t done my stretching, but I could do that out of sight. So I began a light pace toward the park.

Phillip turned into the path just as Wally tugged off to the grass.

Before his owner could react, Wally raised a leg. I'd always thought male dogs peed on trees and bushes, but Wally often just lifted his leg an inch off the ground, or even just squatted. Whether because of his weight or just because that was how he knew to go, I wasn't certain.

"Good boy, Wally. You're such a good boy." Phillip had confirmed to Jordan that Wally hadn't yet had an accident in the house.

Jordan suggested praising the dog every time he went outside. To reinforce proper house-training.

Personally, I figured praising the dog all the time was a bright idea anyway. Because he was a damn good dog. His behavior yesterday cemented that with me. He'd been an angel with all the kids, Zelda, Kevin, and their dads.

"Hey, wait up."

Phillip spun.

Wally barked.

"Shush." Phillip frowned. "Please be quiet."

I stopped close to them. "It's not so early that people will be annoyed. And he only has a little bark." Unlike some of the other dogs in the neighborhood—given the hours they barked at as well as their relative volume.

"I just..." Phillip winced. "I don't want to get in trouble."

"This is a community park, Phillip. Now, if you don't scoop Wally's poop, you'll have complaints for certain. But not for one little woof."

He gestured to the container of poop bags. “Always have at least four.”

“Good advice.” I couldn’t remember if Jordan had said that. Or had Arthur? Regardless, being well-prepared was never a bad thing. “How are you this morning?” I tried to give him a perusal without being obvious.

“I’m okay. Uh, you?”

“I’m great.”

“You were running. I’ll let you get back to it.”

I shook my head. “Light jog.”

“There is such a thing?” He appeared dubious with one eyebrow arched.

Adorable.

“Sure. I had a long run last night, and?—”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“After we said goodnight? And after that long walk?” He pinkened. “Right. Sorry. Not a long walk for you.”

“I’ll have you know we did almost three miles yesterday.” Closer to two-and-a-half, but what was a rounding error? “And I had excess energy last night. I hit the treadmill.”

“I didn’t see a treadmill in your house.”

Ah, so you were paying attention.

“One of the upstairs bedrooms is a workout room. I might be able to run in rain, but even I balk at storms and atmospheric rivers, not to mention ridiculous heat-index days.”

“Like the storm...last year?”

I nodded. “That was a bad one. We missed the damage here in Gaynor Beach that places up the coast dealt with. Some localized flooding in LA, right?”

He returned my nod. “Okay, so you’re just doing a light jog.”

Had we just skipped a step? The one where he says something about the weather last year...? “Light jog. Walk. Doesn’t really matter.”

Well, he didn’t need to know the difference.

“We don’t walk fast.I mean, if you want to join us.”He looked down and a little flush chased up his neck.

I didn’t dare hope it meant what I imagined.“I’d love to join you.”I crouched to Wally’s level.“Sorry, boy, I wasn’t ignoring you.”I’d have sworn his eyebrow arched.Then he relented and licked my finger.I laughed.“Yes, I missed you too.”I pushed up and met Phillip’s gaze.“Both of you.”

He let out a little strained laugh.“It’s barely been twelve hours.”

“Fifteen.Not that I’m counting,” I was quick to add.“I’m just super good with arithmetic.”

“Ah.”He scratched his cheek.“Math was never my strength.Probably why I was studying philosophy.”

I arched an eyebrow.“Really?That’s so cool.You’ll have to share?—”

“I didn’t finish my degree.”He gazed off toward the other end of the park.

“Still, you’ll know way more than I did.I was a communications major.No philosophy in sight.I didn’t even want to take English classes—but they proved critical to my degree.”

He turned back.“Shakespeare?”

I barked a laugh.“I stuck to post-modernists and technical-writing classes.As much as flourish is appreciated, most clients want me to get the facts straight.”

“No one cares if I know the difference between Kant and Kierkegaard.”

“Well, I’m sure they both do.”

“They’re dead.”

“Sure. But, like, if they believe in life after death, or reincarnation, or some shit like that, then they might care, right?”

He opened and closed his mouth several times. Finally, he smiled. “Huh. Funny. I never thought of it like that.”

“Let’s walk.”

“Yeah.”

We headed down the path, with me careful to match his strides. Not too fast, but brisker than yesterday.

Possibly because he hasn’t just walked home from the library? Had I pushed him too hard yesterday? I wanted to ask, but I didn’t want him to think that I was judging him. Or being too nosy.

Even though I totally was. Being nosy. Or wanting to be. “Yesterday was fun.” Nice and light.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“Yeah.” Phillip scratched his cheek again. “I didn’t return your baseball cap.”

“Keep it.”

He glanced at me sharply.

I shrugged. “I was never a big Kings fan. You saw how many caps I have. Enough for an entire baseball team.” Well, at least to cover every active player on the field.

“You’re sure?”

“Yep. Now, a Dodgers cap I might fight you for. So lucky you didn’t nab that one.” Totally not going to admit I’d give you that one as well. In a heartbeat. A little over the top.

“Well...thank you. That’s a very generous gift.”

Something in the way he said the word made my ears perk. Almost like...he didn’t get them often. Which made me want to ask about his family. And I restrained myself. Let him come to you. My every instinct warned me that he was skittish. Nothing overt. Just this pervasive sense of loneliness. Of isolation. Yesterday, though, I’d made him smile while we prepared the food for lunch. Then, he’d appeared to enjoy himself while we ate hot dogs at the beach.

Probably helped I’d spilled chili on myself. I never minded making a fool of myself if it made someone else laugh. As evidenced by my continual goofy ways with my nibblets. I had to be careful, though—sometimes Raphael saw right through me. Or

took things too literally.

We'd be talking about one thing, and then nibblet would be off on another tangent. Probably baking up a storm. "What are your plans today?" We rounded a bend and headed into a more-shaded area of the park.

"I don't have any plans." He shrugged. "No, that's not true. I plan to spend more time training Wally. He's figured out this walking on leash thing so quickly. I want to go through that list Jordan provided. I want Jordan to see how much we can accomplish. I know Arthur did some basic training at the shelter, but I need to prove..."

"Need to prove...?"

"That they weren't wrong in letting me rescue Wally." He wiped at his eyes.

"Phillip." I stopped.

He slowed. "Sorry, I?—"

"Please face me."

After a moment, he turned to face me.

"No one—and I mean no one—can say you aren't taking care of Wally. It's barely been four days, and already I can see how attached he is to you. How much progress he's made."

"He hasn't lost any weight. I haven't lost any weight."

My heart ached. I didn't know much about weight loss—never having been in the position myself. Marcie had complained about six months after Thaddeus's birth that

she wasn't back to where she'd been. I'd comforted her. And stupidly said I thought she looked gorgeous. Wrong thing. But how was I supposed to have known? She gave me a lecture, a lesson, and I'd learned. So I swallowed, dredging up that conversation and how she'd told me she felt. "Phillip."

"Yeah?"

"First, it's been, what, four days?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." I swallowed again. God, let me not fuck this up. "Did the vet say Wally would lose weight in four days?" God, let me be focusing on the right thing.

He shook his head. "No. She said she wanted it to be gradual. Not to starve him and make his food insecurities worse. She figures at some point he'd been deprived, and now he feels he has to eat everything all at once and find more because he's thinking he might have to go without again. Or...something like that."

Is he talking about the dog or himself? Oh, sweetheart...who hurt you so badly? "Okay. So maybe you need to talk to the vet about what's realistic. I understand weight loss can be unsteady. Uneven. He's got a lot to adjust to." As do you. "Look..." I floundered. "Would you like me to come to the vet with you? Would that help? Or would I just be interfering? You can tell me that I'm overstepping the friendship boundaries."

"Are we?" He squinted.

"Are we what?"

"Friends."

His question rocked me. “Well, I thought so. Or I was hoping we might become friends. Good friends.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“I thought we were just neighbors. That you were being nice to me because of Wally.”

Ouch. “Phillip... I met you because of Wally. Because of that first morning and when he came over to my house. But I certainly didn't need to intrude on your lesson with Jordan. Or offer to take Wally.”

“But you did that because of him.”

“I did it because of you. Because you would've worried about him alone in his crate during your appointment. Did I get the bonus of Wally's company? Yes. Did my nibblets and all the other kids love him? For certain. But I didn't do that just for his sake. If you want—if you want—then you now have the opportunity to meet people in the neighborhood. To make more friends. You might find me boring?—”

“No.” He nearly shouted the word. He gulped. “I thought you just... Wally... feeling sorry for me...”

“Nope and nope. I don't ask people I feel sorry for to join me for lunch. Or take the time to walk with them. Or introduce them to the cutest teenager in Gaynor Beach.” I tapped my chin. “Actually, I'm not certain of Kevin's age and I don't want you to think?—”

“I don't think.”

Phew. Only after I'd said the words had it struck me that they might be taken the wrong way. “Okay. So are we good? Friends?”

“Yeah.I guess.”He scrubbed his face again.

“Perfect.Got a doggie bag handy?”

He gazed down at Wally who’d just produced a very healthy pile of dog shit.

Phillip laughed.A bit wetly.“Uh, yeah.”He stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled out one that was already open.“So no one has to be around the poop longer than they have to.”He bent over and scooped.

I always, irrationally, worried when he did that after seeing him tumble twice.But he remained steady on his feet.He bent at the knees.He kept his balance.He tied off the bag and hustled over to the trash can nearby.

Is now the right time to tell him that I’m gay?Well, maybe not immediately after dog poop.But he certainly seemed cool with Joe and Alec yesterday.And, more importantly, where does he fall on the spectrum?I found him attractive—on the inside and out.

He returned a shy smile.“I’ll get used to scooping.I swear.I just always worry.”

“As long as you’re not leaving the poop, you don’t need to worry.Dogs poop.That’s a thing.Just keep them away from the sand in the sandbox.”I bent over to scratch Wally’s ears.“He’s the perfect dog.”

“Yeah, he is.”

“And you’re the perfect friend.”

He sniffed.“You barely know me.”

Am I laying it on too thick?“Maybe.But I do in some of the ways that count.You’re good with animals, friendly to kids, and when you smile it brightens my day.”

“I don’t smile very often.”

“Which makes them all the more precious when you do.”I grinned.“I plan to make you smile more.So, do you have plans today?”

“I...I’m busy.”

“With training Wally, right?But how about you come over later and watch a movie?I still have that popcorn?—”

“No thanks.”He turned.“I have to go.”

“Can I at least walk with you?”

He glanced over his shoulder.“You need to run.I need to go home.”

With that, he headed off.

I wasn’t fool enough to follow him.

Chapter 11

Phillip

By Monday morning, I was regretting all my life's choices.

Well, that wasn't strictly true. That implied I hadn't regretted everything I'd done before this past weekend. I did. Only this weekend was even worse.

Jeremy told me that he considered me a friend. Offered to walk with me, even though he was, I was quite certain, supposed to be running. Had invited me over to watch a movie with him.

What had I done? Run like a scared child. Like the child I was, deep down inside.

My psychiatrist in Los Angeles had talked to me about unresolved childhood trauma.

I'd brushed her off.

She'd talked about more-recent trauma. My highly dysfunctional relationship with Hank.

I'd scoffed.

Because I hadn't wanted to do the work. Hadn't wanted to tie my horrible childhood to the destructive relationship—my one and only—or to my eventual suicide attempt. Those just felt like connections I hadn't been capable of making.

And now, just about the nicest man I'd ever met told me that he saw me as a friend.

So what did I do? I ran yet again.

Dr. Martin, in our first meeting, hadn't asked me to tackle any of that. He'd simply given me the agreed-upon task of going to the library and taking Wally for a walk every day. Nothing too onerous. Then to return on Wednesday and report back.

I wasn't under any illusions, however, that things would remain so simple. So superficial. I'd top-lined some of my life in rural Oregon. More importantly, he had my medical records from LA.

He'd undoubtedly push me to go deeper. I had no doubts he'd read the reports from my LA shrink. I had no question that she'd shared everything with him that I'd wound up saying to her.

Doozies.

All of them.

Now, I sat at my kitchen table and listened to my little buddy snore gently. We'd done a long walk this morning. Instead of heading south after leaving the house, I'd pointed us north.

For something different.

Jordan had talked about keeping Wally engaged and exposing him to new locations and smells.

Or something like that. So we'd headed in a new direction, and I'd carefully taken us on a trip that would get us home after one-and-a-half miles. A quarter more than yesterday. To my delight, I'd figured out how to use the maps app on my phone. Now I enjoyed planning out walks.

Tomorrow we'd do more. Every day, we'd add a few more steps. Go a little bit farther.

Wally loved our walks. Given he'd never left the backyard of his old home for his entire life, I could only imagine what the world looked like to him. He seemed to be settling in, but both Dr. Louisa and Arthur warned me that he'd only feel truly settled after about three months. Was that the length of time before he forgot his previous life? Or was that the time he'd need to trust me?

I intended to earn that trust.

My phone buzzed.

I frowned. The number was vaguely familiar...oh shit. I answered immediately. "Hello?"

"Phillip?"

"Hello, Mrs. Condley." If I hadn't recognized the number, I'd have recognized her voice. Old, but strong. "What can I do for you?"

"You can come by today and pick up the rest of your stuff. The real estate agent is sticking the sign on the lawn tomorrow."

"Uh...you're selling the house?"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

She sighed. “I don’t have good memories of it, now do I? I got it cleaned out, and I’m ready to sell it. The market’s picking up, and the rental property was always my retirement. I’m selling it, as well as my house, and moving in with my granddaughter. She just had her third child, and she wants help. I can do that, at least for a while. Sweet girl, hellion children...they’ll keep me young. I’m wandering this big, old house and thinking of my Larry. And the rental property has such bad memories?—”

“I’m sorry.” My eyes stung. “So very sorry.”

“Not your fault.”

And yet her tone betrayed her words.

“So I need you to come today. The hospital didn’t want to give me your number, but when I explained it all had to go?—”

“Even the pictures?” I’d meant to go back. I really had. To get my affairs settled. Just...she wasn’t the only one with bad memories of the place.

“I understand you’re settled somewhere. That nice lady at the hospital didn’t say where. Wouldn’t tell me anything. She said she’d call you, and I said if I didn’t talk to you today that I was tossing everything.”

This all felt very cruel. But I couldn’t blame her. “I’ll be there. I still have a key.”

“Put it through the mail slot when you leave. Text me when you’re gone.”

So she didn't even want to see me. Couldn't say I blamed her. "Thank you for reaching out."

"Take care, young man. I'm...sorry." She cut the line.

Panic raced through me. I had to find a way to get to LA. I had to?—

A knock came on my door.

I headed to it, still clutching my phone. I opened the door to find Anthony on the stoop.

"Phillip, are you okay?" He spotted the phone. "What happened?"

I pressed said phone to my forehead. "Just...my landlady said if I don't get to LA today, then she's going to throw out all my stuff."

"Ah. That's... I want to say, cruel."

"She's got the right. I haven't paid rent for months and months. She was coming to evict me when—" I couldn't finish the sentence.

But Anthony knew, so he simply offered a sympathetic smile. "Look, I don't have much time. I just got a call about an urgent case I need to deal with—otherwise I'd run you up to LA myself. I'd ask Scott, but he's working. I mean?—"

"You don't have to disturb Scott. This is on me. If I catch a bus? Or the train?"

"And haul all your stuff back?"

"It's only the photographs that matter." My voice might've broken on that.

“Look...let me make a phone call.”He held up his hand and stepped away.

I gazed up at the blue sky so I wouldn't cry.I just couldn't afford to cry.

“Okay, I have a solution.”Anthony's smile was soft.“Two pieces.I've found you a ride to and from LA.”

“How...?”

“I have a friend, Colin.He runs up to LA periodically.He can make the trip today.No worries.”

“That—”

“But I can't ask him to take Wally as well.I mean, I could, but?—”

I waved him off.“No, that's fine.I, uh...”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“Second part.Brooklyn can take Wally.”

“Brooklyn...?”

“He’s just opened a doggie daycare in town.He’s still fixing the kennels and stuff, but he has space for one.He’d love to watch Wally for the day.You can give him a good reference.Well, that’s my suggestion.But we need to go now.”

“Don’t you have the emergency?”

“Yes, but I have enough time to run you to Brooklyn’s, then to Colin’s.”

“Let me grab Wally’s stuff.”Within just a moment, I had Wally’s necessities collected, and we were out the door.I made sure I had the key to my old rental as well as the empty duffel bag Anthony had given me when he helped me move in here with all new things.

I’d thought I had more time.

We loaded into Anthony’s SUV, Anthony passed me his phone so I could get Brooklyn’s number, and in no time, we pulled up to a lovely peach-stucco house with a slate-tiled roof.Very SoCal.

A tall man stepped from the front door, shut it, and headed our way.He had dark-blond hair.Just a shade darker than mine.His beard was neatly trimmed, and his smile was a mile wide.“Hey, Anthony.”

My social worker was already out of the SUV and grabbing Wally's stuff. "Hey, Brooklyn."

I was a bit slower slipping out, then hefting my baby to the ground.

He gazed up at me, clearly vibrating with excitement.

I gave him the command to heel, and he made his way around the SUV at my side.

My little guy had no fear of strangers. He just saw them as someone new to wrap around his little paw. He wasn't wrong about that—he had an ability to make people fall in love with him.

"Did you get my text?" I held out my hand to Brooklyn.

He shook it with a strong grip. "I did. I promise that if anything comes up, I'll text you. I promise he'll be okay." He crouched down, holding his hand out to Wally.

Who promptly sniffed, licked, and cuddled.

Yep, he was going to be fine.

I was a whole other matter. "I've never left him for this long..." Even as I said the words, I held out the leash.

Brooklyn took it with a wide smile that reached his hazel eyes. "I'll keep him occupied. He'll miss you, but I'll make certain he has fun."

Wally gazed up at me. Then he rubbed against my leg.

I crouched and scratched his ears in the way he loved. "A few hours. I love you."

The little guy yipped.

Knowing he didn't understand and believing it were two different things.Or...maybe he did.

I rose, waved to Brooklyn, and climbed back into Anthony's SUV.

We were on our way within moments.

"Brooklyn's helped me out a couple of times."

I was pretty certain I understood.How someone might be in a situation where they needed a hand watching a beloved pet.

None of those scenarios were good.

I wasn't facing anything that dire.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

Yet I still could offer up gratitude for Anthony and Brooklyn helping out. “Uh, anything I need to know about Colin?”

“Great guy. Married to another great guy. Has a dog—Widget.”

“The French bulldog?”

Anthony cut me a quick look before refocusing on the road. “Uh...yeah.”

“Kevin told me.”

“Oh. Yeah. Joe and Alec’s kid. Great family. Lovely dog.”

“Does everyone own a dog?” I asked the question half-kidding.

Only half.

“Uh, no. Scott and I only have a very grumpy cat named Crumpet whom we affectionately call Crumpy. With three kids, we’re already run off our feet. Maybe when the twins are older... Ah, we’re here.”

I’d lost track of whereherewas. Hell, I couldn’t have found Brooklyn’s house again. Neighborhoods weren’t labeled in Gaynor Beach. More just that if one crossed a certain street, then one was in another area. But the town was small enough that everything felt close.

Had we even left Riverside? Or just gone from one end to the other?

The driveway he pulled into belonged to a huge house. Like, really big. Bigger than most of the places I'd seen near me. So definitely another neighborhood.

Anthony put the SUV in park, cut the engine, and gave me a sympathetic smile. "He's just a regular guy."

"And rich."

"And comfortable. I'll let him share what he wants."

Even as he said the words, the garage door opened.

A man with burnished red hair stepped out into the sun. He had a wide grin on his face and, if I were to judge, was about my height.

"I need to get going." Anthony winced.

"No worries." I grabbed the duffel at my feet. He'd already done so much for me today—especially given he had an emergency. "Thanks."

"You're in good hands." He offered a smile. "I'd trust my kids with him."

Which was the reassurance I needed. Anthony always came across as sturdy. Strong. But in the moment when he uttered those words, I read a vulnerability. Something that crossed from professional to personal. Then the mask snapped back on.

I slid from his vehicle and waved at the stranger.

He waved briefly as Anthony backed his SUV out of the driveway, then turned his attention to me. "I'm Colin."

Somehow I expected an Irish accent. Not... I cocked my head.

“Long Island.”

“Ah. A transplant.”

“Sometimes I think we all are. My husband is here via Los Angeles. Which is where we’re headed.” He gestured to the empty duffel. “You want to throw that in the back?”

“Sure.” Somehow that felt like a mature thing to do because what I really wanted was to grip it to my chest.

“Woof.”

I turned to see James sauntering up the driveway with the cutest smooch-faced little dog attached to the leash. I crouched to greet the dog because I remembered the effusive thanks I’d offered James over and over the day he’d let me move into his home.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

Anything to delay my departure—even though I needed to get going. “Hello, Widget.”

She cocked her head.

James chuckled. “Our dog is infamous, is she?”

“Kevin mentioned her. I’m sure there is more than one French bulldog in Gaynor Beach?—”

“Several.” Colin chuckled. “But none quite so infamous.”

James shuffled past Widget—who continued to stare at me—and pressed a kiss to Colin’s cheek. “Drive safe, okay?”

Colin rolled his eyes. “This trip is just routine.”

His husband blew out a breath. “I should be going with you.”

“You have the meeting in San Diego with your new client.”

“Who could’ve waited a day.”

“Didn’t you say their network has some serious vulnerabilities?”

“Yes.”

“And didn’t they say they wanted an in-person meeting before signing the contract?”

“Yes.”

“So drop Widget off with Danny and the kids so she can play with Trouble, and head to your appointment. I’ll get the good news from Cedars and text you.”

James pursed his lips.

“I have Phillip to keep me company.”

That caught the taller man’s attention. His expression lightened. “Yeah? You’re hitching a ride?”

He directed the comment to me.

“Oh, I, uh, don’t have a car?—”

Colin waved me off. “He’s being a goofball and a worrywart. He always rests easier when I have company. Like I didn’t drive in New York City for years.”

“Amazing you’re still in one piece.”

“We have to go.” Colin pressed a kiss to James’s lips.

Widget woofed.

She and her human companion headed into the house.

Colin directed me to an electric SUV. “She’s a quiet ride.”

“Uh, sure. I don’t think I’ve ever been in one. Oh, maybe the cab I took on Friday.”

“Gaynor Beach cab?”

I nodded.

“Then there’s a good chance. Stow your bag and we’ll head out. You have the address where I’m dropping you?”

Page 48

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“Yeah.”

“Great. I like to leave plenty early, so as long as you’re not up near Burbank, I’ve got plenty of time.”

I stowed the duffel in the trunk and slid into the front seat. “Gardena.”

“Oh, perfect.” He backed out of the garage, hit the remote, then continued down the driveway. “So can I ask what you’re up to today? Not that you have to tell me...”

But, trusting him in a way I couldn’t explain, I did. The parts I didn’t mind people knowing, anyhow.

Chapter 12

Jeremy

“Can you repeat that? Super slow. Like I’m an idiot.” I didn’t like using that word, but sometimes Andreas needed me to use language he understood.

“I just got in a bar fight.” The six-foot-five brunet god hunched over his iced tea as we sat in the back of a seedy bar in West Hollywood.

Personally, I would’ve chosen a nice patio with a breeze off the ocean.

My client’s face, however, would’ve garnered way too much attention. So much for brazening this out.

“And why were you in a bar fight?”

“Because a guy called me a?—”

I held up my hand. “Moving on.” Whether the aggrieved party had used a derogatory term toward homosexuals wasn’t the point. That Andreas had felt the need to retaliate with his fists was.

He huffed.

“So the guy’s not pressing charges.”

“Because he’s a pussy.”

“Jesus, Andreas. He’s not pressing charges. That makes him your best friend. And don’t use that fucking word—with me or anyone else. It’s misogynistic and trust me, you don’t need that biting you in the ass as well.” I pointed to his forehead. “You swear that cut is the only injury.”

He rolled his eyes. Then winced.

“Right. And the black eye. That’s a given.” The forehead we might’ve been able to explain. A shiner had many fewer options. “And this guy says he’s not going to the tabloids?”

Andreas shrugged. “The cop said the guy swears he’s not. Something about not wanting his wife to know where he was.” He shifted his gaze around the bar as if worried we’d be overheard. Not likely, but I didn’t mind the prudence.

“The bruised knuckles aren’t going to clue her in?” I rubbed my face. “Okay, we’ll work off the assumption he knows it’s not really in his best interests to share his

exploits with the tabloids.”

“Because I’ll tell them he called me?—”

“Shut the fuck up, Andreas. I swear to God.”

“No one’s here.”

He wasn’t wrong. We were tucked into a booth by the johns and, at this hour, the place didn’t even have a server. Just a six-foot-two stone-faced bartender who had showed precisely zero interest in us. Frankly, she scared me.

“So you’re supposed to be at the charity gala tomorrow night.”

This time, his wince appeared sincere—the first chink in his armor. “Yeah, I’m supposed to be escorting Norah.”

“Well, that’s completely out.”

“Makeup—”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“Bullshit. I mean, I know pancake can work wonders, but your eye’s bloodshot as well.”

“That might clear up?—”

“What did the doctor say?” I put just enough sarcasm in my tone that he shut his jaw.

“That it won’t. Broken blood vessel. Will take time to heal.”

“All right. We need an excuse why you can’t make the gala. Something covering all contingencies but that doesn’t sound implausible. How about a bad case of influenza?”

“It’s summer.” He frowned. “Even I know flu is like, generally, a winter disease.”

God save me...now he chooses to use that big brain of his. My only A-list client who was also MENSA. Personally, I would’ve loved to see him pursue some kind of academic endeavor. But nope. When he injured himself, he’d lost his football scholarship. He’d nearly had to return home, but he’d been spotted on the street. Scouted on the spot. So first, he’d tried modeling. Which had, unsurprisingly, become acting. The twenty-eight-year-old already had an impressive résumé. Last year, he’d been up for a Golden Globe.

Yet here we were.

“Herpes?”

He groaned. “That’s not funny.”

“Well, it would keep people away from you. Seems to me that should be the goal.”

“Filming for the movie starts in a month. Norah’s my costar. I don’t want her to think I have a communicable disease.”

I frowned. “Right.” I wracked my brain. “Pneumonia? You can get that year-round, right?”

“Mainly in the winter when people are crammed together in small spaces.”

“Fuck.” I probably knew that, but my brain was short circuiting. “Pink eye? Highly communicable, would explain any lingering eye damage and...” I waved my hand in the air.

He squinted. “That might work. But I could still show up and?—”

“No.” I tapped the table. “Not only could people see the shiner, but I want this to be a lesson to you.”

“Makeup would work just fine, you know.” He crossed his arms in the universal I’m pissed pose. “You’re not my agent.”

“Makeup can do amazing things. But, again, the eye. And yes, it’s true I’m just your publicist. But Shayna and I are in complete agreement. You need to face some consequences. Now, I’m glad that’s not in the form of the guy suing you or pressing charges.” Shayna was one of the best agents on the West Coast, and this guy was damn lucky to have her. Fucking that up by not listening to her advice could easily get him tossed from her roster.

Andreas pointed to his eye.

“You hit first,” I countered. “And if you hadn’t been drunk, you might’ve had better aim.”

He eyed his hand. “Yeah, that was a miss.”

What he’d succeeded in doing was barely grazing the guy’s cheek.

And yes, my client could’ve pressed charges himself. Thank God, once he’d sobered up, he’d realized that option had most definitely not been in his best interest.

“You’re sure there aren’t any pictures?” He might’ve assured me about a dozen times, but I didn’t want them showing up on TMZ or some other place.

He crossed his heart with his hand.

Quaint. And twenty-four hours too fucking late.

“We were the only two in the bathroom. The server found us brawling and called the cops. We, uh, waited...”

“Like two little saints?”

“Well...” He winced again. “The bouncer might’ve threatened us within an inch of our lives.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“And you finally decided to heed to sense?”

“Yeah.And the cops took pity on us and took us out the back.”

“That was magnanimous of them.”

“The one guy asked for an autograph for his university-age daughter.”

Of course he did.

“His partner, the lady?She yelled at him.Well, told him off anyway.Said we should’ve been paraded out so we could be embarrassed.”Andreas leaned in.“I told her I was already plenty embarrassed.She huffed and said she hoped so.”

“Did you give the autograph?”

“Yeah, when the lady cop left the room.I signed his notebook.”

Of course he did.

“When are you scheduled to fly to Vancouver to start rehearsals?”

“The studio booked a plane for me, Norah, and a couple of other actors.We leave two weeks from tomorrow.”

Filming for the movie was scheduled in Vancouver, Canada.Closest the producers could get to the vibe of Seattle without actually filming in the States.Then the

production was heading up to the Yukon—which was supposed to be Alaska. The difference between Canadian and American dollars these days made shooting in Canada much cheaper. Helped the talent was second-to-none up there—production and acting.

“So you’ve got two weeks to put your house in order—so to speak. Talk to your therapist. Talk to your best friend. Figure your shit out. Otherwise this is going to happen again. I’m surprised the LA cops were so forgiving—Canadian cops sure as hell won’t be.”

