



# Swipe Left, Power Down, Look Up

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Busy soccer coach Trey Novak doesn't have time for the awkwardness and upheaval dating can cause, but when his cousin stands him up for a lunch date, he meets someone who changes his mind.

Dewey Saunders is dying to get a real job in his field and start the rest of his life, but a guy's got to pay rent, and the coffee shop is where it's at. When the handsome customer in the coach's sweats gets stood up, Dewey is right there to commiserate—and maybe make some time with a cute guy.

Trey's making hopeful plans with Dewey when his professional life explodes. He and Dewey aren't in a serious place yet, and suddenly he's promising to make sports a welcoming place for all people. When Dewey puts himself out to comfort Trey after an awful day, Trey realizes that they might not be in a serious place, but Dewey has serious promise for their future. If someone as loyal and as kind and funny as Dewey is what's offered, Trey would gladly swipe right for love.

**Total Pages (Source):** 13

# Page 1

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Now

“SO, AUNT Nancy,” Trey Novak said proudly, “this is Dewey Saunders. I told you I’d bring him to meet you before we moved in together.”

Nancy Armstrong was the fiftyish, interesting kind of aunt, an artist with an eclectically furnished apartment in half a converted Victorian in Midtown Sacramento. She lived in the upstairs and used the downstairs for her crystal and tarot shop and art gallery, where she did readings and life coaching in the mornings. She had a lion’s mane of streaked brown-and-blond hair and squirrel-bright brown eyes in a face that had seen a life lived her way and a few boyfriends she’d rather forget, as well as the one she was living with now, who she was pretty happy to remember.

“Trey,” Nan said, standing on tiptoes to give him a hug. “Dewey! So nice to meet you!” She gestured into her apartment, which had been the nightmare and wonder of Trey’s adulthood because it was a collection of spindly-legged end tables and collectible shelves, each with its share of tchotchkes and dust catchers, none of which had more than a one in a hundred chance of surviving any sort of fall intact. Trey—who had met and come to treasure Nan when he’d moved to Sacramento for school—had both loved and feared visiting here in equal measure, until one day the unthinkable happened and he’d tripped and taken out an entire coffee table, reducing it to tiny sticks and attractive rubble. Nancy had laughed, salvaged what could be saved, and thrown away the rest, patting Trey on the cheek and telling him it was a sign to hit another garage sale and pull some more treasures from storage. She was just glad he wasn’t hurt. The moment had helped establish Nan as the parent he wished he’d had, but he was still really careful about her apartment.

Now Trey settled himself at her dining room table, which featured an assortment of cushioned chairs, at least three chosen specifically with his six-foot athletic build in mind. Dewey, who stood a slender five foot eight, settled daintily on a delicate Georgian creation, while Trey took the farmhouse special.

“Would you like rose-hip tea?” she asked, and for a moment, Trey got excited, because he loved rose-hip tea.

“Trey likes coffee with lots of milk and sugar,” Dewey said with confidence, and Nan met Trey’s eyes across the table.

“Of course,” she said, eyes narrowing a little. “I should have remembered. You, Dewey?”

“Same,” he said. “It’s weird—it’s like we like our coffee exactly the same way.”

“That is weird,” she said, and Trey tried not to fidget. “So, Dewey, Trey never did tell me how you two met. One minute he was the world’s loneliest soccer coach and the next you two were going out to a movie. He’s not exactly Mr. Smooth. How did that happen?”

“We just started talking—” Trey said, trying to get the version out there that was unfettered with details, dressing; that is, the truth.

“Well, he was in this coffee shop where I work, Bean There. Have you heard of it?”

Nan blinked slowly and gave Trey a sly glance. “Yes. Yes, in fact, I have heard of it. Sort of a, erm, meeting place—”

“Meat market,” Dewey said unrepentantly. “I know. The young and beautiful go there for their hookups and their Tindr and Grindr dates. It’s partly why I applied

there, besides the, uhm, needing a job thing.”

“You through with college?” Nan asked, and Trey was in no position to hiss at her to not be an education snob.

“Yeah, but I’m not sure if I want to go back and get my credential,” Dewey said. “Love my education, but art history majors don’t have many options.”

Nan made a greedy little moue in Trey’s direction, because he knew he’d brought her a particularly juicy bunny to eat. “Art history, you say?” she almost purred. “Do tell. I’ve been looking for someone to help me circulate the art on my walls in the shop downstairs for ages.”

Dewey nodded—Trey had filled him in. “I heard about your last assistant. Uhm, sorry?”

She grimaced. “Don’t be. Caitlyn was Caitlyn’s fault. But you know the deal, right? I run a crystal/tarot shop, but the wall space doubles as a gallery, and I’m always hoping for more local artists to sell for.” She practically licked her whiskers. “So tell me more about your art history degree...”

Dewey laughed and started to talk about his favorite art periods, and while he spoke, Nan busied herself at the old-fashioned white electric stove. The entire kitchen was done retro—the floorboards were painted white, the mats under the sink and the tablecloth on the big white-painted farmhouse table were blue gingham. Trey often thought that if his aunt had the money for it, she’d wear those full-skirted house dresses.

“I mean, look at him! Can you even believe his dating-app candidate would stand him up?” Dewey asked, and Trey twitched. How had Dewey gotten there from art history?

Nan's eyes widened to saucer size, and she almost choked on her tea. "No," she said, her eyeballs practically beating Morse code inside his head. "No. I honestly can't believe a dating-app candidate would stand him up."

Trey gave a sheepish smile and hid behind his favorite mug. "Stranger things," he murmured.

"Indeed," Nan said, her voice Sahara-desert dry. "But do go on, Dewey. I want to hear the rest of the story."

"It was great," Dewey said. "See, what happened was this...."

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:22 am*

Then

DEWEY USUALLY tried to be chipper and optimistic at work, but he had to admit, today had been rough. He was known for his cheerfulness, and he hated letting people down, but gah, he was so disheartened. He'd spent his last two days off searching for a job—any job—that didn't involve coffee, waiting tables, espresso machines, or cashiering, but apparently all those people in his hometown who'd predicted dire things for somebody getting a humanities degree had been right, and he wasn't going to get much out of his college education.

Not that he regretted it. No, he loved his subject. But boy, he'd had enough of being a barista during college. His career was going nowhere, his mother was pleading for him to come back to the wilds of Oregon, and he hadn't gotten laid in a year because once college was over, the dating pool shriveled down to grab-assy customers and the people he met in the local watering hole. Ugh. No. Bankers, lawyers, politicians: suits. He went there because his roommate, CJ, tended bar, and he and Ceej could bitch about their lives when Ceej wasn't slinging Michelob for people who thought that's what beer was.

It's a good thing Dewey liked people—not necessarily potential romantic partners, because so many of those losers had been blech—but other people. Young fathers who came into a coffee shop and bought a giant espresso, black, for themselves and a cake pop for their grade-schooler so they could both get a little buzz at the beginning of the day. The elderly couple who came in day after day, sat at their same outside table rain or shine, and ordered coffee regular, in mugs, then sat and talked for an hour about everything from the color of the sky to the yard decorations their neighbors had put up while they took tiny sips so as not to negate their blood-pressure

medication. The two young women planning their wedding.

Those people. He adored them. It was like living in a painting, except he had to wear finger condoms so his nails didn't separate because his hands were wet all the time, and he could smell burnt coffee in his dreams.

So he was trying to pull his optimism from his bootstraps when Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Handsome strode in.

He wasn't wearing jeans—which normally Dewey was a fan of. Instead, he had on microfiber sweats, the kind often worn by men who really did spend a lot of their time on some sort of field. Over that he had a bright red sweatshirt advertising some sort of local soccer club, and as he sat down, the young father with the toddler waved at him.

"How you doing, Coach?"

"Really good, Brandon. How about you?"

"Got married last year," he said brightly and then winked, indicating the three-year-old clinging to his hand. "It was a little late," he said.

Coach laughed, and Dewey wondered when he'd been this guy's coach. He was only, what? Thirtysomething? And Dad was twenty-three? Four? Who let infants coach their teams? Dewey was indignant on somebody's behalf.

"So what are you doing here?" Brandon the young father enquired.

Coach grimaced. "I was meeting someone, but I think they're a no-show!"

"D'oh! Well, I hope whoever it is shows up. Your time is valuable, amirite?"

Coach—and Dewey was hungering for his name by now—smiled kindly, his lean lips curving up under an attractive amount of auburn-brown scruff. He had a bold nose, a square jaw, and dark hair and eyes, but that scruff really did have the teeniest bit of red in it, and boy, Dewey was intrigued.

With a shake back to reality, he reminded himself that the odds of this man playing for his team were incredibly low and finished wiping off the counter he was standing near so he could go take Coach's order.

He found the man biting his lip and scowling over his phone, and he took a little pity on the guy.

“Did she stand you up?” he asked kindly.

“He,” the man replied absently. “He promised to meet me and—” He blew out a breath and set his phone facedown on the table.

“Probably an asshole,” Dewey said confidentially, hoping this guy didn't get all het up about swearing. “What dating app did you use?”

“Dating app?” Coach repeated blankly.

“Yeah—Grindr, Tindr, OKCupid? I've tried a few of them, but it's always so embarrassing, right? I never know what to say to a complete stranger I met off the net. I mean, I've had some fun dinners and all, but nothing that's ever gone beyond that.”

Coach was staring at him, and belatedly, Dewey noted the flush that was creeping up his neck, and it hit him. Oh God. This guy was a soccer coach—a lot of people still had a problem with LGBTQ people being around their kids and—oh God. Please let Dewey not have outed this guy and caused him problems. Dewey hadn't meant for



that to happen!

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “I won’t tell a soul.”

Coach gave him a weak smile. “Thank you,” he rasped. “That’s kind.”

“So, uhm—” Dewey indicated the tablet and stylus in his hand. “—what sort of coffee did you want?”

Coach opened and closed his mouth a couple of times. “Whatever you think is best,” he replied.

“Oh, I’m basic,” Dewey told him truthfully. “I like a big mug of the hot stuff, even on a hot day like this one, with a gallon of cream and a ton of sugar, and since I’m at a coffee shop, a teeny bit of vanilla. But we’ve got lots of much better drinks—”

“That sounds perfect,” said his customer. “I... I’ll take that. And, uhm, a bagel if you’ve got one, plain, heated, with some cream cheese.”

“Perfect,” Dewey said, smiling back into the guy’s long-lashed dark eyes. For a moment there was awkward silence, and then Dewey had to ask, “What do you coach, anyway?”

“Soccer,” Coach murmured. “Both on the college level, where I’m an assistant coach, and in a recreational club. I got my degree in phys ed, with some sports medicine, and played soccer all the way through.”

“Pros?” The man’s lean body underneath the sweats spoke of some serious work, the kind that didn’t die with the end of a season.

His coach (his coach now!) shrugged a little, obviously pleased. “A couple of seasons

with the Republic,” he said modestly, indicating Sacramento’s pro team. “My knees started going, and there was a position open at the college, and the junior-high level always needs coaches.” He grimaced a little. “Neither gig pays great, but....” He shrugged.

“Doing what you love,” Dewey said. His coach had tiny lines by his eyes. Maybe he was midthirties at most, but suddenly Dewey knew why that young father would defer to him.

His coach’s voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “I think I love coaching more than playing, you know?”

Dewey practically clutched at his thundering heart. “That’s awesome,” he said, meaning it. Teachers beat jocks on the potential boyfriend scale any day. “So, uhm, what name should I put on your order?” They didn’t actually put names on orders taken at the table, but this guy had obviously never been there before, so he wouldn’t know that.

“Trey,” he said. “Trey Novak.”

Dewey grinned. “Dewey,” he said, holding his hand out. “Dewey Saunders. Pleased to meet you.”

“You too,” Trey said, taking it. His skin was rough and weathered, and Dewey’s entire groin area throbbed under his barista’s apron. Oh. My. God. He wanted to be spanked by this hand. Or stroked. Or fingered. Or... gah. He wanted this hand on his body.

“Hopefully your next date won’t stand you up,” Dewey said, fishing.

He didn’t catch quite what he hoped for.

“I’ll have to try again tomorrow,” Trey said, but he didn’t sound too hopeful.

“I’ll be here,” Dewey said, trying not to pout. Good going, Dewey. Way to ensure you’re here when this guy found the love of his life.

“Well, if it’s a no-show,” Trey said gallantly, “I’ll at least have the pleasure of talking to you.”

Dewey had never prayed so hard for bad things to happen.

They chatted some more as Dewey waited on him; the coffee shop was just busy enough to give him an excuse to go somewhere when conversation got awkward. He learned that Trey lived by himself in a small house in Carmichael, that he shared custody of his cat and a tank of fish with his sister, who lived about a block away, and that their parents lived in Indiana. Trey had come to Sacramento for the business program and stayed for the soccer, and he followed almost every form of sports known to man.

“Even curling?” Dewey teased.

Trey had laughed—Sacramento was definitely not a curling town. “Only on the Olympics, sadly.” His phone buzzed on the table then, and he checked the screen. “Shit,” he said, standing up. Giving Dewey an apologetic glance, he said, “It’s my cousin. Car trouble. I’m the nearest who can help.”

“Oh no!” Dewey said, meaning it. “It’s been great talking to you.”

“You too.” Trey gave him a blinding smile before he put some bills on the table and then turned to walk out. He paused at the door and said, “You, uhm, work this shift often?”

“Five days a week,” Dewey said, his heart thudding in his chest.

“Then I might see you tomorrow,” Trey said before sliding out the door.

Dewey waited until Trey hopped into a very practical SUV—Dewey could see the sports equipment in the back through the plate glass window of the café—before he pumped his fist. “Yes!”

“Mm...,” his manager, Lena, cautioned as Dewey returned behind the counter.

“Mm what?” Dewey asked, checking the order lineup. “Taking number three,” he said, preparing two ceramic cups for twin lattes.

“Yes, he’s going to be back tomorrow, but he’ll probably be meeting another date. I heard the whole thing, Dewey. I mean, he looks like a catch but, you know, closeted, in education. He’s a grown-up, and you and me are—”

“Not,” Dewey muttered. Still.... “But he doesn’t know that,” he said. “Besides, he can’t be more than nine years older than I am. Don’t count me out yet. Maybe all his dates will no-show.”

“I’ll keep hoping for you, sweetie.” Lena—a marathon runner with wire-thin arms and dark hair cut short around a pointed gamine face—sighed. “By the way, that order is to go.”

Dewey glanced at the tag again and groaned, putting the ceramic mugs back and getting two paper cups ready. He’d been about to go all artistic with the cream on top too. “Thanks,” he muttered.

“No worries—I like your creations. It would be a shame to waste them.”

Dewey managed a smile at her. “Thanks,” he repeated, this time with heart.

“Don’t give up hope,” she said. “I’ve had some abysmal luck on dating apps. Maybe tomorrow’s date won’t show either!”

## Page 3

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“THANKS, CUZ,” Pete said, hopping into Trey’s SUV almost before it had stopped. Trey glanced around the mechanic’s yard and saw Pete’s ages-old Chevy Impala crouched in the corner, forlorn and rumpled and ready for retirement.

“No worries. Sorry you missed coffee.”

Pete grunted. “Man, I was really looking forward to that place. Did you see the barista? Lena? I’ve been trying to get her to talk to me for a month, but she’s, like, a manager, and she’s really good at her job.”

“Which means she’s really bad at picking up hints from yahoos in ballcaps,” Trey said dryly. “Maybe, you know, take it off next time?”

Pete grunted and pulled his faded purple Kings ballcap off his forehead to smooth back his widow’s peak. “I was sort of hoping to get her with the big deer eyes before she noticed the thinning locks,” he mourned, and Trey patted his arm sympathetically before executing a K-turn and getting them out of there.

“Buddy, you’re a great guy. If she’s worth it, she’ll see past the hairline, but it’s hard to know if....”

“I don’t take off the ballcap,” Pete groaned. “God! So, want to come in with me tomorrow?”

Trey grunted. “Uhm....”

“No? I know you hate coffee, but it’s not awful, right? Their coffee cake is amazing.”

“I’ll try it,” Trey said. “But, uhm, your girl’s not the only barista in the place, you know?”

Pete blinked. “Well, there’s Lena, Melissa, Colin, Debbie, Andy, Gretta... who else?”

Trey resisted the urge to stare at him. “Peter Armstrong! How often have you been to that coffeehouse?”

Pete gave a throaty laugh. “They’ve got this sandwich there—it’s made at the place. It’s got pesto and mozzarella, and it’s on this soft sourdough with thin-sliced chicken, the roasted kind, not the lunch-meat kind. Anyway, that and the veggie parm and the potato-cheese bites. Dude. Those and a large latte and you won’t have to eat until dinner.”

Trey grunted. “That’s... amazing,” he said. He’d noted that the coffee shop had an actual separate kitchen behind a counter—he’d known somebody had toasted his bagel—but it hadn’t occurred to him that this was a key part of their business. “All that and no tea,” he muttered, still a little bitter. Like the coffee had been. And always would be, if his experience with the stuff held true.

“God you’re picky,” Pete teased. “My mom has totally ruined you. No coffee, no internet?”

“Everybody uses the internet,” he protested. “I use it for score updates, replay footage, to email or text colleagues—I’m not a Luddite, you know.”

Pete cackled. “I don’t even know what that means!” he crowed.

Trey rolled his eyes. Pete was a machinist at a local cabinet builder’s in south Sac. He worked four days a week, made pretty decent money, and owned a tidy little house by the levee that he improved on constantly. Pete was a catch, really—honest,

hardworking, sweet as pie—but he was the first to admit he was a pretty basic guy.

“It means I use the internet for plenty, but I don’t need it to date,” Trey grumbled as Pete’s cackles got on his last nerve.

Pete’s laughter faded. “Hey, I’m just saying. I know dating is sensitive because of your job and all, but you don’t need to be alone. I mean, you dated in college. Hell, I know you got laid when you were on the team.”

“More than you could possibly imagine,” Trey told him spitefully, although he had gotten his share. Professional athletes were an aphrodisiac, and Trey was as susceptible as the next guy to “You looked really good out there. Wanna come with me and celebrate?”

He’d been lucky. No scandals had broken, nobody had outed him. He’d been just famous enough to get him some but not famous enough for being gay to be any sort of story. Some of his teammates had known—his friends had known—but that had been all he’d needed.

“Well, good,” Pete said, being generous when Trey probably didn’t deserve it. “Because you are certainly living like a monk now.”

Trey grunted. “I’m working with young athletes,” he said.

Pete shook his head. “That doesn’t mean you don’t have a love life!”

“Remember Carl Lowell?” Trey told him, because the story of the divorced dad who’d been told not to coach his daughter’s team anymore had made the local news.

“Remember that he got caught screwing another man’s wife, and she claimed it was nonconsensual? Yes, Trey, yes I do.”



The woman had recanted when her husband hadn't been there, ranting about killing them both, but the damage had been done. Carl had suddenly been too polarizing, and all his daughter's teammates now knew about his sex life. It hadn't been appropriate for him to remain.

"He hasn't been able to coach since," Trey said. "And that was a heterosexual relationship!"

"That was sticking your dick in crazy!" Pete argued. "Which you absolutely should not do. But having a nice romantic relationship with a grown-up—that shouldn't be beyond the realm of possibility. You're a good guy. I mean...." He gestured toward their present situation, which was Trey taking Pete to his house, where he would uber to his job before his car got fixed. "Witness! And you've always been a good guy. Unless you've got any meth-snorting orgies out there that I don't know about."

"I'd tell you," Trey told him, laughing because they both knew that had never been his scene.

Pete patted his arm. "You're a good cousin. I do like a good story. But see? You are a good guy, and you need a good friend. A sexy friend. A friend who will put up with your obscene obsession about sports and still see that you're a good guy—and also give you head."

"Aww. Oh God, Pete, you had to go there!"

Pete cackled again, and Trey laughed too, because his cousin was the good guy he kept talking about, and even bailing him out of a jam was a good time.

TREY DIDN'T have time to linger after dropping Pete off. He had afternoon practice with his U-14 team, and he had to hustle to make it to the school in Carmichael where they practiced so he could set up. Cones, minigoals, his list of drills—all of it was go

before the parents began to pull up and let their offspring out, some of them trying to put on their pads and socks and cleats, all while scrambling across the parking lot and to the field.

Trey didn't give them crap for being late; they were coming after school, and their parents had obligations too. But he did give the plum assignments to the kids who got there on time. Sure, the B-team kid who got put on striker for scrimmage was bound to be replaced as the scrimmage went on, but for five minutes, that kid got to play with the best kids in the team, and Trey thought he could see the improvement in the kids who wanted it the most already. And it kept the A-team kids from getting too cocky and too confident and bagging on their teammates. Every practice was a chance to shine, but you had to show up. If you showed up late, you had to work harder. For kids in a competition league, it seemed to work. Trey had some friends who coached recreational soccer who needed to structure their practices much more tightly, but then, rec team coaches did it all for the fun of it. Trey loved his job, but he still got paid.

Trey was pleased as he put the kids through their paces, built them up when they were working hard, chivvying them along when they weren't, but he glanced around the field, concerned.

"Where's Corbin?" he asked his assistant coach, Don. Don was a parent—and a decent athlete in school—but he was also a steadfast guy who, like Trey, was there to help the kids learn skills and enjoy sport. Trey had coached this team for four years, and they'd both bonded over enough beers to know the secret that few comp coaches ever told. The odds of 98 percent of the kids going through a soccer program, even at competition level, who would get a free ride into college and then rocket into the pros were not great.

Trey had done it, but he'd been the kind of athlete who had run circles around the other kids in the playpen, and he'd still had to work his ass off for the scholarship and

the spot on the team. Once they'd established that little meeting of the minds, he and Don were able to work quite well. They humored the parents who thought their reasonably gifted athlete was the next Messi or Altidore, and urged the kids to be the best they could be, not what anybody else thought they should be.

"That I do not know," Don murmured, scanning the parking lot behind them. Trey was keeping his eye on the field, with the imposing two-story buildings of the new middle school behind it, and he was the one who spotted their best striker limping determinedly from the shadows of what he thought was the school's gym.

"Oh shit," Trey said, his mild voice betraying his panic. "Don, you got them?"

"Go get him," Don said tersely before blowing the whistle and gathering the kids on the other side of the field.

Trey's knees may have been blown in his midtwenties, rendering him too slow to play pro, but he still ran, in better shoes and not making the quick cuts that soccer required. He raced across the field to where the slender boy—brown hair and green eyes like half the kids playing out there that day, but with a graceful, Saluki-like running gait—was two feet away from wandering into another team's scrimmage and trying desperately to keep his shit together.

