



Unexpected Boyfriends (Far From Home #2)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: The truth is, when you fall for the very first time, you fall all the way.

JUSTIN

I always knew it wasn't an option to come out to my family. Then I met the man of my dreams one summer, and how could I stop myself falling for him? I didn't even know if he was interested in guys, or if he'd think I was too young.

When my family realizes there's something going on between us, they send me away and it's the start of a nightmare.

I can't stay here. I can't survive. I know he doesn't want to, couldn't want to, see me again, but I need to see him one last time. Can I make it to him? Will he even talk to me if I do?

AXEL

When the blonde-haired guy walks into my life, I'm really not prepared to be swept off my feet. One night on the beach, and I find I can't live without him. I thought he felt the same, so why's he ghosting me?

Will Justin and I get to be together or will family keep us apart?

Content warning: conversion therapy and its aftereffects, panic attacks, thoughts of suicide, homophobia, rejection by parents, unintentional cheating (not really cheating since the MCs weren't together at the time) and explicit sex scenes between two men.

Total Pages (Source): 45

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Palm Beach, Sydney

JUSTIN

“Don’t forget to set for six. They’re bringing their son with them, remember?”

“Yeah, sure.” I sigh. Why do parents – and grandparents in this case – always assume that two young people will hit it off, just because they’re of similar age?

Ugh. It’s not the first time my grandparents have pulled this stunt, and almost every time it’s been painfully awkward. The only time it wasn’t, the new ‘friend’ was a girl. In my experience, girls like hanging out with gay guys, maybe ‘cause they feel safe around them, but guys my age...well, they generally keep me at a wary distance. My family haven’t figured out my sexual orientation yet, but every person my age can tell, and most straight guys behave as if the gay guy is going to hit on every guy he meets. Like we just can’t control ourselves. Like straight guys are all so lust worthy. As if. Idiots.

Anyway, I know my grandparents mean well. And yes, I don’t have friends here in Sydney, but I’m only here for the holidays and I’m perfectly happy with my own company. My grandparents live in a beautiful, airy house overlooking a stunning surf beach - which is just a short ten-minute walk down the hill - and I spend most of my days down there, swimming or lounging on the beach. What’s not to love about that?

Well, maybe the fifteen-minute walk back up the hill after the swim, which means I’m hot and ready to go back down again as soon as I get home. But, whatever. It’s a small price to pay. I don’t have my license yet, so walking it is, unless my

grandparents pick me up, but then I have to pick a time and stick to it... and that is not the point of a holiday, so, nah, I'll walk.

I love spending my holidays here, and when I'm not at the beach, I draw or paint, or read novels. There's nothing I find more relaxing than sitting at the table in the sunroom surrounded by paper and colored pencils, the sun shining through the glass walls of the sunroom, the cicadas singing, and the beautiful blue ocean stretched out in front me.

But not today.

I will admit to being a little put out at having my peaceful holiday routine disrupted by visitors, but it's not my house, so I roll with it. It's not so bad when it's just my grandparents' friends that come, because after lunch I can easily make my escape and head off to the beach. However, when they're bringing their son or daughter to 'keep me company', I'm obliged to stick around. Sometimes I'm able to convince them to come to the beach which sort of takes the pressure off having awkward conversation, but usually we just end up on our phones basically ignoring each other.

I'm not looking forward to today, because a) guy (probably straight), and b) way older than me, which means we'll have even less in common.

I groan inwardly. Still, it's just a few painful hours and then I can be at the beach again. I can do this.

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Guests

JUSTIN

Colored pencils are scattered across the top of the table - greens, oranges and reds mainly. The rest, except for the blue pencil in my hand, are still in their box. I'm shading the side of the lorikeet's head and struggling a little to give a realistic impression of tiny wispy feathers around its head and the curve of its neck.

I pause, pencil in mid-air, and survey the drawing critically.

"Mmm, okay, let's try this," and I put down the pencil and instead select a navy blue one - almost black - from the box. I check the tip is satisfactorily sharp, and then add a few strokes of color to the edges of several of the miniscule feathers. Then I pause and assess the effect. Much better! I continue adding little dashes of contrast around the neck and head of the bird and it steadily comes to life. Cheerful twitters and chirps in the trees outside approve of my work.

Now for the chest, where I've already shaded in a mix of yellows and oranges, but the effect is not dramatic enough. Probably some red needed, then. As I pick up the shade of red pencil I think will do, a shrill buzz slices through the relaxing morning.

With a scowl I put the pencil down again. The pencils clatter in protest as I hurriedly scoop them up and dump them on a shelf along with the half-finished picture. Yes, I know, we were having fun. Me too, guys, me too. A quick scan of the room to check I haven't left it in a mess, and then I mentally prepare myself for a sociability I don't feel.

I linger in the adjoining living room while I listen to the babble of voices as my grandparents greet their visitors at the front door. I gaze out the floor-to-ceiling windows at a fantastic view of the ocean. The sea air wafts in the french doors that open onto an extensive balcony where there's nothing in front of you but sky and sea, and the green of the trees that line the rocky slope as it falls away to the ocean.

The guests are ushered into the living room. The parents come in first and are introduced to me. I shake hands and smile and murmur bland greetings.

I have a brief hope that they've come alone after all, and their son has found something else to do for the day, but then I see a third person, hanging back and clearly as enthusiastic about meeting me as I am about him. Not.

The guy is standing so far back that everyone else has piled into the room ahead of him, and it's only the mass of dark hair visible above everyone else that lets me know there's someone there. I half expect him to disappear out the front door while everyone else is distracted. I would if I could.

He doesn't though, and as everyone moves further into the room, I see him properly for the first time.

I blink to cover my surprise, and I hope I manage to keep a neutral face, because man, he is gorgeous. I have an almost visceral reaction to the sight of that delicious hunk and I barely pay attention as we're introduced.

"And this is our grandson, Justin," my grandmother is saying, gesturing towards me. "Justin, this is Axel."

Axel steps forward and extends his hand. Mesmerized by his beautiful face, I almost forget my manners, leaving him hanging there a second too long. When I finally do grasp his hand, I hope he doesn't notice the fine tremor in mine. His hand is warm

and his grip is firm and confident. Part of me stirs.

He's twenty-two apparently, four years older than me, and beautiful. Way out of my league. Chances are he doesn't play for my team anyway, so it doesn't matter. Still, one can look, right? There has to be some compensation for having my peaceful day disrupted.

He draws the handshake out a little longer than is normal as he looks me over and I'm afraid he's already figured me out. I paste a neutral smile on my face, and I wait for the reaction. The instinctive shudder, the hastily withdrawn hand, the unconscious sneer. But there's none of that this time.

"Um. Hi." I stammer, breaking the awkward silence.

Axel cocks his head slightly, his eyes appraising, but the expression on his face gives nothing away.

"Hi."

My grandparents start offering drinks and I turn away, glad to have an excuse to move out of the spotlight of that thoughtful stare. I can feel the heat flaming my cheeks, a hot prickling sensation up my neck. The situation in my pants is a little disconcerting too, and I need a moment to get that under control.

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The Beach

JUSTIN

When the main course is finished, I help clear the dishes. Anything to help speed things along. Lunch is always a production, so there's still dessert to be offered and eaten, before I can engineer an escape to the beach. I'm enjoying Axel's company way more than I'd expected, but I'd rather be somewhere I can relax. Lunch is too formal, what with having to make a good impression on the visitors, be polite and sit still. I have a restless energy that really needs to be doing something.

It's also highly distracting sitting across from Axel. He has an aura that draws me to him. And he's totally gorgeous. The guy could easily have walked straight out of one of my wet dreams, which is probably why I'm sporting a half-chub right now. He's tall, has a mass of brown sort-of-wavy hair parted off-centre framing an attractive face, hazel eyes that crinkle into upside down quarter moons when he smiles, and dark pink lips I'd love to smack mine against. But more than his looks, it's his personality which draws me to him. He's confident, quietly and sarcastically funny, laughs readily and seems genuinely interested in me. Then he blows my mind by standing up to my grandfather when he goes off on one of his homophobic rants. I mean, that is sexy as hell.

Maybe it's just my teenage hormones, but I can't help flirting a little, though I'm sure the effect is ruined as I blush readily as I do so. Axel kindly pretends not to notice. He doesn't seem at all put out by my behavior. He doesn't flirt though he does give me an appraising look from time to time. I still don't have him figured out.

We are getting along well and he doesn't seem to mind my company, so as we finish dessert, I lean across and in a low voice ask, "Do you want to head down to the beach after this?"

"Don't you want to hang around and socialize with the adults?" he asks me, eyebrows raised, a perplexed expression on his face.

Oh. Did I misjudge? My chest tightens, feels heavy. Maybe he's not really enjoying being with me after all, maybe he's just really good at faking it socially.

"Um, yeah, sure," I mumble.

The side of his mouth quirks up in the faintest beginnings of a smile.

"Because I don't," Axel says.

What? I'm confused, didn't he just imply he didn't want to hang out with me?

"Let's go to the beach," he says, a slow teasing smile spreading across his face.

I'm having trouble processing this conversation, not helped by the fact that Axel just ran his tongue over his lower lip and I'm finding that highly distracting. He smirks. The fuck? Does he know what he's doing to me? He really must. He's just messing with me.

Feeling a little off-kilter, I stand up and start clearing the table.

"We're going down to the beach," I announce. No-one objects. They're probably all happy that Axel and I have hit it off.

"Got swimmers?" I can't lend him a pair of mine as I'm a lot smaller than he is.

“Sure. Wearing them,” he says, giving a little tug at his waistband. Apparently, he had plans to get away early too and came prepared.

“You didn’t really want to come today, did you?” It doesn’t bother me, after all I’d been the same. We’re pretty much on the same wavelength here.

“Well, let’s just say I’d rather be at the beach than all dressed up for lunch,” he leans in conspiratorially and replies in a voice low enough that no-one else can hear. Then adds, “Not sorry I came though.” And his eyes sparkle as he gives me a bit of a lookover.

I feel my cheeks heat up and I look away.

“I’m not so much the rebel so I will have to go and get changed. You okay to walk down?”

“Sure.”

“Okay. Give me five minutes.”

I disappear off to my bedroom to change and hurry back with a couple of beach towels under my arm.

“Need a towel?” I ask, but Axel shakes his head.

“Got one in the car. I’ll grab it on the way out,” he says, as we head out.

After retrieving his towel from his parent’s car, Axel confesses, “I was hoping to get away early and go to the beach.”

“Sucks having to come and babysit, doesn’t it?” I joke, though a part of me worries

that he might still feel that way.

“Nah, you’re okay,” Axel says and bumps me with his shoulder.

The walk down to the beach is pleasant. Mostly we talk, but when we lapse into silence, we’re both comfortable enough to leave it unfilled. I’m glad. Despite the age difference, we seem to be socially quite compatible.

When we reach the bottom of the hill and arrive at the beach, I admire the way Axel moves around with the confidence of someone who’s grown up here. He seems totally at home, and he acknowledges the lifeguards, who have their tower set up on the sand, with a half-salute.

"Heya Axel mate, whatcha been doing?" one yells down as we walk past.

"Nothing much, man, just the usual," he replies casually.

"Wanna pull a shift, mate? We're short at the moment."

Axel waves him off. "Nah, mate, I'm done with all that shit."

"Too bad, bro. See you on the waves!"

Axel gives him the thumbs up and we keep walking closer to the waterline.

“I used to do Surf Lifesaving here for a couple of years,” he explains, “but since I started working I haven’t wanted to put in the time. I like being free to just come to the beach and chill out whenever I want to, and not have to worry about schedules and stuff.”

“Must be exciting to be a lifesaver though.”

Axel shrugs. "Sometimes, but it can also be scary because when things go wrong in the ocean, they go wrong really fast. But most of the patrols are actually really boring. You just spend the time sitting around talking and you have to deal with all the dumbasses that think they don't need to swim between the flags. God, that's a chore and a half. People do not get it."

"Do you surf?"

"Yes, sometimes. But I prefer bodysurfing."

We find a quiet place on the beach and lay our towels down. Axel strips off his shirt, revealing a massive set of shoulders. To avoid staring I look more closely at the unusual necklace hanging from his neck, a white fibrous cord with a starfish charm entwined with something that looks like it might be a snake. I peer at it, squinting, to get a better look, when I realize the snake-starfish is sitting over a chest that's... oh, my . Quickly, I turn away. The sight of his firm chest with its smattering of fine dark hair, and the smooth skin of his abdomen with the flat toned stomach and happy trail into his shorts which I just had to notice, has my dick starting to pay attention.

I roll onto my side away from Axel to conceal the evidence. I'm enjoying the companionship and I don't want to lose a potential friend by an ill-timed erection. I distract myself by looking at the different groups of people sitting on the sand. Lots of families and a few larger groups of young people, one or two couples. Yes, there's a seagull over there too. And someone's dog. An interesting tree. Plenty of things to look at. Not thinking about Axel at all.

Axel swats me with his towel. While I was busy not looking at him, he's pulled on a rashy – thank God – and is ready to hit the waves.

"C'mon," he says, "I don't like sitting on the beach and getting hot, it just makes it harder to get in."

I have a brief thought that he's hot anyway, before we race each other to the water – I win – and throw ourselves in. The water is icy and we come up gasping and laughing, and we push each other back into the freezing water just for fun.

There's a sandbank and we make our way out to it. Axel is a strong swimmer and reaches it first. He waits for me, then we wade out through the knee-deep water to where the waves are breaking.

I watch fascinated as he fearlessly and effortlessly bodysurfs the waves, some of which are twice his height. He shoots across the face of the wave, and somehow manages to avoid getting tumbled in the white water as the wave crashes onto the shallower water of the sandbank, and then he continues riding the foam.

"You're good at that," I tell him, impressed, as he makes his way back out to where I'm standing near the break after he's ridden a wave almost to the end of the sandbar. He could have ridden it further but I saw him drop off the wave early enough that he didn't have to swim back out.

"I've been around the beach all my life, so it's not that big a deal," he shrugs off the compliment.

"Even so..."

Axel's body is a thing of beauty, which I really ought not be staring at. He has the appearance of someone who's been active all his life - muscular, though not over-developed, lean but not skinny, and sexy as hell. His abs are to die for and his biceps and shoulders are wide. I bet if I touched them they'd be firm as hell. Add to that, the shimmer of the water running down his arms and torso...

I must have zoned out for a moment, because Axel asks, "What's up?"

“Nothing,” I give my head a little shake and duck under an oncoming wave. I need to get a grip on myself and just enjoy the company. And Axel is great company, especially now we’re away from parents and grandparents. Here, he’s relaxed and playful. What we’re doing is enough, but I really wish I knew what team he played for. Though it probably wouldn’t matter anyway. He’s gorgeous. I doubt I’d be on his radar.

I try catching a couple of waves, but I’m not terribly successful. The mass of water moves me along a few metres, but then I just sink as the wave continues on without me.

Axel notices.

“It’s your timing,” he tells me, coming closer. "Mind if I help?"

"Sure," I reply, getting ready for my next wave. He lays a hand on my shoulder to stop me launching myself onto the next wave. The warmth of his hand tingles on my cool skin. It feels good, but I try to ignore it.

He keeps his hand there, holding me in place.

“Not this one, it’s too full,” he coaches, letting a wave wash through. I watch it, and sure enough, it doesn’t curl up enough to create the right momentum.

“Wait, wait,” he still has his hand on my shoulder.

“See how this one’s not so bulky, it’s steeper and it’s curling up? This will be a good one. Not yet, not yet, now!” he says and lifts his hand.

I stroke for the wave. I feel the wave catch me, propel me and push me slightly ahead of its foam as it crashes and I ride the wave onwards. The sensation is amazing and I

don't want to stop so I ride it as far as I can, which leaves me partway between the sandbank and the shore and I have to swim back out.

Axel is waiting for me when I get back out there with a face-splitting grin on my face. He smiles at me as I almost bounce in my excitement.

"That was amazing! I have to do that again!" I enthuse.

I do better at selecting a wave this time, and Axel helps me with timing again, and I get another great ride. This time I'm smarter and stop myself before going over the end of the sandbank.

We spend the next hour or so bodysurfing and by the end of that time, I'm a pro (in my own mind) and I'm also exhausted. We collapse on our towels, although it's probably fair to say I'm the only one actually collapsing. Axel looks like he could still manage a jog or something now, but he can probably see I'm unaccustomed to this sort of exercise and he doesn't push, for which I'm grateful.

"You're so lucky growing up here," I say, as Axel strips off his rashy, making me avert my eyes, and we lie on our towels, drying off in the late afternoon sunshine.

"Yeah, I am. I love it here, which is why I'm still living at home. Wasn't always easy living here though."

"How come?"

"W-e-l-l," he draws the word out as he thinks how to answer. "A lot of the people here are... I don't know, tight-knit? Cliquey? So that can make it hard when you're surfing. A lot of the surfers behave as if they own their local break, and if you're not from there you can run into a bit of trouble."

“Did that ever happen to you?”

“Once or twice, not much though. I know a lot of the local guys, and my mum has taught most of them, so they tended to leave me alone. Couple of my friends got beaten up pretty badly though.”

“Jeez, that sucks! Just ‘cause they weren’t locals?”

“Yeah. We’re a fairly isolated community down this end of the peninsula, and people get some pretty funny ideas.”

“How badly were they hurt? Any long-term effects?”

“No physical effects, but one of them quit surfing and moved away. He was quite traumatized and never felt safe here after that.”

“I never surf on the weekends anymore anyway,” he continues. “I go out midweek, early before work when it’s quiet. There’s too many surfers on the waves now – and a lot of them don’t know the rules, drop in on the established surfers, cause accidents and stir up all kinds of shit.”

“And some of the locals are really badass. They’ll pick on a surfer just ‘cause they don’t know him. Could still be a local, but just not a regular. Between the entitlement of the locals and the ignorance of the tourists, I like to keep away from it all.”

“So... from the sound of it, it’s not a very inclusive place.” I take a breath, then plunge on wondering if it’s wise to show my hand, “Did... did you know any gay guys growing up here? What was it like for them?”

There’s a pause, then Axel answers slowly.

“Yeah, for sure. They copped a few slurs, but I don’t think they had major problems. I’m sure they didn’t feel safe though. There were a few serious hate crimes committed in the area about that time. Bad enough to make the news. Hard to know if that was locals though or just people from outside coming here to cause trouble. Mostly they never got caught.”

Axel shrugs. “That was a while ago and society’s changed some since then.”

“True,” I say.

After a moment, Axel asks, “What’s it like in Melbourne?”

“Surfing? I don’t surf and none of my friends do either, so I can’t tell you if our surfers are territorial or not. Probably are. As for the other... I haven’t had any problems.” I watch him carefully as I drop this one. Figure I might as well put it out there sooner rather than later. I see a slight flicker in his eyes, but other than that there’s no reaction to what is, effectively, an announcement. Probably confirming what he already suspected. As I said before, most young people have me figured out real quick.

“Good to hear.” Axel says, approvingly. “Times are changing, right?”

I’m surprised he’s taking this so well. There is one thing that gives me pause though.

“Um, I haven’t...my family doesn’t know,” I blurt out.

“I figured,” Axel responds. “Don’t worry, I know how to keep my mouth shut.”

“Thanks.” It’s kind of embarrassing in this day and age to not be able to come out to your own family, but I know it won’t go down well with mine and I’ve got no plans to go there any time soon.

“Rested?” Axel asks, smoothly changing the subject. “Ready for more fun?”

I nod. The conversation has strayed into heavier topics and I want to get back to the light-heartedness and playfulness of before.

“What do you suggest?” I ask him, sitting up.

Alex pulls a little ball out of his backpack. It’s smaller than a tennis ball, a neon yellow color and it looks like it’s made of neoprene. He holds it up with a big grin.

“This!” he says and jumps to his feet. “C’mon.”

We head down to the water, where the tide has receded further. This time we wade out to the sandbank that now only has a thin layer of water lapping over it. As the foaming remnant of each wave sweeps across, the depth increases to over knee height of bubbling white water, before the water sucks back out to the ocean again.

Axel proceeds to show me what the little ball is capable of. It’s a type of hi-bounce ball but designed for water and thrown properly it dances at speed across the surface. It’s a bit like skipping stones, only easier. We have a lot of fun skipping the ball across the water to each other, throwing ourselves into the water to catch it when a wave comes in and swallowing a lot of salty water by trying to laugh and dive simultaneously.

Eventually I can’t take anymore. I am completely done. I flop down in the water, floating on my back in the shallows, the sand scraping against my back as the water rises and falls.

“Enough! You win.” I fake a weak groan.

Axel laughs and sits down in the water nearby. As a wave washes through, the water

laps at his chest, drawing attention to his dark pink nipples which have pebbled up from splashing around in the chill water.

“Of course, I win. Locals always win,” he jokes.

I hit the water with the heel of my hand and shoot a sudden spray of water straight in his face. He was totally not expecting it and cops the lot. I’m nearly killing myself laughing when he launches himself at me and flips me into the water. I manage to not swallow any of the salty water.

“Unfair!” I protest re-surfacing.

Axel just smirks.

He’s taller, bigger and older. I’m not going to win this. So, I show him the middle finger. Classy.

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The Rock Walk

AXEL

When I arrive to pick up Justin the next morning, he's fidgety.

“Something wrong?” I ask him, noticing the tight set of his features and the nervous chewing of his lip.

“Um. My grandma wants to invite you to dinner tomorrow night,” he says, awkwardly.

“Just me, or...?”

“Just you. I think she really wants us to be friends.” Oh! He’s embarrassed. He looks down as his cheeks turn a bright cherry pink, and the driveway gravel must have suddenly become incredibly fascinating, because he’s staring at it and won’t look at me.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to,” he adds, digging his shoe into the gravel, shifting some stones around. “I’ll just tell her you already had plans.”

“I don’t have any other plans,” I tell him gently. “And I’d love to come, unless of course, you wanted some time to yourself...”

“Oh. No, I’d like you to come,” he says hastily, finally looking up at me, an earnest expression on his face. “I just don’t want you to, you know, feel obligated, or

anything.”

“Nah, it’s cool. Tell her thanks from me.”

Justin’s smile is shy and pleased. This guy is so transparent it’s almost painful. He really wants me to come, but he doesn’t like to say it. It makes me feel strangely warm inside. I haven’t had anyone that genuinely keen for my company in a long time.

“Are you ready to go?” I ask him, eyeing the backpack slung over his shoulder.

He nods.

“Let’s go then.” I get back in the car and Justin gets in the passenger seat.

Before starting the engine, I pull out my phone, unlock it and toss it to Justin, who catches it neatly. “Put your number in my contacts and send yourself a message so I’m in yours. Then we don’t have to rely on the landline.”

Justin does as I ask, then asks “How far away is this place?” as I back out the driveway.

“Not far. It’s the next beach along, but it’s a bit of a winding drive to get there. Then it’s maybe, ah, forty-five minutes or an hour to walk around the rocks to get to the blowhole itself. Most people don’t go far enough to find it, but it’s basically as far as you can go, because you can’t get round it safely. And you can only reach it if the tide is super low. A normal low tide won’t cut it.”

“Sounds cool,” Justin seems excited by today’s planned excursion. His voice is upbeat, his eyes wide and shining.

“It is. I’ve been out there a few times.”

“You must have done a lot of exploring around the beaches and rocks,” he says. “I suppose it gets old after a while.”

“Not really. I love everything to do with the ocean, especially the way the ocean changes moods. It’s always different. You go down to the beach each morning and you never know what you’re going to find. Sometimes the sea seems wistful or lonely, sometimes it’s happy or hopeful. Kind of a metaphor for life really.”

“That’s a really cool way to look at things. I hadn’t thought of it like that.”

I laugh. “I grew up here and it was pretty solitary a lot of those years. When you spend as much time alone looking at the ocean as I have, you start having weird thoughts like that.”

Justin grins, a funny look on his face.

“Well, you’re not alone at the moment and you’re still having these weird thoughts, so what does that make you?” His tone is playful.

I shrug.

“Weirdo!” we both say at once and laugh.

Before we know it, we’re almost there. The road curves up and around a corner and suddenly laid out below us is the beach.

The water is a stunning blue and glints in the morning sun. Line after line of perfect waves run to the shore, tumbling over themselves in a race to reach the sand. Even from here we can see the dark specks of surfers enjoying the uncrowded break at the

southern end of the beach.

Moments later we reach the bottom of the hill and the gravel crunches as we turn into the carpark.

“This is it,” I announce as we pull up.

It’s a relatively small beach, with steep rocky headlands at each end. There’s a rockpool for swimming, an amenities block at the southern end, and barbecues, wooden tables and bench seats in the park next to the parking lot. At the northern end of the parking is a restaurant with a small kiosk next to it. Tall Norfolk pines line the beach.

There are very few people here, probably because the beach is small and hidden from the main road. There are the surfers whom we’d already noticed, a couple of people jogging the length of the beach, and a handful of swimmers braving the icy water of the rock pool. Apart from that, we have the place to ourselves. It’s like a miniature tropical paradise right here in Sydney.

“Wow! This is beautiful. It’s kind of like a private beach, isn’t it?”

“Well, sort of, I guess. But it does get busy on the weekends. It’s not as popular as the better-known beaches though because it’s kind of hidden away.”

We take off our shoes and walk barefoot, the sand squishing up between our toes, to where the pool marks the start of our rock walk.

I ignore the water-logged crevices and small rockpools near the pool.

“There’s never anything much to see this close to the beach,” I explain to Justin, “because there are too many people walking on the rocks and poking around

disturbing things. The interesting stuff is further round.”

We climb over rocks, around rocks, and skirt around the many shallow rock pools. We’re careful of our timing when crossing platforms and ledges where the falling tide still sends waves washing over the rocks. And every now and then, a larger wave than normal shoots a great rush of water over rocks that were previously uncovered.

“Now I understand how rock fishermen sometimes get swept away,” observes Justin, as we turn back to watch a particularly large wave sweep water over the rocks we’d traversed just moments ago.

“Yeah. You can’t afford to take your eyes off the sea. And you have to learn to read the waves too. You can usually tell when it’s building up to a big one. The sea has a kind of rhythm about it.”

Once we’ve been walking a good fifteen minutes and the beach has been out of sight for some time, we start looking in the rockpools for signs of life. I point out the periwinkles making their slow way across the rocky surfaces or winding trails through the sandy bottoms, and the many different varieties of seaweed or seagrass whose fronds shift in the gentle ripples of the wind-kissed water, sheltering crabs, tiny fish that have been caught in the rockpools by the receding tide, and tons and tons of starfish, all similar in appearance but with different coloration. I would have liked to show him something truly spectacular, but so far, while it’s all interesting, there isn’t anything out of the ordinary.

Although we look in the rockpools, we don’t touch anything, and we don’t spend too much time doing this because we need to take advantage of the tide to reach the blowhole safely. I’m going to look a right dickhead if I get us caught out here.

As we round a part of the coastline that extends seaward and was previously blocking our view, the coastline curves away and a whole bay presents itself to us. It’s

surrounded by steep cliffs and covered in native bushland, making the area inaccessible except the way we've come - over the coastal rocks.

I stop on top of a large boulder we've just scaled and point to a distant spot on the far side of the expanse of shifting sea.

"It's somewhere over there. It'll probably take us at least another half hour to reach it."

It feels like a long way; the air is heavy and eerily still and it's hot walking around the bay, but eventually we get there. For the last twenty minutes we haven't spoken much, keeping our energy for making our way across and over the rocks, which at times is strenuous, especially in these stifling conditions. As we make our way out of the protection of the bay and closer to the point, the sea breeze hits us in the face and brings us some welcome relief.

Finally, we arrive at our destination.

I don't have to say anything, because this place speaks volumes by itself. I can see from how wide Justin's eyes have gone that he is as awestruck as I was the first time I saw it.

The green swell of water surges in through the narrow walls of the channel and erupts in a massive spray of salty water that rains down on us. But even more impressive is the way the water sucks back out as the wave recedes. The water swirls and gurgles around the rocky ledges deep down in the crevice, sucking everything – water, seaweed, everything - down a long, long way. Long chains of seaweed trail helplessly from the crevices between the rocks lower down. It's amazing and sickening at the same time.

"Wow!" is all Justin can say, staring fascinated at the swirling maelstrom of

retreating water.

I stand next to him. Our shoulders are almost touching and I can feel the heat from his body.

Why am I noticing this?

“It’s amazing, right?”

“Yeah,” he breathes, almost reverently. “I know this is sick, but all I can think about is what it would be like to be stuck in there when the water sucks out. Ugh!”

“Mmm. Macabrely fascinating, but yeah, I know what you mean.”

“It would be...I don’t know, terrifying? Definitely heart attack material.”

“It’d be deadly. If the heart attack didn’t kill you, you’d probably drown. You could never climb out before the next wave came in.”

Another wave surges in and the spray goes even higher this time, shooting up in a geyser of churned up droplets that sparkle as they reach for the sun... and we get soaked.

“A pity we can’t come here in a big storm,” says Justin, eyes wide, a massive grin splitting his face. “Imagine it!”

“You are fascinated by the macabre, aren’t you? It would be a fucking nightmare. But anyway, it’s not possible to get here under those conditions, so we’ll never know how wild it can get.”

“It’s kind of sickening to watch. I’m imagining falling in! Gah! I’m sure I’ll dream

about this tonight.” Justin shudders.

I put an arm around his shoulders and give a little shake, as if to push him towards it, though I make sure I’m holding tight enough that he won’t go anywhere. I can be an idiot, but not that much.

“Ahh!” Justin startles, and then punches my arm. “Fuck, that was not funny.”

“Yes, it was,” I laugh. I still have my arm around him when he turns to me.

“Okay, maybe it was, a little, ” he concedes, a smile dancing across his lips and curving up the corners. I’m struck by how cute he looks, with his soft, pink lips curled into a cheeky smile, and his stormy grey eyes framed by his darker lashes, the sun highlighting all the golden shades in his windswept hair.

I don’t know quite why I do it, but he’s standing there so close and I’m looking right into those fascinating eyes, and we’ve been having such a fun, relaxed time together sharing this adventure, and that still doesn’t quite explain it. But maybe it’s the proximity, or the fact we’re here alone so far from anyone else, or it’s the heat of his body or the look in his eyes, or the distinctive masculine scent of him mixed with the summery smell of sunscreen, and it can’t be a good idea, in fact, it’s got to be an epically bad idea, but suddenly I can’t find any reason to resist, and I lower my head and move in to kiss him.

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

First Moves

JUSTIN

Ping. A message hits my phone.

I'm here.

Axel is outside.

I drop everything and rush to greet him, slowing only as I open the door, because I don't want to look too keen. When I do saunter outside, I get a massive surprise. He's sitting astride a serious ass motorbike, dressed in jeans and a leather jacket. He looks hot as fuck. His phone is still in his hand, and he slips it back into his pocket as he dismounts.

"Hey," he grins. He looks sexy and mischievous tonight. He tosses back his hair and combs his hand through it to get rid of the helmet hair and fixes me with a steady look from those intense brown eyes. My knees wobble a little and I lick my lips nervously as I try to hide my reaction to his sexy, masculine presence.

"Hey," I manage weakly, though a big fat smile is starting to crease my face. I am really happy to see him. And as he looks so positively delicious, it's no wonder I have a stomach full of freaked out butterflies.

I'm not sure what's appropriate here. A handshake? A hug? Or is that too much? I have no idea, so I do nothing, just stand there awkwardly. Axel solves the impasse by

retrieving a couple of things from his backpack and showing them to me. He's brought a bottle of wine and a box of chocolates.

"I brought these for your grandparents. I would have brought flowers, but ..." he looks at his bike and shrugs.

"Right. Not practical. You didn't need to bring anything though. It's just dinner."

"I don't like to come empty-handed."

I blink. Unscrambling my thoughts, I say, "My grandma loves chocolate. She'll be thrilled."

I lead the way into the house and my grandmother greets him warmly. As predicted, she's happy to receive chocolates, though she politely scolds him.

"That's very sweet of you, Axel, but there was absolutely no need to bring anything."

"No worries, Mrs. Beecham. I don't like to come empty-handed."

"Well it's very kind of you, but don't do it next time, okay?"

"Sure thing."

Will there be a next time? I hope so. I cast a furtive glance towards him, but Axel doesn't seem bothered by the suggestion.

