



A Cure for Recovery : A College Town Novella

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Category: LGBT+

Description: “Tommy’s been a Granger instead of a Katz or a Cattaneo for almost seven months, and he’s still not tired of signing his new legal name on documents, or seeing it printed in his email signature. He especially likes the sight of it in the elegant script of Leo and Dana’s wedding save-the-date cards.

But even the charm of his new name, and the new life it represents, can’t make up for the drudgery of yet another doctor’s appointment.”

Tommy survived a shooting, retired from the NYPD, and married the love of his life, but recovery, he’s learned in the seven months since, isn’t as straightforward as physical healing. Set after the events of “College Town,” *A Cure for Recovery* tells a domestic story of love, and frustration, and working through tough times with the people you love most. A story of family, and the fears and joys of a future you never thought you’d get to live.

This M/M novella is not a standalone and must be read after “College Town.”

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Tommy's been a Granger instead of a Katz or a Cattaneo for almost seven months, and he's still not tired of signing his new legal name on documents, or seeing it printed in his email signature. He especially likes the sight of it in the elegant script of Leo and Dana's wedding save-the-date cards.

But even the charm of his new name, and the new life it represents, can't make up for the drudgery of yet another doctor's appointment.

His pleasant mood lasted through the sign-in sheet, and then sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with Lawson in the waiting room while they flipped through a magazine meant for children and failed spectacularly to find all the ways the two pictures were different. Lawson beat him by three finds, because of course he did; it didn't matter that Tommy used to be a cop, no one's as observant and detail-driven as his husband.

But then the nurse called him back, and his laughter died in his throat. Lawson patted his thigh and said, "You'll do great, babe." So he scrounged up a smile for him and tried to look positive about the whole thing. At least until he was out of sight.

Now, he leans heavily on his cane with one hand while he unlaces his shoes with the other. He's dressed the way the informational email told him to: something comfortable that gave him a full range of motion. Sweats, a t-shirt, a zip-up hoodie. His shoes are Nikes, new, running shoes, with thin, flat laces he ties into double knots to keep them from unraveling as he walks. They're good shoes...for someone who can run. For someone without a cane, and who isn't huffing, and straining, and nearly toppling over just from trying to keep his balance while he painstakingly picks the double knots loose one-handed.

For his birthday in March, his in-laws gifted him a pair of those Sketcher's sneakers you can step into, hands-free, no laces. "Life-saversssss," Bill said, smiling, not even frustrated with stumbling over the S. The shoes are black, with white soles, unassuming, and, while not the sort of thing he wore while playing a mob boss, at least not hideous. Exactly. Lisa pulled them out of the tissue paper and set them on the ground in front of him. "You don't even have to bend over!" she said brightly. "Easy peasy." She pointed to her husband. "Bill loves them."

A glance proved that Bill wore a pair of solid brown ones, more like boat shoes.

Hot, helpless shame prickled at the backs of Tommy's eyes. Because he was turning thirty-eight, and he couldn't manage a normal pair of sneakers. Because he needed step-in shoes like his stroke patient father-in-law.

The moment the thought formed, he hated himself for letting it cross his mind. His in-laws meant well, and he loved them to bits, and there was nothing shameful or embarrassing about Bill's situation.

"Thank you," he said, around the lump in his throat. He toed off his own shoes with minimal trouble, and stepped into the new ones. When he looked across the room, Lawson met his gaze, and his smile was small, and sad, and knowing. It's okay. I'm sorry.

He should have worn those shoes today, but his pride got in the way, and now his legs tremble, and he sways precariously to the side. He lets go of the knot and slaps his hand out against the wall to keep from falling. He's breathing hard, he realizes. Panting. There's sweat at his hairline and beading along the small of his back. He almost fell; he can't breathe, and all because he tried to take his fucking shoes off.

"Sir," the nurse asks, her concern impersonal, professional. "Would you like me to—"

“No,” he snaps, and then grits his teeth, and takes a breath. “No, thank you. I’ve got it.”

He slides his grip farther down the shaft of the cane, ‘til he’s gripping the space just above the four-footed base of it, and tries again. This time, he gets both knots unstuck, and is able to straighten – shakily – and then toe the sneakers all the way off.

The nurse stands waiting for him, nothing amiss, ready with her clipboard. “Okay, if you’ll turn this way for me, heels together, back against the wall, eyes forward.”

He complies, shuffling and ungainly, when once he would have snapped right into position. He waits, skin prickling, floor cold through his socks, as she slides down the little plastic reader until it rests on the top of his head.

“Okay,” she says, and he doesn’t ask what it said. He knows what it said: his license says five-ten, but that’s with special insoles. He’s five-eight, when he doesn’t slouch. Shorter, he thinks, since the shooting, now that his spine doesn’t want to straighten all the way.

Damn it.

Next, he gets on the scale, and he’s put on five pounds in the past two months. His blood pressure, when she takes it, is a little high. White coat syndrome, he thinks, which he didn’t used to have, before the shooting.

Finally, he’s seated in an exam room, waiting.

And waiting.

And waiting.

He checks his phone again and again, impulsively, gnawing his lip as he thinks about Lawson being later and later to work. He tried, earlier, to suggest he take an Uber to his appointment, but Lawson made a face like come on, man, so he slid into the passenger seat of Lawson's new car – a pre-owned Subaru with enough room for Bill's chair in the back – and has felt guilty ever since because Lawson was supposed to work a double today, and he had to get someone to cover his first shift.

Tommy hasn't driven since the shooting. He's tried to, more than once, and each time, he's crawled down the driveway, his right foot shaking so badly that he put the car in park before he hit the street, too afraid that his body would fail him and that he would crash, or, worse, hurt someone else.

The first time was a...bleak moment. When he parked back at the garage door, and stepped out of the car, his first instinct was to stomp back into the house. Instead, he nearly fell, barely caught himself with his cane, and was red-eyed and fuming by the time he shuffled into the kitchen. Lawson whirled toward him, concern writ large on his face. "Hey, what–"

Tommy threw up a hand and made his laborious way upstairs.

After that, he didn't expect success, and wasn't disappointed.

Lawson still drives him where he needs to go, or Lisa, if their schedules line up.

He still feels absolutely helpless because of it.

It's not something they've talked about, but he knows they'll need to, soon. A little voice in the back of his head points out, unhelpfully, that helplessness is a mental and emotional state, and not a physical ailment. He'll probably have to go see a whole different sort of doctor to tackle it, and isn't that just wonderful?

Despite a long wait, the click and inward glide of the door still startles him. He swears he can feel his blood pressure elevate, a tinny whining starting up in his ears. Calm down, idiot, he chastises himself, and attempts to push a pleasant smile across his face.

When he was first home from the hospital last fall, Noah urged him to come to New York and see a variety of specialists – just as he’d suggested for Lawson’s father, before the shooting. And Tommy considered it, sure...but some reticence had kept him from so much as researching anyone. Instead, he worked his way through a series of specialists and physical therapists in Eastman and its surrounding satellite hospitals.

His new doctor – carefully selected thanks to her stellar reviews working with nerve damage patients – enters the room on a not-unpleasant cloud of hand sanitizer scent, still briskly rubbing her palms together, his chart tucked under her arm. She’s tiny, and her scrubs are printed with little cartoon cats under her white coat, and her smile is unexpectedly bright and broad.

“Good morning!”

Tommy feels his face start to fall, and then corrects it. He thinks of doctors as stern and professional, but that’s a ridiculous stereotype. Sternness and professionalism aren’t synonymous.

“Morning.” He can’t do bright, but he can do polite.

She heels the door shut and goes over to the counter to set his chart down. She gives it only the most cursory of glances and then turns to give him her undivided attention. Despite the friendly smile, there’s an intensity to her dark-brown gaze that he finds reassuring.

He lets out a slow breath.

“I’m Dr. Wilson,” she says, “but, please, call me Rachel.” Hands now apparently dry, she leans back against the counter, crosses one foot over the other, and stuffs her hands in her coat pockets. Casual. Easy. “I read up on your chart and cross-referenced with your previous PT last night, so I’m familiar with the details of your shooting” – she doesn’t skip over the word or avert her gaze – “and recovery after the fact. It sounds like you’re doing really well in a medical sense. Clean scans, a perfect resection. But.” Her smile twitches sideways into rueful territory. “I take it if you’re here to see me, then you don’t feel like things are going all that well, right? So why don’t you tell me what you’ve been experiencing, and we’ll see if we can make things better.”

Tommy blinks. His other doctors have been helpful and encouraging, but it’s never felt like this...like a...collaboration. “Um,” he says, intelligently, and her smile is smaller this time, and kind.

She nabs the stool under the counter and settles on it, which puts her lower than him, and somehow less intimidating; when did he decide she was intimidating? A question he can’t begin to parse at the moment.

“That’s okay,” Dr. Wilson says. “Nerve damage like yours is tricky and can result in a lot of inexact symptoms. We can break it down piece by piece.”

His face warms unpleasantly, and he smooths his palms down the thighs of his sweatpants before he can catch himself.

“You’re still using your cane?”

“Yes.” He glances toward it, fleetingly, where he left it over against the wall, out of reach from the table where he now sits. A small, probably stupid act of rebellion, and

a pathetic victory, to cross the room without it; he's glad no one saw him floundering up onto the table, his upper body strength halved post-surgery. He's started lifting weights again, but nothing like he used to, muscles weak betrayers.

"Would you say you use it rarely, occasionally, or frequently?"

Last week, he insisted on going downstairs to fetch snacks when Lawson set his laptop up on the desk so they could watch a movie. Lawson tried to go, his face softly worried in a way that left Tommy hyperaware of his own shortcomings. Tommy snapped at him, more harshly than intended, and made the trip himself, sans cane. He tripped on his way back up, and loitered in the middle of the stairs, clutching the banister and sweating, not sure if he could make it all the way back up. The idea of shouting for help, of waking his in-laws, and panicking Lawson, made him want to scream. His eyes pricked with tears, and he hauled himself back up, arms shaking, bag of Doritos clenched in his teeth so he could use both hands on the rail.

He swallows. "All the time. I have to use it all the time, or I..."

Dr. Wilson nods. "Any falls?"

"Not serious ones."

His last doctor went grave when he mentioned falling. All falls are serious.

But Dr. Wilson only nods, and says, "Is it more of a strength issue? Or a balance issue? For instance: do your legs feel weak? Or are they slow to respond when you try to take a step?"

Weak, he starts to say, immediately, because he is weak. What else could it mean when he still can't drive? When it's been seven months and he still struggles to make it all the way through the grocery store? When Lawson sometimes (a lot of the time)

helps him shower. When he sweat through the underarms of his t-shirt twenty minutes ago trying to untie his shoes.

But Dr. Wilson studies him, undemanding, wanting to help, and so he swallows down the word and really thinks about it. The time he fell out of the shower, he managed to actually shower, but the stall has a tall lip on it. He made to step over it, an automatic motion, and then his foot dragged, and caught, and he went down hard on his hands and knees on the bath mat.

In the grocery store, he had his cane hooked over his arm, bent down to snag a box of cereal off the bottom shelf, and then couldn't get back up. But not because his legs quaked and wouldn't support him; because he couldn't feel his legs, his whole lower half suddenly numb. Not only had Lawson needed to help him up, but the cane wasn't enough after that; Lawson had to walk with a strong arm secured around his waist, half-dragging him toward the exit.

"Slow to respond," he says, and doesn't know if that's better or worse, harder or easier to say. "Sometimes everything goes numb, and sometimes my legs just...won't move."

She nods, as though she expected as much. "Your nerves are still healing."

"But it's been seven months," he bursts out.

Again, she nods. "The nervous system is a fragile, remarkable, incredibly strong network inside the body. Sometimes, nerve damage is permanent, but because you can stand, and walk, and because you have moments of nearly normal functioning, I'd say that's not the case with you. Your body is healing. You can't put a timetable on that. One of my patients had Bell's Palsy, and it took her a year to regain full facial function." She smiles, encouraging, though his stomach cramps on the idea of a year, or more.

“The important thing,” she continues, “is not to rush yourself. Give your body the chance to recover at its own pace without artificial timelines. And the most important thing, is to have a support network, which it seems like you do.” She motions to his hand – to his ring.

“Oh, um, yeah. My husband, and his family. Our best friends.”

She smiles again. He’s never met a doctor who smiled so much. “Good. I’ll give you some pamphlets to share with them when you leave. But now.” She rubs her hands together and stands. “Let’s see what you can do.”

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He can’t do more than usual, and though he expects as much, it still stings: the way he takes two normal steps, and then his toe drags on the third, and he lurches forward. Dr. Wilson catches him, one hand pressed to his stomach, and one to his back, and she’s shockingly strong for such a small person. Lawson would say the same of Tommy, he thinks, with a wry frown.

“That’s okay, don’t get discouraged,” she tells him, and when he rights himself, she keeps her hands where they are. “I want to try some new exercises to work on your balance.”

One of his “challenges” – she doesn’t say “problems,” and he feels coddled, even as he appreciates the distinction – is that he’s trying to walk the way he always has, which is to say, fast. He always outwalked his friends, even Lawson, despite Lawson’s miles-long legs. A memory surfaces, one of the good ones, Lawson huffing and hitching his backpack up his shoulder and calling, “Slow down, dickface!” This was of course in their early teen years before Lawson confessed to being crazy about both his dick and his face.

They work on taking slower steps, and not committing fully to them – not throwing his upper body forward with abandon – until he can assess how his legs and feet will respond. “Right now, walking can’t be an unconscious activity like it was before,” she says.

After twenty minutes, he manages to walk the length of the room and back three times without his cane, and without stumbling.

“See?” Dr. Wilson says, excited.

Tommy sighs. “I look seventy.”

She cocks a brow. “Do you want to look cool, or do you want to walk?”

That’s not really a debate, is it?

They wrap up the appointment with a lot of encouragement from Dr. Wilson, and with a stack of pamphlets that turn out to be more like booklets, dense as they are, bound along the left edges. Most are about his continuing physical therapy, the nervous system, exercise regimens, resources, even a diet plan. The last, the one he hastily shoves back to the bottom of the stack and which he plans on hiding as soon as he’s home, somewhere Lawson won’t look, is titled Recovery and Your Mental Health: How to Adjust to Your New Normal.

Nope. Not going there.

Dr. Wilson says, “That last one might be helpful for your husband as well.” Encouraging. Dare he say eager. “Recovery affects more than just the patient, and sometimes it can be difficult to talk about the mental aspects of it with a partner. Tools like this can facilitate conversation.”

“Do you moonlight as a psychiatrist?” he quips.

“You’d be surprised how much of my job involves the brain versus the body.”

Armed with the makings of a physical therapy library clenched in one reluctant fist, he takes his cane, thanks her, and agrees to schedule his next appointment with Wynonna in reception.

Even with the cane, he walks in the new way, torso held erect, not leaning forward or back, and moves his feet slowly – much slower than he wants to. Having both hands occupied is a dangerous move, nothing free to catch himself with if he falls. But he makes it the little window in the hallway, pays, makes his next appointment, and he’s not sweating and shaking for once.

He hates the way he must look moving this way, but he doesn’t hate the whole not-falling-on-his-face thing.

When he reenters the waiting room, he sees that Lawson’s made a friend. He’s right where Tommy left him, but now there’s a little boy in the chair Tommy sat in before, no older than five, maybe, sneakered feet swinging off the edge of the chair as he talks animatedly. He’s gesturing with his hands, and his hair is bouncing on his forehead as he bobs his head, and Lawson has angled his body toward him and his whole face radiates amusement in a way so sweet and gentle that Tommy’s breath catches in his throat.

When asked, Lawson claims to dislike children. “I don’t do kids, man.” Followed by a quick, decisive shake of his head. Dana teases that it’s because he’s an overgrown kid himself, which devolves into the sort of back-and-forth banter that leaves Leo catching Tommy’s gaze in commiseration...only for Leo’s face to fall entirely when Lawson turns his snark on Tommy, and Tommy hurls it right back. It’s a miracle they haven’t been kicked out of a restaurant yet.

Tommy knows Lawson genuinely doesn't care for teenagers. He's dealt with too many in every coffeeshop, boutique, bookstore, and restaurant he's ever worked in. But Tommy's never seen him be anything but patient and indulgent with children. The way he's being now.

"...and then it exploded!" Tommy hears the boy say as he draws near.

"It did?" Lawson affects surprise. "No way! You're telling me the Death Star explodes?"

"Yeah!" The boy throws up both hands in demonstration, stubby fingers spread. "It was awesome."

"Hayden," a woman sitting a few seats over calls. "Please don't be a bother."

Lawson shoots her the sort of smile Tommy's seen charm little old ladies and little girls, and everyone in between. He offers a wave. "It's fine." To the boy, he says, "What about Lando and the crew in the Falcon? Did they make it out before everything went..." He spreads both hands apart in a gesture eloquent of boom.

"Yeah, they did."

Tommy gets closer, and Lawson's head whips around. Before he smiles, Tommy catches the flicker of worry in his gaze, and is damn tired of being the one to put it there. "Hey, babe, how'd it go?" The smile stays fixed, but his gaze travels down to Tommy's feet as he takes the last few steps.

Damn it. He definitely looks like a weirdo walking this way.

"Fine."

The smile slips. A notch forms between Lawson's brows.

"How are things out here?" Tommy says, quickly, and tips his head toward the kid.

Lawson's little frown says they'll be having A Discussion in the car, but he lets it go for now. "Good. My new friend Hayden's been telling me all about The Return of the Jedi." He winks: play along.

"Aw, man," Tommy says, without being able to muster Lawson's pretend, for-the-kid's-benefit enthusiasm. "I always wanted to see that."

The kid turns to him. "Hi, I'm Hayden."

Unlike Lawson, Tommy really doesn't like kids. He dealt with plenty of teenagers as a beat cop, and his baby face meant he was always the responding officer who got to play the whole hey, c'mon guys, don't make my life harder, my sergeant's breathing down my neck already card. Throw in some relevant movie references and lingo and he could usually talk them down from their petty vandalism and skateboarding misadventures without a lot of fuss. But children, with their eyes taking up half their faces, and their blunt questions, and their guileless questions always trip him up. He's thirty-eight, an ex-undercover detective with a literal body count, who played a mob boss for five years, and one little boy in a waiting room makes him want to bolt.

"Yeah. Hi," he says, stiffly. "I'm Tommy."

"I have a friend at school named Tommy." The boy swings his legs some more, so hard Tommy's afraid he might swing himself right off the chair.

"Neat."

"Why do you have a cane?"

See? Blunt.

“I got shot.”

Hayden’s eyes get huge. “Whoa? Really? That’s awesome.”

“Hayden.” The mother swoops in and takes him by the arm. “Come over here and work on your coloring book.” She lifts her head, expression pinched as she glances between Lawson and Tommy. “I’m so sorry. Hayden, come on.”

“It’s okay—” Lawson starts, but the mom is hauling the boy up and leading him across the room. “Bye, Hayden.”

“Bye, Lawson!” Hayden calls cheerfully.

Lawson stands, and both knees go crack. “Yeesh,” he hisses, and chuckles under his breath. But he doesn’t stumble, or falter, or lose his balance. He gripes about his “old man knees” every time that pop like gunshots, but he doesn’t need a cane. He can walk for hours without missing a beat.

Tommy isn’t jealous of the fact, but sometimes he watches Lawson jog across the yard toward the mailbox, or effortlessly take the stairs two at a time, and he marvels at the wonder that is the human body. The way it can do so much...until it can’t.

“Ready?”

“Yeah.”

“Here, I can take those.” Lawson reaches for Tommy’s handful of booklets.

Time slows. Tommy envisions the Recovery and Your Mental Health booklet, its

benign, blue cover and silhouette of a human head. Thinks about Lawson seeing it; thinks about Lawson looking from it, to him, and seeing yet another way that Tommy is broken. Lesser. So different from the boy, and then the man, that he fell in love with.

Now sweat prickles across his skin. Panic lurches in his gut. “No,” he says, too fast, and tucks the materials into his stomach; cups them there in the curve of his arm, protective.

Hurt flashes across Lawson’s face, there and then smoothed.

“No,” he repeats, softer, “that’s okay. I’ve got ‘em.”

“Okay.” Lawson nods. “That’s cool.”

Tommy waits for the inevitable, familiar, welcome weight of Lawson’s hand at the small of his back as they head for the door...but it doesn’t come.

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Lawson doesn't touch him all the way out to the car, and doesn't offer to open the door for him. He doesn't always. Sometimes it's a hammed-up joke, and sometimes it's sincere worry. It happens less and less, but this time, the lack of it coupled with the lack of touching leaves unpleasant prickles up the back of Tommy's neck. He's aware that he's fucked up, but he's spent seven months insisting he can do things for himself; he's not sure why today was the breaking point.

Lawson turns on the radio, though, and talks over it, like normal. They debate what to get Lisa for Mother's Day next month, and argue about the lyrics of two songs, and Lawson laughs, eyes crinkled at the corners, and it's okay. It's good.

They go home, change for work, Tommy in nice slacks and a nicer sweater, Lawson in his Coffee Town uniform of khakis, polo, and visor. Lawson drives him to work, and kisses him over the center console before he gets out.

"Love you."

"Love you. Have a good rest of the day."

It's all normal.

Except for the fact that Lawson doesn't press him about his new doctor at all.

Immediately after the shooting, when Tommy still relied on a walker and was struggling to come back from having his colostomy reversed, Lawson didn't sit in the waiting room. He came back to the exam room each time, nodding along, taking notes on his phone, asking the doctors lots of questions. Tommy was torn: he loved

spending so much time together; loved Lawson's big hands righting him when he stumbled, and guiding him, and squeezing him supportively on the arm, the neck, the waist, the thigh. He loved that Lawson's love was writ so large in each pointed inquiry, and each follow-up, and each frown.

But a part of him, selfishly, resented the necessity for that particular brand of care. Forehead kisses and soup deliveries instead of sweaty, tangled nights and dinner dates. They were newlyweds, but instead of a honeymoon, they were going on never-ending trips to the doctor.

Before he was prescribed something to help him sleep, he used to lie awake at night, Lawson's breath warm and even in his ear, where he was curled carefully around Tommy, not holding him for fear of hurting him, and his eyes would sting with unshed tears of frustration. He was so grateful, and so thankful, and so in love; was so lucky to be alive, and to have this second chance with the love of his life, to wear his ring on his finger. And yet they'd already lost twenty years, and they were playing invalid and caretaker, rather than husbands.

He hates himself for those thoughts, but they keep cropping up like mushrooms, his mind gone to damp, dark ground where flowers struggle to thrive.

When Lawson stopped coming back to the exam room at appointments, per Tommy's request, he still grilled him all the way home about what the doctor said.

But not today.

He goes to work, he sells insurance policies, and deals with client woes. Lawson's waiting in the parking lot at five, and he grins, and offers one of Coffee Town's head-sized chocolate chip cookies across the console. "Brought ya something, handsome."

That, at least, is normal, and the knot of tension that has been slowly winding tighter

and tighter all day in the pit of Tommy's stomach unravels by a few turns. "Ooh, my hero."

"I try." Lawson flexes his arm, as though it's a joke, but, well, damn. Tommy's in love with his biceps, and bites them as often as he can in appreciation.

They go home, and relieve Nancy the nurse. They check on Bill – there's a Family Feud marathon on the Gameshow Network and he invites them to watch with him – and then change into more casual clothes. "Dad, Tommy can keep you company. I'll start on dinner before Mom gets here," Lawson says, and Tommy bites back a sigh. Not because he doesn't enjoy visiting with his father-in-law – quite the opposite – but because he hates the idea that he needs to rest. That he can't stand at the counter at Lawson's shoulder and help.

Over chicken parm – Tommy missed this sort of home-cooking so much in his twenty years away, but feels a stab of guilt that he can't run it off – Lisa asks about his appointment.

"How was Dr. Wilson?" She sounds excited, fork poised above her plate. "Could she tell you anything new?"