"Whoa there, chief," Trey murmured, throwing his arm around the boy's shoulders and guiding him around the scrimmage. "Wow. What truck hit you?"

Corbin took a ragged breath and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, smearing blood from his nose and snot and tears across his cheek. He had a black eye, and his practice clothes were ripped and bloodied. So were his knuckles, indicating he'd given what he'd gotten in whatever dispute had taken place.

"Can I not talk about it?" Corbin muttered, his voice breaking.

Oh, if only, Trey thought. Long gone were the days when responsible adults let kids talk about stuff in their own time. “You got half an hour,” Trey said crisply. “We’ll clean you up, call your folks—”

“Call my folks!” Corbin protested.

“Yes, son, call your folks, and probably your school principal and the president of the soccer club as well. I don’t know if you know this, but you appear to have been assaulted, and we need to keep that from happening to other people, do you understand?”

“I know I was assaulted,” Corbin snarled. “I was there.”

“Looks like you gave a little back there,” Trey said as they continued limping around another practice. “Nice job.”

Corbin took a shaky breath. “Thanks, Coach Novak,” he said, sounding proud again. “Fuckers. Sorry.”

Trey managed to keep his expression even. “No harm no foul,” he said. “Now do you want to practice it on me on our way to the team, or do you want to tell everybody at once?”

Corbin let out another shaky breath. “You gotta,” he muttered. “You gotta promise not to hate me.”

Trey gave the boy another look. “I don’t think I could,” he said, honestly surprised. “You’re a great kid.”

Corbin turned his fight-ravaged, tear-streaked face up to Trey’s and fought back another sob. “But will you still think that?” he asked. “I... I got caught kissing

somebody, somebody I shouldn't have kissed. He barely got away, but—"

Oh. "Oh, oh, oh," Trey murmured, then turned the kid to really assess him. Corbin was tall—only a few inches shorter than Trey and probably going to be well over six feet, which might kill his chances at going pro as it was. "Corbin, you looking at me?"

The kid nodded miserably.

"You are a great kid. No matter who you kiss. No matter what anybody says to you from here on out—and I mean anybody—you remember what I'm saying now."

Corbin nodded, staring at Trey like he was the kid's last, best hope.

"You are a great kid, and the only thing you've done wrong here is cut my practice to get a kiss. But that's the cutting practice and not who you were kissing, do you understand?"

That got him a faint smile, which was good.

Trey took a breath. You weren't supposed to get personal with kids, but you were also one of their trusted adults, and Trey took that seriously. In the past three years, he'd had to report abuse once and help a kid's family get on a food program in another instance, because that was the role you took, right? You were stepping up to help people in your community. This was the same. Trey knew—knew from experience—that you didn't just hear a confession like this and turn a kid loose to face their parents.

"Corbin," he said, allowing his voice to soften, "the good news is, the world is getting better for boys who want to kiss boys. The bad news is, it's still not great, especially in sports. You get that, right?"

Corbin nodded, lower lip trembling. “Yes, Coach.”

“Now I will back your play, however you want to do this. What do you think your parents will do?”

Corbin shrugged. “I got no idea,” he said softly. “I think they’ll be okay. They don’t yell or hit or anything, if that’s what you mean?”

“Well, thank God for that,” Trey replied, because that could have been a whole other ballgame. “We need to tell them you got into a fight. Do you know names?”

Corbin nodded grimly.

“We need to give them names. And if you think the kissing thing is going to come out, it’s best coming from you, don’t you think?”

Corbin nodded again, but this time he hesitated. “Do I have to tell them who I was kissing?”

Trey gave a faint smile. “That is the hundred-thousand-dollar question,” he said. “If you want to say, ‘I was, uhm, kissing someone behind the gym,’ and they say, ‘who?’ and you say, ‘I’d rather not say to give them privacy,’ I think that’s valid. Did the person you were kissing get into the fight too?”

Corbin shook his head. “He, uhm, got away. We heard them coming.”

“Did the people who hit you see him?”

Corbin shook his head again. “They just saw, uhm, he was a he.”

Trey nodded again. “Okay, kid. I don’t want to tell you to lie to your parents—that

would be bad. But this... this is something you may need to take your time with, and we don't have a lot of time. We need to tell the principal so people don't go around beating other people up. We need to tell the SRO officer. We need to tell your parents, but we don't need to tell everybody the exact why of things unless you're comfortable with it. Do you hear what I'm saying?"

To his relief, Corbin nodded. "I... I do. You want me to come out in my own time."

Oh, thank God for kids who had the internet. "If I could give you one thing, Corbin, I'd give you that. But I don't want you to risk getting hurt again either."

Corbin nodded slowly and then straightened his shoulders. "Do I have to tell people who I was kissing?" he asked, making sure.

"Nope," Trey told him soberly. "But kid, you know that shi—erm, stuff's going to change some when this happens, right? And some of it's going to be for the good. You'll know who your friends are and who you can trust. But some of it..."

"Not everybody I think I can trust is going to be on that list," Corbin said softly.

Trey nodded. "Yeah. Sorry it had to happen not on your own time. You ready for this?"

Corbin gave him a solid smile. "It'll be fine, Coach. Don't worry. I'll be okay."

Trey had to laugh, because kids—they often surprised you in the best of ways. "Then let's get it done."

THE NEXTtwo hours were long and unpleasant and awkward. Corbin's parents had yelled a lot at first when they saw Corbin had been hurt on the school campus, and then they'd cried a lot, and then there'd been hugging, none of which Trey had

wanted to be there for. Distance, right? He was supposed to maintain distance. The principal had been called in, the culprits had been named, and then while the grown-ups were doing what grown-ups do—including Trey calling Mike, the president of his club, to report an assault on campus because there was paperwork he had to fill out—Corbin wandered over to his team, an icepack on his nose, a beauty of a black eye emerging, and a solid expression of determination on his face.

“I got beat up for kissing a guy,” he told his teammates. “Does anybody not want to play with me now?”

He’d said it just as parents arrived to pick up their kids, and that’s when the fun really began.

BY THE time Trey got home to his neat little house on Robertson, he had a splitting headache, could have eaten an entire side of beef, and to make matters worse, had a college coaching staff Zoom call that started about five minutes before he walked through the door.

He sat down in a flurry of crackers, cheese, and a glass of milk and tuned into a conversation about—hey!—the very thing he’d just left.

“Oh my God, Trey, did you hear about that kerfuffle on the middle-school campus? Kid came out to his entire team. Some parent caught it on camera, and it went viral.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Trey muttered, shoving a cracker in his mouth and staring at their physical therapist, Casey Nguyen, as he tried to wrestle a Great Dane while on the screen. “There’s a video?”

Casey stared at him in confusion, and then his eyes widened—and the dog panted. “Oh my God. Was this your team?”



“Trey?” said Head Coach Harold Frantz, “This was your team?”

Trey nodded and tried to swallow a mouthful of cheese and crackers. “Just got home,” he said. “And yes, it was a mess, but it could have been worse.” Under his desk he kicked off his shoes, and yikes, there was Beckham, his cat, called by the siren song of wiggling toes.

“Why worse?” asked the other assistant coach—and Trey’s best friend besides—Russell Jeffries. “What was the good part?”

“The parents were nice,” Trey said, kicking the cat off gently. “The kid’s parents, that is. And the team itself was one hundred percent supportive. But the kid sort of announced it right when all the parents got there to pick their littler darlings up, and there were a lot of pearl-clutching looks, if you know what I mean.” In his pocket, his cell phone buzzed with a text, and he sighed. “I have the feeling I’m going to be answering the pearl clutchers for a while. It’s a shame. The kid was so brave—a real trooper. And it sucked because this wasn’t how I’d want anybody to come out, but....” He shrugged. “There’s always a good and a bad, that’s life.”

His staff all nodded soberly, and he appreciated them. He’d come out to them early on in his career; he hadn’t wanted to hide, and he hadn’t wanted to switch pronouns should he ever happen to date. Everybody had been supportive. He’d asked them not to tell the team, that was all, because he hadn’t wanted it to be a factor in how the team dealt with him, and so far the staff had honored his wishes.

“So what’s the good?” Harold asked him, and Trey gave a tired smile.

“The good is the president of the recreational club just emailed the whole world that the club is safe for LGBTQ children, and any parent or child who uses hate speech is banned from the club for an entire year.”

That felt good to say. Trey had gotten the notification as he'd pulled up in front of his apartment.

"That is good," Harold murmured, looking troubled.

"What's up?" Russ asked. "You don't sound so sure."

"Oh I am," Harold replied. Then he gnawed his lower lip. "I feel like the college team needs to make a similar statement. In support of the kid, in support of the club, in support of our athletes. I... we all know the culture of sports in this matter. It's not as open as it should be. I'd really like to be part of the voice to change that."

"Sounds great!" Russell said. "Casey, thoughts?"

"I'm all on board," Casey said, and Trey had to plow through another mouthful of cheese and crackers because they were all staring at their screens, waiting for him to talk.

"I am not the voice of gay," he managed, trying to suck the crackers off his teeth.

Russell laughed. "No, but you are somebody from the community we can consult with in this matter. Would an email to the college and the athletes bother you?"

"There's going to be bitching, moaning, and whining," Trey warned. "I mean, it all sounds great on paper, and there's nothing like being proactive, but we should be prepared, is all." He grimaced and told the truth. "Of course in the long run, it might make it easier for me to date, but that's purely a selfish consideration."

And they were all staring at him again.

"Wha'?" he asked, in the middle of shoving more Goldfish crackers in his mouth.

“That’s why you haven’t dated since you started?” Harold asked, sounding wounded.

Trey shifted uncomfortably. “I didn’t want it to be an issue—”

“Oh, that’s it,” Harold said. “I’m drafting the letter tonight, having the wife proofread it, and it’ll be out in the morning. Be prepared for questions at the morning practice. I don’t care who objects—we need to get Trey a boyfriend, stat!”

Trey stared back at his coworkers, all of whom, he was aware, had wives or girlfriends waiting for them to be done with their work meeting so they could start their evening. On the one hand, he hated being the center of attention, but on the other?

The sparkling green eyes of Dewey the barista had been the one bright spot in a really rough day. In the back of his mind, Trey wondered if Dewey would like to go hiking or to the movies or to a car show or something.

Anything.

Anything at all.

“Thanks, guys,” he heard himself saying, but his heart was definitely in it. “Thanks. I appreciate it.” He cleared his throat. “Now can we talk about equipment orders so I can eat something besides cheese and crackers?”

And like the repressed male specimens they were, they moved on.

But Trey knew morning practice would suck with the college team, and so would afternoon practice with the kids. He liked coaching soccer, not practicing politics, but damn if making the team safe for kids like Corbin wasn’t part of his job too.

Still, after a morning of focusing college-age adults on soccer and reminding a few of them that if they couldn't find their better angels for their team, they should find those angels for themselves, because being an asshole would get them booted from the team and lose them their scholarships and FAFSA money, Trey thought he might like... say, a break.

A break at a shop that apparently served good sandwiches and pastries, even if it didn't serve tea.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:22 am*

“OH MY God, he’s back,” Dewey whispered. “Be cool, be cool....”

“The guy with the widow’s peak?” Lena asked with forced casualness. “He didn’t show yesterday—he usually has a dad joke for me when he comes in. I think he googles them.”

Dewey gave her an exasperated look. “Of course he googles them, Lena. He’s been trying to flirt with you for a month.”

“You think?” she asked, with a visible effort not to seem pleased. “That’s sweet. Maybe he’ll come in today. It’s usually later, though. Really?”

Dewey shook his head. God, only the clueless, right?

“So if it’s not the guy with the widow’s peak,” Lena murmured, “which guy are you... ooh...” She made a little moue. “Mr. Track Star over there?”

“He’s a soccer coach,” Dewey said with dignity. “And he’s a good guy. He got stood up for a lunch date yesterday, and I think he’s back for another try.”

Lena stared at him. “So, you’re all excited about the guy who can’t get a Grindr hookup?”

Dewey tried to wave her away like a mosquito. “I don’t think he’s good with dating apps,” he said. “And, you know, yesterday’s date didn’t show, so maybe today’s date won’t show—”

“And maybe he’ll give the barista a chance,” Lena concluded dryly.

“Stranger things have happened,” Dewey said. “Now can I go take his order or not?”

Lena wiggled her fingers toward Trey, the soccer coach, who was studying the paper slip of specials as they were speaking. “May he be stood up again,” she intoned.

“You’re a peach,” Dewey said happily and bustled around the counter. “You look tired,” he said as he walked up, and then he cursed himself. Way to pick up on the cute guy, right?

Trey gave him a warm smile, although his eyes really were a little red-shot. “Yeah, it’s been a weird two days.”

“Got another date?” Dewey asked, knowing he wasn’t being subtle but not caring.

Trey shook his head. “No time,” he said lightly. “But my cousin said I missed out on your sandwiches, and I thought, hey, it’s my lunch break. I’ll bite.”

“Heh heh heh... bite.” Dewey gave him a cheesy grin, and Trey squeezed his eyes shut in an obvious attempt not to laugh.

“Well played,” he said.

“No bait is too high, no pun is too low,” Dewey said with a bow and a flourish. Trey laughed outright, and his grin touched the corners of his eyes this time.

“So,” Dewey continued when Trey’s laughter died down, “Give me your order and I’ll bring it back, and you can tell me why you’re losing sleep.” He paused. “Nothing serious, I hope.”

Trey wrinkled his nose. “Long story,” he said. “Feed me, entertain me, and I’ll save the heavy stuff for my aunt Nan. She’s been dying to read my chakras or do my tarot or whatever. It’ll be good for her.”

Dewey chuckled. “Your wish is my command,” he murmured. “Would you like to hear the specials?”

Trey listened dutifully, and when Dewey was done—with lots of extra flourishes, of course—he put in an order for a sandwich and “Whatever coffee thing I had yesterday. It was fine.”

While Dewey sent that to the kitchen, Trey said almost hurriedly, “Hey, when that comes out, if you’ve got a ten or something, I’d love some company.”

Dewey glanced up from his tablet and couldn’t help the predatory smile that crossed his features. “I think we can do that,” he said, and he very deliberately let his eyes roam the planes and angles of Trey’s face, cleaner cut today but no less appealing. “No tip necessary,” he added, and then he licked his lips.

Trey’s cheeks darkened a little, and he stared at his hands before biting his lip. “Awesome,” he said. “That’d be, uhm, great.”

“I’ll be back.”

Dewey practically danced back to the food-prep space behind the counter and started making Trey’s coffee.

“What?” Lena asked, coming up behind him to start running one of the to-go orders. “You look pretty damned giddy.”

“Can I take my ten in five?” he asked.

“What?” Lena almost fumbled the coffee pot she was reaching for.

“He wants me to sit with him.” It was all Dewey could do not to bounce on his toes and squeal.

Lena glanced around the place, seeing that their morning rush had almost faded. “So, like, all that cow-eyed flirting you did actually worked?”

“I know!” Dewey all but squealed. “Isn’t that wonderful? Look at him—he’s like a blank slate of dating. I could eat him alive.”

“I don’t want to know about your bedroom habits,” Lena said drolly. “But by all means. One of us should be making some time.” She sighed. “I hope widow’s peak guy comes back. I really missed him yesterday.”

“I’ll root for you,” Dewey said, because he tried to be a good friend. “But right now, my ten-minute break is the best date I’ve had in a year!”

Dewey made sure his guy’s sandwich looked like the layout for a magazine, and he added steamed milk in fluffy little dollops to the coffee—not as nice as the pictures he drew with cream in the lattes, but pretty nonetheless. Trey accepted his food with a shy smile and indicated the seat across from him.

“So,” Dewey said, “how many dating apps have you tried?”

“Only the one,” Trey said with a shrug. “Why would I try more when the first one got me a cute barista who felt sorry for me?”

Dewey laughed, like he was meant to, and tried another tack. “All right, then, why a dating app at all?”



Trey seemed to think about it. “Absolutely everybody I meet in my job is either taken or a student. And I don’t care if they’re in their twenties, someone I have power over is somebody I have power over, and no. Just...” He shuddered. “No. And you have to be, I don’t know, settled when you’re in a mentor position. Above reproach. Which is stupid because I know half the faculty is on their third marriage, and fidelity does not seem to be a thing. But that’s, you know, people. People are a mess. But we’re people who are supposed to be able to give students advice, so we have to sort of seem like we know what we’re doing. I guess I wasn’t ready to date until I felt ready to look like I knew what I was doing.”

Dewey swallowed, feeling a little out of his league. “I have no idea what I’m doing,” he confessed, wanting to get this out now. “I’m still looking for a grown-up job! I mean, I’ve got my degree—took me six years, right? But grown-up job is a no. I make barely enough for rent to split a two-bedroom with my buddy, Ceej, and the good news is, he’s still in the bang-everything-that-moves stage of his life, so I don’t see him that often.”

“Bad roommate?”

Dewey shook his head. “No, he’s actually the best, but the apartment is really small. It’s like, I wouldn’t mind living in a small place with a boyfriend, but when we’re both home, we can hear each other jerking off through the walls, and ... no. I would just rather not.”

Trey put his hand in front of his mouth in shock, and Dewey realized what he’d said and did the same.

“I’m sorry!” he said from behind his hand. “That was really blunt. I’m sorry! Please don’t be scared off. I swear, I’m not usually a potty mouth! Or, well, I can be,” he added, in an effort to be honest. He dropped his hand and tried to give a frank assessment. “Okay, yeah. I’m safe around children, but yeah, I guess I have been

known to surprise people by what comes out of my mouth.” He chuckled. “But we’ve all known what would go in it from a very early age.”

Trey’s eyes widened again, and Dewey wondered if he should just keel over and die right now, because he seemed to be taking this one chance and screwing it up amazingly.

“Are you sure you’re safe around children?” Trey asked when he could talk, and Dewey nodded vigorously.

“As God is my witness, I’ve got nieces and nephews and haven’t taught a single one the F-word, and sex education is right off the table.”

The throaty, appealing sound rumbling up from Trey’s throat was hard to define at first—Dewey took a moment to swallow and hope before it hit him. Trey was laughing.

“Oh my God!” he chortled. “That was the most amazing recommendation I’ve ever heard! I mean, I guess as long as you haven’t murdered someone, you’re sort of on a roll.”

Dewey dropped his face into his arms and groaned. “This is the end of our dating relationship,” he moaned. “You can tell me. The river’s not that far away. I’ll wade out into the middle of it and nobody will ever hear from me again.”

“Well, that’s very Greek of you.” Trey was still coming down from laughing, pausing to wipe the corners of his eyes. “Maybe don’t go too tragic too fast. I’m sure we can still manage a trip to the movies without parents coming after me with torches and pitchforks, you think?”

“Trip to the movies?” Dewey asked hopefully.

“Or, you know,” Trey said, “a sporting event. But, uhm....” And again, that charming color in his cheeks. “Can’t hold your hand at the sporting events.”

Dewey blinked. “Why not?”

“Because sports don’t do that,” Trey replied matter-of-factly. “It’s....” He bit his lip. “It’s one of the hardest things about being in sports, really, on a professional level. But, you know, recently I’ve started wanting, uhm, more. Not all the sex like you want when you’re young. I mean, pro sports, someone’s always excited about getting naked, you know?”

Dewey chuckled, remembering a member of the school baseball team who used to really like blowjobs after games. Dewey had been happy to oblige. “Oh yeah,” he said, voice sinking to dirty levels.

Trey gave him a droll look. “I take it you’ve seen that in action.”

Dewey grinned. He couldn’t help it—penance had never been his thing. “I have absolutely zero regrets,” he said with satisfaction. Then he relented. “Except, maybe, not knowing how to take things seriously, you know? I’m... I’m starting to be ready for that. It’s just—” Everything he’d said in the last ten minutes hit him all at once, and his shoulders slumped. “—I don’t know how,” he admitted wistfully.

“Intentions don’t count in sports,” Trey said, and Dewey’s heart almost crashed to the floor. “But sports aren’t real life. A win’s good for the win, but relationships have to be different. At least I’ve always thought so.” He shrugged. “I don’t have that much more experience than you do there, I’m afraid.”

A silence settled then, and Dewey floundered. What to do now? Movies? Did he get to ask this handsome man with the appealing crinkles at the corners of his eyes out on a date? Was that how this worked? It had been so long since he’d had a date end

anywhere besides “So, see ya ’round, maybe,” he wasn’t sure if the whole thing had changed, like internet slang, where if you missed a day at your forum, suddenly everybody was talking about a word you’ve never heard before.

“So,” Trey said, his voice like a cannon shot into the silence. “Movie, then?”

It took a moment for Dewey to get it. “So we can hold hands?” he asked.

Trey appeared very proud of himself. “Yeah.”

“Sure.”

And there was silence again then, but Dewey was pretty sure it was because he spent the moment lost in Trey’s derpy smile and a sort of sweetness in his eyes.

“SO, A DATE?” Ceej said that night when Dewey went out for a beer.

“Yeah,” Dewey said. “Movies. Ice cream afterward.” In his head he could picture Trey’s shy proposition. “Holding hands.”

“Do men do that?” Ceej asked. “I mean, even with women. Do they propose a date to hold hands? Do we have to give up our man card for that?”

“You do whatever you want with your man card,” Dewey said, taking a sip of beer. “I’m keeping mine tucked in my pocket and then holding hands with this guy.”

“Cute?” Ceej asked.

“You have no idea,” Dewey mooned. “So cute. And he’s, like, an athlete, so, you know.” He couldn’t help his pleased smirk. “Very fit.”

Ceej rolled his eyes and wiped off the counter. The rush had passed, and this was clean and stock time. “‘Cause he’s a soccer coach. Got it. Closet case. Understood.”

Dewey frowned. “No. No, it wasn’t like that. He’s just... conscious of propriety, you know? Like, holding hands at movies but not at sporting events. Like a spouse could come to the soccer banquet with him, but you’d have to be living a thing and not just at the beginning of dating. Because that was, you know, what was appropriate for everybody. He’s very conscious that he steers young people, and what he does in public needs to be appropriate. That’s....” He paused and remembered some of the reckless things he and other boyfriends had done when he’d been younger. “Grown-up, I guess. Like, he never wants a soccer game to be about who he’s dating. It’s a soccer game, and it’s for the athletes, and his job is to coach them.”

Ceej scowled. “That’s hard to argue with. Makes for shitty headlines, but it’s hard to argue with. He’s probably boring.”

