



Missing in Action: m/m hurt/comfort romance

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Holden's hiding from the press after his agent stole all his money.

Tyler's just hiding from life after Afghanistan stole his leg.

There's twenty-two years and a wealth of hurt and bitterness between them. It doesn't stop them wanting each other.

Holden's been leading a shadowy existence all his life and his secret is way too explosive to share with anyone. He can't talk about the things he needs and craves on a daily basis.

Tyler's down on his luck and battling just to stay afloat in a world of pain, flashbacks and nightmares. The two of them are worlds apart, but thrown together by circumstances that have them questioning what's most important to them.

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Tyler

The nightmare was the same again. The dust, the blood, the screaming. Then his own cries as he looked beyond his knee and saw nothing but torn and charred flesh. Tyler awoke with a start, dazed, sweating, disorientated. He thrashed on the bed before he took in the small bedroom, the sun streaming through the open curtains. He fell back with a gasp. The nightmares even invaded his afternoon naps now, while the flashbacks were at times near damn continuous. A sudden thud on the door sounded like a gun firing and startled him. He didn't get visitors; who could it possibly be? He shuffled to the edge of the bed and put his feet down, relieved he'd kept his leg on to sleep. Down the short hallway, he saw a shape behind the frosted glass of the door. He only wore shorts, but he didn't stop to pull on a T-shirt. He swung it open.

A man stood there, shorter than Tyler, maybe five feet ten and lean, wearing faded jeans and a white open-necked shirt. He was maybe twenty years older than Tyler, his dark hair streaked with silver, and handsome, with dark eyes.

Very handsome. For a moment, Tyler couldn't speak. With a sinking feeling, he thought he knew who this was.

"Mr. Lockhart?"

"Yeah," Tyler said, waiting.

"I'm Holden Maddison. Your new landlord."

Tyler's heart sank. Yeah, it was who he thought it was.

The guy's gaze flickered down Tyler's body, glancing at his prosthesis and moving back up again with unease written on his face. Tyler was used to the reaction. A twinge of pain right then just completed his misery.

"You've been expecting me, right?"

Tyler said nothing. He had nothing to say.

The man looked irritated. He sighed. "I sent you notice to leave over two months ago, Mr. Lockhart, and now I'm moving in, and I find you're still here."

Tyler swallowed. "Look, I don't have anywhere else to go. I'm not causing trouble. I'm not in your house, I keep myself to myself. Why do you need me gone?"

Holden Maddison looked wrong-footed for a moment. "I need quiet to work."

Tyler frowned. "And your house is there," he gestured across the yard, "and mine is here. I don't play loud music; I don't have parties. Why exactly are you throwing me out?"

Holden stared at him for a moment. "You have till the end of the week." He turned and walked away, across the driveway, away from the annex and into the main house, where he closed the door.

Tyler slammed the door. Prick. He had a feeling he knew the guy's name and face, and had done when the letter of eviction had arrived. Was he famous? Had Tyler seen him on the TV? He couldn't place him. Maybe he was, and that was why he was such an asshole. What did it matter who lived in the little apartment on his land? Tyler was paying rent for fuck's sake. He never went anywhere or saw anyone, how exactly could he disturb Holden? He went back into the bedroom and sat down. His leg was hurting, an ongoing thing because his stump was shrinking and resting too hard into

the prosthesis. He should have taken it off to sleep. He grabbed a jacket from the chair in the corner knowing he should rest his leg and apply more socks to the ever increasing layers that he was always fucking about with, sometimes five times a day, but instead, he slammed the door behind him and set off down the rutted track. Walking would help him clear his head, help him think what he was going to do when he became homeless.

The day was too hot, he realized belatedly. Too hot when the end of your has-been leg was jammed too deep into the prosthesis and sweating made it worse. Too fucking hot for limping along the fucking road in Clear Water fucking Creek like he had somewhere to go. He had nowhere to go and no one to see.

By the time he made it to what passed for the town square, with the doctor's clinic, the bakery, the diner and Bluey's bar, he was in agony. Why the fuck hadn't he added extra socks? What the hell was the matter with him? Was he some sort of masochist?

He'd only been in the diner once. He could hardly afford to eat, never mind dine out, but if he didn't sit down soon, he'd fall down. He was sweating profusely and his leg was all sorts of misery that threatened to undo him. Even worse than the usual phantom limb pain. He didn't know how much money he had in his pocket, but they couldn't refuse to serve him a glass of iced water while he rested, could they?

He climbed the steps to the diner torturously and pushed open the door. The blast of cold air that hit him almost made him groan in pleasure. He limped inside. It was a small, homey place, with only a couple of patrons enjoying a drink. Behind the counter stood a lean dark-haired man of average height in his thirties, wearing a black T-shirt and jeans and polishing steamy glasses fresh from a dishwasher. Tyler had intended to go straight to the counter and order the water. Instead he fell into the nearest booth, almost collapsing onto the padded couch.

He heard running footsteps as he sat with his eyes squeezed shut, breathing hard.

“Are you okay, sir?”

Tyler cracked open his eyes. The guy had come out from behind the counter. He stood there with the cloth twisted in his hands, concern written all over his pretty face. For a moment, he looked like water in an oasis, the nicest thing Tyler had seen all day. Well, that was apart from the silver fox at his door not so long ago, but he didn't need to think about that asshole.

“I'm okay,” he managed to say. He saw the guy glance down. “It's hurting.”

“Take it off,” the man said. “I'll get you a cushion and a cold cloth.” With that he hurried away, leaving Tyler looking after him in admiration. With relief, he unlocked the prosthesis. It wasn't every day he got invited to take his leg off in public. Most people would have been afraid to look. He guessed this guy wasn't most people. He took off the two layers of stump socks. He was wearing more socks and thicker plies as the stump shrunk and the socket was getting looser and looser. He needed a new one; that much was obvious. Easing the liner off his stump was a welcome balm. The air felt great; he needed to air the flesh and cool it down. He looked around and saw the other two patrons were engrossed, one on their phone, the other staring at a book.

Tyler turned sideways on the couch so he could rest what remained of his leg and concentrated on taking a few slow, deep breaths. While it helped to remove the leg, it didn't help the phantom pain and sensation he still had in his non-existent foot.

He heard the guy come back. Setting a bowl on the table, he held out a cushion to Tyler. He glanced at his stump but Tyler didn't see any revulsion in his eyes. When he took the cushion, he saw something on the inner side of the man's right arm—a pink ridged scar that wound its way right up under the sleeve of his T-shirt. He was intrigued. Maybe it was the reason he was so sympathetic to Tyler's plight.

He wedged the cushion under his stump, noticing the red raw skin along its edge with

despondency.

“Cool it down now,” the guy said.

Tyler nodded. A cloth floated in the bowl. He dipped his hands in, wrung it out and patted it along the edge of his stump. It felt great, as he had known it would. He smiled at the guy. “Thanks, man.”

The guy smiled in turn. “I’m Finn Austen.”

Tyler held out his hand. “Tyler Lockhart.”

“Nice to meet you, Tyler. Have you got any pain relief?”

Tyler shook his head. It was a sore point, no pun intended. He was scared shitless of taking opiates, because he had seen other guys hooked on them.

“I can offer you a couple of Tylenol?”

“That would be wonderful, Finn. Thank you.”

“No problem. And to drink? We have some iced tea.”

“That sounds great.” Tyler would need to check the coins in his pocket, but hopefully he could stretch to that.

“Coming right up.” Tyler watched him walk back to the counter. Another guy came out of the kitchen at that moment and they exchanged a few words. He was a young man, ten or fifteen years younger than Finn with cropped black hair and a lip-ring, wearing a T-shirt with a heavy metal band’s logo on, someone Tyler liked to listen to. It made him remember long ago nights in sweaty mosh-pits, the music making him

feel so alive. Now if he wanted to go to a gig, he guessed he'd have to have a seat, in the disabled access. He wouldn't trust the prosthesis to hold him up in a rough environment.

He wet the cloth again and tucked it around his stump. A bell rang over the door and Tyler lowered his head as a tall man entered. He didn't want a stranger staring as he walked past the booth. Once the guy had passed though, Tyler followed his muscular figure to the counter. He wore a sheriff's uniform. Anxiety fluttered through him. He didn't want to meet the local law enforcement for fear the silver fox back at the house had already asked the guy to throw him off his property.

To his surprise, the guy leaned right over the counter and kissed Finn on the lips. Finn smiled, put a hand up to stroke the guy's cheek. They were comfortable lovers, their body language told Tyler that. He felt embarrassed and looked away. Of course someone as physically blessed as Finn would have a significant other, even if Tyler hadn't expected that someone to be a man. He glanced up as Finn approached the table once more. He placed the glass of iced tea down along with a small saucer that held two white pills.

"Thanks, man." Tyler saw the cop had approached behind Finn. And he wasn't any old deputy, but the head honcho, the gold star on his chest told Tyler that. He groaned inwardly, wanting to be anywhere but here.

"This is Brandon," Finn said, putting his hand on the sheriff's arm. "He can give you a ride home when you're feeling better."

Oh God, no. A ride home to the house he was illegally squatting in, for the silver fox to see and tell the sheriff all about Tyler refusing to leave? Stop calling him the fucking silver fox, he's an asshole!

He tried his best to smile at Brandon as he held out his hand. "Tyler." He didn't give

his last name, as though somehow that would keep him off the sheriff's radar.

If Finn was handsome, Brandon was startlingly so. Christ, what was with the hot men in this town? If Tyler hadn't been so incapacitated, his cock might have started to take notice. He was all chiseled jaw and dark, soulful eyes, around six-two with that worked out body straining his uniform.

"Hi there, Tyler." He shook Tyler's hand with a cop type of grip. "Sorry to hear you're having some problems." He barely glanced at Tyler's stump. Tyler wondered if Finn had had the scar before he met Brandon or if it had happened while they were together.

"Thanks."

"You take your time. I'm going to grab a coffee. When you're ready to go, just shout."

"That's very kind of you, but I think I'll be okay," Tyler said. Why the fuck did you say that? If you have to put that prosthesis back on today, you'll end up crawling home on your hands and knees.

"Sure," Brandon said, looking like he didn't believe him. "See how you go." He smiled. It wasn't exactly a smile that meant Brandon felt sorry for him, more that he understood that Tyler was trying to act the big man. Either way, he suddenly wanted to cry. Brandon walked back to the counter and before following, Finn smiled at him too and that was Tyler's eyes full to the brim. He lowered his head, blinking back tears furiously, giving a little moan when he heard the bell ring again.

Please, nobody else. I can't face anybody else seeing me like this. But the day was only going to go from bad to worse. He glanced up and locked gazes with the goddamn silver fox.

The guy looked startled when he saw him. His gaze fell to Tyler's cold cloth covered stump and he looked away again quickly. He approached the counter and sat down. The young lad with the black hair moved up to serve him, then spoke in a voice so loud, the whole diner couldn't help but overhear.

"Oh my God, you're Holden Maddison."

Tyler stared. Was the guy some kind of movie star? He didn't hear the low reply the man gave. Maybe he was trying to keep his fame under wraps. Tyler had seen him somewhere before after all.

"I have one of your books right here." The lad pulled out a paperback from under the counter and waved it at Holden.

Ah, that was where. He was a writer and now Tyler knew where he'd seen him. He'd been all over the news for the last few weeks. His agent had defrauded him of thousands of dollars and disappeared off the face of the earth. The last he heard, Holden Maddison had disappeared too. Now Tyler knew where to. To reappear as his landlord. He wondered if the tabloids knew. It sounded like a good bargaining chip.

"Will you sign it for me, please," the young man begged. "To Jordan."

Still he didn't hear the soft answer the guy gave. He watched Holden take the pen with his left hand and scribble in the front of the book.

"Thank you so much, you made my day. What are you even doing here, dude?"

Tyler smiled viciously to himself. He was glad Holden Maddison's day was turning out to be as shit as his own. He popped the pills in his mouth and took a long drink of the iced tea, then dipped the cloth in the cold water again and rested it along his stump. He leaned back against the couch and closed his eyes.

Footsteps sounded and he looked up, expecting it to be Finn or his boyfriend. Instead, Holden stood there holding a cup of coffee. "Can I join you?" His face was carefully controlled, but he still looked pissed off with Tyler.

"No," Tyler said. "Go away." Holden ignored him. He slid onto the couch opposite and faced Tyler over the table. He didn't speak and Tyler became annoyed. "I'm not in the mood, man."

"Look..." Holden said. His tone was soft.

Tyler hated the idea so much that the guy felt sorry for him, that he burst in. "Does the press know you're hiding out here?" The author's face turned cold as stone. "Would they be interested to know?"

Holden stared at him. Between his teeth, he said, "What do you want?"

"To keep my home."

Holden looked at him for a long moment, those dark eyes locked on his, sparking with anger. "Sure," he said. "Why not? You look like you need the charity."

He rose from his seat leaving Tyler open-mouthed. He had returned to the counter before the anger and humiliation rose in Tyler to boiling point. He sat with his fist clenched in impotent rage, cursing the bastard. A year ago, before his injury, he would have taken the puny old dude down with one fucking punch. Now he was apparently relegated to dealing with these insults from a guy twenty years older than him. He swallowed. Once more, tears of self-pity burned his eyes. Get a grip, man. You need to get a grip before you lose it right here and have a full fucking public meltdown.

He looked up as Finn slid into the seat opposite. "You okay, man?" His face was

filled with concern. Maybe he could see how close to breakdown Tyler was.

“Yeah.”

“You know that guy?”

Tyler lowered his voice. “He’s my landlord.”

“Oh, right. Is that a bad thing?”

“He wants me out.”

“Shit. Sorry. He’s new in town. I’ve got a couple of his books at home. He’s good.”

“Did you hear what happened to him?”

Finn frowned. “No. what?”

Maybe folks in Clear Water didn’t watch the news so often. Tyler felt bad for gossiping, but he couldn’t forget what Holden had just said to him. He leaned over the table. “His agent ran off with all his money. He’s bankrupt.”

Finn opened his mouth, glancing at Holden. “No! Poor guy.” His sympathy seemed genuine and made Tyler feel like a shit. Finn was a good man. Tyler had been once. Now he was too bitter and self-obsessed to give a shit, looking to blame everyone else for the IED that had taken his leg.

He gulped some iced tea and fished in his pocket for some change. “I’m going to get going. Thanks for your help.”

“No problem, man. And it’s on the house. Put your money away. I’ll tell Brandon

you're ready."

"No, it's fine." Tyler pulled the sweat soaked liner over his stump. He meant both the iced tea and the ride.

"No, it's not. He'll..." Finn looked towards Brandon as the sheriff hurried past with his cell glued to his ear.

"I have to go, love." He kissed Finn as he passed, stroking his hip briefly in a gesture that spoke of deep intimacy between the two of them. "Call Tyler a cab."

Bracing himself, Tyler clicked the prosthesis in place. Money for a cab he definitely didn't have and he wasn't sure his few coins added up to the price of the tea either. The pain of the prosthesis overwhelmed him, but he shoved to his right foot and leaned on the table. "I'm fine," he told Finn. "Thanks for everything."

He locked gazes with Holden Maddison as the writer turned away from the counter and slid from his stool. "I'm just leaving," he said. "I'll give you a ride."

"No, thanks," Tyler said. He grasped Finn's hand and shook it, then set off to the door, limping even worse than he usually did and cursing himself.

Finn called his name, but Tyler didn't look back. The door swung shut behind him and he breathed easier even though the pain threatened to overwhelm him. He set off across the square in the blinding afternoon sun.

Take your time. One false foot in front of the other. You can do this.

He couldn't. He knew he couldn't. He reached the dirt track leading away to his home and wished for not the first time, as the sun beat down on his head and the prosthesis rubbed his stump agonizingly, that he had died in Afghanistan.

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Tyler

He heard a car crunching the gravel behind him. It drew alongside him and the window buzzed down.

“Get in the car, Tyler,” Holden said with a sigh.

He drove a five-year-old red Hyundai. Tyler guessed the agent had run off with the Lamborghini too. If he hadn’t have felt so ill, he might have managed a mean smirk. “Go to hell.” Tyler carried on walking.

“Come on. Just get in. I don’t want you struggling home.”

Tyler stopped, bent, and hissed in the window. “I don’t need you to feel fucking sorry for me, thanks.”

“I’m not feeling sorry for you, I’m anticipating having to call an ambulance because you’ve collapsed in the dust and the vultures have started to eat you.”

“Fuck off!”

Still Holden crawled alongside him. “Get in the car or I’ll call the sheriff back here and tell him you tried to blackmail me.”

Tyler’s gaze shot to his. Holden’s dark eyes were calm and steady. Trustworthy eyes even though nothing so far had made him inclined to trust this man. He staggered to the car and almost fell as he grabbed the handle. Somehow he got himself in and

slammed the door. Then he slumped back, eyes shut, breathing hard. The ice cold air-con was heaven. He wanted to wrench the prosthesis off and throw it from the fucking window. Maybe have Holden reverse over it a few times for good measure.

Holden set off at a slow pace. “You’re in a bad way, man. Do you want me to call a doctor?”

Tyler shook his head, gritting his teeth.

“What happened?” It was almost a whisper, as though if he said it quietly enough, it wouldn’t hurt as much.

“Afghanistan happened,” Tyler said.

Holden said nothing else. He drew up outside his house and switched off the engine. Tyler started to sweat the minute the air-con went off. He grabbed the door handle and found Holden had already come around to his side as though intending to help him out. Fuck that.

Glaring at him, Tyler swung his good foot out and used the roof of the car to steady himself while he dragged the prosthesis out like some sort of wounded animal.

He hobbled over to the annex, rooting in the pocket of his shorts for his key. Holden followed him. “Let me...” he said, reaching for the key as though Tyler had lost the use of his arms as well as his legs.

“Leave me the fuck alone, I’m not dead yet!” It was a broken cry, wrenched from Tyler knew not where and it made Holden step back, wide-eyed. Tyler fumbled the key in the lock and turned it. He shoved the door open and almost fell inside. He didn’t have the energy to even close the door. He stumbled down the hall, making his way to the bedroom. Perching on the edge of the bed, he yanked at the prosthesis,

almost howling with pain and relief when it came free. Tyler hurled it across the room, pulled off the socks and rolled off the liner before he crawled onto his bed and collapsed face down, burying his face in the pillow.

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Holden

Tyler's whole body was heaving. Holden stood there watching him, unseen and unheard. Was he crying? Holden was deeply unsettled. He longed to help and didn't know what to do for the best. He felt that he should call a doctor, despite what Tyler had said. He glanced down at the discarded prosthesis, then fixed his gaze on the reddened stump. A shocking sight. He couldn't help his reaction to it when he had entered the diner and seen his tenant with the false leg removed. He was squeamish and shouldn't be, not when this man was suffering more than Holden would ever be able to comprehend.

He felt guilty beyond measure because he had caused this whole sorry mess, hadn't he? He'd seen the pain on his tenant's face when he'd opened the door to him. And instead of going easy on the poor guy, he'd told him to get out. Then he'd seen him limping down the road into town and cursed himself. Following had been a bad idea. Those words they had exchanged even worse. You look like you need the charity. Fuck's sake, what's wrong with you? He's just a kid, down on his luck, a fucking veteran, and you come out with that shit? Fucking shame on you.

Holden backed out of the room. He closed the door to the apartment on his way out.

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Tyler

Tyler woke groggily to see the lengthening shadows spreading over his bed. The agony in his leg had receded to a dull ache and now he felt his toes and wanted to flex his non-existent ankle because it felt sore and stiff. He'd had these days before. It spelled being unable to wear his prosthesis until the stump was better. Why didn't he take better care of himself and use the socks as he was supposed to? Looks like I'll have to take a break from my hectic social calendar. He tried to smile and failed. He sat up, looking out the window to the main house. From his bedroom he could see the kitchen. If Holden stood at the sink washing the dishes, Tyler would see him. He cringed when he thought of the people he'd met at the diner, spectating on his misery.

Still, that Finn was a good guy. Just the kind of friend he needed, if Tyler did friends. As if. He'd had friends enough in the military. They had all vanished after his accident. Still serving their country, or dead, while he was discharged, no use to anybody.

He was thirsty and his head ached. He shifted to the edge of the bed and froze as he saw Holden enter the kitchen across the driveway separating them. The guy hadn't seen him. He ran some water in a glass and stood drinking it. Then his gaze focused on Tyler. Tyler looked at him for a moment before moving out of sight, dragging himself to the end of the bed. Two crutches stood propped against the wall for the times he found himself sans leg.

He pushed his arms into them and hobbled to the kitchen. Like he had seen Holden do, he ran a glass of water at the sink and drank deeply. He glanced back out into the hallway then. He hadn't shut the door, had he? It was closed now. Had Holden been in his home? Had he followed him in and stood there watching Tyler face down on the bed? What a pathetic freak he was. The guy must have had a good laugh at his expense.

He should eat. He hadn't eaten since breakfast, but the idea of food turned his stomach. Tyler made his way into the small living room and lowered himself onto the

couch, pointing the remote at the TV. If in doubt, lose yourself in mindless entertainment.

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Holden

Holden deleted the sentence with angry clicks of his mouse and sat there staring at the screen. The two words at the header of the document said Chapter One. Nothing more, nothing less. The sum total of his work since he'd arrived in Clear Water Creek. He'd been at his desk three hours already today and so far, all he'd done was surf random crap on the internet, think about watching porn, and delete everything from his new novel over and over again. Truth be told, he hadn't written a new word in months, not since Leo had taken everything and left him with nothing.

With a heavy sigh he pushed his wheeled chair back and stood, stretching out his spine and rotating his head. Sitting for so long made him ache, gave him a sore ass. It was the only time his ass was sore these days; more was the pity. His thoughts strayed to Leo. Bastard. Fucking unmitigated bastard. Why hadn't he seen through him? He'd thought the sun shone out of Leo's ass when actually, Leo had Holden exactly where he wanted him as he slowly closed the trap. He'd spent a year courting him, opening him up, prying him undone until he knew everything about every area of Holden's life—not just what made him tick, but his finances, his work, his home, his family. He'd waited until Holden trusted him with his life, then he'd sealed him inside a misery of his own making and left with everything.

Holden stalked across the landing to stand at the window, jaw clenched. Why couldn't he stop his mind from going there over and over again, probing the wound, picking at the scab to see if it would bleed? All he had left was the money tied up in this dilapidated house and his car outside. Royalties trickled in from his previous books and gave him just enough to pay the bills and eat. He needed a bestseller and he didn't know where he was going to find that. His previous books had all sold well,

enabling him to build up his bank balance. He hadn't been a spendthrift when he'd hit the big time. He'd squirrelled it all away—and become a sitting target for the first con artist to come his way. Leo had seduced him, younger than him by fifteen years. Holden had been flattered of course, being the wrong side of forty and feeling his age. He had felt invincible with Leo by his side and even better that Leo was a whiz with numbers and happy to be his agent for free rather than him giving away ten percent to that annoying woman who'd once represented him. But that annoying woman hadn't been a crook. She wouldn't have fleeced Holden.

There was no money now of course to continue the expensive counselling sessions for his addiction. He'd been deep into it when he'd met Leo. Leo had helped him, professed to understand it, even tolerated Holden's many failures and stumbles along the way—the lying, the infidelity. Another man wouldn't. He groaned. Seeing as Leo had never loved him anyway, he'd found it easy enough to lie. Easy to take Holden's behavior on board and act like the long-suffering and ever-forgiving partner. And Holden had believed it all. He had been grateful for what he could get. Someone to understand and not judge. In fact, Leo was merely enabling him.

He remembered one night with Leo, deep into their relationship, sometime after Leo had found out the truth. Holden had come home with the stink of another man on him and confessed it straight away to Leo. Leo had acted so hurt, so patient, such a Goddamn martyr to Holden's addiction. Holden had been taken aback to find himself stripped naked and under Leo. He hadn't expected Leo to ever want to touch him again. Instead, Leo had thrust into him, whispering filthy words, demanding that Holden tell Leo just what the faceless man had done to him. Leo seemed to get off on Holden's stuttered confession of being fucked down a dark alleyway bareback by a stranger who'd spat on his cock to lube himself up. He'd told Holden his ass was still wet with the stranger's cum and he'd moaned in excitement at the fact. It should have spelled alarm bells for Holden. Instead he was just relieved that Leo wasn't ending their relationship. Far from it. When Holden fell again and again, his punishment was Leo making him describe every detail while he fucked him. In the morning, he acted

the wounded partner rather than the man getting off on Holden's infidelity. Holden knew the truth though. Leo enjoyed Holden going with other men even though he told him sternly that it must never happen again. One of his many lies. The unhealthiest of relationships.

Holden looked out of the window, his gaze landing on the annex below. He noticed his tenant's curtains were open for the first time in two days. He hadn't seen hide nor hair of Tyler since he'd brought him home from the diner and had found his mind going back to the veteran over and over again, jostling with his usual anguished memories. He'd wondered if Tyler was dead, maybe from sepsis, but he hadn't gone over there to see, not after how Tyler had yelled at him that afternoon. Leave me the fuck alone, I'm not dead yet! He felt guilty, but he had his own problems. He couldn't even look after himself, never mind the stranger across the yard. Still, the curtains were open, so the guy wasn't dead. Holden guessed that was a good thing. He remembered Tyler lying face down on the bed with his prosthesis discarded, that stump with the skin red and raw around the edges of it, where the bones had been sawn through and the shin and foot removed, tossed into clinical waste like they were unimportant. Holden swallowed. There was always someone worse off than you, and that man was Tyler. Holden had lost everything, but not a limb. Tyler looked like he'd lost everything, including a limb. Holden looked down into the bedroom of the annex. From his vantage point, he could see Tyler sitting on the bed, his back turned. He sat motionless for so long, Holden began to wonder what he was doing. Reading? But his head wasn't bowed and he couldn't see him holding up a book or tablet. Meditating? The guy was ex-military so he was a meathead, yes? Those guys didn't meditate. Holden felt ashamed. He knew nothing about Tyler and yet he had the nerve to presume the guy had nothing between his ears. Why? People who fought for their country weren't stupid, why did he think they were? He reddened at his thoughts as though Tyler would somehow read them through the bricks and glass that separated them. Then he saw Tyler toss something onto the bed—a large red book of some kind, perhaps a photo album—and grab the crutches propped beside him. He disappeared from view and Holden saw him reappear behind the frosted glass of the

front door a moment before he opened it. He paused on the step, giving Holden ample time to observe him unseen.

He noticed first that the guy wasn't wearing his prosthesis. Tyler wore three quarter length cargo pants. The tip of the left dangled in the air and he leaned heavily on his crutches. Holden felt a hot flash of guilt as he remembered that day coming back from the diner. He could only presume it was still too painful to wear. But his gaze travelled back up Tyler's body and his glance turned to a stare. Was he blind? Had the lack of a leg overshadowed everything so completely that Holden had honestly not noticed how fucking built Tyler was? From the broad shoulders to the massive tattooed biceps exposed in the sleeveless T-shirt, his chest was big too, hips narrow, thighs strong, straining the camo pants. Straining them between his legs too. Holden noticed that as well. How could he not?

He licked his lips as he dragged his gaze from crotch to face. Yeah, the guy was beautiful. He'd seen that and recognized it on some subconscious level, but his mind hadn't let him acknowledge it until now, maybe because something about it was wrong when Tyler had been in such distress. And now? You're allowed to acknowledge it now? You're twenty years older than him, you fucking pervert! A flush of shame enveloped his face. He felt like the washed-up middle-aged man he was. Before he could step back, Tyler looked up and their gazes met.

The guy was all chiseled jaw with just a hint of stubble, and stormy grey eyes. His hair was dark, shaved at the back and sides, slicked back with military precision on top, the parting razor cut in, not a hair out of place.

Tyler broke the eye contact. He hopped away on his crutches. Holden swallowed. He turned away from the window and descended the stairs with purpose, pushing his feet into his shoes at the door. He paused with his hand on the handle.

What are you doing? Think about this a moment.

I am. I want to talk to him. I want to say sorry.

No, you don't. You want to try it on. You've realized he's hot and your addiction is taking control.

Like he'd ever look twice at me, I'm nearly fifty! Old enough to be his dad!

That was a sobering thought and almost enough to make him turn back. But he went out anyway. He absolutely wasn't going out into the yard to proposition Tyler. The idea was ludicrous.

Between the main house and the annex at the furthest point of the yard stood an area of decking with a sorry-looking table and chairs. Steps led down to a lawn and flower beds spilling over with roses and sunflowers. Tyler was seated on one of the chairs, looking out over the garden. The day was hot, the air loud with birdsong. Birdsong was the only sound. Clear Water Creek was a peaceful place. For the first time, Holden was glad to be here. But he wasn't alone. He had a tenant. A tenant he needed to get rid of, but wasn't sure he could. Tyler would tell the press. They would descend on Holden and open up his wounds once again.

Tyler heard him coming. He glanced over his shoulder, his body tensing, then looked away. Holden went to stand in front of him. "Look, about yesterday."

Yeah? Make this good.

"We got off to a bad start."

Tyler looked up at him. The sun made his grey eyes glitter with hints of sapphire. His pupils were constricted. His face was cold. "Did we?" he asked.

Holden's gaze strayed from his stunning face to the loose end of his pants where his

left leg should have been. The stump was covered by the material and he was grateful he didn't have to look at it. He felt immediately guilty. The guy's stunning, two legs or not! What's your fucking problem?

"Yeah. I came in all guns blazing when I shouldn't have. I didn't realize your situation."

Tyler raised a brow. The stony expression on his face hadn't changed. "My situation? You mean my lack of a leg?" His face grew ever more closed and hostile. He spoke between his teeth. "I don't need you to feel sorry for me."

"That's not it."

"Isn't it?" Tyler grasped his crutches and lurched up. Holden stepped back. Too far, he realized as he overbalanced on the top step and fell backward, twisting his ankle and landing in a heap on the lawn.

Tyler looked down at him in bemusement. He leaned on his crutches on the top step and held his hand out. Holden grasped it. He made sure not to put all his weight on Tyler as he climbed to his feet, then scorned himself. The guy could probably press more than Holden's body weight, one leg or not. Tyler's hand was warm and strong. He pulled Holden easily to his feet. Their hands remained joined as Holden made it back to the top of the steps.

"Glad you did that and not me," Tyler said, letting go. "Would have had you feeling real sorry for me."

Holden's face grew hot. His cock was thickening in his shorts. It didn't take much for the addiction to rear its head. A casual touch was more than enough. "I don't feel sorry for you. I just don't want to throw you out, okay?"

They stood face to face, looking at each other. Tyler was a good five inches taller and intimidated him.

“What are you even doing here?” Holden didn’t know why the words spilled from his mouth.

Tyler looked away. “I could ask you the same question.”

Holden laughed without mirth. “You already know my business, right? I’m hiding out.”

“I guess I do,” Tyler said. “And I guess I’m doing the same.”

“Hmm. We should stick together then.” He hadn’t meant to say that. Tyler darted him a look of astonishment. Holden smiled. He was pleased he hadn’t come on to Tyler. Maybe he could interact with him after all without his addiction calling the shots. His cock was still half-hard though. It recognized a handsome man when it saw one.

Tyler dipped his head. He seemed about to say something, but in the end nothing came out. He turned, hobbling away on his crutches.

Holden’s cock was fully hard when he got back inside. He stood at the kitchen sink looking into the annex. Tyler was sitting on the bed again with his back turned. He was holding that red covered album once more. Holden berated himself. What a fucking dirty old man you are. Wouldn’t he be horrified to know he was the object of your affection? Is he even gay? He took some deep breaths, clenching the sink. His rampant libido had taken a nose dive since Leo had left. He hadn’t even thought of sex in weeks, when once it had consumed him above all else. Now he wanted to jerk off and he was disgusted with himself. That merely made his cock harder, because it liked the forbidden and was in charge, more often than not.

He stared down at Tyler. It had to be a photo album, right? Old photos, because who had hard copies of photos anymore? Holden wished he could see the pages. He wished he could talk to and interact with Tyler without his desire getting the better of him. He'd come here to escape the world though, so why did he want to seek out Tyler's company? He didn't know. Maybe it was guilt. Guilt at trying to throw him out of his home and guilt at being repulsed by his stump. He'd sunk right down into this hole of self-loathing and he really didn't think he could get any further down, but to his astonishment, there seemed to be room for more self-hatred. Just great. He should avoid Tyler like the plague. That would be the sensible solution.

Meanwhile, his cock was beyond hard, begging him for just a little touch, no matter how he loathed himself. He ground his teeth, gripping his dick through his pants. Let's find some porn then. A hot guy who's not Tyler. A couple of minutes of stroking to send me into oblivion. And make me feel even worse after. I'm supposed to be stopping the porn. It was one of the boundaries I set.

He bounded up the stairs to his office. The laptop had gone into sleep mode. He moved the mouse to wake it up and entered his password. Going to his bookmarks, he chose one of his favorite sites and browsed the video thumbnails, looking for something to catch his interest. Previously he'd jerked off over anything and everything, as undiscerning as it was possible to get. Hell, he'd even jerked off over men with women, because that was hot too, even if he didn't want to sleep with women. He had though, when they'd offered, because he was an addict and sex was sex. While he moved the mouse, he unfastened his pants with his other hand and took his erection free.

What was that? His mouse hand stopped moving. There. Two guys both in army gear, up against a wall and entwined, lip-locked. Holden's heart started to beat hard. He clicked play.

One guy was white, the other black, both late twenties, both attractive. The white guy

was dark-haired and well built. He looked like Tyler. The black guy looked like Idris Elba. They kissed passionately, all tongues and gasps, hands stripping each other.

Oh God, it was hot. Holden gripped his dick and slid his hard flesh through his palm. The white guy dropped to his knees, pulling the black guy's cock free and going down on him. Holden groaned as the man bobbed up and down, taking the guy's dick right to the root. He imagined the black guy as himself, against a wall while Tyler sucked him down.

That wouldn't happen. It would be too painful for Tyler to kneel at the moment, minus prosthesis. The thought dragged him from his fantasy. He carried on watching, but his thoughts drifted, to Tyler and what he'd be like in bed. Would he take the leg off? Would Holden close his eyes so he couldn't see the stump?

A knock came at the door. Oh holy fuck.

Holden slammed the laptop lid shut and fumbled his cock away. Shit, shit, shit. He hurried from the office and ran down the stairs. Checking the peephole, he confirmed his visitor was indeed Tyler.

Shit. He smoothed his hair down, checked his zip was done up. Was he flushed? Did he look guilty? Almost certainly. Fuck.

He swung open the door.

"Hi," Tyler said. He looked awkward and his face was flushed too. Something about him tugged at more than Holden's dick. "So, I know the place is in need of repairs. I could do some work for you. I'm good with my hands."

I bet you are, Holden didn't say. He bit his tongue and tried not to let Tyler's grey eyes take him back to erection. What the fuck was Tyler doing? He took a breath. "I

need quiet to write,” he said, trying to avoid any further contact with this man.

“I can be quiet,” Tyler said. “You can work in another room. Or at my place.” He gestured over his shoulder. He was right about the place needing fixing up, but Holden wasn’t sure he had the money.

He hesitated. Most of all, he didn’t want Tyler in his personal space, where Holden couldn’t control himself, because he couldn’t control himself around any man. Not ever. And now he guessed Tyler was offering his time and skill in exchange for not paying the rent, never mind not throwing him out. Holden didn’t know if that was okay, but he felt sorry for Tyler. He didn’t want to be that bastard he’d been the day they met.

“Why don’t you come have a look around if you think you’re up to it?” He amazed himself. Tyler smiled. He hopped inside on the crutches and closed the door behind him. “Leg still giving you trouble?” Holden indicated that loose flap of material on his pant leg and wondered when Tyler was going to start wearing the prosthesis again.

“Yeah.”

“Do you need to see a doctor?”

“No.”

Holden said nothing. The subject was apparently closed. He wondered if Tyler was in the VA system and had somewhere to go for treatment when he needed it. He guessed whatever compensation he got barely covered his living expenses.

