



Tangents, Vol. 2

(Hazardverse: Sidetracks)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Distractions are a dime a dozen.

Tangents (Volume 2) is a collection of flash fiction stories set in the Hazardverse. It includes the following:

“Team-Building”

North joins a softball team. Unfortunately, so does Jadon.

“Date Night”

Emery and John-Henry stumble across a familiar face in a new restaurant.

“The First Annual Leon Family Reunion”

Tean and Jem take their foster daughters to a family reunion.

“Pride”

Colt and Ash’s Pride celebration is a disaster. Then North and Shaw show up.

“Haunted House Hazards”

Emery goes to a haunted house with Colt.

“New Roommate”

Dash tries to make Bobby feel welcome in his new home.

“Big Brother”

Colt meets Ash’s older brother, Levi.

“A Favor”

Emery asks a favor.

Please note that these stories were previously distributed in various

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:55 am

Ahead of them, the low evening light painted the softball field gold.

North tried not to look excited.

“Plus you’ll get so much good exercise,” Shaw said. Tonight, he’d gone with a crochet shirt, spandex shorts, and rainbow-striped platform shoes that he’d told North (without North asking) would let him run, quote, as fast as a rainbow . “Which is great, because I’ve noticed that sometimes when we’re, um, spanking soldiers, you start breathing really hard, like, super hard, and I don’t want to be one of those widows who have their husband die on top of them, you know, in the middle of it, and then they’re screaming and screaming because they’re stuck under the body—” He cut off with a squeal.

North released his grip on the spandex and kept walking. “My breathing is fine, jackhole. And I’m not doing this for the exercise. I’m doing this because you won’t shut up about me not having any friends.”

Hobbling after him—North knew that Shaw was probably thinking of it as soothing his nethers —Shaw said, “I know, and I think it’s cute that you want to try, but in case, you know, it doesn’t go as planned, I want you to consider all the other benefits—”

When North spun around, Shaw squeaked and tried to cover the shorts.

“It’s going to go exactly as planned,” North said. “It’s going to go perfectly. It’s a fucking rec league, Shaw. And I played softball in college.”

“Intramural. We both did, actually.”

North ignored that. “So, I’m going to go out there, and I’m going to show those asswipes who’s boss. End of story.”

“That doesn’t exactly sound like making friends—”

North lunged, and Shaw tripped over himself trying to escape.

When North reached the field, a group of men were milling around the chain-link backstop. They ranged in age from their twenties to their fifties, but he pegged the majority of the men as solidly in their dad phase—expensive athletic apparel that didn’t hide beer guts, high-end running shoes that probably hadn’t clocked anything longer than the walk to the garage, and mile after fucking mile of male-pattern baldness. North studied the group, trying to pick out the competition. Maybe a couple of the younger guys who still had that cut look like Auggie. He rolled his shoulders to loosen them up. He pulled one arm across his chest. Then the other.

“You’ve been doing a lot of stretching,” Shaw said. “And I want you to know that I appreciate how butch and manly it makes you look—”

Shaw cut off.

Then North saw it too.

He said, “Fuck me.”

And Shaw shrieked, “Oh my God! Jadon! Nico! Over here!”

Jadon wore a gray athletic tee and mesh shorts, and he looked like six feet and change of lean muscle and great hair. Nico had gone with a tank that said KWEEN in giant

sequined letters, and he was about four inches of pink nylon shorts away from doing full-frontal. North's interactions with the pretty man had been minimal, but he was still annoyed on general principle by how fucking perfect the two of them looked together. It might have been North's imagination, but he thought he saw Jadon hesitate like he might try to run.

Shaw, of course, didn't give him a chance.

"What are you guys doing here?" Shaw asked after several long hugs.

"They're playing tiddlywinks," North said. "Look how they're dressed, dumbass. He's going to fuck him in those bushes. What do you think he's going to do?" To Jadon he said, "Be more careful this time. You don't want to get your dick in the poison ivy again."

"Hi, North," Jadon said. "You guys know Nico."

"We love Nico," Shaw said. He was, somehow, already holding Nico's hand, and Nico looked both bemused and pleased. "Mostly because he's sweet, and also because he's perfect for Jadon, and also because he's so beautiful inside and out."

"Inside and out?" North said. "What the fuck do you know? He might be a huge bitch."

"I am, actually," Nico said.

"He's not," Jadon said flatly. And he gave North a warning look that almost—almost—made North smile. "Are you guys on the team?"

"No," North said automatically.

“North is,” Shaw said. “He’s going to be the pitcher because he told me the pitcher is the boss.”

Nico actually giggled before he managed to get a hand over his mouth. Jadon gave him a look.

The heat in his face, North decided, was because the evening was so muggy.

“Small world,” Jadon said in that same flat voice.

Nico giggled again. “Because Jadon wants to be the pitcher too.”

“Oh my God,” Shaw whispered.

“No,” North said—automatically, again.

“Oh my God,” Shaw said again, more loudly. “It’s like my dream!”

“It’s not like anything!” North snapped. “And it doesn’t matter what fuck-of-the-week wants. I’m the pitcher.”

“Because the pitcher’s the boss,” Shaw said, and then the traitorous little weasel burst out laughing.

North stalked off to join the rest of the men.

The team manager was a little-pronged guy who was sweating before he even opened his mouth, and the introductory remarks started at piss-poor and went downhill from there. The only part North heard was that the man would be making decisions about positions after observing everyone during the practice.

First up—and most importantly—were the throwing drills.

North played it cool as the men paired up, watching the dad-types who seemed to be drawn to their own kind. He tried to catch the eye of a couple of the younger, fitter dudes, but they'd formed their own little cluster.

“Need a partner?” Jadon asked.

“No,” North said.

Jadon sighed. “Come on.”

They moved away from the other men until they had room to work. North pulled on his glove and took a few seconds to adjust it. Jadon was already in position, chucking the ball against his own glove as he waited. When North was ready, Jadon threw the ball. It cut the air in a nice, clean arc—a great throw—and thunked into North's glove.

North rocketed it back.

Jadon caught it, but only barely, and by the look on his face, he'd felt the heat.

“Yay, North!” Shaw called from the stands. “You threw it so hard!”

Nico was shouting too. “What the hell was that?”

North grinned.

Jadon didn't. He set himself and threw the ball back. Smooth, controlled, flawless.

And North launched it right back at him.

“North! North! North!” Shaw chanted.

“Are you kidding me?” Nico called. “Jay, light his ass up!”

Jadon’s face was all hard lines.

“Yeah, Jay,” North said. “Light my ass up.”

Jadon threw the ball. This time, it was like lightning. North barely got his glove up in time. The ball cracked against the leather. Pain flared, and then a tingling numbness swept through North’s hand.

“Fuck yeah!” Nico screamed. “Fucking get a taste of that!”

Shaw seemed to have a less clear idea of how to trash talk because he shouted, “Take your shirts off!”

The other men were starting to look now.

North ignored them. He ignored his hand. And he threw.

They settled into a rhythm—ripping the ball as hard as they could, as fast as they could, until North’s shoulder was screaming and his hand had moved beyond that tingling numbness into a dead ache that was actually a little worrisome. Nico and Shaw kept up the boos, jeers, shouts of encouragement, and occasionally confusingly sexual advances from the stands. (Shaw’s “I want to have your babies” got a lot of eyes.)

But North kept his attention on Jadon. And Jadon, for his part, had lost the boyish charm, and his face was fixed now in hard-planed focus.

North almost didn't realize it when they started talking.

One of his throws went outside, and Jadon had to jump to catch it. Before he sent the ball back, he said, "I'm over here, North. Maybe Shaw's right. Maybe you do need glasses."

And when Jadon fumbled for the first time, North didn't miss a beat. "It's all in the grip, Reck." And he grabbed his junk to make sure Jadon didn't miss the point.

It escalated from there.

"You want the ball to go in the glove, big guy."

"Who taught you how to throw? Nico?"

"Nice fucking meatball."

"What the fuck was that? I've got more heat in my ass than that throw."

For some reason, that one cracked Jadon up. And then North was laughing too. Laughing so hard, in fact—and in spite of his shoulder, and his back, and his hand—that he could barely stay upright. Laughing until tears streamed down his face as he staggered over to collapse against Jadon.

The rest of the team was staring at them.

Shaw's scandalized voice cut through the night: "Stop laughing! You're supposed to fight!"