He turned his face to give me his chiseled profile. “You think they won’t swoon for this?”

They just might, but I’m not saying that to you. “I think you need to get your act together, Andreas. You got fucking lucky. And you know it. Things could’ve gone in a very different direction. Derailed a potentially promising career. You need to prove that nomination last year wasn’t a fluke.”

“It wasn’t.”

“I know that. Shayna knows that. Valentino Langston knows that.” Val was the producer up in Vancouver who’d specifically sought Andreas out.

I’d enjoyed writing that press release.

“But you’re not making our jobs easier. Smooth sailing, right? That’s what we talked about.” Most of what I did was issue press releases and put out little fires. This clusterfuck was the biggest I’d dealt with in a long time. Almost made me wish I was still based in LA.

Almost.

But when I thought of my cute house, my cuter neighbor, and the most adorable Yorkie ever, I had zero regrets.

Just have to convince Phillip to give me another chance.

“You think this will blow over?”

I checked my notes. “This guy who you nearly hit?—”

“And who hit me.”

“Focus.” I glared. “This guy you nearly hit. He’s the CEO of a fast-food chain of restaurants.”

“Yes.”

“A family friendly chain?” Andreas refused to give me either the guy’s name or the name of the restaurant. Which had me worried. Does he not trust me, or is he not telling me the entire truth? I couldn’t be certain, and I didn’t like it.

“I’m telling you that he’s not going to be a problem. I can guarantee it.”

Which scared me as much as anything else in this mess.

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“And I don’t have a therapist.”

I blinked.

“You told me to talk to my therapist—I don’t have one. That is such a California thing.”

“Do you have a priest?”

“Fuck no.”

“Well...who do you confess to? Share your deepest and darkest secrets with?”

“I don’t have any.” He jutted his chin.

I arched an eyebrow.

“You.” He sipped his diet cola for the first time. “Honest to God, Jeremy. I’m just a regular guy trying to live my dream.”

I held my silence.

“Okay, like, a Nebraska farm boy who wanted out, okay? I thought Stanford was my ticket. Then the injury...” His face fell. “I thought my world ended. I couldn’t afford to keep up my studies. And I’d been that mythical player who actually went to classes and studied.” He held up his hands. “I wasn’t the only one. But I didn’t want the NFL. I wanted a career in mathematics. Like teaching or something.”

“You could always go back to college.Doesn’t have to be Stanford?—”

“And quit acting?”He scratched his stubbled jaw.His beard grew fast with the dark-brown matching his head.His eyes were the defining feature for him—a stunning light-blue that appeared otherworldly.Like he came from a different time or place.Or that he had a bit of magic running through him.Which was all fantastical thinking—but those thoughts were also what propelled him into stardom.

If he can just keep his nose clean.

“I’m sorry you feel you can’t quit acting.Can you take some online courses?Everything’s online these days.You have enough money to pay for tuition?—”

“Where would I find the time?”

“Maybe go out less to bars?Sitting at home studying calculus means less time to get up to mischief.”

He rolled his eyes.

And winced.

“Look, Shayna will be here any moment.”

He frowned.

“You think I wasn’t going to loop your agent in?Or ask us to meet here?She agreed to let me have a one-on-one conversation with you first.So you could say all the stupid shit and she won’t have to knock you upside the head.”

He winced.

Yes, we know how you can be. For a man so intensely brilliant and so phenomenally talented, sometimes he could be just downright out of touch. Clueless. Adorable, but wandering around in a daze. I wondered if there might be some kind of clinical diagnosis that might help him, but I didn't know how to broach the subject. Or if that was even my place. I was his publicist—not his therapist or his parent.

Maybe he did need a therapist. Well, I'd tried. That had to count for something.

Even as I had the thought, the front door at the far end of the bar opened.

I waved my hand.

Shayna waved back. The woman rivaled Andreas in the stunningly good looks department. But where he had dark, shiny hair, hers was platinum-blond. They shared the same ice-blue eyes, though. While his carried humor—most of the time—hers carried an air of sharpness. She was all angles. She was also the most-ruthless agent I knew in LA. Which was saying something. I pitied anyone who pissed her off. I worked very hard to never be that person.

Likely knowing she'd never get table service, she stopped at the bar to get her drink.

Both Andreas and I moved closer to the wall on our respective benches.

Letting Shayna know she could sit wherever she wanted.

She laid her drink on the end of the table, snagged a chair from another table, turned it around, then straddled it—her long legs impressively made longer by spiked stiletto heels. Her soft-gray pantsuit didn't fool me for a moment. Nothing about her was ever soft.

Which was why I respected her so much.

“All right, fuckwit. Tell me everything from the beginning.” She eyed me before settling her gaze on Andreas. “And don't leave anything out.”

Oh man, it's going to be a long evening.

Chapter 13

Phillip

“You really don't have to do this.” I ran my hand through my hair—partly out of frustration and partly out of nervousness.

Colin offered me a measured smile. “That traffic we hit coming into LA made us late.”

“Right.”

“So I had to go straight to the hospital.”

Which I knew.I'd chickened out and hung out in a local coffee shop rather than come to Gardena by transit.“But...” I eyed the house as we stood before it.

Just a plain three-bedroom bungalow tucked away on a quiet street.

So innocuous.

With so, so, so many bad memories.

“I...”

Colin gently laid a hand on my shoulder.

Given I was on the verge of a panic attack, the touch grounded me.Wasn't unwelcome.No, in fact I was so damn grateful.I'd told him about a lot of what had gone on in this house.Some things neither Dr.Martin nor Jeremy knew.Anthony did.He had to when he offered to help me.My psychiatrist in LA said I needed to get out—and she hadn't been wrong.That Gaynor Beach had provided sanctuary was more than I was capable of understanding at the moment.But I could be appreciative.

“You'll lose your stuff if we don't move it today, Phillip.So let's do this.You say there isn't much?—”

“There isn't?—”

“So it'll all fit in the back.If not, I'll give James or Danny a call, and they'll run up and we'll fill their SUV.”

James the generous landlord and Danny was the brother-in-law who sounded just as sweet.Another nice guy.

“Or we can store your extra stuff in my sister-in-law’s place. Gracie’s got a bit of space and is always willing to help out. Even if she’s irked I didn’t bring her favorite niece for a visit.”

Favorite niece being Widget the dog.

Colin and James were also in the process of becoming foster parents. From what I’d seen, I was certain any kid would be lucky to have them as foster dads. God knew, Colin was taking a paternal role with me today.

And right now, I might’ve been twenty-four, but inside I felt like that scared six-year-old kid making soup from a can for his sick mother. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” He squeezed my shoulder. “We’ll take it one step at a time.”

“Yeah, okay.” I pulled out my keyring that still held the key to the house. I advanced up the uneven walkway until we got to the front porch. “I...”

“Do you want me to do this?” Colin held out his hand.

Slowly, I shook my head. “Just...I didn’t leave here in a good way, you know?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“Yeah, I know.”He didn’t entirely—I’d left the most painful part out of my story—but I appreciated his support.

I put the key in the lock and turned it slowly.The lock popped, and I pushed the door open.

My landlady had left the a/c running, so the temperature wasn’t too hot.

I stepped in and Colin followed me, shutting the door behind him.I wasn’t certain what I’d been expecting, but this hadn’t been it.

The house was meticulous.No sign of the disaster that I’d left.No empty food wrappers, no strewn dirty clothes, no pop cans piled in a corner.The laminate floor shone.The furniture had all been removed.Likely sent to the garbage, given how stained it’d been.The dining room table was gone, and as I looked into the kitchen, that appeared pristine as well.Did Mrs.J.clean it out herself or did she hire people?I really hoped she hired people.She’d seen the mess, of course.

The day she’d found me.

“Are these your boxes?”Colin moved toward a pile in one corner.

“I...uh... I’ve never had boxes.Until I moved here, I never even had stuff to put in boxes.”Just a suitcase of clothes and a knapsack of books.My first few months here, I’d picked up a couple of things.But this had been Hank’s place, and so he’d owned everything.

When he'd abandoned me, he'd left everything behind. The stuff hadn't been worth anything, but he'd gifted it to me along with the cruelest of parting words.

Three months later, Mrs. J. had found me.

Near death.

Another hour, and I would've been.

I shuddered. "We should probably go through them quickly. I don't want to take anything that isn't mine."

If Colin thought that was a weird idea—given everything was labeled as mine—he didn't say anything.

Unable to stand any longer, I plopped onto the floor and pulled the closest box to me. I used my key to break the packing tape seal. Only realizing after the fact that I'd have no way to reseal it.

Fuck.

"This is all Hank's shit. From what I can tell."

"Okay." Colin strode to the kitchen, coming back a moment later. "No garbage bags in the kitchen. Or recycling either."

"I don't want...this is good stuff. Surely there's a charity..."

Like the one that had helped me.

"Right. I'll run to the store and grab garbage and recycling bags as well as packing

tape and a marker. Why don't you search for local charities while I'm gone? I promise I won't be long."

He met my gaze, and I read the uncertainty. "I'll be fine, Colin, I promise."

"Okay. Give me ten."

It turned out to be more like twenty. But he was an east-coast transplant who'd never lived in LA, and I hadn't thought to give him directions to the store.

We spent the rest of the afternoon going through the boxes.

I'd located a charity shop who would take everything. And issue a tax receipt. I didn't need it, but I'd give them Colin's name. That would at least make up for some of the time he was dedicating to me.

He swore he'd planned the entire day for his appointment.

I didn't really believe him, but I also couldn't have done any of this without him.

Three hours later, we emerged from the charity shop.

I handed Colin the receipt.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

He rolled his eyes. “You might need this.”

“I don’t have any income. I may not be worldly, but I understand charity receipts aren’t helpful if you don’t have anything to deduct them against.”

He grinned. “They teach you that in philosophy?”

His teasing warmed me. “Yes. Plato wrote an entire treatise about it.”

He checked his phone. “Look—LA traffic is horrendous all the time but deathly at rush hour. As evidenced by our trip in. Why don’t we grab dinner and wait out the worst of it before we head back to Gaynor Beach? I’m starving and can’t drive and eat.”

And he knew I couldn’t drive at all.

“I’m worried about Wally.” Really, I mostly missed him, but worried sounded less pathetic.

He cocked his head.

“My dog. He’s in doggie daycare. With Brooklyn.” I pulled out my phone and showed him the picture Brooklyn had sent.

Wally curled up against a massive great Dane with the caption, After they ran around all day.

I was worried, but I really liked the idea that Wally had clearly enjoyed himself. That he'd made a new friend. I trusted Brooklyn... I just really missed Wally.

"Uh... is Wally the little one or the big one?"

"Oh, Wally's my little Yorkie." Briefly, I closed my eyes. "I rescued him a week ago. Well, adopted him. And I can't believe it's been a week."

"Safe Haven Animal Rescue?"

"Yeah."

"Arthur's amazing. He's best friends with James. I'm certain he would've made a good match between you and Wally."

"Fat owner for a fat dog?" I pressed my hand to my gut. "Wally could've done better than me."

Colin merely stood, watching me.

"Just... I mean I'm trying to help him lose weight. I guess I am too..."

"Did we not just donate a bunch of your old clothes because they're too big?"

"Yeah." I scratched my chin. "But I also considered keeping them in case I put the weight back on."

"Do you want to put the weight back on?" He cocked his head.

"Of course not." For the most part. I scrunched my nose. "But if I'm fat, then no one looks at me... romantically. Then I don't have to worry about attracting another

Hank.”

He grimaced. “Okay, you had some seriously bad luck with that dude. At least from what you’ve told me. So let’s take a positive attitude that things are going to be different. If you don’t want anyone in your life romantically, that’s fine. You just gently dissuade people.”

“How’d that work for you?” During our interminable ride up from Gaynor Beach, I’d managed to coax Colin into sharing his love story. How he’d met James when he’d needed help with caring for Widget. How James had persistently been around and had eventually worn Colin down. How, despite the fact Colin faced major health challenges as a transplant recipient, James had never wavered. Had never left his side. Had been his rock. And how they were married, trying to become foster parents, and loving the dog who’d brought them together.

As much as I didn’t want to admit it, I wanted that life. The couple with the happy dog part, anyway. And if I was really honest with myself, I wanted it with Jeremy. The man who didn’t judge. The man who accepted me for who I was—not who he could mold me into. The man who cared for my dog.

Which was why I was surprised I hadn’t just asked him to watch Wally. Everything happened so fast, and I hadn’t even been certain he’d been home. Anthony had secured a spot with Brooklyn, and I’d just run with it. I still had no idea how much this was costing me. Brooklyn’s latest text assured me that I didn’t need to race back as he would just bring Wally into the house, and that my little guy would keep him company until I was able to pick him up.

I should’ve been in a bigger hurry to get home, but I was kind of enjoying my time with Colin. I had no idea if I’d ever see the charming man again. I could envision him becoming a friend—with his open nature and genuine kindness. He could’ve just insisted we shove all my boxes into his SUV and race home. Instead he’d helped me

donate all the stuff with bad memories. So I was only bringing the good into my new home.

“Do you know somewhere we can grab dinner?” he asked.

“I know a cheap Mexican place...”

“Is the food good?”

I hesitated. I didn't know how to compare food because I'd only ever eaten what was put before me. Hank chose the restaurant, and I ate. Not much more to it than that.

Colin yanked out his phone. “There's an Italian fine-dining restaurant I've been wanting to try.”

I eyed my clothes.

He waved me off.

“Uh, I love Italian.”

He grinned as he dialed. Within moments, he had a reservation for the two of us. We hopped into the SUV, he programmed the GPS, and we were on our way.

I might've been a little intimidated by the pristine-white tablecloths and red-wine-colored cloth napkins, but I attempted to act like this was no big deal. I managed to order shrimp linguini without too much difficulty.

Colin regarded me. “I should've asked.”

“It's fine.” I smoothed the napkin across my lap. “I've just...never been in a place like this.”

“And I've been in too many. I was thinking of bringing James here the next time

we're in town. And his sister Gracie. She works in a fancy restaurant and doesn't really want to go there. But here? What do you think?"

"Uh..." I rubbed my forehead.

"Are you okay?" Colin's brow furrowed.

"Fine. Just... no one ever asks my opinion. No one ever cares what I have to say. I'm not used to this."

He nodded. "Yeah. I didn't want to say anything, but clearly you've had a rough go. You're seeing someone to talk about it, right?"

"Yeah. Dr. Martin." I waited a beat.

Colin grinned. "Dr. Martin is awesome. He approved me for the transplant list and followed up afterward to ensure I was taking my antirejection meds. He's a really good guy and a fixture in Gaynor Beach. You're in great hands." He sipped his water. "And Anthony's a great guy as well."

I'd told Colin about how Anthony had helped me out so much. First with getting out of LA and down to the shelter and then into a home. "I don't always feel worthy."

A frown marred Colin's brow again. "Everyone is deserving of help, Phillip. I mean, unless you've committed some horrendous crime?—"

"I haven't."

"Which is sort of what I figured. Anthony cares enough about me not to put me in the path of someone dangerous." He chuckled. "Now, my family back in Long Island? Would totally be happy to set me up with a serial killer."

My jaw dropped.

He laughed. “You have to know my family. Hated me for being gay. Hated me for being sick. They’d really hate the fact I’m married to a beautiful Black man and planning to help raise children who aren’t biologically mine.”

I blinked. “They sound like horrible people.”

“They are. Don’t feel sorry for me.” He wagged his finger. “I have the most amazing life. Best in the world. I’m happier than I’ve ever been. I mean, if James and I aren’t able to foster for whatever reason, we’ll find other ways to give back to the community that has given so much to us. And God knows, Widget keeps me in line. Oh, did I tell you she’s going to start training to be a therapy dog? Jordan runs a special program.”

I wasn’t going to mention I’d heard from Kevin this might be a possibility. I wasn’t certain if the young man had been speaking out of turn and, more importantly, Colin was animated. I sat back as he talked about all the different tests Widget was going to have to pass—and how he had faith she’d ace everything.

My grin widened as I tasted my food. Possibly the fanciest meal I’d ever eaten. Certainly with amazing company. I need to tell Jeremy about this place. Colin said it was new, right? Except I’d given Jeremy the cold shoulder. Yet he’d never been far from my mind today. Hopefully I could reconnect with him somehow. Maybe take him a plant or something? As a thank you for the other day? Surely I could think of something...

Two hours later, with some of the LA gridlock cleared, we headed back to Gaynor Beach. Colin turned on a musical soundtrack he really liked, and I eased back into the super-comfortable seat and planned to enjoy the ride.

Chapter14

Jeremy

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

I hummed as I headed down I5.

Andreas was squared away.

Shayna was less pissed than she'd been—more because of my skillful mediation technique than anything Andreas had actually offered up in the way of promises. Under our watch, he'd called Norah—with a hoarse voice—and said strep throat could totally wipe a person out, and he would feel incredibly guilty if he gave her the illness.

Lovely woman she was, her first instinct had been to offer to come by.

Andreas headed that off at the pass with a firm, my doctor said I'm highly contagious.

She'd said she'd send soup via delivery.

He'd tried to dissuade her, claiming he was still out after having seen the doctor.

She admonished him to go home immediately and said the soup would arrive in two hours.

He thanked her and, after the conversation ended, had to boot out of there. He had plenty of time to get home, but even the off chance of missing a delivery sent by Norah wasn't worth the risk.

Shayna and I stayed in the bar—despite neither of us being particularly enamored with the place. We shared a plate of nachos—extra jalapenos—and planned the

strategy on how to deal with things if Andreas's involvement in the fight came to light.

Then we figured out how we might keep him out of trouble in Canada.

I was all for signing him up for online calculus classes.

My compatriot suggested a babysitter.

In the end, I emailed six potential programs of study to my client and Shayna popped a note off to the producer, Valentino, just suggesting Andreas might be lonely, and getting him into activities with other people might be a good idea.

She didn't explicitly recommend staying away from booze, but the sentiment was in the subtext.

Val was a smart guy—he'd figure it out.

As I took my exit off the highway, I lowered my window. I loved catching a fresh breeze once I was away from all the exhaust fumes. California was getting more and more electric vehicles, but plenty of gas guzzlers were still on the road.

The acrid scent of burning wood caught my attention.

I raised the window and turned the recirc on. I was only about ten minutes away from home, and so I'd be fine.

Night had nearly fallen, with just a sliver of light on the western horizon.

Sunset had been stunning tonight. All glorious pink, purple, dark blue, and lavender. Red skies at night, sailor's delight. Red sky in the morning, sailor's

warning. Years in the navy ingrained that expression into my father's admonitions. Although curious, I'd never actually checked the accuracy of the statement. I was often up super early to do my training for the day, so I'd spotted many stunning sunrises. And just as frequently, I'd run after work—so I'd experienced plenty of sunsets. I'd just never bothered to correlate future weather back to the observation.

I turned onto Fern Avenue and encountered a police roadblock.

What the actual hell? Irrational panic seized me. This was bad. Really bad. And I spotted flashing lights on Hummingbird Lane. Fire? Man, if this was the reason for the smell by the highway then things were bad. I pulled my SUV off to the side of the road and hopped out.

“Hey, Jeremy.” Kathleen, the sheriff's deputy approached me. “Not your house, okay? As far as I can tell, no damage either, despite the proximity to the fire. If you left windows open, there'll be smoke?”

“What do you mean, proximity?” That panic ratcheted up to an eleven. “The Monroes'?”

She shook her head. “No, James's house. Well, the house he rents out. I called him and he's on his way over. He was up in Huntington Beach with his parents, and Colin was in LA. Danny's here, though.”

My mind raced to catch up. Danny was James's younger brother and new to town as well. Newer. “James's house?” Her words sank in. “Oh, God. That's where Phillip is staying.”

She frowned. “Who's Phillip?” She scratched her cheek. “Oh, that's the tenant James told me about.”

I tried to push past her. “I need to see. Is he okay? How about Wally?”

“Who’s Wally?”

“The dog?”

“No one appeared to be home, Jeremy.”

“Appeared to be?How bad is the damage?”

“It’s bad.Jayden’s initial thought is electrical, but we won’t know until the fire inspector?—”

“I have to see.”I tried to push past her.

“Just you hold your horses.You’re not going to go charging in there like some white knight.The fire’s out.They’re checking the house for hotspots.”

“But—”

“Jeremy, don’t make me arrest you.As soon as it’s safe, we’ll let you back in there.Until then, you’re staying here with me.”

Even as I tried to figure out how to push past her again, Jayden sauntered over.His black, curly hair was plastered to his head, and his dark-brown eyes were hard to see under the fluorescent light of the street lamp, but his expression lightened when he saw me.“We were able to?—”

“Where’s Wally?Where’s Phillip?—”

He held up his hands.“The house was empty.Completely empty?—”

“But the dog?—”

“No dog, okay?”He scrunched his nose.“Someone said they confirmed the dog is with Brooklyn.”

“What?Who’s Brooklyn?Where’s Phillip?”God, why wasn’t I getting a straight answer?

Jayden glanced at Kathleen.

She shrugged.

“Oh.Sheriff confirmed the tenant was out, and the dog is in daycare.We searched the house as well... It’s empty.”

For just a moment, my panic eased.Then it ratcheted up again.“A total loss?”

He nodded.“Yep.Nothing’s left intact.”

My heart sank.I had no idea how many belongings Phillip had accumulated.Whether he had electronics.Over and over in my mind, though, I kept assuring myself he and Wally were safe.AWOL, but safe.Well, not unauthorized.Not on leave.

Yeah, so my dad’s navy expression didn’t work.

Still unaccounted for.Phillip was free to go wherever he wanted whenever he wanted.But he needed to know?—

Jesus Fucking Christ.You have a cellphone, you know.Half grimacing, half laughing to myself, I yanked out the phone.I spotted a text from Shayna—which I ignored—but I quickly pulled up my contacts and hit send.

As my phone rang, I heard a ringing.

Confused, I glanced around. To find Phillip walking toward me, Wally straining against his harness.

Phillip stopped and tried to dig into his pocket.

“Here.” I held up my phone.

Wally barked.

Jayden and Kathleen turned.

“That him?” The firefighter kept his voice low.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“Yeah.” I hit the button to end the call.

Phillip re-pocketed his phone and came toward me. His grim expression let me know we wouldn't be sharing the bad news cold. Clearly, he knew.

Unless he's stressed about something else. You still don't know why he left.

I was really hating my inner voice tonight—mostly because they were right.

A step behind Phillip was Colin Reynolds. I'd recognize the bright auburn hair anywhere. His expression was also grim.

I moved to Phillip. “Hey.”

He managed a weary smile. “Hey.”

“The firefighter wants to talk to you.”

“I figured. Will you take Wally?” Without waiting for an answer, he handed me the dog's leash and headed over toward Jayden and Kathleen.

Disappointed I wouldn't be part of the conversation—because clearly he hadn't wanted that—I crouched down to pet Wally.

The little guy didn't seem the least bit perturbed. He kissed me enthusiastically and nudged against my thigh.

“He’s great.”

I glanced up to find Colin smiling. A little reservedly—which was appropriate, given the circumstances. “He’s the best. Uh, so’s Phillip.” I wasn’t jealous of Colin. Or worried he’d spent time with Phillip. The man was as happily married as I’d ever seen someone. Not that it mattered who Phillip chose to spend his time with.

“I’m sort of glad we were up in LA clearing out his stuff from his old place.” Colin scratched his chin. “I mean, maybe he might’ve been able to call for help earlier and the destruction wouldn’t have been...bad?”

I nodded as I stood. “Total.”

“But he and Wally might also have been hurt.” Colin bent over to scratch the dog’s ears. “If I’d known about Wally, I would’ve brought him to LA. Although maybe Phillip’s old landlady would’ve been mad. Except she gave him, like, less than a day to clear out his stuff. That was just mean.”

I blinked.

“But Wally stayed at Brooklyn’s. He’s new in town. Has just set up a doggie daycare out of his house. I only met him for a moment tonight, but he seems like good people. And here I am, rambling on.” He gazed over to Phillip and the assembled first responders. “He’s already gone through such upheaval.” He turned his attention to me. “Uh, crap.”

I cocked my head.

“I’ve probably already said too much.”

In my desperate opinion, he hadn’t said nearly enough. I wanted to know everything

about Phillip, and that meant the dark stuff that he had, apparently, shared with Colin. I wasn't jealous. More reassured Phillip had someone to talk to. Someone much closer in age. Colin was in his early thirties. Half a dozen years older than Phillip. I was more than a dozen years older. Not quite old enough to be his father—but damn close. He still had a baby face. I had gray in my beard. Maybe if I shaved it off?

And pull the gray hairs from your head? Or maybe dye everything? Where does it end? You're not vain...so stop acting like you are.

All really good points.

Kathleen gave Phillip a pat on the shoulder.

He gave her a wan smile.

Then headed back to Colin and me.

“And?” I waited impatiently.

He held out his hand for Wally's leash. “They can give me a spot at the emergency shelter, but they don't have room for Wally.” He blinked rapidly.

Before I could even respond, Colin was there. “We can take him back to Brooklyn. He said he does overnight boarding?—”

“I can't afford it.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

But I could and was about to speak when Colin continued.

“Or, better yet, why don’t you just come home with me? We have a huge house and a separate apartment in the basement. We designed it for James’s younger brother Danny who stayed a hot minute before moving in with Rob and his kids. So it’s available. We’ve got your stuff in my SUV?—”

“Or he could come and stay with me. I’ve got room.” I met Phillip’s gaze head-on. “You and Wally have both been in my place. You’ll be more comfortable. We can fashion up a bed for Wally—or he can sleep with you. In the morning, we can head to Bales and Bowls to replenish Wally’s missing stuff.”

“Oh God.” He rubbed his face. “I hadn’t even thought of all he’s lost. I don’t have the money?—”

“I do.” Me.

“I can help.” Colin.

Okay, so Phillip had other friends to help him replace whatever he’d lost. Was it wrong I wanted to be the one he turned to?

Finally, he pulled his hand away from his eyes and met my gaze. “I can really stay with you?”

I pressed a hand over my heart. “I’d love for you to stay.” Hopefully not sounding too desperate.

“Yeah, okay.”

Not overly enthusiastic...but I'd take it for the win.

Chapter 15

Phillip

“Are you certain about this?” Colin hefted one of the boxes we'd retrieved in LA. “I was serious about my offer to come stay with us. Or you could go to the shelter, and we can take Wally. Or?—”

“I'm really okay with it. Jeremy's...a good friend.” I try not to let the catch in my breath be too audible.

Things hadn't sunk in.

The firefighter said something about faulty electrical wiring. In a wall. Certainly not something James would've known about, and nothing I could've foreseen.

Except maybe that I was cursed. That I was bad luck. Maybe if some other tenant had been here, they might've spotted the fire and put it out with the fire extinguisher. The extinguisher I'd known about. James and Anthony had provided me with an extensive tour—including all the safety features of the house. So I'd known where the extinguisher was.

Only I'd been in LA picking up all my stuff. The stuff that was now all I owned in the world. Crammed into four boxes and one duffel bag. All those new things Anthony had bought were gone. All of Wally's things were gone.

Thank Christ I hadn't left him alone today.

My heart lurched.

He would've died.

I would never have forgiven myself.

Likely, I would've tried to kill myself again. Guilt, I understood. Guilt, that would've consumed me. Guilt, the one thing I couldn't live with.

"Phillip?" Colin cleared his throat.

"He could've died." I managed to choke out the words—but barely.

Colin frantically looked around. For a place to put the box? To get away from this weeping man/child?

I couldn't be certain.

"Hey." Jeremy was there again, without Wally. He eased the box I was trying to carry back into Colin's SUV, then he pulled me into a hug. "You're okay. Wally's okay. I got him settled in my place. A little overwrought—what with his day at the daycare and now all the excitement. The smoke smell isn't too bad in my place, so he should be safe there. I'm super lucky the wind was blowing the other direction."

I choked out, "I'm glad." I was, even if I felt numb right now.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“Wally probably senses your stress, though. Now, I’m not suggesting you try to hide it. Anyone would be overwhelmed.” Jeremy gripped me tighter. “But I’ve got you now, okay?”

I couldn’t speak. Partly because my face was buried in his chest, and partly because words wouldn’t come. I’d been so cold to him the other day, and here he was, embracing me. Holding me as if I were precious. Willing, clearly, to share my burden. Hell, I believed he’d carry it...given half a chance.

Can I give him that chance? Can I open myself to him? To the pain I’ll endure when he tires of me and walks away? I just didn’t have a good answer for that.

“Is everything okay?” The deep voice of the landlord I’d met earlier today carried across the still-noisy sound of firefighters doing...whatever they were supposed to be doing. Of the shattered stillness of the night. Oh my God, it’s his house. I let it burn.

“Hey, sweetheart.” Colin’s Long Island accent came through clearly as he embraced his husband. “It’ll be okay.”

“It’s just a house.” James’s voice caught. “Are you okay?”

Somehow, I knew he was talking to me. I tried to push away.