Dewey thought about that ten-minute break, how it didn’t matter what they were talking about—Dewey’s quest for a job or Trey’s hope his middle-school team could win a big tournament going down in two weeks—what mattered was the other person was listening, and how important it was that Dewey listened too.

“No,” he said simply. “I felt... I dunno. Seen.”

Ceej cocked his head. “You’re very pretty, Dewey. You’ve felt seen plenty.”

Dewey shrugged. “I’ve been felt up plenty, but I don’t know if I’ve felt seen.”

Ceej guffawed. “So does he know you do that thing—that Shakespeare thing? I mean, you gotta admit, for some guys it’s a selling point, but for some guys....” He made a face.

“Not so much,” Dewey admitted dryly. “Those are usually the dumb ones, you know. And for the record, he thinks I’m hilarious.”

Ceej didn’t laugh like Dewey expected him to. Instead, he glanced around the bar thoughtfully. Classwise it was pretty upscale, but as long as you could afford the drinks—and wore the right kind of shoes—the place didn’t care who you liked to go home with at the end of the day. Some same sex, some het, some transfolk—nobody making out in dark corners, but nobody hiding their mating objectives either.

“Gotta say,” Ceej murmured, “you could do a lot worse than have someone who laughs at your jokes, you know? I mean, check this place out. I’m pretty sure that’s all anybody is looking for.”

Dewey eyed him thoughtfully over his beer, and Trey’s face—laugh lines, faint scruff, dark eyes and all—filled his mind.

He laughed at Dewey’s jokes. He smiled and lit up when Dewey walked over to him in the café. Too good to be true? Maybe. But the movie was on Friday, and Trey had promised to be in the café tomorrow, which was Wednesday, and Dewey wondered how many more times he could make the nice man in the soccer sweats smile.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:22 am*

THE FUROR over Harold's email still hadn't died down by the next day.

Oh sure, everybody in the locker room thought it had died down. There were no more questions for morning practice, and slurs hadn't been tolerated anyway, so that didn't happen. The coaches, the team, the physical therapist, the equipment managers: everybody went out to the field like it was an ordinary, average day.

And it was. Until about fifteen minutes before practice ended and the field was suddenly filled with reporters, waiting on the sidelines, microphones out, trying to get quotes from the players as they came in for water.

Harold was a pretty good coach—the team went to state and division finals regularly—and he called running formation as soon as he realized what the nicely dressed group of people flooding the sidelines really was.

As the players were gathering, giving the press distrustful glances, Harold signaled the equipment managers to get the water bottles off the field, told Casey and Russell to guard the flanks, and then pointed to Trey before pointing to the press corps.

“Aw, Harold, no!” he tried to protest, but Harold shook his head.

“Buddy, talk about inclusiveness and safe spaces, and tell these people they're fucking this place up for both things.” Harold stopped and scowled. “But don't say fuck.”

“I've dealt with the press before,” Trey said dryly, and Harold nodded.

“See? Go do the thing. Say the thing. Make me look good.” He gave an overbright grin and held both thumbs up before trotting off with the team, starting a running chant.

I don’t know but I been told—

Those news folks are mighty bold

They’ll talk and talk till they turn blue

Then hope the stuff they quote is true

Sound off....

“Wow,” Trey muttered to Russell as Russ brought up the end.

“One, two,” Russell replied in time to the chant.

“I’ll get you all for this,” Trey said.

“Three, four,” Russell called at him gaily, along with the rest of the team.

“One, two, three, four—I’m screwed!” Trey muttered to himself as he walked up to the press corps. “Hello, ladies and gentlemen,” he called, setting himself up in the middle with the field behind him. “Can I ask what brought on this invasion of our practice space?”

The first reporter to speak was a local girl, curvy and bold, in a bright red trench coat. “We were wondering if you had any comment about Coach Frantz’s schoolwide memo reminding the team that he allows no discrimination or hate speech on his team. Was this addressing a particular incident?”



“Not on this team, no,” Trey said, relieved it was a question he could answer. “He just felt the time had come to make it very clear that his athletes needed to respect all players—and all people—if they’re going to play on the team. So far the athletes have been very positive in response. They want their teammates to feel that the team is a safe space.”

“Have any players come out as a response to the memo?”

Trey snorted. “No. Because people don’t work that way. You can’t just tell people ‘Hey, you’re safe!’ They have to feel safe, and part of that, whether you all like it or not, is the press staying the hell away from their personal lives.”

The reporter grimaced, and Trey could tell she keenly felt the irony.

She frowned, and after fielding a couple of questions from other reporters, she raised her hand one more time. He called on her because she seemed to be thoughtful in a way he hadn’t always seen in the press.

“What advice would you give to a player who was thinking about coming out?”

Trey cocked his head, impressed. “I’d say to come out in your own time, to people you feel safe with,” he said with feeling, remembering the kid the night before. “I’d say remember that no matter what anybody says, nobody has the right to make you feel small about who you are, and your sexuality—and your sex life for that matter—is nobody’s business but yours. If you feel like you need to share it, you deserve to be treated with respect. Don’t settle for anything less. If you feel like nobody but the people close to you deserve to know, then there is nothing shameful about that. And that goes for any athlete of any orientation. Your heart is your heart, not your coach’s, not your team’s. And like all human beings, you need to do with it what makes you happiest.” He grimaced. “And that is pretty much the squishiest thing I’ve ever said about feelings in any situation,” he admitted frankly.

The reporters laughed, and he was able to turn away, satisfied that the matter had been dealt with.

THE MATTER had not been dealt with.

“Oh my God,” Harold said as Trey came back into the locker room. The guys were all showering and changing and getting ready for class or work or whatever their days held. The coaching office had Russell, Harold, and Casey gathered around the widescreen while Harold wielded the remote control like the wand of a god.

“What?” Trey asked, taking off his ball cap and scrubbing at his hair. He’d take his own shower after the locker room cleared out a little. They all did if they got a chance because they got just as sweaty as the guys when they were running around the field, and much of their work outside the hours of practice involved dealing with the public. Everybody wore sweats, yeah, but the ones with the holes stayed home as pajamas.

“Your little speech!” Harold told him, smiling. “Dude, you’re going to be a hero!”

Russell and Casey were not nearly as enthusiastic.

“Dude,” Russell said. “You’d better hope your private information stays private. There’s going to be hate groups making you their target practice!”

Trey’s eyes popped open. “You guys!” he said. “This cannot possibly be that big. I mean, it’s a college team in Sacramento—how bad could it be?”

“NICE PRESS conference,” Don told him that afternoon as they were setting up. “I told my super liberal daughter you were the one coaching her brother’s team, and now she thinks I’m a hero.”

“Oh Jesus,” Trey muttered. Everybody had seen it. He’d gotten texts from Pete—who

asked in all innocence if he could send a copy to Trey's parents, who hadn't spoken to him since he'd come out. Trey had sent back an emphatic Please, you asshole, no! and that had been that.

He'd gotten a text from his aunt Nan, who had sent lots of "Good job, honey!" and so had his sister, who had wanted to know if he wanted her to come over after practice in case he needed to talk.

Sorry, Deb, he'd replied. You cannot imagine how much I'm over this.

She'd sent back, LOL—understood. Let me know if you need anything, and remember—I'm coming over next week to make love to your cat.

He'd laughed like he was supposed to, gave thanks for sisters who got him, and then went on to deal with absolutely everybody in his life who had seen the damned video clip.

Everybody except Dewey, who had served him his sandwich and his coffee—which was not tasty, was never tasty, and Trey was going to have to learn not to get his hopes up in that department—with a smile.

And who had then proceeded to charm him for the next ten minutes with more smiles and a story about how his mother had sent him pictures of his nieces dressing their dogs up in their clothes and then letting them run around the yard. The story had been sweet, and Dewey was very entertaining, and the whole lunch had felt like the thing Trey needed to breathe through an otherwise suffocating day.

"Good thing you're up to the talking to the press thing," Don said, "'cause I think some of the parents are planning to ambush you after practice tonight."

Trey straightened abruptly and dropped the cone he'd been placing. "I'm sorry?"

Don grimaced and strode over to Trey's part of the field. Short and stocky, with graying blond hair and a goatee, Don had a presence—and a reputation as a bulldog of a midfielder.

“Yeah, apparently all the kids went home and said, ‘Corbin’s gay, but the coach is fine with it,’ and then Mike sent out that email, and some of the parents were not fine with it, so instead of emailing you like grown-ups, they’re going to show up on the field for a spectacle.” He shrugged. “This is why I’m an engineer. I don’t have to deal with people.”

Trey gaped at him. “How do you know this?”

“Because they asked me if I wanted to be in on it. I said no, I was fine with how you dealt with it, and I’m not a bigot, and then somebody said I was part of the problem, but whatever. So yeah. You’re gonna have a mob on the field today.”

Trey opened and closed his mouth. “Remember what you said about emailing like a grown-up?”

“Hey, this happened right after school. That’s why I’m giving you the heads-up now.”

Trey shook his head and bent down to pick up the cone. “Look, run the kids through their drills and let me deal with the parents, then. For the record, I hate people. All people. Even you.”

“Fair,” Don said, like he’d expected nothing less. “But you were on the news this morning, so remember, you got hero cred.”

Trey snorted, shook his head, and stalked off to call the club president and tell him what was going down.

## Page 6

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DEWEY MIGHT have missed the whole thing going down if Lena hadn't called him when he'd been at home, watching Masterpiece Theater and researching the artwork in the background of the Georgian-era show to see if they were the right period. Some people followed actors, Dewey followed art. So sue him.

"I refuse to work overtime," he grumbled, hitting pause on the show and scowling at the television. Somebody had slipped a Thomas Kincaid onto the set of a show he actually really admired, and he was torn between being livid and being highly amused.

"It's not about work, moron. It's about your knight in shining armor. Hit local news right now—it's live!"

She rattled off the network, and he changed the channel, surprised by her urgency. Sure enough, there on the screen was his hero, handsome face unusually stern, brown eyes with the laugh-line crinkles literally blazing with anger.

The chyron read Local Soccer Coach Defends Gay Player, and Dewey's heart thudded to his feet. Oh God. Everything Trey did not want for sports—or his kids—and here it was.

The video kicked in just as a voice from a crowd of angry parents rang out.

"Shouldn't we have a say about whether or not our children interact with kids who live this lifestyle?"

Trey's eyes widened. "No!" he said, surprising not only Dewey but obviously

everybody in the crowd. “You interact with people from the LGBTQ community every day. They serve your food or sell you clothes. Some of them even teach your kids and police your streets. You don’t know they’re gay or bi or trans or whatever because it’s none of your business. They’re just people. You work with them, enjoy ’er conversation—some of them you even watch on TV, and you don’t know because it’s not your job to know, and it’s not their job to tell you. They’re doing what you’re doing. We’re all just living our lives. That’s all these kids want to do. Play soccer. Live their lives. How dare you try to stop them.”

The speech was impassioned and eloquent, and Dewey wondered if he was the only one who had caught the tiniest error, the most infinitesimal blurring between “our” and “their” before “conversation.” And then right when Dewey registered where the interview was taking place, the newswoman said, “This coach is a staunch supporter of gay rights, given his earlier speech today,” and the screen cut away to Trey giving another soundbite from—oh wow.

Was that before he’d even come in to talk to Dewey?

Suddenly Dewey understood why Trey had gazed at him like a man dying of thirst would gaze at water.

And suddenly Dewey wanted to be looked at that way again.

DEWEY DIDN’T actually have a car. He lived in Midtown, near the college, walked to work, and pretty much the only reason he could afford to split rent with Ceej was that he didn’t pay for gas or parking. He tagged a rideshare, which dropped him off at the middle school he’d seen on TV as the last light faded from the soccer field. Dewey got out and tipped his driver just as he saw Trey and another stockier man trudging up to the parking lot from the field, each bearing a duffel bag full of uniforms and a big net bag full of soccer balls and other equipment.

“Gah!” the shorter guy muttered. “I don’t know about you, but after a hard day of social activism, I like to go home to the wife and get roaring drunk. How about you?”

“No wife,” Trey said dryly.

“Well, get yourself a husband,” the other guy told him. “After today you earned it.”

Trey glanced up to where Dewey was waiting by his SUV, and it was like the lights went on with his smile.

“Maybe I did,” he said. Then he paused. “Do you... do you think I should have, you know...?”

His assistant coach, probably, and friend—Dewey would have put money on it—turned to face him. “No,” he said softly. “You did what you set out to do. Made it about the kids and the game. It’s like you told them all at the end. They don’t deserve to know anybody’s personal life. This is about kids playing soccer, and shame on them for making it about anything else.” Then the other man—plain and middle-aged—gave a smile that could explain the happy wife at home. “It would have been a fun fight. And I swear to God, if anybody tries to make it a thing if you start dating, me and Mike will burn the club down. Half his kids are queer—he’s at a board meeting right now, showing the entire board where diversity is written into the bylaws. And he should know—he built the fuckin’ club.”

Trey laughed a little and nodded. “Thanks, Don.”

“My pleasure, Coach. Go talk to your guy there—he’s being patient.”

Trey’s eyes fell on Dewey again, and oh, that smile! Quiet, self-contained, saving all that banked heat for Dewey.

“Hey,” Dewey said softly as Trey approached. He reached out for an equipment bag so Trey could open the back of the SUV for them. He made sure to brush the back of Trey’s hand with his thumb. Not obvious, but not ashamed either. Private.

“Hey,” Trey said with a tired sigh. “What, uhm—”

“Not often you see the guy you’re almost dating on the news,” Dewey murmured. “And, you know, it looked like you could use a friend.”

Trey closed his eyes and nodded. “Yeah,” he said and sighed.

Dewey searched his mind for something to say or do that would lighten the moment, and what came to him was his stupid job. “Have you, uhm, eaten?”

Trey chuckled. “I have not,” he said in surprise. “And you know, it’s been a helluva day!”

“I know,” Dewey said ingenuously. “I saw it on the news.”

Trey laughed again and walked around the SUV to open the door for Dewey before returning to the driver’s side to get in himself.

Dewey stared at him as he slid in, thinking about how tired he must be and about the... the gallantry he’d just displayed.

And suddenly he didn’t want to wait for the movies Friday night. He wanted to date this guy forever, starting now. He wanted to see if he was grumpy in the morning or if he ever wore anything besides coaching sweats or what he wanted for dinner.

“Did you want to stop somewhere?” Dewey asked as Trey pulled out of the parking lot and into traffic. “My treat!”



“I’ve actually got this casserole my aunt Nan made me that I’ve been looking forward to all day,” Trey said. “She goes on a bunch of business trips at the beginning of September, so before she left she made enough for a week, and I’m supposed to save some for my sister, Debra, but what she doesn’t know won’t hurt.”

“Ooh, that’s wicked,” Dewey said. “I like it! But didn’t you tell me she lived, like, a block away and lets herself into your apartment on the regular?”

Trey grinned. “You remember that, huh?”

“You’ve been the highlight of my week,” Dewey told him frankly. “And there I was, thinking, ‘Hey, I’ve got this date with this really awesome guy on Friday,’ and you show up on TV, and”—he let some of the brightness drop from his voice—“I didn’t want you to be alone tonight. I mean, I hope the date is still a go, but tonight....”

Dewey’s hand was resting on the console between them, and Trey took one hand off the wheel to cover it, stroking the back with his thumb. Dewey’s body hummed with pleasure, with comfort, at that small contact.

“Dinner,” Trey said with satisfaction. “I’ve got Nan’s apple crumble for dessert, and then we can watch mindless television and see if the cat will attack our toes.”

“Is that his hobby?” Dewey asked. “I like animals with a hobby.”

“It’s his obsession,” Trey told him seriously. “Beckham eats feet—no exceptions.”

“And how do your other dates like sacrificing their toes?” Dewey laughed.

Trey grew sober again. “I wasn’t kidding about not dating in the last couple of years.”

“Was this what you were afraid of?” Dewey asked, and before Trey could answer,

Trey's phone rang, and Trey hit the Speaker button.

"Hey, Mike," Trey said. "Don and I just wrapped it up."

"Yeah, I know. The press hit me after they hit you. Good job by the way."

"Thank you. And thanks for the backup."

The voice—a warm, sort of throaty dad rumble—grew irritated. "Bullshit. It was all complete and total bullshit. Of course we backed you up." There was a sigh, and then Mike said, "Hey, Don said something about your boyfriend showing up to say hi. Are you dating?"

Trey rolled his eyes. "Seriously? That just happened. And, uhm," Dewey felt his surreptitious glance in the dropping twilight. "Yeah. Worst possible time, I know—"

"Oh, who cares. You're dating. That's awesome. Try to stay dating until the soccer banquet. My wife starts fussing at me about making sure my coaches are happy. I want to get her off my back."

"Will do," Trey murmured.

"And Trey?"

"Yessir?"

"I'll be at your next game. If there's press or parents, I'll deal with them. You made the point about this being about the kids playing soccer, and it was pitch perfect. If I'm not there with the board, showing a united front, it's going to be about singling you out of the herd like an antelope, and you're our best coach. No dead antelope on my watch, okay?"

Dewey laughed, and the dad voice got excited.

“Is that him? Are you Trey’s friend?”

“Yessir,” Dewey said.

“He’s a total keeper. I’m serious. All this hassle is worth it. Okay, I’m bailing. You guys take it easy. Trey?”

“Yeah?”

“Try not to obsess, and definitely don’t let them get you down. I know it’s got to be hard, particularly in your position. But like I said, you’re our most qualified coach, and your kids would die for you. Hang in there.”

“Thanks, Mike,” Trey murmured.

The line went dead, and the quiet alt-rock station Trey had going before the phone rang filled the car.

“Wow,” Dewey said. “Nice guy.”

“The best. Sort of the ultimate in dad, you know? Harold, the coach at the college, is all soccer all the time, but this is a kid’s club, even though we’re in comp, the competitive branch of it. Mike’s kids are mostly grown, but he coaches a team because he likes being part of the community, and he’s good at the dad thing.”

Dewey hummed. “What’s that like? I mean, I have a single mom. She lives up in Oregon with all the cousins, right?”

“Oregon’s nice,” Trey said, sounding surprised. “Did you move from there, or did she

move from here?”

“She moved from here,” Dewey said with a shrug. “She came down here for my dad’s job, they split, she stayed long enough for me to get into college and make it on my own, and then, well, she missed her family. She texts all the time. And she’s a riot too. She has, like, three small dogs, two giant dogs, and an untold number of cats, and they all follow her to the bathroom. I get pictures in the morning, from the throne, of an entire menagerie staring at the camera. She calls it ‘Poop Theater,’ and I tell her I save them all for the commitment hearings, but really, I just like to know she’s happy.”

Trey laughed like he was supposed to, and then, much to Dewey’s surprise, he answered the original question. “It’s good having a dad who... you know. Dads. Does the dad thing. Asks you if you’ve eaten. Makes sure you’ve got water. Visits your team when they’re playing. My own parents were... well, they worked hard. Really hard. But sometimes that leaches the joy out of people, I think. They were always so hard on Nan, who moved to California to do flaky bohemian things, and Debra and I always thought she was so glamorous. So when I got recruited by the college—and then by the team—here in Sacramento, the first thing I did was get me and Debra tickets from Indiana to visit Nan. And she was—” He laughed. “—as advertised. She runs a crystal and tarot store and does readings, but you know what? She makes money, and she supports local artists, and people come in wanting reassurance about their lives, and she helps them. Debra got a scholarship out here for business when it was her turn, and we both moved within a block of each other because we wanted family—but we wanted Nan and her son, Pete, who’s like the brother I never had. So Mike is like the dad who gives me lessons for when I have a family of my own. I have Nan and I have Mike, and I get to see how other families work.” He gave a short laugh. “Which given I’m thirty-three is sort of sad, you know? I mean, I’m behind on the curve. But....”

“But what?”

“I wanted people in my life who remember how to laugh. Your smile, when I walked into the café....” He shook his head.

“Made you glad your date bailed?” Dewey said.

“Sure,” Trey said, laughing a little.

And then it hit Dewey, the thing Trey had not talked about when remembering his “joyless” parents.

“What about you coming out?” he asked softly. “My mom was fine with it—sort of excited, actually, like it gave her hippie cred when she moved to Oregon. How were your folks?”

Trey grunted. “Three guesses,” he said. “I’ll give you a hint.”

“You haven’t been back to Indiana since you came out?” Dewey hazarded, suddenly sad for this new friend.

“Neither has Debra. And Nan didn’t say as much, but I suspect Mom stopped talking to her once she found out Nan knew.” Trey’s voice was resigned, but Dewey knew that sound—a lot of his friends had it in their voices when they spoke of their parents.

“Ouch,” he said. Pain shared was pain lessened? Maybe. Maybe he wanted Trey to know Dewey heard what he didn’t say.

The hand on top of his tightened, their fingers lacing together for a moment before Trey returned both hands to the wheel.

“It wasn’t unexpected,” Trey said, sounding so self-contained Dewey wondered if he’d ever hear how awful it had really been.

“So,” he said now into the silence, “we have some of your aunt’s casserole, and then we watch movies and play with your cat. And this doesn’t count as a date.”

Trey’s chuckle sounded much less stressed. “Of course not. The real date is the movies Friday.”

“Hmm....” Dewey pretended to ponder. “So do my breaks at the coffee shop count as dates?”

“Why are we so obsessed with counting?” Trey laughed. “I mean, seriously, what’s the deal?”

“Well, ’cause usually the third date means sex, and I just want to see where we are.” Dewey meant to be snarky when he said it—you had sex on the third date, ha-ha, everybody knew that, and hey, it’s not like they didn’t both have a past, right? So, yeah! Sex on the third date!

But the sudden rush of breath from Trey’s mouth sounded like it had been kicked out, and Dewey was brought forcibly back to everything Trey had been through tonight.

“Hey,” he said, suddenly feeling like he had to be the one comforting. “I meant no stress tonight. I was kidding. It’s been a while for both of us—I get it. Tonight’s climax will happen when your cat eats our toes.”

“It’ll be thrilling, I promise,” Trey told him earnestly, and that made Dewey laugh, so he thought they’d be okay.

“VERY... MODERN,” Dewey said when he saw the inside of Trey’s house, and he saw Trey wince. The neighborhood was nice; not too upscale, but Trey’s house had pretty yellow siding and sported a nice little lawn, some lawn ornaments in the shape of black cats, and some trimmed shrubs in front of the porch. Inside, it looked like an

IKEA store had marched in and assumed formation. The furniture was dark wood with very square lines, and the rugs on the equally dark hardwood floor were cream Berber style—tough and warm and spare. The blinds were black and the couch was off-white, and if it wasn't for the bright burgundy throw on the back of the couch that had Republic worked into it and a tropical-fish tank in a recessed part of the wall by the couch, the monochrome would have gotten oppressive.