Tommy's bite of pasta sticks in his throat before he swallows it down like a lead ball. "She was..."

Fine, he starts to say. But Lawson's gone still beside him, big body poised in an uncharacteristically careful way. He wants to know; he's wanted to know all day, and, Tommy realizes with a drop in his stomach, he's been waiting for Tommy to make the overture. Because he's tired of making it himself? Because Tommy's pushed him away one too many times?

Shit.

It's easier, somehow, to look across the table and tell Lisa instead, while guilt churns his half-eaten dinner. He's honest: "She was different than I expected."

Lisa's brows go up. "Really? In a positive way?"

He pictures Dr. Wilson's bright smile, and takes a deep breath, and wills some of his useless tension away. "Yeah, definitely. A little more laid back than some of the others I've seen, but more helpful, too."

"Oh?"

Needlessly, stupidly, his face warms. "She says that it's normal to still be..." Falling. Going numb. Staggering. Nearly braining himself in the shower. "Struggling," he settles for. "She said there's no timeline on nerve regeneration and that I should – should give myself more time." His teeth grit on the last, and he swallows, and works to unstick his jaw. He had no idea he was so prideful until this all happened; he thinks Lawson would laugh if he said as much. Ha! Baby, you've always been a tyrant. "She, um. She showed me a better way to walk. So that I don't trip so much."

"Oh," Lisa says again, delighted this time. "That's wonderful."

Beside him, Lawson lets out a deep breath. "Is that what that was? Earlier?"

Tommy turns to him, wondering what he'll find, and Lawson looks relieved. He was worried about Tommy's new, more purposeful gait.

Tommy is so, so tired of making this man worry about him. But he can't keep the defensive edge from his voice when he says, "Yeah. She thinks I'm, like, throwing myself forward with each step – not like that," he says, when Lawson grins, and nods. "Shut up."

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Boys,” Lisa says.

Tommy glares at him, then faces forward again and reins in his flash of temper. “She said that the reason I keep falling is because I can’t anticipate when my nerves will fail to fire, and—” He realizes he’s never said this aloud to any of them, not even Lawson. When he trips, or even falls, he says it’s fine, I’m alright, stupid feet. Lawson must know some of it, thanks to all those early appointments he attended, but Tommy doesn’t give voice to his body’s failings. “The nerves are still repairing themselves,” he says, face getting warmer; he feels the weight of their gazes – though kind, encouraging – keenly. “And sometimes the signal...I guess it glitches. That’s why my toes drag, or my legs go numb, or – or I can’t feel them at all.”

Lawson’s fork clinks down heavily on his plate.

Tommy continues, “If I’m walking like normal, and the glitch happens, I can’t catch myself in time. So she wants me to try moving slower, and taking smaller, less committed steps.”

Lisa makes a hmm sort of face. “Well. That makes sense.”

Tommy tucks back into dinner, and is thankful when discussion turns to one of Lisa’s newest tailoring customers.

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“There – right, yeah, there – oh God.”

Lawson breathes a quiet laugh, breath cool by the time it fans across the back of Tommy’s neck. “Good?” he asks, innocently.

Tommy grunts in reply and turns his face into the pillow.

Several months back, when his abdominal wounds had closed up and been deemed fully healed, one of his doctors suggested massage therapy to help keep him loose and to relieve the soreness inevitable with overcompensating for his lower body weakness. “You can go to a professional, or your partner can learn some simple techniques and help you at home.”

To no one’s surprise, Lawson leaped at the chance to help, and Tommy was grateful not to have to show off his gunshot scars to a stranger at a massage parlor. Lawson bought a book, watched some online tutorials, and Dana hooked him up with a whole kit of oils.

Tonight, it’s after ten, Bill and Lisa are retired to their room at the other end of the hall, and Tommy’s stripped down to his boxer-briefs, belly-down on the bed while Lawson kneels over him and works his magic.

Lawson has big hands. All of him is big, in a long, lanky sort of way, and Tommy loves every part of him, but his hands are just...magic. Broad, squared-off palms, and long, strong fingers that knead into the sore muscles on either side of Tommy’s spine just right. He has a penchant for finding knots Tommy didn’t know he possessed, and then teasing them loose with firm pressure. The oil is fragrant, and turns his back slippery, and the glide of fingertips, the faint, slick sound, is hypnotic.

Also, Lawson sitting on the backs of his thighs, knees bracketing Tommy’s hips, his weight dipping the mattress while he strokes over Tommy’s shoulder blades, is sending pleasant tingles of awareness down to the cradle of his hips. A slow heat builds there, a faint stirring in his boxer-briefs. Nothing urgent, yet, but a tease of pleasure-that-could-be.

That usually happens when they do this. Sometimes something comes of it...but not

always. And when it does, it's always gentle. Careful in a way that things have never been between them. Or weren't. Before the shooting.

Tommy turns his head again to ask, "What scent is that?"

"Frankincense." Lawson leans a little more weight and digs in with his thumbs, until Tommy grunts again. "You like it?"

"Yeah. It's..." Thinking is getting harder and harder as Lawson continues to work him over. It's not the only thing getting harder. "Earthy," he settles on, and Lawson chuckles, low, and deep, and quiet. Just for this room, and the small space between them.

"It's supposed to be good for your skin. And help you relax."

"Mm. Yeah. It's working."

"Yeah?" Lawson sweeps his palms out to the points of his shoulders and then smooths them firmly down the backs of his upper arms. "You were really tight tonight, babe."

There's a lewd comment to be made there, but Tommy resists. He hasn't wanted to ask outright; keeps hoping he can tease and suggest Lawson into taking the lead.

"Yeah, well..."

Lawson's hands smooth back up his arms, and inward along his shoulders, joining at the base of his neck and kneading there in a way so good that it hurts. Tommy squeezes his eyes shut, and Lawson eases off the pressure.

"No, no, it's good. I like it."

There's a pause, and then Lawson starts digging in again. "Well, what?"

"Hm?" Tommy closes his eyes and tries to arch up into the touch like a cat, hungry for it.

"You said, 'Yeah, well...' Yeah, well, what?" Lawson works oily fingers up the back of his neck, and traces his hairline. "Dr. Wilson get you all out of sorts?"

"No." That's not a lie, but it's not the truth, either. "I mean...physical therapy always sucks," he finishes, lamely, and berates himself for choking on the words.

The problem is, if he had to dig down to the root of it, he spent a very long time pretending to be something he wasn't. Hiding his wants, and his hurts, playing a part, running every single thing he said through a filter before it left his mouth. I love you so much, I've loved you for the whole twenty years we were apart and was trying to get back to you, please hear me out, is what he wanted to say the moment he walked into Coffee Town and laid eyes on Lawson. But he was an asshole instead, playing Tommy Cattaneo, glowering, insulting, hurting.

He got his happy ending. But those twenty years of police work took their toll, and he's learning just how much of one every day.

"She bend you up like a pretzel?" Lawson asks, a laugh lurking in his voice.

"Not today. It was mostly just walking." He shifts his hips, but not far, because he can't, because Lawson's straddling him and he's heavy. God, he loves that. A little more heat builds between his legs. "But you can do that, if you want." He doesn't have to fake the way his voice gets raspy at the end.

Lawson's hands still again. And stay still, this time. Tommy hears Lawson's breath, a little rough, a little unsteady. He doesn't get the impression it's because he's turned

on.

Tommy twists his head around and sees that Lawson is staring at his back, his lashes low, his jawline sharp and square as he tenses it. He doesn't look angry, but there's something wrong, there. A depth of thought, of worry, that in turn makes Tommy worry.

“What?”

Lawson's hands move again – but only to grip on either side of Tommy's neck, right at the join, long fingers wrapping over to lay against his collarbones. His voice is quiet when he says, “I didn't know you couldn't feel your legs at all.” When he swallows, it sounds thick and painful, and his lashes flicker fast, dark fans on his cheeks.

Tommy's chest clenches. “It's only sometimes. And I'm not sure that's even the right way to say it. It's not like they're not there, it's just–” He cuts off when Lawson's eyes lift and flash to meet his own, full of impossible hurt.

“Why didn't you tell me?” It's not accusatory, but sad. Terribly, awfully sad.

Tommy wants to punch himself in the face for putting that look on Lawson's.

“I thought you were feeling better.”

“I am. Law, I am.”

His gaze drops again.

“Let me up. I wanna turn over.”

Lawson moves off his legs, and then, to Tommy's dismay, moves to sit on the side of the bed, feet on the floor. He grips the mattress, and his shoulders slump, looking narrower than they really are inside his plain gray t-shirt.

Tommy twists around to lie on his side, propped on his elbow. He can feel his legs at the moment, and they respond accordingly, only the faintest pains shooting down the outsides of his hips and wrapping around his thighs. Familiar pangs he's long since learned to dismiss.

He slides his hand in the crook of Lawson's elbow. "Hey."

Lawson's head only half turns, his gaze askance, wary.

Oh, Tommy thinks. I've really fucked up.

Voice gentle, he says, "I didn't tell you because it wasn't something new. I've been dealing with it off and on the whole time."

"I thought—" Lawson starts, then shakes his head, and looks away again.

Tommy sits up, which isn't as effortless as it used to be, his muscles gone soft and unsteady from disuse. And isn't that stupid? He should have been working on his stretches, on his Pilates, his upper body exercises, and instead he's kept putting it off. When I'm better, he always thinks. When I'm healed.

But maybe he never will be.

The thought puts a lump in his throat that he swallows down, so he can pet up and down Lawson's arm, raking through the dusting of golden hair there.

"What?" he prompts. "What are you upset about?"

Lawson shakes his head again, and breathes a humorless chuckle. “Shouldn’t that be my line?”

Tommy frowns. “What?”

Lawson turns to him, then, and the hurt from before has been carefully screened with something wry and shielding; the sort of look Lawson gave him before the shooting. Before he learned every truth there was to know about Tommy. ““What are you upset about?”” Lawson parrots. “Baby, you’ve been upset for months. I’m just trying not to rock the boat.”

“I haven’t–” he starts, and then frowns again, and Lawson’s look says gotcha. Unhappily.

“Look, I get that you want to be independent, and do things for yourself. You were this, like, Big Bad Cop or whatever – or, well, Little Bad Cop, y’know – and I know you don’t like it when I’m always helping you, or touching you, or–”

Horror floods across Tommy’s tongue like bile. “Stop,” he snaps, harsher than he means to.

Lawson does stop, mouth half-open.

“Don’t say that. I always want you to touch me. I don’t ever want you to stop touching me.”

Lawson’s mouth slowly closes. His brow furrows. “Last week, when I tried to hold your arm when we stepped up onto the curb at Walmart, you slapped my hand away.” His voice is flat, tamping his hurt down even deeper, and Tommy hates himself, he really does.

“But that wasn’t – it wasn’t that I – it wasn’t because you were touching me. I–” His next breath hitches, and his chest squeezes tight, and the long-healed wounds in his gut tweak and pull as though fresh, because this – the consequences of every dismissal and brush-off – are far worse than he first suspected. His husband thinks he doesn’t want him to touch him, and he doesn’t – he can’t–

An image of the mental health booklet fills his mind, and Dr. Wilson is damn smart, because she picked up on something Tommy has never admitted: he’s not doing well with his recovery. Mentally. Emotionally. He’s not handling it, and in the process, he’s punished the person he loves most in the world.

His breath comes in choppy little gasps.

“It’s okay,” Lawson says, his tone still terribly flat.

“No, it’s not!” He’s loud, too loud, loud enough that Lawson’s brows fly up, but he doesn’t care. This is important, and he’s too emotionally stunted by his current physical state to express it properly.

The booklet. He needs the booklet. He’s not opened it yet, stuffed it on the bottom of the stack and left it on top of the dressing table that’s become his since moving in, but there must be something useful in it. If nothing else, he can give it to Lawson, and maybe he can page through it, and, with its help, decipher what Tommy’s trying to convey.

He swings his legs over the side of the bed. Stands. And his left leg buckles.

He collapses.

Or, he would have, had Lawson’s arm not caught him around the waist, and spun him, and lifted him. Lawson sweeps him up effortlessly, with a quick, “Oh, shit,” an

automatic reaction, and pulls him up to sit sideways across his lap, locked securely in both arms.

Tommy flings his arms around Lawson's neck in his own automatic gesture, and winds up with his face jammed up under Lawson's chin, gasping and panting and flooding with hot embarrassment and shame...and regret. The regret is worst of all, knowing how much damage he's done each time he's rejected Lawson's help.

"You're alright," Lawson murmurs quietly against the top of his head, his heart racing under Tommy's palm where it rests on his chest. "I've got you. You're okay."

And that's true, isn't it? Even when he was being a prickly asshole, Lawson's always had him, since the moment he woke in the hospital, fuzzy with drugs and helpless with pain, Lawson's wet-eyed face swimming above him like something from a dream.

Since before that. Since he knelt in the gravel at Tommy's side, head haloed by the sun, and pressed his hands to Tommy's middle to staunch the flow of blood. I'm sorry, baby, I'm so sorry.

Tommy's sorry, too.

The hot, spiked ball of emotion in his chest lurches up his throat, and his eyes fill with tears, and his next exhale is a rattling sob against the quick-throbbing pulse in Lawson's throat.

"No. No, no, it's not okay," he gasps. Once the tears start, he can't blink them back, and then he's just crying into the collar of Lawson's shirt. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Law. I never meant – I don't want—" He hiccups, mortified, but unable to stop.

"Oh, baby." Lawson sounds heartbroken. He rubs up and down his back, the way

slick with massage oil. “It’s okay.”

Tommy grips tight handfuls of his t-shirt and cries. “No, it’s not, Lawson! It’s not okay. I can’t–”

Lawson stiffens, and, belatedly, he realizes why. I can’t. Lawson has admitted – haltingly, in the dark, only vulnerable enough to say so in a moment of post-coital looseness – that the last thing Tommy said to him twenty years ago was I can’t, and that it had fucked him up for a long time. That Tommy’s bitten back I can’t risk telling you why I’m leaving for your own safety sounded like I can’t be with you. I can’t love you. I can’t keep doing this.

Fresh panic floods Tommy’s veins. His heart beats wildly, trying to punch through his chest, and his wrists, and his eardrums. Forget breathing, he’s not sure he can.

He shoves back – he feels Lawson’s arms start to loosen, prepared to turn him loose if that’s what he wants, and Lawson’s expression is shuttered and closed-off and every kind of wrong – and grabs Lawson ungently by the face, a hand on either side of his jaw. It probably hurts, but Lawson doesn’t pull away; his eyes widen, and he goes still, thighs tensed under Tommy’s.

Tommy knows he’s still crying openly, tears hot and slick down his cheeks, nose running, and he must look disgusting, but this is too important. He has to get it out, even if he chokes and hiccups and sobs his way through it.

“I can’t,” he repeats, stressing it, and Lawson’s throat bobs as he swallows, “say what I want to say – what I need to say. I don’t even – there’s so much, and all of it’s me, it’s what’s wrong with me, Law. There’s not – there’s not anything you’ve done wrong.” He sniffs, hard and wet and gross, and his teeth start chattering with the overload of emotion, but the first sentences unstoppered something inside him, and the words come easier, then – the words come pouring out, through his choked and

clotted throat.

“I want better for you. I want to be your husband.”

“You are—” Lawson starts, and Tommy shakes his head.

“I want to be your husband, and not this – this sad sack you have to take care of all the time. I don’t hate that you help me – I hate that I need help. I hate that I can’t – that I can’t drive myself anywhere, or help you take care of your dad, or run errands for your mom, or fucking – be there for you, for once. I want to surprise you at work. I want to get up on the ladder and clean the gutters so it’s not one of the thousand more things you have to do. I want to take you to Hawai’i. I want us to have sex.”

“We do have sex.”

They do. Hand jobs, and blow jobs, and, sometimes, at the end of a massage, Lawson’s breathing will get choppy and he’ll dig his thumbs into the underside of Tommy’s ass and say can I? Baby, can I? And he’ll get himself off, hot jets across Tommy’s back, and then ease Tommy over onto his back and return the favor.

But.

“Fine, I want to fuck!” Tommy bursts out. “I want you to fuck me. I want you to break me in fucking half. I want the reason I can’t walk to be because you railed me into next week, not because my stupid fucking useless body is—”

“Hey.” Lawson’s face crumples. Shields down, eyes wet, lip wobbling. “Hey, hey, stop, come here.” He cups the back of Tommy’s head and pulls him in close; tucks his face back into the tear-damp collar of his shirt. His other hand splays across the center of his back, right where the exit wound scars turn the skin a puckered silver-pink, and holds him tight. “Baby,” he says, pleadingly, “stop. Please stop.”

He can't, though, trembling, tugging at Lawson's shirt, hiccupping and crying and just...melting down. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I made you wait for twenty years, and now I can't even give you the kind of marriage you deserve."

"Fuck," Lawson murmurs, rubbing circles on his back, rocking him gently side to side. Even if it feels like being reduced to a sobbing child – which he guesses he is right now – it's so comforting that Tommy relaxes and goes with it. "Okay, okay," Lawson says. And they sway like that a minute. Both of them sniffing hard.

Tommy's crying has quieted when Lawson finally speaks again, and there's a fierceness underlying the quiet tone of his voice. "Okay, let's get something straight, first. You didn't make me wait for twenty years. I could have moved on."

The idea sends a shudder through Tommy that Lawson definitely feels.

He ruffles the hair at his nape and kisses the side of his head, lips pressed into his hair when he says, "In a lot of ways, I did move on. I mean, yeah, you leaving broke my heart," he says, with a forthcoming bluntness he never used when Tommy was still playing a Cattaneo. He doesn't dodge and deflect the way he did at first, and it's as welcome as it is devastating, in this moment. "It was one of the very worst moments of my life. But I didn't go lie down in the woods and wait to die like Bella Swan or some shit."

Tommy barks a sudden, shocked laugh, watery with leftover tears, and Lawson huffs into his hair, breath warm on his scalp.

Softer, he continues, "When you opened your eyes in that hospital bed – when you said my name – that was the best moment of my life." Another kiss, this one lingering. "I got you back." Again, wondering, "I got you back. I got to keep you. I never thought I'd get the chance."

Tommy turns his head so he can press his cheek down on Lawson's collarbone, and blinks the last, lingering tears from his eyes. Exhaustion closes over him like a weighted blanket, and he gazes fuzzily at the lamp on the nightstand, the framed photo under it, one from their wedding day, Tommy wan and leaning on his walker, Lawson's arm around him, and his face buried in the top of Tommy's head, eyes shut and crinkled at the corners. Tommy remembers that he was smiling and crying at the same time.

"I want to be better for you," he says, voice hoarse from crying so hard.

Lawson rocks him some more. "You're everything to me. I just want you to be happy. And to feel better."

When Tommy wipes at his face, it's with a clumsy hand, shaky from the emotional upheaval. Lawson takes a corner of the blanket and gently wipes his face for him. Another small act of care, the sort of thing that always makes Tommy feel small...and that's the problem, isn't it? Tommy's perception of those acts. They only smother him because he's wracked with shame and guilt at his own weakness. And Lawson only offers them in adoration.

"Thank you," he murmurs, when Lawson's done.

Lawson tweaks his nose, chuckles at the face he makes, and then cups Tommy's jaw and tilts his head back so they can make eye contact.

He looks tired, blue eyes soft and worried, but determined, too. His thumb traces the puffy skin under Tommy's eye. "If you want me to back off a little, I will. I'm not saying it'll be easy, but I can try. I don't want – I don't want to be the one who makes you feel bad like this."

Tommy shakes his head, and then leans into his palm. "You don't." When Lawson

cocks a brow, he says, “You don’t. You don’t ever make me feel bad. I just...” He sighs, and it loosens something in his chest. “I’ve not been dealing with recovery the right way. Mentally. I think I thought...” He chews at his lip. “That if I quit the force, and we got married, and my body healed, that that was it, you know? I thought...I don’t know. I should be grateful I’m even alive, but I guess I thought I’d be back to one-hundred percent by now.”

Lawson looks pained, thumb sweeping over his skin, back and forth, back and forth. “I know, baby. I’m sorry.”

A light tap sounds at the door, and, hesitantly, Lisa calls, “Everything okay?”

“Oh fuck,” Tommy groans, and buries his face in Lawson’s shoulder. “I woke up your parents.”

Lawson pats the back of his head soothingly. “We’re fine, Mom. We were watching Homeward Bound, and Tommy gets all weepy when they leave Shadow behind.”

Tommy pinches his ribs and Lawson squirms and hisses a laugh.

“Sorry, Lisa,” Tommy calls. “We’re good.”

“Okay. Well. Sleep tight, boys.”

“Night, Mom.”

“Night.”

They sit in silence while her slippers retreat back down the hall, Lawson playing with Tommy’s hair.

When he thinks the coast is clear, Tommy wriggles to sit up higher on his lap, so they're face-to-face. "I'm sorry."

Lawson's smile is crooked and sad. He reaches up to push Tommy's hair off his face; it's longer than it used to be, more of his natural curls showing these days. "You already said that."

"I know. Jerk. I'm saying it formally. This is my formal apology, okay, so take it seriously."

Lawson sits up straight, expression going mock-stern. "Sir, yes, sir."

Tommy pinches his nipple through his shirt until he twists away, laughing and yelping. "Okay, okay. You're serious." He softens. "I get it."

"Do you, though?" Tommy places both hands on his chest. Even in the most serious of moments, when sex is the farthest thing from his mind, Tommy can't help but marvel at the breadth of him. It will never not be a turn-on. "I spent twenty years trying to get back to you, and I promised myself I'd do everything I could to make a life for us. To make you happy."

Lawson blinks, and his eyes glimmer with welling tears. "Yeah." His voice goes raspy. "I read your letters."

He did, didn't he? So he knows Tommy's heart, inside and out. And yet Tommy's wasted all this time being a stubborn shithead.

He presses his fingertips into Lawson's pecs, willing him to understand. "I wanted it to be perfect."

Lawson smiles so wide, even as a tear escapes his eye and slides down the side of his

nose. “Baby.” He pulls him in and kisses him, firm and sweet. “You have met me, right?” he asks, when he draws back. “You understand that if you wanted perfect, you should have picked out a Leo of your own, right?”

“Shut up.” Tommy puts his arms around his neck and hugs him. As he does, he realizes they don’t do it nearly enough. Lawson always has an arm around his waist, or his shoulders. They hold hands; they hook arms. Lie tangled in bed, or on the couch. But they don’t hug, and it’s the balm that Tommy needs in the moment, chest-to-chest, heartbeat-to-heartbeat.

Lawson needs it too, judging by the way he wraps him up tight and hugs him back.

“Dr. Wilson gave me some stuff to read,” Tommy says, after a few minutes.

Lawson hums encouragingly.

“She said it might be helpful if you read it, too.”

“Okay. I’ll read it.”

Tommy squeezes him even tighter, and Lawson cups his head, and rocks them again, and it’s okay. They’re okay.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:35 am

Tommy wrote his first letter to Lawson the night he left Eastman. He wrote it in the back of a car, tears coursing down his cheeks, using a handheld book light to see the notebook, and snapping furiously at Noah when he asked what he was doing. Noah found out, because he was bound to, the two of living in close quarters: as teens, as young adults, as recruits, as rookies, as newly minted officers.

He was twenty-one when Frank found out about the letters.

He and Noah shared a shitty second-floor walk-up with one bedroom and one bathroom. Because Noah was larger – and damn if that knowledge didn't chafe every day – Tommy slept on the fold-out couch. He used the tiny kitchen island as a desk, and was working on his latest letter before he got a call from the desk sergeant about a shift that needed covering, and he went to shower.

He was in the shower, rinsing, when he heard a muffled shout of, "Boys?" from the living room. Frank's voice was unmistakable, even through a door and the hiss of falling water.

"Out in a minute!" Tommy called, and finished up.

When he emerged a few minutes later, clad in nothing but sweats, and toweling his wet hair, he saw Frank standing at the island, thumbing through the notebook there, and his guts turned to lead.