Axel is the perfect guest. He waits until my grandmother is seated before starting to eat, compliments her cooking (and eats seconds), and maintains a steady conversation with my grandparents. The topics are rather adult – politics and stock markets – and Axel seems to have opinions on both, whilst still being able to maintain a diplomatic

conversation. The topics pretty much make my eyes glaze over, and when he sees this, Axel draws me into the conversation with a change of topic.

“How did your day go?” he asks me, when there’s a logical pause in the discussion of whether the local member of parliament is actually representing their constituency or their personal interests (I mean, who cares?).

My spoon scrapes the inside of my dessert bowl before I answer.

“Pretty good. Tried bodysurfing again today but wasn't the best, to be honest. So I went for a rock walk around the headland. Didn't really do a whole lot, but it was fine. I'm happy just chilling anyway.”

“We can go to the beach another day and I'll help you again with the bodysurfing, though you probably don't really need it anymore. Some days the waves are just off.”

I smile at him. “Thanks. That would be awesome.”

“You worked on your art today too,” my grandmother chips in.

“What sort of art do you do?” Axel looks interested.

I squirm in my seat and heat rises in my cheeks.

“Ah, just drawing and sometimes I paint,” I say awkwardly. “It's nothing special. Just something to keep me busy.”

I'm sure my artwork is pretty average, and the last thing I want to do is call attention to it, but luck is not on my side tonight.

“I'd be interested to see it,” Axel cocks his head at me, “if you don't mind, that is.”

“Maybe.” I don’t want to sound rude, so I add, “it’s really not that good.”

“Doesn’t have to be. Anyway, who’s to judge what’s good in art... it’s all about self-expression, right? Self-expression is a very personal thing,” and he gives me a subtle wink which is just for me. I’m pretty sure he’s not talking about art anymore.

I don't actually have that much experience with this, but I think he just flirted with me and my face and neck probably resemble beetroot right now. I cough a bit and pretend I’m choking on something to cover my embarrassment.

"Are you okay?" Grandma rises out of her chair in alarm.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," I stumble over my words, aiming to stop her before she gets going with the Heimlich maneuver. My grandmother is nothing but determined when she gets going. Axel smirks. He knows I wasn't choking.

My grandmother eyes me anxiously, but sits back down again.

A half-smile continues to twist at the corners of Axel's lips. I casually take a sip of water while I think. Putting the glass down, I raise my eyebrows and offer my most innocent expression as I ask, "What about you, Axel? What do you do for self-expression?"

"I like to go dancing." His eyes twinkle. His lips are twisting again and I narrow my eyes at him suspiciously. There's a subtext here, that I don't quite understand.

"Oh, I love dancing," my grandmother exclaims, eyes lighting up. I'm pretty sure the kind of dancing Axel's talking about is very different to what she's thinking of. "We used to do a lot of dancing, didn't we, dear?"

My grandfather grunts.

Clearly he wasn't as impressed with it as she was. "That was what we did for entertainment in those days," he says, gruffly. My grandmother starts reminiscing about the things they used to do in their youth, and before long it's 8.30pm and Granddad's eyes are starting to droop.

He stands up heavily and addresses Axel.

"You young folk probably want to stay up and watch TV or something, but I'm going to bed. Nice to see you again, Axel."

Axel rises too and extends a hand. "Thank you for inviting me." He turns to my grandmother and adds, "I think that was the best dessert I've ever had!"

She smiles. "Thank you, dear."

Granddad says, "Leave the dishes 'til the morning, Margaret, let these two have some peace and quiet."

It might be getting towards bedtime for my grandparents, but for Axel and I the night is just starting. Once the oldies have gone to bed and out of earshot, Axel suggests we go for a ride on his motorbike.

"I brought a spare helmet in case you wanted to ride with me. I don't go crazy on the bike" he assures me, "so you're pretty safe. Well, as safe as you can be on a bike, still have to share the road with the crazies driving cars. But it's up to you."

Would I like to ride on his bike? Hell, yeah.

Am I worried about the crazy car drivers? Maybe I should be, but I'm confident Axel knows what he's doing on a bike, and what's life without a little danger? The idea of sitting on the bike behind Axel is pretty exciting. It's worth a little risk.

“Have you ridden before?” Axel wants to know, as he hands me the helmet once we're outside.

“No,” I reply, my squeaky voice betraying a touch of nerves.

He helps me adjust the helmet, and I'm conscious of how close he's standing. My heart speeds up. He doesn't give any indication that he notices he's affecting me as he gives me a few quick instructions. Apparently, I'm to sit behind him, hold on to him, relax, keep my eyes on the back of his helmet and lean with him through the bends. It seems like a lot but I got lost after I realized I'd have to put my arms around him.

Axel gets on his bike, and I get on behind him and put my arms around his waist. I'm nervous about how close I should get, so I leave a big gap between us. Axel shakes his head and pulls me closer, so my front is against his back. The firmness of his body teases me through the layers of fabric. I try to ignore it but I kind of want to pull him closer.

“Hold on,” he shouts as he starts the bike and kicks the stand clear.

Axel coaxes the bike up the driveway and when we pull onto the road, powers up the throttle and wow! This is exhilarating! The rush of the air, the lean of the bike as we take the bends, the dark shadows rushing past us, the throbbing of the engine between my thighs and Axel's muscular body in my arms. Fuck me! I don't think I've ever felt this sort of rush before.

The road is deserted because it's late, and as we weave our way around the bends and down the hill to the beach, we haven't seen a single car. The solitude is amazing. It's like we have a taste of the most complete and exhilarating freedom. Two souls alone in a universe that's solely ours.

Axel pulls into the carpark of the same isolated beach where he showed me the

blowhole. He drops one foot to the gravel and we sit still for a minute. It's then that I realize I have a complication. Was it the thrill of the ride? The throb of the powerful engine between my legs? Or the proximity of Axel's strong body? I'm not sure, but my jeans are now uncomfortably tight. This is beyond awkward. My cheeks heat up. I don't know what to do. Shifting on the seat, I try to adjust myself, and hope Axel doesn't notice my embarrassing predicament.

Axel kicks the stand down and takes off his helmet but remains sitting on the bike.

When I realize I still have one arm around his waist, I hurriedly let go, in case it's too much. Then take off my helmet.

"Wow!" I breathe. My heart is racing. The sensory overload has my head buzzing. We're too close. I'm too hard. And I need to say something.

"Oh, man, that was really something!"

Axel turns his head to look at me and smiles, though the smile looks a little strained.

"Yeah, I love taking the bike out at night when there's no-one on the roads. You did well too. Usually people who don't ride lean the wrong way, which totally unbalances the bike. You didn't do that."

His praise warms my insides. His approval is important to me.

"I trust you," I confess. "I feel safe around you."

It even feels safe telling him this, especially in the darkness where he can't see my flushed cheeks.

"I'm glad." Axel speaks the words so softly I'm not sure if he's saying them to me or

to himself.

A minute or two more of just sitting there, then Axel tells me, “You hop off first.”

Oh right. That’s why we’re still sitting here. I swing my leg over the bike and get off. Axel follows. He turns away for a moment without looking at me and... is he adjusting himself too?

That possibility makes me catch my breath, and I turn away to compose myself and give him privacy. When I turn back, Axel is rummaging around in the pannier on the back of the bike. With a grin, he pulls out what looks like a blanket, a bottle and a couple of glasses.

My muscles get a little quivery and my legs threaten to give way. Has he brought me down here to seduce me?

Shockingly, I don’t think I’d object in the slightest.

Still. I don’t want to be just someone he scores with.

“I’m, ah, not sure that's a good idea. I'm a bit younger than you,” I remind him.

“I know,” he smiles softly at me and holds the bottle up so I can see the label. “Sparkling apple juice. I’m not about to get you drunk. Promise.”

I feel a bit ashamed of my suspicions and I’m glad it’s dark enough he can’t read the guilt in my eyes.

“Come on,” he urges me, and leads the way onto the sand. When he finds a spot he likes, he drops the blanket on the ground.

“Can you...?” he gestures at the rug, which turns out to be a picnic rug with a waterproof backing.

I catch his meaning and spread it out on the sand and we kick off our shoes and settle down together. Axel pops the top off the bottle and fills the glasses with apple juice.

He fixes me with an enigmatic gaze and clinks his glass against mine.

“To new things,” he toasts and raises his glass to those beautiful full lips, his eyes locked with mine.

“To beautiful new things and new experiences,” I amend the toast and take a sip from my glass. The juice is cool and sweet, rather like Axel himself, I think. Unconsciously, I run my tongue over my lips at this thought. Axel is staring at me. His gaze flicks down to... my lips? Instinctively I part them. My whole being is drawn to him. I draw in a breath, hold it. I watch him, fascinated. Something burns in the air between us.

His gaze flicks back up to mine. He swallows and turns his head away, breaking the moment.

I look away too. We’re both staring at the ocean we can scarcely see because of the darkness, deliberately not looking at each other. This feels awkward. I don't know what to do.

Axel sighs.

Finally, he whispers, “I shouldn’t have brought you here.”

“Why not?” I ask, feeling a pang of disappointment in my chest, a little bit of hurt creeping into my voice.

Axel swallows before answering.

“Because... you’re way too tempting,” he confesses, still not looking at me.

Oh! Really? That’s the problem?

“And that’s a problem, why?” I query, now very interested, looking at the back of his head and mentally urging him to turn around. I really like him and I find him really hot. If he's going to drop little lines like that, I am going to eat them up.

“Ah, I’m a bit older than you, not so much in years, but in life experience,” he says, addressing the night and the darkness and the ocean he can’t see, and still not looking at me. “I worry that there might be an imbalance here... that I might be taking advantage of you, if we, ah, if...”

His head turns towards me and suddenly I'm looking straight into eyes so dark in this light that I can no longer make out their color. Even so, this close, I can't mistake the lust I see there, but there’s also such naked longing, that if I wasn’t already sitting down it would surely bring me to my knees. A thrill rushes through my veins. God, I want to suck him off. Or he could suck me. Fuck. At this point I don't really care which, but I want us to do something! Who cares that I'm a total virgin? I'm down for this. Who better to show me the ropes than Axel, this sexy, fun, caring guy who won't make the first move because he doesn't want to take advantage of me...

The only way he trusts this is if I take the initiative.

“Too late for that,” I tell him, bluntly. “I think we’ve already started something.”

I put down my glass, and scoot across the short distance to him, throw one leg over his thighs and straddle him.

The bulge in my jeans presses up against his lower belly. I'm pretty sure I can feel his too.

“Tell me you don't feel anything and I'll back off,” I challenge him, unusually bold.

Axel closes his eyes briefly as a soft moan escapes him. He looks like he can hardly breathe. He doesn't say anything.

Leaning forward, I press my lips to his. They're softer than I expected. These are the lips I've been thinking about in moments alone, lips I've shamelessly imagined around my hard cock as I stroked myself to completion in my lonely bed. Yes, those lips. And they're as responsive as I imagined, moving beneath mine and in harmony with mine as he lets me control the kiss.

He opens for me as my tongue presses into his mouth, and he tastes of sweetness and apple and something else indefinably him. Then his tongue surges into my mouth and those powerful muscles move beneath me and he flips me over easily and I find myself beneath him on the rug. Caged but not trapped. I know he'd let me go in a heartbeat if I wanted it. But I don't, his strength and dominance is a big turn on. I don't know what I'm doing, but I do know I want him closer.

I slide my arms around his waist and pull him nearer as his tongue explores my mouth. His hand slides inside the back of my jeans and over my ass, and he moans into the kiss. I thrust my hips up into him. I'm painfully hard and alarmingly close to coming in my pants. Which, no, just no. I put my hand on Axel's chest and push back a little. He falters and stills, looking uncertain.

“Keep that up and I'm going to embarrass myself. Suck me off?” I beg him. “Please. I need it.”

He hesitates. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, need it. Please. Now, or I’m going to come in my fucking pants!”

“Show me,” he directs. I don’t want to take my hands off him, but I do, and I unbutton my jeans and unzip the fly, drawing my straining erection out into the cool air.

Axel looks at me with such hunger, like he's going to devour me, and I shiver, then he positions himself between my legs. Very slowly he drops his head and gently, way too gently, swipes his tongue across the crown of my engorged dick, licking away the drop of precum bubbling there.

The wet warmth of his tongue over my sensitive skin contrasts sharply with the cool night air, and my moan sounds obscenely loud in the darkness.

He runs his tongue over his lips and looks deep into my eyes. There’s lust and hopefully something more burning in his, and I feel immeasurably safe exposing myself to this man in a way I never have with anyone before. I know he’ll take care of me. I know I can trust him to lead me in this dance.

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The Concert Date

AXEL

On Saturday night, I pick up Justin at 8.30pm as promised. I bring the car. I'm pretty sure he's hoping I'll take him on the bike, but I'm not sure how happy his grandparents are about him being on the motorbike, and well, he's still in their care and living in their house, so I need to be respectful of that... up to a point, anyway. Besides, I don't really want to arrive at the hall with a hard-on from riding with Justin pressed up against me. So, car it is.

I ring the doorbell and Justin answers almost immediately.

"Hey," he greets me with sparkling eyes and a happy smile.

I give him a thorough, and very obvious, once-over. He looks cute as hell – tight jeans that hide nothing and an oversize T-shirt with cuffs in a bright orange color that contrasts with and highlights the grey of his eyes. His hair is casually mussed and he's used gel to keep it that way. All in all, cute as fuck.

"Hey, yourself." I say appreciatively. I'm sure I must have a hungry look in my eyes because he blushes and glances at the ground. "Ready to go?"

He nods.

"Heading out now. Good night," he calls out, as he pulls the door closed behind him. Before he can step away from the door, I crowd him against the brick wall, pinning

him with my body, while I kiss him slowly and thoroughly on the lips. He's warm and solid, and we're pressed so close together. He trembles against me.

I draw back. That's a much better way to say hello. Justin looks a bit dazed but not at all unhappy.

"Come on, let's go," I tell him, giving him a nudge towards the car.

He blinks back to life, the momentary daze gone.

He jumps into the car, all eager excitement, eyes bright and cheeks flushed. But then once we're underway he falls silent. The constant tapping of his fingers on the door handle bothers me. Something's wrong. I ask him a few questions about his day and I only get one- or two-word answers back.

"Dude," I turn to him as we're waiting at the traffic lights. "Are you okay?"

"Um. Yes?" he doesn't sound too sure.

"What gives? You don't normally have this much trouble talking to me."

Justin hesitates, bites his lip.

"Come on, spit it out." Then, remembering that he is four years younger – four years less experienced – than me. "What's wrong? I won't judge. Promise."

"Uh. Just nervous, I guess."

"Nothing to be nervous of. It's just a band, there'll be a crowd but it's just locals."

"I'm not a local."

“No, but you’re with me. You’ll be fine.”

“Um, but your friends will be there, right?”

“Yeah, a few. Why?”

“Just thinking that might be kind of awkward... with me being so much younger. Might not have a lot to talk about.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’ll be fine. We won’t be talking much anyway, the bands are always way loud.”

I reach across the transmission box and cover his hand with mine. “We’ll be together. It’ll be fun.” I give his hand what I hope is a reassuring squeeze.

Justin nods. After that the tapping stops and conversation flows better, though still not as easily as it usually does. And he’s got me wondering.

Am I going to have a problem with my friends?

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Interference

AXEL

I'm not happy when Jordy turns up, and I'm even less happy when I see the look he gives Justin. I don't miss the sly dig that masquerades as a regular comment. I put my arm around Justin to make sure it's clear he's taken and proceed to ignore the uncomfortable presence of my ex for the rest of the set.

When the band stops for a break, I whisper into Justin's ear, "Let's ditch these guys." Justin nods. We say goodbye and disappear into the crowd.

When we step outside, the cool night air hits our faces like an arctic blast. Inside the hall, the crush of bodies in the confined space made for a stifling hot environment, and the contrast is a welcome relief.

"Who was that guy?"

It's a reasonable question, but it makes me flinch.

"An ex," I explain. "Not that nice a guy as it turns out and he's also not happy to be an ex." I look around half expecting Jordy to have followed us out.

"The guys should have told me he was coming." Then I add, "though to be fair, I didn't tell them I was bringing anyone. Didn't think I needed to though. They know I can't stand being around him."

"Were you... were you together long?"

Axel runs a hand through his hair. "Um, a bit over a year, I guess."

"And what... it finished badly?"

"Well, yes. But he wants to get back together, so he's been doing his best to make sure I can't be with anyone else. If we hadn't left, he probably would have made a move on you. Either to piss me off or scare you away, he wouldn't care which."

Justin shudders. "Wouldn't have had any luck," he says. "There's something kinda sleazy about him. Sorry if that offends."

I laugh. "Why would that offend me?"

"Well, you must have liked him once, right? I'm kind of insulting your taste in men."

"My taste in men isn't all bad," I murmur, stepping close enough to feel the heat radiating off his body. "And it all seems like a very long time ago, and maybe I was just young and stupid. Anyway, can we drop this? I don't want tonight to be about my ex."

Justin moves in close.

"What do you want it to be about?" he asks coyly, looking up at me through his long lashes.

"You know damn well." My voice has gone gravelly. I take a quick look around, and there's no-one out here because the band has started up again. I put my hands on his hips and pull him to me and press my mouth to his. His lips part and my tongue enters his mouth and I taste the combination of Lemon, Lime & Bitters and Justin.

And it tastes wonderful. Too wonderful. And this is not the place for two guys to be making out in public.

“Do you want to go back in or should we leave?” I ask, as I reluctantly pull away from those beautiful sensual lips, already rosy and plump from our kiss.

“Ah. I need to take a piss first, but... let’s go?”

We go back inside and Justin heads to the restrooms, while I lean against the back wall, listening to the band. Deano materializes beside me, a concerned expression on his face. He looks around to make sure I’m by myself, then speaks his mind.

“Axel, what are you doing?” he asks. “Don’t you think he’s a bit young, you know, for that sort of thing?”

“What sort of...? What ?” I’m horrified. He thinks Justin is a booty call. Is that what they all think? “No, man, it’s not like that. ”

Now Deano looks even more horrified.

“You’re not serious about him, are you? Axel, he’s a kid .”

“He’s eighteen. He's older than he looks.”

“And you’re what – twenty-two? I’m serious. Be careful. Someone's gonna get hurt here.”

“No-one’s getting hurt, okay? Oh, Fuck! ” I leave Deano without finishing the conversation and head towards the restrooms. I just saw Jordy heading that way and Justin is still in there.

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

Disappearing Act

JUSTIN

I feel some disappointment that we didn't progress our physical relationship any further tonight. I know the reason, though I don't necessarily understand the why of it. Or agree with it. But whatever, Axel wants us to go slow, so we will. I can't really complain, the kissing and touching was beyond amazing, though it only stirred up my horniness more, something Axel is apparently in no hurry to do anything about. I have to take care of myself tonight! No matter. We did have a wonderful time together and I think about him as I pleasure myself in the darkness of my bedroom, secure in the knowledge I'll be seeing him again tomorrow.

Only I don't.

Sorry. Something came up. Can't make it today.

I'm disappointed when I receive Axel's text the next morning, but I try not to reflect that in my reply.

No worries. Let me know when you're free. ?

Axel doesn't reply, which is also disappointing but hey, he's just told me he's busy, so he's probably not going to be checking his phone every five minutes. Though I would totally be doing that if the roles were reversed.

Anyway, I suck it up and get on with my day. I'm not feeling like the beach this

morning, now that Axel's not coming, so I sit out in the sunroom and finish off my lorikeet. I'm almost satisfied with the way it's turned out and the way I've managed to create a 3D effect with the feathers.

By the time that's done, it's nearly lunchtime and I've run out of creative steam, so I set my artwork aside and help get ready for lunch. I spend the afternoon lying around the house, reading. I feel like I'm marking time, waiting. Which of course, I am. I'm waiting for my next chance to see Axel because right now, everything revolves around him. This is the most exciting thing to ever happen to me.

But when dinnertime rolls around, I still haven't heard from him. I try to stop myself checking my phone all the time, but it's hard. He still hasn't been in touch by the time I'm getting ready for bed. Is he just busy? Maybe he had work to do? Is something wrong? I wonder if I should message him. Would that be too much?

Before climbing into bed, I pick up my phone from the dresser and start typing him a message. Then I delete it. I try again. I hesitate and before I can press SEND, I delete the message again. The clatter of the phone as it drops back onto the dresser reflects my mood and I go to bed.

I'm still awake at midnight. I feel uneasy, but I shrug it off. It's probably just that anxiety that creeps up on you in the middle of the night and which looks foolish in daylight. I check my phone again in case I missed something, but there's still no message from Axel. I remind myself he said he was busy. I switch the phone to silent and get back into bed.

Axel doesn't text the next day either.

Or the next.

Or even the next.

By Friday, I know I won't be hearing from him.

I've never had a broken heart before, and nothing, nothing, could ever have prepared me for this gut-wrenching, soulcrushing pain. It's like being on the 20th floor when the elevator floor tumbles away uncontrolled beneath your feet, like that moment of fear just before the rollercoaster makes its downward dash, like a gut-punch from your best friend. It's like someone has a grasp of my heart and is squeezing tighter and tighter. It's every sick feeling I've ever felt and more. I'm stunned, dazed with disbelief, and my head spins with confusion and grief. We had something, right? I didn't simply imagine the whole thing?

Why would he do this? Lead me on then... nothing?

I want to throw up and I want to cry. I want to punch something and I want to scream.

But through it all, I keep my mask in place. No-one can know what is going on beneath my calm exterior. In my closet, there is no safe place to express my pain. I couldn't anyway. Even under the covers at night, the tears that streak down my face are silent, because I can't let go any more than that... the torrent would wash me away.

I thought I had found something. Clearly, I hadn't. The loss of that something I hadn't had is more devastating than I could ever imagine.

This is how a heart breaks.

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What have I done?

AXEL

I spend the week trying not to feel anything.

I shut the door on my feelings and pretend they don't exist. But I'm not terribly successful.

Each morning I wake to the same depressing feeling weighing me down. I know each day is a day I hurt Justin, and it's hard waking up to that knowledge and carrying it around with me until nighttime when I go to bed and pray that he finds peace in sleep. Because I don't.

As much as I don't want to admit it, every day is another day I hurt myself too, even though I tell myself I'm doing the right thing and for the right reasons. I keep myself busy working on some designs for a couple of my clients, but I lack inspiration and I end up tossing the half-finished jobs aside. I scarcely sleep. My nights are restless, and when I'm not tossing and turning, I lie awake for long lonely hours staring at the darkness.

I'm hurting him, and I'm hurting myself. But it was going to happen anyway, wasn't it? I'm already settled into my adult life and he's only starting to find his way. There'll be so much change for him in the next few years, he'll go in his own direction. How could he possibly know what he wants, who he wants, when he's so young? So it's better to call it quits now, rather than later, when I'd have been even more emotionally invested.

That's what I tell myself, but as each day passes and I don't feel any better, it becomes harder and harder to convince myself.

I know I've lost something - someone - special.

I suppose it was inevitable that I would run into Justin somewhere. The summer holidays are still in full swing, so he wouldn't have gone home yet, and the local community is serviced by one small village shopping centre.

It happens the day my cousin is visiting and insists I accompany her shopping. We've stopped at a boutique homewares store, when I notice him. He's standing outside a shop on the other side of the road, but even from here there is no mistaking the look of deep sadness on his face. It hurts seeing it, knowing I'm responsible. And since his misery only mirrors my own, I feel mine even more.

Just then his grandmother comes out of the shop, and I see his mask go on. A perfectly neutral, perfectly bland expression sweeps over his face, as he slides on a pair of dark sunglasses concealing the heartbreaking emotion so clearly visible moments ago when he thought no-one was watching. As the two of them walk away down the street towards the junction, I feel the weight of regret in my chest. A drummer beats a steady tattoo in my head, and for a moment the bottom falls out of my stomach. I feel sick to my core.

Melinda finishes her perusal of the beach themed homewares on offer and putting her arm around my waist, gives an affectionate squeeze.

"Come on, let's look in some of the other shops," she says, not noticing my sudden attack of feelings. "I love all this beachy stuff but I don't know if it'd really go in our house."

Melinda grew up on the beaches like me, but she married a guy from out west and moved out there years ago.

“Could be a small reminder of what you’re missing?” I suggest, forcing my lips into a smile that I know doesn't reach my eyes. It's the best I can do though.

“Yeah,” she says and pulls a glum face. I know it’s fake. She loves her husband and the connectedness of his big family and she doesn’t regret moving at all.

She takes my hand and drags me towards the village centre where there are other homewares stores waiting to sell their goods to tourists whose normal thrift has relaxed in the happy vibes of a beachside holiday. I try to focus on my cousin and her shopping, but it’s difficult, because I’m silently wallowing.

As we approach the crossroads, my heart sinks even lower. Justin has crossed over and is walking up the street towards us, alone. He doesn’t appear to have seen us yet, and like a coward I look around to see if there’s a shop we can disappear into. There isn’t.

He's not really paying attention to where he is and I think he’s going to walk right past us, when suddenly he notices us, and stops dead in his tracks. For a moment there’s nothing else in the world. Just him and me, and all the said and unsaid things between us. And four years. Four fucking years.

“Hey,” I say, in a voice half-choked by unwanted emotions.

I can't see his eyes behind his dark sunglasses, but then he looks down... at my hand still clasped in Melinda’s.

He makes a strange sound, somewhere between a sob and a choke, turns away and walks off without saying anything. I watch him as he goes, but he never looks back.

Melinda and I resume walking the other way towards the centre of town.

After a few minutes, she says, “What was that about?”

“What do you mean?” I stall, not wanting to open this Pandora’s box of emotions, the lid of which I’d been trying to keep firmly sealed.

“Don’t play dumb,” she insists. “You know exactly what I mean. That guy. What was that about?”

“Oh, nothing. Just a guy I had a thing with, but I called it off. Guess he’s not very happy with me.” I make a pretense of being dismissive.

“You called it off?” Melinda snorts in disbelief. “I would have guessed it was the other way round.”

I stare at her. “What do you mean?”

“I saw how you looked at him, cuz. I’ve never seen you look at a guy like that. Not ever.”

Fuck. She's right. I haven't felt like this over anyone before. Suddenly I can’t hold myself up, the walls that have been shielding me from my emotions crumbling. I stumble. Seeing my distress, Melinda pulls me down onto a bench seat at the side of the road.

“It was something,” I whisper, head bowed.

She continues holding my hand while I try to pull myself together, then she gently asks, “What happened, Axel? If it really was you that called it off, why’d you do it? You obviously didn’t want to.”

“He’s only eighteen,” I struggle to speak though the tears choking me. “That’s a hell of an age gap.”

“Not so much as you get older,” she points out.

“Maybe,” I say doubtfully, “but who knows their mind at eighteen?”

“Some of us do,” she insists, reminding me that she met Damien when she was sixteen, and here they are still together ten years later and happily married.

I think about that for a moment.

“There’s also the fact he’s only just turned eighteen, and I’m twenty-two. Aren’t there laws against that sort of thing?”

“Well... I don’t know. There used to be. I remember having this discussion with one of my friends back when we were in high school,” Melinda says thoughtfully, “but it might have changed now. A lot has changed.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Anyway, you know, it doesn’t have to stop you,” Melinda adds.

“What doesn’t?”

“The age thing. Does he see it as a problem?”

“Ah. I don’t know. We never talked about it.”

“Oh, well, there’s your first mistake. You’re not going to keep a relationship together if you don’t talk about the important things, especially the hard stuff.”

I sigh. Maybe I've been an idiot. Maybe I didn't need to screw up the first really good thing I've had in a long time, maybe ever.

"It's too late now. I'm pretty sure he hates me. You saw how he blew me off just then."

"I think he's hurting," she says in an infuriatingly reasonable tone. "Who wears dark glasses on a day like this?"

"Um, lots of dudes do, it looks cool?" I suggest, since now I think about it, it's not glary enough to actually need sunglasses. The weather turned colder overnight as a southerly change came through, bringing with it a heavy cloud cover.

"Is he that sort of guy?" she asks. "Into appearances?"

"No, not really. I guess I don't know him that well, but I don't think so. He's a genuine sort of guy."

"There you go then," she nods her head, knowingly. "There's another kind of person who wears sunglasses when they don't need to."

I tilt my head, waiting for her to go on.

"Someone who doesn't want anyone to see their eyes," she states emphatically. "The eyes are the mirror to the soul and all that. Or maybe he's been crying."

That gives me pause. Maybe she's right. Maybe there's a chance I haven't totally screwed this up.

"Can we drop this now?" I don't want to keep talking about it. She's given me plenty to think about.

She shrugs. And stays silent. And starts looking around for another shop to visit. I trail along with her, but I'm not thinking about shopping.

I can't help thinking about the haunted look on Justin's face when he was standing across the street thinking himself unobserved.

Now I need to go away and decide what to do about it.

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Can we come back from this?

JUSTIN

After an early dinner, we sit watching nature documentaries on the TV, just the three of us, my grandparents and me. It's all I can manage at the moment, sitting there watching the cheetah slinking through the savanna stalking its prey. The animal life and the wilderness hold my attention sufficiently that for a while I don't think about anything else. And if my mind wanders into unhappy realms, I gently tug it back to the documentary. My grandparents must know something is up, but thankfully they don't ask.

I left my phone in the bedroom while we watched TV, because the last thing I want is to be connected to the outside world. I feel like curling up into a ball, or inside a shell, or just plain bleeding all over the floor, so no, I don't want to be communicating with anyone right now. Consequently, it's not until the documentary is over and we're all calling it a night, that I slip into bed and pick up my phone and see the message.

I need to see you. Can we meet?

Why?

We need to talk

But do we really? What's the point? Explanations? Will it help me move on or will it just break my heart over again? I'm not sure I want to risk that, it's bad enough as it

is. And I'm embarrassed. I feel like such a fool. I'm unsure how to respond. Yes? No? Should I give him some of his own medicine back and ghost him?

In the end, I settle for this: I'm not sure that's necessary. Or advisable

Please

It's hard to refuse him. I want to see him, of course. I do. But I'm afraid I'll end up hurting even more than I do now. Or maybe I'll get some answers, which is better than being dumped and not understanding why. Although I think I already know why. Pretty sure I saw the reason holding his hand.

I really need to see you. Please

I'm not sure what pulls me over the line, but after five or more minutes oscillating between wanting to say yes and thinking it's a bad idea, I finally type a reply.

Ok. When?

The answer comes back immediately.

Now? I can pick you up

I was just going to bed

Please. It won't take long

I sigh, but then I decide it's better to get this out of the way now rather than stew on it all night, wondering what it is that so desperately has to be said.

Ok

Thx. Be there in 10

I toss the phone down and wonder what I've just got myself into, and how much more I can hurt. But hey, what's a few minutes more?

I reluctantly pull my shorts back on, slip on my shoes and grab a hoodie. I knock on my grandparents' door and let them know I'm going out for a few minutes. Before I have time to rethink my decision, my phone buzzes again.

I'm outside.

I take a deep breath to steady myself before I exit the house, pulling the door gently closed behind me. Axel's car is waiting in the driveway, and I open the door and slide in. I can't bring myself to look at him.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey," I reply in as neutral a tone as I can manage. My heart is pounding and I feel like I'm going to throw up. I fiddle with my seatbelt and then stare directly out the windscreen as I ask him, "Where are we going?"

"To our beach," he replies.

The 'our' hurts. We don't have a beach anymore. It's just another beach along the east coast of Australia. Anyone's beach. I swipe at a bit of moisture at the corner of my eye. I'm feeling like a kid again, a hurt kid that can't control his emotions, and I hate it.

We sit in silence as he drives. Neither of us wants to make small talk. How could we make small talk when there is this big thing between us? For once, the silence between us is not comfortable. I lean against the door and stare out the window into

the darkness, biting my lip for strength. Now I'm wondering why the fuck I agreed to this.

It takes a silent forever to reach the winding road down to the beach, the hulking shapes of the trees slash the dark as we take the bends, but eventually we crunch to a stop in the empty carpark behind the tree-lined beach. I feel sad just seeing this place again, and my stomach tenses as my anxiety ratchets up a notch. What can there possibly be left that needs to be said? And why here? This place has memories that I'd like to keep untarnished. Couldn't we have said it back in the driveway?