Jeremy held me tighter for just one moment more before letting me pull back.

I wiped my eyes. “Yeah, I’m okay.” My breath caught again. Fucking hell. “Well, okay is relative, right? Wally and I are alive. Things can be replaced.”

Before he could even respond, a van pulled up with the rescue shelter's logo— Safe Haven Animal Rescue.

James held up his finger as if indicating I wait while he headed over, and he greeted Arthur as the man hopped down.

To my surprise, they embraced.

Right, Colin had mentioned James and Arthur were best friends. Although this appeared to be more than just a quick embrace. Most like solace being offered.

Ah, so maybe James isn't as unaffected as he's trying to seem. He's being strong for me. Maybe I can be strong for him. Colin said this home on Hummingbird Lane had been James's first. Even though he'd only lived there a short time before moving in with Colin, I'd sensed a clear affection as he'd given me the tour. And I'd also gotten the impression he liked that people in need who could find refuge there. Could find shelter.

People down on their luck, so to speak. People like me.

Jeremy's hand remained on my shoulder. "I measured out some canned tuna and mashed potatoes for Wally. He scarfed it down along with a bowl of water. So he's fed, but he'll need to go out before bedtime."

"I don't think..."

"Don't think...?"

"How am I supposed to sleep?"

"Gonna be hard, huh? I bet you're right. You've had a big day, Phillip. Even

before...all this.But know I'll watch over you, and you can let go of some of that vigilance you hold on to so tightly.I've got you.We have all the safety equipment.Smoke detectors, carbon monoxide detectors...a barky dog."

I glared.

He smiled."No, I've never heard him bark.He's such a sweetheart.As are you.I'm so sorry this happened to you."

Arthur and James approached, their arms full of dog belongings.

I gaped.

"Well, I had some extra stuff at the shelter."Arthur shrugged."I happen to know the owner of Bales and Bowls.They're always happy to help in an emergency.I was most concerned about stairs so he doesn't try to jump."

And, in fact, he held some beneath his arm.

They slipped.

Jeremy let go of me and rescued them."Anything else?"

"Yes, a pile of things.But James and I can bring them in.If that's okay," he quickly added.

"That's more than okay."Jeremy grabbed a cloth bag, filled to the brim with God knew what.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

I sniffed. “I can’t afford all this.” I had nothing except the thirty dollars in my wallet, a debit card with a few dollars on it, and the boxes of stuff I’d retrieved with Colin.

Oh, and a dog who would need me more than ever.

“That’s okay.” Arthur smiled. “I get a discount. And we have benefactors who donate money for just such cases.”

“I can cover this.” Jeremy waved. “God knows, I earned my keep today. At my day job,” he quickly clarified.

For the first time, I glanced up at him. His dark-brown eyes were nearly black in the night, but I spotted lines of strain in his face.

“Are you okay?”

“Long day.” He offered his genuine smile. “We’ll get you settled, okay? Let all these good people head home?”

“Of course.” Colin hefted a box and headed into the house.

Arthur and James followed with all the dog paraphernalia.

Jeremy snagged my duffel and hefted it over his shoulder as if it weighed nothing—and still kept his grip on the stairs Wally could use to get onto the spare bed to keep me company.

Jordan had discussed with me the pros and cons of letting Wally sleep with me.

Some nights my dog preferred his bed. Other nights, he preferred mine.

I, being magnanimous, let him choose. Tonight I really hoped he chose to cuddle with me.

After a deep breath—which only filled my lungs with acrid smoke—I grabbed the last box. The lightest one, of course. That didn't surprise me. Colin was the guy who did more than his fair share. He'd assured me he was completely healed from his liver transplant, and hauling a few boxes would be good for his health.

I'd chosen to believe he was an adult and if he said this was okay, that it damn well was. I still didn't know how to thank him.

When I stepped into Jeremy's house, Colin himself was there to snag the box. "We've put all the boxes in the exercise room so you can sort them more easily. We'll put the duffel in the spare bedroom?—"

Jeremy nodded and headed up with the bag and Wally's stairs.

I met Colin's gaze. "I don't have the words."

"Are you okay with a hug?" His hands shook even as he tried to settle them.

Ah, so not unaffected either. He'd had a moment's panic when he'd heard about the fire. James had been the one telling him—so he'd known his husband was safe—but I'd been under the impression that assurance only carried so far.

"A hug would be nice." All these embraces. A guy could get spoiled. Well, not really. But I could get used to them, and that would be bad. Eventually they'd come to

an end.Eventually people would see the real me.The coward.The pathetic fool.

Except Colin knew a lot of the bad stuff...and he still wanted to comfort me.So I stepped into his arms.And realized quickly from the way he trembled that I was also offering him comfort as well.

“Wally, wait.”Jeremy’s command permeated my brain.

Colin chuckled as he released me.“There’s always a dog.”

“That’s absolutely true.”Arthur chuckled as he and James emerged from the kitchen.“We brought food in a container he can’t open.There’s a measuring scoop as well.We picked up a package of t-r-e-a?”

“Don’t bother.”Jeremy winced as Wally started barking.“Damn dog can spell.”

All five of us laughed while Wally gazed around, then he narrowed his eyes at me.

“You’ve got kibble.”I turned to Arthur.“I’ll find a way to make this up?”

“That’s not necessary—” Jeremy attempted to interject.

“We can always use walkers.”Arthur grinned.“We can find dogs docile enough to walk with you and Wally.Jordan says you’re good with training commands.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

Heat rushed up my cheeks. “Well, I?—”

“He’s really good.” Jeremy gestured toward me. “He’s a natural. And I can join in as well, right? I like the idea of walking dogs.”

I nearly said he’d have his hands full with Wally and me. But I resisted. He’d made the choice to welcome us in. He’d known what he was getting himself into.

Or so I hoped.

“Is everyone okay with pizza?” Colin held out his phone. “Because, despite having a big dinner, I’m starving.”

Jeremy cut me a questioning look. Whether to ask if I was too tired or whether asking if the food choice was okay, I couldn’t be certain.

I smiled. “I’d love a slice.”

A friendly discussion ensued between the four men about the best toppings. I loved pineapple and ham, which I shared with reticence because aside from anchovies and green peppers being disgusting, I had no opinion on toppings—I’d eat just about anything. Plus, peppers could be taken off. So could anchovies, but the fishy taste would linger. I eyed Wally. Yeah, he deserved another fishy treat.

In the end, I didn’t have to sneak any toppings to my pooch. Jeremy also loved Hawaiian, so we got one to share with plenty of leftovers for the morning. Arthur, James, and Colin devoured a meat lovers—unapologetically not leaving a single

slice.

Wally got one cube of ham and one piece of pineapple. Smart dog loved both.

Not that I'd ever found a food he didn't love.

Soon our guests departed.

Friends? After tonight, they sure felt as close to friends as anyone ever had in my life. Which was pathetic in one way—that I'd never had close friends. In another way, though, there was something nice about it.

In silence, Jeremy helped me sort the contents of the duffel bag, not speaking as we put away the clothes into the closet and the dresser. This...felt like permanence. Like I'd be staying for a while. I'd expected to be living out of the duffel. Instead, he'd set up an entire room just for me.

While I tucked the underwear and socks into a drawer, he laid my pajamas on the bed. "Are these going to be big?"

"Uh, yeah. Pretty much everything is big." I grabbed my gut. "I've lost a bunch of weight since...you know..."

"Right." He rubbed his forehead. "I don't know, and you haven't told me, and I'm totally fine with that. You had a rough go of it—whatever it is. If they don't fit, it's totally okay if you sleep in your underwear or whatever. You've got a robe and a bathroom to yourself. New toothbrush and toothpaste. If you need anything, just knock on my door, okay?" He scratched Wally between the ears.

The dog lay sprawled across the mattress, snoring softly.

“Do you need earplugs?” He smiled.

“I’m pretty used to him. I’ve even gotten used to the quiet. We lived on a busier street in LA.” Busier better than the street from my hometown, anyway. The near silence of Gaynor Beach, in that one respect, reminded me of home.

“Do you...” Jeremy cleared his throat. “Can I give you a hug? I feel like that’s overbearing, but the panic...” He swallowed. “For just that brief moment, I thought maybe you and Wally were at home. That...” He couldn’t go on.

“But we weren’t.” I rubbed Wally’s belly. “And you’ve offered us sanctuary.”

“For as long as you need, okay? Don’t even consider leaving until you’ve got something safe and solid.” He considered. “Are you...” He held my gaze. “Are you running? I found out later that Rob was on the run when he lived next door. I kept an eye out for him—like I would with any neighbor—but when I found out later...well, I would’ve been even more vigilant.”

“There’s no one.” I ran my hand through my hair. “He left me. Months ago. Trust me...he’s not going to come looking for me.”

“Okay.” He scratched his stubble-laden jaw. “If that changes?—”

“It won’t.”

“If anything changes,” he quickly corrected. “Like, anything. Just be honest with me, okay?”

“I’m being honest.” I tried to keep the defensiveness from sneaking into my voice. “He was a horrible person, and he left me in a horrible way and, trust me, he doesn’t give a shit where I wind up. What happens to me. He walked out that door and never looked

back.I can guaran-fucking-tee it.”

He blinked.“Okay.I believe you.I’m sorry if I made it seem like I didn’t.If you say he’s a non-issue, then we’re good.I just try to protect wh—” He let out a breath.“—my friends.”

Protect what’s mine?Had he been about to say that?And how would I have felt if he had?I couldn’t answer that question.Instead, I offered up, “I like the idea of being your friend.Can we start over?”I wanted to put behind me the other morning where I’d walked away from him.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

He blinked yet again. Whether from surprise at my words or fatigue, I couldn't tell.

Before he could answer my question, though, I pointed to his chest. "You'll have to tell me tomorrow what happened earlier. But I'm falling over even as I stand here."

"Yeah." He nodded. "Call me if you need anything, okay? Phone, yelling, knocking on door... whatever."

"I will. I promise. And, uh, I'm okay with a hug." I needed to show I was a normal person who could give and receive affection. That felt super important in that moment.

He held open his arms, and I stepped into them. He wrapped his arms around me, and I had only a fleeting moment of panic as I thought about my girth. I'd missed my walk today with Wally, but we'd start up again tomorrow.

Anything and everything could happen tomorrow. The possibilities were truly endless.

He gave me an extra squeeze before letting me go. "Sleep well, okay?"

I nodded.

After one last look, he took his leave.

I stood there for a long time, processing what had happened, before I headed to bed myself.

Wally curled into my front as I lay on my side.

The hints of smoke in the air were enough to make me jolt up out of an exhausted doze over and over. Sleep was slow in coming.

But come it eventually did.

Chapter 16

Jeremy

Walking in the park with Wally and Phillip felt...normal.

Marcie had spent the past five years trying to excise the word from my vocabulary. Because she'd understood instinctively that Raphael would never fall into the category of normal. Even from their birth, they'd been a special child. And Marcie drilled into me that normal was a bad word and exceptional was a good one. She was right. Raphael and Thaddeus were exceptional children.

My life, while normal, had been way too boring.

Now I had Phillip and Wally in my life, though, things felt fucking fantastic.

Yet still, tranquility and softness permeated, and our walk stirred something inside me.

The vague scent of smoke still lingered in the air, even a block away from the wreckage. We needed a good breeze to send it away once and for all. Either inland or, preferably, out over the ocean.

Wally glanced back, as if making certain Phillip and I were still with him.

No sense explaining to him that as long as the leash was taut, one or both of us was. And that, no matter what, we'd always be there for him.

We rounded the bend on the path farthest away from Fern Avenue.

"Do you think we could head down to the boardwalk?" Phillip didn't meet my gaze, but continued on. "Maybe grab a sticky bun at Nice Buns? Colin was telling me they're to die for. And that Ambrose makes them fresh. Colin might've also suggested the baker was cute. With, uh, nice buns." Color rose in his cheeks to a cute blush.

"So you want to check Ambrose out? You know he's married, right?"

Phillip waved me off. "I'm only trying to be friendly. Trust me, I'm not relationship material. And maybe I shouldn't go into a bakery. People might think I got fat because of his food."

I snagged Phillip's arm.

He stopped abruptly, then turned to face me.

"You don't need to talk like that. You're entitled to something sweet. Didn't you say that you don't have diabetes? So yes, this treat will have carbs and sugar. You ate a healthy breakfast, and we'll make certain to have something just as healthy for lunch and dinner. We're about to walk quite a way, so that counts. You and Wally are doing amazing. If someone thinks otherwise—if someone judges you—then that's on them. Not you. Certainly not Wally. People can be genuinely fucked up. Some have their own issues, and some are just cruel. Hold your head high. Be proud of how far you've come. Believe in yourself." I rubbed my forehead with the hand not gripping him. "God, I sound like some evangelist."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

He snickered. “Not like the preachers I used to know.” His smile faded. “These are all nice platitudes, Jeremy, but not the reality.” He bit his lower lip.

I longed to pull him into my arms. His pain was so palpable.

“He told me he loved me. That he was happy I was a good weight.” He winced. “I was scrawny when I got here from Oregon. I’d had to scrounge for food almost my entire life. Suddenly I had a meal card and food was everywhere. I ate. Man, did I eat.”

My heart ached for the boy who’d fought for food. So different from the life of absolutely decadence I’d enjoyed.

“And then...” He broke our gaze and looked down, toeing the sidewalk.

At least he’d been wearing his good shoes yesterday. I would’ve bought him another pair, but I was slowly learning to check the instinct to just throw money at him and to solve all his problems. Some of that, he needed to do himself. Not just for the sake of pride—but to prove to himself that he could.

I waited.

He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I met Hank.” He finally met my gaze again. “I was dazzled. He was sophisticated and rich and he offered me everything. He asked me to come and live with him after just a few dates. I...” He swallowed. “I didn’t realize that was a flashing red light.” He sniffed. “I want to be clear that he was never physically abusive. That’s important for me to put out there. I never had anything to fear from him physically.”

Of course, I heard the words not being spoken. There had been abuse. And I was aware that emotional and psychological abuse could be just as damaging. I'd had a client, Mariella. Beautiful, smart, and a brilliant actress. Who married an egomaniac who abused her terribly—yet never laid a finger on her. When she finally escaped, she needed a fresh start. She came to me, and I helped her get it. For her, part of the healing journey was to share publicly what she'd endured. A few people criticized her for being honest. Most people applauded. If someone that beautiful and that successful lived miserably for all those years—but finally escaped—maybe there might be help for others."

These days, Mariella was living her best life. Solo and starring in a movie that might just get her a Golden Globe nomination. Perhaps even an Oscar.

"He liked to feed me." Phillip glanced away before looking back. "He used to joke that I looked good playing video games and eating bonbons." He winced. "I dropped out of college. I mean, my life was set." He rolled his hand.

I understood. "But you didn't cook or anything like that?" What, he'd just been around to, what? Have sex with? Perhaps I was reading between the lines, but I didn't hear any emotional or spiritual connection between him and Hank. Certainly nothing romantic.

"We ordered takeout all the time. And I ate bagels, cereal, toast, and other easy-to-prepare stuff. Remember, I didn't have any money. And I didn't even really understand nutrition. We'd never been taught any of that in school, and it... wasn't my mother's thing." He gazed upward. "In my heart, I knew something was wrong. But my brain and stomach enjoyed being full. So what if I didn't eat a fruit or a vegetable? I wasn't hungry. And hunger would get me thinking about my mom—so I did everything to avoid ever being hungry." He used the hand gripping Wally's leash to sweep up and down himself. "And this is the result."

Jesus Fucking Christ. Whoever this Hank was, I wanted to track him down and give him a piece of my mind. I couldn't fathom that kind of psychological abuse. That was physical abuse. He might never have struck Phillip, but the complete disregard for Phillip's health was a kind of abuse. I regarded him, holding his gaze. "And he's out of the picture?"

"Yeah." An expression of pain crossed his face with a tortured wince. "He left me because I was a fat pig."

The laugh he gave was one of the most pitiful sounds I'd ever heard. My heart ached.

"He was wrong."

"No, he wasn't." Phillip held my gaze. "Remember, I weighed an extra thirty-five pounds from where I am now. A couple months in the psychiatric department in a rehab hospital will do that to you. Help you lose weight. I'd still be there if not for a firm commitment from me that I'd take care of myself and a keen social worker from Gaynor Beach who heard about my situation and offered to help."

Ah. I still hadn't put all the pieces together—how Phillip had wound up in our small town. But it didn't matter. "Anthony's a good man."

"Anthony's the best." Phillip again looked away. "My psychiatrist knew Dr. Martin and asked if he thought I could get a fresh start. Dr. Martin saw the monumentality of the task and asked Anthony to help facilitate things. And to add me to his already full-to-the-brim caseload. But he did. Without a single complaint—at least not to me. He found me the shelter bed while he arranged things with James. He got me clothes and stuff because he knew I couldn't bear to go back to the house in LA."

"Yet you went back yesterday."

He winced. “I realized I left a few photos of my mom behind. And maybe I shouldn’t have been sentimental, given how fractured our relationship was—but I felt like...” He swallowed. “I have pictures of myself from when I was a kid and a teenager. Photographs of me skinny. I... wanted a way to hold on to that kid as much as I am holding tight to the possibility of a future where I’m not...” He flailed his arm.

“Generous? Kind? Attractive? Sexy?” Don’t go overboard. “Where you’re not a sweet man who rescues a dog in need and lets strangers and dogless kids play with said dog?”

“You’re just saying that?—”

“Yeah, I am. Because it’s true.” I considered for a long time. “I think you’re judging yourself more harshly than many other people might. I certainly don’t look at you and see whatever it is you think I see. You’re a good man, Phillip. You just need distance from what was clearly a toxic and abusive relationship. It sounds like your ex was one sick fucker. So let’s celebrate that you’re out of that relationship.”

“He left me.” Sadness. Despair.

“So what? He was a narcissistic sociopath who didn’t care who he hurt.”

“You don’t know him.”

“No, maybe not. But I know his kind. Controlling to the point of obsession. Hurting the one he purportedly loves.”

“He never said he loved me. I said it to him all the time... but he never said it back. So that should’ve been my first clue, right?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“You were a naïve kid from a small town who got taken advantage of and abused badly. I don’t see that any of this—not one single bit—is on you. He’s the one who’s fucked in the head.”

Phillip cocked his head. “You’re really mad.”

“Damn right I am.”

He winced.

I realized I still gripped his biceps. Instantly, I released him. “Sorry.”

“I...don’t think anyone’s ever been mad on my behalf.”

“Maybe I’m the only one who’s expressed it. It’s possible your doctors, and even Anthony, are angry as well.”

“Because they have people who really need help. As opposed to me.”

God give me strength. I wasn’t equipped to deal with this. Helping Mariella recover her reputation was one thing. Counseling a young man so clearly hurting was a bit beyond me. “When do you see Anthony or Dr. Martin? Have you told them how you’re feeling?”

“They both have the report from my psychiatrist in LA.” Again he looked down at his shoes.

“That wasn’t technically my question.I’m asking if they’re aware how you’re feeling now.”

“I’m so much better than I was before.”He scoffed the words.

That derision cut deep.For him and, I was discovering, for myself as well.“Seriously?—”

“Anthony and I were supposed to talk yesterday.Only he had an emergency call and I had to run up to LA or risk losing what little I had in the world.He rushed me to Brooklyn’s, where I left Wally, and then dropped me off at Colin’s.He took off and, as you know, Colin took me to LA.”He let out a long sigh.“I’m supposed to be at a résumé-writing class today at the library, but I’m sure Scott will understand if I don’t show.I mean, I didn’t formally sign up anyway.”

“I can help you with a?—”

He glared.“What?Two years as a philosophy student and four years as a kept pet?I don’t know anyone looking for someone with those talents.”

Jesus.“I bet you have other skills.And plenty of entry-level jobs don’t require experience.We can find a way to explain the past few years.People have gaps.The key is to be keen to work.A few places in Gaynor Beach are hiring—why don’t you let me see what I can find you?”

“There you go again, Jeremy.Always trying to fix things.I have to be able to stand on my own.”He scratched his cheek.“To that end, I have an appointment with Dr.Martin tomorrow.”

“Does he know all the details you shared with me?”

“I’m sure it’s in the report?—”

“You found the courage to be honest with me.”Which humbled me, terrified me, and gave me resolve.Three very conflicting emotions running through me.

“I...” He bit his lip again.“Can we go to Nice Buns?Especially if I promise to just enjoy myself?”

“That sounds like a great idea.We can grab a coffee and sit on a bench near the boardwalk?I’m certain we can scrounge something for our little four-legged companion.”I broke his gaze to crouch to Wally’s level.“You’ve been very good, little one.”I scratched between his ears.

He closed his eyes in bliss.

Phillip cleared his throat.

Wally’s eyes popped open while I stood.

“Shall we go?”Phillip pointed toward the ocean.

“Yes.Yes, we shall.”

And so we did.

Chapter17

Page 66

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

Phillip

The scent of yeast and fresh-baked bread hit me full force as I stepped into Jeremy's house.

He was hard on my heels and greeted the scent with a, "What the fuck?"

"Uncle Jer said a bad word." Thaddeus was right there by the front door, apparently ready to tattle on his favorite uncle.

His only uncle?

Huh.

I hadn't gotten a rundown of Marcie's husband's siblings.

This is what you're focusing on? Seriously?

"Uh, Marcie?" Jeremy leaned over to untie his shoes.

I plopped onto the bench by the front door to do the same thing. So much easier than sucking in my stomach and trying to do it bent over while standing.

Jeremy's defiant words circled in my mind. Generous. Kind. Attractive. Sexy. Who the hell found a fat guy sexy?

Okay, that came out wrong. Some people really didn't see body type in their attraction

factor. Some people were specifically attracted to overweight people. Something about survival of the species. Or something. My doctor in LA recommended a couple of articles about self-esteem but, me being me, I'd gone down a rabbit hole to see what random people thought about fat and skinny people.

Not supposed to use the word fat.

Right. Overweight? Curvy? Something less pejorative? That was the idea, anyway. But shaming myself for my weight was my coping mechanism. A way to keep people at arm's length. If they didn't get close, then they couldn't hurt me like Hank did.

I hadn't told Jeremy about the suicide attempt. Nearly...but I hadn't been able to get the words past my tight throat. Because his kindness overwhelmed me. His anger on my behalf. The righteousness that Hank was...wrong.

Part of me wanted to believe Jeremy. And part of me continued to look at myself in the mirror and hate what he saw.

"Hey, munchkin." Jeremy tousled Thaddeus's hair.

"He's not a munchkin." Raphael put their hands on their hips. "He's a boy. Munchkins are in Oz."

I blinked. I was pretty certain Jeremy did as well, given his stunned expression. Funny—I figured he'd be accustomed to such proclamations from the obviously bright Raphael. I smiled. "I saw that movie when I was a kid. Scared the bejeebers out of me. I didn't watch it again for years. They always played it at Halloween." They being the powers that be in our little town. For reasons, I wasn't entirely clear on, they alternated between The Wizard of Oz and Old Yeller for our once-a-year secular movies. I didn't think either were good choices—but no one ever asked me.

“You were right to be scared.”Raphael pointed at me.“Uncle Jeremy will protect you.”With that pronouncement, they flounced out of the room.

“Well, okay, then.”Jeremy pressed a hand to my shoulder.“I’ll always protect you.Be it from foe or friend.”

“You mean from your nibblets.”

Thaddeus had also bolted out of the room.

“Jeremy, is that you?”Marcie’s disembodied voice came from the kitchen,

He rolled his eyes.“Yes, Marcie.”

“Great.Come help.”

We exchanged a look.

I bent over to unclip Wally who’d been waiting patiently.I was always hesitant to just let him run around in Jeremy’s house.Especially with kids running around as well.

Wally waited and watched as I straightened.

Figuring he might be thirsty, I indicated he was free to go.

He bolted into the kitchen.

“Oh, dear Lord.” Marcie’s voice again carried.

Jeremy and I hustled into the kitchen.

To find Marcie at the stove with her hand pressed against her chest. “That dog.”

“Sorry.” I scanned the room and found Wally at his water bowl, by the back door, slurping away contentedly.

Marcie smiled. “No, it’s fine. I should have realized he’d be with you two.” She pointed to the oven. “I heard about what happened and came over this morning planning to... I don’t know.” She frowned. “And then you weren’t home, and Raphael pointed out that coming home to fresh-baked bread makes everything better.”

“Uh, sis?”

She eyed him. “Yes?”

“I don’t keep many baking supplies in the house. And we weren’t gone that long.”

She winced. “Darren might’ve gotten rip-roaring drunk at his lieutenant’s retirement party last night. At least he got a ride home from a sober friend. He’s sleeping it off, and I thought it would be nice to leave him in peace. Now, if you don’t want fresh-baked bread?—”

“I always want fresh-baked bread.” Jeremy stepped to her and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “We did just have sticky buns from Nice Buns, so we may not partake right now. But you’ll leave the leftovers, right?”

Marcie rolled her eyes. “No. I thought I’d come here, bake, and take everything home with me.”

“No, you didn’t.” Raphael frowned. “You said we needed to do something nice for Uncle Jeremy’s boyfriend because his house burned down and he’s sad.” The kid turned to me. “Are you sad?”

“Uh...” So this is what a deer in the headlights feels like. The answer should’ve been simple. I’d lost all my new things, including the laptop. I should’ve been sad. But thanks to Jeremy this morning—with his quick wit and even quicker smile—I’d enjoyed myself. I’d forgotten the trauma that had led me here. Unburdening myself had been...freeing. I tilted my head. “I’m sorry for the man who owns the house because he’ll have to rebuild. I’m sorry because I lost a couple of things like my new clothes and my laptop.”

“Oh, that’s easily solved.” Jeremy sniffed the bread, then met my gaze. “I have a perfectly good one. Long story, but I needed to swap it out last year. Well, let me be more precise—it needed to be repaired, and I didn’t have the patience to wait. So I bought a new one, and then the repair shop fixed the old one, and now I have two.”

That was entirely too convenient, as far as I was concerned. But I didn’t have tenant’s insurance, and no way in hell was I going to ask Anthony to find me another laptop. He’d already done so much. “Uh, if you’re sure.”

“He’s sure.” Marcie swatted Jeremy on his ass with a tea towel. “Go wash your hands. I’ll cut a bun in half for you to share. And you’re not having leftover pizza for lunch. I brought a rosemary chicken.”

Jeremy and I exchanged looks. And smiled because we'd entirely planned on leftover pizza. Given how many miles we'd walked today, I'd calculated a slice or two wouldn't hurt too much.

I went into the half bath on the main floor to wash my hands while Jeremy hustled upstairs. Soon we presented ourselves in the kitchen to receive half of one of Marcie's delicious-smelling buns.

As we feasted, I caught sight of Wally rolling around on his back, scratching it on the mat, while Thaddeus rubbed his belly. My dog was in seventh heaven.

Given the treat I was consuming, so was I.

"Marcie, you've outdone yourself." Jeremy used a napkin to wipe away a dribble of melted butter that had escaped down his chin.

Drat. I'd wanted to do that...with my tongue. Which was possibly one of the weirdest thoughts ever. Because first, beard. And second, I just didn't have thoughts like that. Ones that were vaguely sexual. Or sensual. Or anything. I'd never had them before, so why start now?

Oh.

Maybe because Jeremy was safe?

High school hadn't been safe. College hadn't been safe. Hank hadn't been safe.

But Jeremy, with his gentle teasing, and his ardent willingness to fight all the battles for me, felt...safe.

I swallowed. Hard. "Delicious, Marcie. Thank you."

Raphael stood before me. “I helped.”

“Then I thank you as well.” Bit by bit, the intimidation factor was wearing off. They were just a kid. Obviously a very bright and special child—still just a child.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“I didn’t help.”Thaddeus grinned as he continued to scratch Wally’s belly.

My dog’s tongue lolled in unbridled pleasure.

“You’re keeping Wally busy and not underfoot.That’s a very important job.”Because a bit of extra validation never hurt.

Thaddeus grinned.“That’s right.”He emphasized every syllable of every word.As if trying to prove a point.

“Why don’t you run around in the backyard while I get lunch ready?”Marcie eyed her children.

Wally perked up.He only ever received breakfast and dinner, but he seemed to react to any word that had any relation to food.

“Backyard.”Marcie pointed.

Raphael, Thaddeus, and Wally all headed through the solarium and out into the bright sunshine.

Marcie turned to her brother.“You, too.”

He cocked his head.“I figured I’d help.”

“Phillip’s going to help me.You’re going to supervise chaos.”

Even as she said the word, a yelp and a yip came through the open doorway.

Jeremy cut me a quick glance as he hustled out the door.

Truly, I wasn't worried about Wally.Maybe I should've been.Maybe he shouldn't have been left alone with the kids, even for a moment.Soon, though, peals of laughter and little yips filtered through the window Marcie had opened when she'd arrived.

Jeremy and I had kept everything shut up tight so the smell of smoke didn't waft in.Now, though, far less of the scent lingered.

"How can I help?"I did my best not to fidget under her eagle-eyed stare.Her dark-brown eyes were identical to her brother's, and her chestnut-colored hair was just a shade lighter.