"Yeah, Jay!" Nico shouted. "Kick his ass!"

Somehow, North got himself upright. Jadon managed to stand too, and North slung an arm over his shoulder. Together, they looked at their bloodthirsty boyfriends.

“God,” Jadon muttered. “They really got into it, didn’t they?”

“They really did,” North said. “Want to teach them a lesson?”

“Absolutely.”

They were halfway to the bleachers, carrying the water cooler between them, when Nico and Shaw realized what was going on.

“No,” Shaw said, trying to scramble backward. “No! North! No!”

“Jadon Reck,” Nico said, pointing a finger, “don’t you dare!”

“One,” North said.

“Two,” Jadon said.

They said, “Three,” together, and they chucked the icy water out in a long, clear arc.

And, at the same time, Nico and Shaw screamed.

“We can never come back here,” Jadon said as he hoisted the now-empty water cooler, and he tipped his head at the men who were still watching them. “You get that, right?”

“Fuck these fuckos,” North said.

They were halfway to their cars when North decided it needed to be said. “You know

he would have made me pitcher, right?”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:55 am

Bistro 18 was new, and it had received a five-star review in the Wahredua Courier (not that Emery put much stock in the opinions of Curtis Platt, who had once waxed poetic about the Ruby Tuesday's salad bar), and, even though it had been John's pick, it appeared to be reasonably priced. Shockingly so, in fact. To the point that Emery wondered if John had meant to choose another restaurant for date night. It was located on Market Street, in an old brick building with a new (but faux-vintage) wood facade. Wrought-iron tables with checkered tablecloths waited along the sidewalk, and the restaurant's large windows had gilt lettering designed to look like it was tarnished and flaking away. Inside, from what Emery could see as they approached, they had continued the aesthetic, with dark wood and pseudo-antique mirrors—what some dark-haired man with excellent cheekbones would describe, on HGTV, as timeless .

When Emery held the door for John, John froze. Then he stepped back, took Emery's arm, and started walking the way they'd come.

"Never mind," he said with a laugh. "I guess we're going to St. Taffy's."

"I knew it," Emery said. "I knew there was no way you wanted to go there, not when the Caesar salad was only fifteen dollars—"

He managed to cut off the rest of that sentence.

John let it go, thankfully. But his voice was dry when he said, "No, that's the right place. But I don't want to crash Cora's date."

Emery stopped walking. "What?"

John stopped too, confusion lining his face.

“Cora’s on a date?” Emery asked.

“That’s what it looked like—”

“What’s his name?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Emery could feel his jaw slacken. “If you don’t know his name, how did you approve?”

“I didn’t approve. I don’t have to approve. She’s an adult. She’s single. She’s not my property.” John peered at him. “Do I need to keep going?”

Emery stared back at the man he loved most in the world—the man, he felt now, he didn’t know at all. “But surely you ran a background check—” He came up dry. “John, my God, how can you not know his name?”

“Because she didn’t tell me. Ree, I didn’t even know she was on a date; it’s not like she tells me. I—where are you going?”

Emery didn’t bother looking back; he kept himself to a brisk walk—barely—grateful for long legs that ate up the sidewalk quickly. It was a mild spring day, but sweat was building on the back of his neck.

At the window, the glare forced him to press his face against the glass. It only took him a moment to locate Cora—in a sleeveless crew neck tank and wide-leg pants, smiling across the table at a man. White, Hazard thought. Mid-forties. Dark hair with silver at the temples. A hint of stubble. A long-sleeved olive-colored shirt over a

Henley. For God's sake, was he on a date or was he an escapee from a hipster commune?

That was when a strong hand pulled Emery away from the window. John was careful to keep himself pressed up against the wall, where he couldn't be seen through the window. His eyebrows had a familiar slant to them. "What do you think you're doing?" he asked in a low voice.

"Making sure he's not a serial killer or a bigamist or—or in a gang."

John was still holding his arm—and managing to keep Emery from his job—but with his free hand, he dry-washed his face. Then he said, "Ree, I'll admit that there is something endearing about how...concerned you are about other people's dating lives, like with Nico and Colt—"

"Colt's dating?"

It came out louder than Emery had intended. It also happened at a less than ideal time—a snooty-looking waiter chose that moment to step out of the bistro, carrying a tray of place settings, and he paused to give them a dirty look. Emery returned the look, and after a moment, the waiter sniffed and began setting the tables.

"He's dating Ashley, dummy," John said in a whisper. "But—"

"Thank God. I thought you meant he was looking for a new boyfriend, and I do not have the bandwidth for that right now. Or, for that matter, the binder space."

For some reason, that made John stop and take another deep breath. "But," he said again—with a hint of a tone—"in this case, Cora is a responsible, functioning adult who does not need you evaluating her romantic partners. And since apparently I need to remind you, I'm her ex-husband, and even though we're on good terms and I love

her and I want the best for her, this puts me in a tricky position.”

That made sense, Emery decided. He took out his wallet, found a twenty, and gave it to John. “You’re right. Go get yourself a salad.”

“What,” John repeated in a tight voice, “do you think you’re doing?”

“John, if it costs more than twenty dollars, you need to go somewhere else—”

“Emery Hazard.” He took another deep breath. “What is going on? You know Cora has dated before. She was dating Ethan when you and I got together.”

“That was before I was invested. And since then, we’ve only learned about her romantic escapades—”

“God, please don’t call them escapades.”

“—after it was too late for me to do anything. Now go away and let me work.”

“Absolutely not,” John said.

But Emery barely heard him. He was considering the bistro, trying to visualize the most likely floor plan.

“What are you doing?” John asked.

On someone else, Emery might have described the voice as tinged with hysteria. “Deciding where I’ll best be able to see and hear their conversation.”

John’s laugh had a jagged little edge. “Let me guess: you’re going to dress up as Chef Boyardee.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, John. In the first place, Ettore Boiardi was a real person, and I have to imagine that Cora, as an educated person, would know that. In the second, even with the mustache, I think the odds are good she would recognize me.”

Silence. And then, with a creeping note of despair, “What is happening?”

After that, Emery got about five seconds of peace and quiet. He was fairly sure that this building’s layout would be similar to the one that housed the Astraea office, which meant—

“Oh my God, Ree,” John said. “Look at the font change on this menu.”

Emery glanced over automatically. And then his brain caught up with him. He leveled a look at his husband. And then he snatched the menu out of his hand and said, “Really, John?”

“It almost worked.”

“Excuse me.” That came from the snooty waiter, who had stopped even pretending to bustle around and was now simply staring at them. “What are you two doing? If you aren’t going to get a table, then you need to leave, or—”

“Or what?” Emery asked.

The waiter stopped. He swallowed. Then, valiantly, he tried, “Or I’ll get my manager.”

“Get him,” Emery said. “These rollups are abysmal—it’s like you’ve never rolled a napkin in your life. That’s not to mention the state of the table linens, or the fact that the fonts on this menu are all over the place. And for God’s sake, stand up straight.”

The waiter straightened. He was staring at Emery, lips parted, as though he were trying to say something but had forgotten how.

“Redo them,” Emery barked.

The man sprang into action, unwrapping the nearest napkin and rolling it again around the silverware—more tightly this time, Emery noticed approvingly.

“And find a steamer. If I wanted table linens that looked like they’d been fished up from the Titanic , I’d go to Arby’s.”

“I—I don’t know—” the waiter tried.

“That’s why I said find one!”

The waiter beat a retreat inside the bistro.

John said, ““That looked like they’d been fished up from the Titanic’ ?”

“I was making a point.”

“And they don’t have table linens at Arby’s.”

“They should.” Emery was about to explain why, but at that moment, he brought his gaze back to the window in time to see the man touch Cora’s hand.

“Oh,” he said, “no fucking way.”

But John caught before he reached the door and, with surprising strength, hauled him away from the bistro. They made it half a block before John released him and said, “What in the world is going on with you?”

Emery opened his mouth.

“The truth, Ree,” John said. “Right now.”

It was strange how, after everything they had been through, it was still so hard to say.

“I know,” Emery said, laying weight on the verb, “that you love me. And I know that you are my husband and my partner, and that you chose this life.”

“Ree—”

“But I am also aware of the fact that you care deeply about Cora. And—” He had to rush through the rest of it because otherwise, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to put it into words. “—you love her. And I do not want to see you get hurt because she gets hurt.” Then, forcing his voice to brusqueness, he added, “And I have a vested interest in making sure Evie’s potential stepfather is not a reprobate.”