Tyler looked around the hallway, with its peeling paint and high ceiling. To the left was the living room. Straight on was the kitchen. All of it was barely furnished and

monastic but Holden suspected Tyler was used to that. He glanced towards the stairs at the same time Tyler did. He guessed Tyler wouldn't be tackling the stairs at the present time and had no wish to see the guy sliding up the steps on his ass.

He led the way into the living room. Tyler looked around his bare surroundings.

“Why don't you sit down and I'll make coffee.” Holden didn't give Tyler the chance to reply, but fled to the kitchen. Once there, he leaned against the counter breathing heavily. Don't proposition him. Don't beg him for sex. Don't drop to your knees and say you'll do anything.

For Holden, sex addiction went hand in hand with degradation and humiliation. He had done almost everything in the name of addiction. He couldn't remember a normal relationship. Certainly that hadn't come with Leo. His addiction sent him to nightclubs and online hook-ups. He'd begged men who weren't into him to let him suck their cock. He'd paid for it, he'd hung around in public toilets and used glory holes. He'd been spit roasted by two guys up a dark alley. At his lowest, he'd hooked up with twins on line. He'd gone to their apartment and two men turned into four. All four men had used him under the influence of cocaine and alcohol. He'd gloried in it, begged for more. He'd passed out, woken up sore, and found out they'd ridden him bareback. He'd slunk home and despite his horror, he'd jerked off over the memory for months, because that was the way it went. The more terrible it was, the more he needed to relive it and get off.

He clenched his fist, looked towards the living room in fear. Please don't let me, God, please don't. He deserves better than me any day of the week.

He poured coffee into two mugs with a shaking hand and took a deep breath before he went back to the living room. Tyler was sitting bolt upright on the uncomfy couch looking as uneasy as Holden felt. He handed over the mug and Tyler thanked him. Holden took the sagging armchair opposite. He crossed his ankle over his opposite

knee and sipped his coffee. Silence reigned.

“So, there’s plenty needs doing,” Tyler said, looking around. “Painting, electrics...”

“You can do electrics?” Holden interrupted him.

Tyler gave him a withering look. “I was in the army. I can manage some wiring.”

Holden reddened. He took a long look at Tyler, wondering just what he had suffered. Everything Holden had suffered was down to his addiction and his own fault. This man had suffered through what he had signed up for. He bit his lip before he said, “Was it awful? In Afghanistan?”

Tyler flinched. He looked as though he couldn’t believe Holden had dared mention it.

“Sorry,” Holden said quickly.

Tyler clutched his mug in both hands. He looked down into the coffee and Holden gazed at the long sweep of his lashes against his cheeks. After the longest silence, he said, “It wasn’t too much fun.”

“I’m sorry,” Holden said again and he meant it. He had a lump in his throat at the expression of torture on Tyler’s face. “Do you...do you have counselling?”

“That’s all bullshit,” Tyler said with a glare.

“Yeah,” Holden agreed before he could stop himself. Counselling hadn’t done much for his need to pursue men for cheap, fast sex.

Tyler met his gaze for a long while. He seemed to see deep inside Holden and he squirmed under his direct stare. He knows. But how could he?

Tyler put his mug down on the table near the couch. He grabbed his crutches. “I should go.” He stood and hopped forward. Holden let him go first and followed him to the front door. He didn’t know if he was relieved or not that Tyler was going. After wanting him to stay away, he’d kind of enjoyed his presence in the empty house. Tyler stopped to open the front door. He negotiated his way outside and turned to look back at Holden. Once more their gazes held.

“Look,” Holden said, and his words dried up. He couldn’t say sorry once again. He couldn’t let Tyler know how sorry he felt for him. Pity didn’t help anyone and Tyler was obviously proud and strong. Or at least, he had been when he was US military. He had joined the army for a reason. He had the strength of character, leadership skills and discipline needed. He had fought for his country and his country had rewarded him with the loss of a limb and an annex outside Holden’s crumbling home in a backwater people came to hide in. He had no money, no job, and his prosthesis hurt too much to wear. What exactly could Holden say that could ever make Tyler feel better? He wore his psychological wounds like a cloak. Holden could never compare his own life to Tyler’s and could never understand the depth of his torment. “If you need to talk...”

Oh God, is that the best you got? He shriveled up inside at Tyler’s frank stare.

“I’ll bear it in mind.” The veteran turned and hopped away.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:09 pm

Tyler

Aknock came at the door next afternoon. The pain had woken Tyler continuously from sleep all night. He was bad-tempered and tired. It had to be his hot landlord at the door, but when he negotiated there on crutches and swung it open, he found Finn from the diner standing outside. In his arms he held a box full of food with a white plastic package lying on top.

“Hey,” he said with a smile. He wore a black T-shirt and grey shorts. The scar on the inside of his right arm stood out white against his tanned skin.

“Hi,” Tyler said awkwardly. He didn’t know if he was happy to see him or not.

“I brought you some groceries.”

Tyler frowned.

“Because you’re feeling under the weather and might not feel up to shopping,” Finn said hurriedly as though reading Tyler’s thoughts about not being a charity case.

Tyler softened. He felt awkward. “There’s really no need.”

“I’m just looking out for you,” Finn said. “It seems like you need someone to do that.”

Tyler’s throat was blocked suddenly by a lump like a boulder. He stepped back without a word. As Finn entered the house, Tyler glanced across the driveway and

saw Holden in the kitchen. Their gazes met. Tyler closed the door.

Finn walked down the hall to the kitchen and placed the box on the counter. “I got you these too.” He turned around and held out the plastic package with a shy smile. They were stump socks, thick ply. Tyler stared at them. “There’s a lady on YouTube,” Finn said. “She makes these great videos. She was demonstrating these socks and saying that they pad your leg if you have shrinkage and I wondered if your pain was caused by your socket being too big and...” He stopped, blushing. “I’m sorry. I know nothing about it but I was trying to educate myself. Sorry if I’m way off base.”

Tyler swallowed. “You’re not.” He took the package and looked at it. The socks were thicker than any he had now and might be just what he needed. He glanced up at Finn. “Thanks. This is probably the best present anyone’s ever bought me.” He gave an unsteady laugh, not sure if he was going to cry or not.

Finn stepped forward. He clapped a hand on Tyler’s shoulder. He seemed about to hug him, but thought better of it. “I’m glad.”

“Would you like some coffee?” Tyler wasn’t sure he wanted Finn to stay but it was only polite. And besides, Finn was a great guy, someone he could be friends with if he could only let him in.

“Sure,” Finn said.

Tyler had a jug freshly made. He rested his crutches against the counter and poured two cups before he twisted around to give one to Finn. “Sugar and cream?”

“No thanks, just black.”

“Go through.” Tyler gestured to the living room. He knew he couldn’t carry his own

mug while using his crutches and he saw that Finn did too, because he reached past Tyler and took the cup, carrying them both into the living room. Tyler followed him in. Finn sat on the couch, placing both mugs on the coffee table and Tyler sat opposite him in his favorite chair.

“How’s it going with your landlord?”

Tyler sighed. “He said sorry for trying to throw me out.”

Finn arched a brow. “He did? That’s great.”

“No, it’s not. He only did it because I threatened to tell the press where he was hiding out.”

Finn kept a neutral expression on his face.

“I’m not usually such a terrible person,” Tyler said, because Finn’s opinion of him was suddenly all important.

“I know that,” Finn said softly. “I’m a good judge of character. You’re hurting and you’re trying to find the best way out of that.”

Once more, Tyler had to swallow the lump in his throat. “I offered to fix up the house. To make up for being such an asshole. I’m not sure he gave me an answer or not. He was pretty reluctant to have me over there.” He laughed weakly.

Finn smiled. “A project might be just what you need. I could help out.” He glanced across to the house and his face darkened. “Although, actually...” he trailed off.

Tyler regarded him. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” Finn rubbed a hand over his face and blew out his breath. “I lived in that house for a spell when I first came to town.”

Tyler remained silent. Something bad was coming. He could see it by the agony on his new friend’s face. Finn sighed. He shifted on the couch, squeezing his hands together in his lap. “It brings back bad memories. I had to really steel myself to come over here today.”

“I really appreciate that you did,” Tyler said in a low voice.

Finn bit his lip. “I was hiding out. From an ex. Dominic. He... found me eventually and he...he tried to kill me. And Brandon shot him. There in the house.”

Tyler stared at him. He couldn’t believe his ears. He wondered if Holden knew. Maybe he had got the house cheap because of what had happened there. He couldn’t imagine anyone wanting to buy it. “Did he... is he dead?” he asked with hesitance.

“Oh yeah.” Finn gave a little, strained laugh. “He’s rotting in hell as we speak.”

Tyler let out his breath. “I’m sorry.” He gestured at Finn’s arm. “And that?”

“Yeah,” Finn said. “He did that. Poured boiling water on me. He did other stuff too. Broke my bones. Whored me out to his friends.”

Tyler sat motionless. He felt tears pricking his eyes at Finn’s matter-of-fact calmness.

“I guess you’re wondering how I allowed that to happen, you being a tough army guy and all,” Finn said and Tyler saw his dark blue eyes had a shine across them now.

He shook his head. “No, Finn, that’s not what I’m wondering at all.”

“Aren’t you?” Finn seemed to need the reassurance and Tyler wanted badly to give it to him.

“No. I’m thinking how happy you seem with Brandon now.”

Finn’s face relaxed into a grin. He blushed. “Oh my God, I love that guy to the moon and back. He’s my everything.”

Tyler smiled.

“I made it so hard for him when I came here. He wanted to be my friend and I needed the help but I pushed him away over and over again, and I regret that. I want to try and pay forward everything he did for me.” He looked at Tyler expectantly.

Tyler didn’t like the focus coming back to him. He remembered Holden’s words. You look like you need the charity. He lowered his gaze and found himself looking at the empty end of his pants leg. Losing a leg seemed to have robbed him of his identity. As though part of his psyche was thrown away when the limb had been discarded as useless. He still didn’t know how to deal with it, when he should have just been grateful that he was alive. But his identity had been wrapped up in being a soldier. Now he was nothing.

“It’s okay,” Finn said softly. “If you want to talk, I’m here. If you don’t, we could just hang out. Any time you want. Brandon’s a great cook.” He gave a laugh.

Tyler did his best to smile. Finn’s company was fine, but he couldn’t imagine being invited over for a pity dinner with the local sheriff. Most definitely not.

“When I’m not at the diner, I’m painting,” Finn said. “Do you have any hobbies?”

Tyler hesitated. “No,” he said, because the thing he’d once enjoyed above all else

wasn't really a hobby anymore, as he couldn't afford to do it now. It wasn't a hobby that he liked talking about anyway for fear he might get laughed at. He'd definitely never told anyone in the army.

"Do you like reading?"

"Yeah." Tyler had been a voracious reader, but even that had fallen by the wayside because the demons inside his head wouldn't stop for one minute to allow him to lose himself in someone else's world.

"I have tons of books. I could lend you some of your landlord's books. He's good."

Tyler scowled, although he was certainly curious. He didn't even know what sort of stuff Holden wrote.

Finn smiled. "Hey, if he's said sorry, you guys are okay, right?"

Tyler shrugged.

"Seems to me that you might be good for each other. Two guys in need of company..."

"I never said I was gay," Tyler blurted out.

Finn looked startled. He flushed. "I didn't actually mean it that way," he said.

It was Tyler's turn to redden.

"I just meant..." Finn trailed off. Then he smiled. "He is crazy hot for an older guy though, right? Got that George Clooney vibe going on."

Tyler couldn't stop the heat rising further up from his shirt collar. "He's not really my type," he mumbled.

Finn grinned. "So you are gay, and he is your type?"

Tyler threw a cushion at him and they both laughed. They drank some coffee without speaking.

"Come over for dinner," Finn said. "I want to see what you're like after a couple of beers. A riot, I reckon."

Tyler smiled against his will. "I'll let you know."

"I won't let you hide away here." Finn stood. "I'll get going, but I'll be back. Now why don't you go over and see your hot landlord? You both need a shoulder to cry on."

Tyler said nothing. He took his crutches and climbed up, hopping towards the door. Finn followed him out and Tyler rested on his crutches and watched as he climbed into his car, a black Toyota. Finn started the engine. "I'll see you soon," he said through the open window. "My treat next time you come to the diner."

Tyler smiled. "Thanks for coming. And the socks."

"Don't be a stranger," Finn said as he turned the car and backed up.

Tyler stood and watched him bump down the dirt road. He thought of everything Finn must have gone through with Dominic. He suffered far worse than I ever did, and he is living testament to putting your demons behind you. Although he didn't know what traumas Finn continued to relive. Was he as happy as he let on? Certainly his relationship with Brandon was, Tyler could see that a mile away. How was he so

strong? What was his secret? Tyler wished he had the same. Someone to lean on, someone to hold him when the pain became too much and the flashbacks threatened to drive him insane. But he'd never had a real relationship with a man, only cruising from one bed to another. He glanced across at Holden's house and imagined what Finn had suffered there. The violence and blood-shed the house had seen. Brandon had killed Dominic. He had killed a man for Finn. A shiver passed through him. It made him see the sheriff in a whole new light. He would perhaps be even more intimidated by him when they next met. But then again, Tyler had killed men too. Lots of men. Those memories were a part of the flashbacks and the reason why he would never sleep easy again.

He saw Holden standing in the kitchen then and he froze. Holden did too. He lifted a hand in a stiff, awkward gesture. Tyler returned it. He turned to go back inside. As he propped his crutches against the wall so he could close the door, he heard the door to the house open and Holden stepped out.

"Hey," he called.

"Hi," Tyler said with his hand on the door, using his other hand to balance himself against the wall.

"How's your leg today?"

"A bit better, thanks."

"That's good." Holden stepped out onto the stretch of land separating their respective houses. He approached cautiously as though Tyler was some sort of wild animal who might bite. "Listen, I found some tins of paint and some brushes in the garage." He gestured behind him vaguely. "If you still wanted to... when you feel better."

Tyler opened his mouth to say he had changed his mind about fixing up Holden's

place and stopped. He remembered Finn's words. They could be good for each other. Even if he didn't mean it that way. It wouldn't kill him to open up and lean on someone. But Holden had enough troubles of his own. Would it do Tyler good to let someone lean on him in turn? Altruism was good. It would make him feel good in turn to help Holden out. Especially after that shit he had pulled with the blackmail. So mean. He could start with the work on the house. And then maybe Holden would forget for good that he wanted Tyler out of the annex.

"Sure," he said. "If my leg feels okay tomorrow, I'll be over to start."

Holden smiled. His teeth were perfect rows of pearly-white. Tyler's stomach clenched. He felt his shorts tighten. Oh wow, I really am crushing hard on an older guy.

"Great," Holden said. He hovered for a moment. "Want a beer?"

Tyler glanced at his watch while he thought of his reply. It was four p.m. Reasonable enough. Tyler liked to drink, though. He had to be strict with himself or it would be way too easy to slide down. He regarded Holden for a moment. What was his angle here? Company? Something more? Feeling sorry for him? He knew Holden was gay after all. Would a guy his age really make a serious play for Tyler? And wouldn't it be welcome? Hell, yes. Tyler had never done a silver fox before. He'd love to see this one squirming beneath him.

But Tyler didn't shit on his own doorstep. A one-night stand with a guy with the power to evict him was as bad an idea as it could get. But what if he rejected Holden and then the guy threw him out in spite? His head hurt from the permutations. Why couldn't he just accept a friendly offer of a beer as something that maybe had no strings? He could sit and chat with Holden without sex looming between them, couldn't he? He hadn't told Holden he was gay and he didn't think he had made it obvious he found him attractive, so surely Holden didn't know, right? But Holden

was gay. That meant he had gaydar and that meant he knew that Tyler was crushing on him. Now he felt that his head was going to explode. He also felt that he wanted to kiss Holden badly. Needed to.

“Yeah,” he said, against his better judgement.

Holden smiled again and Tyler’s cock thickened and begged to come out to play.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:09 pm

Holden

Why did you ask him in? Why, why, why? Are you going to make a pass at him? Drop to your knees and beg to suck his cock?

Over and over the thoughts went around in Holden's head as he flipped the tops off two beers. He could not make a pass at a guy in his twenties. He could not. He would be more humiliated than he had ever been in his life when Tyler rejected him. But you like the humiliation, a sly voice said. We already established this. If he grabbed you by the hair and made you suck his cock until you choked, you'd love it.

He clenched his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut while he took a few deep breaths. Tyler waited for him in the living room. He had no idea why he had invited Tyler over for a beer other than to make a pass at him. He should have been upstairs staring at the winking, accusing cursor on his blank document. He'd rather drink to inebriation then drill Tyler into the couch. Or vice versa. Being fucked was all a part of the addiction. Guaranteed to humiliate him if the man was a rough, uninterested lover. Something Holden was driven to choose over and over again to make himself feel as low as it was possible to get. Would Tyler treat him that way? And didn't that make his cock hard to think that he might? It shouldn't have. When was he going to look for the right sort of person and the right sort of sex?

While Tyler was a cool customer, Holden was pretty sure he was gay, and maybe a touch interested. Are you sure? Are you really sure? Why exactly would he be interested in you? What do you have to offer?

The sly voice had a point. Really, what did he have to offer Tyler? But what did Tyler

have to offer him? Well, his youth and his firm, fit, strong body for a start, if incomplete. He thought about Tyler's missing leg. If it bothered Holden so much, why was he still keen to fuck him? Because of the addiction. Because maybe you're not remotely into him, he's just someone you've been forced into proximity with, someone vulnerable and open to manipulation. He felt sick at that thought. No way could he be the big bad wolf with a younger man. Wrong on so many levels. He wished he knew what was real and what was his addiction calling the shots. He wished they were equals who could fall in love without baggage strangling any chances they might have. Whoah, who started talking about the L word?

He took his final deep breath and walked back into the living room. "There you go."

"Thanks." Tyler took the bottle.

Maybe it would have been safer to sit outside where there would be less chance of Holden doing anything stupid, but it was too hot. Despite the lack of air-con, the house was blessedly cool. He could just bet it would be fucking freezing in winter.

He sank into the chair opposite and tipped his bottle, watching when Tyler did the same, noting the bob of his Adam's apple when he swallowed and longing to trace it with his tongue.

"Was that the guy from the diner visiting?" he asked.

"Yeah. Finn."

Tyler watched him. Was it obvious that Holden was jealous of Finn? He had to be a good ten or fifteen years younger than him and he had a lean, easy body and a beautiful unlined face. Why wouldn't he come sniffing around Tyler? Those two would have been great together. He tried not to scowl at his unwelcome thoughts. He hated jealousy. He hated that while he shouldn't have had any competition for Tyler's

affections in this closed backwater, Tyler had already made a friend of the hottest guy in town.

“His partner’s the sheriff, you know that, right?” Tyler finally said after a silence.

Holden almost exhaled with relief. He had taken a seat next to the hot sheriff at the counter, but hadn’t noticed his interaction with Finn, too busy signing the book for the emo kid. “Really?” he said.

“Yeah.” They watched each other once again. “Did you think he was here for some nefarious purpose?” Tyler looked amused.

Holden felt heat rise up his neck. “Maybe.” He raised an eyebrow, trying to be nonchalant when his pulse beat hard with this all important question that he’d wanted to ask since he met this guy. “Are you gay?”

Tyler looked back at him steadily. “Yeah.”

Holden wanted to fist-pump the air. He didn’t know why, when he had zero chance with Tyler. He tried to keep it calm. “How did that work out for you in the military?”

Tyler scowled. He said nothing.

“Were you out?”

“What do you think?”

Their gazes held. “I’m sorry,” Holden said gently. “I can’t imagine how hard it must have been for you.”

He saw Tyler swallow. He looked away.

Holden wanted him to speak. He wanted to hear Tyler's story. Maybe he wanted to hear the tale of someone so much worse off than him. You lost your money and your home. You didn't lose your leg. While your mental health has suffered a blow, it's nothing compared to what this man will suffer for the rest of his life. Maybe listening would put his own troubles into perspective. Maybe he could help Tyler, just by being here. By being the only person here for him as far as Holden could see.

"It's as macho as you think," Tyler said.

"Yeah," Holden said.

"I had friends but... I had to pretend around them. Tell them I was free and easy and didn't want to get tied down to one woman. While I was picking up guys in bars as soon as I got back on leave."

"And your family?"

Tyler licked his lips. "I signed up to get away from my family. My dad, when I came out, he...took it bad." He picked at the label on his beer bottle. "I don't know, maybe I did it to prove I could be as hard and brave as the next man. That I wasn't the pansy he accused me of being." His voice was unsteady. "That sleeping with men didn't mean I had no balls at all. So I chose the most macho job I could think of."

Holden felt a tightness in his throat. He was worried that Tyler was going to cry and then Holden would most definitely cry too.

"And your mom?"

Pain flashed across Tyler's face. "She died, on my first tour of Afghanistan. A hit and run driver. I hadn't seen her in two years. She chose my dad's side, even though she sent me messages and asked me to stay in touch."

Holden regarded him for a long moment. Yeah, Tyler's story was infinitely worse than his own. From today, Holden couldn't ever feel sorry for himself again. "I'm sorry," he said. "You've been dealt a shitty hand."

Tyler drained his bottle. He shrugged. "Guys out there got four fucking amputations. They're worse off than me."

"Don't compare yourself to anyone else," Holden said softly, even though he had been doing just that. "You've suffered and you continue to suffer. Don't ever think you should just get on with it. You're entitled to feel lost and afraid and alone. No one should go through what you've been through."

Tyler stared at him. His grey eyes were filmed with tears. He held his bottle up. "Please can I have another?"

Holden rose. "Yes, you can." He stepped towards Tyler to retrieve his bottle. For a moment he stood close, looking down at the man on his couch who seemed small and shrunken suddenly with the weight of his pain like a cloak around him. Holden wanted to make it better. He didn't want to ever see a human being suffer the way Tyler obviously did. He turned away with his eyes welling and headed for the kitchen.

He tried to compose himself as he flipped the tops off two more bottles. Things had gotten serious. Maybe he had invited Tyler over for the wrong reasons, but now things had changed. Now, if anything happened, Holden wanted it to happen in order to provide comfort to Tyler, to show him he was not alone in the world. Not because his addiction was in charge and Tyler happened to be collateral damage.

He returned to the lounge and handed Tyler his bottle. Then he resumed his seat.

"What happened with your leg?" Holden said. He hadn't meant to ask this so soon.

Hadn't meant for it to come out so bluntly.

Tyler regarded him for a long moment. He took a drink of his beer and stifled a burp. "Does it repulse you?" he asked.

Caught off guard, Holden felt himself redden. Rather than answering the question, he said, "Show me."

Tyler stared at him. Then he put his bottle down on the small table beside the couch. With both hands, he slid his pant leg up, over his shin and knee to reveal the stump. Steeling himself to keep his face blank, Holden trained his eyes on it.

What remained of Tyler's lower leg was thin and wasted. Holden could bet his other calf was meaty with muscle. The stump was well healed at the edges, the skin smooth and pink, no evidence of the grievous wound caused by a saw when the foot and ankle had been removed. Nor was the skin red with pressure from the prosthesis the way he had seen it three days ago. It looked altogether better. And how did he feel about it? He didn't know, apart from it wasn't as shocking as it had been the first time he had set eyes on it.

Holden lifted his gaze. Tyler had been looking at the stump too. Maybe he was trying to see his leg through Holden's eyes. He looked up at Holden.

"In answer to your question," Holden said. "No, it doesn't repulse me. There's a part of you gone, that's all. It doesn't change who you are as a person. It's only a body part."

Tyler regarded him. Holden drank some beer. He'd meant it. They watched each other. "People stare at me," Tyler said.

"They will," Holden said. "They're ignorant. People'll stare at anybody different."

“Yeah,” Tyler replied. “Finn has a scar on his arm. Quite a significant burn. I found myself looking the other day when I first met him, and I didn’t mean to. I should have known better when I know what it’s like.”

“You have to remember most people are just curious, the way you were. Just because they look, doesn’t mean they’re judging you or they’re repulsed.”

“Rather that they feel sorry for me?” Tyler said with a raised eyebrow.

“It’s human nature to feel sorry for someone who’s hurt. That doesn’t mean that they’re viewing you as a pitiable figure. More like they’re feeling empathy.”

“It sounds like you’re giving mankind far more credit than they deserve.” Tyler’s tone was dry. “Most people are assholes.” Holden didn’t respond, so Tyler went on. “And after what happened to you, I thought you’d agree with me there.”

Holden was surprised at the nerve Tyler hit. Focusing on Tyler’s problems had almost made him forget his own hurt. He lowered his gaze and chose his words. “Well, it was one man who did what he did.” He dried up. He wanted to say more and couldn’t. Instead, he said, “What happened to Finn?”

Tyler hesitated. Then he said, “An abusive relationship.”

Holden frowned. “Jesus. The burn?”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck.”

“You should know,” Tyler said, “before somebody tells you.”

“What?” Holden was sure he was not going to like this.

“The sheriff, Brandon, he shot and killed Finn’s ex, Dominic. Here.”

Holden stared at him. He found himself looking around as though he might see blood stains on the floor and splattered on the walls. “That’s just fucking great,” he said softly.

“Sorry,” Tyler said.

Holden took a long pull of his beer. “Do you know whereabouts? In my fucking bedroom?”

Tyler shook his head. He looked guilty. “I don’t know. And I probably wouldn’t tell you if I knew. I shouldn’t have said anything. I’m sorry.”

“Stop saying you’re sorry.” Holden huffed and sat back, crossing his ankle over his opposite knee. “Well, we’re doing well. We’ve covered being gay in the military, your parents, your leg, domestic abuse, and the homicide perpetrated in my house.”

Tyler gave an uncomfortable laugh. “I guess it must be your turn.”

Holden shook his head. “Not yet. We haven’t covered how you lost your leg.”

Tyler took a drink of beer. He stared at the bottle, running his fingertip over the label. “I can’t at the moment.”

“That’s okay,” Holden said. He watched Tyler. “Do you get phantom limb pain?”

Tyler sighed. “Do I get phantom limb pain? At the moment it feels like someone’s driving nails into the sole of my non-existent foot.” He looked down at his stump and

flexed his knee straight. “I can feel my toes wiggling and they’re not even attached to me anymore.”

Holden swallowed. “Is it constant?”

“No, but mostly yes.”

“Do painkillers help?”

“Sometimes they take the edge off. That’s about it. The only thing that helps is weed.” He gave Holden a self-conscious smile as though he thought Holden might pick up the phone and dial the cops. “But I don’t have any and don’t know where to get any in Clear Water.”

Holden regarded him for several seconds before he said, “Good job I have some then.”

Tyler’s eyes widened. “You do?”

Holden nodded. Their gazes held for the longest time while Holden battled himself back and forwards.

That bastard you once were at the height of your addiction would now use this as a bargaining chip, you know that, right?

What sort of bargaining chip?

Like you don’t fucking know. The weed in exchange for sexual favors.

I’m not sure I’m that bastard anymore.

Aren't you? What's changed to make you an angel?

What Leo did to me has changed me. I haven't thought about sex or had it in months, not until I moved here. I don't want to ever hurt or use anyone the way he did me or the way other men have. Not anymore.

You sure? Don't you want to ask him to get on his knees? Or don't you want to explain that you want to suck his cock in exchange for a joint? That you need him to use you hard, make you feel like that despicable person you know you are?

He stared into Tyler's clear grey eyes. My God, what a horror I would be if I did that. If I actually did it. But once upon a time, I would have done it without hesitation.

Tyler licked his lips. "I don't have any money right now, but when I do, could I maybe...buy some from you?"

Holden's heart broke a little. He shook his head. "No money required. Wait there." He stood and walked through to the kitchen. In the drawer next to the fridge sat his stash tin with a ready-made joint. He wasn't a big smoker; this stash had come from his previous life and was months old. Now he suddenly wanted very much to use it. With Tyler.

He found a lighter and went back into the living room, holding the joint for Tyler to see. "Here's one I made earlier."

Tyler smiled. It held anticipation and need. But only, it seemed, for what Holden held in his hand. He imagined for a moment smoking the weed, then making slow, stoned love with Tyler. He liked that idea a lot. More than he could say.

"I'm not a pot head," Holden said.

“Never thought you were.” Tyler’s eyes danced with amusement.

“Let’s go outside. I’ll take your bottle.” He walked over as Tyler held the bottle out, hopping to his foot and leaning on one crutch. For a moment they were close together and Holden smelled Tyler’s clean, fresh scent and a hint of cologne. So fucking good. Enough to stir his cock in shameful ways. The more he thought sexually about Tyler, the more he berated himself as a dirty old man. He took the bottle and their fingers brushed. The beer was almost gone. “I’ll get you another. Go on out.”

“I’m not an alcoholic,” Tyler shouted after him as he went into the kitchen.

Holden laughed. “Never thought you were.” He procured two more beers and held them in one hand while he carried the joint and lighter in the other. Tyler had already gone outside and Holden followed him out, finding him seated on one of the chairs overlooking the lawn.

Holden placed the beers on the table. He took the chair from the opposite side of the table and placed it next to Tyler. For ease of passing the joint back and forward. Not for any other reason.

Yeah, right.

He settled down. The sun had gone behind a large grey cloud and the temperature had dropped to more bearable levels. He sparked the lighter and lit the joint, sucking smoke into his lungs. For a moment he held it before a long, pleasurable exhale. It felt good. It had been too long since he had sought any relief in any of his vices—weed, alcohol or sex. The latter was the only one he was addicted to though. Then he remembered Tyler and reminded himself that the veteran should be having the lion’s share of this joint, not Holden. Altruism, remember? It makes you feel good.

He held the joint out. Their gazes met before Tyler took it and once more their fingers brushed. Holden watched as he placed the joint between his sensual lips and sucked in deep. Holden took a drink of beer as he watched the smoke come out of Tyler's nostrils. Tyler offered the joint back. Holden shook his head. "Go ahead."

Tyler gave him a look, maybe of gratitude. He took another drag, resting back in his chair and closing his eyes as he exhaled. Holden watched him. Tyler gave it a few seconds, then took a third hit. This time he sighed. "That's fucking good."

"Is it helping?"

Tyler took a moment to reply. He was quiet and still. "Yeah," he said. "My foot's starting to fade away." He laughed. He opened his eyes and held the joint out. Holden took it. He felt electricity when their fingers touched and their gazes held for what seemed like minutes. The joint was wet with Tyler's saliva. Holden savored it as he inhaled. He felt the second hit, a rush that spaced him out all of a sudden and made his inhibitions fly. Christ, he could have just sunk to his knees now and... he glanced over at Tyler, gaze sliding down his body to rest on the bulge in his cargo shorts. Nice, very fucking nice. He tore his eyes away as Tyler's lashes lifted and focused on the joint. Holden handed it back. Tyler gave him the sweetest of smiles and Holden's cock started to thicken and ache. Fuck, he wanted Tyler so much. He watched him smoke again and sink back in his seat with the joint burning unheeded between his fingers. He'd never seen anyone get stoned so quickly as Tyler. It was kind of endearing.

When it seemed like Tyler had fallen asleep and the joint might smoke away to itself, Holden snagged it from his fingers and took another drag. Tyler turned his head, lashes fluttering up to watch. There wasn't much left. He handed it back. Tyler smoked again. Holden retrieved it and looked at the butt. "Blowback?" he asked with his heart beating hard.

Tyler leaned towards him. Holden placed the butt between his teeth and angled his mouth, closing his eyes as he saw Tyler coming. He drew in his breath as Tyler's lips brushed his. Tyler jerked back. "Sorry man," he muttered. "Too stoned for that."

Holden retrieved the joint. His lips were burning and not from having the embers of the joint in his mouth either. Tyler had his eyes shut again. He tilted his face to the sun when it peeped from behind the cloud. Holden sucked on the joint again and felt his bones melting into languor. He studied Tyler. The veteran's skin was pale, unlined and completely without blemish, with a light dusting of stubble on his jaw. Holden lifted his hand. He hovered it over Tyler's face for the longest time before he stroked gently with the backs of his fingers, tracing the curve of Tyler's beautiful cheek with a reverential touch.

Tyler didn't move, although his lashes fluttered. "Tyler," Holden said softly, "why don't I help you home so you can lie down?" He waited, hoping Tyler would contradict the offer because if he wanted to lie down on Holden's bed, Holden wasn't going to refuse.

Tyler groped for his crutches. Clumsily, he lurched to his feet and Holden put an arm around his back, nearly shuddering at the solid feel of Tyler's frame.

"I didn't tell you I was a lightweight, did I?" Tyler said as he made his way slowly across the yard.

"That's okay, me too," said Holden.

They reached the annex and Holden let Tyler go ahead, negotiating the hallway. As soon as he got to the bedroom, he let his crutches go and virtually launched himself onto the bed, falling heavily and sprawling on his back. Holden unlaced his sneaker and pulled it off. Still he hoped, despite Tyler's obvious incapacity, that he might pull Holden onto the bed now. His gaze roamed Tyler's body and he felt like the pervert

he was. It didn't stop his cock from getting hard. He stepped back reluctantly, knowing it was time to leave. His gaze fell onto the red album he had glimpsed Tyler looking at through the window. It lay on a bureau by the door. Throwing the motionless Tyler a guilty glance, Holden walked over and lifted the album, opening the front cover.

He was confronted with pages and pages of glassine leaves holding small square and rectangular colorful bits of paper. He stared at them and started to smile. Tyler was a stamp collector.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:09 pm

Tyler

Tyler woke groggily, tangled in his sheets. His gaze focused on his prosthesis sitting in the corner. He shifted his right leg, then his left. He waited for the ache in his ghost ankle that meant he needed to try to flex then rotate it, even though that wasn't possible. Waited for the pin pricks, stabbing and burning in his sole. Waited for the ache that turned him inside out and made him want to swipe, claw and punch at thin air.

Nothing.

He gasped, staring at the ceiling. Thinking. He moved the stump again, from side to side. He pushed back the covers to look at the pale, smooth skin. It looked good. His mind drifted to Holden. He wasn't naïve enough to think that one joint meant his pain was gone for good—gone even for one day—but Jesus Christ, this was the first time it had ever happened. He could have wept with joy. And he did. He let out a sob before he stifled it, because Tyler didn't cry. Not ever.

He shuffled to the edge of the bed, put his right foot down and hopped across to the window, drawing the curtains. He saw Holden immediately in his kitchen standing at the sink. Tyler froze as their gazes met. Holden smiled. With a warm burst of feeling in his chest, Tyler smiled back. He hopped to his crutches. Holden had brought him back here, hadn't he? He hoped he hadn't said any stupid shit to him while under the influence, or worse, been inappropriate. My God, what if I made a pass at him? Thrusting his arms into his crutches, he made it out of the bedroom and across the hall to the bathroom where he peed. Then it was into the kitchen for a long drink of cold water while the coffee brewed.

A knock came at the door. Tyler tensed. He put down his glass and made his way down the hall on his crutches. Holden stood on the other side of the door. Man, he looked good that morning. Really fucking good. He was fresh from the shower, judging by his damp, pushed back hair and he wore a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, showing a hint of smooth chest. Tyler wanted to taste. He wanted to slide his tongue over Holden's Adam's apple and push it into the notch between his collarbones before moving down between his firm pecs and across to lick at one nipple. Fuck. He wondered what sounds Holden would make as Tyler's tongue left his nipple glistening and hard.

He swallowed, his cock pushing against his zipper.

Holden smiled. "Hey."

"Hey."

"How's it going?"

"All right."

"Did you sleep okay?" Holden's smile widened to a grin. He was teasing.

Tyler groaned. "I'm sorry."

Holden arched a brow. "What for?"

"For you having to put me to bed."

"It was my pleasure." Their gazes held and Tyler found himself blushing. "How's your leg feeling?"

“You’re not going to believe this, but I don’t have any pain this morning.”

Holden gaped at him. “For real?”

“Yeah.”

A slow smile of such happiness lit up Holden’s face that Tyler almost choked up. He actually gives a damn. He actually does. “That’s fucking amazing, Tyler. I’m so glad.”

Tyler bit his lip. “You don’t know what you did for me last night, man.” His voice was small, unsteady.

Holden started to look choked too, and embarrassed. “It was just a joint.”