Frank turned toward him slowly, clutching a handful of looseleaf pages. His brows were up, his eyes big in a pointed, aggressive way. "What," he said, slowly, lifting the pages, and rattling them, "the fuck. Is this?"

Tommy started across the room – and Frank lifted the paper overhead, a childish play at keep away, his face adult and severe in its rage.

Tommy stuck out his hand. “Those are mine.”

“They’re incriminating evidence. They’re – they’re fucking confessions. Are you insane?” Frank fumed. “You can write all the dumbass love letters you want, but you can’t talk about your job, Thomas. Who the fuck is” – he tipped his head back to consult the paper he held aloft, while Tommy’s heart tried to beat out of his chest – “Lawson?” he spat. “Is that that fucking lieutenant who keeps making eyes at you?”

“What? No. No one’s – Lawson is Lawson. From Eastman. My Lawson.” As wrong as that was – Lawson wasn’t his anything, not after the way he left – it sent satisfaction zipping all the way down to his toes to lay claim like that. My Lawson. His boyfriend. His lover. His...everything.

“Eastman?” Frank said, stunned. “Are you – are you kidding me? You’re jeopardizing your whole career for some little boyfriend you had in Eastman?”

Fury whipped through him, snapping pain along all of his insides. He lunged, jumped, and snatched the paper out of Frank’s hand. He heard a tear, and let out an involuntary cry of dismay as he settled back on his heels.

Frank gripped his shoulder hard and dragged them in face-to-face. “Look at me, you little shit. I need you to tell me that you aren’t telling the goddamn world about–”

Tommy knocked his hand away and bowed up his back. Shouted, “Shut up!”

He’d never done such a thing before, and it shocked Frank into silence.

“I’m not sending these anywhere!” He was still shouting. He found that he couldn’t

stop shouting. “I’m keeping them – I’m holding them until I can give them to him in person when all this awful shit is over!”

Frank gaped at him. “What are you—”

But Tommy was on a roll. “I left him! I fucking left him! Without an explanation, without even telling him I love him, and – and I can’t – I can’t even tell him that I still do because—” He shook his fistful of letters. “So I’m writing it all down, and I’ll give it to him one day. When I’m done. When I go home.”

Frank’s face goes incredulous. “You are home. You were born in New York. Eastman was just a diversion.”

“Home is wherever he is,” Tommy spat. “Do you not get that? Lawson is home. Lawson is where I’m going after this.”

“Jesus Christ,” Frank sneered. “It was high school kid shit. Get over it.”

Tommy didn’t hear the key in the lock, didn’t hear Noah arrive, but when he lunged at Frank, strong arms gripped him around the waist and dragged him back.

“Whoa, whoa!” That was Noah’s voice, Noah’s breath rough and uneven in his ear as Tommy fought to get loose and take another run at Frank. “What’s going on?”

“He saw my letters,” Tommy seethed through clenched teeth, and redoubled his efforts to get loose. Noah was too strong, though. “He read them!”

“Oh shit,” Noah muttered.

Frank looked gratifyingly rattled. He pushed a hand through his hair and said, “Are you serious right now? You’re gonna take my head off over some boy you let bend

you over in high school?”

“Damn,” Noah muttered, and his grip tightened as Tommy cursed, and spit, and kicked, and struggled. He was no longer in possession of his body, nothing but blind rage and fingers curled into claws. All of this was Frank’s fault, all of it – save the part Tommy himself had played, when he’d fled from Lawson’s car, and – and...

It wasn’t until Noah said, “Shh, okay, it’s okay, calm down,” that Tommy realized he was crying. Hot tears pouring down his face and ugly, jagged sobs catching in his throat. His legs gave, and Noah held him up.

Above the awful, animal sounds of his own grief, he heard Noah say, “Frank, come on. Don’t fuck with him about Lawson. He’s – it’s serious, yeah? He’s keeping the letters. He’s not doing anything wrong.”

But he had done something wrong, hadn’t he? He’d run away from Lawson without telling him anything, and now he might never get the chance – or Lawson might have moved on – or he could–

The arms shifted, turned him, held him close. It wasn’t the chest he wanted to bury his face in, but it was still familiar, and comforting, and a place where he could hide while he gathered his composure.

Noah rubbed his back. “I’m sorry.”

And Tommy was sorry, too.

Far distant, he heard Frank murmur a quiet curse.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:35 am

Dana's accounting office is part of the same row of business condos as Tommy's State Farm office, so they have lunch together at least once a week at whichever food truck is set up in the parking lot. Today it's Tommy's favorite – Que Delicioso, a taco truck with the best queso and pico he's ever tasted – and they find a free picnic table where they can sit across from one another. Tommy carries his own paper boat, three tacos al pastor, and doesn't allow himself to get bent out of shape that Dana carries her food plus both their bottled waters and the Styrofoam cup of queso. It's a new feeling, that lack of guilt, and he finds himself working at it actively, but after last night, it feels important. He can carry the chips, bag gripped along with the handle of his cane, but not everything he would have once upon a time. And that's okay.

When they're seated across from each other beneath a wide, striped umbrella, he says, "How's the wedding planning coming?"

She groans theatrically and dunks a chip in queso. "You guys had the right idea. I wish we'd just gone to Vegas, honestly. His mom has all these second-cousins she wants us to invite, and it's getting out of control..." She spends a good ten minutes venting about her soon-to-be-in-laws, and Tommy makes sympathetic noises while he digs into his tacos.

"Hey," she says, after she winds down. "You okay?"

Tommy freezes, back half of his last taco raised to his mouth. He knew when he looked in the mirror this morning that he looked like he'd cried hard for a long time, but he hoped some of it faded in the half-day since.

Now, he sets his taco down, wipes his hands, and says, "Yeah. I'm fine." Skin

prickling with apprehension.

Dana tips her head and makes a face. She was intimidating as hell when they were kids, and still is today. More astute and aggressive than any of the detectives he worked with.

Tommy's first instinct is to deflect, because he's been doing it forever. But after last night, after he sat at Lawson's side while he paged through the mental health booklet, he feels like he owes more than his husband a dose of reality.

He sets the rest of his taco down and says, "Actually..."

Dana perks up like a hunting dog.

"Okay, don't look so excited."

She snorts.

"I. Um. I...need to apologize to you."

She looks baffled. "What for?"

"I've, uh...I've been a jackass. While I was recovering."

She snorts again, and dunks a chip. "You've always been a jackass, dude. That's kind of your selling point."

"No, it's..." When he trails off, she looks up again, and goes still. "I'm sorry. I've been a worse jackass than normal. I already apologized to Lawson—"

"Whoa, hey, no." She pushes her paper boat of food aside and grips his hand where it

rests on the table. “Are you okay?”

“I’m...yeah. I’m good.” And as he says it, he realizes that it’s true. Mostly. He’s better. For all that he hates crying, last night cleansed him. He feels lighter, now, even as he trips over his words. “I’ve not been...very good about accepting help. And I – my new doctor said...well, I want to do better. So if I’ve made you feel awkward or shitty while I was recovering, I’m sorry, Dana. Truly.”

She sits with that a beat. Squeezes his hand tight. She has a tendency to brush off sincerity, but sometimes, like now, she takes emotion seriously. “Thank you,” she says, solemnly. “For the record? I know what you’ve been dealing with sucks, and I don’t think you need to apologize to me, because I’ve never taken anything to heart.” She squeezes his hand again. “But I’m glad to hear you apologized to Lawson.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Her smile is small, but warm. “He adores you, you know.”

He nods, lump forming in his throat. “Yeah. It’s mutual.”

~*~

Lawson works a late shift, so Dana takes him home.

“Drinks tomorrow,” she reminds, and blows him a kiss as he eases out of the car. He waves in return, adjusts the notebook he’s carrying, and takes the ramp instead of the stairs because, as Dana reminded on the way home, being kind to himself isn’t weakness.

It’s going to take an adjustment.

But he doesn't stumble, and he gets inside okay, and when he hears the TV, he calls, "Bill?"

"Hi," he calls back, an easy word to say.

Tommy loosens the knot on his tie and hangs up his jacket. "Need anything?" he calls. "Drink? Snack?"

"Water. Pleassssse."

Tommy snags two bottles, plus a bag of pretzel sticks, and makes his careful way into the living room where Bill's chair is parked in front of People Puzzler.

"Ooh, what's the category?" Tommy asks, not having to fake interest. Lawson's teased him about it – sweetly, fondly – but he's gotten hooked on his father-in-law's game show habit.

Tommy opens both waters, and then the pretzels, and they pass them back and forth through two episodes before Bill turns to give him a pointed look.

"Are you...okay?" he asks.

Really, Tommy should have expected this. He did wake them up last night. "Yeah, I'm okay."

Bill frowns, one side of his mouth tugging down harder than the other.

"Law and I, um." He doesn't know how much he wants to tell his husband's father. "We're good," he says in a hurry, when Bill's frown deepens. "My new doctor and I talked about some things. I need to bring Lawson into my therapy a little more. I'm sorry I woke you guys up. I was. Um. Well. We're okay. But I..."

Bill nods, and he's grateful for the chance to trail off.

Then Bill reaches between them, hand slow and clumsy, and Tommy takes it on instinct. "We love you," he says with careful pronunciation.

Tommy blinks, and sniffs, and squeezes his hand hard, as he had Dana's earlier. "I know. I love you guys, too."

He's had far too many emotional milestones in the past twenty-four hours. Thankfully, he and Bill lock into Family Feud, and are laughing over the familiar, stupid dick answers when Lisa and Lawson get home.

"Hi, baby." Lawson leans over the back of the couch to kiss the top of his head, and Tommy reaches up to catch his face and hold him close before he pulls away.

"Hi."

"Good day?"

"Yeah. I had lunch with Dana."

That earns him another kiss, smacked into his hair. "Good."

"Stroganoff okay?" Lisa calls from the kitchen.

"Yeah, Mom, I'll come help," Lawson says.

Before he pulls away, Tommy grips Lawson's sleeve, and says, "Can I help?"

Lawson pauses. "You want to?" he says in a careful voice.

“Yeah. Let your mom sit down and have a break. I can chop stuff.”

There’s a beat, and Lawson swallows thickly, and then he says, “Okay.”

Lisa takes some convincing. “Oh, honey, it’s fine, I don’t mind.” But Tommy persists, sweetly, he hopes, and finally she agrees to pour herself a glass of wine and go into the living room with Bill.

Tommy gets a cutting board, knife, and onion, and sits down at the table to do his chopping.

Lawson stands at the stove, warming the skillet with olive oil, and glances over his shoulder as he tilts the pan. “You, uh...you good?” His expression is cautious.

Tommy tamps down his initial snarky response, because Lawson is his husband, and loves him, and worries about him, and he’s been far too cold and dismissive with him. “Yeah, sweetheart.” He smiles until Lawson smiles back. “I’m good. I just...your mom does so much for us...”

“Yeah. I know. You done with those?”

“Yep.”

Lawson comes to get them, and then Tommy accepts his duty of buttering and spreading garlic on bread while Lawson gets things hissing in the skillet. He is tired; his legs are weak. But he’s still helping.

Once the meat is browned and Lawson’s turned down the heat and added the sour cream and put the pasta on to boil, he pours them both a glass and moves to the table.

Tommy perks up and says, “Thanks, honey,” and has the pleasure of watching

Lawson perk up in turn.

When Lawson gazes at him with such naked warmth, he says, “Hey, c’mere,” and pulls him in for a kiss. Feels the shape of Lawson’s smile on his lips. Such simple acts, and they make Lawson so happy.

Tommy hooks a hand behind his neck and reels him in again, and when he pulls back a second time, Lawson is beaming. “Hi,” he murmurs, and Tommy’s heart melts. He really is the sweetest. Under his veneer of snark and flippancy, he’s the sweetest person Tommy’s ever met.

He should have told him that.

He can still.

He rubs his thumb along Lawson’s jaw. “You’re really sweet.”

Lawson’s brows go up. “Um. What?”

“You’re really sweet,” Tommy repeats. “And I wish we could go to bed right now.”

“Shit.”

“That do it for ya, big guy?”

“Yeah.”

Tommy grins. “Go check on the meat.”

“Yeah.” Lawson blinks a moment before he gets up to do so.

~*~

They have dinner, and it's good. Lisa insists on doing the dishes – a simple rinse and scrub, now, and into the new dishwasher Tommy bought them before he ended his tenure as a mob boss – and then she says, “I think we'll watch TV a while longer.”

Which is a pointed go-ahead for them to go upstairs and do married things.

Tommy is mortified.

But damn if he's not going to take advantage.

“Oh, shit,” he mutters when, halfway up the stairs, Lawson picks him up and slings him over his shoulder. “God, your parents know–”

“My parents are very understanding.”

“You didn't have to–”

Lawson pauses at the top of the stairs. “You want me to put you down?” he asks a little uncertainly, patting his ass.

“Don't you dare.”

Lawson makes a punched-out sound in response and hustles into their room.

He hesitates again, once the door is shut and locked, and Tommy knows he's being careful, being loving. It doesn't make him angry this time. Says, “Honey, would you please, please fuck me into next week?”

“Yeah.”

Lawson swings him around – and then catches him, and lays him down gently. His face is terribly tender. Tommy catches it in both hands and pulls him into a kiss. “Can I tell you something?”

“You can tell me anything,” Lawson pants against his lips. It’s never not going to be thrilling to know how much he’s wanted.

“You know I...” He doesn’t think he’s ever said this out loud before. Not in so many words. “I’ve not been good about...about being hurt, but I do like – I love – that you’re...bigger than me. That you...” He trails off when he watches Lawson’s pupils dilate. Touches his face again. “That you can push me around a little.”

Lawson gasps. “You like when I fuck you, baby?”

“Yeah. I miss it.”

“Oh my God.”

“Will you do it now?”

“Yeah.”

Lawson strips him out of his clothes with a slow carefulness that Tommy realizes is reverence. Not because Lawson thinks he’s weak, but because he loves him, really loves him.

And Tommy loves him back, so why did this sort of care ever make him question anything?

He wants – he wants so bad – so he doesn’t play shy. “Touch me. Please.”

Lawson makes a guttural sound, and then slicks his fingers and does touch him. Finally.

He doesn't tease, but he goes slow, and Tommy tips his head back, closes his eyes, and sinks into the feeling of it.

~*~

Both of Tommy's parents were slight – Mom is still, as timid and brittle as a sparrow. Frank is built like Tommy, not tall, but slender, wiry, athletic (though Tommy doesn't feel so athletic these days). Noah's size was a shock from birth. The old, faded photos in the baby book show two babies side-by-side, and one looks six months older than the other. When they began kindergarten, Mom told Noah, "You have to look out for your brother, because he's so little."

Little. The world trailed after him all his childhood like Pig Pen's cloud of stench. Women thought he was adorable, and wanted to pet his curls or chuck his chin. Men gave him pitying looks, and said things like "we all have different gifts." Or "maybe you'll hit a growth spurt."

It infuriated him. Made him prickly and self-conscious. And that was before Dad died. And before he had the stomach-lurching realization that he was different from his brother in another way, too; that he liked boys instead of girls.

He hated being little. Hated being pretty. Went cold and clammy all over at the concept of being delicate.

So it came as a mighty shock when he realized how wild he was for his size difference with Lawson.

Or maybe it shouldn't have been shocking, because being little, and pretty in

Lawson's eyes had always meant being cherished, and he'd never been delicate to him. Before Lawson, no one had ever looked at him like he was the best part of someone's day, or the most fascinating, attention-catching thing in the room. In any room. They teased and bickered and gave each other grief in the way of all friends, and Lawson's affection was so obvious, so wholehearted, so utterly Lawson's, unlike everyone else's, that Tommy felt safe, and sheltered, and was given the chance to come to his own revelations about what he liked best, in bed and out of it.

He likes the breadth of Lawson's shoulders; the way they stretch out all of his outgrown band and superhero t-shirts; the way, when he spreads an arm out, Tommy fits right under it, the perfect height and width, like that spot was made for him. He likes the squared-off shape of Lawson's palms, and the length of his fingers. Likes the way his hands were so damn big on his own smaller body; Jesus, when he cupped one gently around Tommy's throat...He likes the way the back of his neck and the tips of his ears always get sunburned at the start of summer. Likes the way his blue, blue eyes crinkle at the corners, temporarily in youth, but with faint, constant lines there now, happy crow's feet in the making.

He likes that, though by seventeen he had a pretty good estimation of how the still-lanky boy he loved would mature, he arrived back in Eastman to find Lawson a tall, filled-out slab of man. He loves that, actually. Loves that Lawson grew confident and sure of himself in those twenty years apart, now not simply willing, but damn good at taking Tommy apart. Rough when Tommy wants it, but sweet if left to his own devices.

It's always good. It's always so, so good...

He doesn't realize he's making these quiet, choked whimpering sounds on every thrust until Lawson quiets him with a kiss.

"Feels good?" he whispers, and Tommy digs into those broad shoulders he loves with

his fingertips.

“Yeah.”

He doesn't realize there are tears leaking silently from his eyes until Lawson kisses the tracks at his temples, too, and Tommy blinks them open to see Lawson's concerned, blurry face through a screen of dampness.

Lawson's hips still. His brow furrows, and his lips compress, and he looks like he doesn't want to, but finally asks, “You okay?”

He's so much better than okay. For the first time in seven months, Lawson – his husband – is buried to the hilt inside him, and even with careful prep, it's a lot, since it's been so long; it's overwhelming, and the last thing he wants is to stop. You okay? Displeasure, a kernel of anger, even, hardens in his chest.

But that isn't fair. Because this is his husband, who doesn't see him as little or delicate or weak. And last night he almost face-planted trying to swing his legs over the side of the bed, so it's a fair question.

And he gives it a fair moment of consideration.

They're both breathing hard, bellies sliding together, slick with sweat, and it's creating an incredible glide of friction on Tommy's cock where it's trapped between them. He's full, and overwhelmed in the best way.

He's fantastic.

But when he tries to squeeze his thighs tighter around Lawson's waist, they won't respond. He grits his teeth, and tries again, but no dice. “Aw, fuck. My legs have gone numb.

“Wait, no, no,” he digs in tighter with his fingers when Lawson’s eyes pop wide and he starts to pull back. “Don’t panic. Don’t...it’s alright.”

Lawson looks worried, though. Tommy pats his cheek, and thumbs at his lower lip and says, “It’s okay, sweetheart, I promise.”

They settle on a compromise, because that’s what makes marriages work, after all. Lawson pulls out and sits up on his knees; unfolds Tommy’s legs out straight and massages his quads and hamstrings and hip flexors until feeling floods back into them. Both of their erections flag, and they talk quietly about non-sex-related topics, and it reminds Tommy, with a sweet pang, of being teenagers. Of short refractory periods and talking about the latest episode of *Stargate* between rounds, naked and sleepy tangled up on Lawson’s twin bed.

The bed’s only a little bigger, now. But there’s a blood-warm white gold band on the third finger of the hand stroking up and down Tommy’s leg where it’s slung over Lawson’s hip, cementing what they were already sure of as boys.

They lie on their sides, facing one another, and Lawson stops his rubbing every few sentences with a gesture to emphasize his point.

“...usually the whole thing’s done over Zoom and phone calls and emails. But Leo’s going to some sort of seminar in New York in a couple weeks and he thinks it might be beneficial to meet the guy in person.”

Tommy frowns, and pets Lawson’s chest hair idly the wrong way before smoothing it. He wiggles his toes, gratified that he can, and pretty dexterously, too. “Did the guy’s email sound promising?” He thinks everything Lawson writes deserves to be published, but it’s been seven months since Lawson queried Leo’s friend, Keith, with a cover letter from Leo, and Keith only got back to him last week. Lawson’s been shruggy and evasive about the response, and Tommy’s ready to drive to New York

and have words with this Keith.

Lawson lifts his hand in a so-so gesture, squints, and says, “Ehhh. He wasn’t disinterested.”

When Tommy makes a face and starts to slander Keith – it’s pretty much standard OP at this point – Lawson resumes petting at his hip, digging his thumb firmly into the crease of his thigh which unlocks something in the tendons there, electricity zipping all the way down to the ball of his foot.

“It wasn’t bad,” Lawson says. “He said he’d be glad to take a look at my first five pages.”

“What? The first five? Are you fucking kidding?” Tommy is outraged on his behalf.

But Lawson chuckles. “It’s like I said before: all this publishing bullshit takes ages. It’s not like insurance, where someone gets a call returned in a couple hours.”

Tommy snorts. “It is bullshit. It’s unacceptable. A book’s good, or it sucks. It shouldn’t take seven months to think about.”

“It takes that long if you’re getting thousands of queries a day.”

“Yeah. Well. Keith sucks.”

Lawson’s smile is the smile Tommy remembers from their childhood, wide and unrestrained, eyes flipped to crescents; the same smile he wore when Tommy woke up in the hospital; nothing like the tight, mocking, angry half-sneers Lawson offered when Tommy was first back in town last year. This one, here, now, is the good kind, and it fills Tommy’s chest with a molten sort of heat that makes him think he might stop breathing, or melt like a chocolate chip dropped in a hot pan, and either would be

fine.

Lawson leans in and kisses him, soft and slow, and his rubbing hand shifts to Tommy's stomach, short nails teasing through his treasure trail. "How're you feeling?" he murmurs against his lips.

Tommy tightens his leg, because he can now. "Ready."

They make out a little, stroking and teasing until they're both fully hard again, and then Lawson guides him over to lie on his other side, facing away, and snugs up close to his back.

Tommy loves this position, Lawson warm and big behind him, an arm banded across his chest, inside him and surrounding him so that Tommy feels small in the way that he craves when he's with Lawson.

Lawson's mouth is open and wet on the side of his neck, and his cock hits his prostate head-on with every thrust. Tommy's seeing stars.

He reaches back to grip Lawson's hip and urge him on, head tipping back as he pants. "Shit, shit, shit," he chants, trying to be quiet. He doesn't know if Bill and Lisa have come upstairs; he can't focus on anything but Lawson. He thinks the bed's creaking steadily, tellingly, but it's hard to hear over his own choppy breaths.

Lawson reaches up to span his throat with his huge hand and Tommy whines.

"Baby," Lawson whispers, low and throaty right in his ear. "Is this what you needed? You needed me in you?"

"Yes." Tommy clutches at his forearm. "Oh God, Law, oh my God, fuck."

Lawson grinds in hard on his next thrust, and Tommy whimpers, and Lawson makes this deep, hitching noise against his throat. “Baby,” he says like a prayer, like Tommy is precious to him. A wonder. “I love you. I love you so much.”

Tommy slurs what he hopes is a coherent answer, and Lawson reaches down to stroke his cock. Uses each downward stroke to grind Tommy’s hips back against his own, and it’s so good, and it’s too much.

“You gonna come, baby?” Lawson murmurs. “You can. It’s okay. I want you to.”

Tommy turns his head so sharply it hurts his neck and bites the pillow to keep from shouting as his orgasm tears through him. It’s worlds more intense than the ones he’s had since the shooting, and his whole body twists, and tightens, and cramps, and it’s exquisite.

Don’t stop, don’t pull out, he wants to say, desperately, but is too busy bowing against Lawson’s hold and shaking and falling apart.

But Lawson knows. As the first blinding wave recedes, Tommy feels the tight grip of his hand on his hip, and the erratic, hard thrusts that signal Lawson’s chasing his own release. He spits out the pillow and turns his head – the room’s spinning – reaches out with a half-limp arm, and Lawson knows what that means, too. Buries his face in Tommy’s neck, and pants, and hisses through his teeth, and babbles, “Yes, baby, oh yes. So good. Such a good boy. Look at you.” And comes with a grunt like he’s hurting, and Tommy holds the back of his head, love and pleasure blasting through them like a detonation.

A few minutes later, Lawson asks, “Can you walk?”

Tommy answers honestly, scoured clean by what they’ve done, body humming, his weak, numb legs the last thing on his mind. “No. I really can’t.”