For a quiet moment, John only watched him. The sound of the river filled the background, and the hum of tires, the bell jangling on the door of a shop. Then John reached out to brush Emery’s hair, and he said, “Sweetheart.”

Emery had to cut his eyes away.

But John waited. And when Emery finally looked at him, John said, “I love you so much.”

“I know.”

“And you are the person I want to spend my life with.”

“That’s why you married me.”

“Yes, dummy. That’s why I married you.” John was quiet for a moment. “And yes, I care about Cora. I do love her. As a friend, and as a co-parent, and as someone who is important to me. When she started dating again, it was a shock. And I won’t lie—there were times that it hurt. Mostly, because it reminded me that there had been good times between us, and they were gone now. But I stopped feeling that way a long time ago because I never imagined I’d be this happy. So, I want her to date. I want her to be happy too.” He smiled, and it was that wonderful John-Henry Somerset smile. “I am one hundred percent fine with this, promise.”

After a moment, Emery nodded.

“Thank you for worrying about me,” John said softly.

Emery nodded again.

John kissed him, and whatever else Emery had been thinking, he forgot about it.

“She looked happy, didn’t she?” John asked, and he took Emery’s hand and started them walking again—away from the bistro, Emery noticed.

“She did.”

“Good. I hope it works out.”

They made it another block before Emery said, “You realize with two of us, you could distract him while I got his wallet? I’d also like to get the plates for his car, and I think if I yell long enough, that waiter will give us his wineglass so we can lift his prints.”

“I know, love,” John said, patting his hand. “Let’s go home.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:55 am

It was a forty-five-minute drive up out of the valley. It shouldn't have felt so long.

When Tean was sure that the girls were caught up in their own conversation (it sounded like Sofia was explaining to Anahí, with only a loose grip of anatomy, why Bluey could walk on two legs and Scipio couldn't), he interrupted his husband.

"Jem, I love you. You're the most important person in my life."

Jem's eyebrows went up, but all he said was "Except for the girls."

"There's not really a comparison."

"And Scipio."

"I love Scipio, but he's a dog, and you're my husband."

"Wow." Jem dragged out the single syllable. "He's going to be pissed when I tell him you said that."

Tean took a deep breath. When he trusted his voice, he said, "I love you so much. But I need this to be the last conversation we ever have about whether or not you're going to get frosted tips."

"What?" And when Tean didn't respond right away, Jem added, "Are you kidding me?"

"Either do it or don't. I can't talk about it anymore."

“That’s the whole problem: I can’t decide. On the one hand, Emery did it—I mean, Colt sent us the pictures, and you saw how awesome it looked—but on the other hand—”

“Jeremiah!”

“Okay, okay. Got it. Message received. Transmission, uh, transmitted.”

But that was too easy.

“You mean for the rest of the trip, right?” Jem asked.

You weren’t supposed to close your eyes while driving up a canyon (well, while driving in general), but Tean wondered if there was an exception for husband-related moments.

“It’s going to be fine,” Jem said in a quieter voice. He rubbed Tean’s shoulder, and Tean could feel how stiff his own body was. “If there’s a problem, we’ll handle it. That’s what we do.”

Tean shook his head.

Jem must have heard what he didn’t say, though, because he continued, “The girls are going to have a great time. And everyone’s going to be nice to them. And nice to you. And nice to me, because I’m charming. Or I’ll kick their ass.”

“Tean!” Sofia shouted, interrupting her own explanation. “Jem said ass!”

“Jem said ass,” Anahí echoed.

Jem held up his hands in surrender.

The problem wasn't just that it was a family reunion, Tean thought as they drove through Park City toward the house they'd rented for the weekend. A family reunion might have been manageable if it were just the two of them. After all, Jem had done a good job of setting boundaries—to put it politely—with Tean's family, and Tean had gotten better himself at negotiating some of those fraught relationships.

No, the issue was the girls. Not that they were a problem ; the opposite. But how would Tean's brothers and sisters treat them? How would the in-laws react? What about the nieces and nephews? Was he supposed to introduce them as cousins?

"Deep breaths," Jem said as they turned onto the property. His fingers kneaded Tean's shoulder. "Hey, here's an idea: we line everybody up, and I'll fight them one by one."

"Yeah, fight!" Anahí screamed from the back.

"I'll start with your mom," Jem said. "She's right-handed, right?"

"Fight!" Sofia screeched.

"No fighting!" Tean said. "Nobody's fighting anyone. We don't solve our problems with violence." He added a look for Jem. "Do I make myself clear?"

Jem's exaggerated nod, and the even more exaggerated wink, made Tean swallow a groan.

"But I could totally take her," Jem whispered once the girls were talking about Bluey again.

Fortunately, Tean didn't have to respond to that because they'd arrived. He parked in front of the renovated farmhouse. Around them, acres of manicured lawn made a

vibrant green contrast to the dusty sage and brown of the valley—expensive and showy and not at all native. Some of the nieces and nephews ran across the grass, playing a game that Tean didn't understand, while the adults watched from the deck.

“Let the funeral march begin,” Tean said as he unbuckled himself.

“What's a funeral march?” Anahí asked.

“It's like a parade,” Jem said, “but for dead people.”

“Jem!”

But Sofia and Anahí screamed over him: “Yay! A parade!”

It honestly wasn't as bad as it could have been. Some of it, sure, was what Tean had expected. His dad dominated the conversation at the beginning, telling everyone how much it had cost to rent this place, never mind that his children were paying for most of it. And his brother Amos made a snide remark about Jem's embellishments to the mandatory family reunion T-shirt. On the back, the T-shirt was standard issue: FIRST ANNUAL LEON FAMILY REUNION, with a posterized image of Tean's parents and the year 1981, when they'd gotten married. But where the rest of the family had gotten away with an unadorned front, Jem had...improved the shirts by adding their names. In giant letters. That he'd subsequently bedazzled.

But other parts went better than Tean could have hoped. Jem immediately fell in love with Great-aunt Marion, which mostly had to do with the food she'd prepared. The Dutch oven chicken, the funeral potatoes (“Yay! Potatoes!”), the Rhodes dinner rolls—they all made a significant impression on Tean's husband. But after Jem's third rapturous attempt to describe his love for Great-aunt Marion's scones, Tean decided he was going to add fried dough to the things-we-don't-talk-about list, along with frosted tips.

“They’re not even real scones,” he tried to explain. “That’s just what they call them in Utah.”

Jem nodded as though absorbing the words, but he was already speaking before Tean finished. “And you’ve got to try this dessert. What’s it called, Aunt Marion?”

“She’s not your aunt,” Tean put in.

“Better than Robert Redford,” Great-aunt Marion said. And then, in a guilty whisper, “But Hazel calls it Better than Sex.”

“Oh my God,” Jem said. “We’re totally calling it that.”

Great-aunt Marion couldn’t stop giggling.

The love fest finally broke up after Jem kissed Great-aunt Marion on the cheek so many times that her angina started acting up, and she had to go lie down.

By the time Tean finished helping with the clean-up, Jem had gotten cornered by Uncle Nephi, who wore a calculator watch and whose hobby was programming TV remote controls.

“And Amos’s birthday is October twenty-second,” Uncle Nephi was saying. “I know everybody’s birthday.”

“What’s mine?” Jem asked.

“Has anyone seen Glade?” Sara called from the deck.

Uncle Nephi looked a bit askance at Jem’s question.

“I’ll give you a hint,” Jem said. “It’s not in January.”

“That’s not much of a hint,” Uncle Nephi said.

“Time for games,” Tean’s mother announced.

“It’s not in February,” Jem said.

“Can you help the girls with the games?” Tean asked.

“What if we make a bet?” Jem asked.

“Jem.”

“What do they need help with? They’re fine.”

And that, at least, seemed to be true—although Amos had given the girls the stink eye a few times, everyone else had acted as though their presence was totally normal. At that moment, they were playing with the rest of the kids, slowly being herded by Corom and Seth onto the lawn.

“I’ll give you even money,” Jem said to Uncle Nephi. “It’s not March.”

“Is it in April?” Uncle Nephi asked with a hint of desperation.

“Jem!”

“Why can’t you help the girls?”

“Because I have to find Glade before he burns the house down.”