Tyler shook his head. “I owe you. I owe you big time.” They stared at each other. Tyler half hoped Holden would suggest that he dropped to his knees. He’d be more than happy to repay Holden that way.

“Well, you can get your leg on and come start the painting, how about that?” Holden’s smile was so warm, so goddamn charming.

Tyler nodded. “After coffee. I have to have coffee before I tackle the beast.” He meant the leg, not Holden’s decorating.

Holden looked unsure. “Don’t force it if you’re not ready.”

“I think it’ll be okay,” Tyler said.

Holden stepped back. “There’ll be breakfast waiting when you’re ready.”

Tyler smiled. “See you soon.”

Holden turned away. He lifted a hand as he crossed the yard and disappeared inside. Tyler’s heart was beating hard when he closed the door. He hopped to the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee as a voice started to berate him.

You’re not actually going to make a play for him, right? Do you know how old he is? Forties? Fifties? Your dad’s age!

I’m not sure I fucking care. Tyler’s cock was still hard. He gave it a rub through his shorts. Imagine how experienced he is. Fuck, he probably knows stuff that’ll blow my head off.

Stop. This is not going to have a happy ending.

The only happy ending I want is my dick buried deep in his ass as I pump it full of cum.

Tyler put his coffee down and hopped to the bathroom for a shower. Leaning against the wall with one arm while the hot water rained down on him, he jerked off, imagining Holden on his knees looking up at him with those dark eyes and his mouth full of cock.

Tyler sat on the bed and rolled on the liner. He tore open the plastic package Finn had given him and admired the thick stump socks inside. When he slid them over the pin and up his leg, he felt optimistic that the prosthesis might actually fit properly now. He maneuvered the cup over his stump and stood, wriggling his stump into the socket, backward and forward, applying more pressure, waiting to hear the click.

There.

He stood on two legs, with equal pressure on both, assessing. It felt okay. He rocked the prosthesis to see if it was loose. It felt snug. He stepped forward, good leg first, false leg second. He walked across the bedroom and into the hall to the front door, and back. All felt good, but many days had started off like this before, only for Tyler to be wrenching the leg off an hour down the line and applying another sock. Applying, taking off, doubling, ad nauseam. He was so fucking sick of all the fiddling with the fucking leg. So sick and tired.

He walked right out of the door before he could think anything further. Across the yard he went with no rubbing, no squeezing, no pressure. With his body feeling light, and his heart lighter, he knocked on Holden's door.

Holden answered with a delicious waft of toast following him out. He glanced down at Tyler's prosthesis and smiled. He held up his fist for a bump. Tyler tapped his own against it. As he followed Holden inside, he remembered the blowback from last night. Accidentally kissing Holden because he was too stoned to keep his lips an inch apart without falling into the guy. It was a brush of soft lips, that was all, but thinking about it now made Tyler's mouth tingle. It made him want the firm pressure of Holden's lips and his tongue in Tyler's mouth. He thought again of sliding down Holden's lean body and leaving his nipples glistening with saliva. Leaving a trail right down to Holden's dick.

He shook his head free of his thoughts as Holden led him into the kitchen where the table was set with a mountain of pancakes and fruit. "Sit down." Tyler did so. He thanked Holden as he set down a mug of coffee for him before settling himself. "Sugar? Cream?"

"No, thanks."

Holden speared two pancakes and transferred them to Tyler's plate before placing two on his own. He gestured to the maple syrup and Tyler helped himself. Holden

drank some coffee. “So, I put some dust sheets down, sanded down the baseboards. They’re ready to paint.”

“You’ve been busy,” Tyler said around a mouthful of pancake.

“Yeah.” Holden glanced over his shoulder, down the hallway. “I think I know where the sheriff killed that guy.”

Tyler stared at him.

“There’s some staining on the wood. In the cracks.”

“Jesus Christ.” Tyler shook his head. “I’m sorry. If I hadn’t have said anything, you wouldn’t have noticed.”

“Don’t worry.” Holden chewed a strawberry. “I’m a big boy. I can handle it.”

Tyler bit his lip.

“I was thinking about Finn,” Holden said. “What he suffered. I was thinking of making domestic abuse the theme of my next book. I haven’t tackled it before.”

Tyler regarded him nonplussed.

Holden looked ashamed. “You’re thinking I’m going to cynically cash in on Finn’s misery.”

Tyler shook his head. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“Look, you seem like an okay guy, Holden. I don’t think you’re going to do that. Just don’t have the lead character named Finn and don’t have him get boiling water poured on him, okay?”

“I wouldn’t,” Holden said. “But I wondered whether to speak to him. Whether he would be interested in writing his own story with me helping him.”

Once more, Tyler stared.

“I don’t usually write non-fiction,” Holden went on hurriedly, as though disapproval radiated from Tyler in waves. “But I’m interested, particularly as I’m in the house where it happened. Oh God, you think I’m a monster, don’t you?”

Tyler sighed. “No. Maybe it might be what he needs. Catharsis. But maybe it might open up memories he’s tried to bury. Then there’s Brandon. You really think the sheriff of this town will want you writing about how he shot and killed a man here?”

Holden looked crestfallen. “You’re right. It was a bad idea.”

“I never said it was a bad idea, but...you know, you’d have to play it carefully. Finn, he’s a good guy. A really good guy. I hate the idea that he would be hurt by this.”

“Yeah,” Holden said. “I’m sorry.”

“Aren’t you working on a novel at the moment?”

Holden lowered his gaze and poked his pancake. “Oh yeah, I am.” He laughed bitterly. “I’m working on a novel all right.”

Tyler frowned. He waited.

“Come upstairs and I’ll show you what I’m working on.”

Holden’s demeanor had changed. He seemed cold, unreachable. Tyler had to remember that while he was spilling the beans last night about all his troubles, Holden had not reciprocated. This guy had been swindled out of all his money and he hadn’t yet said a word to Tyler about it.

“What sort of stuff do you write?” He made his tone light and soft.

Holden looked up at him and Tyler saw the sort of pain that he was used to only seeing reflected back in the mirror. “Crime thrillers,” he said.

“My favorite.” Tyler smiled. “Finn has your books. He offered to lend me some. Which one should I start with?”

“No need. I have them upstairs. Come up and choose for yourself.”

Twice now Holden had asked him to come upstairs. If he really wanted him up there, Tyler wasn’t going to refuse. He was only a man after all. He put down his fork. “Come on then.”

Holden pushed his chair back. Tyler followed him out of the kitchen and up the stairs. Holden kept a slow pace to match Tyler’s climb. Tyler eyed his ass. Firm and round in a pair of combat pants. He tried to concentrate on his leg to see how it felt as he moved, but he was far more interested in Holden’s ass. Holden was interesting him more and more, period. Tyler would soon have to do something about it, because this itch needed scratching very badly.

Holden led him into a home office, set up with a desk and chair. A second monitor was attached to the laptop. A notebook was open and propped open on a bookstand, revealing an untidy scrawl across both pages. A cup with a black cat on it overflowed

with pens.

“Here you go,” Holden said and nudged the mouse so the screen fired up. “Here’s my new novel so far. The cursor blinked a few lines down from the top of a word document. The sole words, in capital letters, read Chapter One.

Tyler sighed. “I’m sorry, man.”

Holden gestured to the crammed bookcase against the far wall. “Mine are on the top shelf.”

Tyler peered at the row of spines. There were five in all. They had Holden’s name in block capitals, in gold on a black background. Tyler pulled out the first one and looked at the cover. Red roses dripping with blood on a black cover. The title was Dig Your Grave. He turned it over to read the blurb.

It was a serial killer in a small town and the FBI called in to help. Some friction with local law enforcement. A depraved killer taunting the police and the sheriff knows more than he’s letting on. Tyler glanced at Holden. “Do you write any...romance in your books?”

Holden smiled knowingly. “Maybe.”

“So, like, does the local sheriff maybe get it on with the FBI guy?” Tyler blushed for sounding like a schoolgirl.

Holden continued to smile. “Would you like that?”

“Sure,” Tyler said. “Men in uniform and all that.” He blushed deeper, hoping Holden didn’t think he had the hots for Finn’s boyfriend. Then he remembered those men in uniform he used to work with and how hot some of them were.

“Yeah,” Holden said. “I get that.” He kept his gaze on Tyler and the room started to become too hot, crackling with danger and testosterone. “Do you read m/m romance?”

“Uh, no,” Tyler said, only having a vague idea what that was.

“If you need a fix of enemies to lovers, I can recommend this.” Holden pulled a thick tome from the middle shelf. It had a half-naked guy on the cover, his army combats open to his waist.

Tyler groaned. “Is this a marine? I don’t think I can really read...”

“Sure you can. It’ll make you forget everything for a while.”

Tyler regarded him. “Is this a one-handed read, Holden?”

Holden laughed. “You bet it is. You’ll get everything from there that you won’t get from mine.”

Tyler looked at both books. “I still want to read yours.”

Holden looked pleased. “Good.”

They gazed at each other for a moment. Tyler was going to have to kiss him. There was no two ways about it. He needed it like the air he breathed. He took a step forward just as Holden said, “Well, let’s get started,” and turned around, and just like that, the chance was gone.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:10 pm

Tyler

After they finished their breakfast and Holden led him into the living room, Tyler noticed the table set up with paints, brushes and sandpaper laid out. Holden had said he'd found some supplies in the shed. These lot looked like Holden had popped out to a DIY store and bought them brand new. Tyler looked at him. Did Holden really want him over at the house? Was it the free decorating or was it something more?

He opened up the ladders and set them facing the wall. Then he prized open the top of a tin of white gloss paint with a screwdriver and poured some into a tray. He took the tray and a roller and set them on the top step of the ladder.

"Are you okay to climb up there?" Holden asked with a worried note in his voice. "Maybe I should do that and you paint the baseboards?"

Tyler glanced at him. You really have no idea about what I used to do for a living on a day to day basis, he thought. I shot Taliban. I laid explosives and blew up tanks. Now I'm so emasculated you're asking me if I can climb four steps. Maybe his look said it all, because Holden looked chastened. "So it feels okay?" he asked, gesturing to the prosthesis.

"Yeah," Tyler said. "Let's get this show on the road." He climbed to the third step, picked up the roller and dipped it in the paint. Holden was watching him as he rolled the paint on the wall. Tyler carried on painting. He liked how the dull, yellowish paint disappeared under the bright white gloss. If only it was so easy to paint over the memories that set his brain on fire. The silence became too much for him. "I did plenty of talking yesterday," he said, looking down at Holden. "It's your turn."

Holden looked horrified. “You really don’t need my sob story,” he said.

“Don’t tell me what I need,” Tyler replied. He gave Holden a reassuring smile. “Fair’s fair. I gave you all the dirt.”

“You didn’t.” Holden regarded him unblinkingly. “You didn’t tell me how you lost your leg, remember?”

“Yeah, okay.” Tyler stretched up to the ceiling to get a bit he’d missed at the top of the wall. “Tell me what happened and I’ll tell you all about the day I got my leg blown off.” He hated the sorry look on Holden’s face.

“Sure,” his landlord said. He picked up the tin of paint and a small brush. “Hurry up and paint down here so I can do the baseboards.” He gestured at the bottom of the wall.

“All right, slave driver. Going as quick as I can.”

Holden was silent for a moment. Then he started to talk. “I met Leo over a year ago. He was handsome and charming. I was flattered by the attention because...” He looked up at Tyler. If that wasn’t a sheepish look, Tyler didn’t know what was. “He was a younger man.”

There. Tyler had it confirmed. Holden liked younger men and Tyler guessed Holden liked him too. His heart sank. He makes a habit of it. A younger man massages his ageing ego. He tried not to let his feelings show on his face but Holden’s eyes caught his for just a moment, and he knew Holden had picked up on it easily. Holden shifted his gaze, while Tyler went back to painting the wall. He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear any more.

“He’d been to business school. He possessed all the business acumen that I didn’t and

he offered to help me out with stuff. I struggled with promo, marketing, all the stuff I hated. He gave me financial advice and soon I stopped needing my accountant because he did my tax returns, kept my books balanced and up to date. He didn't want a fee for this, he just wanted me, so it seemed. I should have realized it was too good to be true."

Tyler tensed as Holden's voice wavered but he didn't stop the motion of the roller covering the wall in bright shiny white paint. "He moved in. I was fucking crazy about him. He made me start to question why I was giving my agent ten per cent of my hard-earned royalties, when he could look after me for free." Holden laughed bitterly. "Oh man, he saw me coming. I fell for it all, hook, line and sinker. I thought he loved me. I actually thought he loved me."

Tyler turned slowly on his ladder to look down at Holden who was now seated on the floor with his knees drawn up. He made a small, pitiable figure and despite not being sure anymore if Holden wanted him for the right reasons, or even wanted him at all, Tyler felt moved beyond reason. "I'm so sorry," he said.

Holden looked up at him with glistening eyes. He sniffed. "The day I found out he'd gone, he'd timed it so perfectly. I was out all day at a book signing. His phone went to voicemail every time I called him. When I got home, all his stuff was gone, along with my jewelry, laptop, the cash I kept hidden at home. I didn't call the police straight away. I was too humiliated. I thought it was some sort of mistake, or a joke. I was in a fog and I couldn't think straight. The next day I got a text from the bank. I needed to add funds because my car payment had bounced. I logged in then and saw it." Holden's jaw tightened. He swiped at his eyes. "It was all gone. All my savings. I'd never earned a huge amount of money from my writing, but I did okay, and I saved it all, for better things."

Tyler came down the ladder and put the roller in the tray. It felt insensitive to be up a ladder painting while Holden was spilling his guts this way. He sat down on the floor

facing Holden.

“Do you think I’m stupid?” Holden asked in a whisper.

Tyler shook his head. “I think you trusted too much because you’re open and honest and you loved him.”

“No,” Holden said. “I didn’t love him. I thought I did but I was just deceived into thinking that. I didn’t even come close to loving him.”

For some reason, this confession was all-important to Tyler.

Holden seemed to rouse himself. He swiped at his face almost angrily. “So yeah, my house was repossessed by the bank. I’m tied in with my publishers for another book. It’s due in a month. And I haven’t even fucking started it!” He laughed with a note of hysteria.

“What happens if you don’t deliver?”

“They drop me and probably sue me for breach of contract. No other publisher will want to publish me.”

“You don’t have to use a publisher these days,” Tyler pointed out.

Holden sighed. “Yeah, I know.”

“Aren’t you still getting royalties from your other books?”

“They barely cover my living expenses. I had a flurry of sales with my last one and then they dropped within a week. Happens with every book.”

Tyler didn't know what to say to comfort him. He couldn't imagine what the panic of knowing you can't deliver something must be like. That blank page sitting accusing Holden every day. He hesitated before he said, "Then I guess you should ask your publishers if they'll accept a non-fiction this time and if they say yes, you should go along and see Finn and ask him if he would like to tell his story." Holden stared at him. "Unless you have that novel plotted away in your head right now and you can get it all down in four weeks?"

Holden shook his head mutely. There was silence. He climbed to his feet. "I think we need more coffee."

"Sure," Tyler said. He went back to his painting. Holden was an inordinate amount of time in the kitchen. Tyler had finished the wall and was on his knees painting the baseboards when Holden finally returned with two mugs.

"That was my job," he said.

"Not a problem," Tyler replied.

"Here you go." He placed a mug on the second step of the ladder by Tyler's shoulder.

"Thanks."

"I thought you might have run away while I was gone."

Tyler glanced at him. "Is that why you were so long? Giving me time to run away?"

Holden flushed. He said nothing.

"I'm not going anywhere," Tyler said, turning his attention back to the baseboard.

Holden took another brush from the table. He crouched, dipped it in the can Tyler was using and started at the other end of the baseboard.

They worked their way in until they met. When Holden had done the last few inches, he got up and drank some coffee. Tyler moved the ladder and started on the next wall. They worked in silence for a while. Tyler was mulling over Holden's story and he guessed Holden was mulling over what he'd told Tyler or maybe he was waiting for Tyler to start talking about his leg.

When Tyler came down the ladder and started on the baseboard, Holden said, "Would you speak to Finn? Prepare him for what I'm going to ask him?"

Tyler glanced at him. "Hey, I met the guy twice."

"I know, but you told me about his abuse. Imagine if I turn up on his doorstep asking him if he wants to collaborate on a book with me. He's going to wonder how I know and he's going to be pretty mad at you. Maybe."

Shit. Tyler wished he hadn't told Holden. He was right. Finn could be so mad at him he could break off any fledgling friendship they might have had. And with that soft, thick sock cushioning his stump just right that day, Tyler didn't want that. "Maybe it was a bad idea," he muttered.

Holden bit his lip. "I don't want to get you in trouble."

"You probably will."

Holden blew out his breath. "Then would you like to write a book with me about how you came to lose your leg?"

Tyler stiffened. He put the paintbrush in the can. "Not funny."

“I wasn’t joking.”

Tyler got to his feet. “I get that you’re a writer, but actually, that doesn’t give you open season on everyone’s feelings.”

Holden looked hurt and ashamed. “That wasn’t it.”

“Wasn’t it?”

“No, I just wanted...”

“Yeah, to earn some money at my expense. And Finn’s.” He moved forward and Holden blocked him, grabbing his arm.

“Wait.”

“Get off me.”

“Tyler, please...”

Tyler didn’t look at those dark, beseeching eyes. He tried to shrug Holden off, but he didn’t try very hard because he knew he could hurt the guy, one leg or not, and he didn’t want to do that, no matter how mad he was. “Let me go, Holden. I’ve done your painting; I need to rest.” It wasn’t strictly true because his leg was feeling fine, even from kneeling on the floor. More, he needed to rest his mind and decide what had happened here today and how much further he should let his acquaintance with Holden go.

“I’m sorry,” Holden said and a glance at his face showed Tyler he was mortified. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I wasn’t even serious. I was just desperate. Not that I’d have to be desperate to write your story, I mean, I just...” He let go of Tyler. “I’m

worried about money. I'm worried that I've dried up and can't write a word and I know that's not your problem and..." He stopped.

Tyler stayed in place, their gazes fixed.

"I know you're so much worse off than me and I appreciate you talking to me last night because it made me feel as good as it made you, trust me. I want to help you and..."

Tyler rested his hands on Holden's shoulders as he was talking. He moved closer. He looked down into Holden's handsome upturned face and then he cupped his cheeks in both hands, searching his eyes.

Holden stared up at him, eyes wide. His eyes were beautiful, so dark they were almost black, the sooty lashes framing them adding to their expressive nature. They were also filled with misery and suffering. Tyler wanted to make it better. He wanted to make himself better by losing himself in Holden. He lowered his lips slowly, seeking Holden's mouth.

Holden closed his eyes. He waited for Tyler to kiss him and Tyler closed his own eyes in anticipation as their lips almost touched.

A knock came at the door.

Holden drew back, cursing. He was flushed and he darted Tyler a little embarrassed look as he went out into the hallway. Tyler heard him exchanging words with a guy after he'd opened the door, then he closed it again and came back, holding up a small, flat cardboard package.

"Didn't realize Amazon delivered here," Tyler said. He had regained his senses and now felt embarrassed that he had tried to kiss Holden. At the same time, he wondered

if Amazon hadn't banged on the door, whether he and Holden would now be semi-naked on the couch.

"Sure," Holden said. He tore the package open and peered inside. "Yeah, here it is." He reached free a small, semi-opaque envelope and held it out. "I got these for you."

Tyler stared, because he recognized the glassine package and what it usually contained. And what it definitely did contain in this case. It wasn't sealed and corners of colorful bits of paper stuck out. He took it and pulled out a few with his thumb and forefinger.

"I'm sorry," Holden said when Tyler looked at him wordlessly. "I saw your stamp album. I wasn't snooping. I thought you might like these. They were only cheap though. I don't think you'll find any penny blacks or one cent magentas."

Tyler spread some of the stamps onto the palm of his hand and saw one with a flower from Hungary, one with a beach scene from St. Kitts and Nevis, some definitives with the late Queen Elizabeth and a historic building from Romania. He looked up at Holden. Two gifts in two days. More gifts than he'd had in years. He raised an eyebrow. "How do you know about the one cent magenta?"

Holden gave a sheepish smile. "I used to collect. Years ago."

"Yeah?" Tyler smiled because it had been many years since he'd met a fellow collector.

"Yeah. I have all my stamps somewhere still. I thought about getting back into it not long back. I bought a big bundle of stuff from eBay and didn't get around to looking at them."

A surprise package of goodies from eBay was the stuff dreams were made of for

Tyler. The thrill of not knowing what you were going to get. "I'd like to see them."

"Sure. I'll have a look for them."

Tyler looked down at the stamps on his hand again. "I don't know what to say."

"Do you like them?"

"I love them."

Holden smiled. "Do you still collect?"

Tyler shook his head. "Can't afford to."

"Now you can start again. You're welcome to take anything you want from my collection too."

Tyler was thrown. He had been angry with Holden for what he saw as exploitation. Then he had wanted to kiss him, having seen his softer side, now he wanted to hold him for being the generous soul he was.

Instead, he stepped back. "I should go. I need to take my leg off."

Holden looked disappointed. "Sure. Thanks for your hard work."

"No problem. Thanks for the breakfast." Tyler made his way to the front door.

"Your books," Holden said behind him, holding out the two paperbacks he had given him from upstairs.

Tyler took them. He opened the door and stepped out. Without looking back at

Holden, he let himself into the annex and locked the door. Then he went to his bedroom and sat down on the bed with the two books and the packet of stamps by his side.

He glanced at Holden's novel and then at the other book he'd given him with the army guy on the front. As he looked at it, his mind drifted back to how his lips had almost touched Holden's. He gave a little shiver. If he started reading this book now, he'd have to jerk off. And maybe Holden would know he'd jerked off over it. If he jerked off, he'd be thinking of how his mouth should have been over Holden's. Of how their tongues should have entwined and how he should have had Holden beneath him on the couch while Tyler had driven into him until he'd exploded.

Fuck, he was hard. He wanted to go back over to Holden's house and take what he knew Holden was going to give freely before fucking Amazon knocked on the door. He flicked through the book. Yeah, it was a smutfest. He saw the words fuck, cock and ass on virtually every page. He closed it and took some deep breaths. He wouldn't jerk off. Not when he could be over there finishing what they had almost started. He shoved the book away from him and picked up Holden's novel instead.

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Holden

Holden set off on a walk into town after Tyler had left, resisting the urge to go to bed and jerk off for the rest of the day. He wasn't that man anymore. He didn't need to do it until his cock was so sore it hurt to wear underwear, until his hand was stiff and cramped. Those were the bad old days, when it was normal to spend the entire day jerking off before going out at night to find some random stranger to fuck. He still wanted to do it, but his encounter with Tyler had taken the edge off his desire, even though he had been almost mouth to mouth with his wildest dreams. By rights, they should have been testing the bedsprings back at the house by now. Fucking Amazon. He could almost taste the luscious, decadent warmth of Tyler's beautiful mouth. Could almost feel the satin skin covering hard muscle. He groaned aloud as he walked, his cock hard and suffocating. Not now, not now. These thoughts would lead him straight to hell. He would veer into the first bar he found and fuck the first available hole that gave consent. And he didn't want to do that, because he liked Tyler way more than he should.

It was his birthday tomorrow. A big fucking birthday, and by rights, he should have been pounded into the mattress by Tyler as the present to end all presents. Instead, he was walking along the dusty road to the heart of Clear Water Creek with his dick leaking and wishing he could stop somewhere to jerk off. Instead, he was going to be alone, hiding out from his shame.

Main Street presented itself to him in all its glory—a row of buildings featuring the bakery, the doctor's office, the diner and standing alone, Bluey's bar. Holden hesitated. He could bet Bluey's was the only place to pick up ass in town. He could also bet his chances of scoring with a man in there were zero. He knew what small

towns were like. Going in and making himself available could result in the beating of his life.

He glanced over at the diner. The idea of writing a book about Finn, or rather Finn writing the book with him helping, had come to Holden during the sleepless night after he'd put a stoned Tyler to bed. Now he wished it hadn't and he certainly wished he hadn't voiced the idea to Tyler. Nonetheless, the diner was the only place in town to see a familiar face and probably the safer of the two options, even if he could have done with a strong drink right about now. He walked up to the door and swung it open.

The bell rang. A few people occupied the tables and chairs and the booths along the right-hand wall. Jordan, the lad whom Holden had signed the book for, was behind the counter pouring coffee for a woman with red hair. There was no sign of Finn. Holden's cock was still hard and throbbing for release. He veered into the bathroom, slammed a stall door and locked it. Then he tore his pants open and shoved them and his briefs down to release his cock. His hand felt like paradise around his desperate flesh. He clapped his other palm over his mouth to stifle his groan of relief at his own rough touch. He leaned against the wall as he jerked himself hard and fast and the flimsy structure shook with the movement of his arm. His imagination drew him close to the end in record time. Him face down on the bed with Tyler driving into his ass, pounding him into the middle of next week and calling him a dirty slut. Because he always had to have that element of shame. He knew if Tyler really called him that, if they ever made it to the bedroom, he would be crushed, but this was fantasy. This was the addiction calling the shots and in it, Holden's humiliation needed to be complete. Which was why Tyler was also doing him bareback, and filming their tryst, telling him he was going to splash it all over the internet. He gasped and grunted, trembling on the line of orgasm but not quite able to make it. Fine. He would introduce someone else. On the bed, Tyler drew out of him and someone else took his place—Jordan, because there was no such thing as too young for Holden as long as they were over eighteen. And while Jordan fucked him, Tyler, Brandon and Finn

watched him. He moaned and shuddered as the four men used him one after the other, called him names and slapped his ass. “Yes,” he said, “yes,” as he came all over the wall and slid down to the floor.

Cold and sober, Holden looked at his flushed face in the mirror before he splashed some water on it. How he hated himself. Why did he always need to degrade himself, whether in fantasy or reality? He dried off his face and exited the bathroom, keeping his gaze lowered as he headed for the counter and took a seat, hoping Finn wasn’t working that day.

But Finn was right there. He caught Holden’s eye and smiled. “Hey.”

“Hi.” Holden felt guilty. Finn was hot, but he was taken, and it seemed to Holden that Finn had been exploited enough without starring in Holden’s perverted fantasies.

“What can I get you?”

“Coffee, black, please.”

“Coming right up.” Finn placed a mug before him and lifted the coffee off the hotplate. “How’s Tyler?”

“He’s okay. Got his leg back on today.”

He saw the genuine happiness on Finn’s face at that. “That’s really great.”

“Yeah.”

“He said he might help you with the house.”

Holden sipped and nodded. “He painted the living room today.”

Finn grinned. “How does it look?”

“Good.”

Finn nodded. “Can I get you some homemade cake?”

“No, thanks.”

Finn took a glass from the steaming dishwasher and started to polish. “Are you writing a book at the moment?”

Holden looked away. “Trying to. It’s not going so well or I wouldn’t be here.”

Finn bit his lip. “I heard about what happened to you. I’m sorry.”

Holden regarded him. It was common knowledge of course, and Finn only had to google him but...had Tyler told him? It seemed Tyler had a big fucking mouth and suddenly Holden didn’t want to keep him out of trouble with Finn.

“I was thinking I might write a non-fiction,” he said. “Something uplifting that’s testament to the survival of the human spirit. A fight back from the brink. That sort of thing.”

Finn had paled. He watched him steadily. “Is that right?”

“Yeah. I heard you were once in a difficult situation.”

Finn’s face became closed. His eyes were full of indescribable pain, like Tyler’s, and Holden wished suddenly with his whole heart that he had not said anything. “Did Tyler tell you this?”

Holden swallowed. Shit. “Don’t be mad at him. Me and him, we were having a heart to heart, about his leg, and he mentioned how people look at him and how it might be the same for you...” Holden gestured to the scar that peeked from the sleeve of Finn’s T-shirt and wished he hadn’t. Finn’s dark blue eyes filled with tears. “Sorry, sorry,” he said quickly. “We weren’t gossiping, I swear. He said you were such a good guy and...” he dried up, mentally shriveling in the face of Finn’s distress.

“And you thought you’d come ask to write a book about what my ex-boyfriend used to do to me?”

“No. No. Not exactly.” Yes, exactly. Oh fuck, Holden, what have you done? “I thought it might be...”

“Cathartic?”

“Yes, cathartic.”

“And worth a few bucks?”

“To both of us, Finn.”

“Sure. To both of us.” Finn looked at him hard for a moment with those tears still standing in his eyes, then he turned and walked through the door into the kitchen.

Fuck it. Fucking fuck it.

The skinny guy with the lip ring whom he’d signed the book for on his first day and whom Holden had just imagined balls deep in him, was staring at him with a frown. The bell rang on the door and Holden heard booted heels ring out on the floor as someone approached the counter.

“Hey, Brandon,” Jordan said and Holden wished he could sink through the floor. Because if the sheriff found out about the conversation he’d just had with Finn, he would most likely wipe the fucking floor with him. “Finn around?”

Jordan looked at Holden. “He’s in the back.”

“Uh-huh. Get me a latte, please.”

“Oat milk?”

“Yeah.”

“Coming right up.”

Brandon glanced at Holden. He was a six feet hunk of a guy who strained his shirts the way Tyler did and made Holden feel what he was—small and inadequate. A fuck up who wasted everybody’s time.

Brandon looked towards the kitchen door and so did Holden, anxiously. Don’t go in there and find him crying or something, please man.

Then the kitchen door swung open and Finn exited with two plates. “Hey, you,” Brandon said with such a smile lighting up his face that Holden ached. Nobody had ever smiled at him like that in his life. Certainly not Leo.

Finn smiled back with the fakest smile Holden had ever seen and came from behind the counter to walk down to the tables by the window with the two plates. Two women sat there and he chatted with them for a few seconds, keeping that smile on his face. Holden saw it slip as he turned away and came back to the counter, catching Holden’s eye.

Brandon missed it. He faced front, sipping from his latte. He had picked up on something, though. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Finn said and started wiping down the counter.

“You didn’t sleep well last night,” Brandon said, lowering his voice.

“Nightmares,” Finn said in a whisper that Holden caught and that made him wish that Dominic the abuser had suffered terribly when Brandon had put a bullet in him.

Brandon reached across the counter. Holden watched him lay his hand over Finn’s and the two men’s eyes meet. They needed no words. Brandon brought Finn’s fingers to his lips and kissed the knuckles before he let go. His eyes were tender with deep feelings. Holden had a lump in his throat. He lowered his head and looked into his coffee cup. Never had he felt more alone in his life and not even the thought of Tyler could raise his spirits because voicing his book ideas had fucked it all up with him too. But they had almost kissed. Holden didn’t know why Tyler wanted to kiss him after their argument. But he had been keen to get out of there, maybe recognizing it for the mistake it was.

He heard the burst of static from the radio on Brandon’s shoulder. Brandon clicked a button. “Say again, Jonah.” Some garbled words came forth and Brandon sighed and took a hefty slug of coffee before he wiped foam from his top lip with a strong hand that Holden eyed and imagined sliding down Finn’s slender body. He liked that idea. He looked from one to the other, conjuring up X-rated scenarios. Just one more part of his addiction was imagining people having sex. He’d do it with strangers or friends who weren’t even a couple, but knowing Finn and Brandon really did it in real life added extra spice. He could think about the two of them tonight while lying in bed, and he would, almost definitely. Think of the hottest, dirtiest things he could imagine them doing. Better that than think of his dead in the water chances with Tyler.

“No rest for the wicked,” Brandon muttered. Holden wasn’t sure if he was replying to this Jonah guy or talking to himself, or Finn. “On my way.” That last was said into the radio and Brandon fished some money from his pocket and left it on the counter before he slid from his stool.

“I’m cooking tonight,” Finn said.

“Looking forward to it as always, baby,” Brandon said with a wink and a smile before he turned and strode away.

“Liar,” Finn said under his breath.

Startled, Holden glanced at him, but Finn was smiling and he was watching Brandon disappear out of the diner with a longing look.

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Finn

Finn couldn't cook for shit but he made a mean lentil Bolognese that Brandon professed to love. He wasn't sure Brandon was telling the truth because the guy had never said a mean word to Finn in their entire history, not even when Finn asked him if he looked okay when he wasn't sure about his clothes, or he had a big spot on his chin or his nose was bright red with a cold and the skin flaking off from rubbing it so much. Brandon always said Finn was the smartest, most beautiful, most wonderful human being in the world, so he was hardly going to tell him that his one good dish, the dish he had perfected since he had met Brandon, was shit, was he?

The spaghetti was cooking and the sauce was ready when Brandon opened the front door and unlaced his boots, leaving them on the mat. He hung his hat on a peg in the hallway. "Hey, beautiful," he called.

"Hey," Finn called back and busied himself stirring the Bolognese because he knew Brandon would see he was faking being okay and he wasn't okay, not since he'd seen Holden at the diner.

Brandon came through to the kitchen. He approached behind Finn and slid his arms around his lover's waist. "What's going on?" he said softly against Finn's ear.

Finn sighed inwardly. There was a reason Brandon was a cop. "It's nothing."

"Yes, it is. Something to do with that writer."

Shit, there were no flies on him. He didn't miss the slightest glance, the barest nuance

in body language. Finn licked his lips. “Let me dish up.”

Brandon stepped back. “Sure. I’ll wash my hands.”

“Sublime as always, Mr. Austen,” Brandon said after the first mouthful.

“Thank you,” said Finn, not believing him even though he thought it tasted good too.

“Did you put more garlic in it this time?”

Finn shrugged. “Maybe three or four cloves.”

Brandon coughed. “Shit, Finn, good job I don’t mind your stale garlic breath in the morning.”

“Right back at you, Sheriff,” Finn said.

Brandon grinned. He squeezed Finn’s knee under the table. “Seeing as you didn’t get much sleep last night, maybe an early night is in order tonight?”

“One hundred per cent,” Finn said.

“Yeah?”

Finn leaned towards him. Their noses brushed. “Yeah.” Then their lips. Brandon caressed his thigh, moving onto its inner side.

“I love you,” he said against Finn’s mouth.

“I love you more,” Finn said.

Brandon drew back, smiling. He chewed another mouthful. “So,” he said, “what did the writer do to upset you today?”

Finn sighed. He had hoped Brandon had forgotten. His cock was hard just from the touch of Brandon’s hand and lips and the promise in his eyes, and he wanted to roll around on the sheets for a couple of hours without the conversation with Holden Maddison hanging over his head. “Okay,” he said reluctantly. “You know how I told you Tyler is living on Holden’s property?”

Brandon nodded. He looked away at the mention of the house where Finn had once lived and almost lost his life.

“Well, I went over to see him yesterday with those stump socks I got him, and we got to talking...”

“And you told him about...” Brandon stopped. He reached for his water glass and took a drink.

“Yeah,” Finn said. Neither of them liked to say Dominic’s name. Even now the guy had the ability to cast a shadow over them both. “He told Holden and Holden came to the diner and asked if I’d like to work with him on a book.”

He saw the instant flash of anger in Brandon’s dark eyes before he damped it down. “And how did you feel about that?” he asked in a controlled tone.

“I wasn’t happy.”

Brandon nodded.

“I get it, though,” Finn said. “The guy’s bankrupt. He needs to make a fast buck. Maybe he thought my tale might appeal to readers.”

Brandon put his fork down. He reached out and smoothed his fingertips over the curve of Finn's cheek. "Once again, you see the good in people even if they're trying to exploit you," he said softly.

"I don't think he's trying to do that," Finn murmured. He leaned in to Brandon's touch, closing his eyes. "I feel sorry for him. I feel sorry for Tyler. They're both broken souls. They should get together."

Brandon smiled. "Are they both gay before you try and match make?"

Finn grinned. "I told you Holden's agent ran off with all his money, right? His male agent who was also his lover."

"Ah, right."

"And Tyler virtually told me he has the hots for him."

"There's quite an age gap."

Finn snorted. "So what?"

"Yeah," Brandon said. "So what? That doesn't mean I don't want to have a private word with Holden though."

Finn sighed. "This is why I didn't want to tell you. I don't want you wading in and..."

Brandon lifted an eyebrow. "Wading in and what?" They looked at each other. Finn didn't speak. Brandon regarded him. "Now I know you can't mean throwing my fists around, right? Because that's not me, as you know. I hope you're not comparing me to him."