At this hour the Norfolk pines are dark and mysterious. Beyond them, the sand glows eerily, and the white of the breaking waves catches the moonlight. It's like a monochrome photo, a little unearthly and a little surreal. Like a sad memento of a long distant past.

The sound of the engine dies as Axel turns the key, and we're left with the haunting crash of the waves as they run to the shore, and the mournful whisper of the wind slipping through the pines. Higher up clouds scurry across the sky, occasionally breaking open to allow a glimpse of the half moon.

We sit there in silence for a beat, then Axel speaks.

"I'm sorry."

I don't say anything. What is there to say?

"I hurt you and I'm so sorry I did that."

Yeah, about that...

The light from a streetlight casts my reflection onto the glass beside me, and I stare

past it out the passenger window into the darkness. I blink a few times. And stifle a sniff. I clench my fists on the seat beside my thighs. I'm not going to humiliate myself further by crying in front of him.

"I hurt myself too," he whispers softly. "I was worried that our age difference meant we couldn't work out, but I ...I think I was wrong."

I still can't bring myself to speak.

"I want to keep seeing you," he whispers.

Why is he saying these things? I know what I saw. I keep looking out into the darkness.

"Please, Justin, please look at me."

Slowly I turn to him. I'm not just hurt, I'm also angry. In the dim light his features are pale, and his eyes dark, and I can see distress etched in the shadows on his face, but I don't understand it. When I look at him, I let my guard down for just a moment to let him see all the hurt and pain I feel.

"Don't be cruel," I snap, "I saw you with your girlfriend, and you know the kind of feelings I have for you." Then I turn away again, stare out the side window.

"Girlfriend?" Axel sounds genuinely puzzled, but I know he's faking it.

"Well, yeah, the one you were holding hands with when we ran into each other today?" My voice is harsh and cold. I'm hurting and I'm furious with him for heartlessly playing with my emotions like this.

"Oh!" he breathes a sigh. "She's not a girlfriend, she's my cousin. I don't have a

girlfriend. Justin, I'm not bisexual, I'm gay."

A tiny ray of hope slips through the bleakness of a truly shitty week, and I want desperately to cling to it. I'm so pathetic.

"I'm so sorry," Axel continues. He chokes up. "I should have spoken to you sooner." He falters.

A long silence envelopes us. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say. I'm completely out of my depth here. My world has been turned on its head and I hardly know which way is up. If this is falling in love, it sucks. It hurts and it's confusing.

Axel draws in a shuddering breath, breaking the silence.

"I like you a lot," he goes on, "and I'd like to see where this can go. If... if you want to, that is."

I know I should say something, but I'm frozen in my seat, staring out the side window. Totally still except for the tears he can't see which are streaming silently down my face.

When I don't move or respond to him, he asks, "Do you see our age difference as a problem?"

I shake my head. It's all I can manage right now.

A pause.

"Walk with me?" he asks softly.

I nod.

We get out of the car, and Axel comes to me and wraps his arms around me in a tight embrace.

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You and Me

JUSTIN

Afterwards, Axel takes me back to his house. It's the first time he's brought me here. The lights are off when we arrive and we enter the house quietly because it's likely his mother is upstairs asleep. Although he told me she doesn't mind if he brings people home, it's just polite not to be noisy.

He leads me to his bedroom. It's a simple room - queen size bed in the middle, a large window opening onto the garden. Moonlight streams in the window and across the bed. A bookshelf sits against the near wall, filled with books but uncluttered on top. There's a desk in the corner which is a jumble of art pads and art supplies. Interesting. I file it away as something new I've learnt about Axel, and it explains why he never scoffed at my interest in drawing. A notepad and pen rest on a laptop pushed to the rear of the desk. I catch a glimpse of a sketch but I can't see what the subject is.

"I'm a graphic designer," Axel tells me when he sees me looking at the untidy desk. "I mainly do freelance work."

I nod. I don't really know what a graphic designer actually does, but that's a discussion for another time.

There's also a chest of drawers against the wall, and a chair. Nothing else.

"Come here."

Axel pulls me towards the bed, and after taking off our shoes, we climb on top of it. We lie there side by side, with me on my back, and him on his side facing me. We nearly lost each other, and now we're going to take the time to reconnect and appreciate what we have. And we explore.

He touches me with gentle fingers that run down the side of my face, tracing the curves of my cheek and my jaw. He runs the pad of his thumb softly across my lips. I shiver.

Then he traces down my neck and across my shoulders. I'm still wearing my t-shirt, so I sit up and pull it over my head. Axel does the same with his. I notice that he's wearing the same neck chain again and I mean to ask him about it. But not right now, we have other more pressing matters to pay attention to. When I lie back down, he continues his way down my body.

As his fingers cruise over my shoulders, and then my pecs, I'm torn between the desire to close my eyes reveling in the tingle of his skin running over mine, and my need to watch the emotions flickering across his face as he touches me. He watches the progress of his fingers with such an intense expression, as though it's vitally important that he maps every part of my body... is this what it's like to be adored?

Then his fingers circle my nipples. He drags his fingernail over one and I gasp.

Axel chuckles, breaking the heavy mood. "Sensitive, are we?" he asks, teasingly, and gives it a tweak.

"Holy fuck!" I can't help the expletive falling from my mouth. No-one has ever touched me there and I had no idea it was an erogenous zone.

My reaction prompts Axel to lean down and suck my nipple into his mouth.

“Jesus!” My chest and abdomen are rigid, lifting off the bed, and it's hard to breathe. Well, I'm breathing, just shallow and fast. Quiet and calm has just morphed into something a lot more intense.

“You swear a lot when you're turned on,” observes Axel with a self-satisfied grin.

“I had no idea...” I groan as he continues his attack on my chest.

Now that he has me panting and writhing on the bed, he trails his fingers lower and explores my belly, but I am ticklish and I end up howling with laughter while rolling around on the bed trying to escape.

“You need to settle down or you'll get hiccups again,” Axel reminds me. It's sweet that he remembers such a small detail about me from over a week ago.

He leans down and presses a gentle kiss just below my navel. His lips are warm on the soft skin. Then he looks up at me, dark hair flopping around his face in soft waves, and I'm left breathless by the emotion shining in his dark eyes.

“Come up here,” I beg him, because as much as I love what he's doing, I want to feel his lips on mine.

He comes to me quickly and we kiss a long, hard, breathless kiss that goes on and on, tongues dancing around each other, rough surfaces rasping and rubbing, plundering and taking. It's not a gentle kiss. It's an urgent, I-nearly-lost-you kind of kiss, that says, never, ever do that again.

When eventually we break apart - which we have to because love isn't enough to keep us alive, we need, like, air as well, although at this point that seems almost irrelevant – I say, “My turn.”

"Help yourself," replies Axel, laying back on the bed, arms apart, offering himself to me.

And Axel lets me explore him the same way he did me. I trace my fingers over the hills and valleys of his muscles, from shoulders to abdomen. I can't believe I'm actually doing this, running my hands over a man - this man - his skin warm and alive, the hairs coarse beneath my fingers. My heart is racing, I can feel the pulse fluttering in my neck. I wonder if he notices the slight tremble in my hand as I venture where I've never gone before.

When I've explored my way down to the top of his shorts, I look up at him and ask, "Shorts off?"

For answer, he slides a finger down and removes them, leaving his boxers on. I scramble to do the same. I stroke the bare skin of his lower belly, and then, feeling daring but keeping an eye on his face in case he's not okay with this, skim my hand down over his boxers and over his package. His half-hard cock firms beneath my hand, and I give an exploratory rub with my palm. Heat flares in my cheeks, hesitancy and excitement warring in my chest.

Axel draws in a ragged breath. His eyes flutter closed, and his head drops back onto the pillow.

He isn't stopping me.

I stroke him again, more firmly, more confidently as I watch for his response. His cock is fully hard now. His abdominal muscles are taut and quivering, though he's holding himself very still. I ghost my lips over his erection, and even though the fabric is between us, his heat warms my lips, washes over my face. Still with the boxers in place, I wrap my lips around his crown and suck very softly.

“Ahh,” Axel moans, back arching off the bed. “You don’t have to...”

“Want to,” I murmur. “Wanted to for days. Please?”

The 'please' seems to do it and while he doesn't say anything, he slips his index finger under the waistband and tugs it down a little. I finish the job, pulling his underwear right off. Then I settle between his legs and before I take him fully in my mouth, I take a long admiring look. I've never been this close to another man's cock before. It's long and thick. The skin looks silky soft, but the shaft is firm. The engorged head is a deep purplish color. It rests against his belly in a thatch of dark hair. His balls are full, hairy and plump and I long to take one in my mouth. But not yet. He looks delicious.

I lick the shaft from root to crown, tease under the head, and run my tongue in circles over it, licking into the hole at the tip. Then I swallow him down, almost to the root, and set to stroking him using my mouth. Axel's half-gasps let me know how much he's enjoying this so I keep sucking, settling into a steady rhythm.

Axel's breathing speeds up and little grunts and moans fall from his lips as he gets more and more excited. He thrusts into my mouth a little and I get the sense that he's trying to hold back but it's difficult. I keep pace with his thrusts but when the thrusts are coming fast enough and his groans are loud enough that I think he's close to coming, I pull off.

Axel whimpers in protest. And then groans as I take one of his balls completely in my mouth and roll it around with my tongue, while I gently tug the other one with my fingers.

“Oh, fuck ,” he moans raggedly.

I swap over, and when I've sucked on both balls, I go back to sucking his dick. The tempo of his thrusts changes as he approaches climax, the thrusts are still small as he

tries not to make me gag, but they speed up and then the rhythm starts to stutter. He's about to lose control and I love that I've done this to him.

"Gonna come..." he warns, but I'm not interested in pulling off. I want his cum. I want him to explode in my mouth and I want to swallow his load. I want to taste him. His hard cock fills my mouth and I love being like this with him. His muscles tense and his body goes rigid. And then I feel the hot spurt of cum across my tongue, and taste the bitter, salty essence of him as I swallow him down, and it's perfect.

"Oh, my god. You are amazing."

Axel is sprawled on the bed, totally wiped out.

"Really?" I ask. I am pretty pleased with myself. It's the first blowjob I've ever given, so I'm both relieved and proud that Axel enjoyed it.

"Yes! My god, you have no idea," he whispers. "That was fantastic."

Then he eyes me speculatively.

"Um, so maybe you're a bit more experienced than I thought you were?"

I blush. Nothing but honesty.

"No. That was... the first time," I admit.

Axel gives me a penetrating look with those striking brown eyes of his. For a minute he says nothing, then he shakes his head as if he's not sure he believes me.

He pulls me on top of him and licks the outline of my lips, and we start kissing again. Axel puts his hands on my ass and presses me hard against him. My hard dick presses into his belly. His hand slides between us, inside my boxers, and he wraps my cock in his long fingers and gives a couple of slow strokes. A low groan escapes my kiss-bruised lips as I press into his hand, seeking more pressure, and thrust my hips upwards. Axel pulls his hand away.

“Take your boxers off,” he instructs, his voice firmer than usual, “and sit on the end of the bed.”

His demanding tone sends a tingle down my spine and I shiver in anticipation as I drop my boxers on the floor and settle myself on the end of the bed. I’m trembling, excited for whatever he’s going to do.

Axel gets up and comes to stand in front of me. He nudges my legs apart, and when I let them fall open, he shocks me by sinking to his knees between them.

He softly strokes my inner thighs with his fingers while I watch him in fascination, my thighs quivering. He is mouth-watering, his muscular chest naked in front of me, skin smooth and tanned, and nipples with dark areolas. Dark brown wavy hair, sunbleached into a myriad of golden colors from hours in the surf, frames his face, and he looks sweaty and disheveled. His tanned cheeks are tinged pink and his pupils are blown wide.

“May I?” he asks me, eyes fixed on mine. I find it incredibly sexy how he alternates between dominance and gently seeking consent.

“Yes,” I whisper on an exhale. With you, for you, anything.

And I wonder, how have I fallen this far?

The truth is, when you fall for the very first time, you fall all the way.

Axel takes my cock in his hand and strokes it a couple of times before lowering his mouth and swiping his tongue over the crown. Pre-cum oozes from the tip, and I'm already so turned on I'm afraid I'm going to embarrass myself by coming before he even gets going.

I grit my teeth and try to stay in control.

Axel takes me fully into his mouth, but he's in no hurry and he sucks me slowly and lazily, maintaining eye-contact the whole time. The visual impact of Axel on his knees between my thighs, with my straining cock in his mouth is almost too much. I'm ashamed of the whimper that comes out of my throat. My hips give a small thrust and I try to hold still but it's hard.

Axel lets my cock slip from his mouth.

"Fuck my mouth," he urges me. "I can take it."

I moan at the dirtiness of his words, and when he takes me into the warm heat of his mouth again, I surrender and start thrusting as he sucks. His dark head bobs up and down as he works me, and my thrusts grow harder, deeper, faster. I can't think over the pounding in my ears, the thudding in my chest. I can only feel, my mind spiraling away as I lose myself to the sensations he's heaping upon me. I pant, moaning shamelessly as he takes me deep, time and time again, until my rhythm starts to falter, I feel the inevitability as my orgasm rushes towards me like a freight train.

"Coming," I warn him urgently, but he doesn't pull off, just keeps on sucking while I shatter and come hard, shooting long spurts of cum in his mouth. He swallows down my entire load.

I collapse in a trembling boneless heap on the mattress, while Axel licks me clean.

“Oh my god, you’re so responsive,” he says, getting up onto the mattress with me and pressing his lips to mine. I taste myself on his lips, and I shiver.

“And you’re so good at that...” I gasp, when he releases my mouth. I feel completely out of it, awash with endorphins and floating away on a cloud of pleasure.

“Come up here.” I'm pretty sure he's sucked all the energy out of me and I can't move, but Axel helps me further up the bed until my head is on the pillow. Then he pulls the quilt over us and lies behind me, spooning me, with his head on the pillow beside mine and his arm around my waist holding me close.

He nuzzles the back of my neck just below the hairline and drops a few kisses there.

“You’re amazing,” I murmur, moments before I fall into a deep, exhausted sleep.

When I wake, the sky is already starting to pale with the imminent dawn. A couple of birds call. I’m warm and peaceful and...

“Oh shit!”

I sit bolt upright, shedding sleep in alarm. Beside me, Axel stirs.

He blinks at me sleepily.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“It’s morning! I should be home.”

Axel rolls over, picks up his phone and checks the time.

“It’s 4.30,” he murmurs, still half-asleep. “That’s not morning. It’s still night. Come back to bed.”

He moves to pull me to him. I resist.

“Axel, I have to get home,” I say urgently.

“What? Why?” he says drowsily. And then, his eyes open wide as he wakes up properly and suddenly registers our situation.

“Oh fuck. I forgot. You’re expected home at night, aren’t you?”

I nod.

“I’m sorry,” he says, sitting up, the quilt dropping to his lap and his magnificent abs on display. He cups my face in his hands and kisses me.

“I really do forget your age,” he murmurs against my lips.

I take that as a compliment and a sign that this thing between us can be real, but I’m worried about my grandparents finding out I didn’t come home. That will lead to questions... and I don’t want to have to lie, but the truth is not an option either.

I scramble out of bed and pull on some clothes. Axel does too, though he does it with more grace than I do, and with less of the panicked gazelle and whites-of-the-eyes approach than I’ve taken.

He checks he’s got his keys and we exit his room.

And freeze.

Axel's mother is on the couch in the living room. She's wide awake, a mug in her hand, the rich scent of brewed coffee in the air.

This is awkward.

She looks at me. Then she looks at Axel. She has a strange look on her face, and I don't know her well enough to decipher it. But Axel has told me she's cool with him having people stay over. Just maybe, not her husband's employer's grandson?

"Hi Mum," Axel says, after a brief hesitation.

"Good morning, Axel," she says, with emphasis on the 'morning'. Then she looks at me and nods, "Justin."

"Um, hi," I stammer.

"I'm just dropping Justin home," Axel tells her, heading for the door.

"I'll talk to you when you get back," she says.

Axel and I don't look at each other until we reach the safety of his car.

Then we burst into fits of laughter. Then sober.

"That was embarrassing," I tell him.

"Sorry," he says, looking a bit chagrined.

"I thought you said your mum was cool with you, you know, having guys over?"

“Yeah, she is. Usually. I’ll talk to her when I get home.”

Then a horrible thought occurs to me.

“Um, Axel. She won’t say anything, will she? To my grandparents, I mean.”

“No, she wouldn’t do anything like that. She’s got a gay son, she knows you can’t assume that someone is out, or even if they are, that they’re out to everyone.”

I’m still worried, and it must show on my face, because Axel gives my thigh a reassuring squeeze, “If it makes you feel better, I’ll tell her you’re not out yet. She won’t out you, no matter what she feels about you staying over.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you think your grandparents will be up yet?”

“I don’t know. They usually get up around 6am, I think. Unless they can’t sleep.”

“Let’s hope they haven’t broken their routine today then.”

"Why does your mum even get up so early? I nearly had a heart attack when I saw her!"

"Oh, she does yoga on the beach at sunrise several days a week. It must be one of those days," Axel tells me as he pulls into my grandparents' driveway. "I'd forgotten about that. But seriously, it's not a problem. I'm allowed to have anyone I want stay over."

"Just so long as she doesn't say anything..." I frown.

“Don't worry, she won't. Want me to drive down to the house?” he asks.

“No. The sound of the car might wake them. And anyway, I want to be able to say goodbye properly.”

Axel puts the transmission in Park and turns the engine off. Undoing my seatbelt, I climb up on the seat and throw a leg over him, straddling him. Our faces are close enough for our noses to bump and I search his eyes. I see nothing but happiness and affection.

Leaning in, I close the gap and softly press my lips to his, which respond to my silent request and open for me. My tongue licks into his mouth, and we share the taste of each other, breathe the same air, and I try to show him with my kiss how much he means to me.

When we break apart, we're both panting, and yes, we're both hard. Axel slides his hand over my crotch.

“Think of me when you take care of this?”

“Of course.”

Reluctantly, and a few kisses later, I head down the drive. I enter the house quietly using my front door key. No-one is stirring. With a sigh of relief, I make it to my room without alerting anyone to my late arrival home, and I tumble into bed.

I have a ton of beautiful memories that make me smile as I remember everything that has happened over the last few hours. I'm ridiculously happy and I've never been so excited for the future as I am right now.

I slide my hand into my boxers and think of Axel as I comply with his last request,

and then drift off to sleep with a smile on my lips.

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

Reality Check

AXEL

I'm not exacting bouncing when I walk in the door after returning from dropping Justin home. Mainly because I don't tend to show my emotions all that much. But I'm on a definite high and I feel so light. I've made up with my boyfriend – although we haven't talked about it, he is my boyfriend now – and he's forgiven me for my cowardly disappearing stunt, and I am so excited and optimistic . The sun is rising, the birds are calling, and I have a stunning, cute, sexy boyfriend who I'm really into, and who is really into me. Age difference be damned, it doesn't matter. We are so good together, I don't even notice it. We only parted ten minutes ago, but I can't wait to see him again.

I am so happy.

Which makes it all the more confusing to find my mother waiting for me in a fury.

“What were you thinking?” she demands, the minute I step into the house.

“W-What do you mean?” She's caught me off guard. My head is all fuzzy with endorphins and she's in a rage. It makes no sense.

“The Beecham's grandson. What the hell do you think you're doing?”

“We... went out last night.”

“And he slept over?”

“Um, yes. You don’t usually have a problem with that,” I reply cautiously. “What’s the big deal?”

“The ‘big deal’ is that you’re messing with the grandson of your dad’s boss,” she accuses me angrily.

“Whoa!” I hold my hands up, trying to calm her down. “I’m not messing around. I’m seeing him. This is serious. We like each other.”

“It doesn’t matter how much you like each other. Not only because of who he is, but also because he’s still in school. And you’re twenty-two, for heaven’s sake!”

“Mum, we don’t care about that. He doesn’t. I don’t. We get along just fine.”

“I’m sure it’s illegal. And anyway, you just can’t. He’s out-of-bounds – you can’t sleep with or even date him. I don’t know what you were thinking.”

I’m gobsmacked. How dare she tell me who I can and can’t date?

“I’m not going to stop seeing him,” I insist, starting to walk away.

“You must. Your father will be livid when he finds out.”

I stop walking. I turn around.

“Then he’d better not find out. You can’t tell him. Or anyone. Justin isn’t out yet. And he’s told me his family would not be accepting.”

“All the more reason to stop seeing him,” she says, “as if there weren’t enough

already.”

I turn and walk away. There’s no point in arguing. She won’t out him. And I won’t stop seeing him. I hope that by letting her have the last word, she thinks she’s won the argument and lets the subject drop. I’m not going to fight with her, but I’m also not going to let go of the best thing that’s ever happened to me. It’s my life, not my parents’, and as long as Justin chooses me, then this is what we’re doing. I’m not letting go of him again.

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

Sydney

JUSTIN

The morning is well advanced by the time I wake up for the second time today.

I stretch and lie in bed listening to the sound of the surf crashing on the shore, the currawongs calling to each other, the cicadas trilling in the bush. The sounds of summer.

Memories of last night rush back to me and I can't help but smile. Life is good. I lie there and think of the beautiful brown-haired man who has my blood racing and my heart singing. It's only hours since we parted, and I can't wait to see him again.

And I don't have to wait long. At 11am, Axel knocks at the front door, asking if I want to go for a swim.

"We're going to the beach," I tell my grandparents. "Don't worry about me for lunch."

"Enjoy yourselves, boys," replies my grandma, no doubt totally pleased that I've got a friend to hang out with. I can't help feeling the tiniest bit guilty, as they wouldn't be so happy if they knew the true nature of the friendship. But no-one's telling them, so...

Axel grins at me when we get in his car.

“Good morning ,” he smirks.

“Mmm. It’s a very good morning,” I can’t help the big fat smile on my face. “It was a very good night too.”

“Yes, it was.” Axel looks around, and as there’s no-one in sight, hazards leaning across and planting a kiss on my cheek.

“I’m sorry I was such an idiot,” he says.

“Shh. We’re past that now. Let’s just have fun.”

“Fun is my middle name,” he says suggestively.

“Really? You gonna prove that or are you all talk?”

“Well…” he makes a gesture that says is this really where you want me to prove it?

“Okay. Fair point. You get a raincheck then.”

“Thought you’d see things my way,” Axel chuckles. Then he adds, “Do you want to see a movie tonight? There’s a small cinema down at the shopping village. We could check out what’s on.”

“Sure. Can’t promise I won’t fall asleep in the movie though if we’ve been out in the sun all day.”

This is Axel’s life, so he’s probably immune to the effects of sun and fresh air all day long, but I’m not. At home, I spend most of my time indoors studying, and so much unaccustomed outdoor time makes me sleepy.

“Don’t worry,” Axel’s smug grin re-appears, and he says in a flirty tone, “Pretty sure I can find ways of keeping you awake.”

“Promises, promises.” My own flirty grin is so wide it’s going to crack my face open if I can’t get control of it. “C’mon let’s get going before my grandparents come out to ask why we’re still sitting out here in the car.”

The corner of Axel’s mouth curls up, and I think he’s going to make some smartass reply, but he doesn’t say anything, just turns on the car – no, I mean, turns me on, starts the car – puts the transmission in Drive and we head off up the driveway.

Instead of going to the beach below my grandparents’ house, he takes me to the secluded beach we’ve been to a few times now – our beach. It occurs to me that he’s thought this through, because as we lie on our towels on the sand and Axel’s hand gently strokes up and down my body, we don’t have to worry about being accidentally discovered by my grandparents if they unexpectedly decide they want to go to the beach for a swim.

I roll onto my side and admire the gorgeous man on the towel beside mine, his hand warm on my skin as he lazily runs his fingers over me.

I haven’t been in this situation before, and I’m uncertain what we are to each other.

“Are we... are we dating?” I ask hesitantly, hating the uncertainty that creeps into my voice. I wish I was more sophisticated and confident, like he is.

“Yes,” Axel inches closer. “Yes, we are. You’re my boyfriend.” And he gives me a look that makes me blush, and I lower my eyes. “If that’s okay with you.”

“More than,” I whisper.

“Good.”

I love this, but there’s still a great big ‘but’ looming up ahead. I could ignore it, I suppose, and maybe that would be the smartest thing to do, rather than push things now and possibly unsettle what we’ve got here. But I kind of need to know if we’re building something or just playing... I need to set my expectations, so I don’t get in over my head. Ha! As if I’m not already.

“Um. So, you already know I’m going home in a couple of weeks... ah, so, just wondering how you see this. Is it just a thing for the summer, or... does it continue on after? It, um, it... doesn’t change anything, but it would just be, you know, kind of helpful to know.”

Enough . I stop rambling.

He looks at me for what feels like a long time, but probably isn’t. He reaches across and tucks a stray hair back off my face. It wasn't bothering me and it wasn't in my eyes, so I think he just wants to touch me.

“Trying not to get hurt too much?” he asks gently.

“Something like that,” I mumble, “But either way, I’m still in.”

“I think we’ve got something real here,” Axel says, gazing at me with that look in his eye. “If I said, just the summer and then see, you wouldn’t be all in, would you?”

“Probably not 100%,” I admit, biting my lip and afraid to look him in the eyes.

“That’s what I thought. Might be hard, being long-distance, but I want to keep it going. What about you? What do you want?”

“I want to keep going,” I admit, “I really like you. But I don’t know how we’d do it, being in different states. You’ll probably get bored waiting for me to grow up and get a life...”

Axel laughs, a sort of self-deprecating laugh, like I’ve got things all wrong.

“You’re about to have some huge changes in your life... finishing school, going to uni, meeting all those new exciting people. There’s a good chance you’ll forget about this when all that gets going. I think I’m the one at risk here,” he finishes, voice catching.

I suddenly realize he feels vulnerable. Like he believes there’s a real risk of me ditching him. And that it would genuinely hurt him. And yet he’s still willing to take that chance. The knowledge warms my heart but also makes me rush to reassure him.

“Not a chance. I know how I feel about you. I’d wait for... whenever we can be together. I can handle being apart, I don’t think I could handle not having you.”

“Me neither,” Axel admits, and taking my hand in his, kisses the back of my knuckles. “So, all in then, both of us?”

“Yes, all in,” I whisper.

And right there on the beach, in full public view, he leans across and kisses me on the lips. And then because it’s been a heavy, if worthwhile and necessary conversation, by unspoken agreement we jump to our feet and race each other into the surf.

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

Sydney

JUSTIN

Axel picks me up in the evening. We've only been apart a couple of hours and already I'm missing him like crazy and wondering what he's doing.

What he has been doing, is showering, shaving and dressing up for going out. If he's dressed to impress, then he's hit the mark. I'm totally salivating when I see him, and desperate to get my hands on him. Fuck, how can all this masculine perfection be mine? I don't know. I'm nothing special; too young, too slim, too quiet, but for some strange reason that appeals to Axel and there's no way I'm going to point out to him that he could do way better.

Of course, it's always possible he'll come to that realization himself eventually, but I don't want to think about that.

When he comes to collect me, he's careful not to stand too close or pay me too much attention, keeping it very definitely in the 'friend zone' while we're within sight of my family. But once the car is away from the house, he pulls over, kills the engine and pulls me in for a scorching kiss.

As his tongue plunders my mouth, my hands are everywhere, sliding under his shirt, my fingers tingling as I touch his bare skin.

We're both breathing heavily when we pull apart. Axel's face is flushed and his pupils dilated.

“Can’t do this here,” Axel mutters. “I’m going to put my back out twisting like this.”

I bite my lip and cast a glance at the back seat. Axel shakes his head.

“No. I didn’t bring you here just for this. I want to go out with you. Movie first.”

“And after?”

“I’m sure we’ll think of something.”

Fifteen minutes later, we arrive at the movies and queue for our tickets. Axel refuses to let me pay my share.

“I invited you,” he says, “let me pay. Besides I’m working and you’re still a student.” And then he adds, speaking close to my ear so no-one else can hear, “And there’s no expectations, okay? I’m not expecting you to put out just because I paid, ever. Anything we do, I want it to be because you want to, not because you feel obligated.”

“Thanks, and yeah, I know.”

“Good. You can always say no, or stop me anytime, doesn’t matter what we’re doing, or how far we’ve gone.”

“Thank you for saying it, but I trust you. I don’t feel like we’re unequal or you’d push me into something I don’t want to do. Hell, you’re the one who keeps pulling back!”

“Yeah... it’s just the age thing,” Axel admits sheepishly. “I don’t want that to become a problem for us.”

“It won’t. I promise I’ll speak up if it does.”

Axel takes my hand as we walk into the darkened cinema. We find a couple of seats off by ourselves and settle in for the movie. We hold hands the whole two and a half hours, and there might be a few kisses exchanged, but we keep it PG and we do actually manage to watch the movie. Most of it, anyway.

The storyline is intriguing and the actors convincing, and afterwards we discuss the plot at length. We're so wrapped up in our own little world that we don't notice we're the only ones still there until the ushers start cleaning up the seats around us. We look at each other and have a little laugh at ourselves, as we hurry to get out of there.

"Dinner?" asks Axel, as we get in his car.

Before I can answer, my stomach makes a weird gurgling noise, which is a little embarrassing.

"Guess that's a yes," chuckles Axel. "Do you like pizza? There's a decent pizza restaurant in the village."

"I love pizza!" I reply. I really do like pizza, but to be fair, anything he suggests will be greeted with the same level of enthusiasm. I'm just happy to be with him.

Axel grins. "Me too. Pizza it is then."

Ten minutes later, Axel pulls into a street parking. The glow from the bulb lights around an old-fashioned box sign up ahead catch my attention. They announce 'Marino's Pizza Restaurant'. As we walk up to it, I take note of the small wooden tables set up on the pavement, tricolor umbrellas open over each table and foldout chairs around each one. The tables are set with red table linen, and each has a candle in a jar and a small vase with a plastic flower in it.

Colored lights are strung between the umbrellas and along the restaurant windows,

imbuing a jaunty, cozy atmosphere.

“Sweet,” I exclaim, looking around. It looks inviting.

“Where do you want to sit - inside or outside?”

The evening is warm and the sea breeze has dropped right off since darkness fell. It’s a beautiful night, perfect for eating outside.

“Outside sounds great.”

We seat ourselves at a table, and order soft drinks while we select our pizzas.

“Do you come here often?” I ask Axel, once our order has been taken. Then I laugh, realizing what I've said.

"Oh. That sounds like a pick up line, doesn't it?"

Axel chuckles. "It does, but not one I'm likely to use. It's too much of a cliché."

"So what do guys of your generation use as a pick up line then?"

"First... quit with the 'your generation' stuff - I'm not an old man, okay? A-n-d secondly, it's not really a line I like to use, but most of my friends just go up to people and say 'wanna fuck?' "

"Are you serious?"

Axel nods, lips twisting and nose wrinkling. I can tell he's not that impressed.

"And, does it get results?" I can't believe it would. But maybe sometimes just asking

for what you want is the shortest route to getting it.

Axel laughs. "Surprisingly, yes, sometimes. Mainly at parties though, where everyone's a bit buzzed. It's not my pickup technique, I promise."

"What's your technique?"

"I just pickup dudes on the beach," he replies. My eyes go so wide I probably look like a cartoon character, and I pretty much have to pick my jaw up off the table.

"Chill, dude," he says, "I'm just joking. You're the only one I've done that with."

Phew . For a minute there I actually believed him.

"I don't really have a line or technique or whatever," he goes on. "If I meet someone somewhere and we get along, we usually just agree to meet up again. Pretty casual. I've only had a couple of boyfriends."

I don't really want to get into a conversation about his previous boyfriends, because there's a little green-eyed monster that dwells inside me apparently, every time I think of Axel with someone else. So I redirect the conversation back to where we were before the detour.

"So, I'll ask it differently this time... how familiar are you with this pizza place?"

"I often get pizza here, but usually to take home. And I've been coming here for years. The owners are Italian and the pizzas are to die for."

"I'm expecting one helluva pizza then," I tell him.

A comfortable silence falls between us, and we smile and smirk at each other.

Then Axel takes my hand across the table and begins stroking it with his thumb. I'm surprised he's being this open with his affection in public.

"Um, how well do you know them here?" I ask, looking pointedly at our joined hands.