Jem sighed and turned toward the kids gathering on the lawn.

“Is your birthday on Christmas?” Uncle Nephi blurted.

Jem’s little wave and smile, of course, gave away nothing.

After finding Glade—who had, as a matter of fact, been opening a box of matches when Tean found him, true to form for his little pyromaniac heart—Tean accompanied the eleven-year-old vandal back to the games.

But he was too late.

“Who’s ready for Three Deep?” Tean’s mom called.

“No,” Tean tried.

But excited cheers drowned him out.

“What is Three Deep?” Jem asked, hooking an arm around Tean’s waist.

“It’s nothing. We can sit this one out—”

“Now, the rules are simple,” his mom was saying. “Everyone take a slip of paper. You’re all trying to find your group. Each group has a top—”

Jem’s eyes got huge.

Tean groaned.

“—a middle—”

“Yes,” Jem whispered. “Please.”

“—and a bottom,” Tean’s mother continued. “Once you find your group, you’re going to sit in a stack—top, middle, bottom. Three deep! Ready, set, go!”

Cries of “Top! Top!” and “Where’s my bottom?” rang out.

“I have to FaceTime Auggie,” Jem said between giggles as he dug out his phone. “He’s not going to believe—”

Tean caught a glimpse of Amos’s face; his brother was staring at them with a look that suggested he knew exactly why Jem found the game so amusing and, of course, disapproved of, well, everything.

“Stop,” Tean whispered harshly, shoving Jem’s phone down. “Just stop, okay?”

The hurt came first in Jem’s face. And then smooth nothing.

Around them, shouts and laughter drifted up toward the thickening stars.

“I’m sorry,” Tean said.

“No, it’s okay. I shouldn’t have—”

“No.” Tean drew a deep breath. “No, Jem. I’m sorry. I’ve been so nervous about—” He shook his head and spread his hands. “And I hate it. I hate that I care. I hate that I even think about that kind of thing. And I’m sorry that I’m letting my—my weirdness make me treat you badly. You’ve been so sweet and kind and such a good sport about everything—” The words seemed to have gotten away from him in the flow of the apology, and he couldn’t seem to stop himself as more spilled out. “—and I honestly think Great-aunt Marion thinks she’s supposed to marry you now because your lips

touched her lips.”

It seemed like a long time before Jem said, “Only a tiny bit. And it would be a sham marriage anyway because I’d still secretly love you.”

Tea laughed, but he wiped his eyes.

“Come on,” Jem whispered as he hugged him. “It’s okay. We’re going to have a great time.”

“Yes, we are.” Tea cleared his throat. He wiped his face one last time. And then he said, “Get Auggie on the phone. And then you officially have my permission to go find your bottom.”

“That is the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“No,” Tea said, “it’s not.”

Jem looked like he might argue the point, but before he could, the girls sprinted up to them. Sofia was grinning as she waved a bubble wand—where it had come from, Tea had no idea—and Anahí jumped in place as soon as she stopped running.

“Jem, Jem!” Anahí waved her arms in case he hadn’t heard her. “The next game is called Capture the Bacon!” And she giggled like that was the craziest thing she’d ever heard.

“And Uncle Seth says you have to be on his team!” Sofia said. She pointed to Seth, as though Jem might not understand. “Come on!”

Jem glanced at Tea.

Tea n smiled and kissed his husband on the cheek. “Save some energy for Shake It,” he said. “You literally just shake your ass to make ping-pong balls fall out of a box.”

“Oh my God,” Jem whispered. “I’m going to cream these guys.”

In spite of himself, Tea n grinned.

Then Sofia and Anahí were pulling him into the throng of family, as cries of “Tea n said ass!” floated back through the night.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:55 am

“This is a disaster,” Colt said.

Ash didn’t say anything, which was worse, in its own way.

Their party—their party, the first one ever, as far as Colt knew, for Wahredua High students, hosted in the school gym—was supposed to start in an hour. That wasn’t the problem. The problem was that it looked—

“It looks like my grandma’s funeral,” Ash said.

Colt opened his mouth to try to deny it.

“With more penises,” Ash added.

“Bro!”

“Bruh, your dad gave us a lot of dicks.”

“They’re not dicks! They’re balloons!” Although, now that Ash said it, Colt could see how the putty-colored balloons (which Pops had gotten on clearance) actually did look like dicks. And Ash was right: there were a lot of them.

It wasn’t just the balloons, though. It was, well, everything. A few black-and-white streamers drooped at the corners of the gym. The snack tables looked bare under transparent disposable tablecloths, and that didn’t even address the fact that the snacks were single-serving packs of granola. A mix-up meant that no one from the school’s support staff had shown up to give them access to the sound system. Even

the special shirts Colt had gotten for him and Ash were...not what he'd imagined. He'd liked the idea of something simple, white tees with a black design. He hadn't expected the design he'd labored over for two weeks to be impossible to read because it had been printed the size of a quarter. As despair threatened to overwhelm him, Colt struggled to figure out how this could have happened because he'd been so careful, planned everything to the tiniest detail, even asked Pops to help—

“Because if I want a sausage on a stick, I’m going to ask for a goddamn sausage on a stick.”

The voice came from the hall, and it was rough and bristly and pleasantly masculine. Colt couldn't help himself; he stood a little straighter.

Next to him, Ash tried—and failed—to stifle a groan.

“I like that you’re expressing your wants and needs,” said another voice. “Communication is one of my top ten turn-ons. It might even be my number one. No, wait, my number one is emotional honesty. Or is it back sweat? Either way, a high-risk sexual activity like, um, ‘sausage on a stick’ isn’t something we usually talk about with the waitress at the Waffle House—”

The crash of lockers, and subsequent giggling, put an end to that line of conversation, and a moment later, North and Shaw appeared in the doorway (they had told Colt he could call them by their first names, even though Pops said he should say Mr. McKinney and Mr. Aldrich). North looked the way he usually did—his short blond hair mussed, he was wearing a T-shirt for Columbia Records and well-worn jeans. Shaw wore a linen jumpsuit that made Colt look rapidly away (and then sneak a second look). Ash blushed, hard, and actually scrunched down inside his tee.

“What the fuck is this, a funeral?” North said, staring around the gym. When his eyes landed on Colt, a hint of a flush climbed his cheeks. “I mean—oh. There you are.”

“Hi, Colt! Hi, Ash! Ash! Ashley! Ash-ley!” Shaw was practically dancing as he waved with one hand. His other arm was looped around a box of—

Colt groaned.

“Are those condoms?” Ash asked.

“Your dads asked us to drop them off!” Shaw said. “Well, mostly Emery. And I helped!”

“You didn’t help,” North said. “You asked Emery how many gimps were going to be at the pride party, and before he could answer, you told that story about the twink in the stockade, and that was raunchy even for me.” North’s gaze slid back to Colt, and his color rose even higher. “Uh—”

“I thought your party started in an hour,” Shaw said. “When are you going to take all this straight people stuff down and start setting up?”

In the silence, the hiss of the gym’s HVAC system sounded enormous.

“Shaw,” North said with what had to be the most awkwardness Colt had ever heard from an adult (barring Pops).

For a moment, Shaw’s expression went blank. And then he said, “Oh!”

Colt started to say something—what, he wasn’t sure—and then he had to fight for control as tears stung his eyes. Ash made a miserable sound and squeezed his shoulder.

“Oh,” Shaw said again, his tone brightening. “Oh no! Colt, it’s okay! It’s great! We’ll just tweak a few things, and it’ll be perfect!”

“Famous last words,” North said. “He said that about my nipples once.”

Shaw looked at him.

Colt looked at him.

Ash tried not to look at him.

“God fucking damn it,” North said. “Can’t you turn eighteen already?” Before Colt could respond, North said, “Shaw, go get your Mary Poppins trunk of bullshit or whatever you call it. You with the pretty hair, help me throw away this granola.”

Ash loved that, of course. So much so, in fact, that Colt wondered if maybe he needed to kiss Ash or something, just to remind him how things worked around here.

But there wasn’t time for any of that because faster than Colt could believe, Shaw was back, carrying a plastic tote stuffed to the brim with what appeared to be feathers.

“It’s mostly boas on top,” Shaw said as if that made any sense, “as a decoy. And it’s not a Mary Poppins trunk because that’s copyrighted. And I was going to call it the Wonderarium, but then North said that might be copyrighted too. So, now it’s just my fun tote.”