Finn felt the blood drain from his face. He pushed his chair back and took his plate to the counter.

Behind him, Brandon heaved a sigh. “Sorry.”

Finn turned around. “Why would you say that? When have I ever thought that you’re anything like Dominic?”

Brandon looked shame-faced. “I didn’t engage my brain. Forgive me.”

The tears were springing too easily to Finn’s eyes today. He hid them by reaching a bottle of wine from the fridge and two glasses from the cupboard, pouring with an unsteady hand. Then he leaned against the counter, sipping, and looking at Brandon.

“You know I didn’t mean it, right?”

Finn ignored the comment. “You don’t need to say anything to Holden. I can handle myself.”

Brandon drank some water. He watched Finn. Finn watched him back. The air was thick with tension and regret. Finn bit his lip. His voice was barely audible when he spoke. “Maybe I’ll do it.”

“What?”

“Maybe I’ll speak to Holden. About writing a book. To help others.”

Brandon swallowed. He looked anguished. “Are you sure?”

Finn gave a little laugh. “No.”

Brandon bit his lip. He pushed his chair back a little, then held out his hand. Finn walked across the kitchen, sat on Brandon's lap, and put his arms around his neck. Brandon pulled him close. He held Finn tight, face buried against his shoulder. "Whatever you want, my love," he said, voice muffled. "I'll support you in everything you do. Always."

Finn tightened his arms, squeezing Brandon. Without Dominic, and the abuse, and running for his life, he never would have ended up here in Clear Water Creek, with Brandon. It was perverse to think that way but didn't he owe the murderous abusing son of a bitch a debt of gratitude? He smothered an inappropriate giggle and realized that if he could now laugh about what Dominic had done to him, he really was much further down the road to healing than he had thought. He stroked Brandon's dark, silky hair and mouthed his neck, feeling his partner shiver.

"Take me to bed."

Brandon responded by lifting Finn in his arms as he stood. Wrapping his legs around him, Finn held on tight as Brandon carried him from the kitchen and began to mount the stairs. Brandon kissed him as he carried him through to their bedroom and laid him down on the bed. Finn pulled him close and their mouths clung, tongues entwined, bodies pressing together. The night was still light and warm and through the open window, Finn could hear the soundtrack of cicadas. Brandon undressed him. He slid down Finn's body, kissing all the way before he licked around the rim of his cockhead, making Finn arch in pleasure. Even now he was awkward at being naked with Brandon, with his many scars and deformities, his body so thin and pale compared to Brandon's.

Looking up through his lashes as he tongued Finn's slit, Brandon seemed to read all the thoughts in his mind. He'd kissed the scald on Finn's arm and chest a thousand times. He'd run his fingers and his mouth over the scar on his left ankle where Dominic had broken his leg, the scars on his back where Dominic had taken a metal-

studded belt to him. He knew every inch of Finn's body and he worshipped it all. Still, Finn wished he was more. More man, less fear, less scars, less memories.

Brandon pressed a scar to Finn's inner thigh with a sigh. "You drifted away."

"Sorry."

"No apology necessary." Brandon stroked his hip. "Want to stop?"

"No. I want you."

Brandon regarded him for the longest time. "When are you going to stop being worried about your body?"

Finn bit his lip and itched to drag the covers over his nakedness.

Brandon lowered his head and kissed Finn's thigh, the base of his cock, and his neat thatch of pubic hair. "When are you going to realize how much I love and want you and how your body drives me crazy, despite what you think about it?"

Tears started to leak down Finn's face before he could control them. Brandon slid up his body to cradle Finn's head and hold him close. No matter that he'd had a laugh at Dominic downstairs, it always came back to this for Finn. The anxiety of being undressed by Brandon, those horrific injuries being viewed, and the cycle of memories once again awakened.

It would never end.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:10 pm

Holden

Holden was imagining Finn with his dark hair and big, dark blue eyes. He was imagining Finn's naked, creamy skin, and him on all fours, bent over while Brandon drove into him. It made no difference that he had felt ashamed at jerking off at the diner over the four men he'd met in Clear Water. He wanted to think about Finn and Brandon getting it on. Nothing would give him greater pleasure.

He had his fingers tight around his cock and he was spread-eagled on his bed, groaning, making as much noise as he wanted, desperate to get off. Tyler kept interrupting the scene though. He kept seeing that ripped body, those grey eyes and then it was him on the bed and Tyler was gripping his hair, pulling his head back as he split him in two with his dick.

Fuck, he wanted it. He needed it. He needed more than fucking jacking off, and he had to have it. Keeping his hand around his cock, he shuffled across the bed to grab his phone. He kept stroking as he lay down, opened the Grindr app and starting scrolling. It had been a long time since he'd been fussy but now none of the guys looked right. He wanted somebody big, built, with short hair, and preferably dressed in army camos. Oh wait, here was someone fitting the brief completely, a dark-haired guy in army uniform, a sunny background, a sunny smile to match and...oh fuck, it was Tyler. There he was on Grindr.

Holy fuck, he was beautiful. He scrolled through Tyler's pictures while he jerked harder and harder, all thoughts of Finn and Brandon gone. God, he wanted him. He noticed all the shots of Tyler were above the waist then, which kind of broke his heart. Did Tyler tell guys about his leg before he hooked up with them? He swiped

right. When the chat box came up, he hovered his finger over the keyboard, before closing it. He looked at the pictures again, breathing hard and imagining Tyler sat on his face and Holden's tongue in his ass. Then Tyler's cock inside him, riding him hard.

He came with a cry, jets of cum lacing his stomach and chest. He collapsed, panting, and saw a message pop up. For a moment he thought it was from Tyler and laughed to himself when it wasn't.

Hey hot guy wanna hook up?

Being a writer, Holden disliked the poor grammar and lack of punctuation you got with messaging, but he didn't usually correct them. Because he'd just been offered a way to be less lonely on his birthday.

Bluey's bar was dim and cool inside. The time was seven p.m. Holden had rolled out of bed at eleven, sat for an unproductive hour at the laptop, then watched porn and jerked off for the rest of the day. He hoped he had enough left in the tank for his date. Even if he didn't, he could still lie there and get fucked. Still feed the addiction and the need to be humiliated.

A couple of times he'd looked out of the window hoping to spot Tyler. He'd looked at those photos of him on his Grindr profile again. And again. He looked around the dark bar and wished his date was Tyler, not some random hook up.

A guy was sitting at the bar with a bottle of beer. Tall and built, wearing faded jeans and cowboy boots. He glanced in Holden's direction and smiled. Tanned, blond and green-eyed. At least fifteen years younger than him. Not Tyler, but not bad at all. Holden slid onto the stool next to him and held out his hand.

"Holden."

“Gage. Aren’t you that writer guy?”

Holden scowled. “You’re thinking of someone else.”

Gage grinned. “Ah, sure, I must be. What can I get you?”

“Beer, please.”

Gage leaned over and ordered from the barkeep. When the man had placed a bottle in front of Holden, Gage lifted his beer. Holden tapped his own against it and drank long and deep. Maybe he’d get wasted tonight, so he could imagine this guy was Tyler when he was face down later.

“So, what are you doing in this hick town?” Gage asked and snorted.

Holden smiled ruefully. “Taking some time out.”

“Yeah. Enjoying the solitude?”

“Yeah.”

“Not much action though, I bet?”

Their gazes held. “Not much,” said Holden, “but I hope you’re here to rectify that.”

Gage grinned. “That’s right, sir, I am. And I always liked myself an older man.”

“Well, it’s my birthday today, so maybe you can make it a good one.”

Gage laughed and shook his head. “Oh man, it really is your lucky day.”

Holden kept the smile on his face with an effort. He couldn't imagine Tyler talking like this. And he wished then that he and Tyler were sitting here shooting the shit on his birthday and he wasn't with some random who just wanted to fuck him. He thought about slipping off the stool and walking away, walking right back home and knocking on the door of the annex and saying, Tyler, it's my birthday, please come celebrate at Bluey's with me. And Tyler would smile, ask for five minutes to change his shirt, then Holden would call a cab, because Tyler couldn't walk all the way to town. They'd sit beside each other on the back seat of the cab and Holden would think he was the luckiest man in the world.

He glanced at Gage. He was going to get fucked, regardless. That was the main thing.

Holden opened the door and held it for Gage to follow him inside. He walked through to the kitchen, noticing the smell of paint drifting down the hallway. Taking two bottles from the fridge, he popped the tops and handed one to Gage. Gage took it, swallowed a hefty gulp, then grabbed Holden by the back of the neck and zeroed in for a kiss. Holden turned his face away. Why, he couldn't say. Gage burrowed his face against his neck, using a bit too many teeth for Holden's liking. He squirmed as Gage put his beer down and grabbed him by the ass, grinding his erection against him.

It was hot, of course, and Holden wanted it, but... he could see out through the window to Tyler's place. All the lights were off and it was barely ten. He'd spent three tedious hours in Gage's company where he'd learned that Gage was all about Gage. No one else existed in his narrow little world. He was narcissistic, self-obsessed, and possibly even sociopathic. He found Holden's current circumstances amusing and said he would track down Leo and kill him if he was Holden. All in all, Holden wasn't sure why he'd invited Gage back here. Maybe because he was utterly wasted. He'd been sure to drink as much as he could humanly put away at the bar. Better make this quick, because he wanted Gage gone so he could jerk off over Tyler's pictures on Grindr.

He didn't like that Gage shoved him to his knees though, even though this was the thing he liked above all. He wanted this, didn't he? Wanted to be forced with that hand on his head, shoving him down, making him choke? How many men had done this to him and how many times had he relived it after with tears running down his face and his throat sore? What exactly was there to enjoy about it? Why did he crave it? He looked up as Gage unfastened his jeans and pulled his cock free. Not so big. Something Holden could manage and wouldn't hurt him too much. He felt relief. But when Gage gripped his neck and aimed that cock between his lips, Holden resisted. Suddenly he didn't want it anymore. He didn't want the morning feeling of regret masked as the thrill of being dominated. The addiction controlling him, telling him what he wanted and how to feel. What he didn't want tonight, on his birthday, was this man's dick down his throat.

He stumbled to his feet, knocking against Gage. "No, man," he said.

"What?" Gage asked, sounding baffled.

"Not tonight. I drank too much." Holden staggered around the kitchen table and nearly fell. For a moment he thought he might puke. He negotiated the hallway with difficulty and opened the front door.

Gage followed him. He stepped outside, squinting at Holden. "Are you really serious?"

Holden nodded. "Sorry, man."

Gage grabbed him by the shirt and dragged him from the house. He laughed and swept Holden into his arms, dancing around the yard. "Come on, you prick tease, give me a kiss."

Once more Holden turned his face away. He tried to squirm free from Gage's grip.

Gage was laughing and stumbling and the situation seemed non-threatening, but still, they were right outside Tyler's window and they were being loud. "Listen, how about we do it again next week?"

Gage glowered at him. "Hey, you wanted to hook up. Tonight. That was the deal."

Holden pulled free and steadied himself against the trunk of his car. "Not tonight," he mumbled and pushed off, trying to weave his way back to the house.

Gage grabbed him by both shoulders. "Yes, tonight." He slammed him against the trunk of the car with force.

"What the fuck, man?" Holden tried to jerk free and Gage forced him face down, one hand on the back of his head, the other on his spine.

"We both know how this goes," Gage said, pressing his hard groin against Holden's ass. "Stop playing hard to get. A man can only take so much teasing."

"Hey, I didn't fucking tease you!"

Holden bucked back and Gage shoved him down again. Then he reached around Holden and unfastened his belt.

Holden slapped his hands. "Get the fuck off."

A fist collided with his cheek from nowhere and he almost saw stars. He fell against the car, stunned, and felt Gage unfastening his jeans and pulling them down.

"Stop, no, stop!" He was too drunk and too stunned to be effective against Gage's weight. The guy was strong as an ox and he had his cock free now and pressing against Holden's naked ass, pushing.

Holden cried out. At that moment he heard the door to the annex opening.

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Tyler

Laughing voices woke Tyler from a deep sleep. They started far away, then grew closer and closer until he realized they were right outside. He heard giggling and stiffened as he recognized Holden's voice. He had company. Tyler gritted his teeth and turned over in bed as he heard a door slam. Great, just fucking great. It looked like he had missed his chance with the silver fox. Anger and regret warred within him. His stomach churned so much he couldn't go back to sleep.

He slid to the edge of the bed and found his liner, rolling it up his leg. As he did, he heard voices again.

"Are you really serious?" Some guy's voice.

Then Holden. "Sorry, man."

The sound of feet on gravel and laughing, getting closer to Tyler's window. "Come on, you prick tease, give me a kiss."

Tyler bit his lip hard and reached for his stump sock, hurrying to roll it on.

"Listen, how about we do it again next week?"

The guy. "Hey, you wanted to hook up. Tonight. That was the deal."

More feet on gravel. "Not tonight." Holden was drunk, but his voice sounded firm enough. He meant no all right.

Tyler grabbed his prosthesis from where it leaned against the nightstand.

“Yes, tonight.”

A metallic clatter sounded, bodies colliding roughly.

Tyler stood, forcing his leg down into the cup, his heart beating hard.

“What the fuck, man?” Sounds of struggling and Tyler became panic-stricken, rocking his stump into the prosthesis, waiting to hear the pin lock.

Another metallic clang. “We both know how this goes. Stop playing hard to get. A man can only take so much teasing.”

“Hey, I didn’t fucking tease you!”

Come on, come on, lock goddamn you! Oh fuck, what was happening out there? Tyler tried to take a step forward without the prosthesis locked and almost fell.

More struggling. “Get the fuck off.”

Then a fist hitting flesh and Tyler moaned aloud and rammed his stump down, hearing that click and taking off so fast he almost fell again.

“Stop, no, stop!” Holden’s voice as Tyler raced down the hallway.

He heard Holden cry out as he yanked the door open and the scene painted itself across his retinas like some sort of nightmare.

The guy Holden had brought home had Holden semi-naked against the trunk of his car and was trying to penetrate him.

“He said no,” Tyler said, loud enough to be heard over the two men’s struggles and Holden’s cries.

The guy, blond and built, glanced across at Tyler and fastened his jeans up with reluctance. “No one invited you to the party, man, unless you want to join in?” He looked Tyler up and down, curling his lip when he saw the prosthesis. “Maybe not.”

Tyler stalked forward. The guy threw a punch which Tyler ducked. He drove his fist into the guy’s abdomen, doubling him up before bringing up his left knee—his left knee! The one that ended in a stump!—into the would-be rapist’s face, breaking his nose in a shower of scarlet. The guy staggered back, holding his face and cursing, and Tyler followed him, jabbing him to the kidneys and putting him face down on the concrete.

“Get up,” he said. “Get up and get out of here right now or I swear I’ll finish you.”

The man crawled to his feet, shooting Tyler a look of loathing before he limped away.

Tyler watched him disappear down the dirt track towards town before he turned to Holden.

Holden cut a pathetic figure, still slumped bare-assed on the car. Tyler bent and pulled his jeans and underwear up. “Come on,” he said.

Holden tried to help him, his fingers cold and fumbling. Between them, they managed to get him fastened up, then Holden straightened and turned his face into Tyler’s shoulder.

Tyler swallowed, slinging an arm around him. “It’s okay,” he said gently. “Let’s go.” He led Holden into the house, where he closed the door and bolted it, applying the

safety chain. Holden had weaved his way down to the kitchen by that point and Tyler followed him.

Holden slumped into a chair. Tyler eyed him before he ran a glass of water at the sink and handed it to him. "Here."

Holden took it with an unsteady hand. He slopped some down his front before he drank and put the glass down.

Tyler leaned against the sink. He'd done gentle, now it was time for home truths. "What the fuck, Holden?" he demanded.

Holden lifted his head, looking at him with red eyes. "Never got a date from Grindr, Tyler?"

Tyler bit his lip before he could ask what was so wrong with him that Holden couldn't have taken him out tonight? "Yeah, and you really chose well." It came out as a sneer.

Holden's gaze turned cold. "It's my birthday."

Tyler gaped at him. "Well, happy birthday, you almost got raped."

"Fuck you!" Holden cried, flushing. "Don't you dare judge me, don't you fucking dare!"

They stared at each other. Holden was breathing hard and his eyes were getting redder and shinier. Finally, he dropped his head and it seemed the fight was gone from him. "I'm a sex addict."

"What?" Tyler couldn't believe his ears.

“You heard me.”

Tyler laughed. “Hey, we’re all sex addicts. Don’t use that as an excuse for bringing some fucking rapist home on your birthday.”

Holden glared at him. “No, I mean it. I’m in therapy. Or I was.”

Tyler stared. For a moment he was speechless. It seemed Holden was serious.

Holden licked his lips. “It’s been going on for years. It’s consumed my life. I have to come every day, whether that’s jerking off or sex. Maybe two or three times. Previously, before I came here, I was out cruising every night. I’d get out of one bed and go right back out to find someone else. And the form it takes...” Holden’s voice was so low and so shaky, Tyler had to strain to hear. “I have to be humiliated. I have to be made to feel even worse than this disease already makes me feel. Like it’s my fault. I’ve had men beat me, spit on me, double me, piss on me. I’ve begged them to do that. Begged them to hurt me and use me and abuse me. Some have walked away in disgust, but most have been only too willing to give me what I want.”

Tyler stared at him in horror. He told himself that he would never sleep with Holden now. Not because so many others had been there before him and he was repulsed. That wasn’t it at all. It was more that he wouldn’t know how to even touch Holden in the right way after all he had endured.

“I want it like that. I can’t help it. I relive every episode for days and the more shame I feel, the more I end up jerking off over it.” Holden hung his head. “It’s all I deserve. All I’m worth.”

Tyler’s throat was tight with emotion. Holden started to sob. Deep, wrenching sobs the like of which Tyler had never heard before. He hovered by the sink, deeply unsettled, wanting to provide comfort and afraid to, in case Holden took it for

something else.

Holden put his hands over his eyes, moaning in anguish and Tyler was galvanized into action. He moved forward, pulled Holden's head against his chest and held him hard. Holden half pulled away before he abruptly slumped against Tyler and gripped him around the back with both arms. His shoulders shook as he wept.

"It's okay," Tyler said, stroking Holden's silky hair. Holden felt thin and fragile in his arms. The irony was not lost on him that he was comforting a much older man who was crying like a baby. He held Holden until his tears started to slow, and then he lifted his head in his hands and looked down into his red eyes. Holden stared back at him with shame and misery written on every line of his face. "You're brave to share this with me," Tyler said in a whisper.

Holden tried a smile that came out as a grimace. "Now you can tell me how you lost your leg."

"Sure. When you're sober. You might fall asleep and I don't want to have to repeat myself."

They looked at each other for the longest time during which Tyler told himself that he didn't want to never sleep with Holden after all. He couldn't help his attraction. Didn't want to help it, despite all those men who had gone there before. He stroked Holden's cheeks lightly with both hands before he lowered his head and kissed him.

It was a bare brush of lips. He heard Holden's shocked intake of breath and he tasted his tears, his loneliness and his anguish. He drew back to look at Holden and Holden looked back with wide eyes that told him the kiss wasn't unwelcome. Tyler did it again. He touched Holden's mouth with his own with the tenderness that maybe Holden had never experienced in his life, caressing it with gentle lips and feeling Holden's hesitant response.

Once more Tyler eased back to look at Holden. This time he stepped back to lean against the sink because while he wanted so much more from the kiss—wanted to deepen it and feel Holden’s tongue touch his—this was enough for tonight, considering what he had just rescued Holden from.

“I should go,” he said.

Holden looked dazed. “Was it so bad that you need to run away?”

Tyler shook his head. “Far from it. I’m not running. I’m giving you the chance to get some sleep and ruminate on what we just did.”

“I think it’s more like you’re repulsed by what I just told you and don’t want to go where so many have before.”

“Don’t claim to know my mind,” Tyler said in a low voice. He gestured to his groin. “What does this tell you?”

Holden’s gaze focused on the erection straining Tyler’s shorts. “It tells me you should come upstairs with me right now. Or do me over this table. Your choice.”

Tyler dug his nails into his palms, striving for control. When it was put there on a plate for him, it was kind of impolite to turn it down. He swallowed and said, “How old are you today, Holden?”

Holden huffed. “Are you really going to use my age as an excuse to turn me down?”

“It’s kind of relevant. Answer the question.”

“Fifty,” Holden said. “How old are you?”

It was all Tyler could do not to gape. “Twenty-eight.”

“Great,” Holden said. “Just fucking great.” He pushed himself to his feet. “I’ve always liked a younger man, just so you know. Leo was fifteen years younger than me. I’ve never managed twenty-two years though. You should run a mile.” He stumbled past Tyler, going out into the hallway.

Tyler sighed because despite everything, he still wanted Holden and he wished he didn’t. He followed Holden and watched him climb the stairs unsteadily, holding onto the rail for dear life. He wanted to follow him. He wanted to undress Holden in a darkened room and lose himself in his body. Instead, he stood and let Holden walk away, before he let himself out the door and closed it behind him.

???

Holden

Lurching unsteadily across the room and falling twice, Holden managed to strip his clothes off before he threw himself down on the bed. He replayed the kiss and the way Tyler’s grey eyes darkened and made an attempt at masturbation because it was his birthday damn it, and he hadn’t even got off. His cock was harder than hard but he couldn’t come. Maybe this was a sign of things to come. At fifty, things were clearly slowing down. Soon he wouldn’t need to worry about sex addiction because he wouldn’t have the capacity nor the desire. He closed his eyes and drifted away with tears still staining his cheeks.

Tyler

Tyler woke late after a disturbed night. He'd stayed up reading Holden's book far too late because firstly he'd been worried about Holden, worried that the lights in his house didn't go off for the longest time and secondly, because the book was utterly gripping. Holden was a fabulous writer. He deserved to be king of crime, not scratching a living in Clear Water. Tyler was more than half way through the book, while the one-handed read Holden had given him remained untouched.

He showered before he fitted his prosthesis, examining the stump before he rolled the liner on. It looked good and felt okay. He hadn't been too troubled with pain at all since the weed at Holden's place. It wasn't phantom limb pain that had kept him tossing and turning last night.

He made some coffee then sat at the kitchen table with the packet of stamps and his stamp album, sorting through them with a pair of tweezers, separating them out into countries and cross referencing in the album to see if he had them. There were some nice stamps—old ones, uncanceled ones, pretty colored ones—maybe Holden had paid more than he let on for them. He let out a cry of excitement when he came across one from Newfoundland. That was one of his areas of philately, Newfoundland stamps before they became part of Canada in 1949.

He didn't know why, but maybe collecting from a dead country appealed to him because he could one day complete that collection and be satisfied knowing there was none missing. Not that he'd ever own the pricier specimens. He checked his collection quickly, sure he didn't have this one, a Newfoundland dog on a red background. No, he didn't. He smiled and admired the stamp for a moment longer.

Lovely. He was still sitting looking at the rest of his small Newfoundland collection when a knock at the door made him tense.

He walked down the hallway to answer it with his stomach churning. Holden stood leaning against the door frame with a tired, rueful smile on his handsome face. “Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” Tyler said. He admired the balls on the guy to show up first thing after what he had confessed last night. Tyler probably wouldn’t have been seen for dust.

“About last night.”

“Yeah?”

Holden sighed. “I was drunk.”

“You were.”

“If I was inappropriate, I’m sorry.”

Tyler looked at him for a long moment. “You weren’t.”

“Not even when I told you about...” he stopped.

Tyler shrugged. “I call that getting shit off your chest, not being inappropriate.”

Holden’s dark eyes softened, carried a hint of shine. He swallowed. “I’m sorry anyway, sorry for what you had to save me from, sorry for being such an utter fuck-up and sorry for...” he stopped again. “Actually, you kissed me so I can’t say sorry for that.”

Tyler smiled. “Why don’t you come in for some coffee?”

He led Holden down the hallway to the kitchen and Holden took a seat opposite the spread out stamps and open stamp album. He smiled as Tyler poured him a mug. “Any good finds?”

“God, yes.” Tyler put the mug down in front of Holden and retook his seat. “I didn’t have this one from Newfoundland.” He turned the album around so Holden could see and pointed to the dog.

“Nice. Are those your particular favorites?”

“Yeah. I was trying to complete the collection but there’s a few, like the very early ones, that are way out of my league.”

“Let me have a look.” Holden pulled his phone out of his pocket and thumbed a few buttons. Tyler watched his dark lashes against his cheeks and admired the view. For a guy who had been utterly shit-faced and crying the night before, he certainly pulled it together fast. He looked fucking great. Way better than any fifty-year-old Tyler had ever seen before. He lowered his gaze down Holden’s throat to the open neck of his white linen shirt, the hint of a tan at the top of his chest and the brush of the darkness of his nipples beneath the sheer material. Fuck. Tyler swallowed, his pants getting uncomfortably tight.

Holden looked up and Tyler met his gaze, trying to will away the heat creeping up his cheeks from his neck. “Like this one?” He showed Tyler a picture of one of the coats of arms with heraldic flowers of the UK that Tyler had looked at longingly so often and wished he could stumble across by magic in one of the mystery bundles from eBay.

“Yeah.”

“1857,” Holden said. “That’s worth a pretty penny. Thirteen thousand bucks.”

“Yep, that’s why I’ll never own it.”

Holden put down his phone. “I used to buy old stamp albums from eBay. I loved looking through them and finding hidden gems. You never knew what you were going to get. That last package I bought though, that I told you about, pretty sure it had some Victorian stamps. British, Canadian, maybe Newfoundland.”

Tyler looked at him and hoped his eagerness didn’t show on his face. Apart from Holden himself happening to him, the idea of looking through Holden’s stamp collection was the most exciting thing to happen to him in years.

Holden smiled. “Why don’t I go up into the attic later and find everything? It’s a shame to keep them all hidden away when they could go to a true lover like yourself.”

Their gazes held. Tyler wanted to kiss him again, both for the offer of the stamps and also because he was still remembering that soft press of lips against his.

He took a gulp of coffee and pushed his chair back for a refill for something to break the growing tension between them. Holden’s hand shot out as Tyler stood. He caught him by the front of his shirt and held him in place. Tyler’s heart hammered as he looked down into Holden’s eyes. “Still horrified by how old I am?” Holden asked in a whisper.

Tyler shook his head mutely.

“Good,” Holden said. He stretched up and as though they were magnetized, Tyler felt himself drawn down. Their lips met. It was an action replay of last night but this time, Holden spread his palms over Tyler’s chest, their warmth scorching him through the

thin cotton of his shirt. He moved one hand up to cup Tyler's neck and bring him closer and Tyler responded by holding Holden's head. The kiss deepened, their mouths opened to each other, and their tongues entwined. Tyler heard a groan and wasn't sure if it had come from him or Holden.

Holden's other hand gripped Tyler's ass, squeezing, the kiss turning molten hot and sweeping Tyler away.

Somehow, he managed to ease back before he was lost. He looked down at Holden's pupils dilated in his dark iris, the smile on his pink kiss-swollen lips. "Wow," Holden said. His hand was still on Tyler's ass and he moved the other one there now, so both his palms gripped Tyler's buttocks, lightly massaging. Tyler felt a surge of pre-cum wet his shorts at the look in Holden's eyes. A blatant fuck me come on. Just waiting for Tyler to give the go ahead. They stayed still, looking at each other, and then Holden moved one hand around Tyler's hip and onto the bulge in his shorts, tracing the outline of his erection against the material with his fingers.

Tyler caught his breath. He bit his lip to stifle a groan as Holden applied pressure, gripping Tyler's hard-on through his clothes and rubbing. Without taking his hand away, Holden swung his legs out from underneath the table and planted his feet on either side of Tyler's. His face was just at the right level now and Tyler guessed that was exactly what Holden had in mind as he popped open the button on Tyler's shorts and drew down his zip. The release of pressure on his aching cock was paradise. Even more so when Holden pushed a hand inside his underwear and circled his dick.

Tyler let out a moan. He looked down as Holden freed his cock from his underwear and dragged a hand down it, becoming mesmerized by Holden's fingers around his shaft. "Fuck," spilled from his lips. He caught Holden's intense gaze, the desire on his face, before Holden bent his head and opened his mouth, swallowing Tyler's erection in a heated slick of saliva.

Tyler couldn't help a little cry at how good it felt. He pushed his fingers through Holden's hair and held his head, easing him down until Holden took it all. He watched Holden bobbing up and down, watched his glistening shaft appearing again as Holden ran a tongue around the rim of his cockhead and flicked it against the slit. Tyler hissed. He clenched his fingers in Holden's hair and was rewarded by Holden tightening his hands on Tyler's ass and taking his cock down again.

Tyler looked at the bulge straining Holden's pants. "Take your dick out," he said, his voice hoarse. Holden made eye contact for a moment before he did as he was told, pulling his pants open without taking his mouth from Holden's cock. He freed a good-sized erection and gripped it, jerking it with a long groan around Holden's dick. Tyler grabbed him by the shoulder, feathering the fingers of his other hand through Holden's silky hair and watching Holden jerk off. With his free hand, Holden reached up to Tyler's mouth, tracing his lips. Tyler willingly sucked at the finger Holden pushed into his mouth before Holden slid that hand down the back of Tyler's pants and underwear. He sucked faster at Tyler's dick as his fingers moved down the crease of Tyler's buttocks. Tyler widened his stance with orgasm starting to curl in the pit of his stomach. Holden's finger touched his entrance, rubbed it in a maddening way before he penetrated Tyler and Tyler gasped, rocked helplessly against the intrusion and spurted into Holden's mouth. The climax seemed to go on and on, jet after jet of cum pumping into Holden's throat and Holden swallowing it all. Tyler's legs bowed and shook, his thighs trembling, his ass clenching Holden's finger and his cock shooting fire, or so it seemed to him.

When his partner eased back, Tyler saw the fluid at the corners of his mouth and still his dick leaked as though it would never stop and Holden ran his tongue around the sensitive head, collecting it all while Tyler panted and moaned, still holding hard to Holden, his thighs now like jelly and threatening to collapse at any moment. He looked down at Holden still holding his cock and using the table to lower himself, he sank to his knees. Holden momentarily looked panicked. "Hey, no, don't..."

“I can kneel,” Tyler said. “I still have a knee, don’t I?” He pushed Holden’s thighs apart and gripped his cock at the base before sliding his mouth down it. Fuck. He felt his own spent dick twitch at the feel of Holden’s hard flesh in his mouth. It felt so fucking good and with the moans Holden was giving as Tyler started a swift pace, it was just perfect. He was going to swallow too. He didn’t always like to, but today he would, after Holden had so beautifully taken everything from what had to be the biggest load Tyler had shot in forever. He looked up and saw Holden’s eyes were shut and hoped that Holden was thinking of him rather than addiction dictating his every move. This had been the gamble. Had Holden sucked his dick because he wanted Tyler or because he just wanted a cock in his mouth and got off on it? Tyler didn’t want to analyze it, he just wanted to return the favor and see what Holden’s face was like during climax. And it was epic leading up to it. Holden was loud. His lips were parted and spilling gasps and moans. His face was flushed in a most becoming way and his upper lip gleamed with sweat. He held Tyler’s head in both hands but didn’t try to force his head down, which Tyler appreciated. Holden was a gentle man in every way, even in the grip of pleasure it seemed. He wondered what Holden would be like lying beneath him, wrapped around him, and was desperate to find out.

Tyler drew his head back. He ran his tongue down Holden’s straining shaft and back up to the head, tormenting the slit with the point. With a cry, Holden erupted. Tyler caught the first spurt on his lips and tongue and took Holden’s cock inside to take the rest. Holden’s fingers curled in his hair, holding Tyler’s head in place, still gentle, his thighs tensing and his feet sliding on the floor. He groaned, his head back, mouth open, eyes squeezed shut and Tyler kept his gaze on Holden’s beautiful face as he swallowed everything Holden had to offer.

When Holden had started to subside, Tyler drew back. He licked the last bit of cum from Holden’s slit before fastening his own pants and using the table once more to maneuver himself to his feet, dragging his prosthesis up last. He ached a bit, but nothing he couldn’t handle. It had been worth it.

Holden reached out. He grabbed Tyler around the waist and pulled him in close, burying his face against his chest. Tyler held him, planting a kiss on Holden's forehead and breathing in the scent of his hair. He smelled good, of shampoo and hair styling products, a sweet smell overlaying the scent of sex in the air.

"Oh fuck," Holden said, his voice muffled in Tyler's shirt. "That was something else."

Tyler stroked his hair and kissed it. "Yeah, it was."

Holden eased back to look up at him. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"You shouldn't kneel on the hard floor like that."

"I said it was okay. Don't worry." Tyler traced the contours of Holden's smoothly-shaven jaw. He held Holden's chin as he lowered his lips to kiss him once more. They swapped tongues and Tyler tasted himself which only made his dick want more. He looked into Holden's eyes for the longest time, trying to read his thoughts. Needing a reassurance that this meant something to him other than a quick blowjob. He didn't know why he was so desperate to know. Hadn't he decided a liaison with his older hot landlord with the sex addiction was a bad idea? Sure he had, a million times. That didn't stop him from wishing for more than Holden could probably give though.

He pulled away and took a drink of his coffee, grimacing when he found it cold. He walked across to pour another cup from the jug. "Want a refill?"

"Not for me thanks." Holden had fastened himself up and now stood from the table. Tyler got the message loud and clear. Still, he wanted Holden to stay though.

“I read half your book.”

Holden smiled. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Really enjoying it so far. Great twisty plot.”

“Thanks, man. Listen, I’m going to get going. I have to get groceries.” His manner was awkward. He was actually backing away towards the door. Tyler wasn’t sure what had changed. If it had been up to him, they would have now been getting better acquainted without clothes in Tyler’s bed.

“Sure.” His heart had sunk with disappointment but it was what it was.

“Can I get you anything while I’m out?”

“No, thanks.”

“All right, I’ll see you later.”

Later when? Tonight later or in a few days if we bump into each other? Tyler bit his tongue to keep himself from asking. He nodded and watched Holden go down the hall and close the door behind him. He guessed Holden was only doing what he had done himself last night after the kiss. He had gone away to process it the way Holden was now going away to process the fact they had sucked each other off. It was only right that they both ruminate rather than leaping into the next phase, as much as Tyler wanted to leap into that next phase right now.

His cock was semi-hard again as he thought once more of Holden naked in his bed with his limbs clinging to him as Tyler drove into him. Fuck. He moved out of the kitchen and into the bathroom, whose window didn’t overlook Holden’s. Then he took his dick free and jerked it to full erection while he thought about Holden looking

up at him with those dark eyes while his mouth was stretched wide around Tyler's dick. God, he wanted him. More than he'd wanted anybody for an age. He closed his eyes, panting as he jerked, thinking about Holden's finger in his ass and imagining being on the receiving end of his cock. He liked that idea as much as he liked the idea of fucking Holden. Especially as maybe it would be a novelty for Holden to do the fucking rather than getting fucked. He liked the idea of their bodies sweatily entwined and his legs hard around Holden's back as he slid into Tyler balls-deep. Fuck. It was all too much and he came into his hand with a groan.

Holden

Holden drove into town berating himself all the way. You were going over to say sorry, not to get your cock sucked. He sighed and thumped the steering wheel. The sly voice of his addiction spoke.

You went over to suck his cock, just like you wanted. Just like every man you ever meet. You wanted to be on your knees, him gripping your hair, forcing himself down your throat.

He didn't force me, he told it furiously. His hand was gentle. He didn't make me do anything. He's the gentlest man I've ever met. It was a pleasure to do that for him and a bonus that he returned it.

Still, he felt bad that it had happened at all. Hadn't he told himself to keep his hands off Tyler? Hadn't he told himself the age gap was ludicrous and wrong? Tyler didn't need this shit. He still hadn't decided if he wanted Tyler for Tyler or because he was the nearest available man.

He didn't want his desire for Tyler to be merely a manifestation of his addiction. He pulled up in a space outside the bakery and sat staring forward. I shouldn't have done it. He squeezed his eyes shut and put his head on the steering wheel. Get it together. Get it together. He lifted his head and saw Finn standing at the hood of his car. Swallowing, he opened the door.