"It's more, how can I help you?"She pointed to the kitchen table and, more specifically, a chair.

I sat.

She grabbed a couple of potholders and moved to the oven.Within moments, she had the door open and a pan out and on top of the stove.

The aroma of rosemary chicken filled the kitchen—mixing perfectly with the fresh bread.

She headed for the fridge and pulled out a metal bowl.Then she grabbed salad dressing and a couple of small containers.She held one up."Cheese?"

"Oh yes, ma'am.Cheese is the best."

“It’s Marcie. Ma’am is my mother. Although she prefers Nana these days.” She smiled, “My kids love their grandparents, and that love is returned.”

“You have great kids.”

“I do.” She shook the dressing, poured it over the salad, then grabbed tongs and started mixing. “I didn’t think I’d have them. Well, more specifically, I didn’t think I’d meet someone, and in no universe was I having kids without a husband.” She met my gaze. “Then I met Darren and everything sort of...fell into place. He was the one I was supposed to be with. Now some people will tell you that’s bullshit. That there isn’t the one, and spending your life looking for that person might mean missing someone just as good.” She shrugged. “I can see their logic. But I dated a few frogs before finding my prince.” She snickered. “And no offense to my beloved husband...” She grinned. “He looks more like a frog than a prince—and he’d be the first one to tell you that. But he’s a good man. Works hard, provides, loves me and the kids fiercely, respectful of his in-laws, cares for his parents...all the things I was looking for in a man.” She sighed.

“He sounds like a good person.” Where is she going with this? Is she trying to tell me Jeremy’s a good guy? Or is she trying to warn me off? Or maybe she thinks I’m not good enough for him?

“He’s a great person. He’s more of an introvert than either Jeremy or me. A bit of opposites attract. I can be fierce. He can be quietly strong.”

Fierce. Hadn’t I just been thinking of Jeremy in that term.

“I...uh...” I swallowed. “Why are you telling me this?” I grasped a cloth napkin and twisted it in my hands.

Marcie held my gaze for a moment before shrugging. She turned away, opened a

drawer, and pulled out a long knife with a black handle and a big fork. “Because my brother can be overbearing.” She laughed even as she sliced off a piece of chicken and put it on a plate I hadn’t noticed. “Well, overbearing might be an understatement. He works in public relations because he can be circumspect when needed and a pit bull taking care of his clients when that’s called for. He’ll fight for the little guy—or gal—and call out the bullies. He always wants to be on the side of righteousness. Which, ironically, means that sometimes he has to do the wrong thing.”

“Huh?”

“The expression is that the client is always right. Jeremy’s well-aware that’s not always the case. He has to balance just how much information gets out. Just who he shares what and with whom.”

“Huh?” I’m so confused.

“He likes you.” She cut another piece. “A lot.”

“Uh, okay.” Hadn’t he implied as much to me? Just...subtle. Little compliments. Which either could have been meant to bolster my self-esteem or to let me know he was interested.

Or both.

“I just...” She stopped slicing. She turned to face me and propped her hip against the counter. “Tell me if I’m off, okay. Or, better yet, tell me to mind my own damn business.”

Nope. I’m way too curious to see where this is going. Perhaps I should’ve exercised some form of self-protection, but I wasn’t feeling threatened. More...intrigued. “Go ahead.”

Slowly, she nodded. “I like you. But I also get the feeling you’re...” She pursed her lips. “Naïve?” Before I could comment, she waved off the thought. “No, that you were sheltered.”

Since we'd barely spent twenty minutes in each other's company, I couldn't see how she might possibly know this.

Unless Jeremy said something. Which maybe should've disconcerted me, but I was feeling oddly comforted that he cared enough about me to discuss me with his sister. I didn't have siblings—I didn't understand the bond. What I did like was the idea Jeremy had someone in his life in whom he could confide. Talk through his problems. Bicker gently. Being an only child, I'd missed all that. "Maybe sheltered is the right word. I'm not offended, if that's what you're worried about."

She held my gaze for a moment longer before returning her attention to the chicken. "Well, I'm more worried about you. Jeremy hasn't been a manwhore, but he hasn't been a saint either. He's been around the block a few times."

Maybe this is a touch more than I need to know? On the other hand, I was intensely curious. So I held my tongue.

"He's never, not in the thirty years since he came out to me, talked about someone the way he talks about you." She rotated the chicken one hundred and eighty degrees and then started slicing again. "And I don't want to speak out of turn." She held herself still for a moment. "Oh hell—when has that ever stopped me?" She laughed. "I just want to make sure you're okay. And that you know you can come to talk to me if Jeremy gets to be too much. Because I get it. If you need to talk to someone about it all?—"

"I have a psychiatrist."

That stopped her. She met my gaze. "Oh?"

"Dr. Martin." Because why not vomit out everything? Regardless of my status with her brother, I felt she had the right to know.

“Xavier’s a good man.His daughter Rochelle has babysat for me a couple of times.They’re a fantastic family.Super happy.Which, after everything that happened, wasn’t a guarantee.Zed, Xavier’s husband, is also a really special guy.Newer to town, but fit right in.”She nodded.“Getting help from an expert is a good thing.And here I am...presuming you’re gay.Or bi.Or...something.”

I actually laughed.“Gay, Marcie.Just gay.”

“Well, okay, then.”She resumed slicing.

“I care about Jeremy.”I fingered the napkin.

She kept slicing.

“But...I don’t know.I’ve been in town just over a week.The house I was living in just burned down.I should feel something, right?Not be so overwhelmed that I’m just shutting down.”

“Oh, hun.”She laid the knife and fork on the plate and headed my way.She sat at the table next to me and grasped my hand.

I hadn’t invited her to...but I also welcomed the touch.

Perhaps she sensed that.She squeezed my hand.“I’m sure Dr.Martin would tell you that you’re allowed to feel everything right now.Or nothing, if that’s where your mind goes.And maybe I shouldn’t have brought up this topic.”She regarded me.“Just that Jeremy’s not always the best at communicating his feelings.I’m not telling you that you have to like my brother, and I’m not warning you away from him, either.I guess I’m trying to tell you that he’s into you but it’s okay if you’re not into him.He’s, like, way older than you.”

“Yeah.”Nothing I hadn’t already figured out for myself.“And way more...you know...”

She cocked her head.

I rolled my eyes.“Attractive?Handsome?Sexy?”

She arched an eyebrow.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

Was I not supposed to say that? Well, maybe she doesn't see him that way...

"You're proving my point." She smiled. "You like him and he very much likes you. But it's okay to take it slow. Or to not take it at all. Don't let Jeremy steamroll over you. Make sure he hears what you're saying—no matter what that is."

"He seems like a good listener." God knew, I'd had his rapt attention this morning when I'd word vomited my relationship with Hank to him.

"He is." Marcie drew out the words. "But sometimes he hears what he wants to hear—not what you're actually saying. I guess that's my biggest caution. Be certain you're on the same page."

"Mom, I'm starving." Thaddeus barreled into the kitchen with a grinning Wally hot on his heels.

Marcie gave my hand one last squeeze. "Get Raphael and Jeremy. Everyone wash their hands. I'll heat up the chicken and buns. We're having Caesar salad, and you're not whining."

"But, Mom?—"

She held up her hand. "Remember the super-secret dessert?"

Thaddeus fist pumped the air.

"Clean hands."

He bolted.

She rose. Just before she stepped away, she said, “My brother’s a good man. You’re worthy of him. Hell, he might even be worthy of you.” With a little chuckle, she headed over to the food.

Chapter 18

Jeremy

“Whoever this is, it better be important.” I hadn’t bothered to check call display because, at what-the-fuck middle of the night, it didn’t really matter.

“If this is a bad time?—”

“Don’t hang up.” I scrubbed my face. “What’s going on, Andreas?” I glanced at the clock. Oh, only twenty minutes after midnight. Hell, some people might not even be in bed.

After a day’s activities with Phillip—from the walk to the sticky buns to my nibblets to wondering what the fuck Marcie had said to the poor guy to dinner—it’d been a long day. Wally had crashed shortly after eight. At that point Phillip begged off and I, having decided I’d had enough, called it quits as well.

Sleep had been quick in coming, but now this call boomeranged me into wakefulness. I sat up and scrubbed my face. “Do you need bail money?”

“Uh...”

“Fuck, Andreas, you better not be using your one phone call on me.” I started wracking my brains for lawyers I could rouse at this hour. Slim pickings in Gaynor

Beach, but I knew a few in LA who were happy to take serious cash?—

“It’s not that.”

I let out a long breath. “Well, that’s a relief. Did you beat someone up? Did someone beat you up? Did?—”

“He leaked our private photos to the tabloids. Tommy Tucker just texted me to confirm and asked if I wanted to make a statement.”

My brain screeched like tires on pavement when the brakes were applied too hard. “Back up. Who leaked what?”

“The guy.”

“The one who beat you up?”

“Yes.”

“Leaked what photos? Of you with a black eye?” We can still spin this. Make it look like?—

“No. Not those photos.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“What... Oh.Shit.”Hadn’t seen that coming.“So, like, you and he...?”

“Yeah.”

“And that’s what the fight was about?”

“What?No.I didn’t even know he had the pictures.Or still had them.He told me he’d deleted them.”

Jesus Christ, save me from innocent Nebraska farm boys and girls who believe what they’re told.

“What was the fight about?”I wasn’t even certain this was relevant, but?—

“I found out he hadn’t left his wife.He said he had.Because no way was I going to be a home-wrecker.You know me, right?That’s not who I am.”

To my surprise, I realized I did know him.And he was right—he’d never be a third unless all parties agreed.I let out a long breath.“Okay, so how bad is bad?”

“The photos?”

“Yes.”Because you’ve called me after midnight on a weeknight, and so?—

“I...uh...”

“Spit it out.”

“Might’ve been wearing women’s lacy underwear.”

“Okay. That’s not the end of the?—”

“While trussed up and handcuffed to the bed.”

I winced. “Okay, we can still spin?—”

“And then pictures of me with my bare ass in the air and my hole on display...”

Lord, please save me. “Is it obvious it’s you?”

“You mean is the mole on my ass cheek visible and am I looking over my shoulder?”

I slid out of bed. “Okay, I’m getting dressed and coming to LA.”

“You don’t?—”

“You called me.” I wasn’t the biggest fan of interrupting, but as I scouted for fresh underwear, I had to make my point.

“Well, yes, but?—”

“And the tabloids have the pictures?”

“Uh...yeah...”

“So I’m going to have Shayna call all the lawyers I can think of until we find one to file a cease-and-desist order. We’ll threaten a lawsuit since you clearly didn’t permit the photos to be released.”

“You can do that?”He sounded so hopeful.

“I’m not a lawyer, Andreas, but I think so.”I hope so.I also hope I’m not too late...

“Are you at home?”

“Yes.But the building is surrounded by paparazzi.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

I stopped. “I thought you said the pictures weren’t out.”

“Did I say that?”

I replayed the conversation as best I could in my still-fuzzy mind. “Are they out?”

“On Tommy’s website, yes.”

As I pulled on socks, underwear, and the pants for my best suit, I considered all I’d need to do. “Has Valentino Langston been in touch?”

“I don’t think so?”

“What do you mean? Has the producer of the movie you’re about to star in called? Maybe to cancel? Or to, I don’t know, praise?” Because some producers loved publicity. Any publicity. That being said, he was starring in a movie with Norah. As a very straight man.

Which I’d believed he was before this phone call. More fool you.

“Jeremy?”

Something in his tone had me stopping—one arm in my shirt and one hanging loose. “Yes?”

“I’m really sorry. Why don’t I sneak out? And meet you somewhere? That bar in West Hollywood?”

“You can get out without being seen?”

“Yeah.”

For reasons I couldn't explain, I believed him. “Okay. I'll call Shayna in the car and have her call around for lawyers.”

A long pause ensued as I put on my shirt, buttoned it, then tucked the ends into my pants. A power tie and jacket might be overkill and draw unwanted attention—so I'd leave them in the car. I sighed. “This isn't as career ending as it might've been a few years ago. In some corners... things are changing.”

“My parents...” He cleared his throat. “They won't understand.”

I wanted to argue that he couldn't be certain... except they'd attempted to forbid him to go to Stanford—because California was the work of the devil. At the time he'd shared that little tidbit, I'd been part amused and part offended. Amused they believed they could sway their headstrong son into turning down a football scholarship to one of the best schools in the country. Offended because I'd lived in SoCal my entire life and had yet to find a devil. Bad people? Certainly. Someone trying to tempt innocent souls over to the dark side? Hell fucking no.

Not that such people didn't exist. I just hadn't met one.

Uh... sounded like Andreas's former lover might be one.

Phillip's asshole ex as well.

I shook my head. “All right. If Shayna can come, yes to the bar in West Hollywood. If you're spotted, go to the parking lot of a fast-food joint and grab a burger. Sit in your car and eat the burger and fries until I get there.”

“With extra pickles?”

“As many as you want.” Sometimes I forgot how young he was. At twenty-five, he had several years of acting and modeling under his belt. Hell, he was Phillip’s age. Yet their worlds were so very different. “I’m on my way.” I slid my feet into my shoes and bent to tie the laces.

“Yeah, thanks. I’ll call Shayna.”

“It’s two hours for me to drive up. A bit less this time of night.”

“Don’t get a speeding ticket.”

I smiled. Very few would be concerned about others while in the midst of their own crisis. “I’ll be careful.” I disconnected the call and frowned.

Phillip.

I didn’t want to wake him. So... I could leave a note in his bathroom where he’d find it first thing and then leave a key on the kitchen counter so he could go out if he needed to. Being back before nine or ten felt impossible. On that thought, I tossed jeans, a T-shirt, and a baseball cap in a bag. Oh, and running shoes. God only knew if I’d actually need them, but I preferred to be prepared.

Double-checking I had everything—which included my wallet and a thankfully fully charged phone—I slipped out of my room.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

To find Phillip standing by his door with a sleepy Wally at his feet.

I halted. “You okay?”

“I was going to ask you that question.” He held up his hand. “I didn’t hear the call, but I heard your tone of voice.”

Because I’d left the door ajar so I might hear him if he needed me. I winced. “Apologies.”

He waved me off. “I wasn’t sleeping anyway. Is there something I can help you with?” He was so earnest. With his worried green eyes and his tousled hair.

“I’m really okay. I have to run up to LA?—”

“At this hour?” His voice was full-on panicked.

“Yeah. This is my job, Phillip. Ninety-nine percent of the time, I send emails, press releases, and organize interviews. Then, once in a blue moon, I have a crisis that demands my personal attention. Now, are you going to be okay?”

“Can I come with you? Maybe I can help.”

I envisioned him sitting in my SUV in the parking lot of the dive bar. Maybe with Wally.

Not a reassuring picture.

“Look, how about I call Marcie?”

“I don’t need a babysitter.”

“No...but Thaddeus and Raphael would be thrilled to see you in the morning.”

He bit his lower lip.

“You had a nightmare, Phillip. I know you didn’t think I knew, but I did. The lingering smell of smoke isn’t helping.” I rubbed my face. “Truthfully, I would worry about you here and even more if I leave you in an SUV in a parking lot. So let me check with Marcie, okay? She can always say no.”

I pulled out my phone, found Marcie’s number, and dialed.

Fifteen minutes later, I left a sleepy Phillip in the capable hands of my beloved sister and hit I5 on my way to chaos.

Chapter 19

Phillip

Awareness came in degrees as I wavered between a very erotic dream about Jeremy and the persistent feeling of being watched.

I slowly opened my eyes.

To find Raphael about three inches from my face.

To my great pride, I didn’t startle. Instead, I smiled.

“Mom said not to wake you.”

“Ah, well, I’m glad you did what your mom said. Thank you for not waking me.”

“Are you awake now?”

“Yes.”

“Mom! Phillip’s awake!”

Ears ringing, I pushed myself into a sitting position.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

Wally licked my face.

“Yes, buddy, I’m happy to see you.” I’d taken him for a pee before we’d come into Marcie’s house last night. I eyed the clock radio to discover it was barely past seven. I met Raphael’s gaze. “How about you let me get dressed, and then we can take Wally out for a walk?”

Raphael fist-pumped the air. Then they gently petted my pooch. Finally, they bolted out of the room.

Wally licked my face one more time before sailing down the stairs and following Raphael right out the door.

Marcie will watch over them.

The kids were amazingly gentle with Wally—and he clearly adored them. He’d been around kids pretty much his entire life. The grandchildren of his elderly owner. He’d just never been taken by a walk with any of them.

Which still made me sad. But if he’d had a more fulsome life, he might not be with me. I didn’t believe in destiny per se—or divine intervention—but I could believe some things were meant to be. That the universe might nudge. I was meant to come to Gaynor Beach thanks to Anthony. I was meant to rescue Wally thanks to Arthur. I was meant to live next to Jeremy.

The house burning down had unintended consequences that had, in a weird way, landed me in Marcie’s spare room.

I should've been strong enough to stay alone in Jeremy's house. I should have. I was incredibly grateful, though, that he realized I would've probably broken down. I still wasn't over the fire, and even though Jeremy's home was likely perfectly safe, I didn't have the confidence to just wander around a stranger's house and make myself feel at home.

After I rolled out of bed, I grabbed my bathrobe and a pile of clothes to wear, and I headed to the bathroom. Twenty minutes later, feeling very refreshed, I made my way into Marcie's kitchen.

She grinned. "Raphael woke you, didn't they?"

I shook my head. "Honest to God, they didn't." I gazed out the back sliding-glass door to find Raphael and Thaddeus throwing a ball between the two of them and Wally trying to grab it. He couldn't jump very high, but he sure was making an effort.

Thaddeus dropped the ball.

Wally nabbed it. Then took off. As fast as his stubby little legs could take him.

The children chased him.

"He peed as soon as he went out." Marcie handed me a plate of orange slices. "My roses needed the water."

I winced.

She laughed. "I was joking. He's free to do whatever. Thaddeus's best friend owns a malamute. When the darn dog isn't herding the kids, he's trying to dig up my garden." She grinned. "I don't mind because the dog makes the kids so happy. Much like Wally is."

“That’s good.Arthur said he’d be good with kids.”I gazed out at the squealing children and the yapping dog.My heart sang.

“He is.Now, I’m whipping up pancakes before I run Raphael to school.Thaddeus doesn’t have anything today, so he’s just hanging around the house.”

“Do you want me to keep an eye on him?”

“Sure.How about we all walk Raphael to school?Then you can see where they go every day.”

I wasn’t certain I needed to see their school, but I was certainly open to a walk.“I have plenty of baggies.”

Marcie laughed.“I think we need to teach the kids how to scoop.In case Wally goes in the backyard.”

“That’s my job.”

“Ah, but my children want a dog.Perhaps if they scoop poop a few times...but Darren will still be allergic.”

“Aren’t there hypoallergenic dogs?”That was a thing...right?

“Shh.Don’t suggest that around the kids.”

“I won’t.”

She snagged her phone out of her back pocket and tapped it at a few times.“Well, good Goddamn.”

“Uh...”

“Yorkies are hypoallergenic.”

I burst out laughing. “How did I not know that?”

“Well, I should’ve been more worried when you came here last night, but I had Darren take an allergy pill. He was fine this morning before he went to work. I’d assumed that was because of the pill.” She laughed. “What if he was okay because the dog isn’t going to trigger his allergies as much?”

I eyed her. “You can’t have my dog.”

She petted my shoulder. “No, of course not. We might borrow him, though.”

“Well, that would be okay.”

“Great. Pancakes. Do you want to help, or do you want to supervise chaos?”

I gazed out over the backyard. “They seem okay.”

“Yeah, they do. So, I cheat and use pancake mix...”

Whether Jeremy had mentioned my lack of culinary skills, or whether Marcie was just a mother hen, I spent the next half hour learning the intricacies of making perfect pancakes along with sausages.

Marcie said she hated the damn sausages, but Darren was addicted, and both children had taken up the mantle for the next generation and were carrying on their father's legacy.

That made me laugh.

Then maybe a little sad as I acknowledged I didn't have a legacy like that. Nothing special my mother had ever shared with me. Nothing I could cling to that we'd done together. Just a legacy of neglect by a woman who'd been ill most of my life. I was truly sorry for the life she'd lived...but then I watched Marcie and Jeremy with the nibblets, and I could see how much I'd really missed out on.

After a delicious breakfast, we walked to Raphael's kindergarten class.

Marcie introduced me to the teacher, who took great interest in Wally and suggested, quite boldly, that the dog would make a great therapy dog. She'd observed his calm nature when a pile of children descended.

On the way home, Marcie reiterated what the teacher said.

I pointed out I'd have to be Wally's handler. And deal with, you know, people.

She said I could look at one-on-one settings like the program in the library where young kids practiced their reading skills by reading to dogs.

As I helped her clean the kitchen, that idea circled in my mind. Wally's temperament would be perfect for sitting still and listening to a kid speak. Or just comforting a child. And he was small enough not to be intimidating. All the kids loved him.

And he lapped up the attention.

Which made me think keeping him to myself was selfish.

So I texted Jordan.

The trainer responded immediately that he'd add Wally to the therapy-dog training class starting in two weeks. That meant, though, that we needed at least two personal sessions to ensure Wally was completely prepared for the tougher class.

I readily agreed.

To my dismay, Marcie insisted on driving me to the appointment with Dr. Martin. She said she'd take Thaddeus to the library. I could text her when I was finished, and she'd run back to pick me up.

As I sat in Dr. Martin's waiting room, the past few days caught up with me.

When I dropped into the chair in his office, everything sort of burst out. "I had to go to LA to get my stuff, and Colin took me. Great guy. Then I came back and found James's house had burned down with my new stuff inside. That was sad. Then I moved in with Jeremy, and he's been so nice. But I don't see how that can last. Everyone gets tired of me eventually. Now I'm at his sister's—Jeremy's—and she's so nice to me. And her kids love Wally, and I'm thinking Wally should train to be a therapy dog, but that means I have to be there with him and, you know, people.

"You know about my suicide attempt. We haven't talked about that specifically, although you asked me how I was feeling. And right now, I'm an eight or nine. Great. But I know that can't last because shit happens. Shit always happens. I need to prepare myself so that when things go badly, I don't fall apart again. You know? Handle it more like when my mom died than when Hank left. Which are really the tent posts in my life. I'd like another one. Like, today. Today could be a tent post. A moment that I'm marking." I took in a deep breath. "Sorry."

“I’m not.”Dr.Martin offered a wide smile.“Your story gives me plenty to work with.Of everything, though, what would you say is bothering you the most?”

“Jeremy.”

“The man whose house you’re staying in.”

“Yes.”

“Ah.And what about him...bothers you?”

“Not bother.”I threaded my hands together and placed them on my lap.“He’s a great guy.I mean super great.And I think I’m attracted to him.”I closed my eyes.“Scratch that.”I opened my eyes.“I really like him.Yeah, he’s older.Like Hank was, so that’s a worry.But he’s nothing like my ex-boyfriend.Jeremy’s a great guy.I already said that.It’s true, though.We talked yesterday morning.While we walked Wally to Nice Buns.I’m walking, Dr.Martin.A lot.And it’s not as bad as I thought it would be.And Wally’s got more stamina than I would’ve thought, and he just keeps going.”

“You spoke to Jeremy?”

“Yeah.I told him...just about everything.I vomited out everything that happened with Hank, and how I hate being unhealthy, and how I know people are judging me, and—” I let out a long breath.“I didn’t tell him about the suicide attempt.Or how my landlady found me.How I’d wanted to die.How I really should’ve died.Except...” I scrubbed my face.“If I had, then Wally wouldn’t be with me.And maybe he would’ve found a better owner?—”

“A better owner doesn’t likely exist.”Dr.Martin offered me a smile.“Anthony says you’re wonderful with Wally.I’d like to meet the little guy.Perhaps next time, if you

don't mind, we might meet in the park. Unless you're concerned about being seen with me. There's a little park behind the hospital. It's pretty deserted most of the time."

I bit my lower lip. "I'm not embarrassed, Dr. Martin. I need help. I'm getting help. I don't hide that from people. Jeremy, Marice, and Colin all know. I'm more thinking...do you want to be seen with me?"

He cocked his head.

I pressed my hand to my gut.

"Phillip."

"Yeah?"

"I would never be embarrassed to be seen with you. I only worry about how you feel. I accept you for who you are. You've said you'd like to lose some weight to get healthier. I'm fully supportive of that, as long as it's what you want, not what other people make you think you should want. Being overweight can cause a myriad of health problems and shortens your life. So why not try to get healthy if that's a goal for you? Wally was the first step. You said you've been watching what you eat?—"

"We had pancakes for breakfast. I had just one, and then we walked the nibblets to school."

He tilted his head.

"Raphael and Thaddeus."

He grinned. "That's great. They're wonderful children."

“Marcie said your daughter has babysat them a few times.”

“Ah, yes.”

“She asked me...” I scratched my nose. “Something about...was I getting help or... No, I told her I was seeing you. Because I thought being honest was important. And I didn’t want her to hear from someone else that her brother was living with a guy under psychiatric supervision.”

Slowly, Dr. Martin nodded. “That’s really important to you, right? That you be honest.”

I glanced down at my hands. “Except about the suicide.”

“Phillip, that’s something incredibly personal. Something you never have to share with anyone if you don’t want to. It’s good that Anthony and I know. It’s good that you have the self-awareness and that, hopefully, if you start slipping that you’ll reach out and ask for help. We always have someone on call in town. I gave you that number, right?”

I tapped my phone, still not looking at him.

“Okay...”

Finally, I looked up.

“Why don’t we start by talking about your feelings for Jeremy? I suspect they might be complicated.”

“I like him. I mean I really like him. But I haven’t told him.”

“Telling him would be a big step. Now, let’s go through all the different scenarios of

what might happen.”

I raised my hand.

Dr.Martin smiled and gestured for me to speak.

Honestly.

“What if I’m wrong?What if he’s not attracted to me?What if he’s just being nice?”

“Well, why don’t we discuss the ramifications of if you’re reading things wrong.More importantly, though, you need to think about whether or not you’re ready for a relationship—of any kind.”

I settled back in my seat.“Three days ago I would’ve said no way.Today?Things look really different.”

“Then let’s talk about what’s changed.”

And so we did.For almost an hour.

I texted Marcie, and she picked me up.

We weren’t back in the house ten minutes before all hell broke loose.

Chapter20

Jeremy

I paced the length of Shayna's office.

"You're going to wear a hole in my carpet." The woman herself sat at her desk and scrolled through her phone.

Andreas had excused himself to go to the men's room. Fortunately the sprawling agency office had its own bathrooms so I didn't need to worry about him running into anyone...untoward.

"This is a nightmare." I snagged my phone, started scrolling, and put the damn thing away.

"Alerts going off like crazy?" Shayna gazed at me over her reading glasses. Glasses that made her look sexy as fuck. Not my type, obviously, but I could identify an attractive woman when I saw one. Her legs rested on her desk, showing an obscene amount of thigh. Only Andreas and I were going to see her and, apparently, neither one of us was interested.

Her office phone buzzed.

She swung her legs off the desk, righted herself, then hit the intercom button. "Yes Cherise?"

"Valentino Langston and Norah O'Shay to see you."

My eyes widened as I met Shayna's panicked expression. "Uh, give us two?"

Because one did not make a high-powered executive from a studio and an up-and-coming starlet wait. That just wasn't a thing.

"Hey, so have y'all..." Andreas trailed off. "Okay, what happened? You look?—"

I grabbed him, yanked him fully into the room and then shut the door. “Valentino and Norah are here.”

“Oh shit.”

“Yes, shit.” Shayna shoved her feet into her stiletto heels, smoothed her skirt, then marched over to us. She pointed her finger at Andreas’s chest. “Not a word unless you’re directly spoken to. No joking around and being funny. Sometimes I wonder if you understand the seriousness of what’s happened.”

“My dick is all over the internet.” Andreas scowled. “I think I know how fucked-up this is.”

My sentiments ran parallel to Shayna’s. Andreas just didn’t appear to understand the gravity. People’s careers could be lost over a scandal. Not everyone’s sex tapes nabbed them multi-million-dollar endorsement deals.

Because Omar, Andreas’s ex, hadn’t just released the photographs. Nope. He and Tommy had arranged to release several videos as well.

When the lawyer we’d hired threatened to sue Tommy and the owner, Karen Mixer, she’d received a just go ahead and try. Along with a your guy was a willing participant.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

I worried Andreas might've signed a waiver or something.

He admitted Omar had given him some paperwork but that, in the end, he hadn't signed.

Shayna returned to her desk. She hit the intercom. "Show them in, Cherise. Maybe coffees for everyone?" She paused. "Yes, except Andreas. He'll thank you for making him a tea." She rolled her eyes. Whether because she thought the twit didn't deserve the special treatment, or because she was irritated her admin remembered his preferences, I wasn't certain.

I knew the drink preferences of all my clients. I wouldn't have been surprised if Cherise kept a running list.

After a quick rap on the door, it opened.