He loops grateful, trembling arms around Lawson's neck when he scoops him up, and lets himself be happily carried to the shower.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:35 am

The next night, they meet Dana and Leo at Flanagan's for drinks, greasy burgers, and a vicious round of pool. They've been making a regular thing of it, and other patrons are starting to gather and watch on Fridays.

Tommy started the day sleeping fifteen minutes past his alarm, and woke groggy, sore as hell, shaky – and deeply satisfied. He didn't protest Tommy's help getting up; instead, he hummed a thank you and kissed his shoulder and swayed into his sturdy side, delighting in the way it left Lawson beaming. He stepped into his hands-free shoes once he was dressed, and sat at the kitchen table, cane beside him, unprotesting when Lisa packed him a lunch.

She looked between them, beaming, eyes sparkling, and said, "You boys sleep well?"

Tommy blushed, but didn't shrivel down into his collar. Nodded, instead.

Lawson said, "So well." And winked at him.

Work went by quickly, and he wasn't even bothered by cantankerous old Mr. Baumgartner who called at least once a week demanding his rate be lowered.

When Lawson picked him up at five, he took one look at his face and said, "Oh my God, I've created a monster. A happy, dick-drunk monster."

"Fuck you," Tommy said, cheerfully, as he buckled his seatbelt.

"No, fuck you. If you want."

“Later. After drinks. You should wear that jacket you got for Christmas.”

Lawson laughed. “It’s, like, seventy degrees out.”

“Still. You should wear it.”

“Fine. Don’t have to tell me twice.”

“But I just did. Have to tell you twice.”

“Yeah, because I love listening to your dulcet, dictatorial tones and shit.”

Tommy snorted. “And shit.”

The jacket in question is a lightweight, dark denim with a brown corduroy collar that should have looked western and ridiculous, but somehow works with Lawson’s build and wardrobe, and which makes Tommy’s mouth water besides. Tommy rubs the pads of his fingers down the seam on the inside of the arm where it rests on the console, and thinks – fantasizes – about later.

For once, they’re the first ones to arrive. Lawson hangs his jacket off a high-backed stool at their favorite table and Tommy snags the one empty pool table beside it. They’ve already got a pitcher of beer and two baskets of cheesy tots when Dana arrives, alone, dressed down in jeans and sneakers.

“Hi, boys.” She kisses them each on the cheek. “Leo’s running late. Term paper emergency, apparently.” She takes a sizable slug from the glass Lawson pours for her and grabs a pool cue. “C’mon, Thomas. Warm-up round.”

“What about me?” Lawson mock-pouts, swiveling his stool so he can watch them, beer held between the fingertips of both hands like a toddler with a sippy cup.

“You’ll only slow us down, amateur,” Dana says, lightly, and Tommy snickers at Lawson’s overdramatic gasp.

Dana’s already beaten him once, and he’s already two-and-a-half beers in when Leo finally shows up, and Tommy’s feeling pleasantly buzzed, and moving around the table with ease and a lack of self-consciousness. When he spots Leo arriving at the table, greeting Lawson – who is definitely eating all their cheesy tots, the jerk – Tommy aims the chalky end of his cue at him and says, darkly, “I need to talk to you.”

Dana and Lawson share a look, and then crack up.

Leo’s eyes bug, and he pauses, jacket halfway off, to say, uncertainly, “Hi, Tommy.”

It’s the first time since they met that Tommy hasn’t greeted him with a handshake and exchange of pleasantries, and Lawson’s enjoying it way too much.

“Oh my God,” he snorts into his beer. “Leo, your face.”

“Uh...” Leo says, gaze darting between them all. “Is something the matter?”

Sober, Tommy would feel bad about putting that look on Leo’s face. But flush with beer and good company, he feels a smile threatening. He smooths it, and goes over to the table. If he has to use his cue as a makeshift cane, well, that’s alright.

When he reaches the table, Lawson drags one of the tot baskets up to the edge, where a small pile of golden, cheese-crusteds tots and a half-cup of dipping sauce await. “I saved you some.”

“Thanks, babe. Leo.” He fixes him with a stern, Tom Cattaneo sort of look that leaves Lawson snorting into his beer.

“Tommy, come on,” he tries, laughing. “We talked about this.”

Tommy gestures at him absently with his tot. “Shush, this doesn’t concern you.”

“What? Dude, this concerns me the most.”

“Leo. Why the fuck did it take your buddy Keith seven months to respond to Lawson’s email, huh?”

Behind him, Dana cackles.

Leo still looks wary, but relaxes a fraction. “Oh. Well. Seven months isn’t that long considering the publishing industry.”

Which is what Lawson’s said all along, but Lawson has startlingly low self-esteem and doesn’t expect his writing to ever take him anywhere.

“That’s what I told him,” Lawson says.

“I said shush.” When Tommy gestures again, the tot flies out of his hand, and Lawson dissolves into laughter. To Leo: “It’s bullshit, is what it is. I thought he was your friend? I thought he was going to actually look at Lawson’s manuscript.”

“He – he is. He did. He’d actually like to meet Lawson–”

“Yeah, but will that meeting lead anywhere? Or is this just setting Law up for disap–”

A heavy arm hooks around his neck and drags him sideways so he’s leaning between Lawson’s open legs, hip braced against the edge of the stool. “Okay, okay. Easy, tiger. Pom-poms down.” There’s a laugh still threaded through his voice, but in the back of his mind, Tommy recognizes a note of seriousness.

But Tommy's angry, he realizes. He's angry. He thinks of Lawson last night, gaze skating away from Tommy's while he see-sawed his hand to demonstrate Keith's indifference. Thinks of all those times Lawson shakes his head and says it'll never happen about his books. And why not? Because a bunch of pedantic, elbow-patched professor types who've never written a damn thing themselves say so? Because Lawson doesn't fit in their snooty little box?

Yeah, he's pissed.

It's not Leo's fault – he knows that, beneath a haze of alcohol that he's now realizing was a big mistake on an empty stomach – but Leo's the one who's here, so Leo's where he directs his anger.

“He couldn't move Lawson to the top of the pile as a favor? What's the point of sending a cover letter if he's not gonna do a favor for a friend? What kinda douchebag is this guy?”

Leo's gone pale.

“Jesus Christ,” Dana sighs. “You're swapping to water.”

Tommy draws breath to continue, and Lawson's face is suddenly crowding into the side of his. His hand squeezes at the back of Tommy's neck. “Chill, baby,” he whispers, right up against his ear. Not unkind, but firm.

Tommy's never handled being told to calm down well.

He elbows Lawson in the chest and pushes away from him with a glare. He wobbles, because of course he does, traitorous legs shivering and rippling with pins and needles; Lawson's hand falls to the back of his shirt, and grips tight, and is all that keeps him from crashing over on his side.

The beer buzz has dulled his usual shame and embarrassment, leaving plenty of room for continued anger, and indignation. The stumble doesn't slow him.

Instead, he snaps at Lawson, "Shut up, I'm trying to get you a fucking career." He turns back to Leo, who looks inexplicably sad, now, gaze shifting between the two of them. "Does Keith know how many shitty books are on shelves right now? How many shitty books go viral? There are books out there that are sloppily-written, amateurish, steaming piles of horse shit, and Keith has time for them, but not Lawson's? Are you fucking kidding me?"

Leo's brows knit together. "Tom—" he starts.

Dana swoops in on Tommy's other side, expression furious. Her voice is low, and sharp. "Hey, asshole. What happened to apologizing, huh? What happened to 'sorry'? You're being a dick, and you need to drink some fucking water and back the fuck off."

No one ever could stand up to Dana when she got like this, and Tommy's no exception.

He backs the fuck off.

He twists away from between the two of them – "Let go," he mutters at Lawson, batting his hand away – and heads for the restroom.

Halfway there, he realizes that his legs are shaking, not from weakness, but from adrenaline, and he left his cane back at the table. He presses on. If he falls, he falls. Like hell is he turning back, or calling to Lawson for help.

He makes it down the hall, through the swinging door, and fetches up hard against the sink, gripping its edge with white-knuckled fists. He stares down into the drain a

moment – for a dive bar, the sink’s pretty clean – catching his breath, winded as though he sprinted here.

When he lifts his head, he recoils from his reflection. His brows slant sharply downward, and his eyes are tight, lined at the corners. His mouth is a harsh, flat line, lips pale where they’re pressed together, and his jaw is set, chin juttied like when he used to argue with Frank, or lay down an edict at the head of the Cattaneo table. His hair’s longer, and his clothes are different, but he’s not Tommy Granger right now, and he...he isn’t quite sure how to slide back into his skin. What he thinks of now as his real skin...but has perhaps been a costume for an angry, bitter man all along.

By the time he sees the door swing open through the mirror, his breathing has picked up another notch. He’s nearly wheezing. Lawson enters the bathroom with a deep frown on his face, unfairly handsome in his clinging v-neck tee and jeans. His expression is reminiscent of Before the Shooting, not hi, baby, but what the fuck now? A fitting match for Tommy’s mob face.

But then he freezes, and the door swings shut behind him, and he meets Tommy’s gaze in the mirror. His frown twitches, and the lines on his forehead smooth beneath the overlong flop of his golden hair, and he approaches the sink slowly, like he’s walking up behind a wild animal he doesn’t want to spook.

You okay? Tommy expects to hear, and clenches his teeth against it. He’s not dizzy, exactly, but all his edges are blurred, and he’s angry, and his head feels light, and he wishes he hadn’t been drinking on an empty stomach, but thinks the alcohol might take the edge off his temper – at least with Lawson. He won’t be mad that Lawson asks if he’s okay this time.

But instead, Lawson moves to stand just behind him, hands stuffed in his jeans pockets, and says, “Are you for real?”

Tommy glimpses his own face go slack with surprise before he looks back to Lawson. “What?”

Lawson huffs a sigh, turns away, and shakes his head. “I told you – I told you just last night, and a dozen times before that – how publishing works. How querying works.” He turns back, and his frown says come on, man now. “And then you’re gonna yell at Leo? Leo? In a bar? When it’s not even in his control what happens to my book. Seriously?”

Indignation flares. Tommy tightens his grip on the sink until his knuckles crack, until his ring makes a quiet chink against the porcelain. “Leo encouraged you to write that—”

Lawson’s brows fly up. “Write what? That book you don’t like? That snotty bullshit?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you don’t like it.” Lawson’s voice is tight with anger, but controlled in a way Tommy’s never associated with him. He looks disappointed. Maybe even disgusted. He pulls his hands out of his pockets and props them on his hips, angles his head so he’s looking down at Tommy via their reflections. “Right? You think it sucks.”

“I never said that.” Tommy’s heart throbs quick like raindrops in his throat and fingertips. Somehow, he’s losing control of this encounter; feels like the floor is titling and like he has to hold on for dear life. “You know that I think that—”

“That everything should go your way all the time? Yeah, I noticed.”

“I don’t—”

“You spent how many years playing mob boss? Big mansions, penthouses, flashy cars.” He ticks things off on his fingers. “Expensive clothes. Anything you wanted, whenever you wanted it. Dudes would stand guard outside an office while you got fucked if you wanted.” Here his upper lip curls back, and Tommy doesn’t think he’s remembering their encounter, but imagining all of the others like it Tommy had in the past.

“Law–”

“And now,” Lawson barrels on, raising his voice to be heard above his protest, “you think you’re supposed to be magically perfect after you got shot and almost died.”

“Would you stop fucking interrupting me?”

“No.” Lawson steps in closer, until his breath rushes harsh and hot against the back of Tommy’s neck, and his chest bumps into his shoulders. His voice vibrates with barely-leashed anger. “You can be a dick to me if you want, but that out there” – he jabs a finger toward the door – “with Leo? Way over the line, man.”

Man. It’s not that they don’t call each other that. They do, rather frequently. But in this context, it draws a decisive line between all the husbandly pet names Lawson doles out like Trick-or-Treat candy.

The sound of it tightens Tommy’s jaw another notch, like a winch cranking. He sees the leap of it in his cheek, the flicker along his temple. “Leo said he could get you a publishing deal.” He sounds petulant, but worse than that, he sounds nasty. Petty.

Lawson makes an are you kidding sound in his throat. “Leo said he would pass my manuscript along to a friend. He didn’t promise me shit.”

“Seven months, Lawson!”

“So fucking what?!”

“Don’t you care? Don’t you want Leo to give Keith a nudge?” In the mirror, his brows are up, forehead creased with lines like a stack of pancakes. Jesus. When they used to argue like this, they were smooth and round-cheeked with puppy fat; and now they just look haggard.

“A nudge...Jesus.” Lawson shakes his head, rakes a hand through his hair, big-eyed and disbelieving with an angry-set mouth. “You don’t shake down a publisher, Tommy. This is the real world, not the goddamn mob.”

The words hit Tommy like a slap. “I was never a—”

“Oh yeah, buddy,” Lawson sneers, “you totally were. Pinstripe suit and everything.”

Tired of the mirror game – tired of seeing his own anger-mottled face – Tommy whirls. Totters is a better approximation. He stumbles, grips the sink like a lifeline, and leans back against it hard once he’s face-to-face with Lawson. This close, he has to tip his head back an infuriating amount to make eye contact.

“I’m trying to help you get a career. Do you not even care?”

Lawson wore his heart on his sleeve as a kid. He went still and shocked and terrified the first time Tommy kissed him, but Tommy wasn’t nervous, because he’d known long before he finally swooped in and pressed their sun-chapped lips together that Lawson loved him. And after that kiss, something broke loose in Lawson’s face; his love shined out of him, undisguisable, a light source all its own.

When Tommy arrived back in Eastman, when Tom Cattaneo walked into Coffee Town and almost had a heart attack, the Lawson he encountered had learned a helluva a lot about poker faces and putting up walls in the intervening twenty years.

Post-shooting, post-marriage, those walls came right back down, and it's felt like having the old Lawson back ever since.

Right now, though, in a bar bathroom that smells like cheap air freshener, Lawson is as guarded as he's ever seen him. His face closes off. His eyes go flat and cold. If he's hurt, he's hiding it expertly.

In a low, dispassionate voice, he says, "I have wanted to publish a book since I was old enough to read one. It's the only career I've ever wanted. But I understand it might never happen, and that even if it does, it won't happen quickly. And even if it happens slowly, there's no guarantee I'll be successful."

He cocks his head. "Is this about you wanting it for me? Or is this because you're sick of living in my old childhood bedroom and think a fat advance could go a long way toward living like you did as Tom Cattaneo?"

Forget slapped – Tommy feels steamrolled. He lurches back against the sink and nearly falls. All of his anger, mounting and mounting and burning like coals in his belly, evaporates. "I don't – I – Lawson–"

Lawson's lips curve in a small, unhappy smile. "Yeah. Thought so. Why don't you think on that. I'll be in the car." And he leaves without a backward glance.

~*~

In the first five minutes after Lawson's departure, "thinking on that" is more or less comprised of leaning heavily on the sink while white noise crashes through his skull. His left leg is holding, but his right is shaking, and anxiety has his breath coming in short little gasps, and he's not sure he can walk out of here under his own power.

Damn it.

As soon as he acknowledges that truth, the bathroom door swings inward, and a kitchen employee wearing a sauce-streaked white apron and a hair net enters, looking awkward. He's holding Tommy's cane.

"Um, are you Tommy?"

Tommy doesn't know if he wants to laugh or cry. He wipes a trembling hand down his face. "Yeah. That's me."

"This guy – your husband, he said – asked me to make sure you got this."

"Yeah. Thanks." Tommy manages to step forward without letting go of the sink and take the cane. "Thanks," he says again, face heating, insides going cold with regret.

The employee ducks out with a grateful-sounding exhale, and Tommy spends a few minutes unfolding his cane and deciding whether or not he can make the trek through the bar.

He risks it. Walking slow, and careful, and upright, like Dr. Wilson showed him, cane settling firmly on the floor with each step.

Dana and Leo are gone, which isn't a surprise. Someone else has their usual table, a five-person group laughing loud and hard and having a good time – which the four of them could have had if Tommy hadn't ruined it.

By the time he pushes through the front doors, he's jittery from unbalanced blood sugar, exhausted, and, worst of all, ashamed. Guilt weighs heavy on each shuffling step, and he wishes he had something better to offer than sorry. Again.

They nabbed a good parking place when they arrived, so he doesn't have to walk far. But he pulls up three cars down from theirs, struck by the scene that awaits him.

Lawson sits on the nose of the Subaru, uncaring if his jeans scratch the paint. He's wearing his jacket, collar bunched up around his neck with the way his shoulders are slumped. He has his head tipped back, staring up at the moon, a cigarette between his lips, smoke curling up in thin ribbons.

Tommy makes some sort of involuntary noise, too soft to be heard, too low to be a gasp.

The thing is, Lawson has never understood how damn beautiful he is. Even when he hit his tenth grade growth spurt and was all knees and elbows, he's always been the only person Tommy wants to look at. Lawson calls him pretty, calls him handsome, tells him how hot he is, always discounting his own looks.

But the sight of him makes Tommy feel feverish with want. The long, long stretch of his legs stretched out before him, heels of his shoes resting on the asphalt. The strong column of his throat, bared to the night air as he tips his head back and exhales smoke through his nose like a dragon. And it's a good nose, too, just bold enough not to be "cute," but Tommy thinks it's cute anyway. He wants Lawson when he's working him over with strong hands, and he wants him when he's yawning into his morning coffee, hair impossibly mussed.

He wanted him when they were clumsy kids, and he spent twenty years trying to get back to him, so he could want him up close in person again.

And he keeps fucking it up.

The other thing is, he hasn't seen Lawson smoke since they got married, so tonight he's fucked up even worse than he thought.

He's still angry, though. Frustrated. Upset. All of the above.

He slow-walks his way up to the car, and Lawson sucks down the last of his cigarette before flicking it away and finally turning to regard him. There's enough moonlight to see his half-lidded, disinterested gaze, and to be stung and prickly about it.

Lawson stands without speaking, cracks his back with his arms overhead, and moves for the driver side door.

Tommy climbs awkwardly into his own side, struggling thanks to how close the neighboring car is parked to them.

Lawson doesn't offer to help.

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They don't say anything when they get home, but Lisa, dressed for bed in robe and slippers, making a cup of tea in the kitchen, peers at them with concern when they come through the back door. "Everything okay? You're back early."

"Yep." Lawson pops the P and leans in to kiss her cheek on his way to the fridge. "Dad get to bed okay?"

"Yes. Nancy just left." Lawson actually sounds pretty normal, but she doesn't seem convinced, brows beetling as she turns her worried gaze on Tommy. "Feeling okay, sweetie?"

He forces a smile that only deepens her frown. "Yeah, I'm fine. Dana and Leo had to beg off. We rescheduled."

At the fridge, Lawson turns, sandwich makings loaded in his arms, and sends him a derisive eyebrow lift from behind Lisa's back. Asshole.

Shithead, Tommy thinks back, and thumps out of the room. "I'm gonna take a shower."

He stands under the hot water a long time, letting it beat the tension out of his back and shoulders. It doesn't improve his mood, though. When he swipes a hand through the condensation on the mirror afterward, he looks tired, and sullen, and, yeah, like an asshole, hair slicked back with water and deep frown lines pressed into his face.

His gaze trails downward, and those frown lines deepen. He's still got some definition in his chest and arms, but his sucked-in, flat six pack has gone soft and

convex after more than half a year of recovery and a distinct lack of sit-ups. His scars have faded some since the bandages first came off, but they've turned bright pink under the hot water, like two giant cigarette burns just above his bellybutton.

He touches them, and the skin there is as thick and numb as it ever was, but he imagines his insides shrink away from the pressure of his finger; that the damaged nerves shrivel and wither as he reaches for them.

When he gets to the bedroom, he finds Lawson standing by the bed, barefoot and bare chested, still in his jeans, but with his belt unfastened. He has a t-shirt and pair of boxers slung over his shoulder, and is in the process of setting a glass of water and a plate down on the nightstand. It's a sandwich; Tommy sees the curled edges of lettuce, and knows it will be turkey, cheese, tomatoes, and the spicy, whole grain mustard he likes.

"Eat that," Lawson says, as he steps around him, giving him a wide berth. "Drink the water." There's a small bottle of ibuprofen beside the glass.

The shower – the self-examination afterward – killed what was left of his anger. Now he's just cold, and miserable, and full of a nauseating kind of regret that he can't put into words at the moment.

He nods, and Lawson heads for the bathroom.

Tommy dresses, and hangs his cane up. Levers himself into bed, leaning back against the headboard, and pulls the plate into his lap. The sandwich is delicious – it's a simple thing, not rocket science, not even cooking, but he swears Lawson makes the best sandwiches – and drinks his water, takes his pills.

He's in the middle of a mystery novel – very old-fashioned and gumshoe – and picks it up. Reads a few pages, not really absorbing the words. When he hears the

grandfather clock in the hall chime the hour, he has the lurching realization that Lawson isn't coming to bed.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” he mutters to himself.

He snatches up his phone and starts to fire off a text: where are u??

But then he hears the stairs creak, and he can envision Lawson's long frame crammed onto the couch. The knitted throw from the back pulled over him. The TV reflecting blue off his glasses as he falls asleep to old sitcom reruns.

He doesn't text. “Fuck you,” he hisses to himself, flopping down onto the pillow – Lawson's pillow. “Fucking baby.”

Says the man who got drunk off two-and-a-half beers and pitched a fit in a crowded bar.

Tommy lies in the dark and presses his hands over his face and hates himself. He debates texting Leo. Or Dana. But what good is another apology? He squeezed her hand and told her he was sorry, and the very next day he acted like a total bastard for no reason.

Lawson's words chase around and around his brain. “Is this about you wanting it for me? Or is this because you're sick of living in my old childhood bedroom and think a fat advance could go a long way toward living like you did as Tom Cattaneo?”

Is that the issue here? Is a part of his frustration rooted in something as meaningless as lifestyle?

He rolls over onto his side, stares blearily at the red numbers on the clock, and contemplates. And contemplates, and contemplates. Thinks of the mansion his team

rented when he first returned to Eastman: its handsome wall paneling, and four-poster beds, and its wine cellar. Its chef's kitchen, and extensive gardens, its bridges and koi ponds, and massive garage full of expensive cars.

Does he miss his silk shirts, and bespoke suits, and ruby-studded tie pins? His Rolex, and his Lincolns, and being "sir" and "Mr. Cattaneo," always spoken with a deferential head-tilt.

His immediate, kneejerk reaction is no. All of those luxuries were the trappings of a lie, an act he was performing while the constant threat of death and discovery loomed overhead. He wasn't having fun; was trying like mad to get back here. This town, this man, this family, this marriage.

Which he's rapidly dismantling, brick by brick, with bitterness, resentment, and harsh words.

He groans, and rolls the other way, and breathes in the smell of Lawson's shampoo off the pillow.

He must doze at some point, because the alarm jars him awake at seven.

He's still alone in bed.

~*~

The alarm is Lawson's. It's Saturday, and Tommy doesn't have work, but Lawson does, and had allowed himself time to help ready his dad and have breakfast with Tommy before heading off for his noon shift at Coffee Town. After Tommy slaps the alarm button, he debates getting up and going downstairs to ensure that Lawson's getting up – but there's no need. He hears Lawson and Bill talking in low murmurs down the hall.

Gritty-eyed from a restless night, he rolls over and goes back to sleep. When he wakes next, it's light out, he has a headache, and feels like shit in ways more than physical.

A light knock sounds at the door. "Tommy?" Lisa calls.

"Yes?" His voice is rough; he sounds like he's been crying though he hasn't. He sits up, rubs the grit from his eyes, and rakes a hand through his ruffled hair. "You can come in."

She eases the door open, and her expression is cautious – until she sets eyes on him, and then her face does something distinctly motherly. She doesn't cross the threshold. Lawson said she used to come in all the time to pick up his abandoned socks, gather Coke cans, and gently scold his housekeeping habits, despite him being thirty-seven. Once they got married, though, she stopped. It doubtless helps that Tommy keeps things much tidier than Lawson did on his own.