“Hey.”

“Hi, Holden.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

Holden got out and shut the door. I’m sorry,” he said. “About the other day.”

“It’s okay,” Finn said.

Holden shook his head. “It’s really not.”

Finn trailed a hand over the dusty hood of Holden’s car. “I might be interested.”

“What?”

“I might do it.”

Holden couldn’t believe his ears. “Really?”

“Yeah. Have you asked your publishers if they’re interested?”

Holden shook his head mutely.

“Then why don’t you?”

Holden stared at him. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Come over to the house now. We’ll have a chat.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Brandon’s at work. It’ll be just you and me if you want to talk.”

“Shall I call my publisher first?”

“Sure. I’ll go get us some coffee and pastries. See you in a minute.”

“All right.” Holden got back in his car with his mind whirling. He searched for his editor’s number in his phone with a trembling thumb. It was too good to be true. Provided they were interested in Finn’s story of course.

“Hey, Holden, thought we were never going to hear from you again,” Megan Brown answered. She was an efficient red head with expensive taste in shoes. Rumor had it she owned over two hundred pairs. While she was a slave driver with no room for sentiment, Holden rather liked her. He guessed she had always got the best out of him.

“Yeah,” Holden said. “I’ve been off grid.”

“Where the hell are you?”

“I’d rather not say.”

Megan sighed. “Don’t you trust me?”

“I just don’t want anybody coming here disturbing my peace, that’s all.”

“All right. Less than a month till deadline. Are you ready?”

“Not exactly.”

“What?”

“I’ve been thinking of a non-fiction.”

“What? You mean you haven’t even started?”

“Not as such.”

“Fucking hell, Holden.”

“I can do it if you give me the go ahead for a true crime.”

“Tell me more,” Megan said cautiously.

“There’s a guy who was the victim of domestic abuse. By his boyfriend. The ex followed him here and was shot by the local sheriff. Sheriff and the guy now live together. The guy’s interested in telling his story.”

“How serious was the abuse?”

“Scarred for life serious.”

“All right, first draft in a week.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Don’t let me down, Holden.”

“I won’t. But listen, there’ll be an advance, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll get you an advance.”

“I need it to be a good one.” Holden bit his lip, hating himself.

“I know you do,” Megan replied with her tone softer than Holden had ever heard it.

Holden hung up. He got out of the car again as Finn approached from the bakery with a take-out bag and opened the passenger door for him. “Thanks.” Finn climbed in and pulled on his seatbelt. Holden swung himself behind the wheel. He glanced at Finn’s smooth, perfect profile and wished with his whole heart that he didn’t have to rip this man apart in order to make some money.

At his home, Finn ushered Holden in and asked him to take a seat at the kitchen table. He unpacked the bag, pulling out two Danishes that he put onto plates and two coffees. Finn sat opposite him. It was quiet and warm in the house. Somewhere he could hear a clock ticking. He imagined Finn and Brandon here in contented domesticity and he ached for something so alien to him.

Finn took a sip of his coffee.

“Why do you want to do this, Finn? It can’t just be catharsis, can it?”

Finn shook his head. “No, it’s money. Brandon says he’ll pay for me to start art school in September, but I know he can’t afford it. And I sure as hell can’t, working at the diner and selling the odd painting.”

Holden bit his lip. “I don’t want you to do this just for the money,” he said in a low voice. “It’s a bad idea.” Was he trying to talk Finn out of it? He guessed he was, because then, while still broke, his conscience would be clear.

Finn licked his lips. “Okay, let’s pretend it’s for a noble reason then. To encourage people to leave their abusive partner.”

Holden regarded him. “You can be that spokesman, Finn. Having a voice in a way you never have had before.”

Finn dipped his head with his mouth trembling.

Oh God, don't cry, I can't handle it. Right now, Holden wanted to be anywhere but here. He almost opened his mouth to put the brakes on the whole thing.

Instead, clearing his throat, he said, "Can I record you?"

Fin nodded. "But I want the right to delete any part of it before you leave this house."

"Of course."

In a low voice, Finn started to talk. "I met Dominic when I was twenty-one. He was handsome and charming with old-fashioned manners. He was a badly needed distraction from the misery of my life at home. I'd just come out to my parents and man, they did not take it well. My dad threw me out of the house and only my mom's intervention allowed me to come back. On our first date, he took me to a restaurant. He held doors open. Pulled my chair out, gazed into my eyes like I was the most interesting person in the world and paid for everything. I was smitten. More so when he did nothing but kiss me on the cheek at the end, when I wanted so much more. And he knew that. He knew he had me on a string and he knew I'd put out as soon as he clicked his fingers.

"The first time he hit me, we hadn't gone all the way. I could have escaped then and I didn't. I don't know why. Well, I do. I was telling myself he was something special and he was going to save me from my mundane, unhappy life."

When Finn paused, Holden asked gently, "Why did he hit you?"

"Because a guy smiled at me when we were out on a date and I smiled back." Finn lowered his head. "He almost knocked me out. I hit my head when I went down and my mouth was bleeding. He helped me up and gave me coffee and told me he got

kind of jealous and he was sorry. I said I forgave him.” Tears slid out from under Finn’s lashes. “And I didn’t walk away when I should have done.”

“You don’t have to blame yourself for what he did to you,” Holden said with his heart breaking apart.

Finn swallowed. He cupped his hands around his coffee mug. “I’m not sure how I’m going to bring myself to tell you some of the things he did to me.” He took a breath and even though Holden didn’t expect it, he launched right into it. “He broke my bones. He burned me. He imprisoned me. He made me eat my dinner from the floor. He raped me. He pulled handfuls of my hair out in clumps. He held parties where he passed me around his friends and they all took a turn while he filmed it. He kept it on a DVD and Brandon’s seen it.” He wiped a rough hand over his face and stared down at the table.

Oh, Jesus. Holden kept his gaze fixed on Finn’s distraught face and wished he hadn’t opened this can of worms. What a terrible person he was for making Finn relive it all again.

“Sometimes he told me he loved me and that he didn’t mean it.”

“Did you believe him?”

“I guess I did. I stayed there, didn’t I?”

“Do you think it was just more a case of you wanting to believe he wouldn’t do it again?”

Finn bit his lip. “I suppose it was.”

“Did you love him?”

Finn didn't look at him. He was silent for the longest time. Finally, he said, "I thought I did. Now when I compare it to what I feel for Brandon, I don't understand how it could ever have been love." He started to weep. "I thought it would get better. I thought he loved me enough to stop doing it. I dreamed of the day when he would. When we could be a normal couple. But I knew deep down that nothing about us was normal." He put his head down on his hands.

"It's okay," Holden said with a lump in his throat, deeply shaken.

Finn pushed his chair back from the table. He paced a few steps to the counter, then back again, looking at Holden with his eyes red and his face tear-streaked. "I lived in terror for ten years," he said. "And when I remember it, I can't breathe. I hate that he still has this power over me."

Holden pushed his chair back and stood. He shook his head. "He doesn't, Finn. They're just memories that will get better in time."

Finn's shoulders shook and Holden couldn't bear it. He stepped forward and took Finn into his arms. "It's okay," he murmured, stroking Finn's head. "It's over." What he really wanted to say was sorry for opening this Pandora's box. Guilt ate him alive. Was it really worth this to make a few bucks?

He didn't hear the front door opening over the noise of Finn's tears. Then he saw Brandon standing in the kitchen doorway with his face like thunder. With his stomach sinking, he extricated himself from Finn. Finn looked at Brandon with wide eyes. Then he went into his partner's arms. And despite the look on Brandon's face that suggested he was going to punch Holden, he held Finn with the most tender of hands.

Holden hurried down the hall and opened the door, cursing himself.

Tyler

The pain had been off and on all day. Tyler read some more of Holden's book, really enjoying it and marveling at the guy's skill, then he busied himself sanding down and painting the table and chairs overlooking the lawn. The more he tried not to think about Holden, the more his thoughts were consumed by him. He couldn't stop his mind going over and over that morning. How Holden had pulled him back by his arm so firmly, in command and taking what he wanted. The soft cling of Holden's lips to his. And then of course, the slide of Holden's beautiful lips down his dick, the wet slick of his saliva. The heat of his mouth. His tongue curling around Tyler's cockhead. Fuck.

Once the painting was done, he went back inside. Locked the bathroom door and took his cock free of his shorts. He stood at the sink looking at his flushed face in the mirror as he slid his erection through his hand. He wanted Holden face down with Tyler stretching him open. Or Holden looking up at him with his mouth slack and red and wet as Tyler slid balls-deep into him. Or Holden on all fours as Tyler gave him a reach around. Or Holden riding him, impaled with his cock bouncing and spurting all over Tyler. "Oh God," he groaned. He'd have to fuck Holden. He needed it. Like the breath in his lungs and fuck whether Holden was doing it for the right reasons or whether Tyler was just another cock in a long line. Holden wasn't just another cock to Tyler, he knew that, but his feelings were all caught up with his lust and he didn't think he could ever begin to think straight until he'd had Holden. He knew it was the wrong way to think. They should have allowed their budding relationship to develop before jumping into bed, but it was too late for that. He needed what he needed and he was only a weak-willed man. If Holden would allow him, he'd throw him down onto the nearest horizontal surface—or up against the wall, who cared—and fuck him

to within an inch of his life.

He groaned as he spurted a torrent over his fingers and into the sink. He panted for breath, shaking and laughing in amazement at the evidence of his third orgasm of the day and how Holden still hadn't completely wrung him out. He could go again, he knew.

He had a beer and looked again at the stamps Holden had bought him before going back out to the yard to examine the table and chairs and admire his handiwork. He heard Holden's car bumping down the dirt track before he saw it. He climbed from his seat on the top step as Holden got out of his car.

"Hey."

"Hey." Holden had a bag of groceries under his arm. He looked pale and strained. He gestured to the table. "Looks good."

Tyler smiled.

"Is it dry?"

"Nope."

"Shame. I could just sit there and smoke a massive joint."

Something twitched in Tyler's gut at the mention because that sounded like the best idea ever. Even better if it led to Holden flat on his back on that green springy grass with Tyler inside him. His non-existent leg gave a throb of needy pain.

He eyed Holden. "What's wrong? Please tell me what we did earlier isn't torturing you."

Holden gave a wistful smile. “It is, but that’s not it. Finn said he wanted to do the book.”

Tyler stared. “He did?”

“Yeah. Then he took me home and spilled his guts and...” Holden shook his head. “I wish I could unhear it.”

Tyler swallowed. He said nothing.

“That poor, poor guy,” Holden said with his voice breaking. “I thought I had it so hard but everything I got was shit I asked for. I asked to be used and hurt because I wanted it. He didn’t ask for any of that. He was systematically beaten, raped and abused over ten years. Faceless strangers fucked him and recorded him. The man who should have loved and protected him treated him like an animal and let his friends use him like a toy. And I was worried about everything we’ve done and how we shouldn’t let it go any further when I already know that you’re a gentle, kind man who’s nothing like Dominic.”

Tyler bit his lip. He moved closer to Holden and touched his fingers to his hand. “What about you get that joint anyway and we sit here on the steps and share it? You’re hurting and my phantom fucking foot is agony. And I don’t want you to hurt anymore.”

Holden closed his fingers around his. “Be right back.”

Tyler sat on the step and contemplated the horizon as the sun began to sink, streaking the sky with orange and red. He was almost certain he was going to fuck Holden that night and his stomach was heavy with desire. Holden came back soon enough with two uncapped bottles of beer, a joint and a lighter.

He sat beside Tyler on the step and handed him a bottle. "Cheers."

They tapped their bottles together. "Cheers." They both drank. Their arms and shoulders brushed. Holden put the joint in his mouth, flicked the lighter and sucked a mouthful of smoke in. He put his hand on Tyler's knee and squeezed. Then he handed the joint over. Tyler took a deep drag. Holden's hand slid over the bare skin to the hem of Tyler's shorts. Tyler took another hit. Holden's fingers found his inner thigh and slid below the baggy leg of his shorts.

Their eyes met as Tyler passed the joint over. Holden took a drag. Then he leaned closer. Tyler parted his lips as Holden let the smoke escape his own and pass into Tyler's mouth. It was fucking hot. Tyler was already feeling discombobulated. Holden's fingers reached the edge of his briefs and fluttered over his balls before tracing the outline of his stiffening cock. Then he withdrew his hand and turned his body to face Tyler, using his other hand for better access, sliding it right up the leg of Tyler's shorts and onto his cock.

Tyler jerked in delight. He took back the joint and dragged while Holden's hand cupped his erection through his underwear.

"I really enjoyed sucking your cock today," Holden said in a low, seductive voice.

"Likewise," Tyler said with his dick thickening impossibly under Holden's stroking fingers.

"I did something bad today after I'd spoken to Finn," Holden said, taking the joint back and sucking.

Tyler regarded him. Holden's thumb touched the head of his cock where his briefs were wet with pre-cum.

“I went to the drugstore and bought condoms and lube.”

“Is that right?”

“Yeah.” Holden paused. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah. You’re thinking I responded to something stressful and upsetting as I always do. By looking to get fucked.”

Tyler kept his gaze on his. “Is that what I’m thinking?”

“Yeah.”

“Actually, I’m thinking of how wet your dirty talk has made my shorts.”

Holden laughed softly. He pressed the pad of his thumb against the slit of Tyler’s cock and rubbed, dragging soaked cotton against his cockhead. “I’d like to suck you off right here in the yard.”

Tyler’s balls tightened. He puffed on the joint with his head starting to swirl. “Would you?”

“Yeah.”

Tyler’s cock almost reared over the waistband of his underwear. Holden hooked it back and touched his wet slit with his thumb, making Tyler catch his breath.

“Then I’d like you to get me on all fours there on the grass and fuck me until they hear me scream in Bluey’s bar.”

Tyler smiled. It had been a while since anyone had talked to him this way. Was the sex addict controlling his own fantasy? Did he care and was Tyler just a pawn? A willing cock? He cupped Holden's face. "Come here."

Their lips met and Tyler tasted beer, smoke and intense need. They kissed long and slow, their tongues touching, while Holden curled his fingers around Tyler's dick and started to jack him slowly. Tyler shifted under his touch, his breath quickening. The joint smoldered away unheeded in his hand. The pain in his no-foot and half-leg had all but gone. Holden pulled back. He dropped to his knees and shuffled between Tyler's thighs, pushing his legs apart. Tyler's throat went dry. His body felt loose and inhibited. He wouldn't be able to stop anything Holden wanted to do to him. Not that he wanted to. Tyler watched Holden open the button and zip on his shorts and free his dick from his underwear. He threaded his fingers through Holden's hair as he went down on Tyler.

He groaned and took a suck on the joint. He'd never got head while getting stoned before. The sensation was new and exciting. When Holden drew back to look at him, Tyler held out the joint. Holden smiled. He took a drag, then they kissed again and shared the smoke. Tyler wrapped an arm around Holden's neck and pulled him in close. Holden seemed taken back but he returned the hug and they stayed in the embrace for long seconds.

"I like the dirty talk," Tyler said against his ear. "It turns me on. But don't feel you have to do it because you think it's what I want to hear. It's not. Not all men are like the guys you've been with. I don't need it. You turn me on plenty without it."

Holden pulled away, shame written on every line of his face. "I've always done it," he said, gaze averted.

"I guessed you had."

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry. I want you as you are. You’re hot as fuck.”

He saw Holden swallow, the movement of his Adam’s apple. “Do you mean that?”

“I mean it. Why would I not?” He put the joint to Holden’s lips for him to suck. “Finish your beer, then let’s take this inside. If the sheriff comes looking for you all upset over Finn, he doesn’t need to arrest us for public indecency.”

He saw Holden’s pupils dilate, but he also knew that Holden very much wanted to be banged right there on the lawn for anyone to catch them. The humiliation thing. Tyler wouldn’t take any part in humiliation. Holden kissed him again and once more it was slow and long, before it got harder and deeper and wetter.

Holden crawled to his feet with his knees cracking. Then he straddled Tyler on the step and Tyler held his ass, pulling him closer so they could continue to kiss. Holden’s mouth was something else. Tyler fumbled at Holden’s shorts so he could release his dick, then he had Holden’s erection in his hand and he encircled both their cocks in one palm, jerking them together. Holden hissed through his teeth, bucking against him. Tyler lifted his hips, tightening his hand. Holden groaned. “Stop, or I’m going to come all over you.”

“That’s fine,” Tyler said, mouthing his throat. “Come over me, I’ll come all over you, then maybe I’ll lick it off.”

“Oh God,” Holden moaned. “I want you.”

“I know. So come.”

“I can’t recover the way you can, you get that right? It might take me an hour to

recover.”

Tyler smiled. “Then you can suck my dick four times until you get hard again. And who said it doesn’t take me an hour to recover too?”

Holden laughed. He took a last drag of the joint and ground it out under his heel before he stood. “Come on then.”

Tyler fastened himself up, as did Holden. He took a drink of his beer. Holden held out his hand. They walked to Holden’s house with their hands joined.

Finn

Finn eyed Brandon warily as he headed for the fridge and retrieved two bottles of beer, popping the caps from them. He slid one across the counter to Finn and took a deep drag of his own. “Don’t look at me like that,” he admonished Finn. “I’m not going to slap you around just because I’ve come home and found you in another man’s arms. I could come back and find someone balls-deep in you and I still wouldn’t hit you.”

Finn stared at him. Never had Brandon spoken to him like this in all the time they had been together. “Please don’t talk like that.” He saw the regret on Brandon’s face, but his partner said nothing. Finn scrubbed a hand over his watering eyes. “I said I’d do the book. I started talking to him about Dominic and I got upset. He comforted me.”

Brandon gave a sigh. “And it’s always someone else you talk to. If it’s not Jordan, or Jonah, it’s some down on his luck writer who wants to use you for his own ends. When do you ever talk to me?”

Finn squeezed his eyes shut. He took a deep breath and suddenly the words spilled out. “You want me to talk to you? You want me to tell you how afraid I am to come in your mouth? How I saw the dildo you bought in the nightstand and I remembered how Dom made me fuck myself with one while he filmed it, made me do it in front of his friends, made me sit on it and ride it while I sucked his cock. You want me to tell you how I saw the last porn you viewed on your tablet? Some guy handcuffed while he gets fucked and sucked and I know you want to do it to me, but I remember every time he handcuffed me and how it led to me being fucked by his friends until I couldn’t walk. How I was face down with my hands behind my back so I thought my

shoulders would dislocate as he rode me and spanked me and used dildos on me and rimmed me and I pretended to enjoy it all because I thought he would kill me if I didn't."

Brandon was frozen, his face red and horrified. Finn couldn't stop now he'd started.

"I've seen the porn you watch and I know the things you want to do to me and I want to let you because I want to please you, but I don't want to be that guy who lets someone do stuff to him for their own kicks anymore. I want you and me to want it and I want us both to get off and... and..." Finn's voice broke. "I'm scared. I'm scared you hate the vanilla sex we have and that you wish I was so much more than I am."

Tears streaked Brandon cheeks. He stepped forward, cupping Finn's face in his hands. "Now you listen to me. The sex we have is the best I've ever had in my life. It's not vanilla, it's consensual, loving sex and it blows my head off every time. I don't watch porn because I can't do those things to you. That's not it at all. Sometimes I watch stuff I have no interest in pursuing in real life. You have to believe me. And you can see from my history that I don't often watch it. But the fact you've seen I've watched it shows I've disrespected you and I need to stop. I don't want to do anything more than we do now. I don't have any deep, depraved desires I want to act out with you. I'm not that guy. I've never been that guy. Don't think that I am. When I'm inside you and when you're coming, it's the only thing that matters to me. If one day you come to me and say you want to try something new, I'll say yes. I'll do anything you want. I never want you to think that you can't ask me for anything. I'm not waiting for the right time to ask you for anything. There's nothing I want to ask for. You give me everything I need. I bought the dildo for foreplay, nothing more, nothing less, but it was a bad move and I'm sorry." He rested his forehead against Finn's. "I'm so sorry. I want you to talk to me about anything you need to and yet at the same time I get why you don't want to."

Finn bit his lip. He wrapped his arms around Brandon's waist. "I want to do more. We can do more."

Brandon kept his dark gaze fixed on his. "Not on my account."

"No, on mine."

"Tell me what you want then. I'll do anything for you."

Finn bit his lip. "How about if I cuffed you with your own handcuffs?"

Brandon gave a small smile. "And then?"

"And then I spanked you."

Brandon's pupils were dilating. He ran the tip of his tongue over his lips. "I might be interested. It's been a while. And then?" His voice was soft and low.

"And then I fuck you with the dildo. To see if you like it."

Brandon's hands slid down his back. His palms spanned Finn's ass and pulled him against his erection. "It sounds like a fine idea to me."

"It does?"

"Yeah, it really does."

"Maybe when I see you handcuffed with that dildo in your ass enjoying yourself so much, I'll want a turn myself."

Brandon smiled. "Maybe," he said, "when you've loosened me up, you may want to

lube yourself up and put your cock inside me.”

Heat fizzled down Finn’s spine and pooled in his groin, hardening his cock. “Maybe I will,” he said and really liked that idea. Brandon handcuffed and Finn in charge of his pleasure. As long as he could see past Dominic doing the same to him, minus the pleasure.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:10 pm

Tyler

This is a bad idea, Tyler told himself as Holden opened the door and they both stepped inside. You're stoned. Yeah, and I want to fuck him when I'm sober, don't I? So what's the difference? I was always going to do it and he was always going to let me.

Still, though, he lingered in the hall, watching as Holden dug into the bag of groceries and produced a packet of rubbers and a pump-action lube bottle. Then Holden put an arm around his neck and stretched up to kiss him and Tyler was lost. He pulled him close, the kiss turning molten hot as they staggered backwards, heading for the stairs. Tyler grabbed Holden's ass and lifted him and Holden gasped, holding on tight. "Don't."

Tyler ignored him, planting his real foot on the first step. This would be a test. Had he lost all his strength being so inactive for so long? Had half his strength been in that missing half a leg? He didn't work out like he used to do and he wasn't that prime military specimen he had once been. He almost expected his prosthesis to crack as he placed his weight on it. It felt fine. Tyler felt fine. Holden wasn't heavy. Tyler had carried men with a hundred pounds of equipment on their back, and his own, before now.

Holden hung on as Tyler ascended, eyes wide. "Stop. Put me down."

"Not going to happen." Tyler kissed him.

Holden groaned. "No one ever carried me to bed before."

“Especially a man with one leg?”

“Right.”

“You don’t know how lucky you are. I didn’t carry guys to bed even when I had two legs.”

“Are you hurting?”

“No.”

“But still.”

“Shut up. Which door?”

“Here.”

Tyler barreled into the bedroom and lowered Holden as gently as he could to the bed. It was a plain room, painted white like the rest of the house and bare of furniture save for an old fashioned closet and a nightstand. He bent to unlace his shoes and pulled them off. Holden kicked his own off and yanked his shirt over his head. Tyler climbed onto the bed, astride his hips. He ran his hands down Holden’s lean torso. He was pale and nearly hairless apart from a narrow treasure trail leading beyond his pants.

Holden was breathing hard as though he were the one who had carried Tyler up the stairs. He started to unfasten Tyler’s buttons, sliding the shirt from his shoulders before he sat up, mouth against one nipple, sucking, licking. Tyler caught his breath. Holden moved to the other nipple and tormented the first with little pinches and rubs with his thumb. It was good. Holden’s hands slid up his back, nails digging in while he sucked. Tyler reached down to unfasten Holden’s belt, keen to get to grips with his

cock again. He shifted back to drag Holden's pants off, together with his underwear and socks, leaving him naked.

Holden lay back against the dark bed covers, shifting under Tyler's scrutiny, looking awkward. Tyler couldn't work out why because he was in great shape, his body without an inch of spare fat, lean and toned and just made for fucking.

Tyler smiled. He unfastened his shorts and pushed them and his briefs down.

"Are you taking your leg off?"

Tyler froze. He didn't need the reminder that he was about to fuck his first man since losing his leg. Not that it should have made a difference, but of course it did. "I hadn't planned on it," he said, although he'd actually not thought that far ahead. But now he did, he guessed unclicking the prosthesis and rolling off the liner might spoil the mood. He could keep the liner on so Holden didn't have to look at his stump but then he guessed he might stick Holden with the pin in the heat of passion, which wouldn't be so good. He crouched a moment, looking down at the false foot with the sock still on it.

"Sorry," Holden said, running a hand up Tyler's thigh. "I don't mind. Don't think that I care. I really don't."

Tyler wasn't sure he believed him, but Holden had wrapped his fingers around his cock and was jerking in slow, smooth movements. He moaned, bucking into Holden's touch. He could do this. Just leave his prosthesis on, with his pants pulled down like this and fuck Holden for all he was worth. He was confident he could still do that, but wished Holden hadn't felt the need to mention it at all though. He wished his lover could have pretended Tyler still had two legs. Tyler leaned down and kissed Holden and Holden pulled him down into a deep kiss. They rolled across the bed and Holden ended up on top, straddling him, sitting up so Tyler could touch every part of

his delicious body. Holden leaned over to the condom packet, unwrapping it and taking out a rubber that he placed on the bed beside him. Then he twisted open the lube bottle and looked at Tyler, waiting.

Tyler held his hand out. Holden squirted lube onto the two fingers he presented and dropped the bottle back to the bed. He leaned down to kiss Tyler, ass pushed up into the air, his buttocks spread and his hole perfectly accessible. Tyler reached around him and found the puckered entrance, smearing the lube before starting to work him open with one finger.

Holden gasped, sucking on Tyler's tongue, squirming as Tyler eased inside. He started to buck and moan when Tyler added a second, his fingers sliding into wet heat, and found his prostate. His cock hardened to steel as Holden felt between them to grip it, riding Tyler's fingers with sensual movements of his ass.

"Fuck," Tyler said, desperation getting the better of him. He wanted more foreplay. What was the rush after all? He wanted to touch and suck and lick, but he couldn't wait. He had to be inside Holden right now or he was going to explode between their bellies like a teenager. He grabbed the condom and tore it open with his teeth. Taking his fingers from Holden's ass, he rolled it on, even the touch of his hands making him want to cream himself.

Holden panted with excitement when Tyler threw him onto his back. He stared up as Tyler eased between his hips. Maybe he was shocked a guy wanted to look into his face while he fucked him. Tyler liked it from behind as much as the next guy, but he had no need to do Holden that way.

He lubed up the rubber and added more to Holden for good measure. Then he grasped his cock and steered himself home. Holden arched, thighs gripping to Tyler's back as he penetrated him. "Holy fuck," he ground out.

Tyler kissed the sentiment off his lips. He eased every inch inside and started to move, slow and steady. Holden seemed to appreciate it if the writhing and cursing were anything to go by. He was tight and hot and so fucking good, the ride slick and smooth. Tyler kissed his throat, building his pace and knowing he wasn't going to last. Holden dug his nails into his back and his ass. He hissed as Tyler reached between them to jerk him off.

"Please," he said, urging Tyler on with his hands on his ass and the bucking of his pelvis. "Fuck me. Please fuck me." Hadn't Tyler told him he didn't need the dirty talk? "Harder," Holden said and Tyler knew he'd said this before, to dozens of faceless men who'd taken advantage of Holden's addiction to leave him feeling more humiliated than ever.

He looked down at his partner, slowing his movements. "Stop talking," he said. "Stop thinking and enjoy it. I won't do it harder because I don't want to hurt you. Now relax and let me see you come."

Holden let out a cry and threw his head back, his cock swelling harder in Tyler's hand. "That's it," Tyler said, with his lips against the pounding pulse in Holden's throat. His orgasm was building steadily to a crescendo of ecstasy, but he needed to watch Holden first. "Come on." He increased the movement of his hand and the thrusts that he was sure were striking Holden's prostate every time.

Every muscle clenched in Holden's body, veins standing out on his neck as his hands tightened on Tyler and he came with loud gasps, spurting over his stomach. Sheer poetry. Tyler kissed him on the neck, Holden's stubble rasping against his lips, and let the climax take him away.

They'd shifted and Tyler was lying on his back. Holden had his head on his chest. They were both still and silent. Holden might have been asleep. Tyler had pulled his underwear back up but managed to maneuver his shorts over his prosthesis and

discard them. He was aware he needed to take it off before he fell asleep but he didn't want to. He wasn't sure what Holden's reaction would be to waking up with a one-legged man in his bed and he was saddened that he was even thinking about it. Holden had wanted to sleep with him. Surely he wasn't repulsed? Maybe he wasn't as long as Tyler kept the stump under wraps. He sighed, feathering his fingers through Holden's hair and looking at the silver strands in amongst the dark. What would people say about his relationship with a fifty-year-old man? Not that it was a relationship and not that he had anyone to tell anymore. He guessed he could tell Finn, but he was sure Finn probably already thought they'd been to bed and would be totally cool with it.

He started to drift, with the weed wearing off and the familiar pricking to the sole of his once-foot starting up once more.

Tyler

Tyler awoke to an empty, unfamiliar bed with sun streaming through the thin curtains and a pain engulfing most of his left almost-leg. He gasped, sitting up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. Yeah, he'd slept in his prosthesis after wearing it all day and now he was paying the price. "Fuck." He gritted his teeth, hunched over against the pain.

"Hey. Are you okay?" Holden came walking into the room wearing a towel around his hips with his hair wet, his lovely lean body doing all kinds of things to Tyler.

"Yeah."

"You don't look okay. You're white."

"I have to go."

"You're not going anywhere, Mister. Do you need to take it off?"

Tyler clenched his jaw and rocked as though that would help.

"You shouldn't have slept in it, should you? Please don't tell me you kept it on because..." Holden trailed off. His face was pinched and unhappy. He bent down, hands on Tyler's knees. "Take it off. I'll run you a bath. Let me help you."

Tyler's breathing was coming more quickly. He felt humiliation and mortification. Where was the strong man who had carried Holden to bed last night and made him

come his brains out? “I don’t need fucking mothering.” He pushed Holden back and stood, swaying on his feet.

“You are one stubborn bastard.” Holden blocked his way. “I hate to see you like this.”

“Hey.” Tyler grabbed him by the shoulder. “You want me to take it off so I can see the look in your eyes when you realized what you slept with last night?”

Holden’s dark eyes were hurt and liquid. “I know who I slept with and I’m sorry if you’ve ever thought that I...”

“What? That looking at my stump makes you sick?”

Holden shook his head. “Don’t. Please, sit down. Let me help you take it off.”

“I can’t,” Tyler said, but he slumped down anyway because he felt that he couldn’t hold his weight anymore.

Holden’s hands moved over the cup of the prosthesis. “Show me what to do.” He fiddled with the lock. “Like this?” And to Tyler’s surprise, he clicked it open easily and was sliding it off before Tyler could even stop him. Holden’s gaze took in the stump sock, the liner with the pin protruding. Then his hands were gently rolling the sock down and Tyler watched with his breath caught with something that felt a whole lot like shame.

Holden left the sock on the bed. Then he eased down the silicone liner, taking his time, never less than gentle. By which time Tyler was nearly crying. Holden slipped the liner free. He stood, cupping the stump with both hands. “Lie down.”

Tyler obeyed, twisting his body and settling his head on the pillow. Holden grabbed a

cushion from the floor. He slid it under the stump, then he bent over Tyler, a hand stroking his disheveled hair back from his forehead. “I’m going to run a bath, then I’m going to help you get into it. If you need anything else, if you need me to call a doctor, please tell me. I’ll drive into town right now and come back with a doctor if you want me to. Or I’ll call an ambulance.”

Tyler said nothing. The pain had eased from unbearable to just below agony. He practiced his breathing technique while Holden was gone, with his eyes closed, willing his broken body away.

“Come on.” He hadn’t heard Holden approach. He wrapped an arm around Tyler’s shoulders. “Sit up.” He’d pulled on a robe. Once he’d got Tyler onto the edge of the bed, he stood on his left side, an arm around his back. “Put your arm around me and lean.”

Tyler hopped onto his right foot. He got his balance and held onto Holden, trying not to place all his weight upon him. Slowly, they navigated their way into the bathroom. Tyler let Holden strip him of his underwear. Then he sat on the edge of the bath and swung his good foot into it, dragging himself into the water with Holden supporting his stump.

The water was warm, but not too hot, immediately comforting. Tyler sank back. “I put some bath oil in,” Holden said, “for muscle aches and pains. I hope it’ll help.”

“Thanks.” The scents of rosemary and eucalyptus rose from the bath. Tyler closed his eyes.

“Can I bring you a drink?”

“Water, please.”

“Sure. Coming up.” Holden’s footsteps retreated from the bathroom.

Tyler breathed deep and slow. He let the calming scents bring him down from high anxiety and soothe his mind, while the warm water cradled his aching body. While the pain didn’t go, he felt better now the prosthesis was gone. After a couple of minutes, he opened his eyes to see Holden standing over him with a glass of water and two white pills. “Tylenol.”

“Thanks.” Tyler sat up, swallowed the pills and drank the water.

Holden knelt by the bath. “You’ve got some color back. I thought you were going to pass out.”

“Not exactly the romantic morning-after, is it?” Tyler asked.

Holden shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. My morning-afters consist of waking up lying in the wet patch.”

Tyler grimaced.

“I was going to make you breakfast though. As a romantic gesture.”

Tyler managed a smile. Holden reached out, stroking the curve of his stubbled jaw. “You’re just as beautiful in the morning,” he said.

“Even with half a leg?”

“Especially with half a leg.”

Tyler lowered his gaze.

“You don’t believe me.”

Tyler said nothing.

“Maybe you’d like to check out the erection I have from looking at you naked in the bath.”

Tyler’s cock gave a little jump. He gave Holden another weak smile. Holden put his hand in the water and squeezed Tyler’s fingers. “Last night was great, and it was different,” he said in a murmur. “I woke up with the man who’d made love to me and he hadn’t hurt me, or used me. He was still there in my bed and it felt great.”

Tyler swallowed. “Apart from this.”

Holden heaved a sigh. “I don’t care.”

“It’s not the impression I got when you first saw me with my leg off that day in the café.”

“Come on.” Holden’s voice was soft. “It was just a shock. I haven’t known many people with amputations before. Please believe me when I say it’s nothing.”

Tyler regarded him. “Prove it.”

“What?”

“Take a bar of soap and wash me all over. Including my stump.”

Holden gave a slow smile. “That’ll only lead one way, Mister, you know that, right?”

“I should hope so,” Tyler replied smartly.

Holden reached for a bar of soap on the edge of the bath. “Sit forward.”

Tyler did as he was told. Holden lathered up the soap and washed his back and neck with slow strokes of his hand. Then he made his way down each arm and under them before spreading soapy fingers over his chest. Tyler settled back in the water and let Holden smooth his hand over his belly before he dipped below the water, using two hands on each thigh to wash. He slid down Tyler’s right leg, washing back and front, soaping his foot. Then he started on Tyler’s left knee, sliding down as far as he could. He stood, lifted Tyler’s stump free of the water and bent, washing and massaging with gentle hands, running his fingers over the edge of the knitted skin. “Tell me if I’m hurting you.”

“You’re not.” Tyler watched his face for any signs of revulsion. He saw only focus and concern and he felt the tension in his belly slide away into warmth.

Holden smiled at him. He lowered Tyler’s leg back to the water and massaged it beneath the surface. Tyler closed his eyes and let Holden’s hands take him away.

“Is that okay?”

“Yes.” Holden’s hands felt so good. They were so tender, so gentle, and yet they used the right amount of pressure to knead his trauma and pain away. Holden kept up the steady pace. He seemed in no rush to stop. In fact, he was at it so long, Tyler opened his eyes to look at him. Holden’s gaze was on the stump. He had a serious expression of concentration on his face that relaxed when he saw Tyler looking.

“Okay?”

“Yes.” Since his injury, he had never imagined anyone wanting to do this to him. He had never expected anyone would ever want to touch the remaining part of his leg.

Holden bit his lip before he spoke. "It's beautiful. Like you."

Tyler felt sudden tears dew his eyes and cursed himself. He averted his gaze and watched Holden's hands move up over his thigh, stroking, one sliding as far as his hip before stopping.