Norah O'Shay swept into the room. No other word existed for her entrance. Her knee-length white dress with huge black-and-red flowers flapped with her motion. Her flaming-red hair fluttered, almost as if she stood before a wind machine. Black stiletto pumps matched the metal bracelets around her wrist. Those bangles drew one's eye to her bare arms—all creamy skin with a hint of freckles. Her green eyes scanned the room before settling on Andreas. She held out her hands.

He grasped them.

"Oh, my dear sweet young man. How are you?"

I held in the laugh, but barely. Norah was twenty-two. Which meant Andreas was older by three years.

Valentino surveyed the room as well. His blond hair was longer than I remembered. A bit roguish. His blue eyes were as incisive as ever. His height gave him an advantage as well. At six-one, I wasn't a pipsqueak.

Val, however, had several inches on me. His charcoal power suit spoke of seriousness. His blue silk tie connoted elegance.

The red stain on it didn't.

I cocked my head. Is that part of a pattern I'm not seeing? Or...

Val gazed down to his tie and groaned.

Shayna caught my gaze. Clearly she hadn't seen the stain.

I certainly wasn't going to say anything.

Val unknotted the tie and yanked it off. Then he shoved it into his pocket. Finally, he met my gaze. "My foster son loves juice boxes. I checked my shirt which somehow escaped the damage." He rolled his eyes. "I missed the tie."

"Oh, Jason is with you in LA?" Shayne stepped from around her desk. "Hello, Valentino. Hello, Norah. An unexpected pleasure."

"Nice to see you too." Norah nearly vibrated with excitement. "I saw Jason and Seamus this morning. Family trip to LA. Seamus is taking Jason to the zoo."

I was able to keep up. Seamus was Valentino's Canadian husband. They lived in

Vancouver most of the time. Jason was their foster son. Okay, that all seemed simple enough. And somehow the stain on the tie humanized Valentino in a way nothing else could. I indicated my tie. "Would you like mine?" It might've been my favorite, but I'd have happily given it to the man.

He waved me off, then undid the top two buttons of his shirt. "Seamus claims I look sexier without it and yet still command attention."

Well over six feet? Piercing blue eyes? A mane of golden-blond hair? The guy could've been an actor or a model. Instead, he'd chosen the business side of the movie industry.

And yet, in that moment, I just wanted to be at home with an adorable not-at-all-model-type man and his cuddly puppy. "Well, the offer of the tie stands." I glanced to Shayna, but she stood like a statue. Neither commanding the room, nor ceding power. Just very still.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of your company?" Might as well go with formal. "Both of you."

"Oh, I was so worried about Andreas." Norah squeezed his hands and her emerald eyes flashed. "He's been so badly treated." She pouted her lips. "I wanted him to know that he has my one-hundred-percent support. Our full support." She directed her steely gaze to Valentino.

Who nodded—although perhaps with a bit less vigor.

"I think we should do a press conference." Norah nearly vibrated. "And you can tell them how you had no idea you'd been betrayed by someone you obviously cared for. Because, of course, you'd never let anyone take pictures and videos of you like that if you didn't love them."

“Of course.” Andreas echoed her words.

I did my best to not roll my eyes. People shot videos like that all the time. Perhaps, in some cases, ill-advisedly. But they did it.

Valentino cleared his throat. “The studio condemns revenge porn of any kind. Your initial statement made it clear you had no knowledge the private footage would ever be released.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

Andreas winced.“Yeah.No.I still...” He swallowed.“I really thought I loved the guy.And he told me he’d left his wife.And then when I found out he hadn’t, I confronted him.Things got?—”

I cleared my throat.

Four gazes shot my way.

Valentino shook his head.“I want to hear all of it.If you think Norah should?—”

“I’m staying.”Darling woman actually stomped her foot.

Well, okay, then.

I gestured for Andreas to continue.

“We got into a fight.He threw the first punch.Or I did.”He closed his eyes.“It’s all kind of blurred.”

Norah gently passed her fingers over the yellow bruise.“You poor dear.What a wretched man.I’m glad you’re not with him anymore.I certainly hope you never see him again.”Apparently she’d forgiven him for lying about the strep throat.He’d had to come clean about that when everything had gone to shit.

Valentino nodded.“Do we know why he went public?His name thus far has been kept out of the media.Is he naïve enough to believe that will hold?You were both brought to the police station for questioning less than seventy-two hours ago.Does he believe

he's protected somehow?"

"I have no idea." Andreas shrugged. "Omar can be...impetuous. I'm most concerned about his wife. If what he says is true, she knows nothing?—"

"Maybe she should know." Norah's eyes flashed brilliant green in the morning sunlight streaming into Shayna's office. "If my husband was cheating on me, I'd damn well want to know. If he was putting porn on the internet, I would want to know."

She didn't stamp her foot again, but none of us was left questioning her righteous anger.

"He..." Andreas sighed. "I honestly thought I loved him. That we'd be together forever."

"The man's a damn fool." Norah placed a hand over his heart. "I can tell how sincere you are. And I'm so glad we're making this film together." She gazed up at him and fluttered her lashes.

Yes, fluttered her lashes.

He blinked. "You still want to star in the movie with me?"

"Of course." She held his gaze. "I won't let anyone bully me into dropping you as a costar. We were meant to make this movie together. You're the perfect Thane. I don't want anyone else. I want you. You'll do it, right? You won't drop out because of that horrible, awful, dreadful man. May his wife spite his heart."

I cocked my head. I wasn't certain she had the expression correct but, again, very clearly had her temper showing. Sort of matched the high color in her cheeks and her

flaming-red hair.

“We need a strategy.”Valentino made a grab for his tie.

That wasn’t there.

Despite knowing my best interests lay in not reacting, I smiled.

He caught my gaze and smiled back.

“What strategy?We leave for Vancouver in two weeks and film the most amazing movie ever.”Norah pouted.“I don’t see how we can do anything else.”

I want to live in her world.Black and white.Good and evil.Right and wrong.For some reason, I didn’t perceive her as accepting gray in this universe.The sky was either brilliant blue or black with night.I could admit, I admired her for that.Envied her a little as well.

Unfortunately, I didn’t live in that world.I had to see shades.Omar might be a jackass in every conceivable way—but he risked discovery.One word from Andreas, and the ex-lover would be unveiled.Yes, Andreas wouldn’t intentionally out the man.Concern for the man’s innocent wife would keep an honorable man like my client from speaking out.Other men might not be so scrupulous.

And what about Tommy Tucker and Karen Mixer?When one lay with dogs, they could invariably wind up with fleas.

Well, except Wally.I assumed he was up-to-date with his flea medication.And I’d totally lie on the ground with him and cuddle.Especially if Phillip kept us company.Like, a group activity.A way to show we all cared about each other.A way for Wally to bond with me the way he was clearly bonding with my nibblets?—

“Does that work for you, Jeremy?” Shayna moderated her tone, but I caught the bite in it.

Heat raced to my cheeks at having been caught not paying attention. “Uh.” I rubbed my forehead. “Sorry, it’s been a very long twelve hours. Can you top-line that again for me?”

Page 80

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

She rolled her eyes.

Valentino arched an eyebrow.

Norah grinned.

Andreas sighed.

Yeah, whatever this is, it's going to be a hell of a ride.

Chapter21

Phillip

“I don't understand.”Raphael put their hands on their hips.

Inwardly, I sighed.Outwardly, I smiled.“Your grandmother is in the hospital.Your mom went to help her and to watch over your grandfather.Your mother tried reaching Uncle Jeremy, but she couldn't.So she asked me to pick you up from school and to stay with you and Thaddeus while she's at the hospital.”

We'd been over this three times.While Marcie had given me the quick rundown on what to expect when I threw Raphael's routine into chaos, she'd neglected to mention this.It had, however, been addressed in one of the eighteen articles I'd read from a reputable website while Thaddeus napped and before we went to pick Raphael up from all-day kindergarten.

I worried about watching the kids—seeing as I had very little experience.

Marcie was apoplectic with panic over her mother, and while she tried to think of someone else she could call, I was standing right there. She asked, and I agreed.

I wasn't a stranger to the nibblets. We'd met several times now, and I was, technically, staying with them. At least until Jeremy gets back. I also had Anthony on speed dial. And since Colin and James were trying to qualify to become foster parents, I figured they'd know about kids. Oh, and Colin had mentioned having a couple of nibblets in the form of Hallie and Thomas. Those two were the kids of James's brother Danny and, apparently, visited Colin's home frequently.

So I had plenty of backup if things went sideways.

Just...proving myself capable and worthy was important. I wanted Marcie—and by extension, Jeremy—to see me as competent.

"Your mom said we could play in the backyard with Wally."

"I want to walk Wally."

"We could hook Wally up to his leash and walk him around the backyard."

"I want to go to the park."

"Okay. But I can't watch you, Thaddeus, and Wally." That might not have been strictly true, but I wasn't willing to test that theory my first time out.

"I can watch Wally."

"In the backyard."

They put their hands on their hips again.

Inwardly, I sighed again. Outwardly, I remained stoic. If Marcus Aurelius could do it, then so could I. “Your mom said we could have ham sandwiches for dinner. She said you could even skip the lettuce—just this once.”

“I want grilled cheese.”

“That sounds lovely. But we’re sticking to meals that don’t require cooking. Just for tonight.” Even I could manage grilled cheese, but I wasn’t one hundred percent certain I wouldn’t have little ones underfoot. How do parents do this?

“I’m hungry.” Thaddeus appeared at the door, loyal Wally by his feet.

“Okay, kiddo. Can you close the back door? Ham okay?”

“I want grilled cheese.” Raphael glared. “We always have grilled cheese on Wednesdays.”

Which Marcie hadn’t mentioned—but she’d been beyond stressed.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

What do I do? Give in? Does that set a bad precedent? On the other hand, when am I going to be babysitting them again? Alone, no less. I eyed my phone. Texting Marcie would take two seconds. She'd given me her number and told me to use it—no matter how small my concern was. But she's dealing with both parents. You used to be overwhelmed with just your mom.

That was true. Except I'd been a child and then a teenager. As an adult, wouldn't it be easier to cope?

Texting Jeremy was just as tempting, but he'd looked super stressed at midnight when he'd headed out. I'd no idea his job was so...important. Being called out in the middle of the night? I thought that was, like, doctor-level stuff. Also, he hadn't contacted me all day. So maybe he was too busy.

"Please?" Thaddeus pressed his hands together as if in prayer.

Oh buddy, that would be the thing least likely to have me caving. The look of pleading on his face, as well as the resoluteness of Raphael's had me giving in. "Just this once."

Both children, simultaneously, fist pumped the air.

"But you have to promise to sit with Wally in the family room and watch television while I cook."

"I always help." Raphael's stubborn jaw set was back.

“That may be true. But I need you to watch Wally and make sure I don’t trip over him. That’s a big responsibility.”

They squinted—as if trying to take my measure. “Yeah, okay.”

“Great. I’m going to give you each a couple of baby carrots.”

Wally perked.

“Yes, you too, buddy.”

After I’d doled out carrots for all, the three smaller beings headed into the family room and I set about organizing dinner. Somehow I managed to make four sandwiches without burning anything. As a kid I’d done this fairly often—although not with the good cheese I got to use today. Hell, that I’d gone twenty-four years without burning myself was pretty impressive.

I won the battle between eating in front of the television and sitting properly at the kitchen table.

I ruled over said table and didn’t allow anyone to accidentally drop food for Wally to scoop up.

I managed to get everyone fed and the kitchen cleaned up before bedtime.

Those all felt like huge accomplishments. Seriously big deals.

Then I faced the uphill battle of actually getting the kids into bed.

Marcie had said that, for this one time, they could skip baths.

Raphael wanted none of that.

As a compromise, I sat on the outside of the bathroom and insisted they give me a running commentary of what they were doing. I worked off the assumption that I'd burst in if they stopped talking. I might've also googled the average age of kids drowning in bathtubs and been vaguely reassured that five-year-old kids, if they were going to drown, did so in pools or lakes. The number of kids who died that way distressed me, but the odds were in my favor that Raphael would be fine.

And they were.

In turn, I learned about every single thing they had said and done in the nine hours we'd been apart. Who knew five-year-olds did so much in a day? I was vaguely relieved they didn't share when they went to the washroom. Was it possible they understood the concept of oversharing? Although, given my word vomit to Jeremy yesterday, Raphael appeared to have more restraint than me.

Yet Jeremy didn't turn away. He guided you to a store with sticky buns and made you laugh repeatedly. He welcomed you into his home with his sister and nibblets there. You had fun. That has to mean something.

"I have homework." Raphael made the pronouncement as they opened the bathroom door I'd been leaning against.

At least I'd been sitting, so I only lost my balance for a moment, but was able to right myself. "Uh...you get homework in kindergarten?" I didn't remember much from those days. If I'd been assigned something, it would've been bible study. No separation between church and state in that town.

"I have to draw a picture." Raphael wore a large, oversized shirt.

Jeremy had warned me they didn't like wearing clothes, especially at home. I took the wearing of clothes as win. Then they knelt next to my and started rubbing their wet hair against me. Sort of like Wally did when he wanted attention and affection.

I had no idea how to react.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

Oh, wait. I'd read something about kids and water. How some kids didn't mind being in the water, but once they were out, they couldn't tolerate it on their face. In that light, drying their hair made sense. I might've preferred they use a towel instead of my T-shirt, but something swelled inside me at the trust they placed in me.

At least we have an hour before bedtime. Hopefully their hair will be dry by then... Truthfully, I had no idea how long something such as a wet child took to dry their hair.

Hell, I didn't even know how long it took a wet dog?—

A splash followed by a distinctive yelp had me gently pushing Raphael aside and crawling on hands and knees across the wet tiles of the bathroom.

Oh God. Oh God. Oh God. Please don't drown. I don't know doggie CPR. How do I not know doggie CPR? Oh God?—

As I looked over the side of the tub, a very adorable face gazed back up at me.

A very wet face.

Now, as the panic receded, I reminded myself I'd only given Raphael about eight inches of water to work with. Less likely to be able to drown. I also hadn't thought anything of the little stepstool. Now, as I thought about it, I wondered if Thaddeus used it.

“Oh my God, dog.”

He chose that moment to shake out.

Water sprayed everywhere.

Everywhere.

Even up my nose.

I cough spewed.

“Do you need a towel?”

Raphael stood next to me, now almost as wet as I was.

I hoped that wouldn't trigger them. God save me. “Uh, yes...does your mom have old towels?”

Twenty minutes later, Raphael, Wally, and I sat in front of the gas fireplace. The a/c blasted, but the heat from the fire was drying us off faster.

I apologized to the climate change people who'd have a fit if they saw us.

Well, I don't drive or eat much meat and hate running the a/c, so I normally do my part.

Thaddeus, quite unamused by the band of soaked beings, declared he'd had enough and was going to bed. True to his word, he got undressed, put on his pajamas, brushed his teeth, hopped into bed, and was out like a light before I even turned his lamp off.

In my heart, I knew Raphael wouldn't be so easily convinced to go to bed.

Given they were still wet, I figured drying off was a better idea anyway. They had stuck their legs under the massive T-shirt, perhaps explaining why the thing was so stretched.

Is he doing this because the pressure reassures?

I just didn't know.

Marcie still hadn't texted.

Jeremy still hadn't called.

I worried for both of them.

What if their mom was really sick? What if she died?

What if Jeremy fell asleep behind the wheel and crashed on his way back to Gaynor Beach?

Page 83

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

What if Marcie choked on a sandwich and no one in the hospital could save her?

Yeah, that one felt farfetched, even for me.

“Hello!” A deep voice echoed through the house.

Didn’t Marcie say Darren was down in San Diego for a week for training? Is he home early? Oh God, what if it’s an intruder? I have to protect the kids.

Okay...but an intruder wouldn’t announce themselves.

Right?

I took a leap. “In the family room.” Before the words were out of my mouth, Wally had squirmed out of the towel I held him in. Little damp shit of a dog was gone.

And since I didn’t have an elegant way to get up, and was too fucking tired anyway, I just sat there. Like a lump.

“Uncle Jeremy!” Raphael tossed off their towel, leapt up, and headed toward the front door.

Okay. How did you not recognize his voice? How, in all your calculations, had it not occurred to you that Jeremy might come here? Because...somehow, in my mind, he was still in LA.

I was about to try to get up when Wally returned and barreled into me. Great...now

I'm going to smell even more like wet dog.

"Hey Phillip, how's it going?" Jeremy entered the room with Raphael on his hip.

"Uh...it's a super long story. How's your mom? You know about her, right?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I spoke to Marcie a couple of hours ago—when she was finally able to reach me. Sorry, I should've texted or called you. I just..." He sighed. "It's been a really long day. Anyway, I went straight to the hospital. Mom's fine. Grouchy that they're keeping her for the night. She fainted and although the doctors suspect they know why, they want to keep her overnight for observations. She's seventy and they're just being careful. Which I have no problem with," he was quick to assure me.

"Marcie's bringing Dad home. They're packing him a bag, and he's coming to stay here for the night."

"Oh." My mind whirled. "So she's going to need the spare room back."

"Yeah...which was why she sent me ahead. She apologized, but she's wondering if you and Wally would mind coming back to my place?"

Mind? Oh God, I so don't mind. "No, that's no problem. I sort of assumed I was here temporarily. I mean, I should be able to stay on my own?—"

"But you'll never have to." Jeremy kissed Raphael's temple. "Time for bed, nibblet."

"No. Wait for Mom."

"Ah, I figured as much. About thirty minutes. You're going to be grumpy in the morning."

“No. Won’t.” Again, with the absolute certainty only a five-year-old could have.

Jeremy slid Raphael off his hip and to the ground. Then, he gazed around, apparently taking in the chaos of wet man, wet child, wet dog, and damp towels. Oh, and the blazing fire. “You realize it’s ninety degrees outside?”

“We are aware.”

“And there’s this handy invention called the hair dryer?”

“I knew I was missing a piece.” I snapped my finger. “I never use the damn thing, so no, it didn’t occur to me.”

Jeremy leaned over to feather my hair. “You are perfect just the way you are. If I don’t use the hair dryer, bad things happen to my do.”

“You love Phillip.” Raphael poked their head directly between Jeremy and me. “And you love Uncle Jeremy.”

My eyes widened.

Right along with Jeremy’s.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“Uh...”

“Goodnight.” With that, Raphael bolted from the room.

“Uh...” I tried to unscramble my brain. “Didn’t they, uh, say they wanted to wait up?”

“Likely they’ll do it in their room.” Jeremy scratched his beard, his bloodshot eyes settling on me. “They like to drop bombs and then run away.”

“For a five-year-old, they’re very competent. I was barely able to tie my shoes.”

“Mine were Velcro until I took up baseball and discovered that Velcro cleats weren’t a thing. They should’ve been.”

I blinked.

Wally rubbed against Jeremy.

“Oh, God, I’m so sorry. Those amazing pants are going to smell like wet dog.”

He waved me off. “They’re going to the cleaners anyway. Everything from today is getting laundered. That was longer than most of the all-nighters I pulled in college.”

“You look exhausted.”

“I am. So you finish drying off, and I’ll get your stuff into the SUV. Then when Marcie comes home, we can just go.”

“Are you hungry? I made grilled cheese. There’s an extra one. I made it for Marcie. So she’d have something to eat when she got home.”

“She ate at the hospital, but I haven’t. You’re sure it’s okay...?” He gestured toward the thankfully clean kitchen.

“Please do.”

“Yeah.” For a moment, he just held himself still. Then he caressed my cheek. “You’re a good man, Phillip. This family owes you big time.” With that, he went to the kitchen.

Wally, darling damp dog, plopped on my lap.

I held my hand against my cheek.

Is Raphael right? Does Jeremy love me? Do I love him?

The notion was insane.

And yet had the whiff of truth from a meddling five-year-old...

Chapter 22

Jeremy

Okay, so that was totally unexpected.

As I sat at my sister’s kitchen table and ate the reheated grilled cheese sandwich, I tried to assimilate the last eighteen hours.

Hell, I tried to piece together every moment since I’d tripped over Wally’s leash a

week ago.

A week?It's only been a freaking week?How is that possible?

Honestly, I felt like I'd known Phillip forever.Not in the biblical sense, obviously, although—hello—very interested.

No, just in the deep emotional connection sense.He'd opened up to me about some pretty tough stuff.I'd been even more of an open book with him than I was with most people.Hell, I'd opened my home to him...

A home we were returning to as soon as I finished the sandwich and Marcie returned.I'd apologized to her profusely over and over again for somehow missing her text.When I pointed out she should've called, she countered back with, upon arriving at the hospital and realizing things weren't nearly as dire as she'd been led to believe, she'd remembered my midnight run to drop Phillip off and she worried about me.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

I still would've come.

Interviews with well-known reporters be damned.

Overall, Andreas held up well under the scrutiny. Without being overt, he made it clear he was the aggrieved party. And that he was happy to come out now—not that he had any choice—because he believed in living his authentic life. Just before, he'd believed that meant escorting costars to charity events and keeping his private life exactly that—private.

The reporter also had a brief conversation with Norah—to assure the world that the young woman really was okay with all this—and then everyone had pretended to move on with their lives.

Until, as I'd been walking out the door, an alert flashed that an LAPD source had dropped Omar's name in connection with Andreas. Between that tidbit and the black eye, things had spiraled out of control. I'd be cleaning up the mess likely until Andreas went to Vancouver. Possibly longer. But we'd hit the end of the line tonight, and nothing short of my bed would be enough at this point.

Well, except seeing Phillip taking care of Raphael, himself, and Wally.

I hadn't asked why everyone was wet. I figured my nibblet's insistence on a bath every night had something to do with it.

After finishing the sandwich, I wiped my hand on a napkin, put the plate in the dishwasher, and headed upstairs.

As I'd assumed, Thaddeus was fast asleep. He'd tossed off his blankets, and I engaged in a ritual I enjoyed so much—I tucked him back under the covers.

I found Raphael in their bed with a towel on their pillow and their nose in a book.

“Would you like me to blow dry your hair?”

They shook their head—which I'd expected. They never enjoyed the sensation of hot air being blown on them.

I was grateful it appeared they'd managed to stay dressed today. Although I somehow suspected Phillip would've coped.

His willingness to just step up and do whatever was necessary warmed me. I didn't know how much experience he had watching children. The good news was that Raphael would've been just bossy enough to ensure the house ran smoothly.

Or chaos might've ensued. Things could've gone either way.

“I love you,” I told my precocious niblet.

They rolled their eyes. “Duh.”

Which was often their way of expressing their affection toward me. Sometimes I got an I love you. That was rare, and therefore even more treasured when it happened.

Thaddeus loved to run around hugging everyone and telling them that he loved them, from his mom to a stranger in the park. Cute in a three-year-old, but would likely get him into trouble later if he didn't become more discriminating.

I waved to Raphael before moving to the room Phillip was using. Everything was

organized, so packing up took mere moments. As I'd known, Wally's stuff took up more space in the bag than my human friend's.

Friend.

Yeah, that fit. My being attracted to him didn't diminish the friendship. His willingness to help my sister only amplified my feelings for him. He'd survived an evening with the nibblets—not all the people I knew were capable of that.

Marcie admitted, once she'd calmed, that she'd thought of about a dozen other people she could've called. But she'd chosen Phillip and hadn't wavered in her faith he could do the job. Hadn't wanted him to think she didn't believe in him.

I snagged the bag and Wally's stairs and headed back down to Phillip. I found him putting the wet towels in the washing machine. His shorts were still clearly damp, and Wally wafted eau de wet dog, but they appeared undamaged. I cleared my throat. "Do I want to know how Wally got wet?"

Phillip offered a weary smile. "Apparently climbing step stools and jumping into eight inches of water is a talent I didn't know my dog possessed. I did my best to clean up all the water."

"I'm certain it's fine."

"Raphael directed me."

"They're good at that."

"Yes, they are. They talked me into making the grilled cheese. I resisted the urgings, from both children, to bake cookies."

“Do you know how to bake cookies?” Only after I asked the question did I hear how it sounded.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“Nope.” He smiled. “But Raphael offered to teach me.”

I licked my lips. “Raphael makes amazing cookies.”

“I’ll bet they do. Alas, I wasn’t turning on an oven while babysitting. That was a step too far.” He tried to smooth out his cotton shirt.

A hopeless cause.

“Let’s get you home. You can shower and then...head to bed?”

He let out a long sigh of relief. “Yes, please. That.” He wiped his face with his hand. “I slept badly last night and am exhausted. You must be running on fumes.”

“Yeah, I kind of am. But I got most of what I needed done today. There’ll be cleanup for the next two weeks, but I’ll manage.”

“Two weeks?”

“I’ll tell you about it on the ride home.”

“Home.” He sighed the word. “I adore Marcie and the kids, but I think I’m done for the day. If she needs me tomorrow?—”

“Raphael has school and Thaddeus has daycare. If all goes well, Marcie and I will be able to get Mom home and settled in that time. Now, what do you plan to do tomorrow?”

“Rest?”

I clapped him on the back. “Absolutely legitimate.”

We stepped out of the laundry room just in time for Marcie to arrive.

She spent five minutes listening to Phillip recount every moment of the day. All three of us were exhausted, but clearly Phillip felt he needed to justify all the little decisions he’d made.

As far as I was concerned, he’d done brilliantly. Two unharmed children in bed. A dog who was almost dry. The house put to rights.

Marcie felt the same way as she asked Phillip if she could hug him.

Whether he felt turning her down was rude, or if he saw how much she needed the reassurance, he offered it freely.

Huh. Maybe he needs the reassurance as well. I made a note to tell him repeatedly what a great job he’d done. Without question, few people had taken the time to praise him in his short life. He deserved all the praise.

On the way home, I brought him up to speed on the Omar, Andreas, Valentino, and Norah fiasco.

He made appropriate noises of sympathy. Does he understand? Sometimes he seems very clear-eyed about the world, and other times he seems naïve.

At home, I put everything back in what I now thought of as Phillip’s room.

To my relief, he took a hot shower and dressed in the overlarge pajamas. He’d

shivered in the car, despite my jacking up the heat.

I didn't see how someone in SoCal could get cold in what was now eighty-degree heat...but Phillip had managed.

“Would you like something warm to drink? Hot chocolate? Herbal tea?”

Slowly, he shook his head. “I think...I'd like a hug and then to go to bed.” He pinkened. “I mean in my room. And you in your room. Not together, like, because that would be all kinds of weird, and you're not interested in me that way, and?—”

“The hell I'm not. But are you interested in me that way?” I asked the question before my brain-to-mouth filter could kick in. I hadn't meant to put him on the spot. That was not my intention.

“Of course I am.” He blurted out the words. Then bit his lip as if he wanted to take them back.

Why not take a chance?

Because he might feel uncomfortable and want to leave. Where would he go?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

Yeah...but he might also want it...

I tried to shut off my internal monologue. This wasn't right. Phillip was a guest in my home. I didn't have the right?—

He advanced toward me.

I held my ground. In the dark light of the hallway, I spotted only a bit of those stunning green irises. He was a handsome man, but that wasn't what attracted me to him. Well, not all of it. He had a mixture of innocence and wariness that drew me in. I wanted to show him all the good that life had to offer. I wanted to make him smile.

He stood before me, gazing up.

On impulse, I stroked his cheek, much as I had earlier. Then, the gesture had been born out of endearment. My way to thank him for taking care of the nibblets. For taking care of my sister from afar. For just being a good person.

Now, though, the gesture was tender, to be certain, but also with the knowledge of my attraction to him.

He grasped my hand and held it to his cheek.

The contrast of his cold hand and his warm cheek brought the moment into sharp focus.

He blinked. "Will you kiss me?"

“Anything you want.” I’d deny him nothing. Realizing I needed to lead this, I lowered my mouth.

His eyes drifted shut.

I pressed our mouths together. Just a light brush. An assurance I wanted this.

He grasped the back of my neck to bring me closer. He opened his mouth and licked the seam of my lips. Naturally, I opened. Never, in my wildest dreams, had I envisioned he might be the one demanding ardor. That he might be the aggressor.

I fucking loved it.

When he pressed himself against me, with his erection nudging against me, I allowed myself to share my reaction. I’d been hard at various times over the past week in his presence—and had tugged a couple out in the shower at the memory of those stunning eyes and solid body—but this was the first time I let him see my reaction. I ran my hands down his flanks, eased them around to his beautiful ass. I grabbed the globes and pressed him against me.

He angled himself to get more friction.

Which was just fine with me. We’d been doing an odd dance for a week. I’d suspected he had feelings—physical at least—but that he’d hidden them. Maybe hadn’t wanted to recognize them. Certainly hadn’t felt right in acting on them. Whether that was because of his past with that asshole Hank or because he didn’t even know how to come on to another man, I wasn’t certain. I hadn’t pushed. Now I was extra glad I hadn’t.

He pulled back, his eyes a little glassy as they met mine. “I...this feels like it came out of the blue. But I want...” He bit his lower lip in that way I found so endearing.

“Yes?”

“I want you.”