"Morning," she says, half-hopeful, half-worried.

He glances at the clock. 12:22. "Morning." His voice is croaky. He badly needs a drink of water.

She considers him a moment, and he thinks she's going to ask if he's okay. Or, worse, ask why Lawson spent the night on the couch.

Instead, she says, "I hate to bug you on your day off, but I need to run to the store, and wanted to see if you could keep Bill company?"

"Oh, sure, absolutely. Lemme just—" He gestures vaguely to his blanket-clad legs.

"Take your time." She starts to step back, already reaching for the doorknob – then

pauses, and steps into the room. Walks over to the nightstand to collect his empty plate and glass from last night, expression going maternal again. “I made biscuits. They’re under a towel on the counter downstairs.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Maybe it shouldn’t, but her entrance into the room is somehow a comfort. Like he’s her kid, and not the strange married man living in the second bedroom that she needs to tiptoe around.

When she’s gone, before he drags himself out of bed, he checks his phone to see if Lawson’s texted. They usually text off and on throughout every day. Work anecdotes, and random questions, and memes, and sometimes just emojis; little signs they’re thinking of one another.

But his screen is blank.

~*~

Bill’s watching cooking shows – the Saturday Food Network lineup – and though Tommy settles in the window seat with his book, the sounds of chopping and sizzling keep capturing his attention, and before long his stomach is grumbling.

“I don’t know about you, but this is making me hungry,” he says as he climbs to his feet. Getting worked up and overly tense always leaves him fumbling more than usual, and after last night, he leans heavily on his cane and steps slowly and carefully. “Ready for lunch?”

“Ready for...” Bill lifts an unsteady arm to point at the TV. “Th-that.”

Onscreen, a woman makes some sort of steak sandwich with peppers, onions, and

melty cheese sauce.

Tommy snorts. “We’re fresh out of that. But I’ll see what we’ve got.”

He’s microwaving the morning’s leftover biscuits with the intention of making sausage sandwiches with them when he hears the thud. One big one, and then a series of smaller ones. A pattern: thud-thud-thud. And a plastic and metallic clatter.

Panic grabs him by the throat.

“Bill!”

So many times over the past seven months, his legs have failed him – but they don’t now. I can’t fall, he thinks, as his heart leaps and his pulse accelerates so rapidly he feels faint. I can’t fall, not now.

He grips his cane tight, and though he hurries, he keeps upright, keeps his steps short, sliding rather than stretching his legs out the way he wants to.

He reaches the living room to find the wheelchair overturned on its side, Bill on the floor, on his side, juddering and jerking and twitching. He was a cop, not a paramedic, but he had basic emergency training, and Tommy knows what he’s looking at: a seizure.

Dread and fear threaten to choke him, that first awful moment, when he’s just a guy looking at his father-in-law in crisis.

But then his almost twenty years on the force kick in and he shoves all feeling aside so he can do what needs to be done. His teeth click together when he hits his knees, but the pain is peripheral. He gets Bill on his side, and pins his arms, and holds his head with his other hand, so he can’t bang it on the floor and hurt himself any worse

than he might have. There's foam on his lips, and his breath is coming in sharp, inconsistent hisses.

Tommy holds, and waits, and, slowly, some of the rigidity seeps out of Bill's wasted frame. He moans, and whimpers, and his body goes limp, eyelids fluttering.

"Hold on," Tommy says. "You're okay, I've got you." Deeming it safe to release his head, Tommy rests it back against his knee and whips out his phone, thankfully in his sweats pocket, to dial 911.

~*~

Tommy rides in the ambulance, so he's in the waiting room of the neuro wing at the hospital when Lisa and Lawson rush in, both wide-eyed, breathless, and looking painfully alike, with their blue eyes and blond hair.

The only other person in the waiting room is a stooped, gray-headed man paging listlessly through a newspaper, but Tommy plants his cane between both feet and stands as they enter.

"Hey," he greets as they cross the small room. Lawson's still got his apron from Coffee Town tied around his waist, and Lisa's glasses are crooked. "He was stable by the time we arrived, but I haven't talked to the – oof."

They converge on him from both sides, Lisa on his right, Lawson on his left, and they both hug him, Lisa's arms deceptively strong around his waist, Lawson's familiarly heavy around his shoulders and chest. Lisa presses her cheek to his, and Lawson shoves his nose down into his hair.

Tommy closes his eyes a moment. He can't hug them back, arms trapped at his sides, but he doesn't know if he's ever felt so surrounded, and been so glad of the fact.

He swallows the lump in his throat and says, “I haven’t talked to his doctor yet, but he was alert and speaking when they wheeled him back.”

Lisa draws in a wavering breath, and her voice squeaks with emotion when she says, “Oh, sweetie. Thank God you were there.” She sniffs. “You did so well.”

Lawson doesn’t speak, but he burrows his nose down through Tommy’s hair until his breath rushes hot and uneven across Tommy’s scalp.

Lisa lets go first, stepping back to dab at her eyes with the fingertips, and to squeeze Tommy’s shoulder with the other.

Touching them, feeling the evidence of their worry, and their love, brings some of his own anxiety bubbling back to the surface. His next breath is less steady than the previous. Guilt twists in the pit of his stomach.

“I was in the kitchen when it happened,” he says like a confession. “I didn’t—”

“No, no.” Lisa shakes her head. “You were there. You did everything right.”

Lawson nods, tip of his nose sliding up and down on top of Tommy’s head. With an arm free, now, Tommy reaches up to grip Lawson’s forearm where it’s pressed to his chest. Squeezes.

“Are you Bill Granger’s family?” a new voice asks.

They all turn toward the doctor who’s come through the swinging doors, but Lawson doesn’t release him. He keeps an arm across his shoulders, holding him warm and close, and Tommy slips his own arm around Lawson’s waist as comforting counterpoint.

“Yes,” Lisa says. “How is he?”

The short answer is that he’s okay. Dr. Mendelson thinks the seizure was a result of one of his new medications, but wants to run further tests and keep him at least overnight for observation. Lisa goes back to see him, and when she looks back at them expectantly, Lawson says, “We’ll come in a sec, Mom.”

When they’re alone – save the old man with the newspaper, who may or may not have fallen asleep while reading – Lawson takes Tommy by both shoulders, turns him so they’re facing, and then hugs him so tight Tommy can barely breathe.

He can hug back, though. Rub his hands up and down the bowed line of Lawson’s spine, and feel the faint trembling under his shirt and skin.

“You okay, sweetheart?” he asks, quietly.

Lawson sniffs, but his voice is clear when he says, “Yeah. Glad you were there.”

“Me, too.”

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Bill's alert, and seemingly in good spirits when they go in to visit him. He grips Tommy's hand, tighter than normal, and thanks him, and Tommy's face heats.

Lisa decides to stay the night.

Lawson and Tommy go home to pack a bag for her and pick up some dinner to take back to her that didn't come out of the hospital cafeteria.

"Nothing like going through your mom's underwear drawer," Lawson says, making a face as he pulls out the top drawer on his mother's dresser.

Tommy sits on the edge of the bed, beside the open overnight bag that already contains jeans, a blouse, and a light jacket. "Want me to do it?"

Lawson shakes his head. "I feel like that's even creepier, ya know?"

"Hm."

Lawson hesitates, shoulders around his ears, then darts a hand down into the drawer like a heron snatching a fish from a lake, spins, and tosses a scrap of white fabric into the bag with an overdramatic gag.

Tommy snorts, and then keeps snorting, until he's outright laughing. "Oh my God, you shoulda let me do it. I wouldn't have puked about it."

"I didn't puke." He closes the drawer, shudders...and then leans back against the dresser, and folds his arms, and Tommy's laughter dies away, because they were

quiet on the ride home, but there's an energy crackling between them of things unsaid.

Tommy braces himself for a we need to talk.

Instead, Lawson reaches out and kicks the toe of his shoe with his own, gaze on the carpet. "Hey," he says, quietly.

"Hey," Tommy says back, and taps his sneaker against Lawson's. New step-in Sketchers against battered Vans.

"I'm glad it was you here instead of me," Lawson says, shoulders tucking in, head still bent. His nose wriggles side-to-side, Bewitched-style, and Tommy would get caught up in how cute it is if he wasn't worried that Lawson was trying not to cry. "I wouldn't have – I would have panicked, and I'm – it's good it was you. You knew just what to do."

"You would have known what to do, too." When Lawson shakes his head, Tommy insists, "You've been taking care of your dad for years. You always know what he needs."

Lawson shakes his head again, and Tommy stands. There's only a few feet between them – the length of both their legs stuck out – so he forgoes the cane, and closes the gap, and reaches up to take Lawson's face gently between his hands. When he sweeps his thumbs beneath his eyes, they come away damp, and Tommy ducks down so he can peer up at his crumpled expression.

"I don't wanna fight with you," Lawson says, miserable.

Tommy blinks hard. "I don't want to fight with you either. I...I'm gonna say 'sorry,' because I am, but I know that doesn't fix anything, 'cause I already said sorry, and

then I acted like a total—”

Lawson moves all at once, lurches forward and wraps him up tight in both arms, and crushes all the air out of him.

Tommy slips both arms around his neck and crushes back.

Lawson takes a shuddering breath, and whispers, “I’m always so afraid you’ll wake up one day and realize you don’t want to stay.” He sniffs hard. “The house, and my parents, and – and my shitty job, and just...”

Tommy palms the back of his head and holds him down on his shoulder. “No, honey. No, no, no.”

“I don’t know if I can ever get a book published.” He sounds heartbreakingly young, and so much smaller than he is. “I don’t know if I can make things better for us, and I—”

Tommy turns his head, and presses his face into Lawson’s cheek. “Law. Lawson.” The helplessness that sweeps through him, burning in his eyes and tickling at his throat and squeezing his lungs, must be the sort that Lawson felt a couple nights ago, when Tommy was beside himself. Even as his heart breaks, he’s comforted by the knowledge that they’re both worried about making the other happy.

But at the same time, it’s ridiculous that they’ve taken happiness on as a chore and a challenge, one to be handled alone. They’re working so hard toward the same thing, and tripping each other up in the process.

He kisses Lawson’s cheek, and breathes against his ear, and says, “I love you. Do you know how much I love you?”

Lawson clings to him – and, after a beat, he nods.

~*~

They pick up takeout salads with chicken and fruit, and eat with Lisa in Bill's room at the hospital. Lisa keeps up a lively chatter that Tommy thinks is forced, and Bill's asleep before they're halfway through dinner.

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" Lawson asks her, when visiting hours are over.

She nods. "I'm sure. You boys sleep tight."

On the way home, Lawson reaches across the center console for his hand, and Tommy laces their fingers together.

The house is too quiet when they walk in. Just a few days ago, Tommy would have given a whole month's paycheck to have the place all to themselves for the night. No need to be careful and quiet, no pausing and listening for creaking floorboards, or soft, questioning taps at the bedroom door. But now, the quiet is somber and oppressive, rather than liberating.

Without asking, Lawson gets down two tumblers, and reaches into the cabinet above the fridge where the few bottles of hard liquor live. He gets down the bourbon.

"Ice?"

"Yeah." Tommy watches him get cubes out of the freezer and then pour them both generous doubles; takes his glass with a murmured thanks and leads the way into the living room.

They sit pressed together on the couch, and Lawson turns on the TV. It's still on Food

Network from this morning, and he flips hastily away, finally settling on an overwrought action movie with more explosions and car chases than dialogue.

They sip their drinks, ice cubes shifting with quiet clinks. When Tommy lays his head down on Lawson's shoulder, Lawson tips his head so it rests on top of Tommy's.

He takes a deep breath and says, "What we're doing with Dad isn't sustainable."

Tommy hums a sympathetic noise. "What can we do?"

When he says we, Lawson shifts his drink to his other hand so he can put his arm around Tommy, and hold him even closer. "In a perfect world? We'd move to a single-story house with plenty of bedrooms. Hire Nancy fulltime, or another home healthcare worker, if she can't do that. Ideally someone who could live in-house." He exhales in an exhausted-sounding rush. "And in that perfect world, you and I could live next door, or just down the street. And..." He trails off.

As a general rule, they don't play the Perfect World game. That would only lead to frustration, and impossible dreams. But he thinks they've each been playing it on their own, silently, secretly. Wishing for things they can't have.

Which, given today, given the challenges they overcame seven months ago, seems petty and stupid.

But this thing with Bill is an issue.

"Okay," he says, stroking Lawson's thigh, firm presses over the denim. "So we can't do perfect. But what can we do?" Before Lawson can answer, he says, "Other than paying off my medical bills, I'm not spending much. I can—"

"I can't ask you to—"

“Yes, you can.” Normally, Tommy would get heated, and argue, and insist, but he’s tired, and the idea of fighting pains him. So he’s insistent in a quiet, uncharacteristic way that has Lawson’s teeth clicking together as he closes his mouth.

Tommy leans forward to set his drink on a coaster and twists his upper body when he leans back, so they’re facing each other. Blue TV light flickers along Lawson’s temple and jaw, catches on the bristles of his five o’clock shadow, and glimmers in the whites of his eyes. He looks apprehensive. Fretful.

Tommy grips his knee with one hand, and reaches up to swipe the tip of his forefinger down the slope of Lawson’s nose, a fast little flick he hasn’t executed since they were teenagers necking in the backseat of the Le Sabre.

Lawson startles, blinks...and then his lips twitch sideways in a lopsided smile.

“Your nose is adorable,” Tommy says, mock-stern, and Lawson’s smile widens, flashing teeth.

“Your eyebrows look like angry caterpillars.”

Tommy sighs. “Yeah, I know.”

“Cute ones.”

“Uh-huh. Listen, I’m serious. It’s not just you anymore.” He lifts his hand and waggles his fingers to flash his ring. “We’re us now. A team. And I think – I think we’ve been sniping at each other...or, well, I’ve been a bastard, because I want to be able to take care of you. And you want to take care of me – and your parents. And we’re just...”

Lawson’s smile slips, and Tommy presses the end of his nose like a button to get him

to blink again.

“We have to be a team, babe. We have to share, and take care of each other, and your parents, and our friends, and just...talk. We need to sit down at the table, and go through our finances, and make plans, and all that boring adult shit we’ve been putting off. And we have been putting it off. I have. I keep thinking ‘oh, well, I’ll get better, and then...’ But this might just be it.” He lets his hand fall to his own leg with a slap, and frowns.

Lawson leans in and kisses him. Quick, and sweet, and bourbon-tasting. A silent acceptance of the last thing Tommy said, of the idea of this being it.

“Are you listening?” Tommy asks, when Lawson pulls back.

“Yeah. I hear you.” He makes a face. “Time to grow up.”

“Yeah.” Tommy fiddles with the thick seam on the outside of his jeans. “For twenty years my whole motivation was coming back here. To you. But that’s not – in real life you don’t ride off into the sunset. You still have to live. You get to live,” he corrects, and smiles, filled with a sudden, flooding warmth that has nothing to do with the bourbon. He gets to live. Gets to. Today sucked in a lot of ways, waking up alone, his father-in-law falling out of his wheelchair in the grips of a seizure. But it could have been so much worse, and here he is sitting on the couch, alive, with the love of his life.

Slowly, Lawson smiles back.

“I have to stop waiting for when I’m better. And you need to stop expecting me to get sick of this marriage and leave.”

Lawson ducks his head; it’s hard to tell with the bluish TV glow, but Tommy can

imagine the color that suffuses his cheeks. Then he tilts his head, peers up through his lashes, and says, “And you have to stop yelling at Leo.”

Tommy winces. “Yeah.”

“He’s sensitive.”

“I should apologize.”

“You definitely should.”

They sit in comfortable silence a minute, TV rumbling unheeded off to the side.

“Okay.” Tommy pats Lawson’s hip. “Lie down.”

“What? Why?”

“I wanna suck your dick, and my legs don’t feel up to kneeling down on the floor.”

~*~

Lisa calls the next morning, early, while Tommy’s in the shower, and tells them not to rush on their way back to the hospital. Tommy picks out both their clothes – which makes Lawson wrinkle his nose like a kid, but he looks damn good in the light henley Tommy selects, so he can wrinkle his nose all he likes – and goes downstairs to tidy and make sure there’s nothing that looks like it needs Lisa’s attention when she gets home. He wants her to go lie down and get some rest when she’s back, rather than worry about dishes or dusty tabletops.

They stop for breakfast at Winslow’s Diner: hot cakes, and sausage patties for Lawson, and oatmeal with blueberries for Tommy. He offers to share and gets

another nose wrinkle before Lawson stuffs more syrup-soaked pancakes in his mouth. They order to-go biscuit sandwiches for Bill and Lisa, and Lawson gets a coffee refill while they wait.

Tommy takes a deep breath, and Lawson's gaze goes from sleepy and mild to riveted on Tommy's face. Oops. "I've been thinking," he says, and if he sounds a little nervous, it's because he is. But only a little. Mostly.

"No, it's nothing bad. But, uh – are you gonna go to New York? To meet with Keith?"

Lawson's wariness doesn't dissipate, and Tommy wants to kick himself for being a jackass. All he can do now is do better. "I don't know." When Tommy doesn't respond right away, he arches a brow and says, "Why? Do you think I should?" It would sound like argument bait, if the corner of his mouth didn't twitch and betray a withheld laugh.

"I think you should do whatever makes you happy," Tommy says, loftily.

"Pffft." Lawson snorts, and laughs, and Tommy huffs a sigh to cover his own threatening chuckles.

"Hey, now."

Lawson kicks his shin under the table. "Hey, now," he says back.

"I'm not pressuring. I'm just asking. Are you gonna go? And don't," he adds, "just say what you think you should say to keep me from blowing a gasket. Like, do you want to go? As yourself? Not to make money to take care of anything." He gestures vaguely. "But do you, Lawson Granger, want to meet with Keith Whateverthefuck about your book?"

Lawson's brows climbed slowly throughout his spiel, and now, big-eyed, he says, "Uh..."

"I'm just asking," Tommy presses.

"Yeah, well. I see that. And I, Lawson Granger" – he smirks and Tommy rolls his eyes – "really and truly do not know if I want to go to New York and meet with Keith Whateverthefuck."

You should. That's Tommy's first and loudest thought. He presses his lips tight together to keep from voicing it, because this – Lawson's writing, his career prospects – can't be something Tommy shoulds him into doing. He can praise, and he can back him up, but he can't push him. He's his husband, not his parent. This isn't a homework assignment he can ride him into finishing.

"It's killing you not to say something, isn't it?" Lawson guesses.

"No." Tommy fiddles with his empty coffee cup. "A little," he admits.

Lawson's smile goes rueful.

"I'm not trying to pressure you. I'm not," he insists, when Lawson just stares at him. "I'm asking because, if we can set up some good help for your dad beforehand, and everything works out, if you go, I want to come with you."

Lawson's face falls slack with surprise.

"And not because I want to yell at Keith." He did want to, but he wouldn't. Not on this trip. "But..." Here he went self-conscious. Because they were married, yes, and they did married things, but a lot of the time he felt like they were kids at a sleepover, plus fantastic sex, but minus proper adulthood. "We never got a honeymoon. And I

thought...”

He doesn't need to finish. Lawson's eyes go anime-wide, and his lips part on a shaky breath, and he's such a fucking sap, his man, but damn does Tommy love making him that way.

“Really?”

“Really. Sound oaky?”

Lawson nods, and reaches across the table. They sit with their fingers laced together until their waitress brings their to-go order.

~*~

Bill comes home. Tommy sits down with his laptop, and the checkbook, and a calculator, and then he starts interviewing home healthcare workers, because Nancy can't commit to more than her two days a week, but she has some recommendations.

He sees Leo a few days later. He peeks out his office window and spots him having lunch with Dana out at a parking lot picnic table. It's a barbecue food truck in attendance today, and their sauce always gives Tommy indigestion. He snags his brown bag lunch and makes his careful way outside, down the sidewalk, and across the parking lot.

Dana spots him first. She lifts her head, and her gaze lands on him, and the smile drops off her face. Her eyes narrow.

They haven't spoken since that night at Flanagan's. He knows she and Leo went by to visit Bill in the hospital. There was a massive spray of seasonal flowers on the nightstand, and a jumbo box of Junior Mints, Bill's favorite. He's seen Dana's name

flash on Lawson's phone screen, and knows they've texted and talked. But Tommy and she have managed to avoid one another in person.

Dana always was stubborn when they were kids, as stubborn as Tommy and more vengeful besides, so he hasn't been expecting an easy reconciliation. Still, the ferocity of her glare stops him momentarily in his tracks.

Leo must noticed it, too, because he twists around, and spots Tommy, and though Tommy doesn't feel he deserves it, Leo waves and offers one of his normal, small, almost bashful smiles.

Tommy takes a deep breath and approaches the table. "Hey, guys." He can't muster chipper with Dana looking at him like that. But he can be contrite, and he hopes he is. "I wanted to—"

"Don't say 'apologize,' jackass," Dana snaps. "You don't mean it."

He sighs. "I do, though. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, now."

"Dana," Leo says softly, placating hand stretched across the table. "It's okay."

She frowns. "The day before he screeched at you in public—"

"I didn't screech."

"—he sat right where you are now, and held my hand, and gave me the puppy dog eyes, and said he was 'sorry' if he'd been a jerk during his recovery. Then he turned right around and was an asshole again, when you were the one trying to do Lawson a favor. He was a shithead when we were kids, and he hasn't changed." The last she

delivers with a cutting glance over Leo's head at Tommy, and it lands like an arrow. It hurts.

She's not wrong, though. He was a prickly kid, who turned into an impatient, snappish adult. Capable of calm politeness when necessary, but always with a jab on the end of his tongue. Lawson kept up with him when they were young, and does still, and always smiles with his whole face when Tommy says fuck you. Dana usually gives as good as she gets...but maybe she's never really liked him.

Or, more likely, she's still holding a grudge because he left. Because he hurt Lawson twenty years ago, and then seven months ago, when he lied, and manipulated him, and almost died in his arms. He adores you, she said the last time they had lunch together. At the time, he took it as a reassurance. Now, he thinks it was a warning. He adores you, don't you dare fuck up his life more than you already have.

He thinks he and Dana will have to have a proper conversation at some point. It might even devolve into a knock-down-drag-out fight. But for now, he has an apology to deliver.

"Leo, can I talk to you for a minute?" He hopes his face is doing the right thing. He doesn't know what Dana means by "puppy dog eyes," but she and Lawson both accuse him of it often.

"Sure." Leo scoots over on the bench. "You can sit."

Dana stands in a sudden rush. "You can have my seat," she says, coldly. "I'm getting a refill." She picks up her paper cup and strides toward the food truck.

Tommy takes her abandoned spot with a sigh, settling in across from Leo and folding his hands together on the tabletop. "She's not wrong."

Leo frowns, attentive rather than scathing, like Dana.

“I’ve always been a shithead. I’d blame the other night on the beer...”

“You’d had a lot by the time we arrived,” Leo says, offering him the out.

“Two and a half.”

“Yes, but, well, you’re...” One corner of Leo’s mouth quirks in a rare smirk, and Tommy gapes at him.

“Wait. Are you calling me little?” He tries to be stern, but feels a smile threatening.

The smirk falls away. “What? No. I only meant...you hadn’t eaten anything. And you...”

Tommy snorts. “Yeah, I’m a lightweight. It’s fine.” He sighs. “I am...not the biggest person. Literally, or figuratively. I’ll admit that I have absolutely no idea how the publishing industry operates.”

“I gathered that,” Leo says, but kindly. “It’s not something someone outside the business generally has any familiarity with.”

“I don’t actually think that you’re trying to screw him over – I know you’ve stuck your neck out for him, and I really appreciate it. I also know you have no control over what your friend Keith does or doesn’t do. And he might be a very nice person for all I know.”

“He is.”

Tommy makes a face, and Leo breathes a quiet chuckle. “I just...” He scrubs at his

jaw, swamped all over again by a fanged and indefensible frustration that makes him grit his teeth. “I want this for him so badly. He’s so talented – always has been – and it kills me that I can’t make this happen for him.”