Axel smiles. "Well enough. I dated Giovanni, their son, for a while. He's one of the cooks."

I'm not sure how I feel about this bit of information. It feels kind of weird to be sitting here holding hands while his ex is right there.

"Oh. Isn't it awkward then, coming here for pizza?"

"Nah. We didn't date for long and it was pretty casual. We're still friendly. He's a good guy, and he's chill. And it's a safe place to come if you're out."

Axel points out the rainbow sticker in the front window, right next to the images of the credit cards welcome here.

"Huh, that's cool."

"Yeah, ever since we found out we were hosting World Pride here, a lot of places have started doing it."

We fall silent for a while, and then a sudden thought hits me.

"Oh, I forgot to ask...was your mum cool with me staying over or...?"

Axel doesn't answer straight away, which makes me anxious. What will it mean if his mother doesn't approve?

Axel sighs.

“Not really. It’s not you though... it’s because of my dad working for your grandfather.”

“Oh.” I can see how that could cause a problem. I wonder if this changes things.
“So... what does this mean for us? Are we still...?”

Axel squeezes my hand. “...all in? Yes, we are.” He gives me a big smile, like he’s excited to be doing this and nothing is going to stop him. “It doesn’t change anything for me. Other than, you know, we’ll just have to be discreet at home.”

He frowns. “I don’t like having to hide our relationship,” he says. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m not out anyway, so it doesn’t matter. Um, she won’t say anything to my grandparents though, will she?”

“Not a chance. Don’t worry. She’s worried they’ll find out. I think it was pretty obvious the day we came over for lunch that your family’s... um...”

“Just say it,” I sigh, picking at the plastic table cover. “Homophobic.”

I must look sad, because Axel gives my hand a little tug to get me to look at him.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he tells me. “Some families are like that. We’ll deal, okay?”

I nod, grateful for his support and glad that he’s not letting it stand in our way.

“It won’t be forever. And it’s only when we’re around our families that we have to hide it, the rest of the time...” he pauses here to lift my hand to his lips and kisses it, “we don’t. And I’m proud to be with you.”

That gives me a lot of mushy feelings inside that I don't really know what to do with, and I blush madly and can't help squirming in my seat.

“You're so cute when you get all shy,” Axel laughs, but I see a hunger in his eyes which makes even more blood rush to my face. As well as to other places.

I'm proud to be with him too and all these good feelings fluttering around inside me might just cause my chest to explode. I know I'm new at this, but I really feel this is something special.

After dinner, we walk along the beach. It seems like wherever you are around here, there's a beach nearby. It's dark as there's no moon yet, and we're the only ones down here. It's so easy walking together like this. Axel has his arm around me, and I'm sure he must feel the pounding of my heart through my chest, because my heart is beating really, really fast.

He stops and pulls me into a kiss. I run my hands up under his shirt, over his abdomen and up over his chest. I still can't believe he lets me touch him like this. My heart feels like it's going to beat out of my chest and I breathe shallowly.

Axel's lips move against mine, gentle but firm, and when my lips part for him, his tongue presses into my mouth and tangles with mine. The kiss grows more urgent until we're literally devouring each other. I want this kiss to last forever and yet I want more.

I push my hips into his, and our cloth-covered cocks rub up against each other. One of us moans, I'm not sure who. Axel puts his large hands on my ass and pulls me in tighter, and we start to grind against each other.

One of Axel's hands leaves my ass and we pull apart slightly as he slides it down inside the front of my shorts and takes my straining cock in his hand, giving it a lazy

stroke.

“Fuck!” I gasp, thrusting into his hand.

“Oh god, you feel so good,” Axel murmurs, his lips against my forehead, as he gently strokes my shaft and runs his thumb up over the crown.

“Want you,” I whisper, voice cracking.

I suppress the whimper of protest that rises from my throat when Axel withdraws both his hands from me. There’s a rustle of clothing as Axel pulls his shorts down below his hips and his magnificent cock springs out. He pulls the drawcord loose on mine, tugs them down, spits in his hand and takes both his cock and mine together in his warm hand and begins to stroke.

I should be embarrassed at the unintelligible moans that fall from my mouth, but I’m beyond thinking. My awareness extends no further than our joined cocks and the rough stroke of Axel’s hand up and down our lengths, the slide of silky skin over our hard shafts. My hips thrust in time with his hand.

Axel groans.

We lean into each other and he takes my mouth again with his own, and the feel of his tongue exploring my mouth is both intimate and demanding. The intimacy of our joined mouths and our cocks rubbing together in Axel’s tight grip, is overwhelming, and I feel my orgasm rushing towards me. I surrender and let the waves of pleasure roll through me and I’m half-sobbing, half-moaning as I come.

Axel follows me over the edge, long spurts of cum shooting over his hand and into the space between us. We collapse against each other, wrung out and gasping. I hold Axel tight around his waist, and he slides his arms around my shoulders and pulls me

against his chest. I feel his heart pounding against my chest, the ragged expansion and contraction of his ribcage. He rests his head on mine, as we stand there with the world spinning and we try to recover from the intensity of the moment we've just shared. Axel kisses my head repeatedly and murmurs something, which I can't understand at first.

"Mmm?" I query.

"Mine," he says gruffly.

I smile.

"Yes. I'm yours."

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

Sydney

AXEL

We knew it was coming, and we tried to ignore it as long as we could. But suddenly, it can't be ignored any more.

Justin is going home to Melbourne tomorrow.

We've spent nearly every day of the last two weeks together – mostly at the beach, sometimes lounging around watching movies at his grandparents' house (strictly no touching while there's anyone else at home, except for maybe sneaking the occasional kiss when we're sure no-one would walk in on us) or hanging out at mine when my parents are out.

We've spent a lot of evenings together too. We've had dinner out, seen movies, had quiet, very platonic dinners at the Beecham's house and even the occasional night visit to the beach.

But now it's over.

I want to go out to dinner with him, but Justin tells me it's customary for him to spend the last evening of his holidays with his grandparents and any change might arouse suspicion. He manages to wrangle me an invitation to dinner however.

I arrive on my motorcycle in my black leathers. I know Justin finds them sexy as hell, and right now I want to do everything I can to ensure I'm firmly in his mind when

he's gone.

Dinner is more subdued than usual, the prospect of Justin's imminent departure weighing on everyone. I can see how much his grandparents enjoy having him visit and that they'll be sad to see him go. I can't help thinking it would be so much better if he could be his authentic self around them, but he's told me that's a no-go. Would they love him less if they knew? I think even the most loved of us are afraid of that when we come out. Sadly, for some it's the case.

Suddenly Justin says to his grandparents, "I'm thinking I might come up again in the next school holidays. Would that be okay?"

Mrs. Beecham smiles widely, suddenly looking a lot cheerier.

"Yes, of course it would, dear," she responds happily, "we'll be here, and you're always welcome."

Justin shoots me a quick look across the dinner table. The hint of a smile plays at the corner of my mouth, though I try not to be too obvious. He can tell from the look in my eyes how much I like this idea, though.

"When's that? March? April? The beach is still decent at that time of year. Look me up if you want some company," I say, trying to maintain a steady face and not give away how delighted I am.

"April." Justin flashes me his shy smile. The one that makes me melt. Yeah, he's cute and sexy and gorgeous. I'm going to miss not having him around.

After dinner we sit and talk for a while, until Justin's grandparents decide to call it a night.

“It’s only 8.30 and it’s my last night,” Justin tells his grandmother. “It feels way too early to go to bed.”

Then he turns to me. “Do you want to stay a bit longer, maybe watch a movie?”

“Sure. Or we could go down to the village and see what’s happening maybe?”

“Yeah, that could be fun.”

Justin turns to his grandparents and says, “We might go out. Don’t wait up for me...it could be a late one.”

“Don’t get in any trouble,” she cautions him.

“Don’t worry, Mr. and Mrs. Beecham, I’ll make sure he’s safe.”

That seems to placate his grandparents and they bid us goodnight. After they retire for the night, Justin and I look at each other and grin.

“Let’s go!”

Justin grabs a couple of things and then drags me out the door.

“Ooh! I get another ride on this beast,” he’s almost salivating over my motorcycle as we get ready to mount it.

I nearly say something completely inappropriate but I bite my tongue in time. No need to get ahead of myself.

We helmet up, get on the bike, and take off. We go for a long cruisy ride around the curves and down around the beaches, enjoying the feeling of freedom and being

together. Justin is warm against my back and his arms around me feel so good. As wonderful as it feels, there's a heaviness weighing on my heart, but I shove the feeling down deep. Time enough for that later.

We ride all the way to the village and of course we both have hard-ons by the time we're getting off the bike. But we're not shy with each other anymore and there's no one around to see, so we share a smile, a quick kiss, and don't worry about it.

As it's a midweek night, not much is open.

"Gelato?" I suggest as we walk along the deserted street. "The pizza restaurant should still be open."

"Okay," Justin smiles as I take his hand. His fingers feel delicate, his skin softer than mine.

The restaurant is just around the corner and sure enough, when we get there the lights are on although there are no customers left.

As we enter, Justin drops my hand.

"Is that your ex?" he whispers, a slight dip of his head in the direction of Gio whose mass of black curls obscures his face as he busily wipes down the counter.

"Mm-hm," I confirm as I step toward the counter. For a minute I can't decide whether to take his hand again. I don't want him feeling insecure about my exes. He has nothing to worry about! And Gio was hardly a boyfriend, anyway.

At the last moment, I decide not to. Justin's not out and the township is small.

"Hey, Axel!" Gio greets me looking up, finally noticing he has customers.

"Hey, Gio," I reply, leaning in so we can kiss each other on the cheek. "Are we too late? Are you still serving? We were hoping to get some gelato."

"I'm cleaning up for the night, but I'll serve you anytime," he winks at me saucily.

"This is Justin," I say, waving my hand towards Justin who's standing there awkwardly, a couple of lines disturbing his brow.

"Hey, Justin," Gio nods and runs his eyes appreciatively all over Justin, and I prickle a little. I don't say anything though. This is just Gio. I'm used to his flirting and he does it with everyone... male, female, young or old. It's part of his persona and I guess it helps sell to customers, but it feels a little different when it's my boyfriend he's flirting with.

"What do you want?" I put my hand on Justin's shoulder and steer him towards the refrigerated cabinet where all the stainless steel tubs with their colorful contents form a kaleidoscope of colors.

Justin's eyes flicker over the selection. Finally he looks up with a touch of pink in his cheeks.

"Just a ball of mango in a cone," he says. I admire that he's looking Gio straight in the eyes as he gives his order, despite the red stain creeping up the back of his neck.

"And I'll have strawberry. In a cone," I tell Gio.

Despite our requests, Gio piles two balls of gelato onto each cone, smashing the top ball down with the back of the scoop so it won't fall off.

I raise an eyebrow at him as he places them in the plastic holder on top of the counter while I pull out my wallet to pay.

He shakes his head. "My treat tonight. I can't have you telling people Gio only gave you one ball to lick."

A soft snort beside me is hurriedly stifled.

"Jesus, Gio. You never stop, do you? But, thanks," I replace my wallet in my pocket. Justin hands me my gelato and we move towards the door.

"For you, anything," Gio singsongs and blows me a kiss.

I shake my head and walk out the door, Justin trotting after me.

"Sorry about that," I apologize.

"Is he always like that?" Justin asks.

"Yeah, pretty much. He's a bit of a shit-stirrer. He doesn't mean anything by it though. I think he has a girlfriend at the moment."

Justin raises his eyebrows.

"He's bisexual," I tell him. "Out and proud."

"Okay. Just so long as he's not still into you. I wasn't sure."

I shook my head. "Nah, we're mates now. Like I told you, it was a pretty casual thing."

He drops the subject, which I'm glad of because I don't want the evening to be about Gio.

We walk around the quiet streets, looking in the windows of the closed shops, gazing up at the stars, feeling the breeze as it ruffles through our hair. The air is warm, and it still feels like summer.

I appreciate a little too late that maybe ice-cream wasn't such a good idea. Watching Justin's tongue sweeping over the cone and his lips sliding over the top of it, is highly distracting. And because it's warm, the ice-creams melt faster than we can eat them. Justin has a trickle of gelato running down his hand. I catch hold of his wrist.

"Your ice-cream's making a run for it," I tell him. "Let me help you with that."

Before he can say anything, I lick the runaway sweetness off the side of his hand.

"Ooh," Justin shivers as my tongue slides over his skin. He nearly drops his cone when I playfully suck two of his fingers into my mouth.

He narrows his eyes at me.

"There wasn't any ice-cream on those."

I half-smirk, half-smile, but say nothing.

"Two can play at that," he mutters, holding his ice-cream out to the side and stepping right in close. Stretching up on his toes, he leans towards me and his tongue gives a leisurely lick at the corner of my mouth. The heat of his body close to mine and the wet slide of his tongue against my lips stirs me down south.

"Mmm," he hums, "strawberry."

"Jesus."

I'm undone. I pull him in close and plaster him to my hips, where he can surely feel how aroused I am.

"Let's get out of here," I mutter. My voice or my face or maybe simply my hard dick, betray my urgency because Justin gives me a flirty, mischievous smile and saunters off. But he's heading back towards where we parked the bike, so I guess he's onboard with this idea.

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

Sydney

JUSTIN

We stop just inside the door of Axel's room, lips finding each other again, before heading to the bed. I'm trembling either from anticipation or nervousness, maybe both. I don't want to stop tonight. I want to give him everything, but I've never...

"Are you okay?" Axel asks me gently, softly taking my chin in his fingers and lifting it so I'm obliged to look him in the eyes.

"Yeah. Just, um, nervous," I whisper, blushing and embarrassed.

"We don't have to do anything," he reassures me. "We can just make out and cuddle, if that's what you want. I just want to be with you tonight."

He gently tucks a few longer strands of hair behind my ear.

"Um. I think I want more. I'm just... it's just... I've haven't..."

"That's okay, I get it," Axel kisses me softly on the forehead. "And I'm not going to fuck you tonight, well, not with my dick anyway. I know you're an adult, but you're also still in school. It's kind of a big step, so for me that's a hard limit until you graduate."

He continues. "As for the rest, everything else is on the table as far as I'm concerned, so it's up to you. We'll only go as far as you decide you want to, and you can call it

off at any stage if you change your mind. It's not a problem. I want to take things as slow as you need."

He cradles my face in his warm hand. "We have as much time ahead of us as we could ever want."

Now that I know sex, actual penetrative sex, is off the table for now, it does take the pressure off, even if half of me had been fully on board with the idea.

"Can we play it by ear? See how the night goes?"

"Absolutely. I'm yours tonight."

"Okay," I breathe, and stepping away, open up the space between us and without taking my eyes off him, pull my t-shirt over my head.

Axel does the same.

We stand there looking at each other for a moment, both breathing heavily, fully present, taking in the moment, each appreciating the man in front of us.

I drop my hand to the button of my shorts, but Axel steps forward and nudges my hand out of the way.

"Let me," he says, and pops the button open. The zip rasps as he slides it down. He slips his hand inside, my toes curling and tingles running up my spine as his hand caresses my package, giving a gentle squeeze, while pulling me closer to his chest with his other hand. My cock is already pressing hard against my boxers and a wet patch stains the fabric. The warmth of his hand... I groan. Axel bites his lip and his breath quickens. When I look at him, his pupils are enormous and he looks as turned on as I feel.

“Fuck,” he murmurs, the hand between us gently stroking me through my boxers.

He pulls my shorts and boxers down over my hips and when they slip to the ground, I kick them off. He backs me against the bed and pushes me gently down onto it, taking advantage of the separation to strip his own clothes off, before joining me on the mattress.

Completely naked, body to body, we kiss and run our hands over skin we soon won't be able to touch. Memorizing. My senses seem exaggerated, every touch magnified, every sound highlighted. My body, my skin, my psyche know this is our last night, and every part of me has turned up to etch it into my memory with the vividness necessary to sustain me until we can find our way back to each other.

We're connected: from lips, to chest, abdomen, hips and legs. All touching. Warmth, rough skin, coarse hairs, stubble. A kaleidoscope of sensations.

And tongues. Our tongues are dancing around each other, sliding and caressing, making promises we can't put into words.

Axel's lips run along my jaw and down my neck, dropping wet, open-mouthed kisses as he does so. He runs his mouth over my shoulders and across the muscles of my chest, which shiver at his tender exploration. He sucks on my nipples, his tongue traces the contours of my chest and abdomen. He leaves no spot untouched, and I wonder if he's making a mental map of my body that he'll return to when I'm no longer here.

The press of his lips is soft and tender, and when he finds his way lower, he caresses my inner thighs with his tongue, lazily and languidly, wetly sliding over the fine hairs. The sharp sting of teasing nips at the soft skin make me twitch and jerk, then he kisses the same spot, and loves on it with his tongue.

My cock is hard at attention, weeping, and I'm desperate for his mouth and his tongue, but he's making love to me and he's in no hurry.

I groan. "Please, Axel."

The stubble on his face grazes my inner thighs as he turns his head to look up at me.

"Tell me what you want," he smirks, because of course he knows, he just wants to hear the words. If I wasn't so strung out, I'd roll my eyes, but I am, so...

"Take me in your mouth," I beg.

"Here?" he moves up and closes his mouth around one of my hipbones and takes a nip.

"Aahh, no! Fuck that! You know what I want."

"Where then? Tell me. I wouldn't want to get it wrong," he teases, and I can feel his smile against my skin.

"My cock, dammit, you know...ungh." The sudden warmth of Axel's mouth around my cock renders me speechless, and my hips levitate off the bed as he sucks me deep and hums around my shaft. I release a series of unintelligible sounds as he bobs up and down, his lips dragging the silky skin over my hard shaft. I'm so turned on, I've got no control. I'm not going to last. My cocks swells more and my balls start to draw up, but Axel pulls off before I go over the edge. I release a frustrated groan of protest.

"Don't stop, please! "

But apparently Axel has other plans. He pushes my thighs up and hooks my legs over his shoulders. Then he slides his hands under my ass cheeks, lifting them and holding

them apart. Cold air rushes over my crack. My heart stutters, my body trembles. My legs are spread and he can see my hole. I'm completely exposed to him. I have never felt so raw and vulnerable, so stripped bare.

When his tongue laps at my taint, I whimper. And when his tongue finds my hole and circles it, I moan. The rawness is overwhelming, and one part of me is shocked that I'm allowing him to do this... and another part is shamelessly loving it. I have the feeling that I'm laying my heart and body down for him. And then when his tongue pushes inside, I die a little... a beautiful floating exquisite death and...

"More," I beg, pushing shamelessly back against his tongue.

Oh my god. What kind of magic is this? A deep, base part of me wishes I could see his tongue pressed inside my hole, my thighs spread wide for him; wanton, reckless and needy.

I moan and writhe on the end of his tongue, on the point of coming apart.

I'm lost in a sea of overwhelming sensations, when unexpectedly Axel withdraws his tongue. I sob a protest.

But more is coming. I hear the snick of the lube bottle opening, and the cool of the lube between my ass cheeks makes me jump. Then Axel applies gentle pressure against my entrance, his lubed finger pausing there.

"Is this okay?"

I swallow hard. But yes, this is okay, more than okay. It's what I want, but I'm nervous.

"Yeah. Go slow?"

“Of course. Trust me.”

And I know I can, so I relax and let Axel weave his magic as he slowly and carefully works a finger inside, waiting for my sphincter to relax and accept him, before sliding deeper. It feels weird having someone else do this, but I've experimented on my own before, so the sensations aren't entirely new. The self-consciousness is, however, but I tamp it down and just give myself over to the sensations. I feel safe with Axel.

“How’s that?” Axel checks, but surely he can tell it’s amazing. I’m making the most shocking noises which under any other circumstances would have me cringing with embarrassment. But not with him. With him, I can lay myself bare without shame.

“Oh my god, that’s a..a..amazing,” I stutter, a choked groan slipping out along with the words.

“Gonna try two now,” Axel’s voice sounds strained.

I whimper at the loss as he withdraws his finger, but the emptiness is only for a moment. He adds more lube and then there’s more pressure as he presses two fingers in ever so slowly, waiting for my body to accommodate before sliding them in a little further. In and out, over and over. Waiting patiently for my body to yield to him.

I can’t tell how far his fingers are inside me. It feels like they must be miles up there. And then he hits my prostate and I forget about how far in he is, because it really doesn’t matter. I’m nearly levitating off the bed, keening loudly, as he fucks me with his fingers, hitting my prostate every time and sending me nearly out of my fucking mind.

Jesus. The intensity is mind blowing. Axel might have a point about taking things slow, this is almost more than my body and mind can process right now.

Axel's other hand wraps around my cock and it only takes a couple of strokes before I'm gone. My eyes flutter closed and a zing zips through my body as I erupt everywhere. Hot cum spurts across my chest and splatters onto my chin, and Axel continues stroking me, draining me until I have nothing left.

I whimper as he withdraws his fingers. Then he's on his knees between my legs on the mattress, stroking himself frantically. Pre-cum leaks copiously from his engorged crown, and he moans as his hand glides over the sensitive skin. He closes his eyes and throws his head back, crying out as his warm cum splatters on my abdomen and chest.

As the last drop falls, he leans over me, holding himself up on his right elbow, panting heavily, head bowed as he tries to catch his breath. A trickle of cum tickles as it slides down my side, dripping onto the sheets.

After a while, Axel's breathing settles. He lifts his head to look at me and strokes the side of my face with the back of his hand.

"So beautiful," he whispers, looking at me with such a tender expression that I nearly melt into the mattress. Then he takes my swollen lips in his, tongue softly probing. The kiss is sweet and gentle, loving. In my dazed state, I'm boneless and pliant and I sink into his kiss, mind spinning away into some timeless zone where there's nothing but warm lips against warm lips, and Axel's steady hand behind my neck, anchoring me to the earth.

I must have dozed off briefly, because when I come to, the cum has been wiped off my body and Axel is curled protectively around me. He's awake, and when he realizes I've woken from my stupor, he drops a kiss on the top of my head. And we talk.

We talk until the sky begins to lighten, and the early birds begin their morning

chatter. We talk about everything, and we talk about nothing.

Then he takes me home.

Gravel crunches as the car comes to a halt at the top of the driveway. The silence is deafening as Axel cuts the engine. I wind down the window and let the salty air, fresh with the new day, wash over me. The long elegant leaves of the eucalypts rustle in the faint breeze, a currawong calls. In the distance far below, the surf rumbles to the shore.

Before leaving me, Axel takes my hand in his and kisses my fingertips tenderly. Dark shadows rim his eyes. Mine must be no better.

There are things I want to say, but I can't. I'm afraid. Afraid I'll sound too needy. Afraid to make a fool of myself. Afraid this won't last. Always those small niggling fears.

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

Melbourne - Sydney

JUSTIN

It's hard adjusting back to normal life. The holidays are over, and it's back to school and getting on with my final year. It feels weird. I don't feel the same. I don't seem to have anything in common with my classmates anymore. We're still friends but, I don't know, I feel kind of... older, different. I'm a little older than most of my classmates anyway - my mum was one of those who believed you should send your girls to school early and your boys late - but also my experiences this past summer have changed me in ways I can't quite define.

Axel and I exchange emails every couple of days and a few texts each evening, but I can't afford to get distracted from my studies. I miss him a lot. But I have to trust in what we have and I throw myself into study, which fills the days and distracts me from my feelings about our separation. I figure if I put in the extra study time now, it'll make up for the fortnight's holiday in April when I won't go near the books.

On the weekends we Facetime, and my heart does a little happy skip every time his handsome face appears on the screen. But it always hurts when we have to say goodbye, and I feel a bit down after the call has ended. I shouldn't though. I have a gorgeous boyfriend and so far he's willing to do the long distance thing. A tiny voice in my brain asks me how long I think that's gonna last, but I shove that thought away. I don't want to hear it.

February passes.

Then March.

Before I know it, it's April and the holidays are here. I have a flight booked to Sydney and Axel is going to pick me up at the airport. If my grandparents think that's odd, they haven't said anything.

I can hardly contain my excitement and my nervousness during the flight. There are butterflies in my stomach. I'm so excited I'm going to be seeing my boyfriend in, mmm, less than half an hour now.

Then I have sudden misgivings.

Will it be awkward seeing each other after all this time?

What if it doesn't feel the same?

There's been nothing in Axel's messages or phone calls to suggest anything has changed, but what if he didn't want to spook me and felt he ought to let me down in person? Surely, he wouldn't have let me come all this way, only to call it off. Right?

Ugh, where did all this insecurity come from?

I'm nearly sick with nerves and turbulence as the plane bumps its way in for a typical Sydney airport approach. Then we're on the runway and there's only a few minutes before we'll all be hurrying off the plane. The butterflies in my stomach are having a literal party. All with plus ones. I switch my phone back on and send Axel a text.

Landed

The answer pings my phone seconds later.

Waiting for you

I try to steady my nerves, but I fail, and I'm trembling as I grab my bag and walk off the plane.

As I step out of the aerobridge, my eyes fall on Axel immediately, because he's positioned himself right at the front of the waiting crowd. I don't have time to think or worry because he scoops me straight into a tight embrace and kisses me smack on the lips. When we break away, I'm blushing and a little embarrassed.

"Dude," I mumble. "We're in public."

"Missed you," Axel says unrepentantly, crushing me to his side and paying no attention to anyone around us who might or might not be watching. If anyone is casting dirty looks at us, I don't see it, because when I finally let myself really look at Axel, well, I just can't look away.

"Missed you too." I can feel my cheeks almost splitting with the smile I can't contain.

"Suitcase?"

"Nah. Just this," and I motion to the small backpack in my hand. Axel grabs the bag and slings it over his shoulder and we start talking as he leads me out of the terminal. I delight in the warmth of his arm across my back, the rub of my shoulder against his side, the little flutter in my chest, as Axel steers me towards the carpark, talking all the while.

And just like that, we're back to how we were. It's as though we've never been apart.

"What time are the family expecting you?" Axel asks me ten minutes later, as we drive out of the carpark and head towards the busy expressway.

“I didn’t really say. I told them sometime this afternoon.”

“Good. Let’s make it late this afternoon.”

I can’t help smiling.

“Okay. Sounds like you have plans. Care to share?”

Axel takes his eyes off the road briefly to give me a hot stare.

“No sharing,” he states flatly.

I open my mouth to protest, and then stop. He’s flirting.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I pretend pout, “sharing is caring.”

He lets out a possessive growl. The sound sends the blood rushing straight to my cock. I’m not sure if it’s because I like being claimed or it’s just such a sexy sound coming from him.

“Will you at least tell me where we’re going?” I ask.

“My place.”

“What about your mum?”

“She’s at work.”

“Oh.” I think I like the sound of these plans that I’m not being told about.

I look across at Axel. A flush has spread across his cheek and he holds the steering

wheel with a white-knuckled grip, staring intently out the windscreen.

“So that’s the plan then? No sharing and lots of caring?” I ask innocently. Two can play at the flirting game.

Axel swallows and shifts in his seat.

“Yes,” he confirms. “Definitely.” And the look he flashes me leaves me as heated as he looks.

It takes way too long to drive to Axel’s house. By the time we pull up outside the familiar blue and yellow cottage, we’re both suffering from a very high level of sexual anticipation. The air in the car must be so high with pheromones, it’s a wonder it doesn’t spontaneously ignite.

We manage the walk up the path to the house more or less like normal people, neither of us looking at the other, walking close enough to feel the other’s body heat but not quite touching.

But when we enter the house, Axel grabs me by the hand and literally drags me to his room, reaching behind him to lock the bedroom door.

He steers me to the bed, and I think he’s going to push me down onto it, but he stills. We stand there looking at each other, the harsh rasps of our heavy breathing dominating the room.

Who moves first? I don’t know. I think it was me but maybe not. We both rush to pull our shirts off, then as my hands move to undo the button of my shorts, Axel puts his hand over mine.

“Let me?” he enquires softly.

“Uh-huh.” I let my hands fall away.

Axel’s hands are trembling as he fumbles with the button and unzips my fly. He pauses, then slips a finger inside each side of the waistband and pulls both shorts and boxers down and off. My fully erect cock springs free slapping my abdomen. I move to kick my shoes off, but Axel doesn’t wait and pushes me backwards onto the bed, my legs hanging over the edge and feet still on the floor.

Nudging my thighs apart, he sinks to his knees between them and in one swift movement takes my aching cock in his mouth.

I groan. It’s a relief to feel the wet heat of his mouth around my aching flesh. It’s been so long. And though I might have jerked off to fantasies of this exact thing, nothing beats the reality of his lips around my dick and his teasing tongue laving my shaft.

He sucks my dick like it’s all he lives for, and within minutes I’m reaching the point of no return.

“Not gonna last,” I gasp, desperately trying to stave off my impending orgasm.

Axel just hums, and the vibration tips me over the edge, and before I can warn him, I shoot reams of cum into his mouth, bucking and crying out as I do. Axel sucks me through to the end, until my cock goes soft, then pulls off and licks his lips.

I’ve nearly passed out on the bed with the strength of my orgasm, which is way bigger than anything I’ve been able to achieve alone.

Axel laughs, a soft, low, self-satisfied chuckle, as he takes off my shoes and socks.

Then he pulls me up onto the bed and settles me against the pillows. I'm like a rag doll. He lies on his side, watching me, gently running his hands up and down my side.

After a few minutes, I realize something is not right here.

“You’ve got too many clothes on,” I protest.

“Mmm. I do. Wanna help me with that?”

Yes, I do, actually. Rolling onto my side, I reach across and undo the button of his shorts and unzip them. He helps push them off, and the boxers go too. I scoot down and position myself between his thighs and take his large cock into my mouth, swirling my tongue around and very lightly dragging my teeth over the sensitive skin, which sends a shiver through him.

“Too much?” I inquire, letting him go so I can see his face.

“Nah. Don’t stop.” He gives my head a gentle push back down, and this time I take just the crown into my mouth, running my tongue just under it and flicking the frenulum. I suck the head, then run my tongue into his slit and lap at the moisture there. Axel groans, a deep throaty groan, and I wonder if he’s been wanting this as much as I have.

Then I swallow him deep again, and suck him with a steady rhythm until he’s arching beneath me, his muscles going taut, and... I pull off.

Axel groans. “Bastard,” he mutters.

I smile to myself. Then rasp my two front teeth gently up the underside of his shaft.

Axel squirms satisfyingly. “Ah,” he gasps, “do that again.”

I'm happy to oblige, and then after another pleasing groan from Axel, I start sucking him in earnest, bobbing up and down on his cock, spit running down and onto his balls. I roll his balls in my fingers while I suck, and slide a spit covered finger along his taint which elicits another groan.

I feel his muscles tense under me, and then he calls out my name as he spills down my throat.

I swallow his cum eagerly, loving the taste of him. All in all, it's perfect. I climb back up the bed and he pulls me to him.

"In case you can't tell," he murmurs against my lips, "I missed you."

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

April Holidays, Sydney

AXEL

Having Justin back in my life brings back color to my days which had been strangely dull and grey since we parted at the end of summer.

Even though it's April, the weather is still mild, and there are enough warm days for us to spend a good amount of time lying around on the beach, and on the days we don't go, we either spend our time hanging out at his grandparents' house or wandering around the shopping village, or if my parents are at work, lounging around my house.

He has two weeks of holidays and he's spending it all with me. There's not a single day we don't see each other. We probably aren't as careful as we should be, given that Justin's not out to his family, but this little interlude has brought us closer together and we spend as much time in each other's company as we can. And while there is definitely some sex going on, that's not what's most important to me. Justin is meeting my deepest needs of loving and being loved. Now that I've gotten over my initial concerns about our age gap, I have a bone-deep feeling that we're meant to be together.

The days fly past.

We probably have spent too much time together for just a couple of casual friends and although I'm disappointed when I'm not invited to dinner at the Beecham's house on his last night, I'm not too surprised. I really have monopolized him during

his visit.

Can you come out after? I want to do something for your last night

If I'm worried that the lack of invitation reflects any wavering on Justin's part (and I'm not), the speed with which he replies, would totally put me at ease.

I'll have to sneak out later. Things are a bit weird. But I can totally do that

Text me when you're free?