Trey glanced around and grimaced. “It shows the imagination of a termite,” he said. “That is a direct quote from my aunt Nan, my cousin Pete, and my sister. You can be honest. It's boring as hell.”

“It's... functional,” Dewey attempted.

“Nice try. The best thing about it is the furniture is comfy. Go sit and I'll get us some dinner while you find a good movie.”

“Mm... what counts as a good movie?” Dewey asked suspiciously. “Something with lots of subtitles, weird filters on the camera, and a way of making you feel like all life is meaningless?”

“Ugh. God. No,” Trey replied with gratifying horror. “Explosions. Muscles. Wisecracks. And if there's an animal, it's absolutely imperative that the animal not die. Not the dog, not the cat, not the weasel, and not the giant gorilla, which means King Kong is right out!”

Dewey cackled and started checking out the streaming services for some of his favorite B movies. He pulled up Rampage. While he was doing that, he saw Trey was moving about the open-plan kitchen, getting the casserole dish out of the fridge and dishing up two portions to put in the microwave. When those were started, he pulled out some salad mix, and Dewey was charmed by the idea that he'd offered fast food or even a restaurant but was getting home cooking with greens instead.

“I take it you’ve had dates try the giant monkey death movie with you before?” Dewey asked, hitting pause so Trey didn’t miss the beginning.

“I had this one boyfriend who thought all movies have to ‘improve the mind and spirit,’” Trey intoned. “No. Absolutely not. Some of my favorite movies will never improve me, but boy do they improve my mood.”

“The Birdcage,” Dewey said, getting it. “I’m sure it commits all sorts of offenses in this day and age, but I can’t butter my own damned bread without screaming, ‘Oh God, I pierced the toast!’”

Trey’s laughter was nearly infectious. The fact that Dewey sort of invaded his life on this super stressful night to get him to smile seemed less like an act of kindness and more like a public service. Trey Novak had to laugh. It was a moral imperative.

“Spy,” Trey said. “With Melissa McCarthy. My sister made me watch it, and now it’s my favorite rainy-day movie. I can quote entire chunks of it.” He gave a girlish sigh. “I love it so.”

It was Dewey’s turn to laugh. “Excellent. I think I picked a good one, then. It’s stupid, it’s got the Rock in it, and the big monkey doesn’t die.”

Trey went to the fridge and rooted around. “Beer, soda, milk—”

“Most of the time it’s milk,” Dewey said, “but tonight I think I can have a beer.”

“My sarcasm detector is glitchy,” Trey told him, using a bottle opener to remove the caps. “Does this mean you drink a lot of beer, or is this a treat for you?”

Dewey had to laugh. “My roommate is a bartender,” he said, “in this terrible uberprofessional watering hole that’s balls-to-the-walls investment bankers and



lawyers. I mean, if I was trying to marry to improve my social status, I'd be all over that place like a barracuda, but as it is, Ceej—CJ, my roommate—comps me free beer, and I have an excuse to leave the house.”

“But you do like milk?” Trey said. “Because it’s all I’ve got for breakfast.”

Dewey gave him the side-eye as he approached to put the two bottles on coasters on the black lacquered cube-shaped coffee table. “Presume much?”

Trey shook his head. “I swear, I’ll be a perfect gentleman,” he said. “I ... you know. If it gets late and you want to crash here, I can take you home in the morning. I...” He bit his lip as behind him the microwave dinged with their dinner. “If I don’t say this later, or if I fall asleep on you because it’s really been a hell of a day? I saw you waiting by my car tonight, and I almost cried I was so happy. You were already the best part of my day, and—how’d you know where I was anyway?”

“They had the location on the news,” Dewey said. “And the chyron said ‘live,’ so I took a chance.”

“Well, that was hero stuff,” Trey told him. “Just so you know. You’ve set the bar pretty high for a relationship now. I’ll try to make the jump.”

“You need to go get our food so I can clutch at my heart yearningly behind your back,” Dewey said, not even really kidding. “I don’t do well with praise.”

“Too bad,” Trey said, returning to the kitchen anyway. “I’m that kind of coach.”

“How’s that work in bed?” Dewey asked before he could stop himself. “You’re banging away chanting, ‘Yes! Yes! You can do it! Just a little more effort, come on team!’”

Trey stumbled and caught himself on the kitchen island, then stayed there, shoulders shaking, while Dewey had a deep, deep moment of remorse.

“Oh God. I did it again, didn’t I? I said the thing that will end the relationship. Oh dear God, my mouth—”

Trey didn’t answer. He simply buried his head in his arms on the counter and held up a finger, clearly trying to contain his laughter. After a moment, Dewey got up from the couch and moved to the microwave, thinking that the counters were dark tile while the cabinets were white. He found a drawer full of cloth placemats and set up their dinner, being sure to dish up the salad Trey had prepared while they were talking. With a little more hunting, he had forks, and he picked up both services to ferry to the table.

Trey was still laughing, the sounds muffled by his shoulders, his entire body shaking with what Dewey had to admit was probably some repressed hysteria from what had been a real shitter of a day.

He leaned over to murmur, “I’ll be watching TV while you finish there, okay?”

Trey nodded and gave a weak thumbs-up while the last of the laughter shuddered itself out and Dewey made himself comfortable on the couch with his portion of casserole.

A few moments later Trey had hold of himself, and he joined Dewey, still wiping his eyes.

“Sorry,” he choked, taking a sip of his beer.

“Totally my fault,” Dewey said humbly. “I... I don’t know what to—”

The kiss on his cheek surprised him for a number of reasons, not least because he'd had no idea a kiss on the cheek could be sexy.

“Thanks,” Trey said softly. “I needed that. You’re perfect. Don’t change.”

Then he took the remote from its spot on the coffee table and hit Play, and for a moment all they did was eat and watch the blessedly stupid movie.

THE CAT was stealthy. Dewey was impressed. For about an hour, they ate, murmured things like, “Poor big monkey!” or “Go, Dwayne, go!” at the screen, and gradually, bit by bit, leaned on each other a little more.

Trey got up when they were done eating and put the dishes in the washer, and Dewey—who had slipped off his tennies early on—positioned himself on the couch so he could big-spoon the uberfit athlete who seemed to need comfort right now like nobody’s business.

Trey paused when he got back to the living room. “So,” he said skeptically, “it’s like that, is it?”

“Younger guy doesn’t get to be big spoon?”

That adorable flush—Dewey could practically smell it coming off the bigger man in body-heated, soap-and-sweat-scented waves.

“I just... uhm... usually big spoon?”

Dewey’s low, throaty chuckle seemed to surprise them both. “When we’re naked, you can big-spoon away. But... you know. I showed up to be a friend.” He leered and gestured to the vee between his legs. “Come here and be my freeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeen!”

Trey laughed some more and to Dewey's eternal gratitude did what was requested. He leaned his weight backward against Dewey's body and let Dewey drape his arms over Trey's shoulders. Dewey could actually feel the stress, the exhaustion, seeping from Trey's body as he relaxed, and Dewey smiled to himself and pressed Play again on their movie.

And four, three, two, one—attack!

A ten-pound void swept in from the cosmos, jumped on Dewey's foot, and tried to eat his big toe, and as Dewey yelped and tried to flail, it fled back to the darkness of the hallway from whence it came.

“Oh my God!” Dewey gasped as Trey's body shook in his arms. “The fuck was that?”

“Beckham,” Trey said, laughing. “You got off easy. I had to shove a catnip mouse between him and Debra's arm once. She was bleeding by the time he was done with her!”

“Wow! What a monster.” Dewey was pleased. “I love him. Where are his toys? I may want to torment him in the future.”

“In my office,” Trey said, nodding down the hall. “So if I'm working in there and he gets bored, I can play with him for a while to get him off my back.”

“Good idea.” Dewey actually stopped the “I can see how this place could be boring” before it came out of his mouth.

“What?” Trey asked, half turning in his arms.

“Nothing—watch your movie.”

“No, pause it. What were you going to say? I could practically hear it.”

Well, ask and you shall receive. “Do you not like art? Movie posters? Art? I mean... at all? You don’t even have any sports posters in here. I mean, you seem like a normal person, but I gotta say, this is sort of psychotic.”

Trey laughed softly. “I never really thought about it,” he said. “I guess, yeah, the walls are sort of empty. Why? You volunteering to fill them?”

“Ooh...” The way Dewey’s nerve endings lit up was almost as good as sex. “Would you let me? I could go into thrift stores and get some prints and... please? Please let me get you some art for your walls. I swear, I could make it good. Clean pieces, not too much clutter, straightedged frames, bold colors. Some Toulouse Lautrec posters, Picasso...” He could see it already.

“Sure,” Trey said, and while he might not have known what a big deal this was, Dewey did. This was trust, and hey, this guy just gave it away! Dewey was so desperate for something to do with his degree, the thought of decorating Trey’s apartment made him want to cry.

And the excuse to have a project, to spend more time in this clean naked space and in the company of a man who was not afraid to be the little spoon—that was wonderful. That was worth smiling about.

“Thank you,” Dewey murmured happily, kissing Trey’s temple.

“Mm.... Thank you,” Trey murmured. “It’s a nice thing to do. I’m not sure if you know how much it means to me that you’d ask.”

“Shh...,” Dewey said. “Let’s make sure the big monkey doesn’t die.”

And just as they settled down to watch the movie again, Beckham stormed over the couch and had hatesex with Dewey's foot while he laughed and yelped, because it did tickle and hurt, and then disappeared back into the depths of the hallway again.

Best date Dewey could remember in a long time.

THEY FELL asleep in front of the second movie, and it wasn't until then that Dewey was aware of what Trey had studiously avoided telling him.

This entire idyllic evening hadn't been without cost.

Dewey woke from his curl on the couch, the burgundy afghan thrown over his shoulders, to see Trey at his feet at the other end of the couch, nodding off in front of his laptop.

"What's doing?" he rasped, glancing at the plain black-and-white clock on the wall across the room.

"Emails," Trey yawned. "Mike told me to answer them in the morning, but—"

Dewey sat up and stretched. "Then do that," he said bluntly, yawning and stretching some more and then sitting next to Trey to peer over his shoulder. "And stop looking at that," he continued, reaching up to close the laptop and take it gently away.

"Trending on social media," Trey muttered.

"That's a hellscape anyway," Dewey said. "You know that. Whole thing is bots talking to bots with a few crazies thrown in. Your bosses back you. And...." This hit him. "Isn't your college team winning this season?"

Trey smiled at him. "Yeah. Did you look that up?"

“Damned straight,” Dewey said proudly. “Hey, my best date in a year sort of wanders into my coffee shop and starts chatting me up. What do they say? Opportunity is ten percent luck and ninety percent preparation? You’d better believe I prepared!”

Trey turned his head, still laughing softly, and kissed him.

His lips were smooth and sweet, and when Dewey made a sound of want, fueled by the hour on the couch with Trey’s warm, firm body along his, he pushed the advantage.

Dewey found himself lying on the couch again, this time with Trey’s body covering his, their lips fusing, tentative at first, then deeper and deeper and deeper. Dewey let out a soft sigh and scooted his hips, spreading his legs to accommodate Trey’s muscular thighs and bring them closer together. Trey answered his soft sigh with a moan and rippled his hips until Dewey felt a surge of hard length against the crease of his jeans.

Dewey kept kissing him, shoving one hand under his sweatshirt and rubbing it up his back, and suddenly Trey rolled off the couch and stood, eyes rolling in confusion while he gulped air.

“What?” Dewey gasped, glancing around wildly for the intruder that could have interrupted that amazing kiss. “What?”

“I’m sticky,” Trey confessed, grimacing. “That’s the best kiss I’ve had in three years, and I’m sticky. Sweaty from the field. My balls are sweaty. And I really like you, and this isn’t even a date!”

Dewey chuckled helplessly. “And people say I’m blunt. I must be catching!”

“I’d love it if you were,” Trey said, his voice apologetic, “but honestly, I keep

thinking about sweaty balls and chafing and how badly I don't want you to experience any of that the first time we're naked."

And now Dewey cackled, throwing an arm over his eyes. "God, you're adorable. So should I catch that Uber home?"

"Stay," Trey told him unexpectedly. "Let me shower. Sleep next to me. It felt..." His voice choked, and he gave a sheepish shrug. "It felt so good to hold you."

Dewey stood and moved to where Trey was still wobbling a little on his feet. He was a little shorter, but that felt good too, and he leaned into Trey's space and slid his arms around his waist.

"I stand by it," he said softly. "You're adorable. And a gentleman. And we're both beat. Let me use the bathroom first."

"New toothbrushes are on the towel rack by the toiletries," Trey said seriously, and Dewey cupped his cheek.

"So close to perfect," he practically hummed. "Give me ten minutes, then the bathroom's all yours, and I'll be in bed and probably asleep by the time you get there. And because I know you're a gentleman, feel free to hold me close and kiss the nape of my neck and make me dream about you."

"The nape of your neck?" Trey asked suspiciously. "That's oddly specific."

Dewey wrinkled his nose. "It's a sweet spot," he admitted. "And now you know that about me. Imagine what you'll find out by Friday."

"Our date," Trey said, and Dewey smiled so broadly the apples of his cheeks squeezed his eyes shut a little.



“Yup. Our first date.”

Trey grinned back. “We’re totally having sex on our first date.”

“Sweet!” Dewey kissed him briefly and then pulled away to go brush his teeth. Some things were definitely worth waiting for.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:22 am*

TREY WASnot expecting the standing ovation from the players when he walked late into the locker room the next morning.

He'd been pleasantly preoccupied, actually, his mind on the warmth and joy of having a man in his arms over the course of the night, of Dewey's pleasantly rumpled blond hair in the morning and the way he'd insisted on buying them coffee and a breakfast burrito since Trey offered to take him home.

He thought of all those hurried relationships when he'd been in sports, of the way he'd had to hide his dates—literally in the closet of his hotel room more than once—and the way, most of the time, the guys he'd been with hadn't really been interested in a what-comes-next.

And how he and Dewey were looking forward to going out for dinner and a movie in ways that said they were way ready for more than dinner and a movie. It was like... like waiting made it sweeter. In a million years, Trey wouldn't have believed he could talk so much about things that weren't sports. But Dewey was funny and, well, blunt about pretty much anything. Comedy, television, art, music, movies, celebrity trends, even coffee and coffeehouses and recycling. Their opinions didn't always match up—Trey still hadn't found a way to tell Dewey that he thought all coffee was Satan's piss in a paper cup, and he was never going to be as excited about American Impressionism as Dewey seemed to be. But they both liked Patton Oswalt and Chris Titus and Taylor Tomlinson, and Trey thought that he'd slept with enough guys who'd eaten, drunk, breathed, dreamed about sports but still hadn't had anything to talk about outside the bedroom to build a relationship on that fact alone.

So Trey had been pondering the list of artists Dewey had told him to google so

Dewey could go shopping for stuff for his freakishly boring walls when he'd walked into the locker room as the team kitted up for practice, and they'd all stopped what they were doing and applauded.

Trey almost ran the other way.

"Uhm...", he said as the applause died down. "Thank you?"

One of the younger players, still in his street clothes, walked up to him and shook his hand. "My brother's gay," he said baldly. "And he always worried about coming to games: What's the atmosphere going to be like. Does he have to worry? And he'll still worry, but coaches like you mean things might get better. So thank you."

There was more applause and hoots and hollers, and suddenly Trey felt like a huge fraud. Like he'd stood up for other people and hadn't been that dedicated, that passionate, because he'd like to not worry.

"Thank you," he said, his coming-out speech on the tip of his tongue. "That's kind of you, but you should all know—"

"Oh my God, is he here yet?" Harold called from the coach's office. "Why is everybody still in the locker room. People, do we or do we not start practice in T-minus two minutes!"

There was general laughter, and the players scattered, and Trey was left with the confession he hadn't given yet.

He smiled and waved as the players finished their preparations and ventured into the coach's office, where the staff had gathered, grateful for a reprieve from the smell of feet, balls, and armpits, because there was not enough sanitizer in the world.

“Well, thanks, Harold,” he said dryly as he locked his keys and his wallet in his desk drawer. “I was about to come out because the kids gave me the perfect opportunity, but now I’m stuck in the closet for the rest of my life. Well done.”

Harold snorted. “Don’t come out now, all quietly and shit. I’ve got sixty dozen reporters banging down my door after your second press conference in a day. I’m betting you’ve got your own masses of messages and emails and ‘please, please, please.’ If you feel like you need to hand the media its ass one more time, be bold. Clear it with your other coaching gig and let’s make some fucking magic.”

“No,” Trey whined. “I don’t want to be a poster boy. I just want the team to know because now that it’s a thing, it’s only right!”

Harold arched an eyebrow at him.

“Besides,” he confessed, “I’m sort of dating someone right now that I really like, and I don’t want to shove him in the closet. He’s, you know, awesome. And the closet smells like—”

“Balls,” said Russell Jeffries. “You can be honest. We work here. We know what a coach’s closet smells like.”

Trey stared at him and realized that, while he may be all mild-mannered and Mr. Maturity, he seemed to have a thing for the guy who spoke the truth with blunt words, and who made him laugh when he did it.

“I was going to be nice and say armpits,” Trey confessed. “And Icy Hot.”

Casey snorted. “I think my dog gets high off that smell, by the way. I caught her humping my duffel bag the other night—I’m pretty sure it’s armpits and Icy Hot that’s doing it for her.”

“With my cat, it’s feet.” Trey chuckled. “God, I had a friend over last night, and Beckham was all over his toes—”

“Wait,” Russell said. “Sort of dating? If he was over last night isn’t that actually dating?”

Trey shook his head. “No, last night was... well, it was a nice thing to do. He caught the press conference on the field last night and showed up for moral support and....” He shrugged.

“Your morals needed supporting,” Russell said. “Understood. I’m glad you had a woobie there to help.”

“A cute woobie,” Trey bragged a little. He got to hear all the time about wives and girlfriends. Just once, he wanted to talk about his green-eyed barista with the foul mouth who wanted to decorate his walls.

“Oh God,” Harold mock-moaned. “If we’re going through all this shit so you can date a teddy bear, I’m out of here!”

“Hey, don’t knock teddy bears,” Trey said, because he’d appreciated those that he had dated. “But no. He’s young and lithe—”

“Lithe?” Casey questioned.

Trey laughed, his face heating. “Quite fit,” he amended, and then he couldn’t tease anymore. “And quite cute, but he could look like a rock troll for all I care because he showed up last night when things sucked the most.”

There was a sudden quiet in the room, and Harold said, “You’re right. Come out to the team when you feel like it. But if we keep getting bombarded by the press and

you feel up to being a poster boy for a while, it might be worth it, Trey. For the most part my feedback's been positive. Wouldn't it be great if, at some time in the future, this wasn't even a thing?"

Trey had wished for that his entire life.

"I'd love that," he said quietly. "But, you know, every time we think we're getting close—"

"Someone moves the goal," Harold agreed soberly. "Yeah. I get it. And I get that even if you go on the news and tell the whole world, you're still going to be answering intrusive questions for maybe the rest of your life. At least for your time here, which, God willing, will be until the college rots into the ground and turns to dust. And none of it is fair. And I'm sorry. But I sure would love it if our kids, at some point, could not worry. If the locker room could be a safe place. I mean—" Harold shuddered. "—I don't want to hear it be a safe place. That Kitson kid had a zit under his balls the other day and... bwah, I don't even want to know how that was resolved."

They all shuddered then. Young men, active bodies, zero boundaries, and piss-poor judgment—God knows what could have happened with that.

"So gross," Russell muttered. "Casey, did he end up going to you with that?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Casey muttered. "It's... eww... the human body can be so gross."

Another collective shudder, and Harold cleared his throat and called them back to what needed to be done.

"Okay, then. Out on the field all reporters are banned. Let's get the guys back to task.

Trey, give me a heads-up if you're going to do any of it—just so I know so when somebody comes to me and says, 'Hey, did you know?' I can say, 'Absolutely, and he's such a great guy, we're so proud of him.'”

Trey laughed. “I'll hold you to that, even if we lose tonight's game.”

Suddenly Harold's eyes got big. “Hey, this date of yours. Is he coming?” It wasn't unusual for the coaches to bring their significant others to games. Often they sat together so they could commiserate if things went wrong or plan how to celebrate if they went right.

“I haven't asked. We're, uh, still new. I mean—”

Harold's eyes lit up with unholy glee. “So, uhm, we've got most of the season left. Do you think maybe he'll last that long?”

Trey stared at him, not sure where this was going. “Uhm, why?”

“Because,” Harold burst out, almost dancing in glee. “Because you come out to the team, bring your guy to the game, and suddenly—boom. There's your approval. There's your whole package. All the girls are there, your guy is there, the president of the college's wife is there, and we've got ourselves visual support, and anybody who has something shitty to say can go suck eggs. It's perfect.”

“Aw, Harold,” Trey mumbled. “It's such a big thing to ask somebody.”

“Well, when's it okay? A month? 'Cause we've got until December. It's September now. November? We've got that multicollge tournament, and it's here this year!”

Trey shook his head. “I don't even believe this. What if it goes wrong? Do you know what I could be exposing him to? I mean....”

Harold blew out a breath. “Same shit you’re exposing yourself to, Trey. Yeah, I know. But think about it. Talk to your guy in a few weeks.”

“How do you even know he’ll still be my guy?” Trey asked, although, for the rest of his life, probably, he’d remember the way his heart had jumped in his chest when he’d seen Dewey standing next to his car that night.

“Because he’s the first guy you’ve dated since you came here to coach,” Russell said, and Trey shot him a glare of betrayal. He and Russell had played pro, although not on the same teams, and they’d been hired the same year. They’d spent their first month as assistant coaches bonding over beers while wondering what in the hell Harold had planned for them tomorrow. Russell had been newly married then and expecting his first kid, and Trey had confided in him how jealous he’d been. Russell had someone to go home to. A family. A life. Trey had been looking at the dating scene at the time and had seen nothing but loneliness ahead.

“Russ!” he protested now, and Russell waved him off.

“We gossip about each other all the time, T. Get over it. If this guy even gets mention, it’s serious. So keep it in mind. And with that let’s go coach the kids before Kitson decides to show off his pimple again.”