“You have me, Phillip. Whatever you want, I’ll offer it up. But you have to be sure. Because I’m just fine with taking things slow. I mean, I haven’t even had the chance to tell you how much you mean to me. How happy I am that you’re here. How I want to protect you and keep you safe while also wanting to kiss you for hours and hours. And a lot more than kiss, but... You’re exhausted. I’m tired. But, for you, I’d give you the moon.” Is that romantic or just weird? I’m too tired to care. He seems pretty bright... he’ll figure it out.

“Could we...?” His gaze drifted away from mine.

I wanted him to look at me. I willed him to find the strength. “Just ask, sweetheart. Whatever you want.”

He turned back to me. “I don’t want to be alone tonight. But we’re both exhausted, and...”

“Would you like to sleep in my bed with me? Just sleep? We can give Wally his dog bed. Do you think he’ll sleep there? We can bring the stairs in case he needs comfort as well.”

“That’s a lot.” He gazed down at himself. “I’m a lot.” He rubbed his stomach.

“Hey.” I pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Please, none of that. I love your body. I love how you feel in my arms. And if that changes—if you change—that’ll be okay too. Your mind is what I’m attracted to. Your body is just a bonus.” Am I saying the right things? I want him to know I’m okay with how he is now, and if he loses weight, that’s okay too.

He held my gaze. “You’re not just saying that?”

I shook my head. “Ask Marcie. I’ve dated skinny guys, big guys, short guys, and a guy who was about six inches taller than me.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

As I'd hoped, Phillip's eyes widened.

"And a trans man. He was a sweetheart. Moved away and we drifted apart." He drew in a breath. "Just... I'm not really into women. I find some of them attractive—and I certainly love the intelligent ones." My mind flashed to both Norah and Shayna and how they'd been brilliant today. "But you're the one I want."

"For now."

I drew in a breath. *Forever* was on the tip of my tongue. But he wasn't ready to hear that and, if I was truly honest, I wasn't ready to say it. Not because I couldn't envision him here for all time... but because I needed time, patience, maybe some conversation with folks who saw me clearer than I saw myself. To make sure I wasn't making a mistake. Wasn't pushing Phillip so hard that I might make him turn tail and run. "I'm okay with taking things one day at a time. You're here. You're safe. That reassures me. That makes me feel like we're on the right track. So come to my bed tonight. Let me hold you. Or you hold me. Or we snuggle with Wally. Whatever works. We can sort the rest out tomorrow or the next day or a week from now."

"You make it sound so simple."

"It is. You don't want to be alone tonight. I'm happy to invite you to my bed."

"Yeah, okay."

I offered my hand.

He took it.

We walked back to his room.

He coaxed Wally off the spare bed, then grabbed the little guy's padded bed from the floor.

I nabbed the stairs.

We made our way to my room.

As Phillip settled in, I had a quick shower, then changed into pajamas in the ensuite bathroom. Thank God I had a pair—something to wear when I was around the nibblers. Otherwise I was like Raphael—no clothes, thank you.

Phillip had chosen the unused side of the bed—clearly noting my phone, clock radio, charger, and reading glasses on my side. Well, hopefully he hadn't noticed the glasses. I only needed the damn things when I was super tired and scrolling on my phone at night in bed.

My optometrist kept admonishing me.

I kept disobeying her orders.

And my eyes were getting worse.

Tonight, though, I ensured no alarms were set and crawled into bed. "Why don't you turn away from me? Then I can snuggle you."

"Yeah, okay." He pressed a hand to his belly.

I laid my hand over his. “Don’t, okay? I like having something to hold on to. Something other than a skinny guy who’s all angles.” I didn’t mention how good one skinny guy’s blow jobs had been. Or how he’d taken off for Colorado not long after we’d started seeing each other and how I really hadn’t missed him. Because those things didn’t matter. No one before Phillip mattered.

“Wally’s asleep down on his bed.”

I glanced over to find the pup with his head lolled back, his tongue stuck out, and a light snore coming from him. “He’s had a long day.”

“Yeah, those kids really wear him out.”

“You too.”

He grinned. “Yeah, me too. But I had fun.”

“Great. Now?—”

“Turn over. Yes, oh bossy one.” Yet, after giving me an impish grin, he did just that and turned away from me.

I shut off the lights, then positioned myself behind him. After a bit of adjusting, I fitted my thighs against his, pressed my front to his back, and slid my hand around to his chest. Then I laid my hand on his sternum. “Sleep, Phillip. I’ve got you.”

And I don’t want to ever let you go.

Chapter23

Phillip

Wakingup in Jeremy's arms was the best feeling ever.

Bright light made its way around the curtains, and a shaft of it hit my foot.The foot I'd stuck out to cool down.The contradiction of the a/c and a warm man behind me gave me a weird feeling.Not unpleasant...just unexpected.Since I'd never slept in a bed with Hank, I'd never had to do anything but regulate my own temperature.In Jeremy's bed, with him, things were different.

I gazed down at Wally.Jeremy had taken him for a walk while I'd been in the shower last night.So my little guy would be okay for another bit.I didn't need to race out of bed to take him out.He was quite capable of letting me know when he needed to get outside.I tried to not put him through waiting to the last minute.I tried to stick to a schedule, so he'd always know he could count on me.

Jeremy shifted and something rather hard pressed against my ass.

My breath caught.

From the moment I'd hit puberty, I'd understood the urge to look at other guys would get me into trouble.Even when I got a laptop, for school in LA, I didn't look at porn.Didn't look at other men.Well, I never let my gaze linger.I just didn't want trouble.

That changed with Hank.

Sort of.

My had gaze lingered.

His had lingered back.

We kissed and fumbled around and got each other off.

He asked me to move in.

I assumed that was the logical next step.

And...

Yeah.

Jeremy kissed the little bit of skin on the back of my neck bared by my pajama top. "What are you thinking?"

I squirmed back. Which meant I pressed against his erection. I ordered my own to subside. Mostly because I had no idea how he'd react. "Uh...nothing..."

He chuckled. "You're definitely waking me up in a good way."

His hand, still over my chest, rubbed gently. In some ways, I couldn't believe we'd slept in the same position all night. The rest of me reveled in the idea that we had a connection that only seemed to grow stronger. "How could I make your morning even better?"

He stilled. “You don’t?—”

“But I want. Oh God, Jeremy, I really want.”

“Well, I’m not averse to a good wank.” He pressed against me. “About three tugs and I’ll be done.”

His meaning took a moment to register, but eventually it sank in. “You’d let me?”

“If you wanted to. But only if you’re certain. Because I’m fine with things just the way they are.”

I pulled away from him a bit, then rolled from my side onto my back. Then, with a bit of effort, I rolled to my other side, so I faced him.

“Ignore the morning breath.” He leaned over to place a chaste kiss on my lips.

Great, I wasn’t even thinking about that. Now I am... How very unromantic.

But did I want romance? Would I even recognize the thing if it rose up and hit me in the face? I wasn’t convinced I would.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

He pressed a finger to the spot between my eyebrows. “What’s up?”

“Just thinking...”

“Thinking’s good.” He met my gaze. “Feeling’s good as well.”

“Can I can make you feel good?”

“If you let me return the favor.”

I faltered. That would mean letting him touch me. Not just intimately—that part didn’t scare me—but the fleshy parts of my body. The parts I wasn’t impressed with. The parts that made me feel embarrassed.

“Hey, Phillip.”

I blinked.

“We don’t have to do this. I swear.”

Before I could talk myself out of this—whatever this was—I grasped his hand. “You’re going to have to show me.”

His eyes widened. “Are you saying...?”

“Yes.”

“And...?”

I shut my eyes in humiliation. “That I lived with a guy for four years and was never intimate with him? Yes. Did that make us more like roommates? Possibly. But he said he cared about me, and look at the great meal he’d brought home so I wouldn’t be hungry. So I’d never be hungry again.”

“Oh God.” He blinked several times. “Whatever happened before doesn’t matter. You know that, right? I mean, you can always talk about it. Of course you can. But you’re also free to be honest with me. About everything.” He hesitated. “I wondered. Not that it was any of my business...but I wondered.”

“Barely been kissed, but lived in what I believed to be a monogamous relationship for four years. And put on weight with him constantly complimenting me on how good I looked and how attractive he found me. But he never touched me.” I closed my eyes, willing back the tears.

Jeremy pressed a kiss to my nose. “Would you like a hug?”

I appreciated he was willing to offer such kindness and comfort and, more importantly, that he was okay with obtaining consent first. I opened my eyes. “What I want is to bring you pleasure.”

“Yeah, I’d be okay with that.” He grasped my hand. “You’re just going to do with me what I hope you’ve done to yourself.”

I rolled my eyes. “I know how to jerk myself off. I’ve done that a lot over the last six years—since leaving home. I actually like doing it.”

He grinned. “Well, good. So you won’t mind if I do it to you.”

“Uh, no. That sounds—” I found my courage. “—fucking sexy.”

“Oh, it will be. Does...” He gestured toward Wally with his chin.

The dog who continued his light snoring.

“Nah, I think we’re good.”

“Okay then.” He guided my hand toward his crotch. “Are you okay with skin-on-skin contact?”

“Uh...sure.” I imagined the other way was for me to rub him while he wore clothes. That sounded painful to me. “Do we need, you know, something slippery...”

“Sometimes. I’m so close, though, that you won’t have time to hurt me before I go off.” He said the words through gritted teeth as he guided my hand under the waistband of his pajama bottoms.

I’d never felt another guy’s cock before. That thought flitted through my mind as I let my fingers wander down the silky length. In some ways, the slide was familiar—I had the sense memory of doing this to myself. In another way, my tentative strokes were strange. The small part of the puritanical that remained in my mind screamed this was wrong.

That was the only good thing about my relationship with Hank—I never had to work through the feelings of guilt over being with a man.

“Phillip?”

“Hmm?” I met Jeremy’s gaze.

“We can stop.”

I shook my head, even as I wrapped my hand around him. “Show me how.”

“Okay.” He didn’t sound entirely convinced, but he wrapped his fingers around my hand and showed me, without words, what clearly made him feel good.

I tried to replicate the pressure he was using. I followed the up-and-down motion at the speed he set. I watched his eyes drift shut as his breath hitched. And, after just the few strokes he’d predicted, he gasped and I felt the wetness of his release coat my hand in sticky, wet cum.

Okay then. No big fuss about that. Another thing checked off that unbelievably long list of things you’d like to do before you hit thirty. I grinned.

He opened his eyes. “That was... Fuck, Phillip, that was so good.”

I wasn’t certain what I’d done right or wrong—seeing as he’d been the one guiding me. I worried I wouldn’t be able to replicate what I’d just done and, even more, I worried he wouldn’t let me do it again.

He pressed a kiss to my forehead when I leaned against him. “Now you?”

My head shot back, and I nearly hit his nose.

He grinned. “Give and take. You’ve given...now you get to take.”

“I don’t...” Panic engulfed me. What if I wasn’t any good at this? What if I did something wrong?

“Shush.” He pressed a kiss to my lips. “You’re free to say no, but I’d love to give you a blow job. I want to taste you so badly. I have for a while now. But if you’re not comfortable?—”

“Hell, yes...?” I squirmed, my erection tight against my pajama bottoms. I’d damn nearly come just getting him off.

Close...but not quite.

He’s going to see me naked.

That thought brought me up short. The light in the room was diffuse, but my pasty, white skin would be unmissable. As would the flab of skin. “Uh...” Gently, I withdrew my hand from his pajama bottoms. “I’m not sure.”

He cocked his head. “I’m not going to push. But can you tell me why the hesitation? Because a moment ago?—”

“I don’t want you to see me naked.”

“Ah.” He pushed himself up into a sitting position, but still angled himself to face me. “I can tell you a million times that it doesn’t matter—because it doesn’t—but I can’t convince you. At least not yet. Still, will you let me try something?”

His eyes, even darker than normal in the dim light, mesmerized me. Slowly—wordlessly—I nodded.

He caressed my cheek. No one in my life, not even my own mother, had shown me such tenderness. Such caring.

I turned my head into this touch and pressed a gentle kiss to his palm. My way of showing him just how much I appreciated the tenderness.

While he kept that hand against my cheek, his other hand grasped the button at the top of my pajamas. He tried to open it.

And tried.

And tried.

And tried.

Finally, I laughed. “They’re tricky fuckers. I always need two hands and a lot of patience.” I didn’t have any idea who had made the button holes so small—or who had chosen buttons too big—but the combination had caused no small amount of frustration over the years.

“Okay.” He stroked my cheek one more time before putting in some serious effort to undo the buttons.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

I tried to suck in my gut. A useless effort, but I felt I had to try.

As he undid each button, he pushed the fabric back to reveal more skin. First my sternum. Then my chest. I didn't have much chest hair—yet another point of consternation. I wanted to look like a manly man and, to me, that meant a decent amount of chest hair.

With a start, I realized I didn't know how much Jeremy had. The little tufts I saw poking out when he wore his shirt with several buttons undone only gave me the most tantalizing of glances. I bit my lower lip. "Will you take your shirt off?"

He cocked his head. "Sure." He released his grip on my devilish buttons and yanked his top right over his head.

Oh yeah, that was more like it. A nice pelt of hair that just begged to be touched.

As if understanding my request, Jeremy took my hand gently in his and guided it to his chest. "This is nothing." He encouraged me to stroke his pecs and down toward his happy trail. "Back in the day, my dad had the most chest hair I've ever seen on a man. It's thinner and grayer now, but still even more abundant than mine." He grinned. "I have to say, I was never envious. I don't know how my mother stands being married to a gorilla."

Despite what I thought of as a very serious situation, I laughed. "Okay, that's fair."

When I rested my hand on his taut abs, he resumed unbuttoning my shirt. He exposed my nipples and tweaked them.

Had to say they enjoyed the attention.

He continued down until he opened the last button.He spread the shirt wide.

Cool air hit my chest.

I tried so hard to push down the panic.The worry he'd find me disgusting.

He grinned.Then leaned over to take my nipple between his lips.He sucked it into his mouth, and then lightly nipped the tip.

My cock, which had gone a little soft, perked right back up.

After he nipped one more time, he moved to the other nipple and gave it the same attention.

I moved my hips restlessly—seeking friction—yet knowing I had to be patient.Yes, he was going to make me wait.But he wasn't a sadist.

Right?

Well, I couldn't be certain.But he'd promised me a blow job, and I had to believe he'd been truthful in wanting to give me one.

He dragged his tongue from my nipple to my navel.

I giggled.

He smiled.Then he blew hot air over the damp skin.

A shiver ran through me.

He moved lower still, apparently completely unconcerned about the flab of skin where my belly met my groin. He grasped my pajama bottoms.

Understanding his intention, I raised my hips enough for him to gently tug them down.

His grin as my cock sprang free was a sight I wouldn't soon forget. He licked his lips. "Yum."

I laughed. My belly jiggled a little, but I didn't care as I caught his dark gaze.

He cocked his head.

I nodded.

With his gaze steady on mine, he grasped the base of my cock and slowly eased it through his fist. "Ah, I can't wait."

My grin matched his.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

He continued to stroke up and down my length as he grasped me intimately

The coolness of his fingers did nothing to tame my raging erection.If anything, that light touch heated my blood even more.I desired this.Needed this.Wanted to enjoy every single minute of this.

He licked my slit.

My cock jerked.Jesus Christ.Yes, that.

Continuing his ministrations, he licked his way down the shaft.Nibbling.Enticing.Giving me a preview of what was to come.

Then, without warning, he drew me into his mouth.

Warm heat enveloped my cock as I fought for breath.

He sucked me down.

I moaned.

He rolled my balls in his competent hands.

He overwhelmed me.Even as he continued to suck, my body raced toward a finish I didn't want.At least not yet.I wanted to savor.To enjoy being treasured.To feel everything I could, even as my senses were completely bombarded.The more I fought, though, the stronger the urge flowed through me to just give in.To let the bliss

take me wherever it wanted to.

To give up the last vestige of control and tumble all the way over. Off the cliff. Into the ocean.

Jeremy swallowed me down.

Before I could even warn him, my balls drew up, and the orgasm overtook me. I no longer fought. No longer resisted. Instead, I gave in to the pleasure. Let myself feel the absolute joy that came from this intimacy. From the trust he'd engendered in me. With the knowledge that, if only for this moment, I meant something to him. That my pleasure was important to him.

Just like his kindness was something I'd always treasure.

I shut my eyes against the torrent of emotion.

But I couldn't stop the tears.

Moments later, he gathered me into his arms.

I didn't even remember him taking his mouth from me, and yet now a strong grip held me close.

He pressed gentle kisses against my temple. "I have you, Phillip. I'm never going to let you go. You're never going to be alone again."

I believed him.

If only for this one moment... I believed him.

Chapter 24

Jeremy

“So, Mom’s home and okay?” I eyed my laptop—and more specifically my email program—and waited for the damn thing to leap up and bite me on the nose.

“She’s great. Relieved to be home. And Dad’s awesome. One morning with the kids, and he was totally thrilled to be back in his own house.” Marcie sighed. “Raphael can be...a little intense.”

“You manage.”

“I’m their mother...it’s kind of in the job description.”

“Not all people are lucky enough to have mothers like you.” I hovered my mouse near the icon...and didn’t click it.

“So, about that...”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

I sat up straighter. “What’s wrong?” Am I mistaken? Does she not love being a mom? Did I miss a sign or something important or?—

“Jolly Good Times wants me back.”

My panic receded. Okay, just the old events-organizing firm she used to work for. “Okay.” I scratched my nose. “Well, Raphael’s in kindergarten and Thaddeus is in daycare. You can do a few hours?—”

“Three-quarter time, Jeremy.”

“Oh.” I flashed to what her life had been like pre-Raphael. The crazy hours. The nutty requests. Hell, a couple of times she’d roped me into helping with events. Never enough staff. Always too much chaos. “What are you thinking?”

“That...” She let out a long breath. “I love being a mom, Jer. I really do. But I’m not getting enough adult stimulation.”

“Darren falling down on the job?”

“Jeremy!”

I yanked the phone away from my ear. If Marcie and I weren’t so close, I never would’ve taken the swipe. If she wasn’t madly in love with her husband, I never would’ve made the joke.

“So go back. I’m sure you can find someone to watch the kids.”

Silence.

I moved my mouse to the browser icon and clicked. “Okay, so babysitters in Gaynor Beach. There’s gotta be a website, right?”

“I need someone who can work wonky hours.”

“Right. So there’s got to be a high school student?—”

“I often get home late.”

“Okay, so maybe someone in college? With a flexible?—”

“I think...” She drew in a deep breath.

“What?” My hand fell away from the mouse. “What’s going on?”

“So...” She let out the breath. “You’ll tell me if you think I’m nuts, right?”

“You’re always nuts and not allowed to joke about mental illness. Your rule, remember?” Something she’d drilled into me. Just like how normal could be a very damaging word. I waited.

She didn’t respond.

“Spit it out, Marcie. I’m expecting an email from the lawyer we hired who filed a cease-and-desist demand with Tucker and Mixer.” Jesus, even saying their names grossed me out.

“What about Phillip?”

“What about Phillip? He’s out clothes shopping with James. Something about insurance money.” I flicked the mouse around my screen, but didn’t click. “Like, I know insurance can sometimes give you cash right away, but James isn’t living in the house. Of course, what do I know? Maybe he and Colin are funding this shopping trip because they feel guilty about the fire. Which they shouldn’t. The fire marshal’s report isn’t final, but she’s sure there was something bad with the wiring. Happens in older homes. I’m glad when I did my reno that I took out all the old stuff and?—”

“What if Phillip might be interested in babysitting?”

I sat in stunned silence. “Uh...”

“Hear me out.”

“Of course.”

“He said he wants to get a job, but he doesn’t have any skills.”

His comment about half a philosophy degree flashed in my memory. “Yeah, okay...”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

“He was so great with the kids, Jer. Honestly. Raphael couldn’t stop talking about how much fun they had. And you know they’re not always effusive or enthusiastic about babysitters.”

Hell, sometimes I wasn’t entirely welcome. “Okay...”

“Of course he might say no. But...what if he doesn’t? He could do this for a while until he figures out what he wants to do. I’d need to do a background check?—”

Which I was one-hundred percent certain would come back clean.

Still, better safe than sorry.

“And I’d want him to take a childcare minicourse. The rec center is offering one starting the week after next. Admittedly, most of the people in the class will be teenagers, but I don’t think that would bother him. If it does, I could probably arrange some private instruction. And there’s the online course on parenting free-spirit kids that was so helpful with Raphael. He could take that?—”

“You’ve really thought about this.”

“I have.” She cleared her throat. “If you could’ve heard Raphael. They...they don’t give their trust often. Someone has to earn it. Over the last week, Phillip’s earned it.”

“This might just be a ploy to get Wally in the door.”

She laughed. “Oh, I thought of that as well. I pointed out that Wally might be

overwhelmed and want to stay home with Uncle Jeremy.”

“At least some of the time they can come here.” I gazed around. The solarium could be closed off from the rest of the house, including the area in the front where I worked.

“So you think this is a good idea?”

I remembered the exhausted man I’d tucked into my bed last night. “The kids are a lot, Marcie. Hell, I don’t even know if Phillip likes kids.” Or if he wants ones of his own. Which was the most ridiculous question ever to ask since I barely knew the guy...except I wanted to know what he wanted from life. Or what he thought he wanted. Or what he thought he was supposed to want. Because those could all be very different things.

“I’m asking if you have an objection to me talking to him about it.” Her voice carried an edge to it.

Tread carefully.

“Marcie.” I swirled the cursor in random patterns. “You’re an adult. He’s an adult. Yes, he’s...had issues. He’s been very candid with me about them and, I think to a lesser extent, with you. Do I have any misgivings about him spending time with the kids? None. Do you want me to pay for the background check and the childcare classes? I’m happy to do it. Hell, I didn’t even know such a thing existed.”

“They’re a step up from babysitting lessons, but a far cry from early childhood education classes.”

I blinked. “Yeah, okay. He spent one day with your kids, and you think he’d be good with them?”

“He’s spent several different times with my kids and I know he’s good with them. Look, you know I’m very analytical.”

Which was part of how she coped with Raphael’s autism. “Yes.”

“This is a gut instinct. I promise I’ll ask him in a way that makes it easy to say no, if he doesn’t like the idea.”

I pursed my lips. “He talked about the kids this morning. He lit right up.”

“And you didn’t tell me this first because...”

I could hear her tapping her metaphorical foot. Hell, maybe even her literal one. “Because I didn’t want to get your hopes up. I wanted to know what your intentions were.”

“My intentions. How about yours, big brother? What are your plans for the future?”

“I’m taking things day by day.”

I didn’t often lie to my sister.

Like, ever.

Because she always called me out on my bullshit.

But that lie stuck in my craw as I worked through the next few hours. Same old, same old until two emails hit my inbox at the same time. After only a fraction of a second’s hesitation, I opened the one from the lawyer first.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:14 am

I fist pumped the air.Karen Mixer had removed all the photographs and videos from her sleazeball website.Didn't mean everyone and their uncle hadn't downloaded and made a copy, but theapology and retractionissued by the woman eased a bit of my seething anger toward her.

A bit.

The second email was from Andreas.

For a moment, I worried he was terminating my services.He hadn't actually had a good run of publicity since the bar incident.I'd done my best to guide him through the disaster, but maybe he thought I wasn't on my game?Hell, maybe I wasn't.I had been distracted.

Nope.

He was merely thanking me, and letting me know he'd decided to head up to Canada nearly two weeks early."To clear my head."

That was just fine with me.Away from Omar.Away from LA.Away from all the toxicity and, hopefully, the vultures from the less-than-legitimate press.

Valentino's head of security, a guy named Hallstein, would be assigning a minder to my client.At least until Norah showed up, and the filming started.Then, hopefully, he'd be too busy to get into trouble.

I spent several minutes crafting what I hoped would be an appropriate

response. Empathetic for the shitstorm he'd just endured. Firm that violence was never the answer. Optimistic about the upcoming movie. Friendly enough that he'd know he could always count me on—whether we had a professional relationship or not.

Satisfied I'd hit the right balance, I clicked send.

Lunch.

So much had happened today so far.

James had suggested he'd grab lunch with Phillip in San Clemente where they were shopping, so I rummaged around my fridge searching for something perfect for lunch.

Oh, I'd meant to put the steaks in a marinade for barbecue tonight.

Should I invite Marcie and the nibblets? Is that too nosy?

Possibly.

Probably.

But that didn't stop me from issuing the invitation. Darren was still in San Diego, so I figured Marcie might appreciate having someone else cook.

Wally yawned and stretched as he joined me in the kitchen.

"Have a good nap?"

He cocked his head.

"Well that's good. Don't look too greedily at my food. You're not getting

anything. Your dinner isn't until?—"

He started scurrying around the kitchen in excitement. He grabbed his bowl in his little teeth and brought it to drop at my feet.

Shit. Obviously I shouldn't have uttered the word dinner.

So now what to do?

What would I do if I fucked up with the nibblets?

Distraction.

Right.

I quickly sealed the steaks in containers with the marinade and shoved them back in the fridge.

Wally whined.

“That’s right.”

He cocked his head the other way.

“We’re going for a walk.”

He dropped his bowl.

Apparently, in the short time he’d been with Phillip, walk had become his second favorite pastime. Right after food and just before playing with the kids.

I eyed him as I secured his leash. “How would you feel being around the kids all day long?”

His tongue lolled.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” I shoved my feet into my shoes, grabbed a hat and sunglasses, then headed into the brilliant noonday sunshine.

Although Wally was trimmed, he had enough fur to cover his skin so he wouldn’t burn. And despite the hot temperatures, the asphalt wasn’t too horrendous, so he was able to walk a few feet down the driveway. We hit the sidewalk at a nice pace. Instead of the park, though, I headed us toward the boardwalk.

Half-an-hour later, I sat on a bench facing the brilliant-blue ocean with the sparkling sunlight nearly dazzling my sunglasses-covered eyes. I munched on an order of poutine with the cheese curds just the perfect consistency.

Wally, wonderful dog, sat in the shade beneath the bench, munching on an organic dog cookie. A reward for the walk down and the walk we'd do on the way back. "You're a good man, Charlie Brown."

Woof.

I arched an eyebrow. That hadn't been a Wallywoof. Funny how, after such a short period of time, I knew that.

Movement caught my attention.

A certain French bulldog was barreling toward us.

"Widget!" Colin growled. "Damn dog."

After ensuring I had a good grip on Wally's leash, I gently encouraged him out from his little spot. He'd finished his cookie, so I didn't need to worry about territorialism. He strained on his leash to get closer to the snuffling creature headed our way.

Said creature stopped abruptly, and they started sniffing each other in the time-honored tradition of all dogs.

"May I..." Colin gestured to the bench next to me.

"Absolutely." I shoveled in the last forkful of poutine before putting the container in the recycling bin and the wood fork into the composting bin.

Colin dropped and let out a long sigh.

"You okay?"

“What? Oh yeah, I’m fine. Have been for a while.” He petted his stomach. “Liver’s working great. I just didn’t plan to walk quite this far today.” He pointed to Widget, who now was sniffing Wally’s butt. “She just wanted to keep going.”

“And you don’t know how to say no?” I laughed.

“Yep.” He used his T-shirt to mop his brow.

I caught sight of the incision scar.

Another sigh escaped his lips. “And James is texting me from San Clemente, asking me all these questions.”

“Oh? He and Phillip having a problem?” I tried to keep my voice casual.

Colin’s gaze shot to me sharply. “No, nothing like that. He found a fantastic play set on sale and he wanted to know if I’d mind if he bought it. Of course I don’t mind. We’ve even got a spot for it in the backyard. Even if...” His breath caught. “Even if we don’t get to foster younger kids, James has enough nieces and nephews to wear the thing out. The twins are just six months old. Oh, and the other twins are just two months.”

I raised my hand. “Two sets of twins?” I squinted, despite my sunglasses. “How does that work?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:15 am

“His older twin sisters Felicia and Leticia both got pregnant with twins within a couple months of each other, and they already had three older kids each. His older brother has two. Plus, Danny has two kids with his husband, which gives James seven nieces and seven nephews. Even if we never get to foster, that playset will get used.”

“Sounds like it.”

“And probably more to come. Gracie, my dear husband’s beloved sister, is dating my old nephrologist—and the two women swear they’re not having kids, but I’m not taking bets. The whole family would be behind them. Man, this family I married into? Fierce.” He tapped his wedding ring. “Taking their name was a blessing I’ll never take for granted.” He chuckled. “If my family could see me now.”

“Uh...”

“Bigoted homophobic bastards.”

“Oh, right. Then you’re better off without them.” At least I assumed that was what he meant. “I’m so damn lucky.”

“You are. I’ve met your parents, your sister, her husband, your...” He scrunched his nose. “Nibblets.”

I patted him on the shoulder. “Thank you for that. Raphael can be adamant.”

“Kid has a right to be. They should be accepted for whomever they choose to be. I sorely wish I’d had the courage to come out earlier. But if I had, I wouldn’t have gone

through everything I did to wind up here, and since I'm the happiest I've ever been, I just say hallelujah and move on. No dwelling. That's what I tried to convey to Phillip. He was in a bad place before. I could relate to that. But I told him Gaynor Beach could be a fresh start for him—like the place was for me. That he could begin anew. Clean slate."