Sure. Probably late though

S'ok. Want to see you

Same

It's not until after 11pm, that Justin texts me to tell me everyone has gone to bed and he can slip out. We arrange to meet at the top of his driveway, so there's no chance my car will wake his grandparents. Any guilty feelings I might have about the subterfuge are rendered inconsequential by my burning need to see Justin one more time.

I arrive early and wait expectantly in my car, parked at the side of the road with the lights off. Anticipation thrums through my veins. When I see his familiar figure appear as a darker shadow at the top of the driveway, a soft sigh escapes my lips and warmth floods my chest. I am so completely gone for this man.

Justin gets in the car and leans across to kiss me. Our lips play softly until our tongues have to get involved and the kiss deepens and before long the windows are starting to fog up. When eventually we break apart, I have to run the demister for a

few minutes before I can drive away.

"Missed you," I tell him.

"Same. Where are we heading?" asks Justin, his lips moist and puffy.

"The beach," I reply. "It's sort of a repeat date."

"Mmm," Justin murmurs happily. His hand wanders over the console between us and finds its place on my thigh. He leaves it there for the remainder of the drive, his thumb stroking gently across my skin and teasing under the hem of my shorts.

When we arrive at the beach carpark, it's deserted as I would expect it to be at this hour of night, at this time of year.

We get out of the car and when I retrieve the picnic rug and basket from the back of the car and an extra bag, Justin breaks into a big smile. He remembers.

Like the first time, we walk out on to the sand, only this time, we're holding hands. I try to find the exact same spot (not really possible, of course, but near enough). Justin lays the mat out. I put the basket down.

"Trust me?" I ask.

"You know I do," replies Justin, looking vaguely puzzled. He's wondering, I guess, where this is going.

I pull a strip of fabric out of the basket. It's a blindfold.

"Can I put this on you?"

He chuckles. “Sure. I guess.”

I wrap the fabric around his eyes, kiss him, and move him away from the rug so I can finish fixing things.

I start pulling things out of the basket and arranging them. I place the candles in the sand in a circle around the rug and light them. I pull out the champagne flutes and the two bottles. And the little vase. And the tiny bunch of blue forget-me-nots, which I place in the vase. And I place all of these at one end of the mat. From the bag, I pull out a fluffy white quilt and lay it over the rest of the mat, along with a couple of small cushions.

“You’re up to something,” says Justin, shifting restlessly on his feet. “I can hear you.”

The last thing of all is a small box tied up with a ribbon that I place next to the vase.

I look around at what I’ve done. It’s simple, but it’s what I was aiming for. I hope he likes it though. I also hope he doesn’t think it’s a bit... yeah, now I don’t know, maybe it is cheesy, but I want him to feel special. Well, here goes.

“Ready?” I ask him.

“Yes!” he says eagerly. Too eagerly. I don’t want him disappointed.

“It’s not that exciting,” I warn him, trying to keep expectations low.

He sighs. “Whatever it is, it’s with you, so I like it already. C'mon, show me.”

I take a deep breath. Slip the blindfold off. Justin blinks as his eyes adjust.

“Oh,” he exhales as he sees the candles glowing in the sand around us. Then he looks down and sees the rest of it. His eyes widen. He steps in close to me, places his palm over my heart. His warm breath whispers over my lips, “You’re amazing.” Then his soft lips meld to mine.

After sharing a gentle kiss, I lead him to the quilt and we sit down near the collection of items. I pick up the two bottles, one in each hand.

“Your choice. Champagne or apple juice,” I show him the bottles, “but just to be clear, this time I have every intention of taking advantage of you.”

“It’s not really taking advantage if I give consent, is it?”

“Well, no, not if you’re sober when you consent.”

“I’m sober. I consent. Now let’s have champagne.”

“It’s not that simple. Can we modify that? I’ll take it you’re consenting to anything we’ve done before, but not anything else.”

“I trust you,” he says simply.

“Yes, but there are so many ways I could hurt you, push you further than you’d want to go in retrospect.”

“You wouldn’t though.”

“You’ve never told me ‘no’. There might be boundaries you don’t want to cross that you don’t know about yet. And if you’re not in a fit state to judge...”

Justin huffs softly. “Okay. I meant it though. I feel safe with you. But if it makes you

happy, I consent to anything we've done so far. But please don't let me go home without making me come at least one more time."

I pull him to me, place a chaste kiss on those soft pouty lips, and murmur in his ear.

"Thank you. And there is no chance of that, don't worry."

We sip our drinks, sitting on the mat with the quilt pulled up over us for warmth. The nights are starting to get cool at this time of year. Justin leans against me, his warm body fitting snugly against my side. The tips of his ears are cold when he leans in, resting his head against my neck. We talk and we sip champagne, the night grows old around us, and the candles burn low. Tomorrow looms ahead of us, with the start of another separation, but we made it through the first one intact which means this one isn't quite so intimidating.

So, we just enjoy the night and each other's company.

When our glasses are empty, I remember the box. Picking it up, I hand it to Justin.

"This is for you, to remember me by."

"Like I'd forget... "

"It's for you anyway." I put the box in his hand. He looks at me through his long lashes, eyes soft and moist.

"I'm going to miss you," he whispers, softly.

"Likewise."

He rests his head on my shoulder for a moment, while the small moment of sadness

passes between us. Then he heaves a sigh, sniffs, and begins to open the package.

The ribbon falls away and Justin takes the lid off the little box. Nestled inside is a fine leather strip with a silver charm. Justin takes it out carefully and lays it in his hand. It's a neckchain, the silver charm is a...

"Scorpius," he breathes. "To connect me to you." And he looks up at me, eyes shining from the moisture welling up there. Tears start to roll silently down his cheeks.

"I love you," I whisper, "And I don't want to let you go."

"Will you put it on?" Justin asks, holding up the neck chain, and I take it from him and tie the leather strap around his neck. The silver scorpion sits over his heart.

"Perfect."

"Thank you."

Then we snuggle under the quilt. The candles burn low, and then snuff out. And then, in the darkness, we do things to each other that only lovers do.

We must have fallen asleep in the end, because the next thing I know, my phone's alarm is going off, and I open my eyes to see the paleness of the sky and a yellow glow on the horizon. I gently shake Justin awake.

"Mmm?" he mumbles sleepily. He looks gorgeous with his blond hair all sleep-mussed, and sleepy eyes.

“Wake up, beautiful.” I kiss him. “It’s morning. Let’s watch the sun rise before I take you home.”

We huddle together with our arms around each other as the golden disk slips over the horizon. A new day. I take Justin’s chin gently between my thumb and forefinger and kiss those soft sensual lips. It’s a promise. A sigh escapes him as we pull apart. I look deeply into those gorgeous grey eyes.

And then it’s time to go. Hurriedly we pack up and throw ourselves into the car. I have to get Justin home before his grandparents realize he didn’t come home last night.

As before when Justin has stayed out all night with me, I drop him at the top of the long driveway. Out of sight of the house, we say our goodbyes. Kisses, gentle at first, more desperate later, a lot of gazing longingly in each other’s eyes. Hugs that hold each other so close it’s like we’re trying to merge ourselves into one being.

Finally, time runs out.

“I’ll see you at the airport,” I promise.

And three hours later, I do. I meet up with Justin and his grandparents on the other side of security, much to the Beecham’s surprise. It’s a taste of agony, maintaining a platonic distance while our remaining minutes together run relentlessly through our fingers.

Under some pretext, Justin and I move away out of sight of the gate lounge for a few minutes. I wrap Justin in my arms and kiss him. He holds on like he’s never letting go. Until we have to. Until we hear the boarding call, wipe our moist eyes and compose ourselves, and walk back to where the other passengers are already lined up for boarding and Justin’s family is waiting to say goodbye.

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

Melbourne

JUSTIN

The plane lands at Melbourne Airport after the usual bumpy approach, and as we taxi to the gate, I pull out my phone to text Axel. But I have no service, which is odd. I turn off the phone, restart it, and try again. But still there's no service.

The rustle of people standing up and gathering their belongings fills the cabin. I'm still sitting in my seat, frowning at my phone, which doesn't help at all.

People are starting to shuffle down the aisle and the person in the window seat next to me is giving me increasingly less subtle signals that they want to get moving. I scowl at my phone one more time, stand up and grab my bag from the overhead locker.

Looks like we're exiting from the back of the plane, so I slip my phone in my pocket before heading down the stairs and we all trundle our way across the tarmac. I'll try again in the airport.

Then it occurs to me that I have a problem. How will I call my parents to let them know I've arrived and where to meet me?

That problem is solved as I enter the terminal. My parents are right there and from the expression on their faces, this is not good.

What has happened?

Sydney

AXEL

It's after 2.30pm when I notice that Justin hasn't texted me to tell me he's arrived. After he'd left, I'd thrown myself into work to distract myself, and I'd been so absorbed in the designs I'd been preparing for a client, that I hadn't noticed the time.

He would have landed half an hour ago, if the plane was on time, but then again maybe it wasn't. That wouldn't be all that unusual.

By 5 o'clock, he still hasn't texted and I'm feeling uneasy. It's foolish, but I check the online news just in case, and no, there hasn't been a plane crash, an airport strike, a phone carrier outage or anything else that might explain why I haven't heard from him.

Have I accidentally left my phone on 'Do Not Disturb'? No, I haven't.

Arrived?

I wait for an answer to my text. And I keep waiting.

My unease grows over the next few hours. I probably shouldn't be letting myself get worked up about this. There are any number of reasons he might have got caught up... family, friends...

I can't help feeling a little hurt though. After what we've shared, I thought we were

close, like, really close. Finally, at 10pm, I shut myself in my room and call him.

The number is disconnected.

I don't believe it. There must be something wrong with his phone.

I grab my laptop and fire off a short email.

To:

Hey, your phone's not working. Did you arrive ok? Miss you already.

~A

There's nothing more I can do tonight. I'm sure there's nothing to worry about, but I can't help the niggling feeling that something's not right. I'm sure I'm being unreasonable, so I try and distract myself with reading, music, a movie. None of it works and I go to bed disappointed.

When I wake the next morning, I'm feeling better. My little freak out of the previous evening was nothing more than an irrational reaction to Justin's departure. Of course, he has things to do now he's back and he's not going to be thinking of me every minute. We weathered the first three months of separation and we'll manage the rest.

I smile to myself, thinking about Justin: the feel of his warm skin against mine, his sweet shy smile, his gorgeous eyes, and his utter abandon when he comes.

Fuck! My hand goes to my cock and I stroke myself as I think back on the past couple of weeks and the beautiful man that has totally captured my heart. I fantasize

about the things I'd like to do to him and I remember the things I have done with him, and it's only moments before I unload all over my hand and sheets.

Now, as my brain comes fully online, I'm eager to hear from him. I clean myself up and reach for my phone. Puzzled, I see that he still hasn't replied to my text or my email. Checking the time, I see it's a reasonable hour, so I hit dial.

The number is still disconnected.

Feeling a bit like a stalker, I have a look at his social media accounts, but there aren't any new updates and he's not online. It's as if he's completely vanished.

It's odd.

The question is, has he completely withdrawn, or just withdrawn from me?

This strange information vacuum continues all week. I hear nothing at all from Justin, and I oscillate between trying to rationalize the silence and thinking that he's dumped me. The latter seems ridiculous given the fortnight we spent together, and yet, as the week comes to a close and I still haven't heard from him, a terrible sinking feeling takes over the pit of my stomach.

Finally, I can't stand it anymore.

"Hey, Mum, can you ask Dad to check Justin got home okay? I haven't heard anything from him since he went back." I try to make my voice as casual as possible but I'm not sure I'm successful, because my mother gives me a look I can't quite decipher.

She knows I saw Justin when he was here recently, but I don't think she knows we're still involved with each other. Ever since she told me I couldn't be in a relationship or

mess around with him, I've been careful not to let her see we're anything more than friends.

"Sure, I'll speak to him," mum tells me, and I have to leave it at that or she'll know I didn't stop our relationship when she told me to.

I'm impatient for her answer, and I nearly go crazy waiting, but I daren't ask again. Two days later, she tells me that Justin is apparently fine and back at school. My heart sinks when I get the news. He has dumped me, though I can't figure out why or what happened.

I try one more time to phone him, though it's crushing and humiliating to have to do this. Finally, after the phone rings several times, someone answers.

But the voice that answers, isn't his. Why is this unknown guy answering Justin's phone? I'm not sure I want to know.

"Uh. H-hi," I stammer, "can I speak to Justin?"

My heart hammers in my chest, equal parts anticipation and dread.

"Who?"

"Justin. This is his number."

"Sorry, mate. No Justin here. This is a new number, though, so maybe someone had it before."

"Oh. Ok. Sorry," I hang up. At least he's not cheating on me. I think.

There's only one more avenue of communication, short of landing on his doorstep,

which I am not going to do. So now I'm going to humiliate myself even more. I write a letter... a real letter... asking him to tell me what went wrong and why he's ghosting me, and I send it by post. Snail mail. So heaven knows if and when he'll actually get it.

When no answer comes, I clench my teeth, biting down on my humiliation, and write again.

Each day goes by and... just nothing.

What happened? Everything seemed fine – better than, actually – up until and including our last night together. Did I fuck up there somehow? But we'd both enjoyed it, hadn't we? Now I'm full of self-doubt. Maybe I'd enjoyed it and missed the signs that Justin wasn't happy about... something. Could that be it? But surely he would have said something? Or I would have noticed something was wrong afterwards? I'm starting to doubt myself.

As weeks go by and I don't hear from him, I come to the sad realization I'm not going to. At first, I try to put it behind me by going out socializing, but I'm lousy company, morose and withdrawn, and my friends quickly get sick of my sorry self and tell me to get over myself.

Deano is the most sympathetic, but even he won't put up with my misery for long.

“Mate, I know it sucks, but I warned you someone was gonna get hurt. It was never gonna work anyway. Move on, brother.”

And I do, sort of. I function, kind of. I still work. I still swim and surf. But I feel kinda dead inside. Super-sad, and hopeless. When I get down to the surf in the morning and the sky is grey and the ocean dark and sullen, I just think, yeah, that's my life. Maybe a shark will find me. I don't think I really mean it but shit, this hurts.

I suppose this is what depression is. I sleep fitfully on the nights I sleep at all. Dark pits form beneath my eyes. I catch a look at myself in the bathroom mirror one morning and hardly recognize the stranger with flat, lifeless eyes.

I've had heartaches before, but they haven't been like this.

When my parents come home from lunch at the Beechams' one Sunday and give me the news that Justin is happy with his new girlfriend, I die a little inside.

I feel sad, and maybe a little bit used. With the speed with which he's found a girlfriend and the way he's dropped me, it seems like I was just a bit of experimentation. I always knew his star was going to shine brighter than mine, but I let myself fall anyway.

As the weeks drift into months, I learn to live like this. The ache is still there, and I'm not sure it will ever go, so I just have to deal. I try not to think about Justin, shutting down my thoughts if they stray that way. Maybe I'm finally moving on.

Then one night I'm lying on my bed in the dark, watching the night sky through the bedroom window, and I catch sight of Orion's belt. It reminds me of Justin. A sudden yearning for him rushes through me, and for a while I forget the doubts and the fears and just remember what it was like, us together, that night we lay on the beach and looked up at the stars.

A lone tear slides out of my eye, landing on the pillow.

Could things really have changed so much?

And a girlfriend? I don't really believe it, though I suppose he could be bi.

What's going on, Justin?

Am I just an idiot that can't accept he's been dumped? Or is something else going on?

I fall asleep still looking at Orion's belt. Wondering.

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

Where is he?

AXEL

Clearly my subconscious has been working overnight, because when I wake the next morning, a new idea is circulating in my head.

I won't be able to concentrate on work until I action this, so I start up my laptop and look up Justin's social media accounts. As before, they're inactive, but that's not what I'm here for. I'm trying to figure out who his friends are. When I do, I attempt to make contact with some of them, and ask about him. Then I sit back and wait for someone, anyone, to reply to me.

It takes a couple of hours, but eventually my phone pings. I almost drop it in my haste to pick it up. Yes! One of Justin's friends has answered, but the answer is not what I'm expecting.

They haven't heard anything from him since April either. But - and this is just a rumour - someone had mentioned that he went away with his parents.

This should be reassuring I guess, but...

I don't know what to do. I don't know what I can do.

I still don't know if he's dumped me. Maybe he has.

With no clues as to where he's gone, and the knowledge that it can't be that bad if it's

something with his parents, I have no choice but to keep waiting, and hoping, and to carry on with my life.

But months pass. I don't think any family holiday lasts this long and especially not in the final year of school. There is no doubt now. I'm being ghosted. No goodbye, no breakup text, nothing... just nothing. Maybe his friends are in on it too. I know this stuff happens, I do. But I didn't think Justin would do it. And I don't understand why he's gone to so much trouble to keep me out of his life.

I drag myself through the days. I work. I talk to clients. I go to bed early and lie awake most of the night. I'm functioning but little more than that.

Eventually, I reclaim my social life, partying too hard and drinking too much. Anyone watching me would think I was fine. It's an illusion, but it's a protective cloak I wrap around myself.

I don't hook up with anyone though, it's much too soon for that. It might always be too soon.

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

Sandy Point, Sydney

AXEL

It's well after midnight when I slip the key in the lock of the front door, and the lock clicks open. The lights in the house are all off, so it's likely that my mother is fast asleep in her bedroom upstairs. Good. I really don't feel like conversation right now, so I'm extra careful not to make any noise whatsoever.

It's been another too-late night in the middle of the working week.

As I come in the front door, I make sure to turn off the porch light. I hadn't said I'd be home tonight but she'd left it on anyway. She's doing everything possible to be the caring mother right now, but for some reason I'm suspicious. She never supported my relationship with Justin. Maybe she knows why I'm so sad right now and she wants me to get over it.

I don't want to be in this house anymore. There's nothing but emptiness and heartache for me here, and the memory of what could have been. But I have no choice. If he comes back at all, he would come here. So, I have to stay, for now at least. Right now, I don't know if he'll come back or not. Maybe he's already brushed me from his life and moved on. I haven't heard a word from him since the day he left, so maybe it's just that I'm hanging on, living in the past, unable to move forward. It's kind of pathetic. At 22, I'm supposed to be the mature one, and here I am behaving like a love-sick teenager. I can't help it though.

I don't know what's going on or what I should do. The uncertainty, the unknowing ,

is killing me. I've tried everything to reach him; text, phone call, email, social media. For god's sake, even snail mail. But he hasn't answered anything I've sent. Disturbingly, for months he's had no social media presence that I've been able to detect. But perhaps he just doesn't want to have anything to do with me. I wouldn't be the first person to be totally blindsided when they were ghosted. Maybe I really was just a summer fling?

Is he okay? More than anything, I want to know that he's okay. If he doesn't want to be in my life, well, I'll deal, but I need to know that he's fine, that he's happy. The thought nags at me constantly – what if he isn't alright? What if he needs me?

I sink onto the sofa, burying my head in my hands. This is killing me. What if he's out there somewhere, in trouble and waiting for me to help him? Is there any way to find him that I haven't yet thought of?

“Fuck!” The worry and frustration is driving me mad, and swearing is easier than giving in to despair. In the back of my mind I know that it's probably over, that if he's ghosting me, it means we're done. Nothing more complicated than that. Just because I want answers doesn't mean there are any, other than he's decided he doesn't want me for whatever reason. God! The thoughts just go round and round in my head. I have got to move on.

I get up and make my way through the dark house to my bedroom. I pause in the doorway. The room looks exactly as it did the night I made love to Justin.

The same navy coverlet on the bed in the middle of the room. Two matching fluffy pillows against the bedhead. My desk in a corner of the room is still the usual organized mess of artwork – completed drawings, discarded designs, a few computer-generated collages.

Framed photographs of us at the beach last summer still sit on top of my chest-of-

drawers. My favourite still hangs on the wall.

It's a photo of the two of us on the beach with our backs to the ocean. Justin was standing up against me, and I still remember the sensation of his sun-warmed back against my bare chest. His hair is windswept, and his eyes are narrowed from the glare. Justin has said something playful and his head is tilted and he has a faint smirk playing about his pouty lips. I'm smiling like crazy as if I've won the lottery or something, the smile lines splitting my face.

Some random person walking by had seen us and snapped the photo. And then offered to send it to us because they thought we looked like a sweet couple.

I sigh.

The room is the same, but it's also different. This room where we loved and lay awake through all the dark hours, enjoying each other's proximity and the sheer joy of being together flushed with excitement for the future, now seems empty and sad.

Just like me, I think.

I'm too young to feel like this.

Moonlight shines through the window, so bright tonight that Scorpius can't be seen. The celestial light illuminates the gauze curtain with an ethereal glow. It runs along the carpet and up across the mattress. If Justin were here, he would consider the scene romantic.

But he's not, and I want to hide in the darkness and lose myself. I'll have to close the blinds if I'm to have any chance of that. I don't want to lie in bed with my heart breaking in the moonlight, wondering if maybe Justin is somewhere also looking up at that same moon.

I cross to the window and pull down the roller blind and as the blind reaches the windowsill, a little sliver of paper glowing in the moonlight catches my eye. It's lodged between the window and the sill, and only the tiniest part is poking through, which is why I haven't noticed it until now.

Someone has tried to push it in from the outside.

Curious, I put a finger on it to hold it in place while I struggle with the other to unlock and slide the window up. It's a note. And as I read it, I begin to tremble.

Axel

I'm in the backyard.

I need to see you one last time. Please.

Then I'll leave you alone. Promise.

Justin

Justin? He's here! My heart begins to race. But... what is he saying? What does he mean 'one last time'? And why would he promise to leave me alone? Does he think I won't want to see him? Why would he think that?

Icy fingers of dread run down my spine. Something is very wrong.

Quickly but silently, I make my way through the house to the backdoor and slip outside. I look around. In the light of the moon, the garden is silent and still, the leaves on the bushes silvery, the shadows dark. It's not that dark because of the moonlight, but I can't see him, so if he's here, he must be hidden behind the bushes somewhere. None of this makes any sense. But nothing has made sense since he left

here in April and never contacted me, so...

Slowly I make my way towards the back of the garden, stooping under the trees and bushes that conceal the back fence. And there I find him, a pale shadow slumped up against the palings, hidden from the house by the drooping branches of the weeping apple tree and some large camellia bushes.

“Justin?” I whisper.

He startles, and his eyes shoot open.

“Axel,” he says my name on a half-sob, and when I draw close I’m shocked to see the fatigue and distress on his face. He looks thinner too and paler, and he’s shaking all over. What is wrong?

I move towards him, meaning to take him in my arms but he lets out another sob as he hunches in on himself, and hides his face. Before I can make any sense of this incomprehensible behaviour, words begin to tumble from him.

“I know you must think I’m disgusting,” he blurts out, “and I promise I’ll go away, but I just wanted to see you one more time... I can’t help it, I missed you. I’m sorry...” his voice trails off into soft sobs. Tears glint as they trickle down his cheeks in the moonlight. The anguish in his voice is heartbreaking and unbearable.

“What? Why would I think that? I don’t understand what’s going on,” I protest.

Justin is sobbing so hard, I’m not sure he’s heard anything I’ve said. It’s alarming, and an icy finger of fear wraps itself around my heart. I reach for him and pull his trembling body close to me, wrapping myself around him. This time he doesn’t pull away. I have a feeling that as much as he thinks I’m going to reject him, he desperately needs comfort from me.

But I would never reject him. No matter what. Doesn't he know that?

"What's going on, Justin?" I drop kisses on his head. "What's happened? Please tell me. I missed you. I love you. No matter what's happened to you. But please, please, tell me what's going on. I hate seeing you like this."

"How can you love me?" he asks between sobs. "I'm disgusting, a deviant. How can anyone love that?"

What kind of bullshit is this? It's like he's regurgitating words someone has fed him. Where has this come from?

"You're none of these things! Who's been telling you this stuff?" I demand, angrily. "They're not true. None of them."

Justin quietens a little. The sobs are smaller but the shudders still shake his thin frame. He's so much thinner than I remember. All bones, where he used to be slender but firm. I kiss his forehead, and rub his back, even as I hold him close.

"They're not true," I say again. "These are terrible things. Why are you saying them?"

Justin sniffs. "That's what they said at the ReEducation Centre. And if they're not true, why didn't you write back? I thought you didn't want anything to do with me... that you must have thought so too."

"Oh my God, Justin, no ! I would never think those things about you! I've been so worried. I've been looking for you."

"Then why didn't you answer my letters?" he asks again, finally looking at me. His eyes are tragic. The hurt and despair and disbelief I see there cuts me like a knife.

Then he drops his head again.

“I never saw them,” I whisper.

“I wrote to you,” insists Justin. “They took my phone away, and there was no internet or email, so I wrote letters and when people left the Centre, I got them to take them and post them on the outside.”

“I didn’t get them,” I tell him. “Any of them. I hadn’t heard from you in months. I thought you were ghosting me.”

But the things he’s saying make me wonder...where was he that he couldn’t even post a letter himself? And why was his phone and internet taken away?

And if he had other people send letters for him, either they didn’t do it, or something or someone has stopped them from getting to me.

I have a suspicion about that and it makes me very, very angry, but I tamp down that emotion for now, because Justin needs me to stay in control. I put my fingers under his chin and tilt his head to look at me again.

“Where were you, Justin? What sort of place was it?” I query him gently, because I have a nasty feeling I already know the answer.

Justin shivers. He doesn’t speak, just begins softly crying again.

From the things he’s been saying about himself...

“Did they try and talk you out of being gay?”

A flood of tears confirms my suspicions. My heart aches. How could they do this to

such a sweet soul?

Letting go of his chin, I pull him close against my chest. “It’s all right. I’ve got you now. I’ll take care of you,” I whisper. “There’s nothing at all wrong with you. You are a perfect human being.”

“They said I’ve got Satan in me,” he sobs.

“No. You don’t,” I counter fiercely. “It’s all lies. They brainwash you. They make you feel bad about yourself so they can manipulate how you think. It’s not true.”

“It’s going to be okay,” I reassure him. “And there is absolutely nothing wrong with being gay.”

He needs a professional and God knows I’m not a psychologist – I’ll get him one of those as soon as I can - and I hope I’m not going to do more harm than good, but he’s hurting now and he’s come to me, so I have to at least try.

“Do you remember the nights we made love?” I ask him, taking his chin gently in my hand, encouraging him to look at me. “Do you remember how beautiful it was? Do you remember how happy we were? Remember how we lay awake all night talking? It was the best thing that ever happened to me. You are the best thing that ever happened to me.”

My words seem to resonate with him.

“I remember,” he says, an almost-smile flitting across his face, before a frown chases it away. “I’m so confused,” he groans.

I place another kiss on his head. “They’ve messed with your brain,” I tell him, “But it’ll be okay. I’ve got you.”

Justin rests his head on my shoulder then, and his body sags into mine. I grit my teeth. I want to tear apart the people that have done this to him. Now that my eyes have adjusted to the light, I notice the tears in his jeans and the dark marks on his shirt that might be stains or dirt. He starts vibrating against me. It's his teeth chattering and I suddenly realize how cold it is – well, August in Sydney at night, of course it is.

I take a quick look through the bushes at my mother's window. The room is still in darkness.

“C’mon,” I help him up, still holding him tight against me. “Let’s get you inside. It’s freezing out here. Quietly though, my mum’s upstairs and I don’t want anyone knowing you’re here until we’ve worked out a plan. You are not going back to that place.”

Justin comes willingly into the house with me. He’s obviously exhausted. He’d clearly expected a very different reaction from me, and the relief that I haven’t rejected him must be immense. I’m a ball of suppressed emotion myself. So, so much anger at what has been done to him, fury that he’d been cutoff from all his lifelines, sheer amazement and huge respect that he managed to escape and infinite gratitude that he has come to me. Even if in his messed-up state he thought he was coming to say goodbye, at some level he must have known he could trust me.

When we’re safely in my bedroom, I lock the door.

“Have you eaten?” I ask. Justin shakes his head. He looks dead on his feet and he’s shaking again.

I pull some pyjamas out of my chest of drawers and hand them to him, along with a clean hoodie. They’re too big, but they’ll do for now.

“Here, put these on, get yourself into bed and get warm,” I tell him gently. “I’ll bring you something to eat.”

Justin hesitates, looking unsure. A little ashamed even.

I go to him and cupping his face in my hands, look him in the eyes, and try to make him understand through the sheer force of my will.

“You are a beautiful human being. You have nothing to be ashamed or embarrassed about. You are perfect the way you are.”

Justin blinks, but he doesn’t argue or pull away.

I want to kiss him, but I’m not sure if that would be okay or not, so I instead I give him a quick hug.

“I’ll go get that food now,” I tell him, drawing away. I’m giving him some privacy. He wouldn’t have needed that before. How long have they had him - 3 months? A bit longer? It worries me how much damage might already have been done to him.

I go to the kitchen and as quietly as I can, because I really don’t want my mother waking up now, I cook noodles and heat up some bolognese sauce left over from the previous night. Then I carry his dinner along with a glass of water into the bedroom. It takes less than 15 minutes all up, but when I get there Justin is propped up in bed with the pillows behind him, already asleep.

Putting the bowl on the bedside table, I sit on the mattress and study him. His honey brown hair is scattered on the pillow around his head like a sunburst. His features are fine and graceful. But even in sleep I can see the evidence of tension on his face, the weariness and exhaustion lending a pallor to his cheeks making him look more fragile than I’ve ever seen him. He is the broken shell of the young man who captured my

heart last summer with his shy smile and gentle flirting, and it breaks my heart to see him like this.

His eyes flicker open.

“Hey,” he murmurs sleepily. “I fell asleep.”

“Yeah, you did. When did you last sleep?”

“In a bed? Three nights ago. I escaped after lights out. Been travelling since then.” He sounds more like himself. He yawns, his nose wrinkles cutely and he eyes the bowl of bolognese. “Smells good. That for me?” he asks hopefully.

“It’s all yours,” I tell him, passing the bowl, and then leaning across I run my fingers through his hair. “God, I’ve missed you.”

“I missed you too,” his face crumples and he blinks rapidly, to hide the tears that are threatening again.

“We need to talk, but that can wait till tomorrow. Just for now, though, I need to check something... you're still in school, right?”

"Well, I'm supposed to be. School ends mid-September."

"Yeah, what I mean is, you're still living at home..."

"Oh yeah. Don't get my inheritance until I turn nineteen on September 21, so yeah, theoretically still living at home."

“Yeah, thought so.” I bite my lip.

“They’ll send me back there...” The fear that twists his face is painful to see.

“Only if they catch you. But don’t worry,” I hastily cover his free hand with mine.

“That’s not going to happen. I’ll make sure of it.”

Is it illegal to hide a missing person?

But I don’t share that thought with him. He’s got enough to worry about as it is. And I’m not leaving him to deal with this alone.

“Tomorrow, we’ll talk, yeah? And we’ll make a plan to keep you safe.”

Justin smiles gratefully and hands the empty bowl back to me. His eyes are starting to drift closed again already.

He sighs as he slips down under the covers. Then he reaches across and grasps my hand.

“Stay with me?” he asks in a small voice... as if he’s afraid I’ll say no.

“Of course, if you’re sure,” I reply.

“Yeah. Need you,” he whispers, barely awake now. “Always need you.”

I turn off the main light, and climb into bed with him, wearing another pair of pyjamas. I’d rather sleep naked but I’m not sure of his state of mind and I don’t want him freaking out in the night.

When I turn off the bedside lamp and slide down under the covers, I reach for him and pull him to me. He comes willingly and presses his body up against mine. Minutes later I hear the soft huff of his breathing, his chest rising and falling softly

against me. It takes me a lot longer to fall asleep. Thoughts and emotions are spinning around in my head. Whichever way I look at it, I come to the same conclusion. They're going to be looking for him and it won't be long before they figure out he's come to me.

He came to me .

I remember another night, months ago, when I told him I wanted to be the one he ran to, not the one he regretted.

Tears of gratitude fill my eyes. He did. He ran to me.

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

Where am I?

JUSTIN

4.45am. Brightly illuminated numbers.

We don't have clocks in here.

Where am I?

For a moment I'm confused, unable to figure out where I am. The mattress is soft and pillowy, and the covers are warm and cozy, and they aren't familiar. They aren't the scratchy and uncomfortable bed covers and the hard mattress that I've been sleeping on for the last eight weeks or more. I think it's eight weeks. It's hard to know what day it is when you're deprived of all outside information. I had a system to keep track of time, but some days I didn't even see daylight, so it was hard to be sure if a day had passed, or two. There were no phones, no clocks, no calendars, no computers – nothing to tether us to the outside world.