“Full of bullshit,” North said as he popped a wiener balloon.

“Ignore him,” Shaw said. “Let’s see what we’ve got.”

It turned out to be more than Colt had expected. Much more. First came the decorations—streamers, balloons, tablecloths, even a brightly colored banner, all of them in rainbow colors. Even better, nothing looked like a putty-colored penis.

“Now, I can’t keep food in here because North has this hilarious idea about—what do you call it, North?”

“Bacteria,” North said sourly, phone pressed to his ear. “And I’m taking care of the snacks.”

“No cheese!” Shaw put in quickly.

North just scowled at him and turned his attention to Ash, who was running across the gym to hang one of the streamers. “Pretty hair,” he bellowed, “let’s see some fucking hustle!”

Ash grinned and ran faster.

Colt was starting to wonder if this, maybe, was the other side of the coin—and if maybe Ash felt something like this, sometimes, when Colt wanted to talk to North about cars.

“Now just pop off that tee—” Shaw said, already reaching for Colt’s shirt.

“Um,” Colt said, “I don’t know—”

“Pop it the fuck off,” North shouted, turning the phone away from his mouth. “You look like a virgin who died inside a Banana Republic.”

That cracked Ash up.

“We’re just going to fix it,” Shaw assured him, “and then you can put it back on. How do you feel about crop tops?”

Colt wasn’t sure how to put into words that he mostly felt like screaming.

“Crop tops would be fire,” Ash said, grinning as he wrestled with a tablecloth. “Do mine next!”

Which was how Colt ended up bare chested, watching as Shaw cropped his tee with pinking shears. Then Shaw handed him a Magic Marker and said, “It could use something a little more, um, fun, right?”

“I don’t know what to write,” Colt said.

“Bruh,” Ash called from the tables, half-wrapped in another tablecloth. “I swear this thing is attacking me.”

Which was how Colt’s shirt ended up with brUH on it. Ash’s, of course, said, brO. And it was distracting, to say the least, to see Ash’s expanse of tanned midriff, the hint of his abs, the dark hair below his navel.

“And now a touch of fairy dust,” Shaw said with a lopsided grin, holding up a tube of glitter gel.

Colt was about to decline when Ash elbowed past him and said, “Me first. Get my eyes, Mr. Aldrich. Oh, Colt, then you can put some on my chest.”

Well, maybe it wasn’t a terrible idea.

The first people started to arrive as North barged into the gym carrying a stack of bakery boxes.

“Tinkerbell,” he shouted, “a little help.” When Colt started to rise, North gave a snort. “Not you.”

Ash even had a little glitter on his ears, and Colt had a hard time wrapping his head

around how cute that was.

North joined Shaw and Colt on the side of the gym as Ash unpacked cupcakes (rainbow frosting, of course).

“You guys,” Colt said. And then he stopped, his throat tight. “I don’t even know what to say.”

“Happy to help,” Shaw said with a smile.

North put his hand on Colt’s nape and squeezed once. “This, little bro, is what we call found family, and it’s the fucking shit.”

“It’s what we do for each other,” Shaw said. “One day, you’ll get to do it for someone too.”

Colt nodded. And he was surprised to find himself smiling by the time Ash joined them, and even more surprised by the quick peck on the lips.

“Oh!” Shaw said with terrifying enthusiasm. He held up the box of condoms. “What do you want to do with these?”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:55 am

Emery Hazard was trying to keep his mouth shut.

His son, on the other hand, didn't seem to feel the same need.

"Just don't do anything to embarrass me," Colt said, his volume dropping as they approached the haunted house. It was a large, pseudo-Victorian facade on what had been, until three weeks ago, an abandoned fireworks warehouse. Faux wrought-iron gates screeched in the wind. Polyester batting had been pulled and stretched to near translucency and then draped over the narrow windows and the cockeyed turret as imitation spider webs. Dim yellow light glowed "inside" the house, and at ninety-second intervals, the blue-white of simulated lightning flashed overhead, followed by the toll of thunder and a prerecorded evil cackle.

"Of course not," Emery murmured. "Not in such a classy establishment."

Colt stopped. "That's what I mean. Nothing like that."

"Fine."

"No jokes about how dumb this is."

"All right."

"About how it isn't scary."

"Ok."

“Ash worked really hard.”

“Colt, he’s an hourly employee being paid to pretend he’s a vampire. It’s not like this is his brainchild.”

Colt said nothing. Intensely.

“I will behave,” Emery said.

“I knew I should have brought J-H,” Colt said to himself. “He wouldn’t let this happen.”

Before Emery had to respond to that, a dad-bod type (dressed, in defiance of the deep chill this October, in blue plaid shorts and a blue t-shirt that came almost to his knees) shouted, “We’re here to see Booberella!” His friends, more of the dad-bod-and-plaid-shorts crowd, whooped and hollered, and one of them screamed like a hyena. Then, collectively, they hit their vapes. Emery wondered how funny they’d find prosecution for possession of a controlled substance.

“I think you should wait in the car,” Colt said, examining his face.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Let’s go.”

They paid the outrageous admission fee. Emery was ready to ask if, for thirty-five dollars, they were planning on exhibiting world-class pieces of art, or if the haunted house were built atop a World Heritage site, or something similar that might justify the extortion, but when he saw Colt’s face, he remembered his promise. They went into a plywood vestibule, and then, when a teenage girl in truly impressive orthodontia indicated it was their turn, they started into the haunted house.

Flickering fluorescent lights led them into an ancient operating theater: dingy

checkerboard tile, a battered and scarred surgical table, everything huddling under the darkened observation rows above. A body covered by a sheet lay on the surgical table, but Emery suspected that was a decoy. The scare would come from above.

Colt bumped him, and when Emery glanced over, he caught a grin on the boy's face that bordered between amused and nervous. It gave Emery something of a start to realize that not only was his son genuinely enjoying this, but he also was—if only a tiny bit—scared. And because he was scared, he was walking extremely close to Emery. Which a lesser man might have let go to his head.

Caught up in those thoughts, Emery was unprepared when the doors to a medical supply cabinet flew open. An engine whined, and a masked man in bloodstained apron and scrubs stumbled out. He lifted a chainsaw overhead, the blade spinning, and charged.

Colt screamed. He grabbed Emery's arm and yanked him forward, and they ran through the next door and into a darkened hallway. The sound of the chainsaw faded behind him, and after a few steps, Colt let out a nervous laugh, and his iron grip loosened.

“Holy shit. That scared the shit out of me.”

“Language.”

“Were you scared?”

“He needs to adjust the carburetor on that chainsaw; it's running too slow.”

Colt turned a look on him.

“If he doesn't have a tachometer, he could do it by ear.”

Colt was still looking at him.

“I expected him to come from the observation area.”

Excitement lit up his son’s face again. “I know, right? God, that was so fucking awesome when he kicked that door open. I swear to God, I almost peed myself.”

Fortunately, they reached the next door before Emery had to address the question of toilet training.

They found themselves at the bottom of a winding staircase, the carpet spongy underfoot, walls covered in mold-spotted wainscotting and peeling strips of paper. At the top, a cramped mezzanine level had been decorated as a library. Bookcases slanted across their path, spilling broken-backed volumes onto the floor and forcing them to duck and scoot sideways. A handful of old-fashioned lamps left deep pools of shadow. One of the dark recesses behind a fallen bookcase, Emery suspected. That’s where the surprise would be.

But as they crossed the destroyed library, no one jumped out at them. A cold draft made Emery break out in goose bumps, and he thought he heard something, but when he turned his head, he decided it must be the wind.

Colt, however, had taken a death-grip of his arm again and was pulling him forward. He wore that same tightrope look of pleasure and fear.

“Is something whispering?” Emery asked.

With a scandalized look, Colt shushed him and then said, “That’s not funny.”

“What?”

“Pops! It’s, like, evil. Eat your eyes and dance in your skin and—can you really not hear it?”

“Of course I can’t hear it. It’s practically silent. Did they consider the fact that someone older than the age of twenty-one might actually pay the blood-price this place charges and—”

He stopped at the look on Colt’s face.

The eldritch whispering of a cosmic horror faded as they approached the next door. Colt made Emery go first, which was the only sensible thing he’d done all night. They stepped into an antiquated parlor: a sagging chesterfield, a fireplace black with char, an oxidized mirror. In the center of the room, sawhorses supported a sarcophagus, its lid askew, and within, Emery glimpsed a figure wrapped in linen.