Casey shook his head. “I lanced it,” he confessed. “If there’s a zombie zit there, it’ll be even worse.”

“Ew....”

“Oh my God!”

“I hate myself for even knowing that!”



“And we all hate you for telling us,” Harold concluded, scowling at Casey. “Let’s move it!”

TREY WAS running goalie drills when the text buzzed on his watch. Don’t answer any emails until you read mine. Trust me. It’s fine.

The text came from Mike, and Trey gave a huge sigh of relief. He hadn’t had time to address the email situation that morning, but knowing Mike had a boilerplate worked up for him was a huge relief.

His attention was pulled back to the drills when Ryan, the forward currently trying to kick the ball through their goalie by sheer force, called out, “Heads up, Coach! Are you still high on fame?”

He grimaced. “Still dealing with the PR nightmare,” he apologized. “Sorry!” Then, “Watch it, Keeler. You almost let that one through!”

“Sorry, Coach!”

He blew his whistle. “Ryan, give it a rest and go see Russell for your next drill. But water first.”

Ryan nodded and, to Trey’s surprise, trotted forward. “No, seriously. Is that what made you look so mad?”

Trey grimaced. Twenty-year-olds—their empathy was finally starting to emerge, but their vocabulary was for shit. “Not mad. Relieved, actually. I’m so glad I’m surrounded by grown-ups who aren’t throwing me under the bus, you know?”

“Yeah,” Ryan said. Then, almost under his breath, he added, “But maybe you should all talk about your love life in quieter voices.”

Trey blinked at him, and the kid grimaced. “I forgot my water bottle. I heard what Coach Frantz was saying. You know, about bringing your guy to a game? He’s right, you know.”

Trey took a moment to digest this. “Can I tell you how much I hate that a guy I’m barely dating is being used as a political prop?” he asked bitterly, and Ryan grimaced back.

“Yeah,” he said, and then he leaned a little closer. “But if you can help make it better, it won’t be so hard for me.”

He leaned back, and Trey stared at him in surprise.

Cliff Ryan was a good-looking kid. He had sharp cheekbones, brown hair, green eyes, and a square jaw, and at this moment, he harbored an expression that was both embarrassed and determined, and Trey sighed.

“I hear you,” he said with a little smile. “I’ll come out to the team today. I... you know. Let me date the guy first before I drag him into this, okay?”

Ryan nodded. “Yeah, that’s fair.” Then he gave a chuckle and leaned close again. “And by the way, good call on running away from Kitson’s ball zit. It was so gross.”

“Oh God,” Trey groaned. “Just—no. No. Things I never wanted to know about another person, ever. Not another word.”

Ryan cackled and ran off to get water, and Trey turned back to his job. He should have been mad, he thought, forced into this thing by one of his students, his public life on display. But the thing he liked—loved—about coaching was that he got to share his experience in the game with people coming up. He liked teaching. He liked being passionate about something and giving a whole new generation excitement and

purpose about a thing that had mostly been constructive and, well, magical in his own life.

And making the game safe for everybody, particularly people like he had been, whose only emotional safety had been on the soccer field, that was sort of in his wheelhouse.

Looking into Ryan's eyes, the hope there, the support, he'd realized how important his job was; not only to coach the game but to coach the players. Being bold, being brave, being confident—those were the marks of a good athlete.

But they were also signs of a good man.

Stepping up wasn't just for sports.

He whistled shortly for the next forward to start running the drill and then called to his goalie. "Gotta go talk to Coach Frantz. Back in a sec."

Harold, bless him, was fine with it.

And after they all got whistled in to a huddle before they broke for the showers, so was the team.

Some of them had known already. To some it was a complete surprise. Not a single one of them seemed to care.

"Gen Z," Trey said softly to Russell as they filed in. "Who knew?"

"Gives me hope for Gen Alpha," Russell agreed. "Me and the wife will keep raising them."

Trey snorted and went to tackle his paperwork. Their game was that night, the big date was tomorrow night, and he had a rec-league game on Saturday over two hours of driving away. He didn't want a single shitty email hanging over his head when he left campus that day.

With a happy sigh, he read Mike's email, which said, in essence, that parents had signed on for inclusion when they'd enrolled their kid in the club, and that any complaints needed to be brought up with the board. Mike had provided a cut-and-paste script and had given the directive to cc the board on all emails regarding this matter.

Bless them. Bless them all.

The last of the previous night's exhaustion fell away, and Trey got to work with a good heart.

YOUR CAR'S still broke? He hit Send unhappily, because dammit, he missed his meeting with his cousin, and he'd sort of wanted Pete to meet Dewey since they'd planned to have lunch at the coffeehouse again.

Well, Trey might eat here for lunch permanently, at least until Dewey found another job. He was finding that smile—the one that lit Dewey's eyes and made his baby eye crinkles appear, showing that he wasn't a teenager and all his sweetness and light didn't come without reason and thought—that smile was becoming addictive.

He'd needed it today, enough to text Dewey an actual time he'd be in. Dewey had seen him, signaled five minutes, and said, "I'll order."

It was so cozy! Trey found a corner and wondered where they'd eat when Dewey became a gallery owner or an art buyer or any of the thousand-and-six things he'd rambled about that morning, because although he did like people, he was ready to

move on with his degree.

Then he'd pulled out his phone and asked Pete if he was coming, and, well, here they were.

Sorry, T. Mom's back in town for a few days tomorrow—we're going car shopping. Until then, it's Uber, and I gotta save that shit for work.

Do you need me to pick you up for the game? Pete loved sports as much as Trey. The fact that Trey had been in the pros for a while had apparently gotten Pete laid more than once, although Trey had no idea what the pickup line for that would be. Trey always reserved at least two tickets at the box office for him or Nan or Debra or friends.

I'll Uber, Pete texted, and Trey blew out a breath.

I'll get you, he said. Can you be ready at five? Game's at seven.

Sure thing. Beer afterward?

Sure.

"Making dates without me?" Dewey said as he drew near with a tray.

"Sort of," Trey admitted. "My cousin's coming to the game tonight, and his car's still not working. I told him I'd pick him up."

"Wait," Dewey said, setting the tray down and removing two coffees and a sandwich from it. "You've got a game tonight?"

"Yeah. JV plays Thursday, Varsity plays Saturday night. That's why"—he

shrugged—“movie on Friday.” He batted his eyes winningly, and Dewey slid the tray between the table and the wall and then sat in the chair across from him, inhaling his coffee with a reverence most people saved for church.

“I could come,” he said guilelessly. “Sit with your cousin. Can you get me a ticket?”

“You don’t have plans?” Trey asked, feeling a stupid jolt of excitement in his chest.

“Well, I was going to walk down to the bar where Ceej works and get a free beer,” Dewey said, his lips quirking, “but I do that four, five times a week.”

“Minus last night,” Trey murmured.

“Minus last night,” Dewey amended, smiling slightly. “Seriously, I mean, this sport means so much to you. I-I’d like to see it played.”

“JV games aren’t as much fun as varsity,” Trey cautioned. “And, uhm...” He couldn’t help the shy smile that started. “Uhm, I sort of, uhm, came out to the team today, and it was fine, and so, uhm, when we get to uhm, that, uhm...”

Dewey was actively staring at him now. “Uhm?”

Trey swallowed again, and his mouth was dry, so he took a hurried sip of coffee and tried not to make a face. Tea. Oh Lord, he needed to visit his aunt Nan for a single cup of tea.

“Look,” he said after a moment, remembering when he used to walk into a bar, peg one of four guys in there who’d be interested, find the cutest one, wink, and walk out to get laid. God, actual dating dating was hard. “There’s a family section for spouses, girlfriends, etc. I usually get tickets closer to the center of the field because it’s more fun up close, but, you know. In the future. When you don’t mind a little attention.

Harold said I was welcome to bring someone. You. Someone. When you're ready." He grimaced apologetically. "It's... it'll make it sort of serious. But tonight, you and Pete sitting together—it'll be good. Pete loves the game. He'll walk you through it. And he's a fun guy. Trust me."

His smile was... well, probably weird. Hopeful and embarrassed and excited and....

And then he saw heat rising in Dewey's cheeks for once.

"What?" he asked.

"I trust you," Dewey said, gazing down at his coffee. "It's.... God, I want to kiss you some more. It's weird, us making plans for me sitting with the coaches' wives when we need to...." Trey heard it. Have sex. Get busy. Get naked. Make love. "Kiss more," Dewey finished weakly.

Trey's eyes swept over him, all the things that had attracted him in the first place—pretty green eyes, faintly ironic smile, wide, full mouth.

"I'd love to... kiss you more," he murmured.

"But tonight, we'll go to a soccer game," Dewey said with an exaggerated breath of patience.

"And tomorrow we'll go to a movie," Trey reinforced dutifully.

Dewey's eyes went narrow and catlike, and his smile went feline. For a minute, he bore an uncanny resemblance to Beckham.

"Absolutely," he said. "That's what we'll do tomorrow."

Trey smiled sunnily, because after yesterday's crapfest, things were finally starting to look up.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:22 am*

SURE, DEWEY thought, folding a clean uniform and street clothes and socks and underwear for his backpack. They might go to a movie tomorrow night.

Dewey had faith it could be done. He'd be super excited to go to a movie on Trey's arm. Sit in the theater, hold hands, eat popcorn. It was an adorably old-fashioned idea for a date.

But Dewey wasn't going to wait that long for the rest of it. Trey was going to pick him up and then pick Pete up and then drop Pete off and then take Dewey back to Trey's house where Dewey was going to ravish him from head to toe and every place in between.

Every time Dewey saw him—windburned face, rumpled scruff, shy smile, dark curls peeking out from under his ballcap—the image of him, the impression he made on Dewey's soul got deeper and sexier and more important. And now after Dewey had kissed him the night before? After they'd lost themselves in the feeling of muscles, skin, and soft hurried groans that meant everything felt good? Dewey didn't want to wait for a movie. He didn't want to wait for a soccer game, either, but the soccer game was important.

Waiting for the third date when they'd spent all week flirting, smiling, waiting to see each other—Dewey wasn't sure about Trey, but he was starting to wonder if his heart would ever not beat faster when he saw Trey's lean-lipped smile, the quiet joy in his eyes when Dewey smiled back.

This relationship may have started because Trey got stood up at the beginning of the week, but Dewey wanted, wanted the physical contact, wanted the consummation,

wanted the relationship and all that word implied to start now, before the week ended.

He got that Trey's Saturday wasn't his own, but his Sunday, Dewey was pretty sure, was free, at least this week, and Dewey wanted barefoot on the couch privileges by then. He'd only thought the rest of his life would begin when he'd found a better job. Turned out it had begun when Trey walked through the door of the job he held now. Trey could even make Bean There bearable, and Dewey wanted all the things—shopping for artwork, playing with that banshee of a cat, attending Trey's soccer games, spending an entire day naked and happy—to start now.

He'd enjoyed Trey's company more in the last week over his lunch break and during the night before than he'd enjoyed the company of any of his college-aged boyfriends. He knew there were hurdles in a relationship. He wasn't stupid; shit could always fall out.

But hope—this riotous, blessedly exciting bloom of hope—that was new, and powerful, and he wanted to ride it into a new and powerful part of his life.

He simply had to convince Trey that it was a good idea.

Dewey wasn't sure what had done it. Was it Trey's Midwestern upbringing? Was it the time spent on the road as an athlete? Or maybe the years of no relationship at all, but pretty much closeted sex on tap?

Something about his life—maybe even his own sense of chivalry—had made Trey a bona fide good guy. The kind of guy who would step up for a player when he hadn't been planning to step up for himself. The kind of guy who had the backing of not one but two entire athletic programs, from the players to the administrators to—Dewey hoped—most of the parents. Dewey had lived his life—gotten his degree in fact—guided by the tenet that vision produced beauty. Beauty sustained art. Art sustained life.

Trey had vision. He might need some beauty on his walls and in his life, but he had the sort of morals and vision that also sustained life.

Dewey wanted in. He was in the presence of a literal Coach in Shining Armor. He wanted to jump on that man's prancing steed and ride.

But first he had to get the man naked—and not rolling off the couch in a panicked huff, either.

Hence the small pack of clothes and the tablet and the notebook. If he was going to spend some time in Trey's house (please please please please please!), he was going to invest himself in his "beautify Trey's life" project, and he needed his tools.

"Hey," Ceej said, wandering into the apartment, "what's doin'?"

Dewey glanced up from his frantic search of the laundry basket on the couch for an extra pair of clean underwear and took a breath. Ceej and Dewey had bonded over certain fashion choices—lowrider skinny jeans, colorful button-downs over bright solid-colored T-shirts, and shawl-collared sweaters as opposed to hoodies—as well as their exact opposite choice in bed partners.

Ceej preferred free-spirited girls with no boundaries—and as many bed partners as they chose—while Dewey had always been searching for commitment. Ceej's preferences guaranteed no-strings relationships with girls who stayed his friends, and Dewey's approach guaranteed that pretty much every guy he dated ran screaming into the night shouting, "It's not you, it's me!" over his shoulder.

But lately Ceej had been holding out for a girl who wanted one guy—only one guy—and he'd admitted he didn't mind if she had a steady job either. Dewey was crossing his fingers for his buddy and hoping he'd have some good news to report too.

“No,” Ceej said, answering his own question. “No, that’s not what’s doing.”

Dewey peered up from his backpack. “What?”

“You’re not sleeping with this guy on the fourth day of acquaintance.”

Dewey snorted. “Well, I’m obviously not sleeping with him on the first date of acquaintance,” he said.

“You’re packing for a date. I know that backpack,” Ceej cautioned. “Dewey, things are going so well. You’re taking it slow. You... you went to his house and didn’t sleep with him. Come on, man. Don’t blow it now!”

Dewey glared at him. “I’m going to see one of his soccer games. I’m sitting with his cousin in the stands. It’s no big deal.”

“Then why the pack?” Ceej asked, folding his arms over his impressive chest. They’d also bonded over their reluctant dedication to the gym, but Dewey was mostly a speed guy on the treadmill, and Ceej tended to sculpt all his body everywhere, which worked for him.

“So he doesn’t have to come crosstown to drop me off,” Dewey said with dignity. “Or maybe we want to go out for coffee afterward. Or maybe he and his cousin want to play Scrabble, and they wouldn’t mind a third.”

Ceej laughed softly. “Dewey, you’re grown. Go ahead and pack your bag. But don’t be too disappointed if this turns out differently than you hope. He might be totally pumped and really horny after the game, which could suit you fine. Or it might be disappointing because he’s not as committed as you. Or they might lose, and your job might be an endless supply of beer and sympathy. I’m just saying....”

Dewey sighed and remembered that he could do practicality too. “I get it,” he said, finding the perfect pair of underwear for tomorrow, as well as his clean apron for work. He shoved them in his pack and turned toward Ceej, who had made himself comfy at the kitchen table with a soda and a bag of chips.

“Get what?” Ceej asked, crunching blissfully on a chip. Dewey refrained because Trey had said something about food trucks at the soccer venue, and he really loved a good food truck.

“I get that you’re afraid I’ll get too moony over this guy and show my hand. But this isn’t really about being moony,” he said, although he had to admit he’d been pretty moony all day.

“No?” Ceej set the chips down and wiped his fingers fastidiously on a napkin. He kept his dark hair short, with messy spikes gelled up top, and Dewey wondered if maybe he shouldn’t start letting it go without product now that he was looking for a girl who might see beyond all the pretense and maybe like him for his awesome self.

“No,” Dewey said certainly. “It’s about... about being ready to stay up with him and be or do whatever he needs me to be and do. These games mean a lot to him. I want to show him that however he takes a win or a loss, I can be there for it. If he wants me to sleep on the couch, I can do that. If he wants to cry on my shoulder, I’m there for that too.” He gave an eyebrow waggle. “If he wants to sex me up because he’s feeling like he rules the world, well, I wouldn’t say no, but the point is—”

“You’re willing to do what he needs,” Ceej finished, sounding impressed. “Even if...?”

“Even if it means I come home tonight with my backpack completely untouched,” he said, meaning it. Some of the pounding urgency had faded as he’d talked things out with his roommate. For some reason, Ceej had that effect on him—on a lot of people,

actually. It was why he was in such demand as a bartender.

“Okay,” Ceej told him, rolling the top of the chips closed and standing to put them away. Their apartment was cluttered—there was always an art project of Dewey’s or books or equipment from some sort of theater class Ceej was taking stashed in the corners or taking up the kitchen table or the coffee table or end tables, and laundry was a communal decorating service—but they tended to be meticulous about the kitchen, because, as they liked to say whenever one of them washed the dishes, they weren’t animals.

“Okay?” Dewey asked, eyebrows raised.

Ceej shrugged. “Okay. You’re sounding remarkably adult about a guy you’ve pretty much wanted to jump since you first saw him. I’m okay with your mental state. Go get laid.”

Dewey let out a breath. “Or go watch a game and leave my backpack in the car,” he said.

“Either/or,” Ceej agreed, and Dewey blessed his choice in roommates for the thousandth time. Good friends were hard to find.

And they were also good audiences for unlikely stories, which meant Dewey spent part of his evening dying to tell him about Pete.

“Wait a minute,” Dewey said as he ran out of the apartment to Trey’s waiting SUV. “I know you.”

“Oh!” Pete said. “You’re the other barista! Trey kept talking about you, but I couldn’t place you. I guess I’m always, uhm....” He blushed.

“Fixated on Lena,” Dewey finished, delighted. As they spoke, Pete, who had been in the front of the SUV as Trey pulled up, was getting out and sliding in the back. Dewey barely refrained from preening. He got to be the guy in the front!

“She knows me?” Pete asked, sounding excited. “Did you hear that, Trey? She even knows who I am.”

“I heard,” Trey said dryly as he pulled away from the curb. “Good for you, Pete. You made an impression.”

“She’s missed you,” Dewey said, sliding the backpack down by his feet. “I guess widow’s peaks and dad jokes are her thing, so, you know, keep trying.”

“Yes!” Pete crowed. “She even likes the widow’s peak?”

Dewey gave him a smile over the seat. “Says it’s sexy,” he said, and glancing at Trey’s cousin’s face—lean, with the mouth brackets and eye crinkles that spoke of lots of laughing and engagement with the rest of the world—he could see Lena’s point. Of course, Dewey was becoming more and more fascinated with Trey’s quiet intensity, but Lena was intense enough as it was. Maybe people were always looking for their balance, the other side of the teeter-totter, not too heavy, not too light, but not their side of the teeter-totter either.

Interesting. Dewey would ponder it later when Trey’s cousin was not detailing the list of automobile woes that had kept him from visiting the coffee shop all week.

“You know,” Trey said, his voice holding a note of long-suffering restraint, “weren’t you and your mom going to go shopping for a new car?”

“A new used car,” Pete clarified, laughing a little at the oxymoron. “Yeah. She gets home tomorrow, but she always needs a pajama day after a trip.”

“Wise woman, your mom,” Trey said. “That used to be the worst thing about traveling. No rest.”

“Like your schedule is any easier now,” Pete chided, but Trey shrugged.

“It’s all in the same town,” he said. “And I’ve had the U-14 kids for two years. I feel like I can coach them up until they move on to college, and, you know, that’s... that’s something.”

“The side-gig with the kids is important,” Pete said. “Seriously. When my folks split, baseball was the only thing that kept me smiling. I know you don’t get too close to the kids, ’cause that’s not your job, but sometimes that team is the best thing in their lives. I mean, it’s like you say. Not every kid goes to college on sports, and only a very, very few go pro. But the game can still mean a lot. You’re, like, living proof of what sports can do when they’re good.”

Dewey watched as Trey flushed under the praise, and his chest warmed.

“You can’t say good stuff about me until after the game,” he chided. “Now where are we stopping for food? It can’t be too rich or too messy because coaching with sour cream on my jacket is embarrassing.”

“SO,” PETE asked an hour later, as they were making their way through the stadium seats after Trey had peeled off for the locker room, “Lena really mentioned me?”

“Yeah,” Dewey said. “For real. I’ll tell her you’re dealing with a car situation. She’ll be glad to see you again.”

“Here we go.” Pete pointed to numbers painted on the aluminum bench and triumphantly held out the seat cushions he’d made Trey grab from the back of the SUV. “See? See? And it’s September, so it’s still hot here, so you wouldn’t know



this, but by December, if they make the playoffs, those benches will freeze your balls off. Who's your bestie? C'mon, you can admit it."

Dewey cackled and took Pete's beer from him so he could set up the cushions. "I don't know," he teased. "My roommate gets me free beer at a meat-market bar. I mean, seat cushions or free beer—it's a conundrum!"

It was Pete's turn to cackle, and in a moment they were settled, each of them with a beer and Pete with a lobster quesadilla that he'd ordered from one of the food trucks.

"I can't believe you're going to eat that," Dewey told him. "After chicken tacos? Are you kidding? My eyeballs are full." They were not really full. Dewey was eating light tonight. For reasons. Maybe those reasons were just hope for snuggles and not for actual sweaty naked time, but they were still reasons.

"Physical job," Pete said, mouth full as he chewed. He finished the bite and added, "And the bus doesn't go all the way to the machine shop. I've got a mile run each way, in my boots."

"And it's lobster," Dewey added dryly, because Pete had been adamant that a lobster quesadilla was too good to pass up.

"Am ith lobther," Pete added, mouth full again. On the field, the players had filed out and were doing warm-up drills as a team, Trey leading them. What had once been a ritual of practicality for the players had in past years become something of a psych-out for the other teams, as the warm-ups, from stretches to calisthenics to speed drills, were perfected to military precision with the rhythm and showmanship of a dance team.

"I could watch soccer for this alone," Dewey told Pete, and Pete swallowed and grinned.

“Trey and the other assistant coach worked up the drills, got the kids into it. The college team has become known for it. YouTube videos show up all the time—it’s great publicity. I think Trey and Russ were hired for that sort of creativity. Trey doesn’t know this, but I talked to one of his former teammates, and he was like, ‘Yeah—that guy. Made you glad to play. Would come in and get us all pumped, but not in an obnoxious way, just, you know, ‘Glad to be here!’”

Dewey laughed. “That’s funny. That’s how I try to be at the coffee shop, but it doesn’t feel like this!”

“Is that where you want to be?” Pete asked.

Dewey shook his head. “No. Lena loves it,” he said. “She loves bossing people around, developing menus, talking to customers. But...” He shrugged. “I got an art history degree. I’d love to use it.”

Pete laughed. “You should talk to my mom. She’s got an assistant at her shop right now who’s supposed to help with the art on the walls, but I swear, I had to remind the girl to breathe out the other day or she would have hyperventilated and passed out.”