"You know you have to get on all fours to let me wash your ass, right?"

Tyler gave him a smile. "Is that what you want?"

"You're damn right it is."

"All right." Tyler shifted. He did as he was told, presenting his ass, holding himself on his arms with his cock thickening. Holden lathered up both palms. He slid them over Tyler's buttocks before sliding fingers into his crack, finding his entrance and soaping it. Tyler swayed in place, head dipped. Holden wet a washcloth next. He rinsed Tyler off, lingering on his hole. Then he smoothed his hands over Tyler's ass and spread him open. Tyler tensed and tried not to groan.

"How many men have fucked you?" Holden asked, the arousal in his voice palpable.

"A couple," Tyler said, with his cock jutting out in front of him.

"Suck." Holden presented a finger to his mouth and Tyler did as he was told. Holden touched his hole, massaging it with saliva, slicking it and pressing until his finger slid inside. Tyler shifted in the water with a groan. "You like that?" Holden asked.

"Yes." Tyler closed his eyes, his cock starting to throb. Holden removed the finger. Tyler sensed him lean closer before he felt a wet tongue slide down his cleft and flick over his hole. "Oh my God," he said.

Holden laughed softly. "I've wanted to do this since I met you."

Tyler shivered. He groaned as Holden licked. His tongue was so wet, so soft, so slippery, like a velvet caress on his most intimate area. He hung his head down, his arms shaking, starting to pant. Holden stabbed his tongue inside with darting jabs and Tyler cursed before Holden left a wet line down his perineum to suck each ball before he squeezed them gently.

"Let's get you out," he said. "I don't want you kneeling like that for long."

Tyler agreed with him even though he wanted more tongue. It had been a while since he'd had a rimjob and he'd love it if Holden brought him all the way to climax that way. He turned over for Holden to help him out of the bath. They did it by Tyler sitting on the edge of the bath and swinging both legs over. He rested with his ass on the bath for a moment as Holden grabbed a towel and draped it around his shoulders, rubbing. He noticed the hard-on tenting Holden's robe, and he reached up, hands on Holden's hips.

Holden slowed. He looked down at Tyler with his pupils dilating in his dark eyes so the iris looked almost black. "Wait there," he said before he turned and left the room. Tyler steadied himself on the bath. The room was warm and the water evaporating on his skin felt nice. While his leg still hurt, it was a muted pain he could deal with.

Holden returned. In his hands he held a condom and the bottle of lube. Tyler said nothing but his heart rate increased. He followed Holden's figure with his eyes as he shed the robe and approached the bath. Holden smiled. He squirted some lube onto his fingers. Then he slicked it down Tyler's hard shaft. Tyler caught his breath. Holden turned around. Then he started to slowly gyrate his lovely ass like he was giving Tyler a lap dance, backing up until he was rubbing over Tyler's cock, letting it slide down his ass crack.

Tyler swore. He gripped his dick, holding it steady. Holden had his hands on his knees, bent over. The head of Tyler's cock slipped between his cheeks, leaving a smear of lube and Tyler saw his opening, nestling tiny and puckered and gritted his teeth, helpless to stop himself bucking. Holden pumped more lube onto his hand. He reached behind to lube himself up and Tyler groaned as Holden slipped a finger inside himself. Holy fuck, that was hot. He gripped Holden's hips, watching his cock, looking at the pre-cum oozing from the slit, watching Holden's asshole and his fingers and needing to bury himself as deep as he could go.

Holden pushed the condom into his hand. Tyler tore it hurriedly and rolled it on. He didn't care that he was sitting on the hard bath with no prosthesis. The sexiest thing in forever was going to back himself onto his cock and Tyler wasn't going to turn that down. Which was exactly what Holden did. He backed himself onto Tyler's dick with a groan and Tyler pulled him, jerking up, giving Holden every inch. Tyler watched his cock disappearing into Holden's ass and thought he was going to come instantly.

Holden gasped. "Fuck me," he said. "Oh God, fuck me."

Tyler growled. He thrust up, holding Holden's hips hard. Holden's thighs shook and he cried out. Tyler pulled him back and held him, sitting right on his lap and Holden squirmed, panting and gasping. He moved up, got in that hunched over position again, offering his ass to be plundered by Tyler. Tyler thrust into him again, the slick slide and the deep penetration and the visual of Holden bent over like this so unbearably erotic. He slid a hand around Holden and gripped his dick. "Come on," he said, as he had the night before and used the pre-cum leaking from Holden's cock to jerk him with as he fucked Holden.

Holden tightened around him. His cock swelled harder and he fell back against Tyler's chest where Tyler could hold him tight and kiss his neck as he jerked Holden right over the finish line. Holden let out loud cries. He panted for breath, his dick erupting over Tyler's fingers. Tyler managed another couple of jerks of his hips

before he let go. The orgasm swept him away for long moments before he came back to his body and found his arms around Holden, still holding him hard. Holden was slumped, chest heaving, trying to take some of his own weight, but placing most of it on Tyler.

“That was some work out.” Tyler moved his hand slowly up and down Holden’s spent dick, spreading his cum and making his partner shiver and groan.

“Yeah, those are not the sort of squats I usually do.” They both laughed. Tyler had never had anyone sit him on a bath before and back onto his dick. It would be one for the spunk bank. When Holden eased off him, he caught his condom and tied it in a knot. Holden took it from him and discarded it in a small trash can in the unit under the sink. Then he shrugged his robe back on and slid an arm around Tyler, helping him stand.

“I hope I didn’t hurt you,” he said. “I could have at least got you to the bed before I attacked you.”

Tyler shook his head. He hopped by Holden’s side, taking the pace slow.

“Selfish of me,” Holden murmured.

“I said it’s fine. You don’t really think I have any complaints about that, do you?”

Holden said nothing. He eased Tyler onto the mattress and put a pillow under his stump. “Now why don’t I make you that breakfast?”

Tyler smiled. He lay back and closed his eyes as he heard Holden’s footsteps retreating. The pain was still there, of course it was, but the warm water and the massage had helped. So had the sex. He felt himself drifting on a tide of relaxation with the afterglow still soothing him.

Holden

Finn was sitting opposite Holden at the kitchen table once again, looking like he was going to a firing squad and Holden wished he was anywhere but here and doing anything but this. If it makes us both feel so bad, why are we doing it? He'd rather still be warm and satisfied in bed with Tyler, that was for sure. He felt his cock twitch, because of course it would. The addiction didn't care where he was when he got sexual thoughts. It just wanted more, and more, and more, and God, he wanted more of Tyler all right. He remembered last night, gazing up at him as Tyler drove into him, hitting his prostate with each thrust and sending him clean out of his mind. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had it so good. And Tyler had proved that Holden didn't need the dirty talk or the humiliation. He hadn't called Holden a slut or whispered filthy little encouragements as he'd fucked him. He hadn't taken him face down and hurt him, just because he could. He'd been tender, and respectful and all the things Holden didn't know.

Holden had been the one to make it dirty that morning, bending over and sinking onto Tyler's cock as soon as he got out of the bath. But it had been good. So fucking good.

He tried to focus, but he felt close to tears when he remembered Tyler's behavior towards him last night. As though Holden actually meant something. As though what they had done had meant something. And then he thought of how vulnerable Tyler had been that morning, needing his help, and the pain he dealt with on a daily basis. Could he step up and be the man Tyler needed? How could he ever put anyone else's needs first when he couldn't even control his own behavior from day to day? After the bathroom sex, he'd made breakfast as promised. He'd received a text from his editor telling him an advance had been paid into his account and he'd almost punched

the air in relief when he'd seen how much it was. But that put the pressure on. He had to complete the project and that meant coaxing more heart-breaking truths from Finn, which he didn't enjoy at all. He'd have to offer him at least half the advance. It was the right thing to do. Maybe he should just give him all of it.

He and Tyler had eaten together and exchanged small talk that morning. All Holden could think of was when they could fuck again, and he didn't want to think like that. He wanted to enjoy Tyler's company, not let sex be the only thing he wanted from the guy. He'd left Tyler to sleep after getting the go ahead from Finn to come over, knowing it was for the best to give the guy a break from his relentless sex drive.

He swallowed, finger hovering over the button on the recorder. "Are you ready?"

Finn nodded.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Do you want some more coffee? You look kind of hungover."

Holden laughed, because he wasn't hungover, he was just well fucked. Maybe Finn knew that and was being polite. Maybe seeing as Finn was spilling his guts, Holden could return the favor and spill his own. At the end of this. "I'm fine," he said.

"Okay."

"All right." He pressed the button. "Where are your parents, Finn? Where were they when Dominic was abusing you?"

Finn squeezed his eyes shut. "I left the house as soon as I could after I met Dom. My mom tried to call me an awful lot, but I didn't answer. My dad died of a heart attack a couple of years after I moved out. I saw the death notice in the local paper. Dom

wouldn't let me go to the funeral. I'm not sure I wanted to go anyway. I hated my dad." He picked at some loose skin at the side of his thumb nail, worrying it.

"And your mom? Where is she now?"

Finn shrugged. "I guess she's still in Iowa. I haven't heard from her. I thought maybe after... after Dominic died, she might have heard and she might have been in touch. I suppose she wouldn't know my number though. I didn't even have a phone until recently." He trailed off, looking down at his hands.

There was a silence. Holden didn't exactly have a plan. He just wanted Finn to talk and then he could mold his story into chapters, a cohesive timeline. "Why don't you talk to me about your escape?"

Finn sucked in his breath and let it out in a shaky sigh. He raised his gaze to Holden's with a laugh. "I still can't believe I had that in me."

"I can," Holden said. "And I only just met you."

Finn blushed. "I drugged him with the same ones he used on me. I had a bag ready that I'd kept hidden for so long, waiting for the right time, to gather my guts. I stole money from him on a regular basis and squirreled it away, a dollar or five dollars here and there. I never had my own money when I was with him." He stopped and took a sip of water. Holden waited. "When he was passed out on the couch, I thought about killing him. I thought I probably should because I knew if he caught me, he'd kill me. And yet, something stopped me and it wasn't the fear of jail. I guess I thought I still loved him, even after everything he did to me. Isn't that stupid?"

Holden shook his head. "No."

"I took a bus and at every stop, I told myself he was going to get on, drag me off, take

me home and fucking kill me. I shook and I cried and people stared at me like I was losing my mind. I was so afraid I nearly just went back.”

“But you made it here.”

“Yeah. I saw the notice in the general store for the house for rent and I put down most of my money right then. You should have seen the guy’s face as I pulled out this bag of coins from my backpack. He was horrified.” Finn laughed.

“And you met Brandon?”

The smile that lit up Finn’s face was something to behold. Holden knew he had never smiled like that about anyone in his life, not even Leo. Would he smile like that if someone mentioned Tyler’s name to him?

“Yeah. I’d decided to drown myself in the lake that night.”

“What?” Holden stared at him.

“I couldn’t take the fear, the loneliness. I was locked up in that house and scared to even set foot out for groceries. I got drunk and went down to the lake. Instead of doing it, I started pissing up a tree. Brandon was driving past. He stopped and told me how unimpressed he was.”

Holden smiled.

“I was horrible to him. I suggested that he go eat some donuts.”

Holden laughed. “He must have loved that.”

“He did. He nearly arrested me. I wouldn’t have minded if he had. At least I would

have felt safe for one night. Instead, he drove me home, then he came in to look around the house when he saw how scared I was.” Finn shook his head. “Man, I was an embarrassment.”

“Don’t say that.”

Finn drank some more water. “Anyway, Brandon, he seemed pretty keen to find out the truth from me. I fell for him in a big way, but I was desperate not to let my guard down. I didn’t think he could protect me if Dom came for me and I didn’t want to be that guy who needed protecting.”

“So?”

“So, I slept with him, then told him I was going back to Dominic. He was mad, and upset, and he begged me and I told him I had to. I didn’t see another way for my life to go. I thought...” Finn’s voice trembled. “I thought my life was over anyway. I couldn’t live in fear waiting for him to come for me, so it would be better just to go back and let it happen.”

Holden waited with his chest aching.

“Anyway, Dominic came for me before I could go back, and he tried to kill me, and Brandon waded in on his white horse.” Finn squeezed his eyes shut. “I saw the bullet go through the side of his head. I saw the light go out of his eyes.”

Holden let the silence hang heavy for long seconds, before he asked, “Did you mourn Dominic, Finn?”

Finn caught his lip between his teeth, tears streaking his face, and nodded, and Holden realized that out of everything Finn had confessed so far, this, to him, was by far the worst.

When Finn was more composed, Holden made them both grilled cheese sandwiches. They sat eating, with glasses of orange juice.

“How’s Tyler?” Finn asked.

“He’s okay.” Holden found himself blushing as he remembered that morning and he caught Finn’s grin. “What?”

“You like him.”

Holden smiled. “Yeah.”

“He likes you.”

“I hope he does.”

“Have you...?”

“Yeah.”

Now Finn’s eyes were dancing with delight. “Great. Was it good for you?”

“You’re kind of up front, aren’t you?”

Finn shrugged. “After all I just told you, the least you owe me is whether you had a good time in bed with Tyler.”

“Fair enough. Of course I did. The best time.”

Finn cocked his head. “But I sense some reservation.”

Holden sighed. "Lots of things. Me and my issues. His leg. His other stuff."

"By other stuff, you mean PTSD?"

Holden stared at him. "Is that what you think it is?"

"Don't you?"

"I don't know. I'm not an expert. But he seems to have these phases where he drifts away as though he's gone. And last night, he... whimpered in his sleep, and cried out."

"I am an expert," Finn said.

"Yeah, I thought you were," Holden replied.

"And you? What are your issues?"

"Jesus, Finn, we're really getting down to it here, aren't we?"

Finn shrugged. "Consider this like the confessional booth. What happens in Brandon's kitchen stays in Brandon's kitchen."

Holden laughed. He looked into Finn's dark blue eyes. He liked the guy more than he could say and felt that he could trust him. "I'm a sex addict," he said.

"Oh," Finn said. "Whatever I expected, it wasn't that."

"Sure."

"And I don't really know how to deal with guys when they're not giving me what

I've begged them for, if you get me."

Finn's eyes were soft. Holden didn't want to think it was pity. "I'm not sure I do," he said.

Holden searched for the words. "It drives me to want to be...humiliated. And used. And obviously, it's hard to be with someone normally when it's all I've ever known."

Finn kept his gaze on his. "That must have left you with some deep mental scars."

"I guess."

"And what about the guy who stole your money?"

Taken aback, Holden said, "Well, he let me control it, and it's obvious now why. He acted the way I wanted him to act, which was willing to give it to me when I wanted and exactly how I wanted. I know the sex and the relationship was toxic. And I know already that Tyler isn't like that. And won't ever be."

"I'm glad to hear it. Have you talked it over with him?"

"I've explained what I am. We haven't exactly dissected what we did last night."

"You should. If you want to make a go of it. Seems like you need each other."

"You don't think I'm a dirty old man?"

"What?" Finn looked confused.

"I'm twenty-two years older than him."

Finn shrugged. “And?”

Holden smiled. “I knew there was a reason I liked you.”

Holden

On the drive home, Holden let his mind drift over every moment of his time with Tyler last night and that day. He let himself feel every kiss, every touch, every slide of Tyler's hot silky skin against his and every thrust into his body. As his cock grew hard, he told himself he wasn't going to pull over to jerk off at the side of the road as he had done so very often during his life. Telling himself that made no difference whatsoever.

Even as he swerved over, pulled on the handbrake and fumbled with his belt, he was asking himself what he was doing. You're minutes from home. Tyler might still be lying naked in your bed. He might be extremely receptive to you crawling between his legs and sucking him off. Wouldn't you rather get off with his dick in your mouth than at the side of the fucking road in your car, alone?

It didn't matter. He pulled his cock free and palmed it greedily with a groan. Fuck, he doubted this would even take a minute. He saw Tyler lying in the bath with the water lapping gently over his chiseled torso and strong thighs. He'd nearly come on the spot last night when he'd opened Tyler's shirt and seen his chest. Even more so when he'd pushed his shorts down and his amazing cock had sprung free. So thick and long and ready to fuck Holden into oblivion. It felt awesome in his mouth and even better in his ass and Tyler knew exactly where to strike to send Holden out of his mind. He moaned again and leapt almost out of his seat when he heard a quick siren blast behind him.

Holy fuck! His hands wouldn't obey him as he desperately crammed his erection back into his underwear and zipped up.

A knock at the window and he was face to face with Brandon.

Oh God, please just let me die now.

He buzzed down the window, letting the air-con out and the heat in. “Hi, Sheriff.”

After a quick glance around the interior of the car, Brandon’s gaze fixed on his. “What are you doing, Holden?”

“Nothing, I, I...felt unwell.”

“Uh-huh?” Brandon waited with an arched brow.

“Yeah, I, er, thought I was going to puke.”

“Shouldn’t you be outside the car if you’re going to puke, rather than in it?” The guy caught liars for a living and he showed Holden up to be a bad one.

“Well, yeah, but it passed.”

Brandon’s dark eyes were like fathomless pools of water, nearly the same color as his own. “Do you know the penalty for public indecency?”

“What?” Holden blurted, flushing up to his ears. “I wasn’t...”

“You weren’t what? Jerking off? I could see you.”

“I...I...you don’t understand.”

“I don’t?” That arched brow again, with Brandon leaning oh-so-casually on the roof of the car. “Then enlighten me.”

“I had to.”

Brandon’s eyes bulged. “What?”

“It’s...I just had to. Ask Finn.”

Brandon went still. There was a scene in *The Godfather Part Two* where Michael Corleone is told by his wife that she’s had an abortion. He goes still, his eyes glittering.

The steadily building rage and chilling look on his face was mirrored here now. Brandon’s eyes went so big and dark that Holden thought he was going to piss himself in fright. “Excuse me?” the sheriff gritted out.

“I...” Oh God, he could never make this right. Not ever.

“Turn the engine off and step out of the car.”

With his stomach in his shoes, Holden switched off the engine, leaving the key in the ignition. Brandon was going to kill him. He was going to fucking kill him and dump his worthless body in the woods to be eaten by animals. Tyler would find somebody else. Somebody not middle-aged with a secret so shameful it had ruined his life.

He opened the door. Brandon immediately crowded Holden against the side of the car. The car made an annoying bonging noise from within to tell Holden it didn’t like him leaving the key inside. “Now, you’re going to tell me why you just mentioned my partner’s name in the same breath as you jerking off, and you’re going to make it good, or so help me, I’ll lock you up and throw away the key.”

Holden shook with fear. “I...”

Brandon pulled a cell phone from the top pocket of his uniform shirt. He thumbed a few buttons. “Why don’t we both listen to Finn on loudspeaker?” he said in a tone like ice and held the phone up as it rang.

Holden shriveled and waited.

“Hey, beautiful,” Finn answered.

“Hey, yourself. I need help.”

Finn took a moment. “Are you okay? What’s happened?”

“Just need you to figure out something for me.”

“All right. Go ahead. You sound weird, Brandon.”

Brandon ignored him. “Just wondered if you could tell me why Holden told me to ask you about why I just caught him jerking off in his car by the side of the road.”

Finn gave a low groan. “It’s not like that, baby.”

“Isn’t it?” Brandon’s jaw was clenched.

“No. You’re letting yourself get carried away. He’s fucking Tyler.”

Brandon glanced at Holden. “Congratulations,” he said. “But I’m still waiting.”

“Oh, Brandon,” Finn said with a sigh. “He’s a sex addict. He has no choice but to jerk off anywhere he can.”

Holden lowered his head when Brandon’s gaze whipped to his. “I see. Thanks for

clearing that up. I'll see you later." He hung up before Finn could speak.

Reluctantly, Holden looked at him.

"If I find out you've come on to Finn, touched him in any way, or made any suggestions, if I find out you so much as told him he looked nice today, me and you are going to throw down," Brandon said.

Holden shook his head. "I do it with single guys who want me, Sheriff, not guys who are virtually married. I wouldn't have ever done that. Not ever."

Brandon looked unsure for a moment. Then he stepped back. "On your way. Don't let me catch you again."

Gratefully, Holden yanked open the door.

"Hey," Brandon said behind him and Holden turned. "If you're fucking Tyler, why not go on home and do it instead of sitting in your car like a sad bastard?"

Holden swallowed. "Because I'm a sad bastard." He swung himself into the car and closed the door. Starting the engine, he pulled away and was relieved when the patrol car didn't follow him. What a fucking mess. He'd intended to ask Brandon to give his side of the story about shooting Dominic, for the book. He doubted Brandon would ever speak to him again.

Sure enough, Tyler was still lying in his bed, fast asleep. Holden stood watching him for a moment until Tyler woke with a start.

"Shit, why are you standing there like that?"

"Sorry." Holden sat on the edge of the bed and put his head in his hands.

“What’s wrong?”

Was there any point in lying? He didn’t think so. “I was driving home from Finn’s and thinking about you and I pulled over to jerk off and Brandon caught me.”

Tyler started laughing. “Oh, man.”

Holden glared over his shoulder. “Not funny.”

“It is. It would have been before you lost your sense of humor.”

“Fuck off.”

“You could have just come home and…”

“Which is what I told myself even as I had my dick in my hand. You don’t understand. When I need to get off, I have to do it immediately. I can’t wait.”

Tyler sighed. “I’m sorry. I know it’s not a joke. It must be a terrible thing for you.”

Holden didn’t reply.

“Did you come?”

“No.”

“Even worse.”

They looked at each other and both burst out laughing.

“Why don’t you get in?”

“Are you feeling okay? Has the pain gone?”

Tyler shrugged. “No worse than usual.”

“All right then.” Holden started to unbutton his shirt. “Maybe we can both make each other feel better.”

“I’m hoping,” Tyler said and he scooted across the bed to make room for Holden.

Holden peeled off his socks. He unfastened his pants, pushed them down and discarded them, followed by his underwear. His dick was already hard. It had gone soft at being caught by Brandon, but was hard again before he’d even got in the house. When he pulled back the covers, he saw Tyler’s was too and it was almost enough to make him groan. “It’s been a really bad day all around,” he said as he climbed in and slid into Tyler’s waiting arms. “First your pain, then listening to Finn spill his guts once more, then getting caught jerking off. Especially as I wanted to interview Brandon for the book.”

Tyler kissed his neck. He slid his hands down Holden’s back and lay down, pulling him on top of him. Holden’s pulse skyrocketed as their skin pressed together. Their lips met and he drowned once more in the feel of Tyler’s kiss. Tyler maneuvered Holden astride his hips. He sat up to worship Holden’s chest with mouth and lips, sucking and licking at his nipples. Holden groaned. Tyler fisted his cock, dragged his hand up and down it. Holden felt ready to spurt as soon as Tyler touched him. He gasped for breath at the feel of Tyler’s mouth and hands on him. Tyler put two fingers in his mouth and sucked. He reached around between Holden’s spread buttocks and rubbed saliva over his entrance before pushing a finger inside. Holden groaned. He tensed and trembled as Tyler found his prostate.

“Oh God,” he said. “God, Tyler, I need you to fuck me.”

“Didn’t you get enough this morning?”

Holden tensed because while it was a reasonable question to a fifty-year-old guy, it wasn’t so funny asking a sex addict that.

“Sorry,” Tyler said.

Holden looked down at him. For a ridiculous moment he had the urge to cry. It was true that his body couldn’t quite keep up with his desire anymore. He’d be desperate to come, with his cock telling him it was too soon to come again. Usually he dealt with that by stimulating his prostate and coming that way, whether he was hard or not. It worked just fine and it was a whole different orgasm. Tyler was pretty good at the prostate work. Holden wanted more of it. But his dick wasn’t having a problem keeping in the game today. It was raring to go, harder than he’d been in a long time. Maybe Tyler was making Holden’s sex addiction stronger than ever. He had the boundaries though, after that initial period of abstinence when he had first entered recovery. And he was doing okay with those. He wasn’t lying or cheating, or having multiple partners. He wasn’t paying for sex or going out to bars and clubs to look for it. Well, at least not since Gage, but he didn’t need to think about that and how close he’d come to being taken by force. He was going online jerking off though, instead of writing. He was jerking off in public. He didn’t need to do any of that, so why was he? It was the same old story. He was nowhere near recovery.

Maybe Tyler had seen him disappear for a few moments, because he eased his finger free, looking up. He smoothed his other hand over Holden’s cheek. “You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“My addiction.”

“Thought so.” They looked at each other in silence for long seconds before Tyler spoke again. “I don’t suppose I’m helping you by doing this with you, am I?”

“I’m not supposed to abstain. Just stop with all the behaviors I previously had.”

“Such as?”

“Come on, I already told you all the stuff I do.”

“Do you still do it? Are you going out sleeping with other men at the moment?”

Holden huffed. “You know I’m not.”

“All right then. So me and you having normal sex is okay?”

“I guess. As long as I don’t pressure you to do it five times a day.”

Tyler smiled. Then he said, “Jerking off in your car isn’t okay.”

Holden reddened. “No, it’s not.”

“What else have you been doing that you shouldn’t?”

Holden hung his head.

“Sorry,” Tyler said quietly, stroking his hand. “It’s up to you what you tell me. No pressure or judgement here.”

“I’m still using porn a lot,” Holden said.

“Okay. Is that the reason why you’re not writing?”

Holden glanced up. "I don't know. I told myself it was writer's block. Maybe I think it's that because all I can think about when I'm at the computer is watching porn and jerking off."

"You could turn off the internet while you're working."

"I guess."

Once again there was silence. Tyler stretched up to him and kissed him. Then he whispered, "I think you're doing just fine."

That brought tears to Holden's eyes in a startling rush. "You do?"

"Sure. You're not indulging in so much of what you used to do before."

Holden dropped down on top of him and hid his face against Tyler's neck. "We need to stop. I can't let you do this, whatever this is. I'm no good for you."

Tyler held him close. "I'm a big boy. I'm armed with the facts and I've made an informed decision."

Holden squeezed his eyes shut. "I can't offer you anything. I'm afraid. I don't want to hurt you. You deserve better than me." What he meant was, he didn't want to start screwing around on Tyler. That idea was too horrible to contemplate.

Tyler slid his hands down Holden's back, making him shiver. "Listen to me. I don't know what this is yet. We spent the night together last night and it was great. We don't need to talk about where this is going. It's too early."

Holden felt deflated. It sounded a whole lot like Tyler had just said he was in this for the fun sex and nothing else. But then why else would he be? What else did Holden

have to offer him? Certainly not financial security or the wisdom of being an older man. He'd never made a wise decision in his life. He felt like such an idiot. Listen to you. We need to stop. Stop what? He screwed you twice, that's all, and now you're talking like you're in a relationship. Christ, no wonder he's backing off.

He rolled off Tyler and slid to the edge of the bed.

"Hey," Tyler said.

"You should go." Holden stepped into his underwear and pulled it up. He gathered up his clothes. When he glanced back, Tyler was looking at him with wounded eyes. How fucking dare he when he had just told Holden they'd had a casual no-strings-attached screw?

"Holden," Tyler said as Holden headed to the bathroom.

Holden ignored him and locked himself inside.

Holden

Holden woke early, sometime after dawn judging by the amount of light in his bedroom. And considering the time of year, that made it pretty bloody early. He had a headache courtesy of the amount of wine he'd drunk after throwing Tyler out. He cursed himself. After all the men you've casually slept with, how dare you get upset that Tyler wasn't anywhere near declaring his undying love for you. He tossed the quilt back and padded to the bathroom to pee. In the kitchen he set the coffee machine going and swallowed some Tylenol. Then, at the laptop, the cursor winked at him steadily. Chapter One.

He flicked through his notebook, looking for the plans he'd made for this book. It seemed like so long ago now. The book idea had been drafted before Leo had run away and it still remained that way. A draft. Without a single word written. He read over the brief outline several times, then the chapter plans. He'd got as far as outlining the first eight chapters which was good going for a guy who usually flew by the seat of his pants, putting flesh on the bones of a skeleton idea as he went along. He went over chapter one, reading the outline aloud, thinking, pondering, imagining that chapter taking shape, the first few sentences. He didn't have any names for the characters. All that time ago this plan had been written and still no goddamn names. Still the main players were referred to as X, Y and Z. Fuck it. Well, that book was on indefinite hiatus now anyway, because the priority was Finn's book. He looked again at that chapter one and the cursor flashing with his fingers poised over the keyboard. How to start?

He'd opened a browser before he'd even thought about it. Then he was into his bookmarks. And suddenly he was on one of his favorite sites and it was game over.

Hot and heavy porn with his cock already getting stiff.

He clicked the search box. What was he in the mood for today? Not guys in army combats, that was for sure. He didn't need to think about Tyler while he was doing that thing Tyler suggested was keeping him from his work. The thing that maybe he could avoid by switching off the internet.

Yeah, right. Holden took his cock free from his pj pants. He didn't want to avoid this. He wanted to do it while watching hot guys fucking each other. He liked to watch one guy getting done by lots of others. Imagining that guy was himself so he could feel shame and humiliation even while watching a guy he didn't know. Just making even the act of watching porn another guilt-laden act to torture himself with.

He typed in gangbang and wished he could watch something gentle and sedate—two guys having nice normal sex and maybe even kissing—without needing to make himself feel bad. The thumbnails came up and he scrolled through them, looking for something to capture his attention, giving his cock a stroke as he did.

There. A guy naked on a table on his back, another guy inside him while several others stood around watching. He clicked on it. Then he froze as the video started to load, questioning what he saw. No. It couldn't be. It was just someone who looked like him.

The guy on the table was lean, verging on thin. He lay with his arms flung above his head, his body jolting with every thrust his partner made into him. He was dark-haired and attractive. His eyes were closed. He moaned but it sounded fake, which Holden was used to as a connoisseur of porn. He'd rarely seen a bottom who looked like they were enjoying it. Their limp cocks backed up his theory. Another reason why he felt guilty for watching gangbangs. Getting off on someone else's misery.

This guy's cock was hard though. Some of the guys standing around fondled it,

slapped it. A guy stooped and sucked it. Another man, a massively built brunet, bent and whispered into the guy's ear, which caused him to moan ever louder. "Fuck me," he said. "Please, fuck me."

The men cheered and the guy fucking him doubled his pace. He wasn't wearing a condom, Holden could see. His gaze went once more to the face of the man on the table and he shook his head and told himself it couldn't be. That it was just a terrible coincidence.

But no.

He knew he was looking at Finn.

???

Tyler

With a coffee, Tyler emptied the packet of stamps from Holden over the table once again. He shifted them around, sorting them into countries once more, as previously he had gathered them all back up into the packet without finishing his sorting. He remembered the ones he'd checked against the ones in his album, and the ones he hadn't. Tyler didn't have a huge collection, but the album was almost full. Some individual pages already were and he'd have to buy another one soon if he was going to carry on. Especially if Holden was going to give him stamps from his collection as he'd suggested. Although maybe that idea was dead in the water now after he'd thrown him out last night. He sighed and focused on the stamps. Tyler stuck his stamps in an album using hinges because it was a cheaper method, even though it was time consuming and devalued the stamps. Buying a stockbook where one could slot the stamp quickly behind glassine leaves was way more expensive and took up more space. If he extended his collection, he'd end up needing a stockbook for each country he collected, which couldn't be done, financially and practically. And the

way he was feeling now, he wanted to dive right back into the hobby in a serious way, thanks to Holden rekindling his desire. He had no money, but you could buy a hundred stamps for a couple of bucks. It wasn't like he was going to start running around buying Penny Blacks. Chance would be a fine thing. Taking up the hobby again would be a form of that mindfulness the therapists were so keen on him exploring. It would be a way to disappear from the world for hours at a time and forget everything.

He saw the red Newfoundland stamp peeking out from behind a few others. He couldn't hinge that one. It was mint, never used and worth something, even if that was maybe only a few bucks. He needed to put it in a mount to protect it. Maybe he could buy a cheap stockbook from eBay and put just his mint stamps in there, if he got any more. That was an idea.

Another sigh escaped him as he held the red Newfoundland stamp in his tweezers. He'd hurt Holden yesterday. The guy was obviously hoping for a little encouragement, for Tyler to say he liked him and maybe they could take it further. Why hadn't he? Just to ease Holden's obvious suffering and mental distress over his addiction and inability to conquer it. Instead, he'd made it sound like Holden was some cheap screw whom he could take or leave, when that wasn't the case at all. Far from it. He was way more invested in Holden than maybe he should have been. And there was the rub, because he doubted Holden's ability to feel more for a sexual partner than arousal. Wasn't Tyler just another cock to him? There could be no mistaking that was what Holden wanted from a man. For him to get fucked as hard and as long and as often as he could.

There couldn't be more from his side, could there? Not with his addiction. So if Tyler ending up feeling something for him, it could be him getting badly hurt, not Holden. Did he feel something for Holden? Did he want this to go somewhere? His disappointment when he'd been sent home last night told him yes, but he didn't think Holden could ever be the one for him, not with the age gap, Tyler's mental issues and

disability, and Holden's addiction. They were too different, even if they were both damaged and suffering. Or were they?

He placed the stamp back on the table. The album wasn't old enough to have a separate section for Newfoundland so his others were mounted under Canada. Perhaps he should get a separate stockbook for them, seeing as they were his favorites, and seeing as some of them were worth something as well. He'd checked their values when he'd started collecting Newfoundland stamps and they had been worth a few bucks each at the time. Better than nothing. Maybe the red dog stamp would be worth more now if he checked again. He wondered how much Holden had paid for them. At first glance, he'd presumed they were a three to five dollar mixed bag—pretty, but worthless—but would someone have made the mistake of putting the red dog in it? He doubted it. So maybe some of the others were worth something too. There were numerous old ones, even a used Queen Victoria Penny Red, although he already had a couple of those in his collection that were sadly only worth a few dollars. Many millions of them had been printed. If you wanted one of those with the big bucks, you had to get a Plate 77 one. He glanced along the side to identify the plate number in the scroll design. Plate 216.

He picked up his phone and googled Penny Red plate numbers. It was worth 29 dollars. It looked like Holden hadn't paid a couple of bucks for this bag at all. He switched to

Newfoundland stamps at Stampworld.com and found the dog. It was worth about sixty-five dollars. Considerably less than some others, but possibly more than the ones in his collection. Not bad at all. Perhaps he'd go through them now and see if they'd appreciated in value. It wasn't like he had anything better to do.

A knock came at the door. Seeing as he knew barely anyone in town, he could hazard a guess who it was. A little flutter went through his stomach as he stood and made his way down the hall to the front door.

But when he swung open the door, he found Finn, looking pale and anxious, shifting from one foot to another and twisting his hands together.

Tyler smiled at him. “Hey.”

“Hey, how you doing?”

“I’m okay. Come in.”

“Thanks.”

Finn stepped inside and wiped his feet on the mat before closing the door. He followed Tyler down the hall to the kitchen. “Do you want some coffee?”

“Sure. Hey, what are these?” Finn peered over the scattered stamps and the album on the table with fascination.

Tyler smiled wryly, waiting for the jokes about being a nerd with no life who never got laid. At least, that was what they’d said at school, even though he got laid plenty, and that was what they would have said in the army too, which was why he hadn’t told anybody. “What does it look like?”

Finn smiled. “Did I find out your secret hobby?”

“Looks like it.” Tyler poured some coffee into a mug and set it on the counter.

Finn didn’t look up. “These are amazing.” He picked up the tweezers to Tyler’s astonishment. “May I?”

“Uh, sure.” Fucking hell, Finn was full of surprises.

“Some old ones here. Wow, I know nothing about stamps, but isn’t that Queen Victoria? A penny red?”

Tyler smiled. He knew he’d made the right choice in having Finn as a friend. “Yeah.”

“So this piece of paper is over a hundred years old?”

“Not that far off two hundred.”

“And these?” Finn gestured to the page that housed Tyler’s small collection. “Newfoundland? They issued their own stamps?”

“Yeah, until 1947. Then they joined Canada in 1949.” Tyler couldn’t believe Finn wanted to chat about stamps like this and had to bite his tongue before he went off on an excited stamp-related rant.

“I’d love to go there. Something about it. So wild and rugged.”

“Me too.”

Finn glanced up and smiled. “Have you just bought these?” He indicated the packet and the pile spilling from it.