“Is it about wanting to show him off?” Leo asks gently. “Or wanting him to live up to his...”

He trails off when Tommy shakes his head vehemently.

“No, no, not that. It’s not about that at all.”

Leo waits patiently for him to explain, and, as ever, Tommy feels so much that the words get logjammed in his throat. He wants to pop open his skull and let Leo see everything all at once. But that’s not how you help someone understand something. It’s like Lawson always says: you have to paint the picture. You have to tell the whole story.

He takes a deep breath, and says, “He was always telling stories when we were kids. About stuff that happened in class, or stuff that happened at home. He used to do these bits about his grandmother that made me snort milk out of my nose. But it took a year after meeting him before I read something he’d written. And he didn’t want me to: I found it on his desk, and he tried to get me to put it down. But I knew then: he was good. Even at fourteen. It wasn’t just ‘this happened, and then this happened, and then this happened,’ you know?”

Leo nods.

“It was like I was there. I was a character, and I was flying a spaceship, or riding a dinosaur, or whatever wacky thing he’d come up with. One of our teachers convinced him to enter a short story contest our sophomore year of high school. Against adults. And he won. Leo, he won.”

Leo offers a small, lopsided smile. “His work is very evocative. Lyrical, even.”

“I think most people never figure out what they’re really, truly passionate about. But he’s always known, and he’s always been good at it. He should have the career – the life – that he wants, and he has all the talent and dedication to get it...but knowing he’s at the whims of the industry and all its arbitrary bullshit...” He shoves both hands through his hair, messing up its gelled neatness, and links his fingers at the back of his neck. “He’s supposed to be an author,” he says, helplessly. “And I can’t make that happen, and I...” He shakes his head.

“Tommy,” Leo says, softly, “you know that it’s not something you can or should ‘make happen,’ right?”

“I know.” He looks down at the table, and sees that his hands have balled into fists on the tabletop. He opens them flat, but winds up pressing his fingertips to the wood hard enough that they turn white, knuckles popping from the pressure. “I know that. But I...” Embarrassingly, his throat tightens, and his eyes sting. He blinks the threat of tears away, and swallows hard. When he glances up, Leo’s expression is so soft and understanding that he blurts, “I did him so, so wrong twenty years ago when I left. I know that – I know he left college to take care of his dad. But I can’t stop thinking: what if I’d been here? Could he have stayed in school? Could he have—” His breath hitches, and Leo waves a soothing hand to silence him.

“Have you talked about this with Lawson?”

“A little.” Not in so many words. More like he cried all over him and lamented twenty lost years. But. Same diff.

“I’m not a therapist,” Leo says, “but, as your friend, I think you’re beating yourself up over events in the past you can’t change.”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

They sit in more or less companionable silence a moment. Tommy spies Dana loitering over by the food truck, still, sipping a fresh drink and talking on the phone. Did she call Lawson? Is she even now bitching about him to his husband? He can't blame her.

Leo clears his throat, recaptures his attention, and says, “I shouldn't say this, but Keith is excited to meet Lawson.” His smile is encouraging. “I think he's going to give him good news. He asked for the full manuscript and Lawson emailed it to him yesterday.”

Tommy's brows lift, because he didn't know that. Lawson once again shielding him from potential bad news, protecting him.

Then Leo sobers. “But that doesn't mean he'll take on Lawson as a client. So don't get your heart set on it,” he warns.

Tommy snorts. “Yeah. Thanks.” He extends his hand across the table. “I'm sorry for being a jackass.”

Leo accepts his shake readily. “Don't worry about it. Apology accepted.”

~*~

Lawson's waiting in the parking lot when he gets off work, fifteen minutes late thanks to a last-minute customer phone call. “Hey,” he says, when Tommy slides into the passenger seat. “Mom wanted to know if we could—”

Tommy doesn't slow. As he pulls his door shut, he braces his other hand on the console, leans into Lawson's space, captures his jaw with his now-free palm, and

kisses him soundly. Not a chaste, hi, honey, parking lot appropriate kiss, but hard, and wet, and insistent.

Lawson stills a moment, in surprise, and then his hand is fisted in the front of Tommy's nice shirt, and his tongue is pushing past Tommy's lips.

Tommy allows it a moment – shit, no, he revels in it, almost lost to the drugging swipe of his tongue – but then reminds himself that they are, in fact, in a parking lot, and pulls back. Sinks down into his seat while Lawson blinks at him.

After a long beat, Lawson finishes, "...stop at the store on the way home."

Tommy grins. "Sure. Sounds good."

Lawson blinks some more, then clears his throat and faces forward. "Damn," he murmurs, before he cranks the engine, and Tommy laughs.

They buy ground beef, and onions, and brioche buns. It's a warm night, and Lawson wants burgers, and Tommy picks out the produce: the lettuce, tomatoes, and a head of cabbage for a quick-pickled slaw.

Back home, Lawson gets the dinky little Weber grill loaded with charcoal and lit on the back deck, while Tommy stands leaning against the counter inside, chopping cabbage and carrots, and pausing now and then to peer out the window and admire the shift of Lawson's back muscles beneath his worn-thin t-shirt as he puts the grill rack in place and starts slapping down the burger patties.

Lisa joins him, and it's easier than he expects to tamp-down the kneejerk urge to duck his head and pretend he hasn't been watching Lawson twirl the spatula and shimmy his hips along with whatever song's playing in his head. He's assumed every other time he's tried to play at a more platonic vibe it was some sort of latent prudish

streak; typical embarrassment over being a red-blooded human with urges and admirations. But he thinks now that it might have been more personal than that: some sense that he hasn't earned Lawson, or the chance to be happy and dopey in love.

But it's like Leo said: he can't change the past. He has to move forward, and be good to the people he loves now that he can.

Lisa sidles up beside him at the window, and makes a fond, amused sound. "Bill was always like that when we first got married. Always a song in his head. He didn't walk; he danced everywhere."

He aches for her, for the loss of the kind of marriage she used to have. He knows Lawson does, too; that his guilt has threatened to drown him at times, and that he goes above and beyond the call of duty to look after not just his father's medical needs, but to pick up all of Lisa's slack and then some. He tries to make her life easier. He's good. Tommy's chest clenches with an affection so acute it's painful. He thinks of his own mother, and knows he doesn't possess half of Lawson's goodness.

"Hey, Lisa?" he says, scraping cabbage shreds into a bowl, and she turns to face him, gaze big and blue in his peripheral vision. Astute like her son's. "Lawson has that meeting with the literary agent in New York next week."

"I know! I'm excited for him," she says, voice jittery with nerves.

"Me, too." He sounds just as jittery. Then presses on. "Nothing's certain, yet, and obviously we'd wait to make sure we hired someone you're comfortable with to help with Bill, but—"

"Oh!"

He turns to her again, and sees a smile bloom. Joyful.

“Are you going to go with him? A trip just the two of you?”

His face warms, but he doesn't duck his head now, either. “Yes. If we can swing it. We thought we might make a mini honeymoon out of it.”

“Oh, sweetie, that's wonderful!” She hugs him, and he hugs her back, careful not to dab cabbage juice onto her sweater. “Don't worry, I'm sure we'll find someone. I want you to be able to go.” She takes a deep, hitching breath that he feels against his chest, and in the spasm of her arms around his neck. “You boys deserve a getaway.” Softer, like she can feel the racing of his heart, she adds, “You both deserve to be so happy.”

He wants to believe her...and maybe some day he will.

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Tommy doesn't think he's missed Manhattan until he's walking arm-in-arm down the sidewalk with Lawson, and then he's struck by a sudden, swift nostalgia.

He allows himself a minute, as Lawson points out a guy across the street wearing a truly monstrous hat, to reflect on it. To turn the feeling over in his mind.

He hasn't missed New York the way he missed Eastman for twenty years. His heart was in Eastman, the future he wanted so badly it made his teeth ache from gritting them against the urge to abandon everything he'd built in the city and just leave. Run home.

He spent so much time wishing he was elsewhere, and never stopped to consider that New York – parts of it – had wormed its way into his heart and built up a tolerance that became affection. He likes the convenience of walking everywhere; bodegas, and bars, and coffeeshops, and secondhand bookshops where he thumbed through yellowed pages and tried to select books that Lawson would like to read for himself, feeling a kinship in that small, distant act. He hates the subway, but he likes being up on the street, the bustle of it, even, and the convenience of hailing a cab on a whim, rather than fiddling with an app and waiting for one of Eastman's two Uber drivers to get to him. As Tom Cattaneo, he was spoiled for choice when it came to restaurants, and one-hour delivery.

But everything he finds exhilarating in this moment grated on him by the time he left. The hot stink of sunbaked garbage; people pissing on street corners; the rats and the roaches and the sharp pops of gunshots in the night.

He doesn't want to be back here, living in a multi-million dollar penthouse,

miserable, pining, lying every sentence. But he's glad to be here now, cane folded and held loosely in his free hand, unnecessary as he lets Lawson's strong arm tow him down the sidewalk.

It's muggy, overcast, the air thick with car exhaust and the noise of too many people; it's really too warm to be arm-in-arm like this, their sweaty skin gluing them together in the crooks of their elbows, but Tommy wouldn't let go for the world.

"...warned me not to get listeria from a street cart hot dog," Lawson says, as he turns to look down at Tommy, and then smiles, crooked and curious. "What?"

"What?" Tommy parrots. He wasn't listening, and now he's been busted.

But Lawson doesn't comment on that. Instead, he gestures with a finger and says, "Your face."

He had a latte when they stopped for coffee on the way, and it was exceptionally foamy. Shit. He dashes at his upper lip with the back of the hand holding his cane. "What about it?"

Lawson's smile softens. "I dunno. You just look happy."

"Oh." He searches Lawson's face in turn, worried that Lawson thinks he's happy to be in New York, that maybe he misses it too much, or wishes he lived here still. But Lawson only looks fond. "I am." He tightens his arm, sticky skin catching, tugging at arm hair in an unpleasant way that neither of them pull away from. "I'm happy we're here together."

It's the right thing to say. Lawson's smile widens, eyes scrunching in delight. "God, that was so sappy."

“I know, right? I’m gonna be sick,” Tommy says, smiling so wide his face hurts, and turns his attention back to the sidewalk just in time for them to avoid crashing into a trio of women looking at their phones instead of where they’re going.

Five days ago, they hired Maria, a young, perky home healthcare worker who they both worried was too petite to manage a patient Bill’s size, but who quickly proved that she had a few tricks up her sleeve, both with a deceptive upper body strength, and a knack for using leverage and angles to the best advantage. Bill is thin these days, his legs sticklike and skeletal, but he’s still six-two. Maria, though, handled him expertly and kindly, and quickly won Lisa over.

Things at home covered, Lawson cashed in his unused sick days at Coffee Town – Kyle was a douche about it, but Tommy hopes, if this weekend goes well, Kyle won’t be a worry anymore for long – they packed, and, this morning, left Eastman for New York. They checked into their hotel, a too-expensive splurge in a nod toward the honeymoon portion of the trip, freshened up, and are now on their way to meet Noah and Natalia for lunch at La Historia, Natalia’s treat, she said insistently.

“What sort of restaurant is this?” Lawson asks, as they spy its exterior: smoked windows, and a sleek black facade with gold embossed letters over the recessed doors.

“Knowing Nat, something pretentious with an illegible menu.”

Lawson snorts, and opens the door – rich dark wood with gold pulls – and shuffles them sideways so they can walk in together without letting go of each other. For the first time in a long time, Tommy’s not worried if it makes him look slow and weak; relaxed, not fretting over the image he presents, his legs are working well, and if anything, he thinks they look like two clingy fools in love, rather than an invalid and a caretaker.

The interior is dim – the kind of dim that forces them to a halt while white flowers burst across their field of vision, and it takes a good thirty seconds of blinking for their eyes to adjust. The first detail Tommy notes is the white-veined, black marble floor, and he sighs. Yes, it's pretentious.

Lawson leans down to stage-whisper, "I don't think we're dressed for this place."

"Decidedly not."

But a hostess in a chic black dress steps out from behind her station to greet them and ask if they have a reservation. "Katz? Yes, right this way."

She leads them through a dining room done all in blacks and slate grays, bright gold accents on the chandeliers and wall sconces. If not for waiters gliding through with trays, and the scent of heavily-spiced food, Tommy would think they were in a speakeasy or a ritzy hotel lobby. Every single diner they pass is dressed more formally than them.

And, to his pleasant surprise, he finds he doesn't care. He spent so many years as Tom Cattaneo, dripping finery, and he was miserable as hell. So what if he's wearing jeans and a plaid shirt now? He's hanging off the arm of the only boy he's ever loved.

Noah and Nat are at a booth near the back, beneath an Edison bulb chandelier that throws pale discs of light across the table and makes Nat – red dress, red lipstick – look like a movie star, or European royalty. She lifts a hand to wave at them when they're within sight. Her left hand; Tommy notes she isn't wearing a ring, and looks toward his brother, who's already wearing a sheepish half-smile.

Coward, Tommy thinks, and then smiles when Nat gets up from the table to hug them both and smother them in Chanel No. 5.

Tommy slides into their side of the booth first, so he's across from Noah, and lifts his brows. "Hey," he says, and levers an accusation into it.

Noah rolls his eyes. "Hey."

Lawson and Nat settle in across from each other and Nat says, "Oh, boys, you look wonderful!"

Lawson plucks at the front of his vintage Speed Racer t-shirt and says, "Yeah. Ready for tea with the queen."

Noah looks at Tommy and says, "You gained a little weight," and Tommy bristles.

"Hey, it's hard to—"

"No, it looks good," Noah assures. "You were too thin before."

"Yes," Nat says with an air of finality. "You look healthy, now."

In truth, he misses his sharp muscle definition, but decides not to waste time fretting over it now. Instead, he takes a closer look at Noah: his smart suit, and his cufflinks, and his pink-and-purple striped tie. "Is this how you dress at Narcotics every day?"

As he watches, Noah's face colors. "Um..."

"You haven't heard?" Nat says, leaning forward, face lit up with excitement. "Noah made captain!"

"Captain?" Tommy asks, stunned. "When?"

"Two weeks ago." Then her expression sharpens, and she turns to Noah. "You didn't

tell him? You didn't tell your brother?"

"I'm telling him now."

"You're telling him now, and you're blushing. Noah," she says, chidingly. "How could you not tell your brother?"

Noah's blush deepens, and Tommy shares a quick glance with Lawson.

Did you know?

No.

The truth is, though Noah and Tommy do talk – on the phone, via text, and over Skype sometimes – they don't talk about anything of substance. Baseball scores, and Frank, and their mother, and usually Tommy finds an opening to needle Noah about proposing to Natalia, and Noah says yeah, yeah, I know, I'm getting there. But all Noah ever asks about his recovery is You good? You doing okay? And Tommy says, Yeah, even if he isn't okay. In turn, he says, How's Narcotics, and Noah says, You know. Lots of drugs in the city. And that's that.

At no point has Noah mentioned he took the captain test, nor that he was being considered for the position.

Tommy isn't hurt, exactly. But he feels like he got slapped across the face.

Noah meets his gaze, and then ducks his head, like he knows.

Thankfully, Nat is very good at blasting through tension with weaponized cheerfulness. "Lawson," she says, hands slapping down on the table. "Tell me all about your meeting with the book man."

Lawson chuckles. “The literary agent?”

“Yes!”

“Well, obviously, nothing’s for certain yet,” Lawson says, and launches, at her prompting, into an explanation of the query and book-shopping process. He lays down a lot of qualifiers – it probably won’t happen; not getting my hopes up; etc. – but Tommy notes that he sounds less nervous and more excited than he has at any point since Leo first suggested the meeting.

A waiter comes by for their drink order in the middle of the conversation. Lawson and Tommy both ask for water, but Nata orders a bottle of white wine for the table and four glasses. “It’s your honeymoon,” she says with a wink. “Have fun.”

“I’m sure you’ll be published,” Nat says with confidence, lifting her glass, once it’s arrived, in a suggestion of a toast.

Lawson chuckles. “You’ve never read a single word I’ve written.”

“But I’m still sure,” she says, with a regal toss of her head. “To Lawson, and the millions of dollars he’s going to make.”

Lawson rolls his eyes, but clinks his glass with hers, and then with Noah’s and Tommy’s when they join. Lawson catches Tommy’s gaze and shakes his head. This chick, his look says. Crazy.

I hope she’s not crazy, Tommy thinks, fiercely, while he smiles back. I hope you get everything you’ve ever wanted.

It turns out La Historia is a Spanish restaurant. “As in Spain, babe,” Tommy tells Lawson, leaning into his shoulder. “There’s no tacos.”

“I know that.” But he pouts anyway, and Tommy laughs, and sips his wine, and is pleasantly warm inside, head to toes.

Tommy orders steak, and Lawson gets the paella, despite the waiter giving him a dubious look and saying it’s meant to feed four.

After they’ve ordered, Nat tops up their glasses and turns her laser-focus on Tommy. Uh oh, he thinks, and the wine makes him bold enough not to shrink down into his seat beneath the vivid blue of her eyes.

“Tom,” she says, “you weren’t using your cane when you came in.”

Tommy thinks, aw shit. And then Lawson stiffens beside him, a judder of tension where their biceps are pressed together, and then he thinks aw shit for a different reason.

He reaches with his other hand to squeeze Lawson’s forearm and said, “Have you seen this guy’s arms? Nobody needs a cane holding onto one of those.”

Lawson barks a startled laugh.

“Oh jeez,” Noah says, grimacing. “Marriage made you gross.”

And they don’t talk about Tommy’s legs, or his cane, or anything of the sort for the rest of the meal.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:35 am

In the week of planning that led up to their departure, Lisa and Bill both encouraged them to see something on Broadway while they were in the city. Natalia asks them if they have tickets for any shows, or if they have any interest in this new club her friend just opened. “I can get your names on the list.”

They trade a look, and Lawson’s lips press flat in an effort not to laugh.

“We didn’t bring any clubbing clothes, but thanks,” Tommy tells her, and she throws her hands up, smiling, in mock despair.

“You’re always so boring, Tom!” But she doesn’t push.

Tommy has plans for their evening, and they don’t involve an overlong musical or a crowded, smelly club.

It’s almost four by the time they hug Nat and Noah goodbye on the sidewalk in front of La Historia, pleasantly full of rich food, a little too loud from the wine.

“I want to see you both again before you go home,” Nat insists. To Lawson, she says, “Good luck tomorrow. You’ll do wonderful.”

“It’s not a job interview. He either likes the book or he doesn’t,” Lawson says, but his cheeks pink prettily with bashfulness.

After Nat and Noah head for their car, Tommy loops his arm through Lawson’s again and tugs him down the sidewalk.

“Are you taking me sightseeing?”

“Yeah.”

The first stop is the bookshop where Tommy used to go to breathe the scent of crumbling pages, and old ink, and miss Lawson desperately without the eyes of his fellow officers on him.

Lawson pulls them to a stop on the sidewalk out front, where rolling carts of books have been parked in front of the shop windows. An older woman searches through them carefully, a small stack already accumulated in the crook of one arm. He looks up at the sign, and then down at Tommy. “This doesn’t look like the Statue of Liberty.”

“Nice observation, jackass,” Tommy says, grinning, and Lawson’s returning smile is blinding. “No,” he says, softer, nudging their linked arms. “I found this spot years ago and it always made me think of you. So...” He trails off as his face heats, and turns toward the window.

They don’t do the whole brushing their teeth side-by-side thing, so he doesn’t often see their joint reflections. He sees them now, in the flat glass of the window: Lawson tall, and broad-shouldered, and himself smaller than he feels, but smiling. Happy. They look good together, he thinks. Complements. Light and dark. Tall and...less tall. The way they’re leaning together, it’s impossible to tell which of them has trouble balancing; who’s the steady presence, and who needs help.

Lawson’s legs work fine, but they both do need steadying, even if it’s not of the same sort.

Tommy thought, at first, that their rings, and their vows, and their hands laced together in front of a hospital chapel altar would banish all doubts, all guilt. That each

of them would be sure of the other's commitment and love and willingness to stay and stick out the rough spots. Seven months, but most especially the past few weeks, have taught him that's not the case. The rings, vows, and interlaced hands were a big and vital step toward the rest of their lives...but they've both been in recovery that whole time: from heartache, for one, and from almost dying, in Tommy's case; in Lawson's case, he supposes it's a recovery from whatever future he envisioned when he thought Tommy wouldn't pull through.

There's not a cure for recovery. Only the slow, day in and day out work of nonlinear progress. And love. Love carries more than its fair share of weight.

"Do you wanna go in?" Tommy asks, and realizes Lawson is studying their reflection, too, expression heartbreakingly tender.

"Yeah." His voice is a little uneven, but Tommy doesn't comment on it; strokes his arm, instead. "Yeah, let's go in."

~*~

They only have one more planned stop before they head back to the hotel, so Tommy's content to wander the aisles, occasionally scanning covers and reading blurbs, while Lawson browses with the speed and determination of a consummate bookworm. From aisle to aisle, topic to topic, tracing spine after spine with flickering fingertips. It's cute as hell, and Tommy eventually finds an overstuffed ottoman to perch on near the science fiction section, where Lawson appears to have set up camp.

Forty-five minutes after entering the shop, Lawson comes to him, beaming, arms loaded with yellow-edged secondhand paperbacks. He found a complete set of Edgar Rice Burroughs' John Carter of Mars books, with killer pulpy cover art from the seventies.

The proprietor loads them in a canvas tote printed with the shop's logo while Tommy slides his credit card across the counter, and Lawson leans down to kiss him on the temple, right there in front of the cash register, the shop owner, and a little blue parakeet in a cage behind the counter.

The sidewalks are congested when they emerge, so Tommy unfolds his cane for the inevitable moment they'll have to go single-file to avoid crashing into anyone. It feels lighter than usual; his temple is still warm and faintly tingling where Lawson kissed him.

"Are you trying to get me drunk?" Lawson asks with an eyebrow waggle when Tommy tugs him into a liquor store. "To take advantage of me? 'Cause I could get into that."

Tommy sends him a mock-stern glare. "Pick out a wine you like." For his own part, he grabs a bottle of his favorite overpriced whiskey, and a bottle of champagne, crossed necks clenched together in the fingers of his free hand.

When he finds Lawson debating two whites, one significantly cheaper than the other, he says, "Get the expensive one."

Lawson's mouth tucks sideways in a wry smile. Then his eyes widen when he spots the bottles Tommy's carrying. "I was kidding before about the drunk thing."

"Well, I'm not. Get the nice one. It's our honeymoon."

He says it because it's true, but it has the added benefit of making Lawson flush happily. He gets the good wine, and, as they head for the register, Tommy snags a bag of plastic champagne flutes from a display on the endcap.

~*~

They didn't book the honeymoon suite, but it's still a nice room: wide king bed, floor-to-ceiling windows, marble and brushed brass fixtures in a bathroom that feels like a real bathroom: decadent and roomy, with a massive tub, as opposed to one of those narrow, economy rooms that remind you at every turn that you're in a hotel.

When they get back in, the sun is setting lavishly through the skyscrapers beyond their window, liquid orange and glittering with eye-watering ferocity off every metallic surface across the span of city that separates their thirtieth-floor room from the river. Tommy's drawn to the window; his breath fogs the glass as he stares out at the vista, the cars crawling below like ants, boats moving on the Hudson. He counts five rooftop gardens, one strung with fairy lights that snap on as he watches, tiny people gathering at a table and toasting one another with tiny glasses.

Even at his most miserable during their twenty years apart, he always found a kind of bittersweet comfort in the sheer busyness of the city. The knowledge that, even if he was pining and lonely, there were so many others out there, just beyond his window, living, and loving, and enjoying themselves.

Now, he gets to be one of their number.

He catches the ghost of his own smile in his reflection as he turns, and puts his back to the view, and focuses instead on the view that's for him only.