"Yeah." I held myself still. Waiting to see if more was forthcoming.

"That guy has had it so rough for so long." Colin scratched his golden-red stubbled chin. "And I just wanted to wrap him up. I mean, I gave him a hug to try to assure him that he wasn't alone." He blew out a breath. "And then, after I thought maybe we'd made a bit of progress—of him trusting me—we came home to the fire."

"Yeah. That was bad."

"Yep. But he and Wally could've been there, which would've been way worse. So, like, everything happens for a reason. James contacted a builder to see what our options are. He really likes the idea of continuing to rent below market rate to people who need help to get back on their feet. Now he's putting together plans to rebuild bigger, and the lot size works. Which means he could help larger families."

I blinked. Good to know that I'd continue to have neighbors who could use a hand. I didn't mind that at all. "I'm so glad Phillip and Wally weren't there."

"Right. And they totally could've come home with us the night of the fire. We've got that awesome basement suite and everything."

"Yeah..."

"But he chose you." Colin pointed. "Over and over again, it's you he's drawn to. When we were in LA, picking up his stuff? He talked about you. This morning? When he and

James were getting ready for the drive to San Clemente? You.” He scratched Widget behind the ears. “Good girl.”

I did the same for Wally, who was gently licking Widget’s face. Uh... ick...?

Neither dog appeared the least bit perturbed.

“And I ask myself, what is it about you?”

I held myself still.

Colin cocked his head. “I don’t know you all that well. But you’re the kind next-door neighbor always willing to help.”

“Right...” I drew the word out.

“And, I don’t know, I feel sort of protective of Phillip. God knows, he doesn’t need my protection except...”

He’s going to kill me with this drawn-out shit. “Just say it, Colin. Whatever you’re thinking, just say it.”

“Okay, I will. I think you’d be good together. I don’t know what obstacles you’d face, but I can see how much he cares about you. And how you clearly feel the same. Unless I’m wrong?—”

“You’re not.”

“Yeah, I figured that.” He scratched his nose. “The guy has no one in the world, Jeremy. You probably know that, but he confided in me, and maybe I shouldn’t be telling you. But I feel like I made a connection and now, between the LA trip and the

fire... I'd love to be, I don't know, the big brother he never had. The one who watches out for him. But he hasn't asked me to do that. Might even reject me if I made the offer."

"He'd think he wasn't worthy of it." I hated to say that, but in my heart I saw the truth of it.

Slowly, he nodded. "Yeah, he's got so many self-esteem issues."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:15 am

“I’m trying to help.” I considered. “He’s getting help.”

“He told me he’s seeing Dr. Martin.”

“Yeah.” Phew. I didn’t like talking about Phillip behind his back. But I also understood what Colin was doing. “We’re taking it slow. One step at a time. I’m not going to hurt him, Colin. At least not intentionally. Hell, maybe I’m not good enough for him.” My gut churned. Was that the real point of the conversation?

“You’re a good man. I’m just...if things don’t work out, make sure he knows he’s got friends, okay? I’d hate for him to feel alone again. Or to feel like he’s got to leave Gaynor Beach.”

Slowly, I nodded. “I’ll take care of him, Colin. And if he ever wants to go, I’ll make certain he knows you’ve got his back.”

“All right then.” He slapped his thigh.

Widget shot up.

“She’s signed up for therapy-dog training with Jordan in a couple of weeks.”

“I know.” I grinned. “Wally’s in the same training.”

“Well, that’s cool. You ready to head back?” His home in Marina Park wasn’t far from mine in Riverside.

“Yeah, that would be great.”

“And can I buy you a drink?It’s fucking hot.”He ran his hand through his auburn hair.

“A lemonade would be perfect.”I knew he didn’t mean alcohol—he couldn’t risk his transplanted liver.

“Great.”He stood.

Widget positioned herself by his side.

I rose.

Wally popped off his butt and gazed up at me.

Yeah, we’re good.

Chapter25

Phillip

As I sat on the park bench with Dr.Martin, my life seemed to come into sharp focus.

He was right—this little park was barely used, and we were quite alone in that moment.

“You’ve had a hell of a few days.”The psychiatrist, whom I’d believed to be a staid, stuffed-shirt older dude, was sitting on the bench with a contented Wally on his lap.

My dog was completely enthralled with the man, nudging his hand for pets and giving little licks.

I kind of couldn't believe how open Wally was with everyone. Or maybe I could. He'd never been abused. Never neglected. He'd been exposed to plenty of people. He'd been loved, if not in the healthiest way.

And now even that had changed. He was down half a pound, able to walk farther every day, and getting a set amount of food. So was I. I was looking forward to taking him to Dr. Louisa next week.

"I know I just saw you two days ago?—"

He held up his hand. "I'm glad you called. I had an opening, and this is perfect."

Except I had a sneaking suspicion he was fitting me in on his lunch break.

I'd felt guilty...but only so much. He'd been more than capable of saying no.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:15 am

I cleared my throat. “Uh, so...” I scratched my nose. “Like... I told you I met Jeremy my first morning walking Wally? My second day in the house?”

“You did.” He continued to stroke the dog’s fur.

“And he’s such a good dog. And, uh, Jeremy’s such a good man.”

“He has that reputation around town. His family’s been here for generations. That kind of stability helps. Now, that’s not a guarantee someone is a good person, but I’ve met Jeremy, and he seems like a stand-up guy.”

“Has everyone in this town met everyone else?”

He chuckled. “Uh, no. Twenty-thousand people is quite a lot. But Jeremy’s parents live close to my home. I told you, my daughter has babysat his nibblets.”

“Right.” How had I forgotten that fact?

“So you’ve got a good neighbor.”

“Who I’m now living with.” I met Dr. Xavier’s sharp glance. “I told you that.”

“You did. That after the fire you moved in with him. I suppose...” He scratched his smooth jaw. “How are you living with him?”

“Well...” I winced. “We shared a bed the last two nights?”

“Is that a question or a statement?”

“Both?”

He chuckled. “I can point out you’ve barely known him a week.”

“You can.”

“I can point out you’re still in a vulnerable state.”

“Like that I was in a hospital in LA not long ago. For a suicide attempt.”

“Yes.”

I sighed. “I barely recognize that kid. Man. Guy. Whatever.” I waved my hand as if trying to swat a fly. “I did a lot of work with my doctor back in LA. I know she wouldn’t have discharged me if she thought I was still a danger to myself. She put me into your and Anthony’s hands for safekeeping, but she had to have some trust in me.”

He blinked. “Yes, that’s true.”

“And I have to prove to you that I can do this on my own.”

“You don’t have to prove anything. I’d say, for your sake, that you need to keep working. Dealing with the issues that brought you to that dark place.”

“I am. I promise.” I scratched Wally behind the ears.

The dog closed his eyes in bliss.

“I’ve told Jeremy nearly everything.”

“That’s good.”

“You think I should tell him everything.”

“I didn’t say that. On the one hand, you’re not obliged to share anything about yourself with anyone else. On the other hand, him knowing might be a good thing. So he can say something if you start slipping.”

“But won’t he always look at me and worry? If I have a bad day, might he run to you and tattle.”

He appeared to take a moment. “He’s a pretty sharp guy. Maybe this is me projecting, but he doesn’t seem like the type to panic.”

“He’s very protective.”

“Ah.Well, that can happen in relationships.Especially if one partner has been in a precarious place.You’ve told him about your relationship with Hank.”

“Yeah.”I winced.“And how I got to be the way I am.”I cleared my throat.“I told him everything.Like how Hank barely touched me.How he manipulated me emotionally.How I’m a virgin...”

Dr.Martin appeared to consider.“Well, I think those were all really good things to share.You’ll have certain incidents that might trigger you.Not my favorite word, but very to the point.Jeremy might say something or do something that upsets you.If you’ve been honest, he’ll understand what’s happened.Heck, he might even be able to avoid upsetting you in the first place.”

“I don’t want him to censor who he is.I don’t want him to feel that he has to be anyone other than the person I’ve gotten to know.”

“You’re not asking him to.You’re giving him knowledge.Knowledge is power.There might very well be things that set Jeremy off.Like he’s protective of Raphael.Anyone who hurts the child will face his wrath.Hopefully he’d keep it civil, but I don’t blame families who are protective of children.”

“The way my mom should’ve been of me.”

“Precisely.”Dr.Martin stroked down Wally’s back.“But you have people in your life who care.You told me about James taking you shopping yesterday.How Colin has

offered you their basement suite. How Marcie trusted you with her kids.”

“Okay, I need to sidetrack us. Do we have time?”

He chuckled. “We have time.”

“So, Marcie brought the nibblets over last night. And Jeremy made the most amazing steaks for the adults and hamburgers for the kids, and he’s teaching me how to cook. Which is awesome.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Yeah.” I drew in a breath. “Marcie wants to go back to work. At least part-time. Possibly full-time. That means evenings and weekends and sometimes days when she doesn’t have Thaddeus in daycare. Darren isn’t always available, and Jeremy’s schedule can sometimes be unpredictable.” Like trips to LA in the middle of the night to help famous clients. Mind still blown on that one. I’d seen the show Andreas had starred in last year. I was bound to silence about Jeremy’s involvement, but I could feel bad for the actor over what he’d been through.

“Sounds like Marcie needs help.”

“Right? And here’s the crazy part...” I scratched my nose again. Damned itchy this morning. “She asked me if I’d consider helping out. And that she’d pay me. Really good money. She says I need to take a childcare class—CPR, nutrition, safety...some basic stuff so I don’t fuck up too badly.”

“Okay.” Neutral.

“I handled everything for the kids the other night. When she had the crisis. I managed with Raphael. And I’ve been reading tons of articles—from reputable journals—and

Jeremy shared some blog posts from people who deal with kids like Raphael. I mean, I'd be worried all the time that I might do something wrong."

"The dilemma of every parent. Or at least the good ones." Xavier held my gaze. "How do you feel?"

"Honored. Tempted. I really want to find a job. The hours wouldn't be enough for me to live on my own...but the money would be enough for me to feel less dependent on Jeremy. Like I could contribute, you know?"

"Yes, I do understand. Do you think you could handle the nibblets?"

"It's an awesome responsibility."

"There are plenty of jobs like that. We can certainly talk about finding you something less stressful. I think Bales and Bowls is hiring. You clearly love animals and are good with them. The store offers an excellent training program for their employees as well as good benefits after you complete your probationary period."

I tilted my head.

"Rochelle, my daughter, is trying to convince me to let her work there. She has my husband's support. I'm wavering between letting her fly and worrying about schoolwork." He cleared his throat. "But you didn't need to know that."

"Being a parent is an awesome responsibility."

He laughed. "Damn, my own words used against me."

Panic started to set in. "I didn't?—"

“I’m teasing, Phillip. Not meaning to be insensitive. I like that you have a bit of wit you’re willing to share with me.”

Heat raced to my cheeks. “I’m not usually like that.”

He grinned. “I suspect you have a wicked sense of humor. And that’s a good thing. I hope you let others see how clever you are.”

“I don’t feel clever.”

“Because you don’t, I think, have a true sense of who you are. You’ve never truly been free from other’s expectations. People who haven’t had your best interests at heart.”

“Jeremy has my best interests at heart.” I said the words with absolute conviction. “But what if I’m making a mistake, staying with him?”

“A very good question to ask yourself.”

“Can you know after a week? That you’re in love? That you can honestly see yourself spending the rest of your life with them? That you trust them and know they’ll care for you? I fancied myself in love with Hank. But I didn’t feel one one-hundredth the way I feel with Jeremy. It’s like... Fated sounds ridiculous.”

Dr. Martin smiled. “I met my wife while doing a rotation at an LA hospital. I knew the first moment we spoke. Not her beauty, although she was stunning. No, it was her sense of humor despite a career-ending injury. Her boundless enthusiasm and curiosity. The hardscrabble life she’d lived. How she’d channeled poverty into her art and then, eventually into being a wife and mother.” He closed his eyes briefly. “I don’t talk about her often with patients. Because we’re not here to talk about me. But I will share this final tidbit—I felt the same way about my husband. I’d been a widower for five years. I was raising three beautiful daughters. My life was full to the brim.

“Then I met Zed, and I let some things go to make room for him in my life. In our lives. I knew. I just knew. And I don’t have a single regret. Not one. Someone from the

outside might think we rushed things. Not me. He slotted into our lives as if he was always meant to be there. And, for the record, he does a lot of the childcare work. Shares that with me. I trust him with my daughters. Just like, if Marcie's offering you a job, she likely trusts her kids with you." Gently, he eased Wally off his lap and onto mine. "He's a great dog. You're a great person."

"You think I'm worthy of him?"

"Absolutely. And, from what I've seen, I think he's worthy of you. But it's okay not to settle on the first man you meet. It's okay to not settle at all. Jeremy has offered shelter and friendship. It's okay if that's all you're ready for at the moment."

We parted ways soon after, leaving me with a lot to think about. As I hustled Wally and myself home, gray clouds moved in from over the Pacific. Summer rainstorms were rare, but they could be fierce. I definitely wanted to be home before the rains came.

Home.

I liked the sound of that.

Chapter 26

Jeremy

All evening I'd watched Phillip smile.

Marcie had invited us over and had me join her on a walk around the block with Wally on the pretense of wanting to discuss something very important.

Manipulative twit.

She wanted Phillip to have more alone time with the nibblets. To see if his enthusiasm waned as he faced two irritable kids who hadn't slept well the night before. Not for a discernable reason—they just had refused bed and, as a result, were too cranky for their own good.

Phillip grinned. He played cards with Raphael and built a fort using sheets and the couch with Thaddeus. We left them alone for an hour and returned to find the house a bit of a disaster and two kids fast asleep.

Marcie was thrilled as she registered Phillip for the class at the rec center and also handed him a folio of everything she thought he might need.

He promised to read it all over, and since Marcie already had a gig this weekend, and Darren was still in San Diego, Phillip and I would be sharing the babysitting duties at their house for that time.

Fingers crossed Andreas actually behaved while in Vancouver. At least for the weekend. I didn't want to have to ditch Phillip and fly up there to get my client out of trouble.

“Why do you keep looking at me?” Phillip attempted a mock glare.

And failed miserably as that glare turned into a grin.

“Because I find you...enchanted. Like I just want to bask in your glow. You haven't stopped smiling all night.”

He inched closer to me on the couch—the movie we'd chosen long forgotten. “Because it's so exciting. That I'm going to be taking care of the kids. That Marcie can go back to doing what she loves and I'm part of helping her. That I'll have a real job. My first since the filling station nearly ten years ago. I'm going to be part of

something bigger than myself. That's..."

"Powerful?"

"Yeah, it kind of is."

"I remember the first time Marcie placed Raphael in my arms. The love I felt for that baby. And the sheer terror. My sister was trusting me literally with her firstborn. And she's always been such a great mother. Fierce when she needs to be—to protect them, of course. But also willing to let them go out and make their own mistakes. Within reason. She's just, kind of like the opposite of a helicopter parent. But not quite free range either."

"Oh God, I could imagine what Raphael would get up to if they were free range."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:15 am

“Exactly. But Marcie sees in you the same innate understanding of her children. The same respect for her parenting skills that I offer up every day. I admire what she does. But also know that path’s not right for me.”

“Ah.” He offered a small, but knowing, smile. “You don’t want kids.”

Might as well have this conversation now. Because if I knew one certainty in my life, it was that kids weren’t in the cards for me. I drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “If anything ever happened to Marcie and Darren, I would—without a moment’s hesitation—take the kids. My sister’s will is very clear, and we’ve had long and in-depth conversations about how they would want their children to be raised. All things I completely agree with. I also might say a prayer every night to a god I don’t believe in that nothing bad ever happens to them. That they live long, healthy lives. That they are around to see the nibblets thrive and live great futures.”

“That’s...” Phillip blinked several times. “Wonderful. If I hadn’t been near the end of high school when Mom died, I would’ve gone into foster care. No one would’ve wanted me.”

Which made my heart ache. “You know Colin and James are trying to be foster parents. Or even to adopt.”

“That’s amazingly generous of them.”

“Did Colin mention his family?”

Phillip shuddered. “Assholes. I think that was the word he used.”

I chuckled. “Right. James’s family is the opposite.”

“Colin told me. About all the brother and sisters and nibblets and parents who love them. Both of them. Colin talked about being accepted.” His cheeks took a rosy tinge. “Kind of like how Marcie’s been with me.”

“And you’re meeting my parents tomorrow night. They’re so excited.” I’d seriously considered declining their offer. Meeting the parents was a big step. Except they wanted to thank Phillip for his help when Mom was in the hospital.

“I’m excited to meet them.” He scrunched his nose. “What if they think...”

“Think?” I prompted.

“That I’m not good enough for you. I don’t have a college degree, I don’t?—”

I placed a finger against his lips.

He stopped talking.

Then I realized what I’d done, and I pulled back. “Sorry. You should always be able to tell me whatever’s on your mind, and I don’t have the right to silence you. I just...didn’t want you to spiral like you sort of do sometimes. If my parents didn’t think you were good enough for me, I wouldn’t give a shit. But that’s not going to happen. They’re going to see the amazing man I’m falling in love with—” Shit. Shit. Shit.

He grasped my hand. “Really?”

“Uh...yes. I just didn’t mean to say it like that.”

He arched an eyebrow. “And what were your intentions?”

“Something romantic. Like a picnic on the beach. Except sand gets everywhere. So maybe a walk in the park? Maybe where we met.”

“Okay.” He started to push up and off the couch.

“Hey.” I glanced outside. “It’s dark.”

“There are streetlamps.”

“Wally’s asleep.”

“You know if I ask him to get up that he totally will. And he needs a final pee for the night anyway.”

He was dead serious.

“Okay. We should probably put on light jackets. There’s a breeze off the ocean tonight.”

“In the dead of summer?”

“There’s a storm brewing. I should probably check the weather app?—”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:15 am

“We’ll be fine. We’ll always be fine.” He pushed off the couch and whistled.

Wally popped off one of his four beds—in various places around the house—and perked right up.

“Walk?” Phillip used that sweet tone that always worked on the dog.

That always worked on me.

We donned windbreakers and then headed out into the night. Thank goodness for the streetlamps as the clouds obscured the moon entirely.

I grabbed Phillip’s hand, and he gripped the leash in his other.

We made it about twenty feet before Wally lifted his leg and peed on Mrs. Duggins’ rosebushes.

“You realize I’m going to catch hell for that.” I might’ve dramatically whispered that.

“If she were home.” He pointed to the dark house.

“She might be lurking behind the curtains.

“Well, she told me she and Mrs. Candor were going to the movie tonight. Some new rom-com with a more mature cast.”

I laughed. “Okay, that’s fair. Pretty soon that’ll be Marcie’s speed.”

He poked me. “Do not let your sister hear you say that.”

“Maybe.” Marcie and I teased each other mercilessly about aging. All the while knowing we’d eventually lose our parents and then, in time, each of us would go. Such was the way of the world.

“You don’t want kids, do you?” Phillip squeezed my hand as we crossed Fern Avenue.

Trust him to keep the thread of the conversation. At least he didn’t bring up love again.

“No, I really don’t. I’ve considered fostering over the years. My response was always to find a charity and to make a donation. I also teach an online press-release writing course for anyone who’s interested. For free. I figure that’s my contribution.”

He laughed. “Okay. Didn’t see that coming. I’ll have to sign up.”

“It’s virtual. And anyway, I can just show you anytime.”

“Ah, but I like the idea of seeing you in action.”

“I’d be nervous with you there.”

“No you wouldn’t. You’d shine. You always shine.” Again, he squeezed my hand as we made our way into the park. “It’s just over here.” He pointed to a bend.

The bend where we’d first met. Just ten days ago.

A lifetime. In a good way.

We stopped at the bend. Under the streetlamp with the weird pink glow.

“Now...” He drew in a breath and gazed up at me. “I never saw you coming. And I need to tell you something important before we go on.”

I tilted my head. I'd thought we were here so I could do the talking. Except maybe this was his safe spot. His spot for revelations. Because the last doozie had been delivered at almost this exact spot. Well, except the virgin thing.

“Like, you know I'm seeing Dr. Martin.”

I nodded.

“You know I had troubles back in LA.”

Again, a nod. He wasn't telling me anything I didn't know.

"Yeah." He winced. "When Hank left, I didn't have any way to pay the rent. And I really didn't care. So I spent the little bit of money he left on junk food and just sort of..." He shrugged. "I wasn't thinking more than five minutes ahead at a time. My phone got cut off. Eventually the internet and cable were gone. And I just didn't care."

He blinked.

"Then one day the landlady showed up. She said I had a day to clear out." He bit his lower lip. "The next morning I took every pill in the house. All of them. I didn't know what half of them were. I didn't care. Just swallowed the whole lot, climbed into bed, and reassured myself it would all be over soon."

My heart seized. In a way this news shocked me. In other ways, it made perfect sense.

"Obviously, I didn't die. My landlady found me, called an ambulance, and the rest you know. Did I deliberately wait until morning so she might find me? I don't know. Maybe I didn't want to die. It sure felt like I did at the time. And then I was in a hospital, under psychiatric care, and getting the help I'd needed for most of my life but never had access to. Eventually, I was ready to be discharged. With meds and a social worker willing to add me to his caseload in a small town away from all the bad memories. Negative associations. I mean, I still need the drugs. Thank God I had them with me and I didn't lose them in the fire. I guess I would've coped..."

"We'd have found a pharmacy to fill the prescription. Contingencies exist for that."

“I figured.” He held my gaze. “What I didn’t see coming was you. Tripping over my rescue dog. Making me feel alive for the first time in my life. Giving me hope. Accepting me as I am.”

With great difficulty, I held myself still. Pain was etched all over his face, and I wanted to badly to take it away. To reassure him. To comfort him.

“Somewhere along the line, I realized I was glad I hadn’t died. And that walking away from my pasts in Oregon and LA were good things. Gaynor Beach gave me a fresh start. People offered friendship.” He gazed up at me through his lashes. “Someone offered me more.”

My turn. Don’t fuck this up. “I didn’t see you coming either. I’ve been living the bachelor life for years. A couple of short-term relationships. A bunch of dates. Some hookups...” I scrunched my nose. “Some really nice guys, to be sure. Just no one who captured either my imagination or my heart. No one who made me say yes, I’ll change my life for him. Even when Marcie and Darren married, I was never jealous of them. I didn’t want what they had. Didn’t need it. And then I met you.”

He blinked.

“Yeah. Like a lightning strike. My world irrevocably changed in a nanosecond. And yes, for me, the attraction was immediate. Your eyes are this amazing shade of green. Your tousled hair is adorable. I found you sexy.”

He tried to look away.

I gently grasped his chin and guided his gaze back to me. “I told you that. I like guys of every size. Whether you stay the same as you are now or lose a bit of weight to be healthier, I honestly don’t care.” I considered. “No, that’s not true. I want you healthy. I want you to be here a damn long time. So you do whatever you need to.”

“My blood sugar is high, and my cholesterol worries my doctor.”

“Then we focus on the things we can control.I’m getting up in age.”

“You’re thirty-nine and run marathons.”

“And my knees might give out.I might break an ankle.I might eventually develop angina like my dad.All those things are in my future.Some less probable than others.I’m almost a generation older than you, Phillip.That’s a lot.”

“I don’t care.”He ran his fingers through my beard and scratched my chin.“I find silver sexy.”

My mind rebelled because I didn’t like the idea of getting old.Well, I didn’t embrace it.I had so many things left that I wanted to do.

He tapped my forehead.“You’re frowning.Please don’t frown.Because I’ve now told you the worst of it.”

I blinked.“You did.”

“And you’re still here.”

“I am.”

“So now I get to tell you about how this stunningly attractive sexy older man stumbled over my dog, and how I was the one who fell head over heels.”He smiled tentatively.“I didn’t think I was ever going to try any form of a relationship again.Four years of... whatever that was... should’ve inoculated me against older men with big promises.”

I winced.

“But you haven’t made big empty promises. You’ve promised me safety. You’ve promised me respect. And you’ve given me those. You’ve offered me a space in your life without you having to make a lot of changes. I like that idea. I’ve never wanted to be a burden. I thought what I wanted was to make my way in the world alone. You’ve shown me that it’s okay to have a partner.”

“An equal partner,” I interjected.

His eyes widened.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:15 am

“I get the feeling you think I’m not getting anything out of this. That couldn’t be more wrong. I get you.” I placed my hand on his heart. “I get the generous, kind, and wonderful you. In my home. In my life. Taking care of my nibblets. That’s incredibly powerful. And I don’t feel like I’m giving up anything except being alone. No one’s going to mourn if I’m no longer on the market and looking for a hookup.”

He chuckled.

Pressing my advantage, I lowered my head so our lips could brush. Just a light touch. A promise.

“Is it really that simple?” He held my gaze. “I thought love was hard won.”

“I would say you’ve fought a mighty battle to get where you are. If I’m an easy part of your life, I’m okay with that.”

“I love you. I think it might just be that simple.”

“It is. Because I love you too. I also didn’t see you coming. And yet here you are. And I have zero regrets.”

He scratched my bearded chin again. “Can we celebrate?”

“How?” My eyes drifted shut in bliss. I didn’t shave my beard for two reasons. The first was I looked weird without one. I had an oddly shaped face. The second was expediency. A trim every few days kept everything looking neat. Now, given how much Phillip seemed to enjoy it, I was never going to shave it off.

“I think...”

At his hesitancy, I opened my eyes and met his gaze.

He went up on tiptoes to press his mouth to my ear. “I think I’d like you to fuck me.”

My cock, previously sitting quietly, minding his own business, got quite perky at that idea. “I think that could be arranged.” I searched his gaze. “If that’s how you want it.”

He gave me a careless shrug. “For the first time. Unless...”

“It’s just fine. I’m vers, but usually top.”

“Then can we go home?”

I pressed a kiss to his lips. “You bet.”

Chapter 27

Phillip

Anticipation thrummed through me as I settled Wally into his bed for the night. Despite his stairs being positioned, he had zero interest in sleeping on Jeremy’s bed.

Which was just fine with me since I definitely wanted to be in that bed without Wally around.

Jeremy emerged from the bathroom wearing sleep pants that rode tantalizingly low on his hips, and absolutely nothing else.

I loved his chest.

And he knew it. So he no longer wore shirts to bed.

He moved toward me as I stood.

Wally snuffled, settled, and closed his eyes.

“That is one easygoing dog.” Jeremy grinned.

“Yeah, all the ladies say that.” I glanced down. “You know, technically I’m the one who rescued him. I found him in a shelter, and I passed all the checks and Arthur let me bring him home.”

“Right.” Jeremy caressed my cheek. “That makes you a good man.”

Heat raced to my cheeks. “That’s not my point.”

He grinned. “Okay, what’s your point?”

“I’m being serious.”

His smile dropped. “Okay, I apologize—I read the room wrong. I do that sometimes. Thank you for clarifying. I need that sometimes.”

“No.” I closed my eyes. “Now I’m overreacting.”

“There’s a balance. We’re still figuring it out.” He tucked his index finger under my chin. “Open your eyes, sweetheart.”

I obeyed.

“Now, what were you going to say?”

“Just...” I wrinkled my nose. “Everyone thinks I rescued him, right?”

Jeremy nodded.

“But I think he rescued me. I mean, obviously his little matchmaking heart made sure we wound up together.”

“Yeah, okay.” He glanced down. “Did we ever figure out how he got between our yards?”

I shook my head.

“Well, we need to either figure it out quickly or reinforce the whole fence. Colin said a demolition crew starts next door on Monday.”

“Yeah, okay.”

He rolled his eyes. “I derailed you. Apologies. You were saying how he rescued you.”

“Well, yeah. Through him I met you. Then Marcie, the nibblets, and half the kids in the neighborhood. Brooklyn, of course, who said he’ll be happy to watch Wally at his daycare whenever we need help.”

“Right.”

“And then Jordan the trainer. Plus, I might not have met Colin if I hadn’t needed someone to watch Wally. I might’ve tried to get up to LA myself.”

“I’m glad you had Colin for that trip. I’m sorry I couldn’t be there myself. And maybe one day you can tell me what all happened. Colin...he thinks highly of you.”

I cocked my head.

“Wally and Widget met on the boardwalk. Colin and I were truly superfluous.”

“They’re going to be in therapy-dog training together. That’s a super intense program. Jordan’s going to get them ready for the test.” I frowned. “What if Wally doesn’t pass?”

“Then we take the test again or, if he’s not enjoying himself, we figure out something else. He’s going to be pretty busy with the nibblets. Who have friends. And friends with dogs and...” He rolled his hand. “I don’t think Wally will ever be lonely.”

“I...” I squinted. “I’m hoping to never be lonely again either.”

He grinned. “Oh, I’m going to do everything in my power to keep you occupied.” He cupped my cheeks and drew me close.

I went willingly, allowing him to kiss me.

We hadn’t done much kissing before we’d wound up giving hand and blow jobs. He worried we were taking things too quickly.