“It’s a mummy unwrapping party,” he said to Colt. “The Victorians absolutely loved—”

But before he could finish, a linen-wrapped hand shot up from inside the sarcophagus, forcing the lid to the side. It clattered and fell, and Colt let out a squawk. His fingers bit into Emery’s arm even more tightly, and he dragged him into a run. Again.

They were forced to sprint across the room, past the mummy rising from its sarcophagus. Emery only got a quick look at the figure: not linen after all, but a cotton sheet cut into strips, with an Eye of Horus amulet. The mummy moaned and raised its arms, apparently not yet at the stage of actually leaving the sarcophagus, but before Emery could point this out to Colt, the boy had pulled him through the next door.

Another stretch of dark hallway waited for them.

Colt let out another of those nervous laughs. “Did you see him to try to grab me? God, that would have been so awesome if he had.”

“It would have been awesome if they’d managed some semblance of historical verisimilitude,” Emery said, “instead of that anachronistic debacle. Anyone can tell that’s an Old Kingdom mummy—for Christ’s sake, they didn’t even use resin in the mummification—but I’m supposed to believe he was wearing an Eye of Horus amulet, when that didn’t become popular until the New Kingdom period.”

Colt yanked his hand back.

“What I mean is,” Emery tried, “it would have been awesome—”

“You’re going to get us kicked out. Do you think everybody else going through the haunted house wants to hear how stupid it is?”

“Hold on.”

“Just like you did at that church.”

“In my defense, that pastor was asking for it.”

“And I asked you to do one thing and be cool for one night!”

“Colt, come on.”

But Colt strode down the hallway, one hand held behind him to ward Emery off. Emery gave him a few yards of courtesy space and followed. They wound their way down the staircase at the end of the hall—bare metal, this time, and judging by how it shook under every step, Emery thought the clear need for a structural engineer was probably the scariest part of the evening yet.

At the bottom of the steps, another room waited for them. They stepped into darkness.

For the first few moments, the darkness was absolute. Then Emery's eyes adjusted. Faint lights—glowsticks, he guessed—had been placed in various parts of the room. He took a step forward, and his shins thwacked against a barrier. Swearing, he turned, put a hand out, and fumbled a few steps. One of the lights was directly ahead of him, not far, and—

His hand met the cold slick of glass.

“God damn it,” he said under his breath.

It took him several minutes to navigate the maze, and when he finally emerged into the hallway on the other side, Colt wasn't there.

Emery followed the hall and checked the next room. It had been done up to look like a cemetery, complete with fake hills and trees and a moon swinging on a silver rope. No Colt. He backtracked to the maze again, opened the door, and whispered, “Colt?”

The sounds of movement came back to him.

A little louder: “Colt?”

“Hey, buddy, you're ruining this for the rest of us.”

It sounded like the dad-type who'd been looking for Booberella.

Emery made his way through the fake cemetery. When Wolfman came bounding out of the shadows, Emery said, “I'm looking for my son, Colt. He's about my height, thin, still trying to grow out his hair.”

Wolfman rubbed his snout. “Sorry, Mr. Hazard. Colt didn’t come this way.”

“Thank you, Jesse.”

The next room was full of glycerin-sweet fog and ghosts that whipped past him on theater rigging. Emery batted them away as he crossed the space, and when he emerged on the other side, he found himself in another plywood vestibule. The cold damp of the October night reached him, and a teenage boy with too much eye makeup said in a dead voice, “Thank you for coming, have a spook-tacular Halloween.”

Emery poked his head out and scanned the parking lot. No Colt.

“You can’t go back in,” the boy said. “And there are no refunds.”

“I lost my son.” He repeated his description of Colt.

“Nobody came out, mister.”

A bit of haggling—John would have called it threatening—produced the manager, a sloe-eyed woman in middle age who had the good sense to wear cargo pants and carry a clipboard with two backup pens. Emery liked her immediately.

“We’ll do a quick walkthrough,” she said. “This way.”

She led him through a door, and they moved quickly along a backstage route. They passed two ghosts who were sharing a SoBe tea. They almost crashed into a Bride of Frankenstein who was trying to curl her eyelashes.

“While we walk,” Emery said, “a couple of notes.”

He told her about the carburetor. He mentioned the volume of the eldritch horror. Delicately—oh so delicately—he raised the issue of the anachronisms.

She jotted everything down as they walked. “This is really good stuff.”

“In that case, you might also reconsider your Wolfman. Real wolf’s fur would have a mix of guard hairs and undercoat. Oh, and you’re cheaping out on the fog machine. I could see the sneakers on one of the ghosts. It might cost a little more to run the fog machines at a higher setting, but it’ll pay off with a better customer experience.”

“Gold, pure gold,” she said as she pushed open a door marked DRESSING ROOM. “Hey, do you want a part-time job? Our Frankenstein walked out on us this afternoon.”

“Technically, it’s called a Frankenstein’s monster,” Emery said.

“You, sir, are a godsend.”

“How committed are you to that Edwardian bone saw—Colt!”

Colt was straddling a bare-chested vampire in a director’s chair, and the two of them were in the midst of a serious make-out session. Colt’s head whipped up, his eyes wide with horror. A mixture of pancake makeup and lipstick had transferred to his face and neck.

“Um, hi, Mr. Hazard,” Ashley said as he tried to cover his nipples with one hand.

“Ashley!” the manager shouted.

“Please don’t fire him,” Colt blurted. “It was my idea!”

That didn't seem to do much to assuage the manager's temper. In short order, Emery and Colt found themselves in the parking lot. Ashley skulked behind the manager, trying to disappear inside his satin-lined cloak.

"Ashley is a good worker," the manager said, "for the most part. But I'm not going to have a repeat of tonight."

"I won't come back. You can ban me. I'll never come back."

"No," the manager said. "You won't. For a long moment, the manager seemed to wrestle with what to say next. "You're lucky," she finally said, "your father has been so helpful."

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:55 am

One of the little miracles of life is how quickly a simple question can send you (me) into a complete and total tailspin.

“What’s that?” Fox asked.

There was a definite tone.

In the kitchen of Hemlock House, I paused in my (painfully bad) attempts to tie a bow.

“It’s a gift basket,” I said.

Fox stared at the basket. And then they stared at me.

“For Bobby,” I said.

Silence.

“You know, like, to welcome him to Hemlock House.”

Fox didn’t say anything.

“As a roommate,” I said.

Nothing.

“You know,” I said, “and as a friend.”

And somehow, against all odds, Fox still didn't say anything.

"I read about it on the internet," I said. "It's totally a thing." And then, because I am perpetually Dashiell Dawson Dane and cannot help but undermine myself, I added, "It's super normal."

"Which," Fox murmured, "is what everyone says when they do something normal."

Even though I didn't like it, I had to admit Fox might have a point. I glanced at the plate of chocolate chip cookies that Indira had generously made for me to include in the basket. Chocolate chip was Bobby's favorite, I was pretty sure. And it was definitely one of my favorites. And chocolate helped with heart health, blood pressure, um, antioxidants. Plus everyone knew the brain ran on glucose.

That was the moment when Keme stepped into the kitchen. He stared at the basket.

"It's a welcome basket for Bobby," Fox told him. And then—yes, to answer your question, there was a tone—"It's super normal."

Keme snickered. Then his expression changed, his eyes widening. He moved closer to the basket and reached out a hand.

"No, don't, I've got it just the way—" I began.

But Keme ignored me and plucked out a framed photo. He stared at it for a moment, and if anything, his eyes got wider. Then he turned and displayed the photo for Fox.

"What in the heck—" (And Fox did not say heck .) "—is that?"

"It's a picture of Bobby," I said. "He doesn't have any decorations in his room. Nothing personal, I mean." When no one said anything, I added, "Keme told me to!"

Keme's look suggested pure disgust and a complete disavowal of any responsibility.

I looked at the cookies again.

No, I told myself. They were for Bobby.

"I'm guessing Keme didn't mean for you to download his photo from the sheriff's website," Fox said.

"Well, what was I supposed to do? Use one of those pictures where he's sleeping? He always has his earbuds in—"

Fox looked at me.

Keme made a scoffing noise and set about opening the back of the frame.

"Not," I said carefully, "that I have any of those."