Intellectually, I knew they were messing with my mind, but I didn't know how to fight it.

My sleep patterns were disrupted.

I went to 'education' sessions. They wanted me to confess stuff, kept telling me I was a sinner, that I was dirty, and that I should be ashamed. They told me a lot of things, and at the beginning, I knew them not to be true, but as time went on, it became

harder to see the truth, harder to struggle against them and I began to struggle against myself instead.

Of course, it couldn't work.

Whenever I had a moment to myself, my thoughts would turn to Axel. He was the one sure point of my existence and I clung to it. With him, there was clarity. I could keep myself from drifting away, as long as I had him as a reference point.

Communicating outside the Centre was not permitted. Well, they pretended it was, but as the residents had no internet and no phone, it had to be snail mail, and the rumour was that they opened all outgoing mail. No-one was sure if mail even got through. We all had writing paper, and if we asked for them, envelopes, but it was a charade. And possibly a trap too... we sometimes went along with what they wanted us to say in therapy just to get them off our case, but if they read our private mail, then they'd know what we really thought, right?

We also had paper and pens in our rooms, so we could jot down our 'reformed' thoughts. Instead, I used them to write letters to Axel, telling him all the terrible things that were happening to me here and pleading with him to help me. I made secret envelopes from spare sheets of paper. And when someone graduated from the Centre, they carried my secret letters out of the Centre with them. I lied about who they were for, and I begged them to post them. I don't know if they did, but I didn't hear from Axel.

Maybe someone eventually betrayed me, because one day the sessions became more intense. They told me they knew about Axel. They said Axel didn't want anything to do with me, that he was as disgusted with me as they were, and as I should be. That he didn't want to be with a deviant.

Axel hadn't written back and I began to believe the lies they told me. Maybe I was

disgusting, maybe I should be ashamed. Axel didn't want me. They were relentless. Every day I had to face my failings and try and change. I was ashamed and the worst of it was that I knew I couldn't change, not really. I could only pretend and that made me twice as ashamed.

But as disgusted as I was with myself, I was also confused. How could something that felt so right, so natural, be wrong? I wasn't religious, not really, but could Satan truly have infected my soul? Nothing made any sense. I was going to go mad if I stayed in here, so I decided, unworthy sinner though I apparently was, that I needed to get out of here. I would get out and find some place peaceful to live. I would live alone, where there was no temptation but also no more voices telling me how terrible I was. But despite how I now believed he must feel about me, I longed to see Axel one last time. That was the one thing I wanted to do before I made myself disappear.

Somehow, I escaped.

And now I'm here, waking in an unfamiliar bed, very confused. Memory of last night returns to me as the clouds of sleep dissolve. I know where I am, and my heart pounds with some unrecognized emotion, as I look beside me and see the dark head on the pillow next to me.

Gratitude. It's gratitude, that unnamed emotion. No matter what else happens, my wish has been granted. I've seen him again.

Then a much darker and unwelcome emotion sweeps over me as I realize I'm in bed with him. I can't help the terrible shame that instantly overwhelms me. I'm so disgusting. He's taken me in, and I've shamed him by sleeping with him.

I draw my legs up to my chest and clasp my arms around them. I feel the most abject despair.

Maybe I make a noise or maybe it's the sudden movement, but Axel's eyes open. At first he smiles at me, but then his face falls.

"Justin. What's wrong?" His voice is so gentle, so tender that it breaks my heart more. I feel dirty. And I feel guilty. But I love him. I feel so conflicted, so confused. I don't even understand why I'm feeling this way.

Strangely, Axel doesn't seem all that surprised that I'm freaking out this morning, and his calmness helps ground me a little, and I manage to choke out the words.

"I'm sorry. I'm ashamed of myself. I'm dirty and..." I can't bear to bring out all the other words they've used to describe me. "I shouldn't feel the things I do, want the things I do. And I can't stop myself. I've tried." I dissolve into tears.

Axel doesn't say anything, just strokes my hand while he lets me cry it out. When I'm done, I look up, tears still wet on my face. Axel looks at me carefully. He doesn't look disgusted, just thoughtful. He reaches out and wipes a tear away with his finger. It takes everything I have not to lean into his touch.

"Do you think I'm dirty?" he asks, quietly.

"No! Of course not!" I'm quick to answer, and I glare at him. How can he even think that?

"Do you think I'm shameful?"

"No, no! What are you saying? Of course, I don't think that. You're... amazing."

"But I'm gay too, Justin. If you're all these terrible things, then I must be too."

"But you aren't those things."

“And neither are you.”

I think about that for a while, which is good, because it gives time for the adrenaline spike to drop, and I become more rational. What he says makes sense. If I’m bad because I’m gay, then he must be too. But he’s not. I know he’s not. He’s never been anything but amazing. He’s a wonderful human being. None of this makes sense!

Then I think, is Satan trying to trick me into sinning? And for a brief irrational minute I wonder if that could be true? But no, I don’t believe that. And I don’t really believe in Satan, either. Do I?

No. Axel is sheltering me from the people who’ve been lying to me. Axel is safe. Everything else is not.

I let out a big breath and relax my grip on my legs. The chaos in my head starts to calm.

“Sorry,” I mumble. “I freaked out.”

“It’s okay,” Axel opens his arms to me. “You’ve probably got some kind of PTSD from what’s happened to you. Come here?”

He lets me move towards him, rather than taking me into his arms himself, and I appreciate his sensitivity. I unravel myself and scoot across the short distance between us. He wraps an arm around me and I rest my head on his shoulder with a sigh. I even relax enough to allow myself to sink into him. For a short while I can let it all go, safe in the comfort of Axel’s embrace. I don’t have to think, I just feel.

“It will all be fine,” he tells me as he kisses me gently on the head.

If he tells me often enough I may believe it.

A Missing Person

AXEL

I walk back along the beach, past the boatsheds and past the houses that front onto the water until I reach the point where the lane runs down to an asphalted boat ramp and the sand widens into a proper swimming beach.

The air is very fresh, though there's already the faintest hint of spring in the air. The sun wouldn't be far above the eastern horizon yet, and this beach faces west, with a tall hill behind it, so no sunlight will reach here for some time.

Boats dance at their moorings just a few metres offshore, rigging tinkling as the boats swing and jostle in the gentle early morning breeze. The wind makes things extra cold. A shiver passes through me.

Only a crazy local would swim here right now, but that's what I'm going to have to do to explain my absence from the house at this hour.

As I strip off my outer layers, I realize I forgot an essential item – swimming briefs. Shit! I curse mentally. But I can still do this, because I'd left my boxers on under my pj's last night and thank god I'm still wearing them.

Dressed only in my boxers, I plunge into the freezing water. Right in, head under. I come up gasping for air, my chest constricted and aching from the cold.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I mutter to myself. The water is freezing, the warm summer

currents a distant memory, or a distant hope, whichever way I choose to look at it.

I swim a few strokes, but I'm not really warming up, just going numb and possibly blue, so I leap out of the water faster than I went in. God, I think I've frozen my balls off!

It's enough anyway, I just need to look wet. Goosebumps cover me and my teeth are chattering. A wisp of wind blows over my wet skin and my whole body shivers.

At this point, I discover my second mistake – no towel. I left it with Justin. I pull my trackpants over my soaking boxers, and of course the water immediately soaks through. I pull on a hoodie and run back to the house.

Although I'd rather the police not know about the back gate, I come in the back door anyway, because it would look really weird – to my mother, at least – if I came in the front, given that the front door is the furthest from the beach.

The door bangs shut behind me as I rush in shivering and three heads turn towards me. My mother and two police are standing in the living room at the end of the hallway.

“Oh, there you are!” I hear the relief in my mum's voice. “We've been wondering where you were. Can you come in here a minute? The police need to talk to you.”

“Just a tick,” I call back, heading into the bathroom. “I forgot to take a towel and I'm dripping everywhere. Let me get changed.”

I dry as best I can, and duck across the hallway to my bedroom to find some clothes to pull on. I take a deep breath – I can do this - steady myself and go back out. At least I can cover my nerves with the excuse of being freezing!

“This is my son, Axel.” My mother gestures towards me when I join them in the living room. “Axel, this is Constable Matthews and Constable....” My mother pauses as she squints at his nametag, “Collins. They want to ask you some questions about the Beechams’ grandson. You remember, you met him last summer...”

She knows full well I did more than meet him, but this is her way of warning me to be careful, to not incriminate myself. She’s the one who warned me off having a relationship with him, though I think she was most worried about what his grandparents would think. With a stab of guilt I remember I totally forgot to google the legalities of my relationship with Justin, although since he was eighteen I’d decided it was probably fine. At the time it hadn’t seemed to matter since we wanted the relationship anyway, and then later it hadn’t mattered because I thought he’d dumped me. She has no idea how I have just compromised myself.

“Sure,” I say, shaking their hands. My hands are freezing. That’s a good enough reason to explain why they’re shaking, right?

“Morning swim, eh?” says Collins. “Isn’t it a bit cold for that?”

I shrug.

“One of the perks of living at the beach, I guess. It’s energizing, and then you can usually come home and have a hot shower,” I say pointedly.

He ignores the barb and steps forward, showing me a photo. It’s a photo of Justin, from several months ago at least. Before they took him away. Before he lost all the weight.

“Do you know this person?”

I nod. My mum has already told them I know him, so there’s no point in lying.

“Yeah. Justin McMillan.”

“How do you know him?”

“Um, I met him at his grandparents’ house last summer. We were invited there for lunch.”

“Have you seen him recently?” the cop asks.

“Nah. Not since summer. He lives in... ah, I don’t know, Melbourne, I think, or maybe Hobart.” I look towards my mum as if asking her to confirm.

“Yes, I think the family lives in Melbourne,” she confirms.

“What’s this about?” I look from one cop to the other, trying to look curious but not concerned.

“He’s missing,” replies one of the cops. “And his family suggested he might have come to you.”

A small tic starts in my eye, and I blink a few times to hide it.

“I don’t know why he would. I mean, I let him tag along a couple of times when I met up with friends last summer, because he doesn’t know anyone here, but I wouldn’t say we’re exactly friends.” I make myself sound a bit dismissive. I know my story isn’t going to hold up for long if they start digging into it, but I just need to buy a little time.

The other cop is making notes in his notebook. I try not to shift from foot to foot, though the urge is strong. I don’t want to look nervous, but quite frankly I’m about to shit myself. If I don’t pull this off, Justin is so screwed.

“What do you think’s happened to him?” I ask.

“That’s what we’re trying to find out. He left, ah, school, and hasn’t been seen since. So, you haven’t had any contact then?”

“No, none. No phone calls either. But I wouldn’t expect to, like I said, we’re not really friends. He must have other friends he’d be more likely to go to if he was in trouble. Is he in trouble?”

“Can’t really answer that,” says the older cop. He hands me a business card with his name and number on it. “If you do see him, or if he contacts you, give me a call, okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” I reply taking the card. “Um, are you done with me now? I’m freezing, I need to go take a shower.”

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

Sandy Point

AXEL

9am.

What time is it in Paris? Very early morning. These guys used to be party animals, but I think they've slowed down a bit since they got married. Regardless, I'll still call. For something like this, they won't mind. In fact, they'd be mad if I didn't.

The phone answers on the fifth ring. I'm sitting on a park bench overlooking the water, a couple of blocks away from home. The park is near the ferry wharf that services the local offshore communities, and not far from the local shops. There's no one nearby to overhear me – it's a bit early for the kids to come out and play on a cold winter morning. I've come here for privacy. I'm not sure how closely I'm going to be surveilled or whether they'll watch the house, but I'm taking as few chances as I can. I'm not a PI, and I'm not a fan of crime shows so I don't really know what is possible or likely in terms of surveillance. I figure the more distance I put between Justin and myself, the safer he'll be, but I'm worried about his mental state. He might be safer without me, but he needs me.

"Hey," says a sleepy voice at the end of the phone.

"Hey, Shannon. It's Axel," I reply. "Sounds like I woke you. Sorry."

"Hey, Axel! That's okay. Something up or did you just forget the time difference?" asks Shannon, yawning loudly into the phone.

“I need a favor,” I reply, and I fill him in on our situation.

“Jeez. That’s fucked up. But wait, isn’t conversion therapy banned now?”

“Not in all states. And yes, it’s totally fucked up. The cops were at my house this morning looking for him.”

“They gonna make him go back?”

“I guess, if his parents get their hands on him. He's still in school, so he's dependent on them.”

“Shit. That sucks. More than sucks actually.”

“Yeah. He’s only been there a couple of months and it’s already fucked with his head.”

“So, how can I help?”

“He needs a place to hide out until school ends next month. He wants to try and graduate. As long as he keeps turning in his assignments, he'll still be allowed to sit exams. He needs somewhere not connected to me or anyone he knows. I thought you guys might know someone in Melbourne. Conversion therapy is banned there, so probably better there than here.

There’s silence as Shannon thinks.

“I wasn’t in Melbourne long enough to make those sorts of connections, but let me ask Max.”

In the background, I hear the sound of someone grumbling, and Shannon’s voice.

“Wake up, babe, Axel’s on the phone. He needs our help.”

There’s more grumbling and then I hear Shannon explain the situation to Max, followed by a few moments of outraged ranting by Max. Shannon calms him down. There’s a moment of quiet discussion where I can’t hear what’s said, and then Shannon gets back on the phone.

“Max might have someone. What time is it there now?”

“9.15 in the morning.”

“Okay. Max is gonna make a call and I’ll ring you back.”

“Thanks, man. And I don’t need to tell you but...”

“Yeah, I can guess. Keep it on the down low. I get it. I’ll get back to you soon.”

We say goodbye and end the call.

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

Sydney

AXEL

“I think I’ll do some shopping today. Is there anything you want me to pick up for you?” I shout out to my mum, trying to act normal as I hurry to get myself ready to go out.

“No, thanks. All good,” comes the reply, so I head straight out.

I drive a good distance to get to a large shopping centre where I’m unlikely to encounter anyone who knows me, and where I can blend in with all the other shoppers. Maybe I’m just paranoid, but I can’t help wondering what lengths Justin’s family will go to in order to locate him.

I buy two cheap pre-paid mobile phones. It worries me that I have to provide ID to buy them, but real burner phones aren’t available in Australia, at least not at short notice, so I have no choice. I just hope that using a different phone number will be enough.

I pick up a few other things. Clothes in smaller sizes than my own, a sleeping bag, toiletries, and some snacks.

I’m driving back when Shannon calls me.

“Hey, Axel, good news. Max’s...”

“Stop! Don’t say anything,” I almost shout. “Just give me a minute. I’m driving. I’ll call you back.”

Shannon hangs up. After I’ve pulled over and killed the engine, I call him back – on one of my new phones.

“Hey,” I say, when he answers. “Sorry about that. This is my new number. Don’t want to use the other one in case, I don’t know, they track it or something.”

“Do you think they would?”

“I honestly don’t know. But the police are involved, and I think his family have money, so... maybe? His family are serious enough about this that they sent him interstate to get round the illegality of what they’re doing, so who knows.”

“Better safe than sorry, right?”

“Yeah, and the thing is, he’s already a mess. They’ve screwed with his brain big time. I can’t let them get to him again.”

“I know. That shit can really mess people up. Fuckwits. There’s a reason it’s illegal.”

“Anyway, so this is my new number, but keep it on the DL.”

“Of course.”

“Okay, what’ve you got for me?”

“Max’s grandma lives in Melbourne. When Max explained the situation to her, she said he was welcome to stay with her as long as he needs.”

“I thought Max’s family had disowned him?”

“His parents have, yeah, but his grandma’s chill. She’s been his safe haven a few times. That’s where he went when I...” Shannon’s voice trails away. He doesn’t like thinking about the time he broke Max’s heart, and he still beats himself up about it. “God, I was such a dick.”

In the background, I hear a voice say gently, “Move on, babe. I have.” I think I hear the sound of kissing.

“Anyway,” Shannon resumes a moment or two later, after I’ve had to listen to some disgusting slurpy sounds, “he can stay with her. And she understands the situation and that he needs to stay under the radar.”

Relief sweeps over me and I let out the mother of all sighs.

“Oh, thank god.”

“No, thank Max. Or thank his grandma when he gets there,” Shannon chuckles, then grows serious. “Good luck, man. I hope your guy makes it out of this okay. I’ll text you the details, okay? And let me know if there’s anything else we can do. We’re both pretty steamed up over this.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Shannon ends the call, and as promised, texts through a name and address. As I head back to the peninsula, I consider the logistics of getting Justin there safely. He can’t get on a plane or any form of public transportation because of the risk of being recognized, since he’s now a missing person. That leaves only one option that I can think of. Someone has to drive him. And because I don’t trust anyone to protect him more than I will, that someone will have to be me.

Closer to home, but not at the shopping village where they know me, I pull into a parking space next to an Italian restaurant and pick up the two large pizzas I called ahead for.

It's early afternoon and Justin must be hungry and wondering where I am. A sudden thought sends chills down my back.

What if he's not there when I get back? What if the shame and the guilt and all the twisted emotions they've heaped on him came back while I was gone and he decided I wouldn't want him, couldn't want him?

Fuck. I have to get to him. Panic starts to overtake me, and I break out in a cold sweat. I've been away from him too long already. My hands are shaking as I navigate the bends and pull up in the little carpark behind the Sandy Point beach, at a safe distance from the boatsheds.

I grab the pizzas and a couple of my shopping bags and hurry along the road and down the back entrance to the sheds. I can hear voices in the distance, but I can't see anyone, and I conclude there must be people further down the beach. It's all clear around the boatsheds, though, and I don't hesitate as I take the last few steps to the old shed.

I put the pizzas and bags down with trembling hands, and after looking around to make sure there's no-one to see me, prise open the loose boards and frantically look inside. My eyes take their time adjusting to the gloom after the bright sunlight. At first, I can't see anything. It's all quiet in the shed, and for an awful moment I think he's gone.

Then I see him, a pale shadow slumped against the wall, in virtually the same place I left him. He seems to be sleeping.

The tension drains out of me in relief and maybe I sigh, because I catch a glint of white as he opens his eyes.

“Justin?” I whisper.

“Axel?”

The relief in his voice matches my own, and he scrambles to his feet as I climb into the shed as quickly as I can, bringing the pizzas and bags.

I rush to him and embrace him fiercely. He hugs me back and we stay like that for a long time. I can feel his heart pounding against my chest, and the faint tremble that shakes his body mirrors the shaking of my own.

“Fuck,” I whisper into his neck. “I was afraid you wouldn’t wait for me, that you’d be gone when I came back.”

Justin lets out a choked sound and holds me tighter. Then after a minute, he releases his grip, and pulling away a little, gifts me one of those sweet smiles I remember so well.

“No. I knew you’d come back,” he says, “you left something valuable behind.” He fingers the neck chain I’d placed around his neck that morning.

It’s not really funny, but I smile anyway. He’s trying. A little bit of the Justin I know is coming back. He just needs time, and love, and a whole lot of therapy.

“That’s not the only thing I left behind,” I chide him, playfully, “and you know it.”

Suddenly, he wrinkles his nose.

“Is that pizza ?” he sounds excited.

“Yep. Thought you might be hungry by now.”

“I am now. Pizza. My favorite!”

“I thought I was your favorite.”

“Mmm, yeah, you are. After pizza.”

We share a smile, then make a picnic of it, sitting on the towel in the musty shed, the pizza boxes open in front of us. Justin moans as he chews the first mouthful of pizza, and I wonder how long it is since he ate properly. We sneak slices from each other’s pizza, and feed each other, and for a while we manage to block the rest of the world out.

It can’t last though. There are things we have to take care of.

“Is this one of Giovanni’s?”

“No. I didn’t want to stop somewhere people recognize me.”

After we’ve eaten as much as we’re going to for now – given how thin he is, Justin hasn’t been eating much for a long time and his stomach must have shrunk – and we’ve polished off a couple of bottles of water, Justin leans against me with a sigh, and briefly closes his eyes.

“Thank you,” he whispers.

“Anything for you,” I pull him tighter against my side and kiss his head. “Thank you for coming to me.”

“Always,” he says to me, opening his eyes and looking at me with such faith and love that it rocks me to my core.

This time I kiss his beautiful lips. They move softly against mine and part for me, as my tongue slides in and caresses his. His tears wet my cheeks, but he doesn’t withdraw or retreat, instead kisses me back fervently, as though he’s starving for affection or reassurance.

I run my hands up his back, but the fabric is between me and him. I want to be closer, need to be closer. My fingers find the hem of the t-shirt, and I pull back from the kiss briefly.

“Is this okay?” and I tug a little at the hem. He gets my meaning.

“Yes,” but he turns slightly troubled eyes to me.

“I don’t think so.” I drop my hand, but he grabs it and places it back on the bottom of his shirt.

“Yes. Please Axel, help me get past this,” he entreats, eyes pleading.

I cup his face with my other hand and whisper, “I’m afraid of making things worse.”

He shakes his head. “You won’t do that. I’m safe with you. I can’t say it will be easy, but... just let me be me.”

I understand then. He needs me to treat him as if he’s not broken – because that’s what they’ve told him he is.

He doesn’t need me to fix him – he’ll get a professional to help him sort out the stuff in his head.

He just needs me to love him - to show him that he is lovable despite what they've told him – and to be his safe place when he falls apart.

I can do that.

I run my hand up under his t-shirt, over the soft skin that trembles at my touch, and I hold him close and with my kiss and my touch, try and show him all the things that are in my heart.

Sandy Point

JUSTIN

My relief when Axel pokes his head into the shed is, well, indescribable . I knew he would come back when he could, but I was afraid.

The police were at his house, searching for me apparently. What would they say to him? Would they try and convince him to hand me in? I'm not worried that he actually would, but what have I dragged him into? And what if they found me? They'd take me back to my family, I suppose. I hadn't done anything wrong. But my family would just send me back to that place and I don't think I could escape a second time and I don't think I could survive another stint there.

It's been a long day, just waiting. Waiting and wondering and worrying. At one stage I have to take a piss, and fortunately find a rusty old tin to do it in, all the time trying to be as quiet as I can. I certainly don't want to attract any attention. Yeah, it's been the longest day. But Axel is here now, finally, and I'm so pleased to see him I almost forget about everything else. Almost.

I don't realize how hungry I am until I smell pizza, and it almost brings me to tears. It's a little bit of normality in a world which has been turned on its head.

I say a silent prayer of thanks to whatever powers of the universe helped me find my way to him. I try not to think about the what ifs ...what if I hadn't tried to see him one more time? What if he hadn't come home last night?

But I'm here, he's here. And the miracle of it all is the way he looks at me, the way he holds me and kisses me. I know my brain is totally scrambled at the moment, but one thing I do know. This is real. Axel does care about me, and he doesn't think I'm shameful or broken or anything like that. And if I keep him as my point of reference, I can keep myself from drowning in the lies they've fed me.

I'm not broken, just confused.

After we've eaten and kissed and cuddled, and I feel relaxed and safe again, Axel unpacks the bags he's brought with him.

He's brought two new phones, and hands one to me.

"This one's yours. And this is one I'll keep just for communicating with you. We should keep them separate from everything else. Let me text you, and you can save my number in your contacts."

"Okay."

Ping.

"Fuck! I should have put it on silent," growls Axel in a half-whisper.

I switch the phone into silent mode and save his number in contacts straight away.

"Are you... are you worried they'll ask for your phone?"

Axel nods. "It makes sense. They already think I know where you are, or that you'll contact me, so, yeah, I think they will ask for it at some point."

He's also brought me clothes that fit better than his which hang way too big on me. I

can't help the tears that well up. His care and concern are overwhelming. I can't believe how good he is to me. Despite everything they told me at the Centre, Axel does care for me.

"What?" he asks.

I hug him. "I can't believe everything you're doing for me," I whisper, my head against his shoulder.

"Of course, I am. I'd be a useless sort of boyfriend if I didn't help you when you needed it," he retorts, though he keeps his voice soft and low.

"Are we still boyfriends then?"

"Of course. Though to be honest, I thought you'd dumped me when I didn't hear from you for months. I never stopped loving you though."

"I swear I wrote to you."

"I know. It's okay. I believe you," he says reassuringly and rubs gentle circles on my back. "We're together now. I missed you so much..."

"Now what, though? I'm basically on the run."

"Only until you turn nineteen, then you'll have the means to look after yourself, right? And I have a plan."

I'm relieved he thinks there's a way out of this. He sits down and pulls me down onto the floor beside him, where the cold of the wooden planks seeps through my pants, making me shiver.

“I’m going to take you to Melbourne,” he starts. “You can stay with my friend’s grandmother. You’ll be safe there. And she’s an ally. She looked after my friend when his parents rejected him.”

“Because he’s...?”

“Yes. He came out to his parents, and they tossed him out. But his grandma’s cool. She knows your situation and she’s happy to let you stay there as long as you need.”

“Wow, that’s really nice of her. Especially as she doesn’t even know me.” I’m shocked and overwhelmed at the generosity of someone who is a stranger, a relative of a friend of a friend. It’s heartening to know there is support out there. I had felt so alone in the Centre.

“When you turn 19, you won’t be dependent on your parents anymore and they can’t make you go back. I can lend you money if you need it until the inheritance gets paid. So this is just for a couple of months. You’ll have to lie low though... you won’t be able to leave the house or tell any of your friends where you are.”

“I don’t care about that,” I hasten to assure him. “And it’s not that long anyway.”

“That’s what I thought,” Axel smiles and kisses me.

“How will I get down there?” I frown, wondering about the logistics of getting from here to there without being picked up by security cameras or police or something.

“I’ll drive you,” Axel replies.

“Um, if they really believe I’ll come to you, won’t they be watching your house or your car?”

“Maybe. But I've already thought of that. We won't go in my car. I've got an idea about that, but I have to make a phone call after I leave here.”

“Okay. When... when do you want to leave?”

“I think we need to get out of here as soon as possible. I'm sure the cops will be back. If I can get things sorted in time, I'd like to leave in the early morning.”

Suddenly I'm exhausted. The last few days have been physically and emotionally draining, and the prospect of continuing on the run is daunting.

“Can you stay for a bit?” I ask him.

Axel must sense my fear and exhaustion, because he doesn't argue, just unrolls the sleeping bag that he's brought with him, unzips it and lays it on the hard floor.

“C'mon, let's lie down for a while. I don't have to go yet.”

We lie down together and he holds me close. I rest my head on his shoulder, one arm around his chest, and we stay like that for a long time, without speaking. Silence has always been comfortable between us, and it still is now.

I relax into the warmth of his body against mine, the strength of his arms holding me, the soothing steady beat of his heart. The future is uncertain, but right here, right now, I'm safe and I'm loved.

Farewell

JUSTIN

It's after dark when I hear soft footsteps in the sand outside. I'm bundled up in the sleeping bag for warmth and I try not to move, not to make a sound, holding my breath until I know who's there.

Then a moment later, a whisper. "Justin?"

The air rushes out of me in a woosh of relief.

It's Axel.

The loose boards creak loudly as they're twisted open, and then Axel is inside and we fall into each other's arms.

"We're leaving in the morning," he whispers. "It's all sorted."

I don't say anything, just hold on tight, the fabric of his shirt fisted in my hands, eyes shut, breathing in the scent of him. It's soothing, calming. I feel some of the tension flow out of me. My body has been on high alert every moment I've been here alone in the shed. Now my heart rate gradually slows, my muscles ease. It's not until I lose the tension that I realize how tight my muscles have been.

Reluctantly, I draw back. I've spent so many months without him, fearing I'd lost him, that I can barely prise my hands off him now, scared to let go, but we have to

keep moving.

“We need to take everything. You won’t be coming back here,” Axel says. I’ve already changed into the clothes he brought for me earlier - moving so quietly in case there was anyone around outside - and packed his into one of the bags, so there’s only a few things left to collect: the sleeping bag, the leftover food, the towel, the spare clothes.

When finally I climb out of the musty shed, I draw in a deep breath of the chill night air. It hits my lungs like a shower of icicles. Yes, it’s cold, but it feels wonderful breathing in that fresh air. After the rank, stale air in the boatshed it’s like paradise, not that I could be anything but thankful for the refuge the shed has provided me.

We walk quietly along the foreshore, the sand cool beneath our feet. The moon hasn’t yet risen and it’s dark except for the stars, the lights in some of the houses along the shore, and at the end of the lane, the streetlights casting lonely circles of golden glow.

I thought we’d go straight to his house, but Axel leads me instead to the beach near the laneway. He lays out the beach towel and pulls me down to sit on it beside him.

He speaks in a subdued voice.

“It’ll be a while before we get back to the beach again. Let’s just take a minute to enjoy it.”

We sit there, breathing in the slightly salty air and watching the dark shadows bobbing at their moorings in the water out in front of us. In the distance, we can hear music playing. Further down to our left where the estuary divides into two, we see lights from the distant houses.

Axel puts an arm around me.

“Do you remember that night we went down to the beach on my motorbike? The first time.”

“Yes. Of course. How could I forget that?”

“That was a perfect night,” he says softly.

“Well, it was for me,” I chuckle, remembering. “You kind of missed out.”

“No, I didn’t,” he corrects me gently. “I had you all to myself and we were falling in love. It was a perfect night.”

“You didn’t come.”

“And you know why. I was totally okay with that. Besides you gave me some mental images to think about while I was getting myself off later.”

“Oh, you thought about me then?” It gives me a little thrill to know he was jerking off to thoughts of me. And you know, a little less alone. I’m not the only one.

“Of course.” Axel says it like it’s a given. “Don’t I always?”

I’m glad it’s dark and he can’t see the color rushing into my cheeks. I can feel the heat of it though.

But then a niggling concern scratches at the back of my mind, a judgmental voice trying to intrude on my thoughts. It’s the same critical voice that’s been picking at my self-worth for weeks – my voice, but not my words. I silence it. I will not let them win. I won’t let them steal away my time with Axel. My brows scrunch up tight.

“Are you okay?” There’s a sudden look of concern in Axel’s eyes. “Was that too

much?”

“I’m fine.” It’s only half a lie.

“Un-huh.” He sounds skeptical.

“I am, really. Just... there’s a lot of noise in my head. I have to keep shutting it down.”

It’s hard to explain, but Axel seems to understand. He gives my shoulder a squeeze.

“We’ll get you a therapist in Melbourne,” he promises. “That will help.”

I smile gratefully at him, though in the darkness I’m not sure he can see. I lay my head on his shoulder.

“Doesn’t matter what they did to my brain,” I whisper, “I still love you.”

He finds my lips with his, and murmurs “I love you too.”

Time to Go

JUSTIN

When the alarm goes off in the morning, I'm confused. It's still dark outside, it's comfortable in bed, and I have Axel's warm body up against mine. Why would I want to move? Everything is perfect. I know it's Axel pressed against me, because I recognize his scent, and I think that's the only reason I don't freak out when I realize I'm in bed with a man.

I wait for the rising panic and shame, but it doesn't come this morning, for which I'm grateful. Yes, I do feel some unease, but I'm able to push that feeling away.

Axel stirs beside me and turns off the alarm. He sits up and when he turns to me, his torso is on display, all firm muscle and smooth skin. A flush rises up my neck as I realize I'm staring, and I drop my eyes self-consciously, but Axel is having none of that.

He takes my hand and places it on the blankets over his crotch. Even through the covers, I can feel his erection. It matches the one I'm sporting too.

"Don't ever doubt that I want you," he says, leaning across and caressing the side of my face with one hand. I turn my head and kiss his palm, but I don't say anything.

"How are you feeling this morning?" he asks gently, removing my hand and taking it in one of his.

“Better than I have for a long time,” I reply. “At least I didn’t freak out this morning.”

He smiles. “That’s true. Progress, right?” Then he frowns, “But don’t worry if it happens again. Trauma’s a bitch. Has a nasty way of biting you again when you least expect it.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I just want you to know... I won’t judge. I don’t expect any of this will be easy. But no matter what, I’ll be here for you.”

I nod and bite my lip. I wish he didn’t have to see me like this though, so uncertain and, well, damaged. When I think about the other morning, I’m so embarrassed. I know I probably shouldn’t be, but since when does logic have anything to do with feelings?