Naturally, I assured him I hadn’t minded. We’d woken up together in a bed. I certainly hadn’t planned on being frisky—not after the previous few days. Yet, when presented with the opportunity to deliver my first hand job, I hadn’t bothered to point out we hadn’t spent enough time properly kissing. Like with tongues and stuff.

Well, we’d made up for that over the past couple of days.

I pulled back. “I was serious when I said I wanted more. One should, like, test the merchandise. Right?” I tried to bat my eyelashes.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:15 am

“Do you have something caught in your eye? Here, let me look.” He tried to guide me to where, undoubtedly, the light would be better.

I felt my face heat. “I’m fine, Jeremy. Honestly.”

He stopped the movement. “Yeah, okay.”

“So you’ll take me to bed?”

“Yeah.” He blew out a breath. “Going to be really honest here, Phillip. I’ve never been with a virgin before.”

I mulled that over in my mind. “Your first time?”

“Greg Mullins. Captain of the football team. Not his first rodeo.”

“And no one since?”

“Not that anyone ever admitted. I just... Have sort of tended to pick guys with experience because soon after I got started, I was one of those guys. I mean, I’ll be honest and say I enjoy sex. I can also say I’ve gone months without it and been okay. I might miss it, but not enough to go out searching for it.”

I tried to take in what he was telling me. No serious relationships, but he enjoyed sex.

Will I enjoy sex?

He moved to the bedside table and pulled out condoms and lube. “I’ve been tested, but I want you to feel safe. I’m going to get tested again, even though I haven’t been with anyone.”

“You want to go bareback.”

He nodded. “Yes, I would eventually.” He eyed me. “I’ve never done it before—with anyone. I grew up when AIDS was very much a death sentence. My parents drilled condoms into my consciousness, and although I’ve met a couple of guys over the years who made me reconsider, I never went that extra step. Which assures me that they weren’t the right person for me.”

“Ah.” Because what else could I say? He wants you to know you’re different. You’re special. No one’s ever been in his heart. Not like you. “Okay.”

He moved back toward me. “So you think you’re ready?”

I stood a little taller. “I know I am.”

“That’s great. One last thing. Possibly the most important. You might be giving me your consent now, but you can take it away at any time. You say stop and everything stops. No anger. No recriminations. No hesitation. We stop, if you want, then we discuss, and we move on.”

“I don’t want to stop.”

“But you need to know the option’s there for you.”

“Yeah, okay.” Which made me love him even more—if that was even possible. I believed him. I doubted I’d ever want to stop, but I appreciated that option being on the table.

“Now...do you think we can get undressed?Because as adorable as these new pajamas are, I’d love to see you out of them.”

James had helped me pick a pair that I hoped connoted maturity.Off worked just as well.I unbuttoned my shirt.

When I was done, Jeremy gently slipped it from my shoulders.Then he carefully laid it on a reading chair.

I sort of liked that he had two oversized chairs clustered near the window that faced the backyard.I envisioned days when we curled up and read books.Reading more was definitely on my priority list.

Jeremy ran his fingers down my chest until he reached the waistband of my pajama bottoms.

I nodded.

He slowly grasped the elastic and tugged them down.

Cold air hit my semi, and I giggled.

As he lowered the pants to the ground, he gazed up at me.He tapped my left foot.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:15 am

Understanding his request, I raised that foot so he could pull the pants out from under me. We repeated the process, and soon I stood naked before him. Part of me wanted to die of embarrassment, but the rest of me reveled in the looks he gave me. I enjoyed the way he ran his hands up my thighs and then grasped my cock in his hands. He arched an eyebrow.

I nodded.

He took me into his mouth.

The sensation was the same as the past two nights—only also different. The heightened intimacy brought greater pleasure. Greater closeness. Like the barrier where I'd been holding myself apart—assuming he'd get tired and ask me to leave—was no longer there. Had melted away like the ice surrounding my heart. I'd sworn I'd never let anyone else in again. Then I'd met a beautiful man who accepted me the way I was, and now, as I braced my hands on his shoulders for balance, I could admit how happy I really was.

He sucked harder, hollowing his cheeks. He tongued my slit. He did everything he could to make me come.

And so, when my balls drew up, I whispered, "I'm coming." A warning he deserved.

He redoubled his efforts and, although I hadn't thought it possible, he pulled me in farther.

I erupted, spilling into him.

He continued to swallow as the orgasm ripped through me. All the climaxes that had come before had been good. This one was...spectacular.

“Man, I think I’m going to fall over.”

He pulled off me with a pop, kissed my very flaccid cock, and rose. “Let’s get you into bed. If you’re up for it, I really want to make love to you.”

I’d almost forgotten this was the plan. Or that I’d asked him to fuck me, and now he was offering to make love to me. To me, these were two different things. Truthfully, I liked his idea better. “I’ll always be up for making love.” I gazed at my cock. “Good thing you’re topping.”

Grinning, he rose gracefully. “That’s me—always at your service and quick with the quips.”

“I love your quips.” I hadn’t noticed many. But then I hadn’t really been paying attention, had I? Too scared to get comfortable. Too terrified to quip back. That’s going to change. I’m going to be an active participant in this relationship. Boldly, I snagged the waistband of his sleep pants. I grinned. “Fair is fair.”

He smiled back. “You’d better believe it.”

I grasped his pants and slowly tugged them down. I was very mindful of his impressive erection.

On a sigh he said, “I almost got off when you did. When I was blowing you.”

That startled me. That a guy could get off just by giving pleasure to another guy. Without a hand on himself.

I'd have to try that out.

I tapped each foot in turn, and we got him out of his pants.

I was face-to-face with his cock.

My knees were already hurting, though. I cursed my weight and tried to figure out if I could work through the pain and give him a blow job at the same time.

“Not right now. You touch me and I'll go off. You take me into your mouth and you'll be waiting a bit.” He feathered my hair. “I'm not seventeen anymore. Refractory periods are a thing.”

I frowned.

He laughed.

Clearly not at me, though.

“I'll explain another time. Will you lie on the bed?” He held out a hand and helped me rise.

Appreciating that more than anything, when I stood before him, I wrapped my arms around him and placed my head on his chest.

He rubbed my back.

Whether he understood the comfort I got from this, I couldn't be certain. I just knew I needed the reassurance. The skin-to-skin contact.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:15 am

Finally, I pulled back—relieved my eyes were still dry. “I’ll get on the bed.”

“Will you let me prep you?” He held my gaze, his dark-brown eyes nearly black in the dim light.

“Yes.” Because I wouldn’t have known how to do it myself. I should have. At twenty-four, and having had access to porn for a decent amount of time, I should’ve tried this on myself sooner. I’d dreamt Hank would teach me.

More fool me.

Except Jeremy would be my first, and that would be way, way, way better.

So I crawled onto the bed, made my way to the center, lay down, placed my head on a pillow, and tried to battle the nerves raging within me.

Moments later, he was there with me with the bottle of lube and a condom in hand. He started at the foot of the bed and slowly crawled his way up.

Instinctively, I opened my thighs and welcomed him into my personal space. A space no one had ever gone before.

He knelt before me, and the grin I found so endearing returned. “Move your thighs apart more. I want to see your pretty hole.”

I had no idea what my hole looked like. Something in his warm words, though, had me spreading my thighs, bending my knees, and planting my feet on the mattress—as

far apart as I could make them.

Under his intense scrutiny, my cock started to perk. I meant to ask what arefractory period actually meant, but I suspected he was saying he'd need longer to get it up again. For me, anytime I saw him naked—of even semi naked—my cock took interest.

He opened the bottle of lube and coated his fingers. Then he positioned himself so he could gently lift my cock and balls out of the way.

Next thing I knew, his fingers gently circled my rim. "Okay, that feels weird."

"That's understandable. And lube's a little cold." Slowly he eased his index finger inside me.

The contradiction of sensations really knocked me sideways. Something going into me was...strange. The puritanical part of my brain said, no way, no how...just no. The happier part of my brain thought, it's about fucking time, and thank Christ that Hank wasn't your first. He wouldn't have been this gentle.

"I'm going to add a second finger."

"Yeah, okay." I held myself still as he sank two fingers in. Slowly, the weirdness receded. Then, quite surprisingly, his fingers brushed something inside me. My cock leapt to attention, and an unexpected jolt of electricity rocketed through me. My gaze shot to him.

He grinned. "Prostate. We're going to have fun with that." He brushed it again.

"I...uh..." Nope. No words. Just an understanding this was more than I could ever have thought possible. "Oh, Jesus, I want to..."

Slowly he eased his fingers back a bit.He scissored them and moved them around.Stretching me.So I'd be able to take that very pretty and rather large cock of his.I understood we weren't entirely designed for this, but that men had been doing it as far back as recorded history.

Or so I told myself.

So I could believe I'd survive this.Even enjoy this.

“Do you think you're okay?Ready?”He eased his hands from me and tilted his head as if trying to take my measure.

“Yes, I'm good.I promise.”I would be.Because this was Jeremy, and he'd take care of me.

He leaned over me and planted a kiss on my lips.

Instantly, I opened my mouth to him.Welcomed him.

He took full advantage, thrusting his tongue in.

He dominated the kiss, which was just fine with me.I understood, instinctively, that I was giving him control.That was okay because he'd made it clear he had no problems with us changing roles.That, in fact, he wanted me to experience everything—so I'd be knowledgeable and easily able to decide what I wanted.

Our cocks brushed as he canted his hips.All while keeping up the assault on my mouth.

I tried to push against his hip—to get any friction possible.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:15 am

By angling his thighs in a certain way, though, he prevented me from getting any satisfaction.

He chuckled. “Eager?”

“Hell fucking yes.”

Slowly, he eased back. He kissed his way down my chin. He sucked on my neck. He pressed his lips against my skin as he moved down my sternum. He paid homage to each nipple—bringing them to sharp peaks.

“Jeremy...please...”

Another rumble of amusement from deep in his chest.

He went lower still, this time nuzzling my bellybutton with his nose.

I giggled.

He nipped at the skin just below my navel. Where I carried much of my fat.

In that moment, it didn’t matter. Nothing else mattered except getting Jeremy inside me as soon as possible. He said he didn’t care about how I looked—and I believed him.

When he licked my tip, I nearly went right over again. “Jesus, Jeremy, give a guy some warning.” I said the words teasingly, and he met my gaze with a wicked grin.

Then he rocked back on his heels, snagged the condom, disposed of the wrapper, and rolled the thing on. “We’ll teach you how to do this.”

“Okay. But I’d prefer to go bareback as soon as possible.”

“We can run down to a clinic in Oceanside tomorrow. San Diego, if we have to. Then dinner with my parents and?—”

“Say something like that again, and I’m going to lose this boner.”

He coated his cock with lube, then stuck two fingers back inside me to add just a little bit more stretch. “You ready?”

“I’ve been ready pretty much since you crashed into us. Again, hell fucking yes.”

Without another word, he guided his cock to my entrance. Then, slow as molasses, he started to push in.

The burning took me by surprise because I hadn’t felt this much discomfort before when he’d only been using his fingers. Still, I breathed through the intense sensation. I willed my body to acclimate. To not fight.

“The head getting in is the worst of it.” Jeremy said the words through gritted teeth.

“Then just do it. Just push in. We’ll figure the rest out later.”

He chuckled. “I’ll keep going slow, and you keep breathing.”

And so we did. Eventually the worst of the pain eased as his head was fully inside me. Then, inch by inch, he pressed his way into me. Pushing forward a bit, pulling back a bit. Slowly and surely, he found his way home.

“I’m in. Now’s the good part.”

I chuckled. “How’s that?”

“Every time I brush your prostate, you’ll get that happy feeling.”

“You’ll have to tell me about this magical thing.”

“I will.” He gritted his teeth. “I need to move.”

“By all means.” I offered my most winsome smile. “Give me all you’ve got.”

Chapter 28

Jeremy

His innocence nearly stole my breath.

His absolute trust in me nearly blew my mind.

His humor nearly derailed me as he grinned.

“Yeah, okay.” Slowly I withdrew, almost to the tip. Then I pushed back in. As gently as I could. I repeated this over and over, trying to stave off my orgasm. He was tight. He was dear. He was...perfect. The man I’d waited for my entire life but hadn’t known it.

Marcie would crow in triumph if she saw me now. No, forget that. Not thinking about my sister seeing me balls deep in the man I loved.

“You can go harder.” Phillip grinned. “Because I know you want to.”

Hopefully he’d seen guys go gentle as well when watching porn. Making love was complicated. Done incorrectly, a guy could get hurt. Still, he was asking for more. He was smiling, not wincing. So I’d have to trust he knew what he was doing.

I increased the force of my thrusts. Picked up the pace. Began to chase the orgasm I’d attempted to stave off. I reached between our bodies, snagged his cock, and tugged him to the rhythm I set. I should’ve probably used lube, but when he came all over my hand in just a few tugs, I didn’t have time to worry.

He cried out in fulfillment as he contracted around my cock. After three good thrusts,

I followed him over the cliff of pleasure and into the abyss. As the waves of the orgasm ripped through me, I finally dropped onto him. I worried about my weight, but when he wrapped me in his arms, that worry abated. My cock slid out with a sad little pop, and he laughed. I did too.

He pressed a kiss to the crown of my head. “So that’s what all the fuss was about. I wondered.” He chuckled.

“Uh, yes, pretty much.” I pressed a kiss to his neck. “That was fucking amazing. You were spectacular. That was...” I sought the right words. If I said the best of my life, he likely wouldn’t believe me. But it had been. Because I’d never been so connected to another person before. Had never enjoyed this level of intimacy—this level of trust.

“Jeremy?”

“Yes?” I forced my head to move, propping my chin on his sternum so I could meet his gaze.

“Is it always that good?”

“Uh...no. But I bet it will be with you.”

“Wow.”

“Uh...yes.”

“I don’t want to move.”

The sticky wetness of his orgasm was drying, and we’d be stuck together. I needed to remove the condom. Still... “Another minute or two. Then we’ll be good.”

“Okay.”He stroked my hair and then, eventually, scratched my beard.

I moaned in pleasure.

He chuckled.“And we didn’t even wake Wally.”

“Yeah.”I grinned.“Let’s go to Oceanside in the morning.I can get tested, we can have lunch, and then we’ll be back in time for dinner.”

His smile ranked as one of the shyest I’d seen from him.“I’d like that.”

“So would I.Now, we need to get up and maybe showered?Or you can just lie there and I can wash you.”I liked the decadence of that idea.Me taking care of him.

“That sounds amazing.”His eyes drifted shut.

Ah, the old sex-makes-me-sleepy scenario.I eased off him, removed the condom, disposed of it in the trash, and padded to the bathroom.I fixed myself up, then wet a washcloth that I returned to the bedroom with.I cleaned my lover quickly, tossed the cloth into the hamper, and slid into bed.“Why don’t you turn on your side?”

He did, but facing me.“I get to be the big spoon.”He uttered the words without even opening his eyes.

I slid in so I could tuck myself against him.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:15 am

He wrapped his arm around me and placed his hand on my sternum.

In turn, I placed my hand over his.

He pressed a kiss to my shoulder. "I love you."

"I love you too."

And we slept that way until a very enthusiastic Wally joined us in the morning light. He snuggled against my front and we cuddled for about twenty minutes. I would've thought making love to Phillip would be top of my list of morning enjoyments, but this was far better.

I caressed Wally's fur. "Okay, so do we go out for breakfast or cook?"

Phillip rubbed his stubble against my shoulder. "I vote for whatever keeps us closest to this bed."

"You're bound to be sore."

He giggled a little. Then giggled a little.

God, I loved that sound so fucking much.

"Uh, a little." He pressed his erection against my ass.

My cock perked up. "Are you interested in..." I wiggled my butt. I had no issues with

bottoming.I might prefer topping...but only by a smidge.

“Maybe...later?”His hand rested on my chest as he made whorls with his fingers in my chest hair.“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I’ll teach you.”

“But you’ve never taught a virgin.”With a hint of a laugh.

“Ah, well there’s a first time for everything.”

He nipped my shoulder.

I laughed.Then, lightning fast, I spun to face him.

Wally harrumphed at being jostled and scooted down his little stairs.

Phillip arched an eyebrow at me.“You know you’re going to pay for that later with some major attitude.”

“Sure.”Yet we both knew Wally didn’t have a vindictive bone in his little body.If I cooed and gave him scritchies, we’d be good to go.

I grasped Phillip’s cock in my hand and added my erect one—sliding our lengths against each other.

His breath caught.

I probably should’ve grabbed lube, but in the few strokes it took to get us both off, I barely had time to rethink what I was doing.

“Christ, yes.” Phillip gasped for air. “That was so fucking hot.”

“You’re so fucking hot. I love watching you come.” And I did. His skin would develop this rosy hue that got my engine running and my heart soaring.

I pressed a kiss to his chest. “Showers. Then let’s walk Wally down the boardwalk. Maybe we’ll drop by Nice Buns. Grab a muffin.” I considered. “Or a sticky bun. I’m going to make you burn a lot of calories today.”

He grinned. “Okay, but why don’t you do your run to the lighthouse and on your way back Wally and I will meet you at Ambrose’s shop?”

“Sure.” I eyed him.

“You haven’t been running recently. I saw the schedule on the calendar.”

“Oh.” I pursed my lips.

“Was I not supposed to see it? Right on the fridge?”

“Well, I have to admit I barely see it.” My training schedule was embedded in my mind and in my sports watch.

“So you get up and get going. By the time you’re on your way back, Wally and I will practically be there.”

“I’ll walk back with you.”

“Will that mess up your training?”

I shook my head.

He kissed my lips. “I don’t want you to change anything about your life just because Wally and I are now a part of it.”

Instead of arguing, I made my way to the shower, cleaned off quickly, donned my running gear, and headed out. A run to the lighthouse at the north end of the beach and back wasn’t a long journey. My muscles, however, let me know what they thought of the training break I’d taken.

This early in the morning, I didn’t pass as many people on the boardwalk as I expected. The day wasn’t hot yet, but it certainly looked like it might be another brutal one. The threat of last night’s storm never materialized, and the sticky heat remained

untouched.

Still, I continued to run. Until Phillip, nothing had made me feel as good, as free, as running. Now, as I reveled in pushing myself physically, I thought about the man who made me feel even better. Phillip just made me smile, all the damn time.

And sure, things might not last. I understood all the obstacles stacked against us. But he understood me in a way that only Marcie really did. And I saw him in a way apparently no one ever had before. I'd continue to worry about his mental health, of course. But I would for anyone I was in a committed relationship with. He was clearly on the right track with a team of professionals behind him. He'd implied Dr. Martin had given him the green light to proceed in a relationship with me. I'll need to make sure that's the correct understanding. If the doc's worried, or if he wants us to take things slow, then I will. I wouldn't be happy about it...but I would.

Phillip came first. Always would.

With Wally a damn close second.

I grinned and waved at a couple with their two kids. The baby, in the man's arms, was squawking away. His partner pushed the stroller with a toddler who snoozed. The men looked frazzled.

And happy.

I was grateful Phillip didn't want kids. He might change his mind—what with him being so young. He might spend time around Raphael and Thaddeus and decide he was missing out.

Or he might come home exhausted every day and decide that, in the end, he was glad the two were Marcie and Darren's responsibility.

Personally, I thought Marcie's suggestion of Phillip babysitting was brilliant. In a while, I'd suggest he could finish his philosophy degree. If he wanted. Or he could do something else. Hell, if he really enjoyed being in childcare, he could study that.

I wanted him to be whomever he chose to be.

Admittedly, I hoped that meant with me.

I waved to Wynn at the lighthouse as he did something near the huge tower. I ran a gentle loop, checked my watch, and headed back. I was a bit off my best time, but I wasn't worried. My next race wasn't for a month yet. Should I ask Phillip to come and watch me? With Wally? What would it feel like to have someone at the finish line waiting for me? In my early days, Marcie used to come and watch. These days, with the chaos of having two kids, I never asked her. She had enough to deal with.

I waved at a young man being pulled along by a massive dog.

Wish I had a card for Jordan that I could give the poor guy.

Not that he might welcome the intrusiveness.

Still, when the dog snarled at me, I gave both owner and pooch a large radius.

I continued on with my steady pace until I neared Nice Buns.

Phillip sat on a bench by the boardwalk with two travel mugs, a bottle of water, and a pastry box.

My saliva glands kicked into overdrive.

I slowed my pace as I approached.

He waved.

Wally, who'd been contentedly napping under the bench, leapt up and headed toward me.

"Sit." Phillip's voice carried authority that hadn't been present when we'd first started working with Jordan. Slowly, he was coming into his own. "Wait."

Wally, wonderful dog he was, stopped immediately and plopped onto his butt.

When I got to them, I winked at Phillip, then stooped to praise Wally first. "Okay. You're such a good boy."

Said good boy licked my hand.

Phillip offered me a napkin.

I wiped my hand as I did my cool-down exercises.

"Good run?" He sipped his coffee.

"Yeah."

"I got you a coffee...but I wasn't certain if you could drink it right after a run."

"Thanks. I'll start with the water."

“And I figured if you couldn’t then I’d just have a second cup” He chuckled.

I finished stretching and plopped onto the bench, gratefully grabbing the steel water bottle with the cold, refreshing liquid. “You’re the best.”

“I know I am.” He grinned impishly. Then he sobered a little. “How is this my life?” He pointed out toward the ocean. “Beautiful scenery. Beautiful town. Beautiful man...”

For a moment, I held his gaze. “Because you said yes to fighting. Yes, to starting new. Yes, to this grizzled old guy who nearly tripped over your dog.”

“You’re not grizzled.”

Wally rubbed against my leg.

I scratched his belly with my sneaker. “See, Wally approves.”

“He’s hoping you’ll share your sticky bun.”

I eyed the dog. “Nope. I know Daddy fed you breakfast.”

Phillip barked out a laugh. “Did you just call me his daddy?”

“Yep. Yes, I did.” I took a bite of my sticky bun—grateful to see a pile of napkins. “And since we’re together, that makes me his other daddy.”

“Are we?” Phillip eyed me. “Together, that is.”

“You want a ring?” I tried for casual as I took another bite.

He stayed silent.

Oh shit, did it again. “Right, like I know it’s too soon?—”

“If we didn’t have two coffee cups, a bottle of water, and two sticky buns between us right now, I’d tackle you and give you tons of kisses.” He glanced down at Wally. “Add an oversized Yorkie in that list.”

“The Yorkie comes first.”

“Of course.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:15 am

“He’s looking...healthy.”I gave the little guy a scratch behind the ears.

He grinned.

“We’re seeing Dr.Louisa next week.Did you want to come?”

I blinked.“Well, yeah.I can drive you over to the clinic.”Then...super casual... “We should probably get you a driver’s license.You know, in case of emergencies.”

“You know, Scott at the library said the exact same thing.”He snickered.“I’ve already looked up the testing requirements.And thank you for the laptop.”

“Truly the easiest part of our relationship.”I laughed.“If only everything else were so simple.”

“Like putting a ring on it?”

My breath caught in my chest.“Uh, yeah.”

“Give us until Christmas.That’s about six months from now.”He continued to look out over the ocean.

“Sure.”I could wait—would wait—forever.Whatever it took to make him happy.I liked the idea of formalizing things so he’d be taken care of, were something to happen to me.I blinked.“But I can be Wally’s otherdaddy?”

Finally, he turned his head to meet my gaze.“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Epilogue

Phillip

I stood proudly next to James as Colin snapped a million pictures.

Okay, maybe not a million.

But so many that Jeremy just stood next to Arthur as they chuckled.

Jordan, who'd arranged caps for the graduation, beamed. "My best class yet."

"Oh, you look so adorable." Neil stood beside Sawyer, grinning. "Our own little graduation party."

"A first for Safe Haven Animal Rescue." Shane, Arthur's assistant, also offered a massive smile. "Hopefully the first of many." He held his glass of sparkling apple cider up.

Jeremy, always one to get into the spirit, clinked glasses.

At last, Colin appeared ready to put the camera down.

"Can I wipe this silly grin off my face? I think it's frozen on." I wrinkled my nose.

"You can't freeze in one-hundred-degree temperatures." James glanced down at me. "We did okay."

In unison, we bent to give Widget and Wally scritches. They'd both sailed through the test with perfect scores.

Scott, too excited to wait a day, had texted me last night to reiterate that if Wally passed, the little guy was more than welcome at the library for literacy time. Basically, kids practicing their reading skills to very nonjudgmental dogs.

I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that my pooch would be thrilled. Kids? His jam. Friendly librarian? Also a favorite. He'd even endured Scott and Anthony's toddler twins when we'd all arrived at the Fourth of July party at the same time. At first, I'd wondered if it might be awkward to see Anthony in a social setting. He'd been super chill, though, and Wally had become fast friends with the two-year-old terrors.

After a moment, I rephrased. With placid Zayden and rambunctious Alicia.

Macie, Darren, Raphael, and Thaddeus had shown up a few minutes later.

Raphael took one look at the twins, plopped onto their butt next to Wally, and joined in the general chaos.

Thaddeus wanted popcorn.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:15 am

And so that day had gone.

Today was a lot less chaos, but I was just as proud of how Wally had handled himself. I held up my phone.

Jeremy, understanding my request, messaged me the graduation photo.

I shot it off to Scott at the library.

Who sent back a flurry of, like, fifty emojis.

Without an iota of doubt, I would find time to fit in the library visits along with working for Marcie. Jeremy and I had already watched the nibblets a couple of times to help her out, and my childcare course, which had been delayed, started next week.

I'd already read all the materials, of course. I intended to be the best prepared student in the class. Even if I was the oldest by half a dozen years.

Jeremy approached, having somehow located another glass. He handed it to me. "I'm so proud of you."

Heat raced to my cheeks. "Yeah?"

"Of course." He pressed a kiss to my temple. "Even if you two had somehow not passed, I still would be proud." He crouched. "How's my Wally? Are you a good boy?"

Wally gazed back at me.

I gave him the go-ahead signal with the sweep of my hand.

He lunged into Jeremy's arms.

I was still amazed at how well-behaved he was.

Jeremy and the dog.

I grinned.

Wally had come a long way. Although he adored Jeremy, I was his primary handler now. He was to take his cues from me when we were together. If he was alone with someone else, he was to give them his full attention as long as he had his vest on. He thrived on the mental stimulation that training gave him, and he'd adore the kids in the library—of that, I had no doubt.

"You are so adorable." Sawyer approached. "Can I take a picture of the three of you? For your family album."

Our family.

Yeah, we kind of were. The three of us.

With an extended family spanning all these wonderful people, Marcie and her crew, as well as Jeremy's wonderful parents. They wanted to come today, but Mom was still a little woozy, and the noonday heat would've been tough on her. The doctors figured she'd make a full recovery and, overall, she and Dad were healthy.

They both insisted I call them Mom and Dad. Especially after I'd shared my upbringing. I wanted Jeremy's family to know where my gratitude sprang from. Why I sometimes teared up at moments of closeness between everyone. Either Jeremy or

Marcie—or even Raphael once—would put an arm around my shoulder and give me a squeeze.

Wally and I were down a bit of weight, with more loss on the horizon. Slow and steady, as Dr. Louisa liked to say. Somehow, I'd finally got it into my head that making social connections was far more important than what the scale said. I'd get healthy. More importantly, though, I'd found acceptance.

We posed for Sawyer.

Jeremy waved his phone and Neil, understanding the request, snatched it and shot a couple of pictures as well.

I planned to get the best one framed and to give it to Jeremy. Along with a proposal. I figured... Thanksgiving. Mostly because he had Christmas in his mind for the grand proposal. I didn't want to keep him from having fun, but I wanted to be the one doing the asking—so he'd know how true my love for him really was.

Arthur approached us, still appearing a little shy. He'd been chatting with Jeremy earlier, which I took as a good sign.

I shook his outstretched hand. "Thank you. For taking a chance on me."

He grinned. "Easy decision to make. Clearly you were meant to be together." He eyed Wally. "He's such a great little guy."

"A matchmaker to boot." Jeremy offered a chuckle. "I don't know if I'd ever have met Phillip, if not for our little guy."

Our.

He did little things liked that.Used language to include me.To make sure I knew, every moment of every day, that I'd found a home with him.We were a team.

We were in love.

“I hope we keep making more matches.”Arthur eyed the building.“We always have more animals than homes.”

“We could?—”

“We were thinking?—”

Jeremy and I met each other's gazes as we both started and then stopped talking at the same time.

Arthur perked up.No other word for it.

Jeremy gestured for me to go first.

I smiled.“We've been talking.Depending on how things went today, we thought we might get a brother or sister for Wally.Perhaps a dog Jeremy can train and get certified as a therapy dog.So we each will have a dog we can take into the community.”

Finally, Jeremy spoke.“I think my parents are going to be moving into an assisted-

living facility.I'd like to have a dog I could visit them with.”

“Well, I happen to have the perfect dog.Why don't we head inside and I can introduce you to a sweet little schnauzer named Flora?”Arthur pointed to the shelter.

Jeremy and I exchanged looks.

Then, with Wally beside us, we went to meet Flora.