Fox snorted.

Without hesitation, Keme took the photo of Bobby out of the frame and proceeded to tear it into tiny pieces.

I grabbed one of the cookies. One. Just one. For my blood pressure.

"Okay," I said, "good feedback. No photo—"

Before I could finish, Fox interrupted, voice rising sharply as they said, "What does that candle say?"

"Oh." I managed a chuckle. "Isn't that cute? I found it—"

“Smells like the best roommate ever?” Fox picked up the candle for closer inspection. “With notes of movie nights, pillow fights, and cinnamon?”

I knew, in my head, that it wasn’t as weird as Fox was making it sound. It was just the way they read it.

But I said weakly, “Everyone loves cinnamon.”

Fox looked at Keme. Keme held up his hands in a what-do-you-want-me-to-do kind of gesture.

“It was on the internet,” I said. “It was from a cute shop.”

“I’m sure Bobby will enjoy it when he immediately packs his bags and goes to a motel,” Fox said.

“Come on,” I said, but before I could stop myself, I grabbed another cookie. “It’s not that bad.”

“What’s not that bad?” Millie asked as she joined us. “Dash! That basket is SO CUTE!”

“Don’t encourage him,” Fox said.

“Millie, will you please tell them that they’re overreacting?” I gestured at the basket. “They’re making me feel like I’m some kind of psycho stalker—”

“With a dash of Hannibal Lecter,” Fox put in, and Keme chose that moment to give them a high five.

“—but I’m just trying to be a good friend and help Bobby feel—” I grabbed a third

cookie. And maybe it was just me, or maybe Indira's baking game was a tiny bit off, but the cookies seemed...dry. Like, crumbs clogging my throat. I had to force the word out: "—welcome."

"Don't be silly," Millie said as she set about redoing my failed bow. (And doing a much better job than I could.) "You're not a psycho stalker."

I coughed to clear my throat and grabbed another cookie. Still for my blood pressure. "Thank—"

"I mean, look at these socks. They're PRECIOUS! Like you're HIS MOM!"

I swear to God, Indira must have overbaked them or something, because I inhaled a lot of cookie dust on my next breath.

Everything got even worse, though, when Keme picked up the key to Hemlock House, which I'd attached to a little keychain shaped like handcuffs (because of Bobby's job, duh). Keme's eyes got wide. And then wider. He held the key between two fingers like he didn't want to touch it. And his face turned a remarkable shade of red.

"No," I choked out through the cookie crumbs. "No. No!"

Indira strode through the door. "What in the world is happening in here? I could hear you all the way outside."

"Keme found Dash and Bobby's sex handcuffs," Fox said.

"No!"

"Just the key," Millie clarified.

Nose wrinkling, Keme dropped the key back into the basket.

I grabbed another cookie because at this point, they were the only thing keeping me from a stroke.

Indira seemed to take in the scene for a moment. Then she said, “Get rid of the picture frame—no, Keme, I don’t want to know. Fox, take care of the candle.”

“I shall perform an exorcism,” Fox announced.

“Yes to the socks, I think.”

For some reason, that made Millie cheer.

Indira slapped my hand. I hadn’t even realized I was reaching for the plate until she said, “And those are for Bobby. I’ll order you a pizza, and there’s beer in the fridge, and—good idea.”

This last bit was for Keme who was in the process of removing the key from the, uh, incriminating keychain—to judge by the look on Keme’s face, it was the single grossest thing he’d ever had to do.

The sound came of the front door opening.

“Everyone out,” Indira said. “He’s here.”

So, I was alone in the kitchen when, a moment later, Bobby appeared in the doorway. His T-shirt was damp with sweat. His mesh shorts hung low on his hips. He’d worn some of his old sneakers, not the fancy ones he collected, and he was covered from head to toe in dust and dirt.

“That was the last of it,” he said. And then, “What’s that?”

“Oh, uh, um, uh, um—”

(It went on and on like that.)

After about fifteen seconds of it, he came over and glanced in the basket. A smile spread across his face as he took a cookie and bit into it. He made a sound of pleasure that would have been illegal on broadcast TV, and his eyes closed halfway.

“God, I’m starving.” He took another bite and asked, “Did you do this?”

“Indira made the cookies,” I somehow managed to say.

“Socks!” He plucked them out of the basket, sounding—believe it or not—genuinely excited. “You remembered my feet get cold!”

“Oh, yeah—”

“And a key.” He touched the basket’s handle and looked at me. He seemed to be struggling with what to say. “Thank you.”

“I know you’ve had a few hard weeks.” It was difficult to believe it was my voice, sounding so steady. “And I want you to be happy here. Oh! And I ordered pizza.”

(Okay, the I part was a white lie.)

That earned me Bobby’s big, goofy grin. His hand came up, and before my brain could process what he was doing, he brushed a crumb from the corner of my mouth. Then he took another bite of the cookie, and, if anything, his grin got wider. “Thanks, roomie.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:55 am

The headache got worse on the drive to the Boones' house. Colt blamed it on the fact that he was hot—really hot, actually, but weirdly, not sweating—and then cold a moment later. That was probably the truck; the heater was on its way out, and so the cab could swing from sweltering to freezing in a matter of minutes. That probably explained why he was shivering. And why his joints had started to throb by the time he pulled into the Boones' driveway. The suspension, Colt thought as he climbed down from the truck. The old Ford wasn't the smoothest ride.

On his way to the door, he hit a slippery patch, although it looked like the Boones had shoveled the walk. But there must have been ice. Black ice. That was why the world went all scrambly for a moment and he had to put a hand on the side of the house and wait for things to stop spinning. Then he remembered the present, and he had to shuffle back to the truck. Slow, slow. Because the driveway had some of those slippery spots too.

Maybe it's because I didn't sleep, he thought. Evie was sick, and she'd been up all night tossing and crying. She'd practically been glued to his lap all day. But he just had to get through one meal. One perfect, flawless, zero-fuck-ups meal. With Ash's older brother.

It wasn't that Colt was scared of meeting him. Everybody talked about how nice Levi was. Ash certainly talked about it. As a matter of fact, Ash worshipped the ground Levi walked on. Ash played football because Levi played football. Ash played basketball because Levi played basketball. Ash played baseball because Levi played baseball. Hell, Ash played piano because Levi played piano. And Levi was smart, too. He'd gotten a great scholarship to the University of Arkansas. He already had a summer internship lined up. He was probably going to get his MBA a couple of years

after he graduated. He didn't have a girlfriend right now, but he could get one whenever he wanted. All of this information was delivered by Ash with a kind of baseline wonder, like the starting place for everything with Levi was getting your socks knocked off.

So, no, Colt wasn't scared of meeting him. He was just Ash's brother. Ash's only brother. Ash's favorite brother. Ash's brother, whom he loved so much that he had one time told Colt, with total confidence, that Levi probably could have played football for Mizzou if he'd wanted to.

Colt hadn't grown up with an older brother, but it hadn't been hard to recognize the dynamic. He knew not all brothers were like that. But it probably shouldn't have been a surprise that the Boones, who were the perfect family in literally every way, would also have a pair of sons who were best friends. And that's why Colt hadn't said anything when Ash mentioned, in passing, that he hadn't talked to Levi in weeks. That's why Colt didn't frown when Ash told him how busy Levi had been. Colt didn't say anything about why Levi hadn't come home that summer, after Colt and Ash had started dating. He didn't say anything about the unhappiness that sometimes shimmered in Ash's face when he talked about Levi. He didn't say anything, because he knew, if he opened his mouth, all he could do was hurt Ash more.

The wind must have picked up because as Colt gingerly made his way to the porch, he heard this high-pitched rushing noise in his ears. He hit another of those wobbly patches, and he only barely managed to save himself—and, by some luck, save the present (a bottle of sparkling cider, non-alcoholic of course, since J-H would have shat himself and Pops would have murdered him if Colt had actually tried to buy wine). They really needed to throw down some salt, he thought muzzily as he took the steps up to the porch. And when did the wind get that loud?

When Colt knocked, the house started to tilt sideways, and he realized something had gone wrong. He tried to grab on to the house to make it straighten up, but he couldn't

quite seem to catch up with it. From a long way off came the sound of glass shattering, and then the bright, summery sweetness of apples. The door swung open, and an Ash who wasn't Ash stood there: taller, broader across the chest and shoulders, his hair short and brown instead of long and auburn. Levi, a distant part of Colt's brain informed him. Not Ash.