“So, um, is there anything I can do for you this morning?” Axel looks knowingly at the covers where I’m hiding my own erection.

I like that he’s checking for consent, but with what I’ve been through recently I’d prefer he take charge of the situation. With the guilt and the shame that’s been heaped on me, I don’t know if I can ask for what I need.

Axel slides a hand under the covers, under the waistband of my pajamas and rests it on my thigh.

“Let’s try it this way,” he pauses. “Tell me if this is not ok.”

I simply nod and shift slightly to encourage his hand to go further. I want this, even if I have some conflicting feelings about it. But I know they’re not my real feelings, because I was fine with way more than this before they messed with my head.

“Do you want me to take control?” Axel asks frowning, the look he’s giving me a mixture of concern and affection. I'm glad he's worked it out.

“Yes. Please.”

Axel gently pushes me back down onto the bed, and taking both my hands together, pins them down onto the pillow above my head, holding me in place, albeit so gently I could easily get away if I wanted. But this way, if I need to, I can pretend I'm not choosing this, that it's out of my hands. I don't know yet if I'll need to do that, but even if it's not a very healthy coping mechanism, at least I have it.

Axel's warm hand slides over my hard dick. I tense up briefly, but in my head I tell myself to relax and allow myself to enjoy this. This is Axel, after all, the one person in my world I know I can trust. I allow my eyes to flutter closed and give myself over to the pleasure.

My cock stiffens further in his grasp, as he strokes me lazily. I moan softly. It’s been so long and this feels so good. I hadn’t realized how much I needed it.

Axel withdraws his hand which elicits a protest from me, but he shifts beside me, pushes my pajamas down, slides his cock against mine and wraps his hand around both of them.

My brain does a little short-circuit and all my awareness focusses on the point of connection with his hand, as he strokes us harder and faster. It feels amazing, our cocks sliding against each other, the friction of his hand stroking up and down. My hips move in time with his strokes, pushing into his hand, and he does the same as the tension builds and grows until we’re both straining and moaning softly and when he slides his thumb across my slit and smears the precum across both our heads, I can’t hold back and with a couple of violent thrusts come all over his hand, forgetting that we need to be quiet, until he swallows my cry with a kiss. A few thrusts later, Axel

emits a deep guttural groan, his movements stuttering as he follows me over the edge.

My head is still spinning as Axel releases my hands and pulls me onto him into an embrace. Gradually, the frantic racing of our hearts slows, and our ragged breathes become slow and steady.

Afterwards, Axel asks me, “Are you okay? Was that...”

“So good. Didn’t realize how much I needed that. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He kisses me. Then he waggles his eyebrows at me. “Happy to help you out anytime.”

Brrrrrr! Brrrrrr! Brrrrrr!

The annoying sound of the alarm interrupts our post-sex haze.

“Shit!” exclaims Axel. “We need to get going.”

He kisses me. “Come on, up you get!”

I want nothing more than to lie in bed and go back to sleep. Why do we have to get up this early? Clearly sex has wiped my brain, because it takes me a moment or two to figure it out but when I finally do, I’m out of bed faster than I can think.

We take turns in the bathroom cleaning up, and grab the bags Axel packed the night before. There’s no-one around to see us leave the house and we hurry out into the brisk morning air. It’s so cold this morning that we make little white clouds with every exhale, and the windows and mirrors of the car Axel has parked in his driveway out of sight of the road, are all fogged. Axel opens the back door.

"Get in and lie down out of sight," his voice is so low I barely hear him, but his intention is clear. If anyone does see him driving, he wants it to appear as if he's alone. I do as he says.

Axel uses his elbow to clear the fog from the side mirror. He's about to get in the driver's door, when he pauses. He leans in.

"Wait here a moment," he whispers. "There's one more thing I have to do before we leave. I'll be right back."

Then he's gone, and I hear the sound of his footsteps heading back to the house.

Time drags while I wait. I'm nervous that something will go wrong. That Axel's mum will wake up and put a stop to this. Or she'll call the police. Or... I don't know, just... anything.

I realize my breathing has become shallow and fast, and I'm in danger of having a panic attack. I focus on my breathing, trying to slow it down, and blocking out thoughts of anything else. The last thing we need is for me to freak out right now. Breathe in through the nose, 1 2 3 4, breathe out through the mouth, 1 2 3 4. Over and over.

After what feels like forever, Axel climbs into the car, and something lands on the passenger seat beside him with a thwack! He seems upset, but doesn't say anything, just starts the car and backs out of the driveway.

"Something wrong?" I query from where I'm slouched down in the backseat.

"Yeah. But I don't want to talk about it right now. It doesn't change anything we're doing. Don't worry."

Of course, I do worry. But I know better than to push him. He'll tell me when he's ready. Right now, we just need to get out of here.

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

Road Trip – Sydney to Albury...and a bit further

AXEL

Once we are safely beyond the outlying suburbs of western Sydney, and in the relative quiet of the Southern Highlands, I pull over and Justin jumps into the front passenger seat.

In Melinda's car, with Sydney behind us and just the long road ahead, the likelihood of being noticed by the police is low, unless I get myself pulled over for something foolish, like speeding. Justin slept for the first part of the journey, and now we're on the open road he seems relaxed and playful. It's like we're on a road trip for fun, rather than one to escape hell.

Kilometers and kilometers of bushland and rolling green hills covered in livestock, rocks or thistles, pass behind us. Not all of the farmers are keeping their paddocks in good shape! I'm not a farmer but I do know what a thistle is and I'm sure it can't be good to have your paddocks covered in weeds!

The road curves towards a large installation of wind generating turbines located on a hill. Dominating the landscape, they grow in size and loom over us menacingly as we approach. Their immense size makes us feel insignificant as the road winds between them.

The highway goes on. Hours and hours of asphalt pass beneath our tyres and still there's further to go.

By early afternoon, we reach Albury, and I decide it's as far as I want to drive in one day. It will be our last night alone for some time, and I want us to share some time together before Justin goes into serious hiding. I hesitate before taking the exit, as a thought occurs to me. Well, two thoughts really. We're still in New South Wales where conversion therapy is legal. And it's also where the police are looking for Justin. Albury and Wodonga are twin cities, one on each side of the border. If we just drive that extra five minutes, we can get into Victoria.

I make the decision. Wodonga, it will be.

Internally, I relax a little as we cross the border. Some of the tension eases from my shoulders. Maybe it's just psychological, but I feel safer now we've left my home state.

We pull off the by-pass, and I drive around until I locate a small family-run motel on the outskirts of town that has a 'Vacancy' sign. Pulling into the driveway, I park undercover next to a screen door where battered adhesive lettering spells 'Reception', with some of the letters starting to peel off.

Leaving Justin in the car, I open the screen door. A small bell jangles.

Reception consists of a small office, nothing more than a high counter with a desk and a chair. Beyond, a door opens from the house behind and a tinny cacophony of noise blasts through the doorway from a TV in the background.

A middle-aged man dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and a battered pair of jeans comes through. His face is somewhat weary and lined, but not unfriendly.

"Good afternoon," I say. "I need a room for the night. I saw your sign outside...?"

"How many people?"

“Two,” I reply.

“How many beds?” he asks, and I see what I didn’t notice before. There’s a security camera in the carport, and the guy is looking at the screen right now. The camera must be facing straight at the car, probably to get a good picture of the license plates, but the camera sees straight through the windscreen and there’s a very clear picture of Justin now showing on a screen on the reception desk.

Wodonga is a large enough town, and close to Melbourne, but it’s still pretty rural. I don’t know if two gay guys would have a problem here, and I don’t want to attract any attention at all.

“Um...” I only hesitate a moment before answering, but it must be enough to give me away.

“We’re a family establishment, a respectable establishment, and we’re proud of our family values,” he tells me, and I’m sure he’s about one second away from telling me to get the hell off his property.

But he doesn’t.

“Everyone is welcome,” he continues. “And we don’t stick our noses in other people’s business. We’ve got rooms with one large bed, or two. Or interconnecting rooms. We’re only half full at the moment because it’s low season. You’re welcome to take whichever setup suits your situation.”

I blink. “Um, thanks. Well, a room with one large bed then.”

“No problem,” the man replies, and hands me a form to fill out. It’s the guest registration.

I fill in the car registration plate... that's not a problem, there's no reason Melinda's car registration would ping anywhere if someone did run a check on it.

But the next few lines are a problem. Name and address, and then credit card for payment. Fuck, he's probably going to want to sight ID.

"Ah. I'll pay cash up front."

He looks at me and nods understandingly. Then he pulls the registration form towards himself, and writes JOHN SMITH in the name, and NFI for the address.

"That work for you?" he enquires, cocking his eyebrow at me.

"Yeah. Thanks," I reply sheepishly.

"Like I said, everyone's welcome here."

He takes my money and hands me a key.

"Room 17. Down the driveway and turn first left, second room from the end. It's quiet this time of year. There's no-one else down there. You boys make as much noise as you like."

"Oh. Er, thanks."

As I turn to go, he adds quietly, "My uncle came out a few years ago. And a cousin of mine – a decent bloke - is in jail. Everyone's entitled to have someplace they feel safe. Reception opens at 7am, but if you leave before that, there's a box on the wall outside to put the key."

Then he turns and goes back through the doorway into the other part of the house.

The door bangs shut.

Justin looks up hopefully as I get in the car.

“Here.” I toss the room key into his lap and start the car.

The room is easy to locate and set towards the end of the motel, which is a series of separate buildings. It’s probably a bit early for check-in, but even so, the motel does seem very quiet.

Our room is basic, clean and simple, and it’s all we need. There’s a bedroom with an ensuite, and a separate living room that opens out the back to a shared porch. We toss our bags in the bedroom and wander out the back door to check out our surroundings.

Our room opens out onto a paddock, where a family of ducks is floating around on a dam. A couple of horses graze nearby, and as far as the eye can see, it’s green grass and paddocks.

Justin heaves a sigh of relief as we look out over the peaceful scene. His nostrils flare as he breathes in the fresh scent of country air, visibly relaxing in front of my eyes.

“We could almost be the only ones here,” he sighs, resting his head on my shoulder.

“I think we pretty much are. The guy at reception said we could make as much noise as we like.”

Justin gives me a mischievous grin – hell, that’s a dirty grin. In this moment I’m seeing the old Justin again.

“Is that right?” is all he says, but I like where his mind is. Truth is, I like even better that he seems to be getting back to being the guy I knew, not the one constantly plagued by all the negative self-talk and doubt. I know it’s early days yet, and it’s too soon to think he’s recovering, and there will be setbacks but if he can joke about sex, it’s a hopeful sign.

“That’s what he said,” I play it cool, like I haven’t caught on to his innuendo.

“Maybe we should test that out,” Justin suggests. “You know, just to be sure.”

Mentally I urge him to make the first move, but he still can’t. It’s disappointing, but I can’t expect too much too soon. It’s devastating to witness the impact on his confidence. He didn’t used to be afraid to take the lead.

I take his hand and lead him to the bedroom.

Wodonga

JUSTIN

Axel leads me to the bedroom and I follow willingly. I hate that I'm not able to initiate anything myself right now, but Axel seems to understand. He also seems to know what I need, and for the next two hours we make each other sweaty, dirty and loud .

Axel rolls off me, after coming for the second time, this time on my back. After the hand jobs we've been giving each other, I think we've proven without doubt there's no-one within earshot. At least, no-one game enough to knock on our door and complain. We don't take things any further than that because I think we both know this is as far as I can go right now. I'm running on adrenaline, but there are uncomfortable feelings rolling around in the background, and a sense of unease. At some point these feelings are going to have to be dealt with, but for the moment we need to keep up the pretense that everything is okay.

Axel comes back from the bathroom with a warm washcloth and cleans me up, but I'm already half out of it. I must have fallen asleep, because some time later when I open my eyes, I'm surprised to find myself alone and Axel nowhere to be seen.

I lie in bed, taking stock of how I feel, and surprisingly, I feel good. I feel sated... and I feel loved. That feeling keeps me warm and comfortable in bed for a while longer, until curiosity over where Axel is makes me restless.

Carefully I get out of bed. Pulling on clothes, because yes, it is cold here, I wander

out in bare feet to the living room.

Axel is sitting outside on the back porch and he doesn't hear me approach. There's something about his posture that disturbs me. He's hunched over, head in his hands and he's... shuddering?

"Axel?" My voice sounds uncertain and small even to my own ears.

He looks up and I see his red-rimmed eyes and wet streaks down his cheeks. He looks at me with such pain and heartbreak in his eyes, and it frightens me. What is going on?

Axel gets up and comes to me, wrapping his arms around me and holding me suffocatingly close to his chest. The fabric of his shirt rasps across my nose.

"I'm so, so, sorry," he whispers. "I had no idea you were going through all of that. I would have found a way to get to you if I'd known."

I can't see over his shoulder, but he shifts and I see around him to the table. I recognize the misshapen envelopes lying there.

"You found them? Where were they?"

He swallows hard, and sniffs. He doesn't answer for a few moments.

"I wish I didn't have to tell you this," he starts, but continues brokenly, "I found them in my mother's desk. She hid them from me."

It feels like a slap in the face. I can't help myself. I step back from him. The sense of betrayal is profound. It's not Axel's fault, but... I... I have to get away, I need some time to process this.

“Give me a minute,” I mutter, and stumble into the bedroom. I push the door shut hard behind me, so Axel doesn't follow. I need a few moments alone.

Supporting myself against the wall, I draw in some deep breaths. For a few minutes I'm back there... the taunting, the shaming, the deprivation, and the overwhelming sense of emptiness and despair. There's a loud buzzing in my ears and my vision goes, and I realize I'm about to pass out. I sink to the ground and put my head between my knees. I focus all my thoughts on my breathing, in 2 3 4, out 2 3 4, in 2 3 4, out 2 3 4...

Eventually I come back to myself. I take in a few deep cleansing breaths and open my eyes. The panic attack has passed. My heart rate slows its frenetic pace and I rest my head wearily against the wall.

It's then that I remember that Axel is hurting too.

Fuck!

I jump to my feet, a little faster than is wise, and have to steady myself against the wall again as my head spins, before going out to find him.

He's back outside, where he was sitting before, in almost the same posture as I found him last time. His shoulders are heaving as he quietly sobs. This discovery has gutted him and I feel a sense of shame that I ran away from him.

I plonk myself down in his lap and hold him close.

“I'm sorry,” I murmur. “I know it's not your fault. Everything is just so messed up.”

He doesn't say anything, just kisses me fiercely. I taste the salt of his tears mingled with the familiar taste of his mouth and I hold on tight.

We hold each other and reduce our world to just the two of us, perhaps the only thing that makes sense right now. He holds me like he's afraid to let me go.

Eventually, it grows colder outside as the evening closes in. I shiver in Axel's lap.

"Let's go in," I say softly, and rising to my feet, I hold out my hand and lead him inside. This time I lead him to the bedroom, help him take his clothes off, and pull him into the bed and under the covers.

We're lying there holding each other, when Axel breaks the silence.

"I wondered why you weren't wearing the Scorpius I gave you," he says.

"They took all my jewellery when I was admitted," I tell him. "They said jewellery was for girls."

"Figured it was something like that."

We lie there in silence, until the sounds of Axel's even breathing tells me he's gone to sleep. The last few days have been emotional, and there are some hard ones ahead. I'm not looking forward to living in a stranger's house and Axel walking out of my life again so soon, but I know there's no alternative, so I push those worries out of my head.

Tomorrow we'll talk, and tomorrow we'll do what needs be done. Just another month and a half and they can't force me back. But my life is fucked up anyway. I probably won't get my final year of secondary school... I've missed too much of the year already. Which means, university is out of reach.

I wrap an arm around the warm body next to me and try to hold back the feelings of despair, until sleep finally claims me.

Wodonga – Next Morning

AXEL

I wake in the very early morning, starving because we didn't eat dinner before falling asleep last night. Beside me, Justin is still asleep, curled up against my side. Even though it's something out of my control, I feel ashamed that my mother was a part of the conspiracy to isolate Justin, forcing him to endure the horrors that he did for the last months. I wonder how much she knew about what was happening. Not that it changes her culpability much, but if she knew about the whole gay conversion thing and went along with it... well, what does that say? What does that tell me about her relationship with me too?

Justin can't have been sleeping deeply, because when I sigh, he rolls over, the mattress shifting beneath us.

"What's up?" he asks me, as if he hasn't a clue.

"Just thinking," I say. "I can't believe my mother did that. I..."

Justin shuts me up by leaning over and pressing his lips to mine.

"Let's not spoil our morning together," he murmurs. "While it's just you and me..." he trails off, and I realize he's probably trying not to think about the coming weeks. I wonder if I should even be leaving him in Melbourne.

Justin has a determined expression on his face. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows

hard and takes a deep breath. He looks a little conflicted.

“Are you...” I start, but he silences me with a wave of his hand.

“I want to try something,” he gulps. “I want to take control of my life.”

Before I can ask him what he means, he climbs on top of me. My dick is quick to respond, rapidly going hard, and I forget about words. Justin thrusts his hips and our cocks rub together. His hair tumbles around his face as he moves, and he has an expression of fierce concentration on his face. My heart swells just looking at him.

Then he slides down and positions himself between my legs, and his warm wet mouth opens and slides over my swollen cock.

I grunt and throw my head back deeper into the pillows. I want to watch him, but the sensations his sensual lips are bestowing on my cock are too much and my eyes shut of their own volition.

He sucks me and strokes me and plays with my balls until I’m quivering and gasping and dangerously close to my release. Then his fingers slip behind my balls, playing with the sensitive skin there and then there’s no holding back and I come in his mouth. Justin swallows it all down and licks his lips to catch any stray drops.

“S-s-sorry,” I stutter, out of breath and still out of my mind. “I should have warned you.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Justin replies with a grin. “You didn’t catch me by surprise. And I wanted it. Besides, I was hungry. I think you just fed me...”

“Idiot!” I pretend to cuff the side of his head, but I’m exhausted now, and I’m happy that he’s joking and silly about sex. I know his mood could change on a dime, but

right now he's relaxed and in a good headspace. While it lasts, I want to make him feel good.

"Let me take care of you."

I pull him up and roll him onto his back and wrap my hand around his dick which is hard and totally begging for relief if the fluid leaking from his slit is any indication. I stroke him slowly and gently at first, loving the feel of the silky skin contrasting with the hardness beneath. Touching him is so much better than touching myself. I could do this all day.

"Hurry up," Justin groans in protest at my leisurely pace. I don't want to hurry. I want to admire him and worship him, with my eyes and my lips and my body. Right here, right now, he's mine and there's nothing they've done or that they can do that changes that. Justin and I are bound together by the invisible ties that bind us to the one we love. He's already proven that by overcoming so much to be here with me.

But I don't want to torture him, even if it's a delicious torture, so I pick up the pace, and before long he's sobbing and begging and then finally, shouting as he finds his release.

Road Trip – Wodonga to Melbourne

JUSTIN

As we approach Melbourne, my sense of unease grows. I know this is happening for my safety, but the future is unknown and frightening. I'm about to be handed over to a stranger, and I'm going to be totally at their mercy, dependent on their discretion and their loyalty to whoever it is who's asked for this favor. My own family were happy enough to hand me over for conversion, so how much can I trust a stranger?

At least I'm in Victoria, where it's against the law to conduct this so-called conversion therapy, and now I know what the family has planned for me, I can resist. The first time, I had no idea what was happening to me. I just went along with everything until it was too late.

I look across at Axel. He's concentrating on driving, but he's also grown quieter as we approach the outer suburbs. Where yesterday we spent a lot of the drive relaxed and chatty as if we were on a road trip, today the atmosphere in the car is a lot more somber. I wonder if he's worried that this won't work out, or that we'll be caught, or maybe – and there's a little kernel of hope in my chest – he doesn't want to leave me.

It's late morning when we pull into the driveway of a quaint suburban house. Axel checks the address before we exit the car and walk up to the front door. I breathe in lungfuls of faintly salty air... we must be somewhere near the bay, I think. I was too absorbed in my worries to pay much attention as we drove through Melbourne. It won't matter anyway, as I won't be going out and about.

There's a mat on the doorstep, one of those ubiquitous bristle mats with WELCOME printed on it in large, faded letters. I hope the actual welcome won't fade too.

I'm trembling a little and I'm sure Axel notices, but he doesn't say anything, just puts his arm around my shoulders as we wait for someone to answer the doorbell. We hear slow footsteps make their way towards the door, and when at last it swings open, we're met by a grey-haired lady with a lined but friendly face. She looks carefully at us both then breaks into a wide, welcoming smile.

"Axel and Justin?" she asks, cheeks rounded and plumped up by the wide set of her smile. I notice she has gentle eyes. They're grey, like mine.

Axel nods.

"I'm Max's grandmother. I've been expecting you. I'm glad you made it down here safely. You can call me Gran, like Max does. Come inside."

Once inside, with the door locked, she takes a good look at me. I know how bad I look. The bathroom mirror at the motel was not complimentary. My face is pale, and there are dark circles under my eyes, and there's a faint but distinct tension tightening my face. It's easy to see which one of us is in trouble.

"You must be Justin," Gran enfolds me in a warm grandmotherly hug. "You poor boy. I don't know what your family was thinking. But don't you worry, you'll be safe here."

"It's really kind of you to take me in. Are you sure it's okay, though?" I ask, as I step back. "I have to stay in hiding until school finishes in about six weeks."

"Perfectly fine. If you're thinking there's nothing in this for me, you'd be wrong. I'm looking forward to having some company for the next month or so. Now Max is

living in Paris I don't get many visits anymore."

"I'm the black sheep of the family," she adds with a wink. "The rest of the family thinks I'm on the scandalous side, so they don't bother me too often."

Despite everything, I smile. Max's grandma seems like she'll be fun.

She turns to Axel.

"So, you're Axel? Max's friend." She says it more as a statement than a question.

"Yes. And Justin's boyfriend."

She doesn't skip a beat.

"Well, you're a good boyfriend to take care of him like this," she says.

"That's my job, isn't it? Wouldn't be much of a boyfriend if I didn't," he replies cheerfully. I can see he likes Gran and I do too.

"That's true. But it's not always the easy thing to do."

Axel just shrugs.

"Well, let's get you settled, and then we can have a cup of tea and make plans. Have you got bags?"

Axel nods. "I'll get them."

While he's fetching our backpacks, Gran shows me to my room. The walls are painted in a peaceful blue color, and there's a single bed, a dresser and a bookcase.

Filmy curtains cover the floor-to-ceiling glass that looks out onto a balcony with a stunning view of the bay. A beautiful salty breeze blows gently through the open window.

“This is Max’s room when he visits,” Gran says in her sing-song voice. “There are empty drawers in the dresser where you can put your things, Justin. Make yourself at home. This is your room for as long as you need it.”

“Thank you. It’s a beautiful room. It’s... peaceful.”

“Yes. This room has seen some stories over the years.” She sighs, a wistful expression flickering across her face, but she doesn’t elaborate on her comment.

Axel appears in the doorway with my backpack and puts it down inside. His eyes flick to the bed, and I can almost see what he’s thinking.

Gran turns to Axel.

“I assumed you’d stay at least one night before driving back to Sydney, so I’ve made up the other guest room for you. It’s down here.”

She leads the way to the other bedroom which is located a little further down the corridor and on the other side, facing the garden instead of towards the bay. It’s a storage room as well as a bedroom, as evidenced by the piles of laundry on the cupboards and the sewing machine in the corner. There’s also a large bed, at least a double, probably queen size.

“While you’re here, this is your room,” Gran says. Then adds nonchalantly, “My room is across the hall, but I sleep quite soundly, so I won’t hear if you move around in the night.”

I'm pretty sure she just gave us carte blanche to sleep together.

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

Gran's House, Melbourne

AXEL

After giving us a quick tour of the house that will be Justin's home for the next six weeks, Gran makes a pot of tea and we sit at the kitchen table to discuss the situation.

"Max has given me an outline of your circumstances, but why don't you fill me in on any details you think I need to know," Max's grandmother starts the conversation.

"Well, the police showed up at my place looking for Justin, so we think he's been reported a missing person," I explain.

"At your house? That's... interesting."

"Justin's grandparents must have figured out we were involved with each other."

"They did," inserts Justin. I give him a look. He hasn't mentioned this so far.

"My mother also knew, but she seemed uncomfortable with the police turning up. I don't think she would have called them," I continue. "Anyway, it means Justin needs to stay out of public view, you know, just in case someone recognizes him."

"You know gay conversion therapy or whatever name they use to conceal what it really is, is illegal in Victoria, don't you?"

"Yes, but they sent him interstate. It wasn't done here."

“It’s also illegal to send someone interstate for the purpose of giving them that therapy.”

“Didn’t stop them last time,” Justin points out. “If I get sent home, they’ll just do it again.”

“Well, you could report them to the police. What they did is a crime, not simply morally reprehensible.”

Justin looks bleak. “But they’re my parents, you know? If I report them, I’ll lose them. They won’t want anything to do with me anymore.”

Gran looks at him sympathetically.

“There’s no guarantee that won’t happen anyway,” she says softly. “You didn’t choose to be gay, and you can’t change it even if you wanted to, you could only ever pretend. Do you think they’ll come around and accept you the way you are?”

“I don’t know,” Justin answers in a small voice. “I always knew it wouldn’t be good if my family found out, but I hoped that maybe with time...”

“How did they find out? Did you come out to them?” I interrupt.

Justin gives me a sad look, his expression shuttered. I have the impression there’s some reason he doesn’t want me to know, and for a moment my heart freezes. Could he have been involved with someone else? We never specifically said we were exclusive, but I’d thought it was... implied?

Suddenly I don’t want to hear the answer anymore. I can’t deal with the bottom falling out of my world right here, right now. We need to focus on keeping Justin safe.

“It’s okay,” I amend quickly, “I don’t need to know.”

Maybe something of what I’m thinking shows on my face, because Justin reaches over and takes my hand.

“That last time at the airport,” he says quietly, “when I came home after mid-term holidays. My grandparents saw us together.”

My first reaction is overwhelming relief. Then guilt. Guilt that I’d misjudged him and jumped to the conclusion I had, and a second serve of guilt that I was the reason he’d been outed to his family. The conflicting emotions war inside me and I get lost in my head for a moment.

“Are you okay?” Justin asks anxiously.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. I just thought for a moment, that maybe you’d... you’d...” I can’t finish articulating it, but Justin’s eyes go wide. He’s understood.

“No, no! Of course not. Only you.” He’s emphatic. And he looks a little horrified, which just makes me feel even more guilty.

I’m sorry. I mouth the words.

He gives my hand a gentle squeeze. “It’s okay. Long distance is hard enough without all this other shit, oops, sorry, stuff going on.” His eyes glance to Gran as he apologizes for the slip. “And I can tell from your reaction that you haven’t been seeing anyone else either, so that’s a plus.” Justin shrugs. Then he adds softly, “I did wonder, when I was locked away for a couple of months and couldn’t contact you, whether you’d move on. Especially when you didn’t answer my letters.”

I hate the look on his face when he thinks about that place.

“I did write to you, you know. When you didn’t answer my emails, I wrote letters. But I sent them to your home address.” And clearly, if he never got them, the same thing that was happening in my household was also happening in his.

Still, even with what I know now, I cringe, remembering how needy and awkward it felt at the time, writing multiple letters to someone who didn’t seem to care enough to answer any of them.

But when it comes to Justin, I clearly have no pride; I will do anything.

And then I remember he’s just told me I accidentally outed him.

“I’m sorry you were outed because of me,” I say, apologetically.

“It wasn’t your fault. Just bad luck. But my grandparents must have called my parents immediately because by the time the flight landed, my phone had been cancelled and they drove me straight from the airport to the ReEducation Centre and checked me in. I had no idea what was happening. They told me some bullshit story about going for a holiday.”

His eyes go distant as he recalls the day that started his nightmare, and I’m afraid he’s going to have another panic attack. Gran must have seen it too because she jumps in.

“Well, you’re here now and we intend to keep you safe,” she says and immediately changes the topic to distract him.

We discuss plans, but really it’s very simple. Justin can only leave the house to go in the back yard, but otherwise he’s staying home for the next six weeks. He’s going to get in touch with one of his school mates who he can trust, and get him to send class notes and references, and he’s going to study like crazy to catch up. Gran will take care of the shopping and any errands that might become necessary, scarcely varying

her routine at all. Justin won't answer the door, or the house phone, and will stay out of sight if anyone comes to visit.

I'll stay the night and then drive home.

Gran excuses herself and heads to bed early this evening. I suspect she's just giving us privacy for our last night before we separate again.

We stay up late watching a movie on the couch, Justin resting his head in my lap. When the movie ends, we reluctantly get up and prepare to go to bed.

Things are awkward between us. I'm going, he's staying, and we're in someone else's house. We pause at the door to Justin's bedroom.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Another pause. We both look at each other. Justin bites his lip. I take a deep breath.

I don't know who moves first, but the next moment our lips come together in a fierce kiss, our tongues thrusting into each other's mouths, taking and giving, desperate for each other.

Our hands are roaming everywhere too. His. Mine. Seeking skin. Trying to get closer.

"Stuff it," I say, breaking momentarily from the searing kiss. I drag him towards my room and he comes willingly.

Once I have him inside, I reach around him with my foot and nudge the door closed. Backing him up, I press him against the wall with my body. Our erections rub against

each other through our clothes. Justin groans and I swallow the sound with my kiss.

We rut against each other, until Justin pulls away from the kiss, and begs me, “I want you to fuck me. Please.”

There’s nothing I want more. My cock is hard and leaking. I can already feel the wetness in my underwear. But...

“I don’t think we should.”

Justin looks at me desperately. “Please,” he begs.

“We were going to wait, remember?” I run my fingers through his hair. “Believe me, it’s not that I don’t want to.”

I take his hand and place it over my crotch, to prove my point.

“I want to. I’m not sure it’s a good idea though. Especially after what you’ve been through,” I say, but I feel myself wavering. A guy can only resist so much, especially as we’re about to be separated again.

“I want to,” insists Justin stubbornly, looking at me with eyes wide in appeal. “I’m fine. I just want to be normal. And I’m almost done with school now anyway. What’s the point in waiting another six weeks?”

It’s true, he has seemed mentally stable since we left Sydney. There have been no more distressed outbursts or tears, or moments of shame, at least as far as I can tell. Still, this is a significant step to take.... but maybe it’s okay. Maybe it’s what he needs.

I hope I’m not letting myself be convinced because it’s what I want.

Justin can see when I make up my mind, because he grins and launches himself at me, kissing me frantically. I run my hands up his sides and groan. He feels much too good to keep at a distance.

“We’re wearing too many clothes.”

We both start stripping off shirts and jeans and underwear, until we’re standing there completely naked, both of us hot, hungry and trembling.

Falling onto the bed, we continue making out as our hands trace over warm skin and we press ourselves against each other.

Justin trails wet, open-mouthed kisses down my neck and runs his hand down my chest. I arch into his touch, and as his hand goes lower, I tangle my legs with his, and flip him over. His beautiful slim body is laid out beside me, almost begging to be touched.

Licking my fingers, I place them over his right nipple and rub it. Justin responds with a broken sound as his nipple pebbles up. He’s so beautifully responsive. I lower my head and torment him, using my tongue to flick the nipple, teasing and torturing it with my tongue and teeth.

He groans, and from the way he’s arching into my mouth, he wants more. I back off.

“Oh!” he complains.

“Oh, you like that, do you?” I tease.

“Fuck. You know I do. Don’t be cruel,” he whines.

I run a finger down his chest and abdomen in a teasing caress. Then I take pity on

him and play with his other nipple until he's writhing and moaning on the bed.

Moving on, I kiss my way down his abdomen and lick and nibble around his hipbones and the creases where his pelvis meets his thigh. Justin squirms, twisting slightly, trying to bring his swollen cock to my mouth. I ignore him.

Justin moans his disapproval.

I lick my way down his thighs, then push them up so I have better access. Missing his balls and cock altogether, I lick the patch of skin behind them. Justin whimpers. My cock must like the sound, because it responds by leaking some more. It wants to be inside him, but we're not ready for that yet.

Pushing his thighs higher, my tongue finds his hole and I suck and lick him, savouring the unique taste of him and the sound of his increasingly desperate moans. I love this man and I want to give him everything, want to be as close as it's possible to be.