“Er, yeah, but uh, Holden bought them for me.” Tyler felt himself blushing and cursed inwardly.

Finn’s eyes went wide. “Oh, right.” He took his mug from the counter. “I think me and you need to sit down. It must be serious if he’s buying you stamps.” He winked.

Tyler smiled. He poured himself a top-up of coffee and led his friend into the lounge.

“How’s the leg?” Finn asked as they took a seat opposite each other.

“Bearable,” Tyler said. He ran his fingers over the edges of the sock on his knee. “These have been great, Finn. The best present anybody’s got me in a long time. Thanks so much.”

Finn lifted an eyebrow. “Even better than the stamps?”

Tyler laughed. “They’re neck and neck.”

“A pretty sweet present to buy you,” Finn said, sipping his coffee and eyeing him. “That ranks alongside someone buying me art supplies.”

“I bet Brandon buys you those all the time,” Tyler said.

Finn laughed. “Yeah, he does.”

Tyler regarded him. He could still see the strain on Finn’s face. The shadow behind his eyes. “Is everything okay?”

Finn shrugged. “I just came to get the gossip.”

“Is that all?”

Finn lowered his gaze, examining the liquid in his mug.

Tyler spoke gently. “I’m guessing you’re feeling the strain from the interviews with Holden.”

Finn bit his lip. He looked up, his dark blue eyes gleaming. “It’s really difficult to talk about some of that stuff with him.”

“I know.”

“And I’m questioning whether I want to carry on.”

Tyler waited a beat before he said, “Nobody’s making you do it. You have to think about what’s right for you. If it’s too traumatic, why put yourself through it?”

“I know. I like talking to Holden though. He’s an okay guy. Even if he does jerk off in his car.”

Tyler spluttered on his coffee. “God,” he said, “he was so ashamed when he got home.”

“I bet.”

“He wanted to interview Brandon for the book and now he knows he stands a cat in hell’s chance of that happening.”

Finn’s face had gone serious again and Tyler cursed himself for mentioning that. “Even if he was Holden’s biggest fan, I’m not sure he’d want to talk about shooting and killing a guy.”

“Yeah,” Tyler said, noticing Finn had said a guy. Not Dominic. A guy.

Finn sighed and sat back against the couch. “He likes you,” he said. “Holden.”

“I like him too,” Tyler said. “But he threw me out last night.”

“He did?”

“Yeah. Says we should stop.”

“Do you want to stop?”

“I don’t know. I think I’m just a cock to service him when he needs it. Which is often.”

Finn regarded him. “That’s not the impression I got from him.”

“It isn’t?”

“No. He likes you. He’s afraid of the obstacles there might be between you, but he likes you. He didn’t talk about you like you were just a cock to get him off. He’s not disrespectful.”

Tyler lowered his gaze.

“Now I know who plays pitcher and who plays catcher.”

Tyler whipped his head up to catch Finn smirking. He smiled reluctantly. A knock came at the door and his smile dissolved to a frown. More visitors than he’d ever had before. It had to be Holden this time.

“Be right back,” he told Finn, placing his cup on the side table before he stood. Sure enough, it was Holden at the door. He looked even paler and more anxious than Finn had looked and Tyler wondered if it was because he was regretting throwing him out the previous night or if something more was at play. “Hey,” he said, noticing the white shirt and jeans Holden wore and the few inches of smooth chest he could see. With difficulty, he forced himself not to look for that dark brush of nipples against the material again. He remembered mouthing those nipples the previous day with Holden astride his lap while Tyler fingered him. How they felt, small and bullet-hard under his lips, wet with saliva. The way Holden shuddered when Tyler licked them.

“It’s Finn,” Holden said without preamble. “I found...”

Tyler put his finger to his lips, effectively cutting him off. He jerked his head back towards the living room.

Holden’s eyes widened. He opened his mouth to speak and closed it again.

“You found what?” Finn asked behind Tyler.

Tyler groaned inwardly. He suspected shit was about to get very heavy and wasn’t sure he could deal with it that morning. There was a lot to be said for sitting at your table sorting through stamps and ignoring the world around you. “Come in,” he told Holden.

“What did you find?” Finn repeated.

“Let’s sit down,” Tyler said, closing the door with a sickening feeling.

The two men were sat opposite each other when he went into the living room. He took a seat next to Holden and looked at his hands clenched on his knees. He suspected whatever it was, it wasn’t something to be shared with Finn.

Finn’s eyes were boring holes in Holden. By his side, Holden seemed to shrink in on himself. Tyler felt sorry for him. “It’s just... a newspaper article about the shooting,” he said. He was a shit liar and Tyler braced himself waiting.

“Try again.” Finn’s voice was cold and hard. “You found what about me?”

Tyler watched Holden. He bit his lip and worked his mouth. Those hands of his compulsively clenched his knees. He wanted to take one of them and squeeze it with reassurance. Instead he said, “Just calm down, Finn.”

Holden looked at him then and Tyler tried to project some reassurance.

“I can’t calm down,” Finn said with his face reddening. He clutched his head in his hands. “Oh God, you’ve seen me on the internet, haven’t you?”

One glance at Holden’s face showed Tyler that Finn had hit the jackpot.

“Finn,” both Tyler and Holden said at the same time and in almost exactly the same tone—sorrow, comfort and horror.

Finn leapt to his feet. “You’ve seen the video of me getting fucked, haven’t you?”

Tyler stood and so did Holden. Finn made to run for the door and Tyler caught him by the arm. “Hey. Don’t.” He pulled Finn to him and suddenly Finn was holding him hard, his face buried against Tyler’s shoulder with great sobs wrenching his lean frame.

Tyler cupped his head. He looked at Holden and saw the tears in his eyes. With his other hand, he reached out to Holden and Holden entwined their fingers and squeezed.

Tyler

“Why don’t you let me call Brandon for you?” Tyler asked gently when Finn was sitting beside him with his head on his shoulder and his tears all cried out.

Finn shrugged away. He shook his head. “Why? So he knows you’ve all seen me?”

“Hey, I haven’t seen you,” Tyler said.

“I already sent a take-down notice to the site,” Holden said from his place on the other couch. “I threatened them with legal action. Told them it was a police matter.”

Finn swallowed and swiped at his eyes. He said nothing. Tyler rubbed his back. “I’ve got something strong in the cupboard. Why don’t I get it?”

When Finn still didn’t reply, Tyler got up. He went into the kitchen and heard Holden following him in. He saw him glance at the stamps spread out on the table, before Holden said, “I’m sorry.”

Tyler pulled a bottle of scotch from the cupboard and three glasses. He didn’t much care that it wasn’t midday yet. “What for?” he asked.

“For telling Finn. I came over for your advice. I hoped me and you could handle it without him ever finding out.”

Tyler sighed. He poured the scotch and handed a glass to Holden. “I’m sure he knew deep down that he was out there somewhere.”

Holden took a gulp of his drink. “My publisher sent me a big advance. I feel bad.”

Tyler left the bottle on the counter because he suspected Finn might need a top-up. “Don’t,” he said.

“Should I give it all to Finn?”

“He wouldn’t take it.”

Holden bit his lip. “I’m sorry about last night too.”

Tyler swallowed some scotch. “You got the wrong idea.”

“I know.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I like you, Holden.”

Holden gave a small smile but his face was still strained and anxious. “I like you too.”

“Good.”

“But you think I’m a guy that can’t commit or have any feelings other than where the next dick’s coming from. It’s not true. I have feelings for you.”

Tyler didn’t say anything. His chest was aching a little.

Holden dropped his voice. “I don’t want to hurt you. As I said last night.”

“And I think I said I was a big boy.” He expected Holden to make some joke about the size of his cock, but he didn’t. He stepped forward and put an arm around Tyler’s

neck, holding him. Tyler closed his eyes, breathing in the scent of Holden's skin, his cologne and his hair gel. He smoothed his hand down Holden's back and wished they were back in bed, just them, with the world outside and all its problems sailing away from them.

Finn gulped his scotch down in one. Then he stood. "I'm going to get going."

"Don't go like this," Holden said softly. "You'll wrap your car around a tree."

Finn turned stricken eyes on them both. "What am I going to tell Brandon? He'll know something's up. If he finds out...God, it was bad enough when he found those DVDs at Dominic's house."

Tyler glanced at Holden and Finn noticed. "Brandon went to Dominic's house, after he'd killed him," he said by way of explanation. "He wanted to...I don't know what he wanted to do. But he found me starring in some movies Dom had made. I bet he wishes he hadn't gone there now. How can he ever unsee that? Then he went back and burned the place to the ground. He thinks I don't know, but I do."

"God," Holden said.

"If he finds out I'm on the fucking internet too, it'll break him."

"No, it won't. He's the strongest man I've ever met," Holden said. "And it's not about him, it's about you. And you're just as strong."

Tyler looked at him in admiration. Holden gave a great pep talk. Tears had dewed Finn's eyes again and he swiped them away. "I don't feel strong," he said in a wavering voice. "I feel like that man Dom beat and abused until I couldn't get any further down at the bottom, and he's still having the last word."

Holden shook his head. “He’s dead. You’re not. The last word will be yours. In your book.”

Maybe it was Holden’s age that made him so wise. Tyler liked his sure, steady manner and his firm belief in what was right. He came with baggage, but he was a good man, that much was clear. Holden glanced at him when Tyler stared at him for too long. Tyler smiled and Holden reached over and squeezed his hand.

“Do you want me to come home with you?” Holden asked Finn. “Speak to Brandon? I realize I’m not his favorite person after yesterday.” He blushed and Tyler tried not to grin.

“Why don’t we both come?” Tyler suggested. “Make a plan to deal with it.”

“Yeah,” Holden said. “I can engage a lawyer.”

Finn stared at him wide-eyed. “You can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because...because then they’ll know too.”

“They won’t bat an eyelid, Finn. I’ll hire someone with experience in this kind of thing.”

“What kind of thing? Revenge porn from beyond the grave?” Finn started to laugh, a kind of hiccupping sob, but still a laugh. Tyler joined in because it was kind of funny. Holden gave him a look but Finn was laughing harder now and didn’t seem to mind that Tyler was too. Holden smiled, still looking unsure.

The three of them were sitting at the kitchen table when Brandon arrived. He let

himself in and took off his shoes before he padded down the hall, stopping short in the doorway and looking from Tyler to Holden. “What’s with the welcoming committee?” he asked, reserving the hardest look for Holden. Finn had called him ten minutes ago and asked him to come home. Tyler was impressed at how long it took Brandon to arrive when summoned.

“Sit down, babe,” Finn said in a small voice with his pain etched on his face.

Brandon studied him for a moment. Then he bent and pressed a kiss to the top of Finn’s head before he took a seat next to him, reaching for his hand.

Tyler had suggested in the car on the way over that Holden or he could tell Brandon, so Finn didn’t have to put it into words. Finn had moaned and muttered and not come up with a reply. Then Tyler had suggested that Finn didn’t even need to be there, that he and Holden could meet with Brandon privately and talk about the video. Finn had vetoed that idea, even though he sat now looking like he was going to a firing squad.

“What’s going on, sweets?” Brandon asked Finn, stroking his thumb with his own. Tyler saw the concern and love on his face. He saw the stiffness of his body language, the tense line of his jaw and wondered how low this man had been brought by dealing with all Finn’s demons. He guessed all the support had always been for Finn and he wondered if anyone ever went out of their way to ask Brandon how he was feeling. He suspected the sheriff kept his feelings inside just fine and got on with it. He was a stronger man than Tyler would ever be and he envied Finn. Glancing at Holden, he wondered if dealing with Tyler’s nightmares, pain and flashbacks would be something he would end up getting tired of when he had his own shit consuming him.

Finn looked from Tyler to Holden with something approaching terror. Brandon glanced at them too. He must know, Tyler thought. Surely he’s always thought Finn would be on the internet after he’d seen the DVDs.

Brandon sighed. “Any of you guys want to enlighten me? You all look like someone just died.” He didn’t smile.

Tyler licked his lips and glanced at Holden before he said. “There’s a video of Finn on a website.”

Brandon paled. He clenched his jaw so a muscle in it ticked, then he tightened his hand on Finn’s and looked at him. “It’s okay,” he said. He was probably ruining the day Finn got tangled up with someone like Holden, a porn connoisseur who, if the video was going to be found, would find it. Maybe he and Finn would never have been the wiser about the video being online were it not for Holden.

Finn bowed his head. Tears slid out from under his lashes and he wiped his hand roughly over his face.

Tyler balked at this intimate moment. “We want to help take it down from however many sites it’s on,” he said.

Brandon was so still and pale that for a moment Tyler braced himself for an explosion of blame and recrimination and for him and Holden to be thrown out of the house. Instead, Brandon cupped Finn’s head in a gentle hand and eased it down against his shoulder. “Thanks,” he said and with that one word, they were dismissed. Tyler and Holden stood and left the kitchen. Glancing back at the door, Tyler saw Finn clinging to Brandon and Brandon stroking his head, murmuring words too quiet to hear.

They walked away from the house together, circling the lake in silence. As they approached Holden’s house, Tyler took a breath and said, “I’m ready to tell you about losing my leg now.”

Tyler

The sun was at its zenith in the sky, reflecting in a dazzling glow from the still surface of the lake. “Let’s sit down here.” Holden tugged Tyler’s hand and they crouched beneath the low hanging branches of a weeping willow, secluded and shady.

Tyler glanced at Holden’s house on one side of the water and Brandon’s on the other. He’d literally stuck a pin in a map when he’d chosen this place, and found a realtor’s online. Looking out now over the tranquil surface of the lake and at the handsome man beside him, he felt a little of the torment and pressure in his chest ease. Maybe coming to Clear Water Creek hadn’t been so bad after all.

“You’re a compassionate man, Holden,” he said. “You’re principled and you stand up for what’s right. I admire you. I admire you a lot. And don’t ever tell yourself that your addiction and the way it makes you behave makes you less of a man or a bad person. Far from it.”

Holden gave a small smile with his cheeks reddening. He touched his fingers to the back of Tyler’s hand. “Right back at you,” he said softly. “I like you and admire you more than you’ll ever know.”

Tyler’s gaze dropped to Holden’s pale pink lips then moved back to his dark eyes before he leaned forward and kissed him.

Holden touched him on the cheek. He slid his hand to the back of Tyler’s head and returned the kiss, slow and long and tender. Tyler’s toes curled. Warmth fizzed down

his spine and coiled into his stomach. They touched tongues and Tyler's original purpose became muddy beneath a veil of lust. He eased his palms up Holden's shirt, tracing the curves of his back, reveling in the satin soft feel of his skin. Holden let out a little murmur against his lips. His spine arched under Tyler's touch and his breathing quickened.

Tyler helped Holden straddle his lap. He pulled him close, arms tight around him, hands savoring every inch of skin before grasping Holden's ass to pull him forward and feel his hardness pressing against his belly. Holden let out a shuddering gasp. He eased back an inch from Tyler's lips. "I'm already in hot water with the sheriff for public indecency," he said. "Much as I'd love to fuck you here, he'll lock me up this time if he catches me doing this on his doorstep. Plus, you're supposed to be telling me about your leg."

Tyler smiled ruefully. He gave Holden's ass a last stroke. "I'm sorry for being inappropriate."

"Never apologize for being inappropriate."

They both laughed. "Can I get a raincheck?"

Holden brushed his lips over Tyler's. "You most definitely can."

"Is this the first time you've ever turned sex down in your life?"

Holden laughed. "Yeah. I can't believe it." He slid off Tyler's lap.

They sat side by side holding hands and looking across the lake while Tyler figured out how to start, knowing the memories and emotions were about to bury him under an avalanche.

“It was in J-bad. Jalalabad. We were in a market square. I had a sort of friend, Ronnie. He was with me that day. He and I got on well. He was more cerebral than the others. I was thinking about sounding him out that night. Maybe even telling him about me. I thought he might be gay but I wasn’t sure. He didn’t have a girlfriend and he didn’t talk about girls at all, the way the other guys did. Even if he wasn’t, I got the feeling he might react okay. We were patrolling. It was a car bomb, of course. We never knew what hit us. When I came to, I was lying on the ground choking on the smoke and deaf from the explosion. I tried to move and couldn’t. One of the guys, he grabbed me, dragged me over to sit against the side of a truck. He started rooting in my pack. He pushed an antibiotic in my mouth and made me swallow it dry. Then he stuck a syringe of morphine into my thigh. I couldn’t work out why until I checked out both legs and saw the left one was mangled. My foot was flipping about and not looking quite right, like it was barely attached. He tightened a tourniquet above my knee, then he got on the radio.”

Tyler took a breath. The memories came thick and fast. He’d spent so long trying to repress them that it crucified him to bring them voluntarily to the surface. He squeezed his eyes shut. His voice shook when he spoke again.

“I saw Ronnie then lying in the dirt. He was in two pieces. Cut in half.”

Holden was completely silent. Tyler smelled the smoke and the blood. He could hear the screaming of the wounded and the cry of the innocent civilians caught up in the terror. He breathed hard, panic rising, and felt Holden squeeze his hand. “Slow your breathing. Follow me.”

Tyler turned his gaze. He watched Holden’s face, then his chest, copying his inspiration, holding it and letting it out slowly.

“That’s right,” Holden said. “You’re doing good. Really good.”

“They took me by helicopter. I ended up at Ramstein in Germany for weeks. They amputated on the first day. When I woke up, I could still feel my foot. It was agony. I only knew it was gone when I pulled the covers back and saw for myself. I couldn’t understand the pain.” He laughed weakly. “I still can’t.”

Tears shone in Holden’s eyes. He held Tyler’s hand tightly.

“My dad didn’t come. I guess it was more important to him that he continued to show his disdain for my choice of sexual partners. I wanted my mom. I needed her more than I ever had before in my life and she was gone. I lay there crying day after day wishing she was still alive.”

“I’m sorry,” Holden said in a whisper and he started to cry. “I’m so sorry.”

Tyler dropped his head into Holden’s lap and wept.

They walked towards the diner in silent agreement, both of them thirsty and hungry. They kept their hands entwined until they got there, then Tyler let go once he’d pushed the door open and held it for Holden to follow him. The inside was cool and air-conditioned and fragrant with coffee and apple pie. Tyler’s stomach growled. He led Holden to the counter and they both took a seat. He saw Holden’s hesitant face when Finn came out from the back, and he squeezed his knee gently to reassure him. Holden glanced at him, then looked at Finn when he approached the counter. “What are you doing here?” he asked. “You should be at home with Brandon.”

Finn shook his head. He was pale, his eyes red. “I had a shift.”

“Finn,” Holden said, reaching across the counter to lay his hand on top of Finn’s. “I’m sorry.”

Finn glanced at Holden. His lip trembled and he bit it. “You don’t need to be.”

“But I am. I brought a whole heap of trouble to your door.”

Watching, Tyler ached for both of them.

Finn didn't say anything, so Holden went on. “I got an advance for the book. It's yours.”

Finn shook his head. “No.”

“Yes.”

“No, Holden.”

“Guys, let's not argue over money,” Tyler interjected in a bid to lighten the mood. “And can I get some iced tea? I'm dying of thirst here.”

Finn gave a wan smile. He filled a glass with ice and set it on the counter, then moved off to a fridge to take out a jug.

“You should have let me persuade him,” Holden murmured, watching Finn.

“You can't persuade him if he doesn't want it, babe,” Tyler replied.

Holden threw him a look. “Did you just call me babe?”

Tyler blushed. “Yeah. Sorry.”

Holden smiled. It was a tender smile, his dark eyes soft. “Don't be.”

“Noted,” Tyler said with a grin and felt his insides dissolve into warm treacle. He liked the feeling a lot.

Finn filled the glass and Tyler gulped it down in one. “And another, please.”

Finn smiled and refilled. “And for you?”

“I’ll take the same,” Holden said. “And will you at least think about it? You could use it for art school.”

Finn put another glass on the counter. “No. Now what are you guys having to eat?”

Holden sighed. “Can I have a menu?”

“Sure.” Finn put down two laminated cards, then walked back into the kitchen.

Tyler squeezed Holden’s knee. “Let him be.”

Holden glanced at him. “You can have it then.”

“What?”

“The money.”

Tyler frowned. “No.”

“Yes. You can get a better leg. See the best doctor for your phantom limb pain.”

Tyler swallowed. “Just how much money are we talking about?”

“Quite a lot.” Holden took a drink of his iced tea.

“I can’t.”

“You can.”

“No.” Tyler glanced to the kitchen and lowered his voice. “Listen, Finn’s mental health is precarious. He could pull out of this at any moment. You know that, right?”

Holden looked down into his glass. He didn’t speak.

“If he does and you’ve spent that advance, you’re in a world of trouble. Don’t go giving money away that’s not really yours yet.”

Holden lifted his gaze and smiled ruefully. “You have a better business head than me, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.”

Holden reached out. He cupped the back of Tyler’s neck. “I want to kiss you. Can I do that here?”

Tyler surveyed the diner behind him from the corner of his eye. A woman on her own at the back was watching them, but apart from that, no one seemed interested. His policy had always been don’t ram it down people’s throats. Not doing that kept him safe in his book. The diner in this quaint backwater seemed as non-threatening as you could get though. The clientele were ladies lunching together and a few middle-aged heterosexual couples. No children to ask difficult questions.

He opened his mouth to say sure, but Holden had already decided for himself. He pressed his lips against Tyler’s and swept him away on a tide of bliss. Tyler heard himself sigh in deep pleasure. He opened his mouth and they explored each other’s lips with soft, sweet kisses and no tongues.

“All right, get a room,” Finn said. When they drew apart to look at him, he said,

“Brandon and I give this crowd enough to talk about, thanks. The lady at the back reading a gay romance likes herself some man-on-man though; you just made her day. She only comes in on the days I’m working because she knows Brandon will show up and give her an eyeful.”

Tyler looked and the woman in question lifted her paperback featuring a half-naked man on the cover over her blushing face. He smiled.

“We should invite her for dinner,” Holden said. Tyler glanced at him and caught the direction of his thoughts. Voyeurism. Inviting someone to watch them. Part of his addiction. He probably wasn’t even joking.

He shifted his gaze to his menu and said nothing and Holden squeezed his knee as though in apology.

They walked home together after their meal. The sun was still hot, the air thick and humid and buzzing with insects. Tyler admired the bright wild flowers growing along the side of the road and the bees busily collecting pollen. Their arms brushed and then their fingers. Holden caught Tyler’s hand loosely. They didn’t speak. Tyler felt easier than he had ever been since J-bad. Even though his leg was doing its best to ruin his day as it always did, at that moment it didn’t have the power to touch him. The pain was what it was. A testament to his survival. Keeping him strong.

They got back to the house and stopped in the yard facing each other. “I’m going to go up to the attic and look for my stamp collection,” Holden said.

Surprised, Tyler said, “Now?”

“Yeah.” Holden smiled and patted him on the arm. “Go and rest.”

Tyler did as he was told. He sat on the edge of his bed and debated taking his leg off.

If Holden brought the stamp collection straight over, Tyler would have to answer the door without the prosthesis. Even now, he didn't want to be without it in front of Holden, despite what Holden had said about it not bothering him. Maybe it was true. It didn't mean Tyler wanted to flaunt the stump at every opportunity. But still, he was in his own house, if you could call renting a house from Holden his own, and that meant he should be able to take off the damn leg whenever he wanted to. If Holden chose to knock on the door, it was his fucking problem if Tyler answered it without his leg.

Sighing at the fierce nature of his thoughts, he unclicked the prosthesis and maneuvered the cup free. He rolled down the silicone liner and followed it with the several layers of socks. Exposing his skin to the air felt great, as it always did. He used a baby wipe to clean the stump before he lay down. Just a rest, he told himself. Forty winks while Holden looks at the stamps. He felt his eyelids growing heavy immediately and drifted into a fond reverie of Holden coming back from the attic with a full sheet of mint condition Newfoundland stamps. Or maybe a dozen nice Penny Blacks.

Holden

Holden saw Tyler lying motionless on the bed from the window on the landing before he carried the heavy cardboard box downstairs. He let himself out of the house and crossed the yard, hesitating outside Tyler's door. He didn't want to knock and disturb him. Nor did he want to leave the box outside his door, where dust and maybe even rain could get into his collection. Not that he was that bothered anymore about the collection, but Tyler would be. And maybe his enthusiasm would kick start Holden's appreciation of the hobby of kings. Maybe he and Tyler could be a pair of stamp collecting geeks together. For some reason, he liked that idea more than he could say. And he was all too well aware of the power of a hobby to take you away from the weight of life. Balancing the box against his chest, he tried the door handle and found it open. He tiptoed inside. He'd leave the box and let himself out. It would be a nice surprise for Tyler when he came around from his rest.

He entered the bedroom and placed the box on the foot of the bed, on the opposite side to where Tyler was stretched out, one long muscular leg bare with a white sock on the foot, the other ending just below the knee in a smooth stump. Holden stopped. He examined the stump for long moments. Then he went around the bed to the window and sat down beside Tyler. He smoothed Tyler's dark hair back from his forehead with a tender hand and all sorts of feelings rushing to fill his breast. This man was special. Broken and damaged, but special, and Holden wanted him in his life. He couldn't fuck this up. He couldn't hurt Tyler. He needed to step up and be the man Tyler needed.

Tyler stirred under his touch, thick lashes flickering before he woke, looking up groggily at Holden. The smile he gave melted Holden's heart. If he hadn't been sure,

he was now. “Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to wake you. I’ve left the box. Go back to sleep and look at them when you get the chance.”

Tyler raised himself on his elbows. “No way,” he said and Holden couldn’t help but smile at the childish excitement on his face. He got that. He’d had it once himself when looking through packets of stamps he’d purchased without seeing the contents first. There was always the chance of a great find, a rare find, no matter what the odds. Although it hadn’t really been about the money with him, more about the beauty of stamps, their history and the story they told.

“All right then,” he said and got up to walk around the edge of the bed. He opened the box and lifted out the contents—smaller boxes, envelopes, glassine packets of stamps, albums and stockbooks—before placing the box on the floor and spreading the goodies out over the other side of the bed. He couldn’t believe how much stuff he had. He didn’t remember most of it. He found numerous envelopes sorted by country or continent. He showed Tyler—Asia, Africa, US, Canada, Great Britain, Australia and various countries in Europe that had their own envelopes like Germany and France. He remembered doing these over a period of years, recognized his own scrawl on the front as though looking at a stranger’s writing. Tyler opened one of the albums. Holden hoped he wasn’t a purist about hinging stamps because Holden had done that from childhood. Only when he got older and gained some stamps worth something did he display them in folders and stockbooks.

“Really nice,” Tyler said, admiring the colorful Hungarian stamps Holden had a lot of which he’d been given by a family friend in the late seventies and early eighties. He got a lot of pleasure from looking at those. He loved the birds, the butterflies and flowers and was even now more attracted to those than creased up old stamps from over a hundred years ago. Even though those were worth the big bucks. Still, he found himself apologizing to Tyler. “I never really collected to retire on the profits,” he said with an awkward laugh. “I like pretty stuff.”

Tyler had moved onto a few sheets of Japanese stuff on black plastic cards—all flora, fauna and Mount Fuji—some of Holden’s favorites. “I can see that,” he said with a reassuring smile that told Holden he didn’t think he was as worthless as his collection. If he was disappointed that Holden’s collection probably didn’t contain any gems, he didn’t show it. On the contrary, that childish excitement remained on his face as he searched through the collection.

Holden located a few A4 size wallets of stamps—there had to be thousands. “These are the last stuff I bought.”

Tyler grinned, looking thrilled, and Holden found two lots of tweezers in the box, handing one to Tyler before he tipped one of the folders onto the bed. They sorted in silence for long minutes, occasionally making murmurs of appreciation. The stamps were a world mix and while many were as modern as the 1980s, some were considerably older. As in a hundred years older. Tyler showed him a couple of Queen Victoria stamps from Malta and Jamaica and nodded approvingly and Holden smiled and thought about gifting the entire collection to Tyler just to make his day.

Tyler held up a red stamp in his tongs. “Penny red.”

“Really?” It really was.

“Have you got a magnifier?” Holden pulled one from the box and handed it over. Tyler put it to his eye. “Well, it’s not a plate 77.”

Holden didn’t know much at all about Victorian stamps and wished he did. “That’s the big bucks?”

“Yeah. Thousands. This looks like a plate 88. It’s mint with a nice clear watermark.”

Holden had never looked at plate numbers in his life and hadn’t really cared when he

had been collecting his birds, butterflies and flowers. This stamp had four perfect regular borders with the initials M and K in the bottom corners and swapped around in the top corners. “Worth anything?”

Tyler pulled his phone from his pocket and thumbed the buttons, opening a browser. “Couple of hundred bucks,” he said.

Holden smiled. “Not bad at all. Maybe we’ll find more.”

They looked at each other. Tyler’s eyes were shining and Holden wanted to be the one to put that expression there for the rest of his life. He dipped his gaze back down to the pile of stamps and froze as something jumped out at him as though painted in neon.

“What the fuck?” he said softly.

“What?”

Holden reached into the pile with his tongs, his hand starting to shake with adrenaline because he recognized the stamp. He wasn’t sure what it was or from where, but he knew he had seen it before, and recently.

As the tips of his tweezers found it and lifted it free, Tyler let out a cry like someone might make when they won the lottery.

“No!” he yelled, “no!” And he grasped Holden’s wrist, making him hold the stamp between them, bending his head to look while with the other hand, he fumbled the magnifier to his eye.

Holden knew then where he had seen the stamp before. In Tyler’s kitchen on his phone that week when Tyler had said he would never own it. The red two penny with

the flowers and the coats of arms. 1857. No postal cancellation. Thirteen thousand bucks.

He jerked his gaze to Tyler's and saw his grey eyes were wide and round and filled with tears. "Is it?" Holden asked, the stupidest question in the history of questions because he could see the name, for fuck's sake, Newfoundland, and the design and he knew it was.

He knew just like he knew their future was now way rosier than he had first thought. He cupped Tyler's face and kissed him before he dug his tweezers back into the pile of stamps. "Maybe there's more," he said.

Tyler laughed. "Greedy much?"

"Hey, we found a Penny Red and a rare Newfoundland so far. What are the chances of something else?"

Tyler shifted a few stamps with his tweezers. "Did you really get these from eBay?"

Holden searched his memory. "Maybe not. Maybe it was at a garage sale in my old neighborhood."

"They obviously didn't know what they had."

"No. That's why we might find something else."

Tyler gave a sharp intake of breath. His whole body started to quiver. "Like this?"

Holden saw the stamp he was holding up. An Inverted Jenny.

Tyler

First of all, Tyler made Holden put the two stamps carefully into a black mount covered with plastic. That then went into another packet. Then he made him put the packet in the top drawer of the bureau in the gap beside his socks, where no liquid would get spilt on it and nothing could actually damage it. Then he searched for the Inverted Jenny online with trembling fingers. He knew nothing about this stamp other than it was worth a fortune. Wikipedia told him there were only a hundred copies of the 1918 stamp with the rare fault in existence and they were worth around one and a half million dollars, although some had sold for two million in the past.

Holden closed the drawer. He looked at Tyler's screen, before he took the phone from him and laid it down. Then he pulled Tyler into his arms and kissed him. They kissed like they were millionaires. Which Holden was. They fell onto the bed amongst the pile of stamps—even the hundreds of bucks Penny Red—and rolled about with abandon, ripping at clothes. Money had never made Tyler hard before but it did now, even though it was Holden's. Because Holden's excitement was his excitement and there was no doubting the writer was hard enough to drill diamonds. Tyler kind of hoped Holden wouldn't sell his stamp and move away to Malibu or some such place, leaving Tyler alone and maybe homeless after he'd sold the house, but if he did, he did. Tyler would accept Holden's good fortune—and he was due some—and wish him well.

But Holden, on top of him and breathing hard with tears in his eyes, said, "We're rich. We're rich. Our troubles are over." And Tyler stared up at him, hearing the word we and his tears started to roll down his cheeks.

“Don’t cry,” Holden said in a whisper. “The best leg money can buy, I swear. The best fucking leg. A fucking robotic leg that takes you for a walk down the street when you’re too tired.” And they both started laughing, clinging together half naked and kissing.

Holden eased between his thighs and Tyler caught his breath as they rocked together, hard cock to hard cock before Holden started to strip Tyler of his shorts and underwear. Tyler watched his gaze and didn’t see Holden so much as glance at his stump. Instead, he was focused on his balls, and stroking the area behind them. They kissed again and Holden’s fingers moved into Tyler’s ass crack, over his hole, and he got what Holden wanted. Tyler wouldn’t have called himself versatile, because he mainly did the fucking and actually, couldn’t remember when he last got fucked.

But it seemed reasonable to get fucked as a celebration of his new fortune. What better reason to submit. And besides, the touch of Holden’s fingers made him shiver and tremble and ache for something inside him. It wouldn’t be a hardship. Far from it.

Holden sat back on his heels. He took lube and a condom from his pocket. Of course. Why wouldn’t he be without these supplies? Then he looked at Tyler, hesitating. “I want to fuck you.”

“I know,” Tyler said.

Holden waited. “Is that okay?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

Tyler smiled. “Don’t try to talk me out of it.”

“I’m not, but...”

“What?”

“Don’t think that I...” Holden stopped.

“Don’t think that I need to let you fuck me because you’re going to share your expensive stamp with me?” Tyler asked with an eyebrow raise.

Holden reddened.

Tyler stroked his cheek. “I don’t think that. What I do think is that I want you inside me very much. So why don’t you just get on with it?”

Holden smiled. He uncapped the lube and squeezed some on his fingers.

Tyler flinched at the cold gel.

“Relax.”

“I am.” The sensation of one finger pad lightly stroking his entrance almost made his toes curl, so good did it feel. “Fuck,” he said when Holden pressed and Tyler opened up. He groaned when Holden eased his finger all the way inside, fucking him. Holden leaned over him. He kissed Tyler’s throat, then crooked his finger to find his prostate and Tyler jerked as though electrified. While he’d managed to stimulate it himself in the past, no one else ever had. No one had even tried. He threw back his head, shuddering under Holden’s touch.

Holden gave a low groan. “Fuck, Tyler, you turn me on so much. Look at your cock.”

Tyler looked down. He watched how his cock jerked and dribbled cum with every

press of Holden's fingers.

"So fucking hot," Holden said, his voice low and dancing along a feverish line. "I can't wait to feel you squeezing my cock."

Tyler groaned. The dirty talk again and this time he loved it. "Fuck me," he said and saw how Holden's eyes darkened. His partner knelt back and rolled on a condom with unsteady hands before he lined his cock up with Tyler's entrance.

Tyler's dick was throbbing. The action of his ass stretching open almost made him come. Never had it been like this before. Maybe Holden would turn him into a needy bottom with one fuck. He clutched Holden's shoulders as Holden slid balls-deep, making him gasp.

"Holy fuck," Holden ground out, his face flushed. He reached between their bodies to take Tyler's dick in his fist, looking down at him. "I need you to come for me."

Tyler whimpered. His ass felt stuffed to bursting and when Holden withdrew and nailed him again, he let out a cry and brought his thighs up around Holden's back.

"Come on." Holden started a rhythm, long and slow, getting harder and faster until Tyler couldn't breathe or think and his body arched away into an ascent to orgasm that engulfed him. A climax that loomed on the horizon and approached steadily with the force of a tsunami. How was it possible to come so quickly after being penetrated? He never had before. In fact, from what he could remember each time on bottom had been a miserable anti-climax that he hadn't wanted to repeat, hence he was always the pitcher and never the catcher. Until Holden showed him how it was done right.

He clawed at Holden's back and Holden responded with a bruising kiss that sent him spiraling beyond all control. At that moment, Holden owned him body, mind and soul

and Tyler was smitten. If this was how Holden always made love, Tyler wanted to be part of it for as long as he could.

He heard Holden's name slip from his lips. A responding growl from Holden before Tyler dissolved into orgasm and things became hazy as he shook and cried out, holding on tight as though Holden might slide away like a dream. Like one of the morphine dreams he had had on the base at Ramstein when his leg had been amputated and he could still feel his foot alive and hurting and begging to be put out of its misery.