He opened his mouth to say hello. And, instead, he puked all over Levi's feet.

The worst part was they wouldn't let him go home, and, apparently, it was impossible to die from humiliation.

After a startled shout, Levi had caught Colt before he could hit the ground. Somehow, he'd gotten Colt inside—that part was a blur—and now Colt found himself on the sofa in the Boones' living room, with a blanket over his legs. Ash sat next to him, running his fingers through Colt's hair, occasionally pressing a cold cloth to Colt's forehead.

"Do you need more Tylenol?" Ash whispered.

"He's not allowed to have more Tylenol for six hours," Mrs. Boone said from the kitchen. And then, in a different tone, "I'm sorry to bother you, Emery. I think Colt's sick."

Colt groaned.

"Are you too hot?" Ash asked, the words sharp with panic. And then: "Too cold? Do you need to throw up?"

Shaking his head, Colt wondered if Ash would do the good, boyfriendly thing and bury him under the sofa cushions, and then the Boone family could have their nice dinner without him.

“No, he’ll be fine,” Mrs. Boone said in the background. “We’ll see you when you can get here.” Her voice changed, and she said, “Colt, your dad’s at the urgent care with Evie. He’ll be here as soon as he can.”

Colt groaned again.

“Bruh,” Ash whispered, tickling the back of Colt’s neck with his fingers. “I’m so sorry you’re sick.”

“No, I’m sorry. I ruined dinner.”

“It’s fine. It’s just dinner.”

But it wasn’t just dinner. It was Levi.

The front door opened and shut, and unfamiliar steps moved toward the living room. “I think I got all the glass,” Levi said, “but I’ll check again in the morning.” He appeared in Colt’s field of view as he shucked his winter coat, and then he grimaced. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” Colt croaked.

“He’s really sick,” Ash said.

“I feel a lot better.”

Ash and Levi gave him identical looks, which would have been hilarious if he hadn’t been millimeters away from barfing again.

The best Colt could come up with was “Sorry about the puke.”

“Oh man, no big deal,” Levi said with a laugh as he flopped down into a chair. “You live with guys at college, that stuff kind of washes over you after a while. You know what you need? Some Sprite.” He started to get up again. “I think we’ve got some in the basement.”

“I’ll get it,” Ash said, shooting up.

“You stay—” Levi tried.

Ash spoke over him. “I should have thought of Sprite. I can get it. I’ll get it super fast.”

Levi had a strange smile on his face as he watched Ash sprint off; the house thundered under his steps, and in the kitchen, Mrs. Boone called out, “Ashley, slow down!” Then Levi turned that smile on Colt. He did look a lot like Ash. Not as handsome, but maybe Colt was biased. Nobody could look at them, though, and not see how similar they were.

“It’s nice to meet you, Colt,” he finally said. “I, uh, I don’t know what Ash said to you.” His silence felt like a pause instead of a question, and sure enough, after a moment, he continued. “I should have come home. I should have done this earlier.”

Even sick, Colt knew what he was trying to say. He should have taken Colt’s measure earlier. He should have come back to see the boy who turned his baby brother, the person he loved most in the whole world, into a fag. Colt’s face was hot, and it had nothing to do with the fever.

“Watching him with you—” Levi said and stopped. The whole house shook with Ash’s steps as he raced toward them. And then Levi smiled again. “The way he wants to take care of you. It’s nice to meet the guy who could help my baby brother grow up.”

Ash launched himself into the room—literally. It looked like he was long-jumping, and the china rattled in the hutch when he landed. He held out a can of Sprite. He was grinning. His hair was in his face, and he was such a dork, and Colt loved him so much.

“At least a little,” Levi added, and that made both of them laugh, and they laughed harder at the outrage on Ash’s face.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:55 am

This story contains spoilers for The Evening Wolves .

The problem was that Emery couldn't do it alone.

True, it was only a contingency plan. But after everything that had happened over the last four months, he suspected he'd need it. If nothing else, it never hurt to be prepared.

So, the question became: who?

From the living room came the sounds of laughter and voices. When they'd gotten home from the restaurant called the Nifty Fifties, Theo and Auggie had already put Evie and Lana to bed, but Colt was still awake. He was asking North something about his new car, while North was—to judge by the sound of things—telling Jem all the reasons he ought to shave his beard, and Jem was trying to recruit Theo for the defense. Auggie and Shaw were listing all the reasons beards were great—a couple of times, to judge by Shaw's verbal stumbles, veering into inappropriate-for-children territory. Emery's personal favorite, of the reasons he'd heard so far, was “And remember that time we went to a lesbian bar and that lady tried to kiss you?” Tean, of course, was saying nothing.

Emery discarded the wildlife veterinarian first. Tean was too gentle, and although he might no longer identify as Mormon, Emery suspected a rather tightly oriented moral compass lay under his quiet façade.

Jem, on the other hand, would have made an excellent choice. He was savvy, he was competent, and he was dangerous. He talked too much, but Emery imagined that,

with enough time, he could correct that—one of those shock collars for dogs that barked, maybe. No, the real problem was that Jem was still something of an unknown quantity.

Theo was another good candidate. He was big and physically powerful. He was intelligent. He had a brutal streak that would be an advantage. Like Tean, though, the teacher had strong opinions about right and wrong. He was capable of tremendous violence when defending himself and people he loved. But in cold blood? Emery wasn't sure.

Auggie was another easy no. Emery had no intention of admitting it, but he was rather fond of the little guy. Auggie was surprisingly likeable, especially when—with his particular brand of good looks—he easily could have been another sex bunny with an underdeveloped personality. He was also a convenient intermediary when Emery had zero fucking idea what his son was saying. And, when pressed, Auggie was resourceful. But he wasn't a fighter, not the way Jem and Theo were. And perhaps Emery was wrong, but he thought, when push came to shove, Auggie didn't have the right...grit.

Under certain circumstances, North might have been the one to ask. Aside from being a bewilderingly annoying ass, the blond man was an excellent investigator, and he knew how to handle himself. In a tight corner, Emery would have picked him in a heartbeat. But as with Theo, Emery thought that North might balk at certain necessities.

In his dream world, Emery would have asked John, of course. But John could never know about this.

And that left Shaw. If Emery had said it out loud, the others would have laughed. Shaw in his kilts and kimonos and wooden clogs. Shaw with his crystals and his auras and his psychic boners. But all of that was only part of it. And Emery had seen another part—just glimpses, really. But he recognized it.

Once, when Emery had been taken by dangerous men, Shaw and North had saved him. Shaw had sprayed a man with pepper gel. He had taken the man's gun. While everything else dissolved into chaos, Shaw had stayed cool, calm, and unflappable. And irritating as all fuck, for sure.

Another time, a sniper had almost shot Shaw. Emery had crashed into him, carrying both of them to the ground, and he remembered the look in Shaw's eyes. That same icy control. No panic. No screams. Calculation. Control. And yes, he'd still managed to be a jackass.

And then there had been the time that Emery had picked up North and Shaw on the side of the road. North had been staggering, barely able to walk. Shaw had practically carried him. Emery had seen it then, too. The resolve. The determination. The unyielding strength hidden under so much bullshit.

Perhaps most important, though, was the fact that Shaw kept it all hidden. The proof that Shaw understood that some things—sometimes, the most important things—had to be kept secret.

Emery found his way to the living room, where the jackassing was still going on. North was trying to get Theo to wrestle him, which Auggie thought was a great idea. Jem was egging them on. Tean had taken refuge behind a book, although he was sneaking peeks, and Shaw was saying something about greasing each other up, Greco-Roman style. Emery didn't understand his son a great deal of the time, but he had little trouble reading the expression right then on Colt's face.

When Shaw ran into the kitchen for Crisco, Emery caught his arm.

Shaw looked over at him, grinning, mouth already opening to spill out nonsense.

He stopped at what he saw on Emery's face. And his own expression changed in an instant: serious, almost grim. For an uncanny moment, Emery had the strangest

thought that somehow, Shaw already knew.

It was harder than he'd expected. He had to remind himself of all the reasons this was the right thing to do. That it was a contingency. Only if everything else failed. And that, long ago, he'd left behind the person he'd been—the one who had believed in clear lines of black and white, who had believed that an impartial system could provide justice.

He cleared his throat. And then he said, "I need your help."