Lawson's sprawled on his side across the width of the bed, propped up on an elbow. He turned the TV on immediately, found a rerun of *The Office*, and then dug into his tote of new/old books. He's idly paging through one of the paperbacks, smiling to himself with soft delight.

It's an innocent picture, and Tommy almost hates to dirty it up.

Almost.

He crosses to the marble-topped counter that hosts a hot plate, coffee pot, and an assortment of complimentary snacks and water bottles, and plucks the champagne from the bucket of ice they grabbed out in the hall. After years playing a mafia boss, he's developed a particular talent for uncorking bottles without showering himself and the floor in champagne, and he pulls this one neatly; fills two of the plastic flutes from the liquor store and turns back toward the bed.

Lawson's flopped over onto his back, book held overhead, properly reading now, and Tommy swallows an amused huff. He moves to stand at the foot of the bed, holding both flutes. Waits for a count of ten.

"Law."

He rolls his head, spots Tommy, and then sits upright in a hurry. Chucks the book up onto the pillows. "Oh. Hey. Right now?" His hands grip the hem of his shirt and his face takes on an eager cast.

Tommy laughs. God, he loves this man. "Right now what?" He puts a knee up onto the mattress and offers one of the champagne flutes. "I'm just handing you a drink."

"Uh-huh." Lawson takes his...and drains it all in one go like a shot.

"Dude!" Tommy laughs, and gets his other knee up onto the bed. "It's not a race. You don't win if you get drunk first."

Lawson leans over to set the flute on the nightstand, and then reaches for Tommy; grabs him by the hips and hauls him up to kneel between his legs like he weighs nothing, a move that never fails to set Tommy's stomach swooping. "Yeah, but the faster the I drink, the sooner I get to do this." His hands slide down to Tommy's thighs, and part them, and he rearranges him so he's straddling Lawson's lap.

Tommy braces his free hand on Lawson's shoulder, which is honestly its favorite spot to be anyway, and closes his eyes, head tipped down for a kiss.

Lawson's hand settles big and warm on the back of his neck, and goosebumps prickles across his skin, anticipation a pleasant shiver down his arms and legs. He doesn't kiss him, though; rubs his nose against Tommy's and murmurs, "Now, huh?" against his lips. He retreats when Tommy tries to bring their mouths together fully, and when Tommy slits his eyes open, he sees the mix of smugness and fondness in the curve of Lawson's smile. "You don't want to rest a little bit first?"

"Not" – shit, he's out of breath already – "unless you want to."

Lawson's nails scratch up into the hair at his nape and his lashes flutter, which prompts Lawson to hum a low, pleased note that goes straight to Tommy's dick.

"I thought," he continues, with no small amount of difficulty, "that we could – after – that we could get room service. After."

"After?" Lawson teases, his grin a slice of blurred white this close. "After what?"

"Law," he sighs, squeezing his shoulder hard. "What do you want? And I mean," he adds, before Lawson can say anything self-sacrificing. "What do you want? Not just what you think I want to hear."

Lawson draws back another fraction, far enough for them to see each other properly. His gaze tracks slowly from Tommy's face, to his neck, his chest, the crotch of his jeans, one hand sliding to his inner thigh and stroking over the seam there, until Tommy takes a shuddery inhale. When his gaze returns to Tommy's, it's gone hot, and hungry, intense in the way that Tommy loves, and in a way it hasn't been nearly enough lately.

“I want...” The hand on Tommy’s thigh lifts to cup the bottom of the champagne flute and urge it toward Tommy’s mouth. “For you to drink this. Slowly.”

“Oh shit,” Tommy breathes, shivering all over.

Lawson gives the bottom of the flute another nudge, and he raises it to his lips, and drinks.

Slowly, as instructed.

Lawson watches the movement of his throat, and on the last swallow, reaches up to press his palm there, right over the bobbing of his Adam’s apple.

“Christ.” Tommy pulls off the rim of the glass with a gasp, and Lawson plucks it from his fingers and leans over to set it on the nightstand beside his own.

Tommy leans with the movement, not wanting to separate even an inch, and overbalances; nearly goes toppling off the side of the bed.

Lawson catches him by the waist and rights him effortlessly, which gets Tommy’s pulse racing. “You okay?” he asks, clearly amused, but his eyes are still big, and dark, and full of want.

“Yeah.” Tommy cups his jaw between both hands and kisses him.

Tommy knows he’s worked up – maybe too worked up – but doesn’t realize how acute it is, how quickly he gets hard, until Lawson’s murmuring, “Easy, easy,” against his lips, and urging him back with a hand at his throat again.

Tommy makes a frankly embarrassing noise of distress, and Lawson grins, and hooks his fingers in the collar of his shirt.

“Now who’s running a race?”

“I just...” Tommy pets over Lawson’s shoulders, and down his arms, grips tight at his biceps. The champagne went straight to his head, and now he’s flushed and a little dizzy – but not unpleasantly so. With the city view through the open curtains, and the big bed, he’s keenly aware that, for all intents and purposes, they’re alone – properly alone, locked in their own private bubble – for the first time since they got married. There’s probably people in the neighboring rooms, but no one they know; no worried parents who’ll come ask if they’re okay; no medical crises waiting to unfold that require their intervention. He doesn’t resent those things, but they’re alone. He’s straddling his big, pretty husband, and they have nowhere to be, and nothing else to do, and Tommy’s vibrating out of his skin with how badly he wants to be destroyed.

“Okay,” Lawson murmurs, leaning in to press a string of kisses up the side of his throat. He breathes warm and damp against the underside of his jaw, and licks him there. “You really need it, huh? I know, baby, I know. I’ll give it to you.”

“Please.”

“Shh, come here.”

Lawson gathers him in close and rolls them; presses Tommy down into the mattress and braces over him on one hand, so he can cup Tommy’s face with the other and finally kiss him the way Tommy wants.

It’s a good kiss. Deep, and slick, and messy, Lawson’s tongue insistent inside his mouth; his weight blanketing and immovable between Tommy’s thighs, across his hips, his chest, putting pressure on his hard cock. Lawson kisses the way he writes, with thorough attention to detail, knowing just when to push for more, and when to back off, when to tease. He reads all of Tommy’s reactions, from the hands fisted in his hair, to the little gasps and shaky exhales that slip through in the fleeting moments

their lips aren't together. It's something that shocked and delighted him as a teenager, when they first started making out like it was a sporting event, and something that delights him still. He knew back then that he wanted to kiss Lawson – more than he wanted anything, most days – but he thought it would be clumsy, or awkward, or even unpleasant. Wet mouths smacking against one another. But it was good then, and it's better now, and by the time Lawson sits up and peels his shirt off over his head, Tommy's worried his brain might have melted out of his ears.

“God.” The word's punched out of him, as he exhales all in a rush.

The sunset gilds Lawson like a Greek statue, all wide shoulders and thick muscle, his torso not sculpted like a gym bro's, but strong, from carrying his dad, from carrying Tommy himself.

Tommy reaches for Lawson's fly – and Lawson plucks his wrists up and pins them back against the bed on either side of his head.

“Oh.”

Lawson leans down, and kisses him with deliberate slowness. “Stay there,” he says as he pulls back, voice gone low and velvety-gentle. “Can you do that?”

Tommy thinks a stupid squeaking sound is all that'll come out if he tries to speak, so he nods.

Lawson kisses his cheek, the sensitive skin below his ear, and says, “Good boy.”

Oh my God. Tommy wants to get fucked, but worries he might not last until then if Lawson keeps this up.

Lawson kisses his throat, right over his fluttering pulse point, and then shifts down

his body. Pushes his shirt up so it's bunched above his chest, and kisses his sternum. Trails his lips up the gentle swell of his pec and sucks his nipple into his mouth.

Tommy closes his eyes and starts to reach for Lawson, wanting to cup the back of his head, to rake his fingers through his hair, those thick, short waves made fluffy by the humidity outside. But Lawson said stay, so he grips two handfuls of the coverlet instead and endures the sweat torture of Lawson's mouth.

Time drags. Lawson spends a long time working over his chest, until Tommy's nipples are hard and aching, and his hips have started lifting of their own accord, seeking friction along Lawson's ribs.

Then Lawson lays a hand down low on Tommy's stomach and presses his pelvis flat on the mattress. "Nu-uh," he tuts, and lifts up enough for Tommy to see his pink, damp lips, smirking.

Tommy clenches his handfuls of comforter. "Oh, fuck you."

Lawson grins. "Well, that's not very good."

"Lawson." He's whining. Oh well. He'll be embarrassed about it later.

Lawson chuckles, and smooths his hands up and down his stomach, teasing at his ribs, and his sucked-raw nipples. He hits Tommy's shirt, still bunched under his arms, and says, "You wanna take this off?"

"Yeah."

Tommy's arms are still braced up above his head, so Lawson pushes it easily, up and up, leaning down as he does so. When the material clears Tommy's face, Lawson kisses him, sticky-sweet, and unhurried, while he gets the shirt the rest of the way off

his wrists and hands. It's the kind of mind-altering kiss that drowns out everything else: the tension in his arms and shoulders, the pulse throbbing between his legs, the hitch of his breathing. The world narrows down to the way their mouths fit and slide, nip and press.

He cranes his neck, chasing Lawson when he lifts his head, and Lawson gives him a soft, indulgent sort of look, thumb tracing his lower lip where it feels slick and swollen.

"What?" Tommy asks.

Lawson breathes a quiet laugh. "Where are your arms, baby?"

"They're...oh." They're around Lawson's neck, his hands shoved into his hair.

"That's okay." Lawson kisses his cheek, chaste compared to the way they were kissing before, and it feels more reassuring than romantic. "I like how worked up you get."

"Lawson—"

"I know, I know. Hold on."

It's awful when he sits up and then climbs off the bed, leaving Tommy cold and thrumming without him, but he enjoys the view. The shift and flex of muscles in Lawson's back as he goes to their bags, crouches down, and retrieves the lube. He turns back and tosses it onto the bed, and then unfastens and shoves down his jeans and boxers. He's a lot less clumsy about stepping out of them than he was when they were seventeen, finally grown into his long legs, but the effect's the same as it always was: Tommy has a fleeting moment of oh shit, he'll never fit, followed by the knowledge that he can, and has, and will, and then his mouth waters, and his legs fall

open, and his face does whatever it is that makes Lawson's eyes dilate while he watches him and strokes himself.

Tommy reaches for the button of his jeans, and suddenly Lawson's there, batting his hands gently away and doing it for him. When they're unzipped, he hooks his long fingers into the waistband of jeans and boxer-briefs both, and drags them down in one clean movement that leaves Tommy shivering. He chucks them heedlessly over his shoulder and gets back on the bed, kneeling between Tommy's thighs. He rubs his hands up the insides, petting the hair the wrong way, and Tommy spreads them farther with a groan.

"You're so hard," Lawson marvels, touch skirting up to the join of hip and thigh, so close to where Tommy wants him, and then back down again.

"You're one to talk."

"Hm." Lawson ducks down and licks the head of his cock.

"Oh – Christ, Lawson – Don't, I'm gonna..."

Lawson sits back up, far too pleased with himself, and shuffles closer, taking Tommy by the hips and dragging him in closer, until Tommy feels the hot brand of his cock against his inner thigh. Just that sends the breath shaking out of Tommy's lungs.

"Lawson," Tommy pants, "I'm not kidding. I can't – I'm not gonna last."

"That's okay, baby." Lawson picks up the lube and squeezes a generous amount into his right hand, rubs his fingers together to warm it. "I can make you come again." Then he presses in slow and relentless with two fingers straight away.

When Lawson starts stroking his cock in a counterpoint rhythm to the thrusting of his

fingers, the press of his fingertips over his prostate, Tommy comes and comes hard.

When he's aware of his surroundings again, he finds that Lawson's stretched out on top of him, letting him hold some of his weight, but not crushing him. His fingers are still inside Tommy, flexing gently, working him through the aftershocks, and he's pressing kiss after kiss to Tommy's slack, panting mouth, murmuring between, words that Tommy slowly begins to decipher.

"...beautiful, you're so beautiful, my beautiful baby."

Tommy turns his head, buries his face in Lawson's throat, and drifts off with Lawson's pulse knocking sweetly against his forehead.

~*~

"Legs okay?"

He's lying on his stomach, head toward the foot of the bed, folded arms and chin propped up on a pillow while Lawson works his glutes and hammies with frankincense oil. He's so relaxed he thinks he could melt straight down through the bed, contentedly watching *The Office*, which has been running the whole time, unheeded, since they first got back in the room. It's the one where Jim, Dwight, and Michael set up a sting for a guest starring Timothy Olyphant, one of Tommy's favorite episodes, and between it, and Lawson's magic, knot-unraveling hands, he almost forgets to answer.

"Good," he says, voice muffled from the pillow. "Little tingly. No pain."

"Yeah? That's good." He digs in with the heels of his hands, drawing a grunt out of Tommy. All the way down to the backs of his knees, and on the way back up, he pushes Tommy's thighs farther apart.

Heat flares deep in Tommy's pelvis. Not the flashfire, frantic neediness of before, but a lower, more pleasurable burn. He's already come once, recovered, and this time, he'll be able to last.

One of Lawson's hands lifts away, and when it returns, it's slicker than it was. It trails purposefully up the inside of his thigh, and then nudges up between his cheeks and presses at his entrance, where he's still loose.

Tommy spreads his legs wider.

"Yeah?" Lawson asks, voice gone throaty.

"Yeah."

Lawson presses in with three fingers and Tommy hisses, sensitive. "You wanna turn over?"

"In a minute. Wanna start like this."

"Shit, yeah, okay."

The mattress dips and shifts under Lawson's weight as he rearranges himself. As he grips Tommy's hips and lifts him up so he can get his knees braced on the mattress. The position immediately sends a pinching dart of pain down Tommy's right hip flexor and leg, but it also stirs something primal and Pavlovian in the back of his head. He's about to get what he wants, finally, and his cock jerks and thickens, and heat pools and pools in the pit of his stomach, a tightness that's anticipated pleasure, and nothing to do with his shoddy nerves.

The fat head of Lawson's cock nudges at him, blunt pressure that feels massive after his fingers, and then it's pressing in, and in, and in.

Tommy moans. “God, yes.” He’s gone from relaxed and drowsy to rock-hard and needy in the time it takes Lawson to bury himself to the hilt.

“Baby,” Lawson murmurs, hands tightening on his hips, spasms Tommy knows will leave bruises. He grinds into him, breath hitching. “Don’t – don’t let me hurt you. I don’t wanna hurt you.”

“You won’t.” Tommy braces his elbows and turns his head on the pillow so he can drag in a deep breath. “I know you won’t, you never do. Fuck me.”

Lawson makes a choked, whimpering noise, draws his hips back, and rolls them forward. Not fast, but hard, dragging against Tommy’s insides in all the right places.

Tommy decides – as Lawson’s hands tighten, and his thrusts speed up – that he wants, needs for Lawson to fuck him as hard as he wants to, as he used to, when they were stupid kids, and when they were grown men, whole and hale, and Lawson pinned him down in a featherbed in a rented mansion and took what he wanted.

Tommy arches his spine and pushes back each time Lawson drives forward. Until their skin meets with a loud smack. Until the tingling in Tommy’s legs becomes numbness, and his knee slips.

Lawson falters.

“No, I’m good, I’m good, let me turn over,” Tommy pants. When Lawson pulls out, his planned, sinuous roll turns into more of an inelegant flop. “Shit. You may have to help me – but I’m fine. Just. Come on.”

Lawson lifts his hips up and over, and settles his legs on either side of his waist. He’s flushed, chest, throat, face, and breathing hard, cock so hard it looks painful, nearly purple. But his touch is gentle up and down Tommy’s thighs, kneading at the

twitching muscles there. His face crimps, and Tommy's stomach drops unpleasantly. He's going to stop, he thinks. Insist on waiting, or doing something else, or...

Tommy wraps his legs tight around Lawson's waist, and hooks his ankles together at the small of his back. He reaches up to pet Lawson's forearms, feels the tension of restraint there. He's vibrating.

The desperation in Tommy's stomach swells, and then pops like a bubble, that empty, animal want giving way to the sort of tenderness that makes him want to hide his face. How is it possible to long for someone when he's right in front of you, touching you? How can love be so sharp it cuts, but in a good way?

His voice comes out small and shaky when he says, "Honey, I'm okay. Will you come inside me? Please? I want you to fuck me the way you want to."

"What if I want to be sweet to you?"

Tommy's eyes sting. "Okay. Yeah, okay, come here." He blinks hard, and reaches for him.

Lawson pushes back in, slow enough to make Tommy arch and claw at his shoulders, and then curves over him. He cups Tommy's face in one big hand and kisses him as his hips start to move, and all of it is molasses-slow, and sweet, and so good, and Tommy feels worshipped. Sheltered beneath Lawson, as he kisses him, and breathes in short little bursts that sound like he's...

A warm, wet droplet strikes Tommy's cheek, and he realizes, with a surge of distress, that Lawson is crying.

He touches his jaw, and parts their lips. "Hey, hey." He doesn't ask what's wrong, because his own eyes are damp, and nothing's wrong anyway. It's overwhelming:

getting to be here together like this, after everything. “It’s okay.”

Lawson draws in a shuddering breath, and presses his hand flat over the scars on Tommy’s stomach. “I love you.”

Tommy knows that, but Lawson blinks tears out of eyes gone serious, and imploring, and Tommy wonders if either of them is ever going to get to a place where they stop trying so hard to convey what those three words really mean.

He reaches to tuck a sweat-damp lock of gold hair behind Lawson’s ear. “I love you, too.”

Lawson’s face crumples with emotion, and he leans down to kiss him again, makes love to him, and after, when Tommy can’t walk, carries him to the bathroom so they can take a bath together. By the time the water’s gone tepid, Tommy can stand on his own, and Lawson smiles like it’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen.

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They fall asleep warm, and drowsy, and content, Tommy happily little-spooning inside the strong curve of Lawson's arm. It's a peace that's in short supply by ten the next morning, as Lawson paces the room and tries not to hyperventilate.

Tommy's still in his pajamas, disguising his own nerves with usefulness; he's taking Lawson's sport coat out of its garment bag and checking for wrinkles. "Have you brushed your teeth?" he asks.

Lawson hits the window, turns, and rakes his hands through his shower-damp hair again. Tommy's not sure if he should bother trying to gel it for him; if he keeps pawing at it once the product hardens, they'll have a Cameron Diaz in *There's Something About Mary* situation on their hands.

"Yeah," Lawson says, distracted, then stops in the middle of the floor and frowns. "No. Maybe? I dunno." He heads for the bathroom and a moment later the tap cuts on.

The blazer looks fine, so Tommy hangs it off the back of the desk chair. The shirt and pants are already laid out on the bed. Tommy picked the outfit himself, and texted a pic of it to Dana the day before they left, not expecting a response, really. But a half-hour later, she texted back a thumbs-up and take the blue jacket, which he did. The two of them still haven't had a proper conversation, but he's taking that returned text as a step in the right direction.

Tommy sets out Lawson's belt, then, water still running in the bathroom, moves to Lawson's briefcase where it rests on the TV table. It was a Christmas gift from Dana and Leo: a smart fold-top, brown leather bag with a long shoulder strap in addition to

its handle, soft-sided and with plenty of inner pockets for pens, notebooks, and flash drives. Chic, and modern, and very Dana-approved, Lawson looks like a laid-back professor when he carries it, the sort of teacher whose class students want to take, and who buys the first round at the bar once office hours are over. Inside, he double checks Lawson has what he needs; more than he could possibly need, really, but better safe than sorry. Laptop, fresh spiral notebook, three pens, business cards (that Tommy mocked up and ordered, despite Lawson's protests that "I haven't done anything worthy of a business card, dude"), and multiple copies of his manuscript: three copies of the first five pages, and then first ten pages respectively, and two copies of the whole thing, spiral bound at Staples.

Lawson comes out of the bathroom wearing socks, underwear, and a white-t-shirt, scrubbing his face with a hand towel. He pulls the towel down as he approaches the bed, and groans. "Oh man, I'm gonna hurl."

"Do not hurl." Tommy points to the clothes on top of the coverlet. "One thing at a time. Get dressed."

Lawson sets the towel on the nightstand, and does so.

Tommy moves the briefcase over by the door, collects the towel, and takes it to the bathroom.

At home, Lawson's fastidious in a way that Tommy knows – based on past experience and the way Lawson sometimes snatches up a dropped sock with a guilty look like he's about to get in trouble – isn't natural habit, but an attempt at pleasing Tommy. They've had enough tearful conversations by this point that Tommy thinks that Lawson worries Tommy might pack his shit and leave if Lawson leaves toothpaste flecks on the mirror, and that hurts his heart in ways he still can't clearly define.

He's not been meticulous this morning: towel on the floor, water all over the counter, splashed on the mirror. Faucet only most of the way off in the shower so droplets plink, plink, plink down onto the tile.

Tommy smiles to himself, because this is what he expected when they moved in together. And maybe this is all because Lawson's freaking out about his meeting with Keith, but maybe, Tommy thinks, as he scoops up the towel, and shuts off the water, and starts wiping up the counter, Lawson's feeling surer than he did about Tommy's permanence in his life. He hopes so, anyway.

When he walks back out into the room, Lawson's dressed save for his blazer, shirt tucked sharply into his waistband in a way that makes him look extra Dorito-shaped, and he's popping his knuckles in an almost manic way as he mutters under his breath, like he's practicing.

"...summer book club potential, more like upmarket fiction, and it...Oh." He pulls up short when Tommy grips him by the shoulders and turns him. "Hi. What?"

"Sit down." Tommy pushes him toward the desk chair. "Your hair's a disaster."

"Oh." He pats at it absently with one hand while he folds down into the chair, and then makes a face. "I washed it."

"Yeah, and then fiddled with it. Let me fix it."

Air drying has lent it such volume that Tommy decides to smooth the flyaways and twist the waves into some semblance of shape rather than slick it all back, which has never been a good look on Lawson anyway.

"I look like a poodle," Lawson declares, afterward, but he's grinning. "Or like one of the Brat Pack."

“It looks good,” Tommy says, capping the gel. “You ready?”

Lawson exhales. “No. But yeah.”

Tommy throws on jeans and a t-shirt so he can ride down in the elevator with Lawson and see him out to the sidewalk. Lawson protests that he doesn’t need to, but quickly begins talking a mile a minute in a clear effort to distract himself from the meeting.

“...I just think,” he says, as they push through the lobby doors and out into the humid, exhaust-scented midmorning air, “that making a live action version of a movie immediately kills everything magic about the animated version.”

There’s a cab idling at the curb, empty, and Tommy hails the driver with a wave of his hand and gets a nod in return. Then he stops, and turns to Lawson, and reaches to straighten his collar. “I don’t disagree with you, so I don’t know why you’re arguing about it,” Tommy says, “but it’s time to go.”

Lawson closes his eyes and screws his face up. “Do I have to?”

“Yes.” Tommy plucks a stray thread off his lapel and brushes down his shoulders just because he can, because he loves how wide and strong they are, exaggerated mouth-wateringly by the jacket. “You’re gonna kill it, babe.”

Lawson cracks his eyes open to squint at him. “You’re just saying that.”

“Nah. It’s true. You should try listening to me for once: I’m pretty damn smart.”

“Well, you married me, so...” When Tommy socks him in the arm, he smiles, and that’s what Tommy was aiming for.

“Kiss me and go, dummy.”

Lawson leans down and does so, and Tommy shoves him away when he grips his waist and tries to deepen it.

“Go, go,” Tommy says, laughing, “I love you, good luck.”

“Love you!”

Tommy watches the cab pull away from the curb and into the flow of traffic, and that’s when the practical calm that’s powered him through the morning abandons him completely, and nerves turn his hands jittery on his cane. So long as he was propping up Lawson, he was fine. But now, all he can envision is Lawson, alone, sitting across a massive mahogany desk, being told no, thanks, you’re not what we’re looking for. Lawson’s big, but he looks small in Tommy’s mind, in that nightmare scenario, tucked down into himself and swallowing thickly as someone with no idea how extraordinary he is dashes his dreams to pieces.