Dewey sputtered some of his beer. “Nobody’s that stupid,” he said, although he remembered Trey mentioning this too.

“Oh my God. She called me at four this morning to go pick my mom up at the airport, but Mom had forwarded me the itinerary, and she gets home tomorrow at four in the afternoon. The girl kept talking about ‘pim.’ She was like, ‘But she gets here at four pim, and that’s gotta be today.’ I was, like, cross-eyed, right? Because it was four in the morning, and it wasn’t until I woke up that I thought to wonder what ‘pim’ was. I called her up and said, ‘The hell is four pim?’ And she said, ‘Well, it’s not ‘am.’”

Dewey blinked. “Am? As in....”

“A.m.” Pete blew out a beleaguered breath. “That girl wakes me up two hours before my alarm goes off because she thinks ‘pim’ means morning in idiot-speak.”

Dewey had to cover his mouth with his hand to keep from spitting out his beer again. “That’s terrible,” he choked.

“Yeah,” Pete said darkly. “Dude, if my mom can pay you a decent wage, I’d love it if you took over for Caitlyn. I just... I can’t even. Four pim!”

Dewey managed to swallow his beer that time, but that wasn’t the last time Trey’s cousin made him laugh. And then he taught Dewey the rules to the game, and Dewey got to watch Trey on the field, cheering the kids on, analyzing plays, even exchanging speaking glances with the rest of the coaching team, and suddenly Dewey got it.

Got why this was so important. Got the excitement of a full stadium cheering on their soccer club. Got the thrill of watching athletes drive themselves to their best.

Got why something like this would mean something to the people who organized the play and helped the players and tried to create order out of chaos.

And then Trey’s team won, and he got winning...and fell completely in love.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:22 am*

TREY HADto laugh at Dewey and Pete on the ride home after the game. The locker room celebration had gone on for a while. It was only their third game of the season and their first at home, and yeah, the team was psyched. Trey had emerged from the locker room, showered, happy, and as he and Russ did their part of the locking up, found Dewey and Pete waiting for him by the locker room tunnel, both of them dancing a little in the eleven o'clock chill but talking like old friends.

Their subsequent banter as Trey took Pete to his little house in West Sac had only enforced that impression, and Pete had begged piteously to be Dewey's "bestie" because, as he said frequently, his company was way better than Dewey's roommate's offer of beer.

"No," Trey told him firmly. "He can't be your bestie because I'm your bestie, and I have no social skills, so I can't afford to give you up."

Pete snorted. "You're my cousin—you can't lose me. I'm like amusing toe fungus. I sort of hang around and make your life colorful. Russ is your bestie, I'm your cousin, and Dewey's your boyfriend. You need to get this straight because there's a test tomorrow."

"Is it in the am or pim?" Dewey asked, and they both laughed so hard, Trey couldn't get them to explain what the joke was. The fuck was a pim anyway?

The drive home was so riotous, the quiet was almost stunning after Trey dropped Pete off, waiting until he was inside the house and flashed his porch light before he pulled away.

“Wow,” Trey said, his cheeks aching from smiling. “You two. I had no idea what I was doing when I introduced you.”

“He’s a blast,” Dewey said. “A grown-up blast, you know? Not like college, where the fun guy always has a story about how he was a jerk to somebody less popular. I mean, even your aunt’s assistant—”

“Oh God, Caitlyn?” Trey asked, remembering the girl’s blank silence when Trey had called asking for Nan’s itinerary.

“Yeah,” Dewey said. “Tragically stupid. I’ve heard. But apparently she threw herself at Pete and he was like, ‘Sorry, honey. You need to graduate from college first, okay? I’m too old for you.’ Which is a nice way to turn somebody down. And the fact that he’s crushing on my boss shows he’s got good taste.”

“Yeah, Pete’s a good guy,” Trey said.

“But you know his biggest failing,” Dewey said as Trey piloted them toward the freeway.

“He gossips?”

“Hell no,” Dewey dismissed with a snort. “No, his biggest failing is how far away he lives. Damn, Trey, you’re going to spend an hour taking people home before you get to bed.”

Trey grunted. “Yeah, but it was worth it.” He grinned. “You had fun, right?”

“Had a blast,” Dewey assured him. “In fact—” He paused and put his hand on Trey’s thigh. “—I, uhm, brought a change of clothes. I, uhm, know you’ll probably fall asleep as soon as you walk through the door, but if you don’t mind dropping me off at

work tomorrow, maybe we could, uhm, snuggle again?”

Trey’s heart thudded so hard he could feel it in his throat. “You want to come over to snuggle?”

“Or whatever,” Dewey said innocently.

Trey covered his hand and laced their fingers together. “I’m sure we could manage some whatever,” he said, wanting to burble with triumph. His team had won, he got to sleep in tomorrow, and Dewey was going to stay over.

It was like a trifecta of perfect things, and for once Trey wasn’t going to worry about how it was going to work.

He was going to call the plays as they came to him and see if the goal would happen on its own. They talked about the game after that—Dewey listened to Trey go on and on about strategy and letting his forwards control the ball and how good his defense had been. He asked questions and praised plays and was generally the best audience Trey could have asked for in a postgame breakdown.

And his hand never left Trey’s thigh.

THERE WAS an order to things when a person got home. He parked the SUV in the driveway since the garage was full of sports equipment, led them in the front door, and turned on the lights, calling softly for Beckham as he moved into the house.

He turned to check that Dewey had locked the door behind him and was surprised to see Dewey leaning against the door as he locked it... and turned the lights back off.

In spite of the tingling in his thighs, the fluttering in his stomach, the rush of blood flowing under his skin from their touch on the drive home, Trey was still taken aback.

The absolutely wicked gleam in Dewey's eyes as he dropped his backpack to the ground beside the door knocked him in the solar plexus, and he couldn't breathe.

"Trey?" Dewey said, his almost-elfin features assuming an innocence that made Trey's mouth dry.

"Yeah?"

"Is the cat fed?"

Trey felt a smile starting at the corners of his mouth.

"Yeah," he murmured.

"Are we still high from the game?" Dewey teased.

"Oh yeah," Trey said, moving closer in the darkness, until he could feel Dewey's body heat as he leaned against the door.

"Ready to give talking about it a little rest?"

His smile was so naughty. Trey had to kiss it.

He started with a corner of the wide, smiling mouth, tickling a little with his tongue, slipping it gently along the seam of Dewey's lips.

Dewey groaned and opened his mouth, tilting his head and pulling Trey in for ravishment. Trey went willingly, the adrenaline and excitement and furious joy of the win converting in a heartbeat to full-throttle desire.

Dewey kissed him back, matching kiss for kiss, and Trey pressed him up against the

door because he wanted to get closer, wanted their flesh to meld, wanted them to be naked, skin to skin.

Dewey, slender and lithe, as Trey had noted rather dreamily, gave a little bounce and wrapped his legs around Trey's waist. Trey turned and, without breaking the kiss, strode toward the couch.

Dewey pulled back and squeaked, "The bed!"

"Do I look like a wrestler?" Trey asked breathlessly. "I'll race you for the bed!"

Dewey stood up, and their eyes locked playfully.

"Now?" Dewey asked.

"Now!" Trey ordered, and they both took off, scrambling down the hallway, shedding their clothes as they went.

Trey got there in time to pull the covers back, and then Dewey stretched out on the bed, naked, put his hands behind his head, and stared up at Trey with twinkling eyes.

"Got lube?" he asked, crossing his ankles primly.

"By the grace of God....," Trey murmured, pulling open his drawer and grabbing the tube. Very deliberately he slid it under the pillow Dewey was using, the action bringing them close enough to kiss.

"Under the pillow?" Dewey whispered, outraged.

"I have things I'd like to do to your naked body first," Trey whispered back. "Good things. This is a special occasion for me. I'm gonna enjoy it."



“Ooh... I’m a special occasion,” Dewey murmured, uncrossing his ankles and moving his hands so he could run them up Trey’s bare upper arms. “Will you enjoy me this much if I become an everyday treat?”

“Love to find out,” Trey breathed, mesmerized by his forwardness, his impudence. His life.

“Me too!” Dewey waggled his eyebrows, and Trey kissed him, moving his body over Dewey’s, welcomed by his legs and arms wrapping around him, holding him tight.

Their naked skin on naked skin sliding together was the most erotic of sensations, and Trey began to shudder with urgency.

He moved down Dewey’s chest, taking a nipple in his mouth and tonguing it until Dewey clenched his hands in Trey’s thick hair. Trey moved to the other, and Dewey groaned.

“Trey?” he whispered, voice thready.

“What?” Trey lifted his head, almost dancing with urgency.

“I know you’re trying for foreplay, but can we jump to the big-ticket ride? I need... oh my God, now!” And with that, Dewey reached behind him and grabbed the lube under the pillow, shoving it into Trey’s hand.

Trey was honestly stunned. “But... but... oh my God, Dewey, your cock is right there!”

“It is,” Dewey practically whimpered. “But my ass is right below it, and I’m dying.”

Trey was going to tell him no on general principles and move down to take Dewey’s

delicious, drooling member into his mouth. He could almost imagine the taste, the feel of it on his palate, and the thought alone made him grunt and undulate against the bed.

He had to stop because he was going to spend himself on the sheets.

And suddenly he got Dewey's urgency—and his own.

He took the lube and went to work quickly, whispering, "You owe me a long, slow, merciless fuck with all the bells and whistles," as he thrust his first finger in to the knuckle and watched as Dewey arched his back and moaned.

"That's a promise, right?" Dewey hissed, lifting his bottom and pushing against Trey's invasion. "Because it's not making me want you less."

Trey added another finger and went slower this time, gentler, and he indulged himself with a quick slurp along Dewey's length.

"Bwah!" Dewey groaned, beating the bed with his hands. "Please! It's like I've been waiting for you for my whole life!"

Who could resist that? Trey slid up along Dewey's slender body and positioned himself at his slick and stretched entrance. "You're sure?" he asked, thrusting his hips the tiniest bit.

"Please," Dewey begged. "I need you so bad."

Trey thrust in, gently, gently, gently, and then pop, his head was inside and his shaft swallowed by Dewey's ass as Dewey shuddered in his arms.

"Okay?" Trey asked, the backs of his thighs quivering with the need to move.

“So okay,” Dewey whispered. He brought his hands up to smooth Trey’s curly hair back from his forehead, to cup his cheeks. “Go,” he said. “C’mon, baby, let’s fly.”

Trey snapped his hips forward then pulled back, then forward again, and Dewey’s back arched and he cried out.

“Like that!” he crowed, and Trey gave a shaky laugh as he continued to thrust. Dewey was vocal and insistent and pushy. “More more more—yes! Oh God. Keep going. So good. Don’t stop!”

Trey loved it. He couldn’t remember the last time a lover had so delighted him, made him tingle with only his words, but Dewey did. He begged, he urged, he praised, and Trey kept fucking him, feeling like a god.

Trey’s own balls tightened, a climax beginning its rush up his spine. He rocked back on his ankles and hauled Dewey’s backside up so he could pound at a premium angle.

“Grab yourself,” he panted, wanting to see. Dewey’s cock was a perfect stroking handful, and Trey had not tasted it nearly enough. He wanted to watch Dewey’s long-fingered hand wrap around it, see Dewey squeeze along its length, hear Dewey’s groan as he touched himself just right, and still Trey continued to thrust in his backside.

Dewey’s climax was as much of a surprise as Dewey himself. It hit hard and fast, spurting across his stomach in a great arc, and Dewey’s cries of release and his asshole’s tight grip on Trey’s cock shot Trey right into the stratosphere along with him. His entire body washed in fire and ice, and warmth blew straight from his core and his groin to his chest as he came.

He couldn’t stop the tremors that wracked him, didn’t want to, and he dropped Dewey’s hips and fell forward, little minithrusts rocking them both as Dewey

groaned in happy completion next to his ear.

With a final sigh, Trey sank onto him, loving his long, sturdy muscles, like a dancer's. Loving how he could support Trey's weight.

"Oh God," Dewey breathed. "That was even better than I hoped."

"Just wait," Trey panted. "Wait until I can make a plan and stick to it."

Dewey laughed softly. "Even if you score a thousand times, Trey, I'm not going to let you scream 'Goal!' when you come."

Trey convulsed with laughter at the thought and held Dewey even tighter. He'd always assumed the world would be perfect, his job would be perfect, his life would be perfect when he met the right guy, but he was starting to suspect that it could all be in chaos, and might continue to be, but the right guy made it perfect anyway.

And if it wasn't perfect, the right guy could at least make him smile, and that was perfect too.

TREY HAD pulled himself up along Dewey's body and settled into him, one arm stretched out, Dewey's head on his shoulder, before he remembered the niceties.

"Should I get a cloth?" he murmured.

"Why?" Dewey asked, nuzzling his shoulder. "Am I supposed to forget it happened?"

Trey chuffed out a laugh. "No, but, you know... some guys are all about the wipes."

Dewey gave a drowsy snort. "My ass is not a coffee-shop table," he said. "There are some messes I don't mind as much as others."

Trey's laughter rumbled out of his throat, and he dropped a kiss on top of Dewey's head. "Your mouth...."

"Will feel great on your cock," Dewey said cheekily. "But we do need a washcloth before that happens. Let's glow a little first."

"God, I can't remember the last time I was this happy," Trey told him.

"But you must have won a game recently, or you would have lost your job," Dewey said, all innocence, and Trey chuckled.

"Man does not live on soccer alone," he murmured, his eyes going to half-mast in spite of his efforts to stay awake.

"Sleep," Dewey mumbled, apparently on the same page. "Sleep. We'll do this some more. And again. There's got to be more. So much more."

"And again and again and again...." Trey sang, and then his body, replete and tired from what he had to admit had been a helluva week, pulled him into sleep.

HE AWOKEA few hours later to use the bathroom and remembered the washcloth for himself then. He rinsed it out and then brought it back to the bed stand, just in case.

As he got back in bed, Dewey slid out and grabbed the cloth, chuckling. Trey closed his eyes and looked forward to holding him again when he returned.

He was awakened by a hot, wet mouth on his cock and a firmly stroking fist.

"Oh, hello," he mumbled, rolling to his back while Dewey scrambled to fit between his thighs. Oh wow, the decadence of bending his knees, spreading himself out, and then reaching down to tangle his fingers in Dewey's thick blond hair.

Dewey's throat worked him for a moment, and he tilted his head back. "Ahhhh..." The glorious sensation, the blessed relief of somebody else taking the helm, giving the commands, sucking his cock!

Dewey slurped along his length and finished off with a lick at the end. "Want a preview of what's next?" he asked. "Or do you want it to be a surprise?"

Trey stared down the length of his torso to Dewey's face, peering out from between his spread thighs, and the raw eroticism made him pulse in Dewey's fist. "Keep sucking," he breathed, and Dewey's low chuckle brushed breath across his sensitized head.

"Okay," Dewey said, lowering his head for a quick slurp. He let a little spit dribble down between Trey's cheeks, and Trey pressed his feet against the bed, torn between pushing on Dewey's head—gently—and reaching down to spread himself for what he thought would be coming next.

Dewey's bony finger was enough to make him clench his hands, his body tingling to the tips of his toes, to the ends of his hair, so caught up in the surprise of arousal so close to sleep.

"You like that," Dewey whispered. "Good."

Then he added another finger and lowered his head. Trey moaned and bucked, and Dewey pulled back, keeping Trey's cock gripped in his fist.

"Now see," Dewey murmured, "now I'm torn. 'Cause either way I want to ride you, but which way... which way..." While he was taunting Trey, he reached under the crumpled comforter and pulled out a small, slickened object that Trey barely recognized from his end table.

“Oh my God,” he breathed. It had been so long since he’d even remembered sex was a thing, he’d almost forgotten he had that.

“Don’t worry,” Dewey murmured. “I washed it. Found it last time I was here, ’cause I’m nosy.” He bumped Trey’s cockhead with his nose, and Trey whimpered in need. “And I thought, ‘I want him inside me so bad, but what if he likes to bottom?’ and then I found this, and I thought, ‘Aha! Crazy what modern technology can do.’” As he spoke, Dewey’s clever fingers were busy with the matter at hand. He added a little extra slick to his fingers and spread it along Trey’s pleasantly aching rim. He brought the plug to Trey’s entrance and thrust it inside, to the stretching point, and then...

Left it, while he continued to taunt Trey not just with his words but with his busy, voracious mouth, which was licking and sucking and tormenting even though Dewey was no longer fisting his cock.

“So,” Dewey said, his voice so gruff Trey was relieved to know this was arousing him as well, “I’ve got to admit I’m dying here. I woke up with a hard-on and your come dribbling down my ass, and I needed you all over again.”

“I will come on your face,” Trey managed, “if you do not—ahhh...”

Dewey thrust the plug all the way in and Trey had to relax, give in to the dark pleasure washing through his body if he didn’t want to climax too soon.

When he could breathe again, he realized Dewey had straddled him and was holding his cock, sliding it inch by inch through his rim. Trey imagined he was adjusting to the stretch, the burn, the deliciousness of being filled, much as Trey was adjusting to the smooth piece of soft silicone in his own channel.

“Whooow....” Dewey breathed as he slid in that last... two... inches. He paused for a moment and leaned forward, his hands on Trey’s chest. “God. I thought, ‘It could not

possibly have felt that good, but it's even better this time, and... oh!" He rose a little and sat again, and Trey echoed that tiny, helpless sound. Dewey paused at the bottom and shuddered, then peered into Trey's eyes through the fall of hair across his brow. "Fast now?" he pleaded.

"Yeah...." Trey sighed, anchoring Dewey's hips with his hands and arching his backside against the mattress. With a heave, he thrust up into Dewey's body, and it was Dewey's turn to tilt his head back, exposing the vulnerable line of his throat, his mouth open in soundless joy.

Dewey adjusted his position enough to give Trey some room for longer, harder strokes, and Trey continued to thrust, but the position made the thrusts slower, not as hard but more tantalizing.

The pressure in Trey's backside upped the urgency, and the plug jostled every time Trey pulled back to stroke. He was shaking with arousal but almost helpless to relieve it, and Dewey was making greedy, unsatisfied little sobs as he rode.

"You ready?" Trey asked, pulling his knees up in anticipation of rolling them both over.

In response, Dewey tightened his knees around Trey's flanks and leaned sideways. Trey followed him, and they rolled so seamlessly the rhythm of the fucking didn't even falter, and Trey found himself pounding furiously before he could stop himself. Dewey's cries grew louder, more urgent, and his hands kneaded at Trey's biceps, his shoulders, his chest, while Dewey rode his desire higher... higher... higher....

Trey gave a brutal, powerful jerk of his hips, and Dewey cried out, spurting come between them without a touch to his own cock. His ass gripped Trey unmercifully and Trey gave a hoarse shout, burying his face in Dewey's shoulder as his own climax was ripped out of him, the powerful ripples of his muscles milking him, from



taint to balls to cockhead, of every drop of pleasure he'd ever imagined sex had to offer.

Dewey was stroking his neck, his shoulders, cupping his cheeks, and Trey melted into him, well and truly tired now, and so, so satisfied.

This is why people come out. This is why they take risks. This is why they stand up in front of the whole damned world to say, "Let people love whom they choose, let them hold hands or kiss or date or marry who makes them happy."

He smiled and rolled to the side, once again pulling Dewey up against him and not minding the mess, although knowing he'd need to visit the bathroom sooner than later.

"God," he said passionately.

"Right?" Dewey panted. "I'm... I'm boggled. Round two doesn't usually top round one."

Trey laughed a little. "I bet between you and me, we could have a lot of firsts, you think?"

Dewey turned to him in the darkness and regarded him soberly. "I'd really like to try," he said. "I mean, look what we've done so far, and we haven't even been on our first date."

Trey's laughter shook him even as he ventured to the washroom to clean up again, and still when he returned and put on his sleep shorts for the night. He crawled back into bed next to Dewey and thought, rather grandly, that he really didn't ever want to crawl back into bed on his own again.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:22 am*

“DEWEY!” LENAchided. “Are you here on earth or off on a cloud again?”

“Cloud,” Dewey said through a yawn. Trey had let him sleep as long as possible before he had to shower and dress for work. Trey had dropped him off with a lingering kiss in the front seat and a promise to be at his apartment at six for their date.

“Should I pack?” Dewey asked primly.

Trey gave a shy smile. “I’ve got a game tomorrow at eleven and another one at night. The night one is at the college, but the day one is in Chico. You can come if you want....” He squeezed his eyes shut. “I mean, never mind.”

Dewey gave him a suspicious glance. “Isn’t that close to a marriage proposal where you come from? You know, heteronormative sports world?”

Trey grimaced. “Yeah. Yeah. I know. Sorry. Don’t want to freak you out. Don’t want to rush things. Just don’t want you to go home early in the morning, either.”

Dewey thought suddenly, I am falling in love with the crinkles in his eyes. With his self-deprecating smile. With the things he wants for me that are soooo grown-up, but so tender too.

“I’ll hang out for the morning game,” he said brightly. “Make plans for all those dreadful blank walls. Don’t worry.” He kissed Trey again, hungrily. “You’ve got steadiness and permanence and community leader written all over you, Trey Novak. I can wait until the time is right to be the coach’s significant other. It doesn’t have to be

tomorrow.” He knew his grin was wicked and wanton and all the other good words. “It’ll come.”

Trey snickered like a little kid. “Come!” he cackled. “You said come!”

Dewey was still laughing as he slid out of the car, his backpack over his shoulder. He had the feeling he was going to get a lot of use out of it before he got enough art on those white walls to feel like the place was his too.

He looked forward to all of it—the courtship, the anticipation, the building of the foundations, and the living in the castle. He’d never in his life felt so much promise and known it could be fulfilled.

So yeah, his head was in the clouds that day when it was supposed to be on his job, but he could do both. Oh, but first! He’d forgotten—he had something to tell Lena!

The bell to the shop rang, and Dewey glanced at the incoming customer before grinning at her. “Yeah, I’m on a cloud,” he said. “But don’t worry. There’s room on the cloud for two.”

“Hey, hey, Dewey! Good to see you, bro!”

Dewey stepped forward to do the bro shake with Pete, and then he turned to his boss. “Lena, I don’t think you two have been properly introduced. This is Pete. He’s Trey’s cousin, and he’s been having car trouble this last week. I think you two should exchange phone numbers, right? Because what I’m doing here? This is a little bit middle school, you think?”

“Car trouble?” Lena asked, shaking hands with Pete—and blushing, Dewey noticed. “Then how’d you get here today?”