When he regained coherent thought, he was lying sprawled beneath Holden with his partner plastered against him, breathing heavily, his hand still around Tyler's spent dick.

"Oh my God, Tyler," Holden said with admiration in his voice.

Tyler laughed.

"That was..." Holden uncurled his fingers as though his hand had been welded to Tyler's cock. He drew patterns in the semen on Tyler's belly before bringing his finger to his lips. "Mmm." He sucked and Tyler watched, enthralled, his dick already surging with renewed interest.

Holden smiled at him. Then he slid down Tyler's body and Tyler watched as Holden licked around the rim of his cock and ran his tongue over his belly, lapping at Tyler's cum.

"Fuck," he said under his breath, feathering his fingers through Holden's silvering hair.

"You're getting hard again."

“So I am. You drive me fucking wild, Holden. No one ever got me as hard as you in my entire life.”

Holden’s smile was shy and he actually blushed.

“And when you were inside me,” Tyler continued, unable to be anything but hopelessly honest, “no one ever fucked me like that before. It was kind of something I just had to suck up before. That’s why I didn’t really do it.”

Holden watched him from beneath his lashes. He planted soft kisses on Tyler’s belly. His eyes were tender and misty. “I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“You have no idea.”

Holden laughed. He slid up and rested his head on Tyler’s chest. “You’re something else, no matter which way around we do it,” he said. “Any way you want, any time, that’s fine by me. Whatever you want. I’m yours.”

Their gazes held before they both stretched for a kiss. Tyler considered how lucky he was. While he was broken, Holden was too. They were two damaged and needy souls finding solace with each other. They had a difficult road ahead of them—he was under no illusions about that—but they had each other and he wanted Holden to be a part of his life for as long as he could have him.

“Let’s sell the stamp and buy a new house somewhere,” Holden said.

Tyler regarded him. “You don’t want to stay here?” He wasn’t surprised.

“I don’t want to live in the house Finn almost died in, no,” Holden replied. “And maybe Dominic fucking Bateman’s ghost haunts the place.”

“Hope he enjoyed the show we put on then,” Tyler said. “I’m guessing he won’t get too much action in hell, unless you count being raped by Satan for all eternity.” They both had a chuckle at that. He hoped maybe he could tell that joke to Finn one day. Then again, perhaps not.

“Do you want to stay here?” he asked. “In Clear Water Creek?”

Holden hesitated. “Yeah, I think so. I like the peace. Even though the sheriff hates me. But I’m easy. Whatever you want. Wherever you want to go.”

A thought occurred to Tyler then. “What if the stamp’s a fake?”

Holden shrugged. “We’ll get it appraised. If it is, it is. No biggie. Doesn’t change how I feel about you and how I want to keep you around.” He regarded Tyler for long moments. “If you can cope with me.”

Tyler swallowed. “I can. I want to. I want to more than anything.”

Holden kissed him. “I’m the luckiest man in the world.” Tyler shook his head and tried to speak and Holden laid fingers over his mouth. “Yes, I am.”

They looked at each other in silence, no words needed, and Tyler thought finally, that it had been worth surviving Afghanistan if Holden was what he found at the end of that long road back.

Six months later

Tyler

Tyler threw open the French doors and stepped onto the balcony. The lawn stretched down to a river at the back of the house, the yard full with mature trees and shrubs, most of them now winter bare and covered with a thick layer of snow. One of them stood out though, a huge Nordic fir tree, just perfect to hang Christmas lights on. Tyler would make that his next job, if Holden let him.

Holden had already shooed him away when Tyler had tried to help with lugging his huge new antique writing desk up to the second floor. It was what they had paid movers for, Holden said, and Tyler should go take a break. Even with the new leg, Holden liked him to take it easy. Tyler would take it easy when he was dead.

He fastened the windows shut and looked around the master suite with admiration. Decorated in shades of silver, gold and cream, it was a touch flashy for his taste, but Holden liked it enough to want to keep the décor. Their king size was already set up in the middle, with the nightstands dumped haphazardly next to it and a few suitcases scattered around. The suite was so large that Holden had ordered a chaise longue to go on the far side, with a chair and an occasional table. Tyler snorted, eyeing the luxurious silver velvet and ornate legs on the thing. A fucking chaise longue. Where did Holden think he was, eighteenth century France?

He busied himself carrying the suitcases into the adjoining walk-in closet, where they would be out of sight out of mind, because he had no intention of starting on them now. If it was up to him, he'd probably live out of them for a couple of weeks before

he got around to emptying them, but he suspected Holden would have something to say about that.

Something made him glance at the chaise longue again when he reentered the main room. Okay, he'd try it out. Maybe it might be nice for a slouch during the day with a book, or a snooze in front of the fire that definitely needed lighting because it was a chilly day, but where were the logs?

He stretched out on the chaise longue, too tall of course with his feet hanging off the end. Padding his head on a plump matching cushion, he closed his eyes. Yeah, it was comfier than it looked. Holden knew what he was doing after all. Tyler wondered what Finn would make of it when he came over. Their new house was around half a mile from Finn and Brandon's little love nest. Finn had seen photos and been astonished when they put an offer in for the property after selling the stamp. The old house by the lake remained for sale, empty once again and waiting for someone who didn't mind that Dominic Bateman had met his last days there. The Inverted Jenny had sold for so much at auction that Holden decided against selling the two pence Newfoundland too and gifted it to Tyler. Holden had got the best blowjob of his life that night.

Tyler looked out once more at the immense garden. The house was too good to be true. With four bedrooms, plus a library, study, orangery and massive basement housing another three rooms, it was the stuff dreams were made of. Holden had already organized some work on the place before they'd moved in, work that he had been especially secretive about, saying it was a surprise. Tyler didn't mind. Holden had a better eye for things and Tyler trusted his partner's decisions.

The collaboration between Holden and Finn had been released the day before. It sold thousands on its first day as well as the thousands of pre-orders it had taken. Finn had reluctantly taken all the advance money once he found out Holden was now rich, and he would also take a hefty cut of the profits—more than Holden. The press were

clamoring for interviews and while Holden refused, Finn had agreed to do just one, a meeting with a respected British journalist for the BBC, involving a substantial fee. He and Brandon were now set for life and Finn was three months into his art degree. While Brandon was still sheriff. Tyler wasn't sure why the guy didn't retire but he guessed unlike most people, Brandon enjoyed his job.

Tyler sighed and glanced down at the immense and expensive titanium beast strapped to his knee. What a beautiful machine it was. So it should have been for the price. His new doctor had arranged physical therapy sessions, pain management appointments and mirror therapy. He went to the city once a month for mindfulness sessions where he was taught to be present in the moment and let go all his thoughts about the past. Holden accompanied him to the group for his own demons and afterwards they always went out for a slap-up meal and booked into their arranged suite at The Four Seasons, rolling around on the bed till the small hours under the influence of an expensive bottle of wine. The staff knew them there now. They'd started giving Holden and Tyler the honeymoon suite when it was available and hinting very hard that they wanted them to actually book the place for their wedding. Not that it was in the cards and he wasn't sure why the staff thought it was. They left rose petals on the bed and champagne on ice which had backfired the first time when Tyler had ended up with his head in the toilet bowl. Red wine and champagne did not mix. As well as the mindfulness, Holden attended a once-weekly addiction meeting in the next town over. There was a range of alcoholics, drug addicts and sex addicts in the group. Tyler imagined all the sex addicts getting together for a gangbang after the session and had let that idea torture him for way too long. The way he looked at it now was if infidelity was going to happen, then it would. He would deal with it when and if it came along. Holden had tried to reassure him until he was blue in the face. He told Tyler over and over again that he was on the road to recovery and that road would be travelled with Tyler, and Tyler alone.

Holden was working on his next book, back to crime fiction, with another law enforcement main character, who he'd made gay at Tyler's suggestion. He smiled to

himself as he remembered the story Holden had written for him. The conversation had come about in bed. Tyler had asked him to write a dirty sex scene between two men. Holden had taken the brief and come up with an older business man in a suit picking up a hot younger rent boy in a bar. The steam rising from the pages had nearly melted Tyler's tablet. Holden had been out at the store when Tyler had read it—one-handed of course—coming way before the story had ended. He'd waited in the house by the lake for Holden to get back. As soon as he'd stepped foot into the kitchen, Tyler had pinned Holden flat to the table, wrenched his clothes down and dropped a blob of lube into his ass crack before thrusting inside.

The rickety table had almost given way beneath them as he'd rode Holden, his partner nearly screaming the place down as he came. They'd laughed and kissed and Tyler had suggested that Holden write a dirty story as often as he could and publish under a pseudonym. Holden had been amused, but with the writer's block seemingly banished he came up with a series of erotic shorts that made Tyler's toes curl. Tyler took over formatting and uploading them and paying a PA to promote them, and they were making a tidy sum that Holden insisted went into Tyler's bank account. He guessed he was earning his keep by being in charge of publishing the stories, but Tyler still felt guilty that he was riding the coat tails of Holden's fortune. Holden didn't see it that way of course.

Tyler closed his eyes again. He tuned out the crashing and banging from other parts of the house as the movers manhandled the furniture, and let the stress of the day slide away, focusing on the movement of his ribs as he breathed in, held it, and let it out slowly. He felt the tension in his body slide away along with the muted pin-pricks to the sole of that fucking non-existent foot. He jumped when he felt two hands on his knees, sliding up his thighs.

"Hey," a soft voice said. "Here you are."

Tyler opened his eyes and smiled at the heavenly vision of Holden kneeling before

him. He was dressed all in black, heavy wool sweater and black jeans, the silver glinting in his dark hair and his lashes casting shadows on his cheeks as the gloomy day started to slide towards an early sunset.

“You okay?” Holden reached up to stroke his cheek.

“Yeah, just taking five.”

“Good.”

“I’ll be back out in a moment.”

“No, you won’t. Stay here,” Holden said. “How do you like my chaise longue?”

“Ridiculous.”

“Oh, really? So you won’t want the benefits it comes with then?”

“What?” Tyler focused on Holden’s hand on his belt buckle, sliding it open before popping his button.

“It comes with a free blowjob every time you sit on it.”

Tyler’s dick went so hard so quickly he was sure there was no blood left to perfuse his brain. “Uh huh?” he mumbled.

“Yeah.” Holden made short work of his zipper and reached into Tyler’s underwear.

“Fuck,” Tyler said, glancing at the door in panic.

But Holden had closed it and the clatter of removals sounded like they were

downstairs rather than close by. He grabbed Holden's hair in an attempt to stop him as Holden opened wide and sank down his erection. That attempt lasted all of a second before he tightened his fingers and urged Holden down deeper, groaning as his partner sank all the way to his balls.

"Oh fuck, Holden." Tyler arched off the chair, his toes curling. Holden had the wettest, hottest mouth Tyler had ever known. When he drew back to lap across his cockhead and torment his slit with the point of his tongue, Tyler whimpered, his legs shaking. "Take your dick out," he said, as he had that day in his kitchen when Holden had been sucking him off.

Smiling, Holden released his cock from his jeans. Then he went back to long, slow sucks of Tyler's dick while jerking off, emitting groans around Tyler's flesh that nearly undid him. He watched Holden's hand as he got closer to the end, fantasizing about christening the room later—his cock in Holden's ass on that bed overlooking the magnificent garden. With the curtains open because there were no neighbors to see.

"Don't you dare come," he told Holden. "I have plans for you."

Obediently, Holden took his hand away with his eyes wide with anticipation. Then his last suck took Tyler over the edge into oblivion and he filled Holden's mouth.

He lay still for a moment, getting his breath back. Then he looked down at Holden still kneeling there with his cheeks flushed and his cock hard. Tyler swung his legs to the floor, planting his one good foot and one expensive fake foot on either side of Holden, before tugging him to his feet. With a groan, Holden stood and guided his dick into Tyler's waiting mouth.

Tyler loved sucking him off. He grabbed Holden's ass and let his partner thrust into his mouth, using him and grabbing hold of his hair. Holden looked down at him,

mouth slack and panting, eyes dark with lust, so incredibly beautiful when he was turned on. “Fuck, Tyler,” Holden said. “Oh my God, I love you so much.” And with those words, he came down Tyler’s throat in a gush.

Tyler took it all with his heart soaring at hearing this from Holden for the first time. He lapped around Holden’s cockhead collecting every drop until Holden’s erection started to subside. Then he swung his legs back onto the chaise longue and lay back for another rest. Holden joined him there, clambering onto him and squeezing his body onto the seat, and Tyler discovered something else about the expensive piece of furniture. There was room for them both to squash on without fear of one of them falling off. He was impressed. Perhaps it would become his new favorite place to fuck. Although there were plenty of places in the house he planned to take Holden. Starting with that massive antique desk.

Holden buried his face against Tyler’s neck, kissing him while he fastened his pants back up. “Epic,” he muttered.

“Thank you, Mr. Maddison,” Tyler said. “Right back at you.” He was still thinking about those three words Holden had let loose in the heat of passion.

“Now I’ve given you one present, I want to give you another,” Holden said. “I’ve got something for you. Upstairs.”

Upstairs was a large empty attic room that Tyler had presumed would store all the usual detritus of a normal household. He hadn’t thought too closely about it. But Holden was looking at him with a grin. “I had the room done up,” he said. “For you.”

Tyler mock-groaned. “You’re putting me up there because of my farting in bed, aren’t you?”

Holden slapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t tempt me. Fasten up and come with me.”

He climbed off the couch and waited for Tyler to make himself presentable before he held out his hand to hoist him up. Hand in hand they left the bedroom.

Looking over the banister into the hall below, Tyler had been right that the movers were downstairs, at the far end of the house, wheeling in the new fridge and carrying boxes containing Holden's new china dinner service. He followed Holden down to the end of the landing and up the flight of stairs that led to the next floor.

The steps opened into the massive room that Tyler had viewed empty a couple of months ago but which now looked very different. He climbed all the way to the top and stood staring around him with his jaw open.

Along one side of the room stood the longest desk Tyler had ever seen with shelves and drawers and two chairs. A brand new magnifying lamp was angled over the surface at one end while an organizer held that essential equipment to stamp collecting that Tyler had once had the cheapest of, or not at all—tweezers, perforation gauge, watermark detector, glassine envelopes and more stuff that he wasn't even sure about.

The other wall was lined with built in bookcases. On one shelf he recognized his own stamp album, together with a basket containing those loose stamps he had yet to file away—things he had been buying with gusto on eBay since coming back to the hobby. On the other shelves, he recognized Holden's stamp albums and stock books and boxes containing envelopes and packets of stamps, enough to keep Tyler busy for months. There was also row upon row of what looked like brand new stock books, alphabetized for every country in the world, including the dead ones.

The walls had been painted white and hung with some of the stamp art Holden had recently shown him for sale on Etsy. Two little birds wearing crowns, their beaks almost touching and a shower of hearts radiating between them, all completely made from pink, red and purple stamps. Another one of two cats nose to nose made from

black and grey stamps, then the well-known sculpture of Queen Elizabeth ? as she had been on the famous Machin stamps for over fifty years. Again, the picture had been rendered completely in stamps—all Machins of the Queen in a variety of stunning colors. Tyler had once told Holden he admired the late Queen greatly. To be confronted by this stunning artwork in this spectacular room that was now apparently his new stamp den took his breath away.

He turned to Holden with tears in his eyes. And because he couldn't speak, Holden took Tyler into his arms and held him tight.

The fire was lit and crackling in the hearth, casting a rosy glow over the room, the shadows darkest on the bed where Holden and Tyler lay together under the quilt. They had walked to the diner to eat and been served by Finn who had secured an invite around the next day and planned to help Tyler hang lights on that magnificent fir tree out back. Tyler also intended to let Finn sit in the orangery—or out in the garden when it got warmer—to paint whenever he wanted, because the view was so spectacular. Brandon had joined them for a cup of coffee when they'd finished eating. His frosty manner towards Holden had started to thaw once Holden had helped with the legal action against all the websites hosting the video of Finn, to the point that he'd given the interview Holden wanted—talking about the shooting of Dominic and his feelings for Finn. Holden had told Tyler he'd seen that strong man he knew the sheriff was, but also, Brandon had let his guard down enough to show the vulnerability Holden knew lurked beneath the surface. That anxiety for Finn and his wellbeing and that all-encompassing love. As well as those memories of what he had done. Taken a man's life. Holden respected Brandon more than he could ever say and if Brandon ever returned even a tenth of the sentiment, he would be a happy man.

Sheriff Schofield was now a local celebrity along with Finn thanks to the book, and when Finn had hurried to their table in a state of high excitement and shown him a royalty statement for the book, Brandon's jaw had dropped open. He had stared at Holden, then at Finn, before he pulled Finn onto his lap in front of the entire diner

and kissed him. Tyler had wondered if they would roll around on the bed when they got home the way he and Holden had when they found the Inverted Jenny and smiled to himself.

Holden caught his eye and winked at him. When Finn extricated himself and hurried back to the counter where the cook was shouting that orders were getting cold, Brandon had leaned across the table and offered his hand. Holden shook it. Brandon had read the book before it went to print because no way would Holden have risked the sheriff's wrath by not giving him final say-so on the manuscript. And he had done such a good job that Brandon had not asked for a single word to be changed. Holden knew very well that both Finn and Brandon had wept when they read it, as had Tyler. He sensed that Finn had achieved some of the catharsis he'd hoped for, and maybe too, so had Brandon.

So much more had come to light during Holden's interviews with Finn and Brandon though. Finn's nightmare hadn't ended with Dominic Bateman's death because six months later, Brandon had discovered Finn's ex was collaborating with Reinhard Hellberg, a wealthy porn connoisseur with a taste for snuff, which he financed. Hellberg had had some sort of obsession with Finn after being invited to one of Dominic's parties. He'd kidnapped Finn, planning to star him in his best movie yet. Brandon had found Finn locked in a basement, having fought off his captors. Hellberg and his cronies were now serving life in prison. Tyler couldn't believe his eyes when he'd read the book. He hadn't been able to bring up those details with Finn, but maybe his friend would want to talk about it in time. One little tidbit and criminal act that hadn't found its way into the book was Brandon paying a visit to the house Dominic had shared with Finn and burning it to the ground. That would stay just between the four of them.

They had made love when they got back from dinner, Holden on his back staring up at Tyler as he moved inside him with slow, deep strokes until they both came.

“You’re an amazing man,” Tyler said, squeezing Holden.

“So are you.”

“I don’t deserve all this. That stamp room, this house, you sharing your money this way...”

“Shut up.” Holden silenced him with a kiss.

“I can’t. I need you to know...”

“I know. Now shush. I’m not an amazing man, I’m a man who’s behaved badly for a large portion of his life and now wants to pay his good luck forward. To you, and to my friends. Those two guys are great, and we’re lucky to have them in our life. I’m even luckier to have you. When I wake up every morning, I thank God that I met you. I’ll do anything you want to keep you happy and make your life as easy as possible. Because I love you.”

Tyler grabbed his neck and kissed him. His heart was so full it felt like it would burst. Their troubles weren’t over of course. Holden still confessed thoughts to him of wanting to watch porn when he should be working, of thinking of faceless men using him for their own ends. They’d experimented with ways around this. Ways to gratify Holden’s addiction without giving into it. They’d watched porn together. Tyler had blindfolded Holden and held him down while fucking him and whispering the filthiest of obscenities. Holden had responded with great enthusiasm. Down the line he’d told Tyler that he now starred in Holden’s fantasies, not anonymous men. He only had to ask for what he wanted and Tyler would deliver it. Holden had asked Tyler to meet with his addiction counsellor privately because he wanted no secrets between them and the guy had told Tyler that Holden was doing great. Certainly there was no infidelity to be worried about.

It all helped to calm Tyler and reduce the energy he spent worrying over the future. He and Holden were solid and moving in the right direction. Their lives were brighter and easier and there was so much to look forward to. When he'd laid helpless in that hospital bed all alone in Ramstein with half of him gone, Tyler had wondered how he would ever come back from such a tragedy as losing part of himself.

Now he had found the missing part of himself in Holden and felt more complete than he ever had before.

THE END

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In Inferno, passion burns hotter than hell...

“I wept not, so to stone within I grew.” – Dante Alighieri

Step inside Inferno and meet Dante Jardine, six feet four of satanic beauty indulging every vice at his disposal.

An ex-cop, injured on the job, Dante has buried all the grief and torment of his dark life in fire and ice. He lives in a twilight world of sordid encounters that leave him cold.

When a notorious rent boy is murdered in his nightclub, Dante finds his hellish world pried open by in-the-closet Moonlight Cove cop Zack Stewart and his partner Angela Keaton, his carefully constructed facade ripped away.

Zack loathes the arrogant nightclub owner from the moment he sets eyes on him. Dante is obstructive, disdainful and, he is sure, frozen all the way to the core. As he investigates, all roads lead back to Dante and he becomes Zack's chief suspect.

“You don't want to see what sort of man I am in the dead of night when I'm all alone.”

Soon it becomes apparent the cops are looking for a serial killer targeting gay men and Zack's priorities become more muddled the longer he is around Dante. He finds himself walking a dangerous road between being a good cop and giving in to his growing desire...

“I don’t know what I’m going to do with you, Detective Stewart. You’re a thorn in my side but I’m not sure I want to try and dig you out.”

Warning: Scenes of violence and murder. Historical child abuse. Drug abuse. Strong language and sexual scenes.

Detective Zack Stewart slammed his car door, not bothering to lock it. He crossed the parking lot, avoiding a puddle of vomit and a couple of used rubbers, and held his badge up at the uniformed officer guarding the door, grunting, still groggy with sleep. The cop waved him past the police tape and into the dark, sweaty club.

For a moment he stood blinking, staring into the depths of Inferno, the premier—and indeed, only—gay nightclub in Moonlight Cove.

That a town the size of Moonlight Cove—nestled somewhere between Dana Point and San Clemente on the southern stretch of the Orange County coastline—had a gay village at all was a source of great pride to its LGBTQ inhabitants. Sure, it consisted of little more than five bars but it was their own space, flying the flag for their sexual identity.

Inferno closed at five a.m. most nights. It operated a strict door policy and often ran men-only nights. Famous celebrities appeared there and competition nights gave away fabulous prizes. The place was the talk of the town.

It looked like Saturday night was still in full swing. The place was outfitted like a version of hell itself—all black and red, flames licking around the edges of the walls and up the spiral staircase, a mural depicting the nine circles of hell with quotes from Dante’s *Inferno*. Other landscapes showed naked men with men and women with women, entwined in a variety of sensual and explicit poses that made Zack’s blood run hot.

The front door might have been cordoned off to prevent anyone leaving or entering,

but it was business as usual inside—heaving dance floors, half-naked podium dancers and gratuitous sexual displays around each corner. Zack swallowed and tried to remain calm and detached as he saw his partner with relief and hurried to greet her.

“Angela, it’s four in the fucking morning.”

“The night’s young,” the attractive blonde detective said with a wry smile. “Homicide in the alleyway outside. White male.”

“Lead the way.”

He weighed up the options as he followed Angela past the dance floor and restrooms, down a long corridor and out of a fire exit. Lover’s tiff, drinking gone wrong, jealous bar-fight, that kind of thing.

Zack squinted into the spotlights set up. The crime scene was taped off and scenes of crime in white suits meandered around.

“Angela, Zack,” said the pathologist, straightening up. He was a rugged man in his sixties, brusque and to the point, but good at his job. Suspicious deaths weren’t frequent in Moonlight Cove and he made no secret of the fact he loved to get his teeth into a good homicide.

“Eric.” Zack’s gaze strayed to the thin, blond-haired figure on the ground. “What can you tell us?”

“Preliminary: white male, approximately five feet nine, one hundred and twenty pounds. Been dead around two hours. Driver’s license id’s him as Corey Breton, age twenty-seven. Money in his wallet, watch still on his wrist, one cell phone, switched off.”

Zack crouched down at the victim’s head, looking at the swollen, congested features

and staring eyes.

“Ligature mark around the neck. Strangled from behind,” Eric said. He nodded at a torn pair of briefs discarded on the ground. “The murder weapon.”

“His own?” Angela asked, glancing at the white material.

“I’d say so. Slight marking around his hips from elastic indicate he’d been wearing underwear.”

“Was he raped?”

“I’m hesitant to say. There’s some blood. I’ll do a proper examination downtown but the killer wore a condom and there’s evidence of lubricant around the anus. Not usually the actions of a rapist and not just that, but there’s semen on the wall.”

Angela and Zack looked at each other. “He came before he died?” Angela asked.

“Yes. Brick dust under his nails consistent with being held against the wall during sex.”

Zack stared down at the corpse. “Rough sex gone wrong? Trying to get off with some asphyxiation and his partner accidentally kills him?”

“Possibly,” the pathologist said.

“I’ll run a check.” Angela straightened up and walked away, talking into her phone.

Zack glanced around the crime scene. Dry ground, no footprints. He leaned closer to the wall, wondering if the rough bricks might have snagged some fibers from the murderer’s clothes. All in good time. Let the crime scene unit do their job and he’d do his. Hard enough at four in the morning.

Back inside the club by the restrooms, a uniformed policewoman was comforting a crying young man.

“I take it you found the body?” Zack asked.

The man looked up, blue eyes swollen. He was about twenty years old, attractive in a gauche kind of way. He straightened up, checking Zack out, giving a wan smile. “Yeah. The bathroom was heaving so I ran outside to take a leak. Almost tripped right over him.” He sniffed and wiped the back of his hand across his nose. “It’s so horrible.”

“Did you see anyone?”

“No.”

“All right. Give the officer your details and we’ll be in touch if we need you again.”

The man nodded and Zack wandered back outside. He blinked as he walked under a spotlight. He looked up and spotted a camera above the fire exit.

He’d managed to get his hands on a cup of coffee and was standing watching the body being zipped into a bag when Angela joined him. “He’s got a rap sheet,” she said. “Two arrests for drug possession—crystal meth—with intent to supply. Three arrests for soliciting. Suspended sentences or a fine every time.”

Zack sipped his coffee. “So, robbery wasn’t the motive unless our killer took his stash. But they had sex. Maybe it was consensual. Perhaps things just got out of hand?”

“Maybe,” Angela said. “You spotted the CCTV?”

“Yeah. Let’s go see who’s in charge here.”

The bar manager, Anthony, escorted them up the stairs. Men walking down eyed Zack and he flushed, feeling hungry stares checking out each part of his anatomy. As they reached the second level balcony, Angela grinned at him. “You’ve got a few admirers.”

Zack worked out three times a week and kept himself well-groomed, his dark hair regulation short, his face closely-shaved, but all his efforts were wasted: he was married to the job. He found some of the men looking at him attractive and had to fight the urge to stare right back. This was one secret he had yet to share with anyone at work. He suspected Angela knew but was waiting for him to say something. He wouldn’t be coming out any time soon. What was the point in stirring up trouble for himself when he was virtually celibate anyway?

Anthony led them along the next landing and up a second flight of stairs marked Private. Staff Only. He knocked on a door and opened it when a deep voice bade them enter. Angela thanked him. As he walked away, he glanced back over his shoulder and winked at Zack.

Angela rolled her eyes. “Every guy in this place is falling over themselves for you.”

Zack said nothing. He straightened his tie, grasped the handle and pushed open the door.

The owner of Inferno rose from behind a mahogany desk and Zack instantly forgot any of the men who had just looked at him. His glance turned to a stare.

The guy was in his late thirties or early forties. He was taller than Zack, around six feet four with a broad-shouldered, worked-out physique that filled his tailored black suit. His hair was jet black and slicked back from his satanically handsome face. A stark black beauty mark stood on one cheek, drawing the gaze.

Zack couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t look away. He couldn’t think of a more fitting

person to own Inferno. The man looked like Lucifer himself.

The fallen angel walked around the desk—with a slight limp, Zack noticed—and his big body dominated the room. He looked the two of them over, his gaze lingering on Zack. “Dante Jardine,” he said.

“I’m Detective Keaton, this is my partner Detective Stewart,” Angela replied.

Dante shook their hands. His grip was firm and solid, his hand large. His eyes were a startling violet, at odds with his black hair and pale skin. He appraised Zack with a cool gaze.

Zack made sure to draw his hand back as soon as he could without appearing rude. He felt intimidated and didn’t much like it. “You know about the murder?”

“Please have a seat.” Dante gestured to the two chairs in front of his desk and waited until they’d sat down before he settled back into his own chair. “Yes, I know. Dreadful business.”

“I’d expect you to be down there in the alleyway, not hiding up here in your office,” Angela said.

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t trample all over your crime scene. I’m safer up here.” Dante’s tone was smooth and calm. He smiled from rather cruel, if sensual lips, the beauty mark stretching, the smile not reaching his eyes

Something about his aloof manner made Zack bristle. Before he could speak, Angela stood and leaned across the desk with her phone. “This is the victim. Do you know him?”

Dante glanced at the photo. “Not exactly. He was a regular. I’d seen him around the club.”

“Do you know anything about him?”

Dante arched a sardonic eyebrow. “About his lifestyle you mean? He was a whore who sold drugs.”

Zack glowered at him. “You shouldn’t speak ill of the dead.”

Dante looked chastened. “Forgive me. He didn’t deserve to come to such a nasty end.”

Angela took over again. Maybe she sensed Zack’s antipathy. “So you allowed him to sell drugs and solicit for business in your club?”

“Of course I didn’t. He was frisked every time he came in. He hadn’t been caught with anything on him for a while.”

“Why didn’t you just ban him?”

Dante shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Like fuck you don’t. There was more to this than met the eye. Zack stared at him.

A small TV on a table in the corner of the room showed a black and white image of the activity in the alleyway downstairs. “Who watches your CCTV? Just you?”

“Usually, yes.”

“You mean you don’t have your security people keeping an eye on it during the night?”

“I don’t find that necessary.” The club owner’s tone was blasé, almost bored.

Zack clenched his teeth. "I don't think much of your security precautions here at all. Perhaps I'll have a word with a few people I know."

Dante paled, his eyes narrowing.

"Where were you this morning at around two o'clock?"

"Here," Dante said between his teeth, his expression stony now, his gaze fixed on Zack.

"Can anyone vouch for that?"

"Plenty of people. I had phone calls. The bar manager came up. Then the door manager. I was called around three-thirty when the body was found."

"You've been up here all night?"

"No, I was down at the bar till about midnight."

The two men stared each other down until Angela broke the silence. "We need to see the CCTV footage from the time the club opened."

Dante pushed his chair back and stood. "Knock yourself out." He moved to the desk where the TV sat and rewound the tape. "It starts at ten p.m. Shall I get some popcorn?"

Zack ignored him and focused on the circle of light outside the fire exit door. From time to time, crime scene investigators walked past, their white outfits glowing.

"Doesn't it pan down the alleyway?"

"No. That's it."

“Your camera is fixed above the door and just films that spot?”

“Yes. It does the job, doesn’t it? It’s supposed to capture the face of anyone breaking into the club. I’m sure it will show the face of your murderer. If there’s nothing else, I’ll leave you to it.”

“Oh no,” Zack said, rising to his feet. “You can stay here while we watch.” He crossed the room and put himself into the club owner’s personal space.

Dante stared down at him. He was around four inches taller. They were so close Zack could smell the spicy, intoxicating scent of his cologne. Despite himself, he felt a stirring of arousal. “Take a seat, Mr. Jardine,” he said before he turned his back on the club owner.

Angela took charge of forwarding the tape. Zack leaned on Dante’s desk and watched, stifling a yawn. The tape wound on at a good speed but it still made for tedious work watching four hours’ worth of the small circle of light.

Angela perked up when a black shape slinked up to the door, nosing around. “Cat burglar?” she joked over her shoulder to Zack who glared and said nothing, not in the mood.

As the time on screen clicked around to nearly two a.m., something happened. Angela stopped, rewound, then played the tape. But it was just as obvious in play mode what was going on. A shadow fell over the circle of light before the camera went black.

“Son of a bitch put something over the lens. He knew it was there.” Zack turned around to look at Dante.

Dante frowned. “And you’re looking at me, why? Am I being accused of something here?”

“Is there a fire escape down to the alleyway from this floor?”

“Yes. At the end of the corridor.”

“Ever been down it?”

Dante’s face was like ice. “I don’t know. Maybe. I own the place, don’t I? I’m getting tired of the interrogation, Detective. Should I call my lawyer?”

Zack shrugged. “If you feel you need one.”

The two men eyeballed each other.

Angela stepped in. “That won’t be necessary, Mr. Jardine, we’re just asking questions, that’s all.” She shot a warning look at Zack. “Why don’t we see what time the camera was uncovered?”

Zack turned back to look at the TV. Angela forwarded the tape again until the item blocking the lens was removed at two-fifteen.

“Okay, so our murderer went back into the club at two-fifteen. Someone must have seen him come back in.”

“Not necessarily,” Dante said. “There’s an entrance on the corridor to the fire exit from the back room. If he went back that way, nobody would have noticed. It’s kind of, er, dark in there.”

Zack regarded Dante for a long moment. “The back room? Do I want to know what goes on in there?”

Dante smirked. “I don’t know. Do you?”

Zack clenched his jaw. “Do you have CCTV in there?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“In the corridor to the fire exit?”

“No.”

“All right, that’s it.” Zack marched to the door and wrenched it open. “Jerk us around as much as you want, Mr. Jardine, that’s fine by me.”

Angela ran after him. “What are you doing?”

“Looking for witnesses.” With his jaw set, Zack set off down the stairs. He glanced back to the third floor landing to see Dante standing at the railing, pale and angry.

“Detective, if you lose me business, I swear I’ll sue you for every penny you’ve got.”

“Expect around fifty dollars then,” Zack said. He charged down the next flight to the ground floor and stood looking over the dance floor a moment. “There,” he shouted to Angela over the ear-splitting dance music, pointing to a black door.

Zack banged the door open. The first thing that hit him was the dark, then the heat and the smell of sweat. The next thing was the noise. Without warning, the hair on the back of his neck stood up and his cock stirred. He pulled a small flashlight from his pocket and switched it on, surveying the darkness, raising his voice.

“My name is Detective Stewart from Moonlight Cove PD. There’s been a murder outside this club in the alleyway behind this room. We are looking for witnesses. Nobody is to leave until they have been questioned.”

His jaw dropped at the scenes his torch lit up.

“For fuck’s sake, Zack,” Angela muttered behind him.

In every corner, against every wall, couples and multiples were entwined, sucking and fucking. Zack thought he had stepped into a Roman orgy. He had never seen anything like it in his life, but then he had never frequented anywhere like Inferno before.

“Detective, have you seen enough or should I snap a few photos for you to take home?”

Zack wheeled around. He grabbed a handful of Dante’s jacket and propelled him back, pinning him against the wall. “You and I are going to go back up to your office and have a nice chat, starting from the beginning,” he hissed, flashlight shining full in Dante’s face. “And you can give me a reason not to close you down right now.”

Dante stayed still in his grip, his eyes flashing—startlingly violet, like jewels—pupils constricted to pinpoints. “I’ll be calling that lawyer after all.”

“You do that.” Zack let him go and stalked out of the back room.

Angela caught up with him by the dance floor. “What the fuck are you doing?” she shouted above the music. “Do you seriously like him for this?”

“I don’t know.” Zack ran a hand through his hair, unsteady with the after-effects of adrenaline. Christ, the things he’d seen. “Don’t you?”

“Not really. He’d have to have one hell of a good motive to start murdering his clientele.”

“Look, someone’s been murdered and he doesn’t give a fuck.”

“He’s just a cold fish. Doesn’t mean he did it. You were out of line back there, you

know that.”

Zack stared at her a moment. He didn’t bother to deny the accusation.

“You should go home. I’ll wrap up here for tonight.”

“No.”

“Yes. The guy’s going to be all lawyered up and what will we achieve? Nothing. I’m going to do some damage limitation and you’re going to go back to your beauty sleep.”

Zack sighed. “I want a background check on the bastard. I want CSU to go over the fire escape leading from his office to the alleyway, got it? Let the fingerprints and fibers do the talking. And I want every dumpster in that alley and every inch of this club checked for the killer’s condom.”

“Okay, fine. Now go.”

Zack glanced up the stairs. Dante stood on the third floor landing looking down at him with an unreadable expression on his face.