Tommy whips out his phone and texts Noah: ur taking me to lunch. Somewhere w/ a liquor license. Then goes back inside to fetch his wallet.

~*~

“Is this just what you do now?” Noah asks a half-hour later, after Tommy’s thrown back his first whiskey neat and signaled the waitress for another. “Day drink and scowl at people?”

Tommy shoots him the bird. “I have a job, dipshit.”

“Riiiiight.” Noah nods, mock-sage. “Selling insurance.”

“Fuck off.”

The interesting thing, he notes, in an absent, distracted way, is that he's not even actually angry. The insults are rote, part of an automatic call and repeat that's been his entire relationship with his twin. Everything he loves about Lawson – how much taller and larger and stronger he is; the way he pushes all of Tommy's buttons; his loud laugh and his inappropriate comments – has always irritated the shit out of him on Noah. It's the love goggles. Or maybe the fact that he knows Lawson cares more, capable of intense gentleness when he senses it's necessary. Whatever the case, he's usually pissed at Noah for some reason or other, but today, his digs roll right off Tommy's back.

And Noah, cop that he is, notices, perking up in his chair. "Damn."

"What?" His drink arrives, along with a basket of fries. "Thank you." When she's gone, he repeats, "What?"

"Do you like selling insurance?"

"It's not the worst thing I've ever done for a paycheck."

A muscle in Noah's cheek twitches, and Tommy wonders which on-the-job shooting he's thinking of. Or if he's remembering the hospital, the wires and machinery hooked to Tommy's body.

Then his face softens, and he grows serious, all traces of mockery gone. "Yeah, okay. But are you happy? Like, really happy?"

Tommy frowns, but he's still not angry. "How often do we Skype, dude? You've seen me."

"Yeah, and usually your Bigfoot half is loitering in the background. I'm sitting here talking to just you, and I wanna make sure: are you happy? Tom," he presses, when

Tommy rolls his eyes, “you spent twenty years saying you were gonna go back to Eastman, and then you did. It would be normal if it turned out that wasn’t the happily ever after you always thought it would be.”

Tommy sends him a sharp look. Feels the first stirrings of anger.

He picks up his glass. “Talk shit about my husband and see if I don’t throw this in your face.”

“Christ,” Noah mutters, spreading his hands. “I’m not. Holy shit, can you not chill? Isn’t marriage supposed to mellow a guy out?” Tommy glares at him, but sips at his whiskey and enjoys the warmth of it. Deep down, he knows that Noah knows better than to trash Lawson. He was the one, after all, who stood between him and Frank from the very start.

“Eat something.” Noah nudges the fries closer. “Don’t get sloppy at noon, man.”

Tommy tsks, but takes a handful of fries.

Tone careful, Noah says, “Why are you drinking? Are you that nervous about his meeting?”

“Yeah. And I may or may not have been a huge jackass about it a couple weeks ago.” Without really planning to, he spills the whole story about what happened at Flanagan’s.

Noah’s frowning by the time he’s finished, and shakes his head. “Okay, first off, if this Leo guy is that much of a pussy—”

“He’s nice. Unlike you and me.”

“I’m nice,” Noah says, unconvincingly. “You’re a shithead—”

“Fuck you.”

“Thanks for proving my point. But, like, come on. You were looking out for your guy. And you maybe had too much to drink on an empty stomach.” He reaches across the table and Tommy pulls his drink out of reach. “Was Leo even upset? Or was it Dana?” he asks, a knowing glint in his eye.

“Mostly Dana,” he concedes. “And Lawson.”

Noah’s brows flick, surprised.

“He thinks – he thought,” he corrects, because he doesn’t believe Lawson truly thinks this, and after last night, he doesn’t see how Lawson could doubt his commitment. But his stomach still twists when he thinks about Lawson’s face in the mirror that night, the way he doubted him. “That I was pushing this author thing because I wanted us to have more money. Because I was tired of the way we live.”

“Are you?”

“What? No. I’m not—”

“I mean. I can see why you would be. It’s—”

Tommy slices a hand through the air. “Stop. That’s not what I meant. That’s not why I’m nervous.”

Noah looks at him expectantly.

Tommy considers his drink, and then sets it aside. He doesn’t need it. It’s a stupid

crutch, and he wants to be clear-headed and well-spoken when he says what he's about to, because even if Noah has been sympathetic and supportive in most ways, Tommy doesn't know if he gets it.

"When I was living and working here, I tried not to wonder too hard what Lawson was doing back in Eastman. Honestly, I assumed he wasn't there anymore. I thought I'd have to track him down on Facebook, or go ask his parents where he was and what he was doing. I really didn't expect..."

"For him to be—"

"Careful," Tommy warns, and Noah puts up his hand.

"Miserable. I was gonna say miserable." At Tommy's narrow look, he says, "Hey, I saw him at Coffee Town, too. That was not a happy and fulfilled man I, uh, may or may not have threatened at his place of employment."

"What the fuck?"

"I was playing mob guy," he says, with an eyeroll of dismissal. "I wasn't gonna actually do it. My point is: yeah. He wasn't happy."

Tommy shakes his head. "None of my worst-case mental scenarios involved him being that unhappy. I kept imagining that he was in a relationship, or that he'd forgotten all about me. That he'd run off and become a millionaire, recluse novelist in a cabin mansion somewhere. Or that he hated me, or he'd hit me, or—"

"Dude. Take a breath."

He does, and massages at the tightness in his chest, the way his patched-together insides clench uneasily against one another.

“I want to make him happy,” he says, in a small voice. “I want him to have everything he wants, and I can’t do anything about this writing thing except sit back and hope for the best.”

To his surprise, Noah smiles. And it’s a kind smile, though his sigh is exasperated.

“What?”

“Do you even hear yourself? You want to make him happy. Don’t you think that you are the thing that makes him happy?”

“I know, he makes me happy, too, but—”

“No ‘but.’ Here.” He picks up his phone where it rests on the edge of the table, and scrolls for a minute. When he finds what he wants with an “okay,” he turns the phone around and shows Tommy the screen.

It’s a photo from the hospital, and at first Tommy’s shocked by how pale and small and half-dead he looks, sitting upright in the bed, still hooked to an assortment of IVs and monitors. He’s talking, though, mouth open mid-word. Frank’s standing at the door, arms folded, clearly giving him good-natured shit about something.

But then Tommy spots Lawson, sitting right up near the head of the bed, rail folded down so he can rest his arms in Tommy’s lap, and Tommy’s struck dumb by the look on Lawson’s face. He’s seen his crinkle-eyed, tearful smile in profile in the photo by their bedside at home, the one with Lawson’s face buried in the top of his head on their wedding day. But here, there’s nothing hiding his expression, and the soft curve of his smile, the joy glittering in his eyes as he stares up at Tommy, is staggering.

“Oh,” he says, softly. It’s not even the first time he’s seen that look on his face – Lawson wore it last night – but in the photo, they aren’t having sex, or even alone

together, Noah clearly took the photo standing opposite the door of the room, and Lawson is gazing at Tommy's bristled, washed-out face like it's the most incredible thing he's ever seen.

"Tom," Noah says, pulling his phone back. "Has he seemed miserable since you got married?"

"No," he says, automatically, but that's not totally true. He's looked miserable when Tommy's gotten upset at his own stupid body, when he's cried, or insisted he didn't need help, or pushed Lawson away. "Well. When I'm an asshole."

"You've got to chill out," Noah says. "I get that you want him to, I dunno, chase his dreams or whatever. But he wasn't unhappy because he was there, or because he wasn't an author. He was unhappy because he missed you."

Tommy buries his face in his hands and works to even out his breathing. "And I can never go back in time and fix that," he mutters. And that's the root of it all, isn't he? He can't undo the damage he did. Can't make up for the lost years. He would if he could, in hindsight: thirty-eight-year-old him wants to take seventeen-year-old him by the shoulders and shake him until his teeth rattle. Fuck Frank, fuck the job, fuck Gino. Dad's dead. Avenging him won't bring him back, but Lawson's alive, and he loves you, and you're going to destroy him.

"What's done is done," Noah says, softly. "Are you really gonna fuck up the future because you're stuck on the past?"

"No." He sniffs. "I don't want to."

"Okay, then," Noah says, like it's that simple.

And it is, isn't it? He thinks of Lawson getting home from work, and kissing the top

of his head with a “hi, baby,” and his sharp burst of laughter when they talk shit about whatever movie they’re watching; and the way Lawson always wants to touch him, only pulling back when Tommy insists he’s fine.

Noah pats the top of his head. “You’re a real pair of codependent idiots, huh?”

Tommy nods, and Noah laughs. Then flicks him in the forehead between his spread fingers.

“Ow.”

“Time to order.”

When Tommy lifts his head, he sees that their waitress has arrived, looking between them uncertainly.

“Get the bacon lovers’ burger,” Noah says, like an order, and he does.

~*~

Lawson texts much sooner than Tommy’s expecting. “Shit, he’s done already,” he says, staring down at his phone.

I’m done, where r u? :)

Tommy texts back the address of the bar, and then says, how did it go?????

Be there in 10, Lawson says, the dick.

“What’d he say?” Noah asks.

“He didn’t. What an asshole.” Tommy’s stomach gives a shiver of disquiet, and he sets his phone aside and pins Noah with a look. “Hey, stop avoiding the question.”

Noah sips at his water and plays innocent. “What question?”

“You picked a ring. You showed me the ring! Why have you not proposed?”

Noah sighs and flops back against his side of the booth. “I don’t know. I just...”

“Keep in mind that there’s no answer you can give here that I’ll respect.”

Noah scowls. “Fuck you. I’m nervous.”

“About what?”

“Dude, getting married is a big deal. It’s normal to be nervous.”

Tommy scoffs.

“It’s normal for normal people to be nervous. Just ‘cause you’re some kinda Jane Austen character pinning your whole life for your one true love or whatever doesn’t mean the rest of us don’t go about it the normal fucking way.”

“Fuck you, I’m not a Jane Austen character.”

Noah grins. “I want Anne Hathaway to play you in the movie of your life.”

“Fuck you.”

There’s a couple in the booth behind Noah, and the woman turns around to glare at them. Oops. They’re being loud.

“See?” Noah says. “You’re so dramatic, your story was made for the big screen.”

“Yeah, and yours is for a shitty advice column. Stop trying to sidetrack me.”

Someone arrives beside their table with a squeak of shoe soles and a rustle of cloth, and a familiar, large hand settles on Tommy’s shoulder. He scoots deeper into the booth so Lawson can slide in beside him, not even needing to double-check that it’s him.

“Sidetrack you from what?” Lawson asks. A glance proves he’s carrying his blazer, and he hooks it on the corner of the booth so he can unbutton and roll up his sleeves.

Tommy watches, not caring that Noah’s there, enjoying the pleasant prickling of his skin as he watches Lawson expose his strong forearms, tendons flexing, long fingers nimble on the shirt cuffs. “Noah’s too big a chickenshit to propose to Nat.”

“Oh, dude.” Lawson points at Noah across the table. “I saw that yesterday. Where’s the ring? What the hell?”

Tommy leans in to stage whisper, “He’s nervous.”

“About what?” Lawson picks up the last third of Tommy’s burger and sniffs it. “Damn, is this two kinds of bacon?”

“Yeah, it’s amazing.”

Lawson takes a bite and talks around it. “She’s gonna say yes,” he tells Noah. “You understand that that’s a foregone conclusion, right?” He swallows and says, “Oh my God, this is the best burger I’ve ever tasted.”

“We’re coming back for dinner.”

“Oh, definitely.” To Noah: “So maybe you’re the one having second thoughts.”

“What? No.”

“Is it ‘cause her dad’s in jail?” Lawson presses, and offers the burger back.

Tommy shakes his head. “No, I’m done.”

“Or because she used to make sweet, beautiful love to your brother?”

Tommy and Noah make matching sounds of disgust. Tommy elbows Lawson hard, and he laughs and ducks away. “That never happened. You know that never happened.”

Lawson’s still laughing as he polishes off his burger and wipes his hands and face with a paper towel from the roll on the table, then pushes the basket aside and folds his arms on the edge of the table. “Okay, look, I’ll be serious for a second: you guys don’t have to get married. It’s not the be-all, end-all ultimate pinnacle of a romantic relationship or whatever.”

“Uh...” Tommy drawls.

Noah snorts. “Yeah, that means a lot coming from you.”

“Okay,” Lawson says, unfazed, “it was for me. But you guys don’t have to get married, if it doesn’t feel right. But you bought the ring, so I think that’s a strong sign you want to get married. Just ask her, man. I think she’ll say yes. But if she doesn’t, that doesn’t mean you have to break up. And,” he says, holding up a finger when Noah starts to protest, “I really do mean ask. Have a conversation. Don’t, like, hire a skywriter or do it on the Knicks Jumbotron or whatever.”

“You think Natalia likes basketball?”

“I think you need to talk to your girlfriend,” Lawson shoots back, and grins.

“Law,” Tommy says, and manages to maintain a falsely patient tone. He scratches at the back of Lawson’s neck in the way he knows he likes. “How was the meeting?”

Now Noah grins. “I can’t believe you made it this long without asking. You’re vibrating out of your skin.”

Lawson turns to him slowly, and blinks. “My meeting?”

“Lawson.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, okay. It went well.” His cheeks pink, and he smiles, small, almost hesitant, but deeply pleased. “Actually, it went really well.”

Tommy’s hand is still at the back of his neck, and he cups the width of it and squeezes. “How well?” His pulse is juddering, and he can hear the unsteadiness of his next breath.

Lawson’s grin widens. “I signed Keith as my agent. He’s already shown the book to a friend at Doubleday. He wants to know if I can go in tomorrow and maybe sign a publishing contract.”

“That’s—” A high whine starts up in Tommy’s ears. Blood pressure, he thinks, absently. “That’s fast, right? Is it fast?”

“Yeah. But Keith says his friend’s been looking for something just like it, and he’s excited about it, so I think sometimes—” He stops talking when Tommy grips his face in both hands.

“Does this mean you’re getting published?” Tommy asks, breathless and not caring.

Lawson smiles Tommy’s favorite smile, eyes scrunching, lips spread so wide his cheeks get smushed between Tommy’s hands. “Yeah. I’m getting published.”

Tommy doesn’t breathe for a second, and then, when he does, it’s to make a wild, wordless whoop that startles the people behind Noah, and which makes Lawson laugh. Then he hauls him down and kisses him, hard and smacking. Mwuah, like a cartoon character. Then he flings both arms around his neck and hugs him as tight as he can. He might be crying; he doesn’t know or care.

“I’m so proud of you. Oh my God, I’m so proud of you.”

Lawson hums and hugs him back.

“Ugh, you guys are gross,” Noah complains, but when Tommy finally lifts his head and glances his way, Noah’s expression is nothing but soft fondness.

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Tommy's been a Granger instead of a Katz or a Cattaneo for a year, and sometimes he forgets that hasn't been his name forever. It rolls right off his tongue at the post office, at the bank, on the phone with customers. "This is Tom Granger." When he sees the name printed on the mailbox, he thinks that's me. I'm a Granger. I'm part of the Granger family.

And it's in the Granger family backyard that he and Dana are stringing up fairy lights on tall metal poles to spruce up the new brick patio where a fire pit has pride of place. Dana brought candles in mason jars that she hung in the surrounding trees, and Lisa picked out Adirondak chairs and cushions at Walmart a few weeks ago. A dry-rubbed pork shoulder's been smoking in the green egg-shaped grill on the deck for hours, and the smell of it wafts across the yard and makes Tommy's stomach rumble. The air is cool, this late into October, but the bonfire is warm, and they already have hot dogs and s'more ingredients spread out on the table beside it.

"Time?" Dana calls.

Tommy checks his watch, craning his neck so he doesn't have to let go of the base of the ladder to do so. "Six-fifteen."

"Okay, cool. Coming down."

The ladder's not exactly stable, so Tommy grips it tight while she scurries down, relieved when she lands on the grass in one piece.

"Done with this?"

“Yeah, thanks.”

He knocks the spacers loose and folds it up. His cane is standing by, waiting, and he'll need to lean on it, but he knows he can manage carrying the ladder back to the garage because he carried it out here, and didn't stumble once.

Dana surveys the yard, nods to herself, and then claps her hands together. “Right. Leo's getting the cornhole setup out of the car. I'm gonna go help him, then check and see what Lisa needs help with inside. What time's Noah getting here?”

Six-thirty.”

“We should be good, then.”

Noah finally had that conversation with Natalia, albeit a month after Lawson encouraged him to do so. She said yes, and flashed her new rock at them – “Holy shit,” Lawson muttered, “maybe you should go try to be a Narcotics captain,” to which Tommy bashed him over the head with a couch pillow – via Skype, but when they talked about having an actual engagement party, small and intimate, Lisa said, “Why don't we have it here at the house.” So that's what they're doing.

It's also Tommy and Lawson's anniversary tomorrow, but both of them agreed not to say anything about it, not wanting to overshadow Noah and Nat's moment.

“Where's your husband?” Dana asks, frowning. “He's supposed to be setting up drinks.”

“I'll go see.”

There are tubs of ice on the deck, full of beer and soda, and a few bottles of the wine Lawson and Lisa like best. That's the drinks, then, but no sign of the man himself.

“Law?” Tommy calls as he steps into the kitchen. “Babe, you here?”

Lisa’s in the pantry, rooting through the shelves, and calls through the open door: “He’s in the living room, sweetie.”

“Okay, thanks.”

He is in the living room, as advertised, but not on the sofa in front of the TV, nor at the liquor cabinet. He’s standing by the window in the corner, at the desk that houses the ancient desktop where Lisa pays the bills online, and the house’s lone printer – which is chugging and wheezing and churning out paper marked with rows and rows of tiny, cramped print.

“Oh, hey.” Tommy hastens his steps to cross the room. “It’s still going?” In the busyness of Dana and Leo’s arrival, and last-minute party prep, he forgot that Lawson hit Print something like two hours ago.

“Finishing up,” Lawson says with a grimace. “It ran out of ink, and then the tray got jammed. But I got it fixed.”

Tommy joins him in staring down at the struggling little ink jet machine, and his eyes land on the words THE END, as the last page settles, and stills. The printer coughs, and then whines, and goes quiet.

His pulse picks up. “That’s it?”

“Yeah.” Lawson sounds more than a little dazed, and his movements are slow when he reaches to gather the stack of pages. He rearranges them, raps them on the edge of the desk, and then tucks them at the end of a much larger stack of pages. A soaring stack, in fact, which tilts like the Tower of Pisa before Lawson catches it and realigns it.

Tommy whistles. “How many pages is that?”

“One thousand, four hundred, and twenty-nine,” Lawson murmurs.

“Holy shit.”

“Holy shit,” Lawson agrees.

Tommy reaches, and then hesitates. Turns his head to regard Lawson, whose eyes are wide and unblinking behind the lenses of his glasses. It’s taken a month to finish his space opera – or the first draft of it, anyway – but the last week he’s written nearly non-stop, hunched over his laptop at his desk when Tommy falls asleep, and sometimes still there when Tommy wakes. The screen’s been bothering his eyes, and he hasn’t worn his contacts in days.

“Can I?” Tommy asks, gesturing to the loose-bound, printed-out manuscript.

“Yeah.” Lawson finally blinks, and looks at him, and hooks a crooked smile. “Yeah,” he says, surer. “I wrote it for you.”

Oh, that...yeah, that’s giving him heart palpitations. He lets out a shaky breath, and edges in closer to the desk. Rests his hand on the top page, the cover page of this impossible, miraculous stack.

There’s no title. Lawson insists the publisher will want to come up with something on-brand and timely, and that whatever he picks will be a placeholder. The page reads:

Alloy

By Lawson Granger

Tommy's finger traces the name, over and over. Granger. Granger, Granger, Granger. His name. My name. Our name.

The next page contains only two words. The dedication.

For Tommy

He thinks, this is for me. My honey wrote this for me, and it's astounding.

Tommy means to tell Lawson how proud he is, how amazed he is. Wants to tell him that, though he's so proud of that first book, too – due to hit shelves March of next year! – this is Lawson's magnum opus, he knows it, he can feel how much the world is going to love this story.

But there's a thick lump in his throat, and he can't say anything.

Lawson's arm steals around his waist, and his chin rests on the top of his head. He rubs Tommy's arm, and Tommy nods.

"Hey," a familiar, brash voice calls from behind them. "What kinda party is it where I have to come track down the host?"

Tommy dashes a hand over his face, thankfully dry, and rolls his eyes as he turns toward Frank. "Quit your bitching, we're coming."

~*~

"Your mom wanted to come," Frank says later, when they're all seated around the bonfire, full of hot dogs and spearing marshmallows on sticks.

Tommy snorts. "No, she didn't."

“Well, no,” Frank agrees. “But she sends her love.”

Tommy shakes his head. He’s not surprised, and not even disappointed. His mom is...well, she’s his mom, and he loves her. But he made peace a long time ago with the knowledge that she can’t be motherly. He feels, as ever, a twist of guilt that he hasn’t worked harder or tried more insistently to help her find some sense of contentment, but the last time he tried, she laid her soft, trembling hand on his arm, and said, “You can’t fix me, Thomas. I don’t want you to worry about it.” Frank looks after her, and Tommy doesn’t ever want to know if that includes sleeping with her. On this matter, he’s happy to keep his head buried in the sand.

“Nat,” Dana says, “were you able to book the Plaza?”

Nat grins sharply, firelight dancing in her eyes, and says, “I called in a favor.”

“No!”

“Yes!”

Lisa clasps her hands under her chin like an excited child. “A wedding at the Plaza! Oh, goodness. Isn’t that every girl’s dream?”

“It was definitely mine,” Lawson says, batting his lashes, and Tommy chucks a marshmallow at his head while everyone else laughs.

Leo taps the edge of his marshmallow stick against his glass and lifts it. “A toast?” When they all murmur assent and lift their own glasses – water bottle, in Tommy’s case – he says, “To the bride and groom to be. May you find the same kind of lasting happiness that we have.”

“Hear, hear,” goes up as a chorus, and they don’t clink glasses, but they mime it.

“Except for Frank,” Noah says, and Nat swats him.

Frank tilts his glass of Scotch – some of the good stuff he brought as a gift, though Bill’s only had a swallow, thanks to his meds – and says, “Are you kidding? This is the love of my life right here.”

There’s laughter, and as it dies back, Bill clears his throat, and they fall silent, turning to him. Slowly, with great care, he says, “And another toasssst.” Then his gaze shifts to Tommy, and Tommy freezes, bottle poised at his lips, skin prickling as everyone turns to him. “To Tommy.” Bill’s smile is crooked, because it always is, but it’s so, so happy, and his eyes gleam wetly in the firelight. “You – you’ve been. A Granger. For a year. We’re sssssssso.”

Lisa leans over and grips his hand tight, where it rests on the arm of his chair.

“Glad,” Bill continues, for once not getting frustrated by his lisp and his hitching breaths. He presses on, gaze never wavering. “That you got to join our family.”

“Hear, hear,” Dana says, loudly, and she gets up, and walks around the fire to clink her glass first against Tommy’s bottle, and then Lawson’s glass. “Happy anniversary, you guys.”

“Ugh.” Tommy puts a hand over his eyes. “Why do you people want me to cry all the time?”

Frank barks a laugh to his right. Nat says, “Awww.”

And to his left, Lawson peels his hand off his eyes, their rings clicking together, and then cups his face, and smiles down into it, radiant with happiness.

“Happy anniversary, baby,” he murmurs. “We made it.”

“Yeah.” They did, didn’t they? “Happy anniversary.”

When Lawson kisses him, everyone cheers, a joyous chorus amidst the autumn crickets, and the crackle of the fire, and the beat-beat-beating of Tommy’s heart, swollen fit to bursting with love for this family that loves him in return.

THE END