Pete looked abashed. “Today, I ubered. ’Cause, uhm, Dewey said you’d missed me.”

Lena, with her punk hair and her sharp-edged features, seemed to melt. “You took an Uber for me?” she asked. Then she glanced up to where people were backing up behind the counter and made an unhappy sound.

“Don’t worry, boss,” Dewey said smartly, saluting. “I’m on it, boss.” As he jogged back behind the counter, he turned to Pete and taunted, “Who’s the bestie now!”

Pete pointed to Dewey and laughed and then turned his attention to Lena in a completely adorable, bashful smile that made the next frenetic half hour behind the counter totally worth it.

Finally Pete had to leave, and Lena came to give Dewey his break. “Wow,” she said, sounding like a schoolgirl. “He’s... he’s even better for a long conversation than he was for a quick visit. I hope he’s as good a kisser, right?”

“Well his cousin is dynamite in the sex department, so you might be a lucky girl,” Dewey said smugly, and since the lunch rush had died when Pete left, it was Lena’s turn to pump him for answers, which he happily gave.

“So,” Lena said when he was done, “all this and you haven’t even had your first date. What do you think will happen next?”

Dewey grinned at her. “Happily ever after,” he said with a smug smile. “I don’t see that we’ve got any other choice!”

THE WORDSwere prophetic.

The much-anticipated date was as comfortable and as wondrous as their first week together had been—and their second night together even better.

Dewey spent two weeks researching art before Trey pretty much gave him a blank check to order some and have it framed and installed. Piece by piece it arrived, and Dewey fell more and more in love with the little house in Carmichael with each installment.

And he and Beckham were beloved antagonists by now. On the weekends, if Trey had a game and Dewey was still at the house, Dewey would spend hours chasing the little terror around in circles until Trey would get home to find them both panting and exhausted and cuddled together watching trash TV and bonding.

The third weekend Trey went off to coach his rec-league team, Dewey was surprised by a key in the lock when Trey wasn't supposed to be home yet, and a young, dark-haired woman with brown eyes and a shy, self-deprecating smile walked in, blinking as Dewey stopped midterror, and Beckham zoomed laps around him before teleporting to the bedroom.

"You," said Debra, Trey's sister, "have been sucking all the attention away from my cat."

Dewey had laughed and told her she was welcome to chase the little hellion around herself, and she'd shaken her head.

"Nope. But we do need to order DoorDash, watch reruns of RuPaul, and bond. Trey's told me so much about you, but he hasn't introduced us yet, and I think we need to dish dirt and spill tea and make sure he knows we will gang up against him when Christmas comes around and there's holiday games of Trivial Pursuit."

Dewey stared at her, enchanted. "You think I'll stick until Christmas?" he asked hopefully. It was getting close to Halloween.

"God yes," Debra said, nodding. "Trey's talking about inviting you to the rec-league

soccer banquet. That's the next best thing to a marriage proposal in sports guy world."

Dewey couldn't help the radiance of his smile. "Good," he said, his chest quivering. "Cause he makes me happy."

Debra—who dressed as conservatively as Trey in dark slacks and a long-sleeved navy tee—clapped her hands and squealed. "DoorDash," she said. "Now. And then dishing." She sobered. "My brother has worked really hard to be in this place, with a house and jobs that accept him. Being gay and in sports is not a picnic, and that mishigas last month was probably the scariest thing he's ever done. You're awesome. I can already tell. But even if you were ridiculous and shallow and terrible, I would have sucked up to you just to make my brother happy." She let out a relieved sigh. "You do not know how glad I am that we're going to be besties."

Dewey grunted. "What is it with your family and besties? Pete already claimed me but?"

"No," she said. "No. Pete absolutely does not get you as bestie. It's not fair."

Dewey laughed and said, "DoorDash. We'll discuss it."

And they did. And what they determined was that anybody who loved Trey as much as the three of them did was bound to be a bestie. Dewey, who had grown up alone and felt like he'd missed the boat on family when he'd declined to move up to Oregon with his mother, was suddenly surrounded by "besties" who wanted to go out to dinner with him or the movies or Trey's games, because anybody who loved Trey was somebody they would love.

And Dewey loved Trey.

Had probably loved him from that first meeting when Trey had gotten stood up in the coffee shop by some random person who had swiped right and then not shown. It didn't matter. Trey had been there, and Dewey had seen him, seen the laugh crinkles in his eyes, seen the sweetness in his smile, and that had been it.

It had been love before the first date. It had been love before the first sex, and more and more, Dewey found himself declining drinks with Ceej and finding ways to be with Trey.

One night when Ceej asked him out just to hang, Dewey was forced to say, "No, man, I'm sorry. Me, Debra, Lena, and Pete are going to the game," and the disappointment on CJ's face was so acute, Dewey found himself adding, "But you can come too, since you don't work."

Ceej brightened like sunshine, and in the ensuing discussion of vehicles and caravans, Lena ended up getting Pete and Ceej ended up picking up Debra, and Dewey got to see Trey's little sister and his roommate/bestie meet for the first time.

He liked to think he'd get to brag about that to their children, because while they weren't as ridiculously extroverted as Pete and Lena, their quiet conversation seemed to make the world a quieter, more grounded place, and Dewey thought that was beautiful too.

Halloween came with the six of them at Trey's house, watching scary movies and passing out candy. Dewey and Lena had decorated the front of the little house, and they all took turns hanging out on the front porch in a Grim Reaper costume to scare the older kids before they knocked. When it was over, Trey and Dewey said goodbye to everybody at the door, arms around each other's waists, and then turned out the lights and went back into the house to clean up after the party.

Dewey was in the middle of vacuuming up popcorn they'd thrown at the screen

during Season of the Witch when he realized Trey was watching him. Just... watching him.

“What?” he asked, grinning.

“I like my walls,” Trey said after a moment, but his eyes remained thoughtful.

“But?” Dewey glanced around, feeling some satisfaction. He’d found a series of modern paintings depicting sports. Not all soccer. There was football, rugby, basketball, even an old race-car driver, wearing a leather helmet and looking ancient and grizzled and unimpressed. The colors were bold even as the pictures were detailed, and Dewey had framed them all in bright primary colors. Two in the living room—along with a framed banner from Trey’s team and one of Trey’s jerseys from the Sac Republic, framed as well—and one in the kitchen. They were only the beginning. Dewey had gotten permission to make the guest bathroom sports themed, and he’d found a shower curtain, of all things, for the Sacramento Kings, and some bathroom rugs as well. He knew they weren’t soccer, but they were purple, and he had great plans for the trim in the bathroom too.

He wanted to do the bedroom, but he was hoping to look for art that was a little more personal. Not erotic—just personal. He’d heard stories of Trey and Debra growing up in a big farmhouse and playing games, mostly of their own devising, in the backyard. They’d even had a tire swing. While neither of them talked about their family much, those times together had meant something to them, and Dewey knew somebody who painted old farmhouses. He wanted to save some of the good. And he loved visiting his mother and traveling along the Oregon coast; he was hoping a picture of the ocean would make Trey happy because he talked frequently about making trips to the beach in the offseason. (Dewey had not yet figured out when the soccer “offseason” was, particularly for the middle-school team. To hear Trey talk, it was in the phantom month between July and August, although their banquet was in early December.)



So yes, he was happy with the walls, and Trey had bragged about them all night. Everybody had heard the stories of who the sports figures were, which had been fun for Dewey too, since he'd only picked the pictures because he'd thought they were beautiful and well done.

So yes, Dewey knew Trey "liked the walls," but he got the feeling there was more at stake here.

"No buts," Trey said, shaking his head, smiling softly. "I just... like my walls. I like your plans for them. I, uhm, like you in my home."

Dewey grinned. "I like being here," he said.

"You—you've made everybody's life better, you know that? Lena and Pete's, my sister's—all your people fit so neatly with my people. I... I want to talk to Aunt Nan and see if we can do Thanksgiving together. Here. With my new walls. With my new boyfriend. With all the new and the good in my life."

Dewey knew his smile was going to take over his whole body. He wanted to wriggle like a puppy. "Yeah?" he asked, leaning the vacuum against the end table and moving toward Trey. This sort of speech called for touching, he thought confidently, and Trey's hands spanning his waist, riding up under the tight long-sleeved shirt he'd worn that night, proved him right.

"Yeah," Trey murmured, feathering his lips along Dewey's ear. "And I want to ask you...." He paused, biting his lip, and while Dewey loved his adorable bashfulness, he had zero patience.

"Yes, I'll move in with you!" he announced, throwing his arms around Trey's neck.

Trey stared at him, stunned. "Really? Uh...."

Suddenly Dewey was panicked. “That’s what you were going to ask me, right?”

Trey nodded almost manically. “Of course,” he said. “Of course that’s what I was going to ask you! Not another thing I want more!”

Dewey kissed him then, so happy he had no words. The kiss went on, grew hotter, until they were both naked, sweaty, and ultimately very sated.

They were sprawled on the couch, under the throw Dewey had so admired (and now needed to wash) when Trey’s surprised expression registered on him.

“Trey?” he asked.

“Yeah?”

“You did plan to ask me to move in with you, right?”

“Sure, sure,” Trey said.

“Was there anything else you wanted to ask me?” Dewey followed up suspiciously.

“Well,” Trey said, “a couple of things. But, you know. The moving in was the most important.”

Which was when Dewey realized that moving in hadn’t been on Trey’s radar at all, but he was excited about the idea now. Well, he’d been sort of that way about Dewey’s quest to put art on his walls, so Dewey figured that was fine.

“So what was, uhm... less important?” Dewey asked.

“Well, the guys—the coaches at the college—wanted to know if you wanted to claim

the tickets for the significant other's section. There's four tickets—you can bring anyone you want, and, you know, Aunt Nan has reserved a spot with Pete and Debra in case we make the playoffs or something exciting happens, but this way you'd get to bring people there when you came. They come with cushions and their own vendors and everything.”

Trey's voice was excited, like having a beer vendor dedicated to Dewey's section was the selling point of the spouse's section.

Dewey knew what it really meant.

“Out,” he said, his voice a little shaky. “You'd be out. So on the games that are televised, they'd pan over me and Pete and someone would say, ‘That's Dewey Saunders, Trey Novak's boyfriend,’ right? I mean, I know it's not pro, but they do that, don't they?”

“Yeah,” Trey said softly. “They, uh... they do. Yes. It would be a big deal. Harry, Russ, and Casey are really excited about it. They're like, ‘We'll get the wives T-shirts, and the whole section will wave rainbow flags and hold up signs that say Woke to tick off the people who are always ticked off anyway.’ So, uhm, if you want to be... you know. My boyfriend. In the public eye. It's waiting for you.”

Dewey pushed himself up on his elbow. “This... this is even bigger than moving in together,” he said, marveling. “Th-this is huge.”

Trey gave that bashful smile again. “Well, it is to me,” he said. “But I wasn't sure you knew—”

“Yes!” Dewey crowed, not wanting to lose his spot cuddling naked but very tempted to do the chicken dance that way in the middle of the living room. “Yes, I would like to be your very controversial and totally besotted boyfriend who loves you.”

“Oh God,” Trey muttered, burying his head against his own shoulder. “I wasn’t even done yet, but yes, I should have led with that. I love you. You make my life better. You’ve made my home homier. Come live with me and be my very much in the public boyfriend and attend the middle-school team’s soccer banquet with me and Don and Don’s wife. Be... be official. Is that okay?”

At that moment, Beckham made one of his famous sorties into the living room and over the arm of the couch. Normally he’d bite Dewey’s toe, but this time he used Dewey’s ass like a trampoline for a few pounces and then scurried back into the bedroom.

Dewey was left laughing hysterically against Trey’s chest, not even able to say “Yes! Yes! A thousand times yes!” because he was far too happy for words.

Trey yawned and held him close, obviously falling asleep because his life didn’t get any less hectic because the fall holidays were in progress.

“Great,” he murmured happily. “All the things asked. My favorite answer for all of them. And next week, you’re going to meet Nan.” He paused and frowned. “If I can get Caitlyn, her assistant, to remember to tell her.”

And for some reason that made Dewey laugh harder.

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:22 am*

“AUNT NAN?” Trey asked when the phone picked up. “I thought I’d get Caitlyn.”

“Nope,” Nan said crisply. “I had to fire the girl. She.... God. I can’t even tell you how many vendors she’s pissed off. I’ll be lucky if I have a business left at all.”

“I’m sorry about that,” he said sincerely. It had been a big deal to get her to accept help anyway. He wasn’t sure how he, Debra, and Pete would get her to interview another assistant for her gallery.

“Not your fault, honey. Unless you know an art history major you’ve been hiding from me.”

It wasn’t quite like fireworks going off behind his eyes or a giant bell tolling with his head as the clapper—but it was close.

“Oh my God, do you and Pete ever talk?” he asked, trying desperately to cover for the fact that his conversations with her in the last two months had been mostly about him and the fallout from his two days in the spotlight and the rest of his career as it followed. A lot of that he’d shared with Dewey, but apparently national news feeds had been carrying some of the clips, and his parents, who no longer spoke to Trey and Debra, had called Nan to complain.

Nan hadn’t told Trey much about those conversations, but he imagined she’d had some acid things to say.

“We talk all the time,” Nan said now, defensively. “What aren’t we talking about?”

“You know my boyfriend?”

“The one I haven’t met yet?” she asked, and she was no longer defensive.

“Yes, that one—the one I’m calling to schedule for dinner so you can meet.”

“What about him?”

Trey laughed, feeling smug. “What your son, the one who talks to you all the time, has declined to tell you, is that he’s an art history major. And he’d love to get out of his current job.”

There was a silence on the other end of the phone.

“He’s no longer my son,” she said after a moment. “I renounce him. I don’t care if he’s found the perfect girlfriend, he’s dead to me.”

Trey laughed again, knowing Nan would defend Pete to the death. “He keeps calling Dewey his bestie—I think you need to tell him there’s obligations to the word.”

“I think I hate being gone so much in September and October is what I think,” she muttered. “Okay, so you want me to meet this amazing person like family. This is what you wanted to tell me?”

Trey sobered. “You’re... you know. It’s like introducing him to my parents, Nan, but you know. Better. And we’re moving in together—officially after Christmas, but you know....”

“He’s there most nights now?” she asked, laughing.

“Yeah,” Trey said with satisfaction. “I really love this guy, Aunt Nan. I want you to

meet him. But, you know, since he's an art history major, I wouldn't mind if you hired him too."

"How good is he?" she asked. "Does he know his stuff?"

"I let him buy art for my walls," he said, because seriously, that was all he knew about art. "And I love it. I mean... love it."

"I can't wait to meet him," she said, her voice dropping softly. "But mostly, that's because he makes you happy."

"Thanks, Aunt Nan."

Now

DEWEY HADN'T stopped talking since they'd walked down the stairs of Aunt Nan's place and set off on the two-block quest to find the car. Nan lived and worked in Midtown, so even though it was eleven o'clock, there were still people on the streets, walking from restaurant to bar—or from bar to bar—or finding live music. There had been a Kings game that night; Trey could tell because he could see the bright purple beam from the Golden 1 Center lighting up the sky and knew that happy fans would still be converging on the square.

"So I showed her the prints I got you for your front room, and she loved them," Dewey babbled, lacing their fingers together. "And I know you were doing the dishes, but we had so much to talk about. She knows artists like you wouldn't believe, and she needs help now. I think I might work both jobs, if that's okay. I can do early mornings at her shop and then take a bus to the coffee shop until Lena finds someone else. Oh my God, I may have to get a car! Trey, I hate to tell you this, but your aunt pays really well. It's insane! Anyway—"

Trey smiled and listened, loving all the plans he was making, loving the bright future his words painted for the two of them. It wasn't until they spotted the SUV that Dewey paused for breath and dropped the bomb.

"So," he said, the familiar thread of humor lacing his voice. "When were you going to tell me you hated coffee?"

Trey grimaced. "Uhm...."

"It wasn't until your aunt actually tried to hide that she was giving you tea—and you drank it, which you don't do with your coffee, that I figured it out. Holy cats, Trey, how did you end up in a coffee shop?"

"Uhm...."

But Dewey was on a roll. "I mean, you were meeting a date, right? Why would you even choose a coffee shop for someone you were planning to go out with? You wouldn't even have that in common!"

And here it came. The moment of truth. "I wasn't meeting a date," Trey said in a rush. "I was meeting Pete. He wanted me to see Lena because he'd been crushing on her for months and he was trying to work up the nerve. I've never been on a dating app in my life. I wouldn't know how to sign up for one in a million years."

"But... but why didn't you say that?" Dewey asked, laughing.

"Because I hadn't dated in so long," Trey told him, biting his lip. "I was so tongue-tied. You were so beautiful, and your smile just...." He shrugged. "It was like a shoulder tackle right to the solar plexus, you know? I would have done anything to keep you talking to me. Pretending to get stood up was small potatoes. I drank coffee."



“You’ve been drinking coffee!” Dewey accused, eyes squeezed closed. They’d drawn abreast of Trey’s Tahoe now, and Trey hit the key fob and then opened the door for Dewey. Instead of sliding into his seat, Dewey snuggled into his arms, taking shelter from the chill of the early November evening and, Trey suspected, wanting to prolong the conversation.

“Yeah,” Trey sighed. “I... I really don’t like coffee.”

“I sort of figured when you had an electric teapot and a tea cozy and no coffee maker,” Dewey told him indignantly.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Trey asked.

“Because I was afraid to jinx it,” Dewey said. “The perfect guy wanders into my coffee shop and boom, I’m in love for the rest of my life. I was afraid if I asked you why you were even trying to drink coffee, you’d admit that you were a spy, or it was all a hoax, or your original date had shown up after all.” Dewey shook his head. “And because you walked in and the rest of my life started, and I didn’t want to even question it.”

Trey kissed him, and it was meant to be brief and reassuring, but it lingered, became the kind of kiss you’d offer your lover in the moonlight.

He pulled back and said, “Me neither. I’d drink coffee every morning for the rest of my life if it meant I could wake up next to you.”

“I’ll buy you tea,” Dewey told him drolly. “But you can still wake up to me every morning for the rest of our lives.”

“Win!” Trey said brightly. Then he whispered, “Goal!” reminding Dewey of his first predictions of their lovemaking.

Dewey sputtered, and Trey captured his mouth again and the kiss lingered even longer, even more sweetly. They had a future together. It was even better than tea.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:22 am*

ISABELLA brYNE was very nearly the most stunning piece of physical female perfection that Sebastian Craig had ever laid eyes on. She was five feet, eleven inches of Norwegian perfection: hip length, satiny blond hair; eyes the color of the Atlantic Ocean on a summer day with naturally brown lashes and brows; high cheekbones; the faintest brushing of freckles on her faintly tanned skin; a plump, lush mouth; and a straight, small nose.

She was brilliant, competent, took shit from nobody, had a razor-edged sense of humor, and worked her ass off academically. In fact, given all her assets—and the fact that when she stood next to dark-haired, blue-eyed, gaminely beautiful Sebastian, they practically glowed like Olympian gods—only two things kept Sebastian from being head over heels in love with her.

The first thing was that she often had a temper that made a PMS-ing harpy going into nicotine withdrawal look like a chubby fuzzy bunny that burped daisies and shot rainbows out its ass.

The second thing was that Sebastian was so gay he made a parade in San Francisco look like a Bible Belt tent revival. Oh, he toned it down most of the time, unless he wanted to torment someone who did the wedgie dance out of a glass house and Sebastian felt like throwing stones, but oh yes—Sebastian could only look at Bella as the sister of his heart and not the wench he wanted in his bed.

They adored each other.

And gay or not, when he found out that her brother was willing to put them up over the summer so Sebastian could save his money for his second doctorate, he was about

ready to have her babies.

“So tell me,” he begged, “tell me your brother isn’t some psychotic, gun-toting, homophobic Nazi, or, you know, like the Unabomber, locking himself in the linen closet and making homemade explosives using peanut butter and methamphetamine... because otherwise, Bella, I don’t see a downside.”

Bella had shrugged in her laconic way. “I haven’t seen a lot of Asa since I went away to school,” she said. “He... you know. He got his job, got his business, put the rest of us through school. Talks to Mom and Dad once a week. Mom talks his ear off—tells him who’s doing what, what the nieces and nephews are doing, that sort of thing.” She shrugged again. She was the youngest of five children, and Sebastian had met the other three. Classrooms full of sugar-hyped kindergartners talked less. He often wondered if Bella’s surly disposition was to ward off the overwhelming press of family that could be generated from three such unapologetic extroverts—and their rambunctious, terminally charming children.

“So, does he do any talking, or is it all your mom?” Bella’s mother, Brenda Bryne, adored Sebastian—and vice versa. She even adored the way he gave her shit about her name.

Bella’s upper lip came up in what Sebastian thought of as a lazy-man’s shrug. She’d shrug with her shoulders, but it was too much damned effort. “I think Asa and me are both like Dad.” She looked thoughtful then, and Sebastian cocked an eyebrow at her.

“The thing is, Dad and me, we don’t talk much, but we get hurt really easy. It’s why I’m such a bitch—easier that way. I just....” And now she looked away. “You know, he just had a horrible divorce out east, and here he is, a single father and back home. It just occurred to me that maybe I should have been more worried. He was always really kind to me when I was a kid.”

Sebastian straightened up from his insouciant lean over the counter at Barnes Noble and looked at her more closely. They both worked there (Sebastian was a day manager and Bella kissed his long shapely toes, as she liked to say) and had been friends and fellow students at U.C. Davis for over four years, when Sebastian had gotten his first doctorate in pre-Renaissance Art History. He'd never seen this particular expression on Bella's face before—not even when she dumped a bewildered pre-med student for no other reason than that he liked Death Cab for Cutie—which was actually her favorite band.

“Omigod, Bella!” he exclaimed, a little horrified. “Is that remorse?”

The narrowing of her eyes should have warned him. She pulled a pen from the cup at his elbow (he was working the information kiosk in the store today) and started scribbling furiously on the pad of paper on the counter.

“Yes, Sebastian. Absolutely. Today, on May fifteenth, two-thousand-and-ten, Isabella Bryne felt remorse. Here. I've made a note of it.” She ripped off the piece of paper, wadded it up into a ball, and shoved it into his hands. “Now here, just for you, take it into the bathroom, shove it up your ass, and jack off with it. I know you'll enjoy yourself.”

And with that she stalked off, leaving a trail of red-tinged funk in her wake. Sebastian ignored her suggestion and unfurled the piece of a paper. While Bella would never be a famous artist, she was a decent caricaturist—in fact, she often doodled or cartooned to express her rather repressed emotions.

The piece of paper in Sebastian's hand had a picture of a lion cub on it, looking playful and befuddled and dear, and Sebastian looked at it thoughtfully before he folded it and put it in his pocket. His parents were living in Europe at the moment and God-knew-where-else at the long term, and Bella was the next best thing he had to a sister. They looked out for each other, and that little piece of paper was a clue to her

grouchy, miserable heart.

It was worth keeping, but he wouldn't tell her that.

They made peace—they had to. They were moving their shit into Asa Bryne's house that day. Of course, most of Sebastian's stuff was in storage—not that he had much. He'd been pretty much traveling from degree to degree since he'd been turned loose on the world at eighteen. That September he'd turned twenty-seven, and the thought had made him sad.

"I don't know why you're doing this," he grumbled to Bella as they schlepped their sixth box of books into Asa's ginormous garage. The whole house was ginormous. It should be—it was situated on six acres of hillside in Ophir surrounded by oak trees, mowed grass, and cattle wire.

The house itself was stunning: stained raw wood, wraparound porch, a stand-alone garage that could probably hold six vehicles, a porch-side swimming pool that could actually give a passable workout. The yard was oddly shaped; it sort of capped the hillside, and although it looked as though there had been some serious landscaping to get the whole hilltop level, the lawn ran to a patchy, uneven edge before blending into the weeds.

They'd parked Bella's beat-to-shit blue Honda in front of the garage, and started moving Sebastian's boxes from the truck they'd borrowed from their friend Sammy. Bella's sudden cramp of bitchiness couldn't hold up to Sebastian's determined good will, and eventually she was talking to him again. But judging from the way she was narrowing those spectacular eyes, maybe not for long.

"Doing what?" she snapped.

"Planning to come with me to Spokane. You like it here. You have family, and not

just any family—awesome family. Fun family. Family that has dinner every Sunday and celebrates everybody’s birthdays and gives a shit. Who wouldn’t love your family? I love them to death, they’re wonderful; I want a gym membership changing my name to Bryne. Seriously, Bella-luv, if you had anything resembling a penis, I’d marry you just for a reason to stay.”

Bella wrinkled her eyebrows at him. “You don’t need a reason, Sebastian,” she muttered, hefting his suitcases and walking toward the house. He grabbed his favorite box of books and struggled to keep up with her. After taking a look at the spacious—and well kept—garage, complete with work bench, meticulously organized tool rack and chests, and a lot of expensive man-machinery that Sebastian knew nothing about, he was itching to see what the inside of this suburban palace looked like.

It didn’t disappoint.

“Oh God—are you sure we don’t sleep with the servants?” he muttered as they walked into the front room from the entryway. Beyond the entryway was a sunken living room—wide, spacious, with a cluster of couches and armchairs in front of a plasma television to one side and another cluster in the center. On either side of the living room was a twin spiral staircase that curved along the wall to meet at a landing that overlooked the sitting area and led back into a hallway. It was a small-scale version of the stuff of Hollywood dreams, and for a moment, Sebastian and Isabella just gaped.

“Jesus, Asa,” Bella muttered. “Be ostentatious, would ya?”

Except it wasn’t ostentatious, Sebastian thought, his inner princess completely beguiled. It was dreamy. He just stood there and soaked up the awe for a minute while Bella disappeared. The couches were both fabric and leather, in dark, subdued colors—oxblood, dark canvas green, navy—and the arrangement made the living

room seem both cozy and personal as well as spacious. The vaulted walls all had skylights near the top, and there was enough natural light to satisfy even Sebastian's artistic eye. The only thing missing was art on the walls, he thought, and he automatically began to sort through which artists he'd put up to make this whole room perfect.

He had a sudden vision of himself, sitting on those couches, surrounded by his beloved books, with his laptop on the coffee table, and swallowed a little lump in his throat. He wanted to belong here too.

Bella sauntered in from the kitchen—which was off to their right with a dining room attached—holding a piece of plain white scratch pad paper.

Bella—on a daytrip with Jordan. Back tonight. You and friend get two rooms on right side of upstairs hall. You must share a bathroom. Sorry. A'.

“He's sorry we have to share a bathroom?” Sebastian asked, disbelief in his voice. Considering that he, Bella, and Sammy had been sharing a two-bedroom, one-bath apartment for the last three years, this seemed like the height of luxury. Alas, Sammy had moved in with his partner, Chad, and Sebastian and Bella had been at loose ends on their bookstore salary before they moved to Washington for their next academic adventure.

And voila! Bella's brother moved back into town, and they had a rent-free luxury suite with a swimming pool. Sebastian looked at the note again, blocked out in precise engineer's printing. Sorry. A'. A' must be a helluva nice guy, to think he had to apologize for this.

Sebastian was even more impressed once he saw the rooms.

“Oh, nice,” he commented, running his hand along the dark wood of the bedframe.



The bed—burgundy cotton sheets, matching cotton comforter, pillows and bolsters—had been made, and after setting Sebastian’s stuff down, the two of them took a moment to bounce on the relatively new mattress. A queen-sized bed, complete with box springs. “It’s gonna suck going back to the old student cot after this,” Sebastian groaned, throwing himself backward, and Bella sighed in agreement next to him.

Sebastian turned on his side and propped himself up on his elbow. “So, baby, what’s your room like?”

Bella blushed, and if Sebastian hadn’t thought he’d get another piece of paper threatening his nether orifice, he would have marked this occasion on a calendar too.

“It’s perfect,” she mumbled, and Sebastian popped up off the bed and ran through the bathroom (the tub and shower were sinfully big, he noticed) and then threw open the adjoining door.

And stopped dead with his mouth hanging open. “Oh shit, Bella—if this guy wasn’t your brother, I’d say he’s trying to marry you!” The room was... well, it was a gallery for finely made prints, for one thing. All in frames on sanded wood walls, and all of them from Bella’s specialty eras. Rococo, Renaissance, Impressionism—you name an era that was featured widely in women’s historical romances, and Bella had written a paper on it in a Master’s level class. There was at least one print from every era Bella loved in that room, in hand-beveled hardwood frames with specialty, non-glare glass.

The quilt on the bed was a pale cream color, with accents of dark gold and pale violet, and the curtains matched. Sebastian knew for a fact these were Bella’s favorite colors—her favorite painting in the world had these colors in it, and her life seemed to be a search for the feelings that color scheme gave her.

The floor was the same golden wood as the walls, and there was a deep, plush area throw around the bed. Sebastian threw himself back on the bed and made a strangled sound of enchantment.

“A down pillow top on the mattress. Bella, are you shitting me? Jesus... Sammy’s brother beats the shit out of him as a sign of affection. What did this guy do to you as a kid—run over your kitten? Behead your Barbies? I mean, Jesus, Bella—this is some serious penitence here!”

And it was a day for surprises, because Bella looked away, and Sebastian was struck absolutely silent. She wiped her cheek with the back of her hand and made a noise he’d never heard from her—not in four years of friendship.

“It was my fault,” she muttered, making that sniffling sound again. “It was my fault. He didn’t have to do this. Shit, Sebastian, I can’t talk about this right now. I’m a bitch, he’s a good guy, and I need to get our shit moved in so I can spend all summer avoiding him....”

Sebastian moved to hug her instinctively. He’d never really been a hugger until he met Bella, but being her absolutely bestest best friend in the entire world gave him certain privileges. Bella was the slyest, meanest, most sarcastic glitch-bitch a boy could have, and they’d been hugging each other like Hansel and Gretel lost in the woods since Sebastian had his first breakup when they were roommates. They probably couldn’t live without a hug a day from each other, and Sebastian gave a little bit of thanks for that. Best moments of his life.

But Bella wasn’t talking—and she definitely wasn’t hugging—and after moving his shit, then driving to Davis to get hers, Sebastian wasn’t in the mood for anything more than dinner and a shower. Bella got a call on her cell about the time Sebastian had put on his basketball shorts and a T-shirt, enjoying what felt like a stellar air conditioning system as he did. Bella came into Sebastian’s room, fresh from her own

shower, and flopped on Sebastian's bed.

"That was my brother," she told him. "He and his kid are out on a fishing/star-gazing expedition, but he said he ordered pizza for us—all paid and everything. He told me it should be here in half an hour and to make ourselves at home."

Sebastian looked at her. Just looked at her. It was like the guy had read his mind.

"Jesus, Bella! I think I love the guy already. Please tell me he's gay. Please, pretty please, with someone else's cherry on top? Bi. Bi-curious. Watched a friend jerk off in junior high. Anything. I'm dying here. What is your brother like?"

Bella's mouth curved reluctantly into a smile. "He's hella tall," she said immediately. "And if he hasn't cut it yet, he's got long blond hair down to his waist. He keeps it neat and all, but he's sort of vain about it—and he's not vain about anything."

"No vanity? How is that even possible?" Sebastian was beautiful; he was aware of it. He didn't think it made him more or less than anyone else... but that didn't mean he didn't enjoy appreciative looks, male and female. He was vain about his academic work; he worked hard on it, he thought it was comparable to anyone else's in the country. He was even vain about his friendship with Bella, because he'd been raised an only child and the temptation to be a spoiled, self-centered diva-bitch could have been overwhelming. But Bella had once nursed him through the flu and then typed up his next paper from notes while he was still curled over the commode, just so he could make his publishing deadline. He wasn't sure where a girl learned that kind of loyalty, but he was going to clutch it to him with selfish, bony fingers.

How could a man who could build this house with his bare hands—and have it decorated with a bare heart, apparently—not have any damned vanity?

"I didn't say he didn't have pride," she said softly, and then flopped down on the bed

next to him, rolling into his arms for an easy, sexless hug. “I just said he doesn’t really flaunt the shit he does well. And”—she sounded uncomfortable here, as though she was repeating gossip—“I think his pride has taken some hits lately. If you listen to Mom, his ex-wife really fucked him over.”

Sebastian pulled back and looked at her, truly curious. “Care to explain?” he asked impatiently when she didn’t go into details.

Bella rolled over to her stomach and rested her chin in her hands, tracing her finger moodily on the burgundy comforter.

“I don’t know, Sebastian. I’m pretty sure she wasn’t faithful, but beyond that?” She shook her head. “All I know is that Asa got full custody of Jordan, and whether she gave it to him or the courts did, that’s full-blown fucked-up bitch in my book.”

Sebastian nodded. She didn’t show it often, but Bella had the same values as the rest of her close-knit family. The children were important—and treasured.

“So he’s here, doing the single father bit—and you get free room and board for helping?”

For the first time in the past two days, Bella’s lush mouth curved upwards. “Yeah—Jordan was just a little squish on the carpet last time I saw him. I can’t wait to meet him.”

But it didn’t seem as though it would be that night. They ate pizza on the back deck by the pool, watching the sunrise over Lincoln (or thereabouts—not always easy to tell in the foothills), and split a six-pack of microbrew beer between them in celebration of free room and board in such a spiffy place.

Afterward, they went up to Sebastian’s room and watched television on the little set

they'd brought with them from their old apartment. Bella fell asleep on the bed next to him in the middle of an NCIS rerun, and Sebastian wasn't far behind.

He wasn't sure what woke him up a few hours later, but he was starving for leftovers.

Bella had gone back to her bed; she insisted he snored and he insisted she was full of it, and the lure of a room to herself must have been irresistible. In the quiet dark of the vast, strange house, his stomach rumbled, and he thought rather greedily that there was more pizza left for him. He kept his sleep shorts and his T-shirt on and padded rather diffidently through the vast house. When he was on top of the landing, he paused and looked out into that magnificent living room, violet in the starlight, and wondered what sort of vision it would take to dream that sort of art up in three dimensions. Then he quit his moment of open hero-worship and padded down the curved staircase in search of pizza.

And pudding. And a glass of milk. And some fruit. Ah, gods, this guy had the best stocked refrigerator in the state! Sebastian was still young enough to have an amazing metabolism, and he'd spent two days moving shit from Davis to Ophir—he was ready for round two.

He had just gathered it all into his arms—stacked up on the pizza box with the carton of milk in his other hand—when a terrible beast wielding a baseball bat came roaring out of the night and scared him shitless.

“Auuurrrrrggghhhhh!” screamed the naked giant with the baseball bat, and “Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!” shrieked Sebastian, dropping his midnight snack on the floor, and then Sebastian got a good look at the terrifying man swinging the Louisville slugger like a drumstick and said, “Asa?” and Asa stayed in his crouch, trapping Sebastian against the refrigerator, and said, “Who the fuck are you?”

“The guy who almost shit his pants,” Sebastian sputtered, trying not to sit down on

the refrigerator shelf from sheer relief. For one thing, he didn't think it would hold him. "Good God—you really are Bella's brother, aren't you?"

Asa Bryne straightened up to his full six and a half feet, pushed back a wet, tangled mass of yellow-brown hair that looked like it might actually go to his waist, and blew out a breath.

"You're Bella's friend from school. Shit. Jesus fucking Humphrey bastard Christmas. I'm fucking sorry—I was changing out at the pool and I saw the light and had a fucking panic attack." Asa eyed the scattered pieces of midnight snack at his feet and suddenly dropped to his knees and started to pick it up, shoving it into Sebastian's bemused hands. "Here. Here—you put this on the table, and I'll go get some fucking towels for the fucking milk."

Asa stalked off, leaving Sebastian to finish picking up the remains of his snack and set it up on the table—which he did promptly, when he was done gazing at Asa's fine, muscular, pale ass as he disappeared in the direction of the washroom.

Stop drooling at the straight man, Sebastian. You don't want to fuck up a perfectly good situation here. But it was no good—Asa returned, wearing a pair of cut-offs, and Sebastian's brain went on slide-show freeze frame, with the best parts of Bella's brother highlighted in softly glowing moonlight. Brown-blond hair—wet now, but falling from a jagged part at the top of his head and framing his face like that was where it went when he normally let it. Ocean blue eyes—Bella's blue eyes, faintly crossed over a bold, Roman nose, with a high, expressive brow and a lantern jaw. He was probably in his late thirties, and he had just enough lines around his eyes and mouth to make him interesting and not just... just... mmmmmm damn!

Sebastian had always thought of himself as pretty, but this man—this man was beautiful. He had a face that should have been carved into stone, one that could be memorialized in marble as a general or a king or an emperor.

Or just as a wood-erecting panty-wetter with a mouth that could peel the paint off a steel girder. Sebastian wouldn't forget that impressive oath he'd muttered when he realized there wasn't an intruder in the house. Ohmigod—the guy really was Bella's brother.

By the time he realized he'd been gaping at Asa as he got on his hands and knees and cleaned up the spilled milk, Sebastian had an erection he couldn't hide and a burning need to babble like a complete moron.

"I'm sorry to scare you like that," he muttered, getting a sponge from the sink and wiping off the pudding containers and the table. "Bella and I just really enjoyed the pizza, you know, and I was starving and I didn't know anyone was home and... omigod! Do you think we woke your kid? Bella was really looking forward to seeing Jordan. I hope we didn't just totally freak him out because that would suck, and she'd never forgive me. Have you ever heard your sister when she's angry? It's like being dragged naked over sandpaper and dipped in battery acid—deranged harpies have sweeter voices, you know?"

"Yeah," Asa grunted, and Sebastian was surprised enough to drop the jar of canned fruit he'd pulled out of the refrigerator. It didn't break or spill, but it did thunk loudly enough to make Asa look up.

"You talk!" Sebastian stammered.

"You shut up!" Asa rolled his eyes and went back to the milk. He was going to need another towel—nearly two quarts of it had hit the tiled floor before Asa had righted the gallon. Sebastian hurried off and grabbed another kitchen towel from the back, then came back and got on his hands and knees to help. He was relieved as hell to find that his hard-on had gone to half-mast, because otherwise this situation would have gotten really awkward.

“Thanks,” Asa grunted as he finished mopping up his milk.

“Sorry I freaked you out,” Sebastian muttered. “I didn’t realize you’d gotten home yet.”

Asa shrugged. “Wasn’t ready to sleep yet. Here—gimme.” He held his hands out for towels.

Okay—Sebastian took it back. Asa was like Bella squared. Forget minimalist poetry—this guy was like a three-word handbook on how to be taciturn.

And he was still half-naked.

Asa came back and sprayed some cleaner on the floor, and Sebastian moved to the table and sighed. Apparently, he was some sort of domestic god to boot. Asa looked up at his sigh and raised his eyebrows. “Problem?”

“Feeling useless?”

“You’re a guest. Eat. Feel full.”

Sebastian sat bemusedly and did. “You wan thom pizza?” he garbled through a full mouth, and Asa stood, putting Sebastian eye-level at his equipment. Sebastian swallowed—hard. Twice. Tried not to cough and failed like an asshole. Asa went to the sink and got him a glass of water, setting it down on the table and waiting solicitously until he drank some and sounded like he was going to live.

“You okay?” Asa asked, and Sebastian frowned up at him with watering eyes.

“I wasn’t expecting to be eye-level,” he sputtered, and then he felt like an idiot. Asa looked down to where Sebastian had been looking, and the heat of his blush filled the



room.

“Shit,” he mumbled. “Didn’t mean to distract you.”

“Dis....” Sebastian sputtered, indignant. “Distract me? You’d be distracted, too, if something that big threatened to stare at you with its one big eye... distracted!”

“One big eye?” Asa squeaked, and then he let out a sound between a choke and a snort, and then he took a deep breath. It was loud enough to sound unforgivably intimate in the dark.

“I’m sorry,” Sebastian mumbled, mortified. “Sometimes my mouth just does that.”

“You may want to find other uses for it,” Asa muttered, and an appalling silence descended between them.

“You didn’t mean that the way it sounded,” Sebastian interposed, and Asa shook his head.

“Not even a little bit,” he muttered. “I’ll go to bed now, before I just blow it a...”

Sebastian burst into giggles.

“...gain,” Asa finished with a resigned sigh. Sebastian couldn’t even look at him anymore. He did hear the embarrassed sigh, and felt Asa stand up next to him. Then there was a gentle, wide-palmed, blunt-fingered hand in his hair.

“You’re adorable,” Asa said. “As long as I don’t open my mouth more than necessary, you and Bella should have a good summer here.”

Sebastian choked on his own giggles, and then Asa was gone. Sebastian pulled

himself together and was left in the quiet, darkened kitchen, chowing pizza out of sheer embarrassment.

## Page 13

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The tidal archipelago of Spinner's Drift is a refuge for misfits. Can the island's magic help a pie-in-the-sky dreamer and a wounded soul find a home in each other?

### The Luck Mechanics: Book One

In a flash of light and a clap of thunder, Scout Quintero is banished from his home. Once he's sneaked his sister out too, he's happy, but their power-hungry father is after them, and they need a place to lie low. The thriving resort business on Spinner's Drift provides the perfect way to blend in.

They aren't the only ones who think so.

Six months ago Lucky left his life behind and went on the run from mobsters. Spinner's Drift brings solace to his battered soul, but one look at Scout and he's suddenly terrified of having one more thing to lose.

Lucky tries to keep his distance, but Scout is charming, and the island isn't that big. When they finally connect, all kinds of things come to light, including supernatural mysteries that have been buried for years. But while Scout and Lucky grow closer working on the secret, pissed-off mobsters, supernatural entities, and Scout's father are getting closer to them. Can they hold tight to each other and weather the rising tide together?

### The Luck Mechanics: Book Two

Miller Aldrun has spent his life being Cassandra, the prophet nobody believes. Born knowing when a dangerous, armed presence is nearby, Miller has always been

dismissed—and had to see the people he cares about hurt. Grieving the death of a closeted lover, he finds solace cruising the waterways of Spinner’s Drift, making sure the people in the outlying islands feel safe.

When Miller discovers the weekly gathering at The Magic of Books, its members become the family he didn’t know he could have. That includes Piers Constantine, who’s hiding on the islands with his cousin to elude her stalker.

Golden, kind, and humble, Piers finds Miller fascinating. But Piers is destined to leave the island, and even if he’s the only person who ever had faith in Miller, Miller can’t bear the thought of losing someone else he loves.

Then Miller wakes up with that familiar warning in his gut. The long-ago evil that has been stalking Piers and his cousin is catching up. Miller’s gift might be the only way to protect them... but he’ll have to let Piers in. Together, they plunge into one of the island’s oldest mysteries. For once, being Cassandra is on Miller’s side. Piers and Miller conceive a desperate plan to set them free from fear—but if Miller fails, he knows nothing will be left of him but the salt-bitter sea.

If Taz Oswald has one more gross date, he’s resigning himself to a life of celibacy with his irritable Chihuahua, Carl. Carl knows how to bite a banana when he sees one! Then Selby Hirsch invites Taz to walk dogs together, and Taz is suddenly back in the game. Selby is adorkable, awkward, and a little weird—and his dog Ginger is a trip—and Taz is transfixed. Is it really possible this sweet guy with the blurry mouth and a heart as big as the Pacific Ocean wandered into Taz’s life by accident? If so, how can Taz convince Selby that he wants to be Selby and Ginger’s forever home?

Search and Rescue: Book One

Survive the adventure. Live to love.

Following a family emergency, snowboarder Tevyn Moore and financier Mallory

Armstrong leave Donner Pass in a blizzard... and barely survive the helicopter crash that follows. Stranded with few supplies and no shelter, Tevyn and Mallory—and their injured pilot—are forced to rely on each other.

The mountain leaves no room for evasion, and Tevyn and Mal must confront the feelings that have been brewing between them for the past five years. Mallory has seen Tevyn through injury and victory. Can Tevyn see that Mallory's love is real?

Mallory's job is risk assessment. Tevyn's job is full-on risk. But to stay alive, Mallory needs to take some gambles and Tevyn needs to have faith in someone besides himself. Can the bond they discover on the mountain see them to rescue and beyond?

Tenner Gibson has a job he enjoys, a prickly ex-wife, and an adorable daughter he wouldn't trade for the world. With no romance, no sex life, and no other hobbies, a rec league softball team is as close as he gets to hedonism.

But life throws him a curveball when cocky Ross McTierney sets his sights on getting under Tenner's skin.

One explosion of lust later, Tenner wonders what possessed him to have a quickie with Ross, and Ross wonders how to do it again.

Tenner has eight weeks to convince his tiny modern family that Ross is what's best for him. Ross has eight weeks to get used to the idea that complicated doesn't always mean bad. Their sex life is moving at the speed of light, and everything in their relationship is coming at them too fast....

But together, they might make a connection and knock it out of the park.