I need the lube but it's still in my backpack.

"Wait," I murmur, getting up and hurrying to get my supplies from the bag. I'm back in no time, but by then something has changed, and when I press my lubed finger against his hole, Justin tenses.

"Are you okay?" I check.

"Yes, keep going." Something in his voice doesn't sound right, but he wants me to keep going, and I'm hard as a rock, so I ignore my gut feeling. It's a big mistake.

My finger begins to enter him, but he doesn't move or say anything. He's gone completely still, and it's not anticipation or even discomfort. He doesn't stop me but I

feel very uneasy. Something is wrong. I know it. I can't ignore this.

I gently withdraw my finger.

“Justin, what’s going on?”

For a moment, he doesn’t respond. Then...

“I can’t do it,” he says brokenly, covering his face with his hands. He lets out a muffled sob. “I’m sorry. I really want to. But I just can’t.”

“It’s okay,” I tell him, “We don’t have to do anything.”

He pulls his legs up and hugs them to himself, sobbing brokenly into his knees, but when I go to comfort him, he moves away.

“Don’t touch me!”

It’s like a smack across the face and I flinch. Then he’s gone and the bathroom door rattles the frame as it slams shut, and I hear him retching, and then sobbing again.

The sound of Justin throwing up in the bathroom makes me feel ashamed. I slump on the end of the bed, feeling helpless. At some level I’m pretty sure this doesn’t have anything to do with me, or anything I’ve done wrong, but that doesn’t make me feel any better. What I was doing with him, doing to him, has made him throw up, for god’s sake! So yes, I feel shameful. I’ve never felt that way about sex in my life and it’s devastating. And now I understand a little, the terrible crushing weight he carries around with him since those bastards messed with him. He’s been doing a good job of suppressing it, until finally he couldn’t.

I’m depressed and defeated. I’ve let my own lust cloud my judgment and I’ve made a

big mistake. I should have realized he wasn't ready for this after what he's just endured. And I recognize we need to get him professional help as soon as possible. I hope that it's not too late for us. That I haven't become something, someone, that triggers him.

After some time, I become aware of silence in the bathroom. And a little while later I hear Justin's door click shut.

I'm alone and shut out. I want to go to him and talk to him, because I know he must be hurting and he's putting a wall up between us, but I have to respect his wishes and he clearly doesn't want to see me right now. Will that change, I wonder, or have I become someone who reminds him of things that make him feel ashamed?

Not knowing what else to do, I text.

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. Are you ok?

Please, please tell me you're okay.

After the longest time, he replies.

It's not your fault

Can we talk? I'm worried about you

I can't right now.

I don't know what else to say. I'm devastated. I want to go to him and hold him and promise him this will all turn out okay. But I don't know that, and in any case, he doesn't want me near him right now. I'm torn between what I think he needs and what he thinks he needs.

And I'm leaving in the morning. Oh god, I don't want to leave with things like this between us. If I do that, I'm not sure we'll ever get back on track. The distance between us – the emotional distance – might be too great to bridge.

Frustration and despair chase the thoughts around in my head. I lie in the darkness searching for answers but there are none. We're caught in a web not of our making but I can't see any way out.

I look at the old-fashioned bedside clock. An hour has passed. I can't sleep. I'm so afraid this spells the end for Justin and I. I squeeze my eyes tightly closed, but a hot tear trickles out anyway, followed by more. My pillow grows wet as I silently weep. Despair drains me of hope and weighs down my chest. Though the oblivion of sleep eventually claims me, it's a slumber disturbed by random thoughts and sad dreams, and I toss and turn and wake frequently. And every time I wake, dread and despair choke the air out of me.

Sometime after midnight, waking again from my restless sleep, I hear the sound of muffled sobbing down the hallway. I'm sure it's Justin and I can only listen to it for so long until I have to do something. I pull on pants and a hoodie and go out into the corridor. Standing outside his closed bedroom door, I can feel his pain in the heartbreaking sobs coming from inside.

He may not want to see me, but I can't leave him to bear this on his own.

I open the bedroom door. He's face down sobbing into his pillow and so immersed in his misery that he doesn't hear me enter. Even in the dim light I see his body shuddering with the force of the sobs wracking him, and it's not until the mattress sinks as I sit on the edge of the bed and place a hand on his back that he becomes aware of my presence. If it's even possible, he starts crying harder, the sobs completely decimating his slight frame. I wonder if I've made a mistake coming in. Then... his body stills and the sobs soften and slowly subside into gulps and sniffles

as I silently rub circles on his back.

I don't know how long we sit like that. Quite some time, if the cramp in my twisted back is anything to judge by, but it doesn't matter how uncomfortable I am, I won't stop as long as he's accepting my comfort.

Eventually, Justin reaches around and grasps my hand. Without speaking, he kisses it and pulls me down onto the bed beside him, drags the quilt up over us, and we fall asleep like that, scrunched up against each other on his single bed.

Morning finds us still huddled together, as the rays of sunshine peek around the gaps between the curtains.

When my eyes open, Justin is already awake. He looks at me with those beautiful grey eyes tinged with sadness and uncertainty.

"I'm sorry about last night," he says, looking embarrassed. He hesitates. "I'm really not okay, am I?"

"Mmm. You will be," I try to reassure him. "We just went a little fast. I'm sorry."

"Nah. It's not you. I think... I really do need therapy. There was... stuff I didn't tell you in my letters. Things they did... I think that was why I reacted like that last night. I thought because I really wanted it, that it would be fine, but it wasn't." Justin's voice trails off. "I didn't mean to hurt you, but I know I must have."

I pull him closer.

"None of this is your fault. And yes, I was upset, not about the sex, but because you shut me out. I was worried about you, and when you pushed me away, I didn't know what to do anymore."

“I’m sorry,” he buries his head in my shoulder.

“I’m not leaving.”

“Me neither.”

“No, I mean. I’m not going back to Sydney. I’ll fix things so I can work from down here, but I don’t want to leave you.”

“Really?” Justin looks at me with such relief in his eyes that I wish I’d thought to do this sooner.

“I don’t think I’d be able to concentrate on anything anyway, if I went back, and I’d rather be here with you.” I place a soft kiss on the top of his head. I can’t bear the thought of him going through this alone. Staying with him makes sense for both of us.

“Thank you,” he whispers. “I’d feel much better if you stayed. I know it’s a lot to ask...”

“You’re not asking. I’m offering. I want to,” I tell him. “I’ll talk to Max’s grandma today and see if I can stay here. Otherwise, I’ll find some place nearby. I’ll look into getting you a therapist too.”

“Axel?”

“Mmm?”

He hesitates.

“What happens if they can’t fix this? If I can’t ever get to having sex without freaking

out?”

“I don’t think that’ll happen,” I tell him, hoping like hell I’m right. “But if it does, then we’ll deal, okay? It’s not the end of the world. Not all guys are into anal. And there’s lots of other stuff we can do that doesn’t trigger you. We’ll be fine, either way. Promise.”

Can I actually promise that? Yes, I think I can. Fucking is great, but it’s not worth more to me than Justin, so if I had to choose? Justin, every time. Would I resent Justin for it? No, never, but I would resent the hell out of the bastards who’ve done this to him, but I’m going to hate them anyway. So yes, I can promise this.

“Never going to let you go,” I murmur into his soft dirty-blond hair.

Melbourne

AXEL

“Of course, you can stay here!” exclaims Max’s grandmother when I broach the subject with her. I’ve only told her a little of what happened last night, because I don’t want to betray Justin’s privacy. I think she must have heard the door slam though.

She witnessed the fallout when Max came out to his family years ago, and although Justin’s case is different, of course, she knows he’s going to need as much support as possible as he navigates the next few months.

“You can stay as long as you like,” she tells me. “I think it’s a wise decision. I suspect he’s a lot more fragile than he’s letting on.”

Thinking about his breakdown last night, I have to agree. He’s been functioning really well given what he’s been through, but the necessity of escape had forced him to keep going. Now the immediate danger is gone, maybe we’ll see more and more the effects of the so-called ‘therapy’. I hate that they even use the word ‘therapy’... ‘torture’ might be more appropriate terminology.

“Thanks. I think he needs this. And to be honest, I do too.”

Gran nods understandingly. “He’s lucky to have such a devoted boyfriend. A lot of guys would run in this situation.”

I feel the heat in my cheeks as they redden. “I know he’s younger than me, and inexperienced, but um, I’m serious about him,” I admit, slightly embarrassed by this admission.

A warm body with messy brown-blond hair sticking out in all directions plops down on the seat next to me and rests his head on my shoulder.

“I am too,” he says, looking up at me with his beautiful grey eyes soft and dreamy. He’s looking at me with eyes filled with affection, but I can see the exhaustion and sadness too.

I put my arm around him.

Gran snorts.

“I think I’ll leave you two to it. If I’m going to have two young men as house guests for a while, I’d better go buy some food. Axel, do you need to stay out of sight too, or ...?”

I shake my head. “I don’t think so. No-one’s likely to be looking for me. Although, I probably do need to let my parents know I’ll be out of town for a while, so they don’t decide I’ve gone missing.”

“Do you think they’ll find that suspicious?”

“Maybe. But I do leave Sydney for work from time to time, so maybe not. I’ll email them, I think. Avoid any awkward questions.”

When Gran leaves to go shopping, with strict instructions that we are not to open the door for anyone, I fetch my laptop, and Justin and I retreat to the living room to watch a movie.

While Justin scrolls through the movie streaming offerings, I open up my laptop and quickly type an email to my parents telling them I've gone away for work and won't be home for a few weeks. I hit Send and close the laptop. Justin stretches out on the couch, the weight of his head comfortable on my thigh as the movie starts. I lean down and gently kiss his head, then comb my fingers through the silky soft strands of his hair as we watch the movie.

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

Melbourne

JUSTIN

Six weeks passes slowly.

I can't wait to be let out of my virtual prison. It's frustrating not being able to go out and about freely, but there's no way I'm risking being sent back to that place. There's no alternative than to suck it up and let the time pass.

And it's not as if I have nothing to fill my days.

I have regular online therapy sessions and there's always plenty to reflect on and process afterwards. Other times I draw. Axel found an art shop that he says is amazing and brought me back a set of exquisite colored pencils and a sketch pad. He says I'd love the shop and he wants to take me there when this is all over.

At the suggestion of my therapist, he also bought me a diary in which I journal my thoughts and feelings. Some stuff I share during sessions, other stuff I don't. I don't understand how or why, but despite my initial skepticism it's been an incredibly freeing process and along with the counseling, it's helping me work through my issues.

We haven't got back to having sex yet, though as I straighten things out in my head, I'm starting to think about it more. The truth is, I yearn for it, but I'm scared I'll mess things up if I don't sort myself out first. Not that any of that will happen overnight. My real therapist has warned me I may feel the lingering effects of my so-called

'therapy' for years, but I'm making progress.

I worry that Axel will lose patience and give up on me, but he doesn't even bring up the subject of sex. We watch movies together and he seems perfectly content sitting on the couch, with my head in his lap while he strokes my hair and occasionally drops gentle kisses on my cheek or hair or lips, depending on what's available.

And on top of all that, I study. I study like crazy. Ravi, my closest friend at school, has been emailing me the class work that I missed. I spend hours every day diligently trying to cram as much as I can. Fortunately, this late in the final year, there's not much new content, so it's really only the missing four months that I have to catch up on. It's a mountain of work and I despair of getting through it all, much less retaining it. I have no choice but to try, so I do, one hour at a time, one day at a time.

After our first week in Melbourne passes with no knock on the door from police or family, I began to hope that no-one knew where to find me. Maybe they'd even stopped looking, since I clearly don't want to be found. But as it draws closer to the last week of school and my birthday a few days later, the tension ratchets up again. I'm terrified we've got this far, and that something might happen at the last minute.

But it doesn't.

I wake up on September 21 to a sunny sky and the songs and calls of a variety of birds. A gentle breeze stirs the trees and blows the sound of the early morning joggers along the foreshore in through the open window.

My spirits rise, excitement bubbling inside me.

Quickly I log in to my bank account, my eyes going wide at what I see. Yes! It's there! Whatever Uncle Jim intended this money be used for, I'm sure he'd be happy with how it's going to be spent.

I'm free at last! Relief surges through me, releasing the weight of a burden that I didn't truly realize I'd been carrying. I feel giddy.

Leaping out of bed, I run to Axel's door and knock. A half-asleep grumble tells me to come in, and I rush in and throw myself on the bed beside his somnolent form.

"Hey!" I say excitedly. "It came through!"

Axel blinks at me, slack-eyed, red creases pressed into his face from the pillow, as he struggles to wake up. I see the moment when realization hits. A smile takes over his face and he pulls me to him in a crushing hug.

"Hey," he murmurs, his warm breath tickling the shell of my ear. "Happy birthday."

"We made it," I say, nestling closer, wriggling my head into the hollow of his shoulder.

"Yeah, we did," he sighs, and there's a world of relief in the sound. "Thank god, you're safe."

It strikes me the responsibility of keeping me safe must have weighed heavily on him.

"Thank you," I whisper.

I tilt my head up, and putting my hand behind his neck, bring our lips together, softly at first, but then the kiss takes over and becomes more urgent, more passionate. Tongues get involved, sliding against each other, roaming inside each other's mouths, licking and tasting.

I pull away, breathless.

“Finally, I can go home.”

Coming Home

JUSTIN

I'm a nervous wreck as we pass through the familiar streets of my childhood. It's just as well Axel is driving, because my hands are shaking so much, and I'm so distracted that I'd be a menace on the road. Not that I have my license yet. Just another thing I've fallen behind with because of being sent away for 're-education'. My actual education has suffered from my disappearance for at least four months of my final year, dammit! I'll have to apply for special consideration, but even if I can somehow manage a pass, I won't get the marks I need to enter Vet College. All in all, the year has been a total fuck-up. I'm putting on a confident front, but I'm nervous it's about to get worse.

We pull up outside the neat suburban cottage in the middle-class street I've lived in all my life. I wait a minute before getting out of the car, taking in the familiar scene, absorbing the small details in case it's the last time I come here. I still hold out a little hope, but it's tenuous.

The Sweet Gum in the front yard is covered in the bright green of this year's new leaves starting to shoot. I fell out of that tree when I was five, quickly dusting myself off and looking around in embarrassment to make sure no-one had seen.

The lawn is green, neat and trim, as always. I remember picnics in the front yard with my mother before I was sent off to school at six years old.

Camellia bushes still grow in the corner of the yard, leaves dark green and glossy but

it's too late in the season and only a few battered blooms hide amongst the foliage. We buried my cat under there when he died of old age. I was ten at the time.

The flower bed along the front of the house is full of pansies and violas and other winter flowers. I planted my first daffodil bulbs there when I was twelve.

And there's the spot where I accidentally rode my bicycle off the porch, the soft earth and crushed flowers softening my fall.

A sheen of tears fills my eyes, and I swipe it away. Axel rests his warm hand over mine, comforting and reassuring. He doesn't say anything, just lets me feel the emotions churning inside me, while showing me I'm not alone.

Taking a deep breath, I turn to him.

"Okay, let's do this."

We get out and walk up the driveway together. Axel has brought wine and chocolate, just like he did to my grandparents' house.

It's only when we're standing on the porch about to knock on the front door, that I realize we haven't discussed something important.

"How do you want me to introduce you?" I ask Axel.

Axel shrugs.

"However you're most comfortable," he replies. "I don't think it's going to make much difference. They'll probably guess in any case."

"Okay. Here goes," I mutter under my breath, steeling myself.

I knock.

The door opens.

It's my mother, thank god, and she silently takes me in her arms and hugs me.

"Welcome home," she says, brushing the hair off my face. I think I see a trace of moisture in her eyes, but then she turns to Axel and her eyes sharpen and narrow. There's nothing friendly in that look.

I pull away, and step back beside him.

"This is Axel," I say. "My boyfriend."

Lines appear around her mouth as her jaw clenches, and she doesn't offer her hand.

"Hello, Mrs. McMillan," Axel behaves as if he hasn't noticed, but he has - his polite smile doesn't reach his eyes.

She barely acknowledges his greeting and I almost hear the resigned sigh that Axel doesn't give, as he offers her the wine and chocolates he's brought. For an awful minute I'm afraid she's going to dash them from his hands, but civility wins out and she accepts them from him with a clipped thank you and motions for us to come in.

Axel and I exchange glances. This is not going well so far, but what did we expect?

In the lounge, my father is reading his newspaper. He scarcely looks up long enough to grunt, "Well, here you are finally." He doesn't get up.

"Dad, this is Axel," I announce, pointedly.

He looks over the paper at us. “So I see,” he says before returning his attention to the paper.

I open my mouth to tell him to stop being rude, but I feel Axel's elbow jab me in the ribs and he shakes his head.

Don't worry about it, he mouths.

We've only been here a few minutes and already it's a disaster. How are we going to survive a whole day of this?

Fortunately, my mother comes into the room just then to announce lunch is ready and we head for the dining room in awkward silence. Axel's hand brushes mine as we enter the room. I'm grateful for the brief touch. It reminds me I'm not on my own.

My mother asks us to sit, and hands my father the wine Axel brought.

“He brought it,” she says, nodding towards Axel.

My father puts the bottle aside.

“A bit early in the day for alcohol, don't you think?”

Seriously? My family always include wine along with their meals when they entertain friends. This open hostility is doing my head in. If I wasn't so desperate to maintain a relationship with my parents, I'd already be out the door.

Axel shrugs. He looks composed and unbothered as he says politely, “It's for whenever you want it, sir.”

My father just grunts and sits.

My mother leaves the room to fetch the lunch. I'd go with her except I'm afraid of what my father might say to Axel, so we just sit there in silence.

Once the lunch is served, conversation picks up a little. My mother asks what I've been doing and where I've been. The subject of my disappearance from the ReEducation Centre is not brought up, and it occurs to me that maybe my parents knew what they did was illegal, and don't want to admit to something in front of a witness.

My father contributes slightly to conversation but there are frequent thinly-veiled barbs directed at gay men and Axel in particular. Axel smiles serenely through it and it's obvious he expected this frosty reception. When I open my mouth to explode after one too many digs, Axel kicks me under the table and gives the slightest shake of his head, but I don't know how much longer I can bite my tongue.

AXEL

Lunch has been torturous and it's a relief when it finishes and we move back to the lounge for coffee and cake. The cake makes conversation unnecessary and silence hangs heavy in the room. It's so quiet, you can hear everyone as they swallow.

Afterwards, Justin's mother gets up.

"Excuse us, Axel," she says, using my name for the first time. I'm immediately suspicious. "Justin and I need to talk about some things. Justin?" and she indicates he should follow her to the kitchen.

Justin looks uncertainly at me, but it's fine. His father has parked himself behind his newspaper again, and I can occupy myself on my phone. When he sees that I'm okay here, Justin follows his mother out to the kitchen. I can hear the murmuring of voices out there, but I can't make out any words. I hope he's okay, but I have to trust he'll

come and get me if he's not.

The visit has been awkward and uncomfortable. I can see how much Justin wants his family to accept him, and it's been painful watching him reach the slow realization that they will never accept him as he is, nor anyone he chooses to bring home with him.

Retreat

AXEL

Emerging from a video I'd been watching on my phone, it occurs to me that Justin's been gone for a long time. I'm worried about him, so I collect the dirty plates and mugs, using those as a reason to head towards the kitchen.

I pause just outside the kitchen when I hear a firm voice inside. Justin's mother is speaking.

"I'm sorry," she says, "I realize now that was the wrong way to go about it. Can we please put that behind us. It was a mistake."

She must be speaking to Justin, though I don't hear his reply. They must have been talking about the conversion therapy. I probably should enter the room, and I probably shouldn't eavesdrop, but I do anyway, wondering what she's going to say next. She's been coldly polite in front of me after the initial hostility, but I'm unsure if she was holding back until she could talk to Justin alone.

She continues speaking.

"But if you want to be a part of this family, you need to stop this. Break it off. Tell him to go home and start behaving the way you were brought up to behave. You do want to be a part of this family, don't you?"

I wait for him to protest or refuse her ultimatum, but he doesn't.

After a few moments, he says, “Yes, yes. Of course I want to be a part of the family. That's why I've come back.”

I blink, in shock. I can't believe what I've just heard. The blood rushes from my head. A buzzing starts up in my ears, and I stumble away. They say eavesdroppers never heard good things about themselves, and in this case, I didn't hear anything good about us.

They're still talking in there, but I can't hear it over the buzzing in my head. I wonder if I'm going to pass out. I can't go in there now. I retreat to the lounge and stumble into a chair, before hurriedly replacing the dirty plates on the coffee table. For a minute the world disappears in a sizzle of blackness and pinpoint stars. Then a hand shakes my shoulder.

"Axel," a worried voice breaks through my confusion. "Axel. Are you okay?"

The stars recede and I become aware of Justin kneeling on the carpet in front of me, brows scrunched in concern.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," I shake my head trying to clear it. "Just felt a bit off for a minute, that's all."

Alone again

JUSTIN

It's terribly quiet around the house once Axel has gone. I hope I haven't made a terrible mistake in sending him away. He's already put up with so much because of me, including a very painful afternoon, and now I've effectively shoved him aside to try and make things good with my folks. At least it's only a couple of nights and then we can... what, exactly? My future is screwed. I'll probably have to stick around and redo my final year of school. What else can I do? I'm going to talk to Axel about it tonight. We hadn't really looked past me turning 19, and re-uniting with my parents. At least I'll be independent now.

My morose introspection is disturbed by my parents coming down the hall. I hear the scuffing of their shoes on the carpet before they round the corner into the living room.

My dad is dressed in outdoor clothes, battered old jeans, a long-sleeved-shirt that's seen better days, and scruffy work boots.

"I'd like you to give me a hand in the garage after dinner," he says. "I'm getting ready for a kerbside cleanup, need to sort through some stuff. It'll take a couple of hours and your mother's planning an early dinner, so we can do it after."

I take this as a bit of an olive branch. "Sure. I'll have to change my clothes though."

"Might as well get changed now," my mom says, "Dinner will be in half an hour."

When I get to my old bedroom, I pause as I enter, my breath catching in my throat. Everything is just as I left it. There's something comforting and simultaneously melancholy about that. I had a good childhood, but I'm not the same person I was then. Time has moved on, and so have I. I'm not that same innocent boy anymore.

Once I've dressed in some clothes that can afford to get filthy, I head back down to the living room. There's no-one there but I hear voices in the kitchen so I wander straight in there to find my parents deep in conversation. There's a pause and they seem to change topics. I lean on the kitchen island and pull out my phone. My mother is pacing around the room and passes behind me while talking, but I don't pay much attention. I unlock my phone and smile. Axel has sent me a funny meme. I send him one back and then quickly scroll through my social media notifications. There's not much there given that I've been on radio silence for a few months.

I lock the screen and shove the phone back in my pocket.

My mom comes up beside me and asks, "What was that you were looking at? Something amusing?"

"Oh, just a meme," I replied. Then realizing she probably doesn't know what that is, I add, "It's a funny thing that gets passed around on the internet."

"Oh? I'm not sure what you mean. Can you show me?"

She's standing right beside me, which is a little awkward, but she's trying to be friendly, so I unlock the phone, flick through a couple of things until I find it, and hold the screen up to her.

After a beat, she chuckles. "That's pretty funny. You young people send these things to each other all the time, don't you?"

"Ah, yeah, I guess. They're a thing at the moment," I reply, putting the phone away.

"Here, let me see," my dad is standing real close on my other side. I don't know how I didn't see him there. I pull out the phone again, unlock it again, and show him the picture. He shrugs like he doesn't get it but doesn't say anything. Maybe he doesn't find it funny.

My mother steps away and goes to the fridge. "You two go and chat in the living room, so you don't get in the way while I'm getting dinner ready."

Does she mean talk about me being gay? Or is tonight for getting along and the hard conversations will come tomorrow? I guess I'll find out.

???

It turns out that the hard conversations are for tomorrow, as we don't discuss the elephant in the room before or during dinner. We do have a pleasant family dinner though. I help with setting the table, and clearing away afterwards. I don't get time to text Axel, but I'm not worried as he probably doesn't expect to hear from me, and he's going to text me tonight anyway.

After dinner, Dad is keen to start work and hustles me along.

As I go to follow him out of the kitchen, Dad turns around and snaps, "Leave your damn phone here. I know how you young people are. You'll be spending more time on your phone than you do working if you have it with you."

I sigh, but it's not worth the argument. I'm trying to build bridges here, so I have to pick my battles. I drop the phone on the table and follow him out the door.

Melbourne

JUSTIN

Evening finds me on Gran's doorstep again. I'm very conscious that I'm only here because of Axel's friends. If he really has left me, maybe I don't have a place here anymore. Hopefully, he'd just had enough of my parents and I'll find him waiting for me here.

Gran sees instantly that something is wrong, and when I ask, "Axel?", she shakes her head and a frown creases her brow.

"He came by and picked up his bag a short time ago," Gran says.

My face crumples. He has left me.

"Come in and tell me what happened," she invites me gently.

I have nowhere else to go, so I come inside and begin telling her about yesterday afternoon; my parents' barely disguised hostility towards Axel, their proposal I stay the night, and Axel's reaction and subsequent ghosting.

I break down and cry before I've finished the story. Gran scoops me up in her arms and holds me while the tears flow. Eventually, I sniffle and pull away.

"Can I stay a bit longer?" I ask through my tears. "Until I sort myself out."

“Of course, you can. I’ve already told you you’re welcome to stay as long as you need.”

“I... I wasn’t sure if I could, now that Axel’s... Axel’s...” sniff “... left me.”

“Justin, you’re always welcome in this house. Even if you and Axel can’t work things out. Though why that would be the case, I can’t imagine. That boy is smitten with you.”

“He told my dad he was sick of my drama,” I admit, through a hiccup.

Gran looks skeptical. “That doesn’t sound like Axel. Maybe he just got tired of how your parents were behaving and he’ll come home when he’s had a chance to cool off.”

But Axel doesn’t come back to the house.

I still have the phone he gave me, and I keep trying to contact him with it, but he doesn’t call or reply to any of my texts, so I figure that tells me all I need to know.

???

There’s only a month of swot vac left, followed by the final school exams. I’m already behind in my studies because of all the disruption I’ve had this year. Even with special consideration, it’ll be a miracle if I get the necessary grades to get into any university next year, so I don’t have the luxury of falling apart now.

Somehow, I hold myself together and immerse myself in my studies. Every waking moment is spent studying, preparing. And if I’m studying, I’m not thinking. And if I’m not thinking, I’m not feeling. And if I fall apart in bed each night, at least it doesn’t interfere with my education.

Somehow, I keep going. And somehow, I get through the exams. I'm exhausted by the end of it. I'm drained by the tremendous hours I've had to put in to get on top of all the missed study hours, the pressure of the exams themselves, and exhausted from continuously suppressing my emotions. After the exams, I sleep for two days solid, and then cry for two more.

Gran feeds me, and eventually kicks me out of my bedroom and makes me go on errands for her. I know what she's trying to do, but I resist all the way. I'm drained by the entire year, and I'm despondent. It's been too much. And the loss of Axel has left me adrift. Add the pressure of facing exams not fully prepared and I'm tumbling into a downward spiral. It gets harder to get out of bed every day. I want to lie there in the dark with the curtains drawn, blocking out the light and the sun. And goddamit, can't those birds shut up? They've got no business being so damn chirpy. I get to the stage where even Gran can't coax me out of bed.

When a doctor appears in my bedroom one day, I realize I've slipped so far I'm in trouble.

There's talk of admitting me to hospital, but I don't want to go. Finally, I agree to counseling and medication, and they agree not to admit me. For now.

The therapy and the tablets help. They dampen my emotions. But there's no light in my life. Still, I can do basic functions again. I go out shopping, on errands, even catch up with some of my old school friends.

One day, friends convince me to go to the beach with them, but although the sand is a different color, the texture finer and there no waves here, the beach reminds me of Axel, and I go home feeling sadder than when I arrived.

Summer has begun and the weather is warmer. I'm waiting for my exam results to arrive. I need to make plans for the summer. I need to make plans for next year. I

suppose I should make plans for the holidays.

Since school finished, I've increased my therapy sessions to twice a week trying to undo the damage that was done to me at the Centre. I'm making progress. But then I think of how I don't have Axel any more, and I wonder why I bother. I don't really care about my sexuality at this point. But I do want to be okay again. I want to feel okay about myself, and I want to be able to start a relationship again, if I ever find someone. If I get over Axel.

One sunny day, when Gran asks me to do the grocery shopping, I decide to walk the couple of kilometers to the store and catch the tram home afterwards. There isn't much to buy, so it's not long before I'm lining up at the checkout.

The checkout girl stares at me. Well, not at me exactly, or at least not at my face. She's looking at a spot below my chin and I begin to wonder if I've dropped food there or something.

Then her eyes light up and she literally squeals with excitement.

"Oh my god! Is that what I think it is?"

She leans in a lot closer.

"Yes, it is!" She squeaks. "Oh my god, it's a Soul Necklace, isn't it?"

"What?"

The only thing she can be talking about – given where her eyes are fixed – is Axel's neck chain which I'm wearing, though I don't know why I still do. Maybe because it's the last link I have to him, to a time when everything felt new and special and optimistic.

“Huh? Um... maybe?” I stammer, caught by surprise and confused.

The girl gives me a strange look. “Maybe?”

“This?” I ask, holding up the serpent enwrapped starfish on its fibre chain. “It’s nothing. Just a lucky charm. My friend lent it to me.”

She looks at me incredulously. “Your friend . Sure. You don’t even know what it is, do you?”

She’s right. I have absolutely no idea what she’s talking about, and I’d like to get this conversation done with because the checkout line is starting to build up behind me. But the girl insists on regaling me with the full blast of her enthusiasm and knowledge.

“That’s not an ordinary neck chain. I’ve never seen one in real life before but I’ve read about them,” she gushes. “I’m studying History with a major in Ancient Artifacts and Mythology. There’s said to be an island somewhere in the Pacific, where it was traditional within the indigenous families for everyone to have one of these necklaces. It’s supposedly their soul connection. It’s said the neck chain can’t be given away, it chooses to go. It’s believed - or was believed - that the heart itself chose its soulmate, so sometimes it would end up going to people in other relationships, or people the person didn’t think they liked, things like that. It sounds terribly romantic. I mean, it’s probably not real. That side of things is probably just a myth. But if someone gives you one, it isn’t nothing .”

I can feel the blood drain from my face as I take in her words.

“Oh, fuck,” I groan, forgetting all the people lined up behind me. There are some muttered tsk tsks from the line. And irritated murmurings.

“You really didn’t know,” she whispers wonderingly. “Someone’s heart chose you. If she gave you that...” her voice trails away as she stares at the chain wistfully.

“ He ,” I say, dazed. “ He gave it to me.”

I’m vaguely aware that’s the first time I’ve come out in public, but the significance of that pales beside this bombshell she’s dropped on me.

If his heart chose me, why would he walk away?

Sydney

AXEL

It's two months since Justin chose his family over me, and I'm still not over him.

I went back to his parents' house the day after he sent me that awful text, hoping there was some mistake. It was stupid, I guess, how could there be any mistaking the meaning of that? But just in case it was a bad joke, I went anyway. Justin wasn't there, but his horrible dad was, and he took great delight in humiliating me by telling me Justin had decided to work things out with them and didn't want to see me any more. I can't forget the malicious delight on his face as he told me this. I wouldn't put it past him to lie, but combined with Justin's text and ignoring my calls and texts or blocking me - whichever it was - I had to accept the truth. It was over.

It's hard. And time passes agonizingly slowly.

I've spent the last two months moping around at home. Sure, I've been working, though it hasn't been my best work, but I haven't been going out at night, or even seeing friends at all. Each morning I go down to the beach and swim or surf, but I go early enough that it's pretty much deserted and I don't have to talk to anyone.

I especially don't talk to my parents. I had that one raging tirade at my mother when I first came home and told her I'd found the letters she'd hidden from me. And because I was feeling particularly hurt and vicious, I'd told her in detail all the terrible things done to Justin that she had effectively collaborated on by keeping the letters from me. Mum had cried because she hadn't realized what was really going on when his

grandparents had asked her to stop our communications. She isn't at all homophobic, and I knew in my heart that she'd been an unwitting accomplice, but still, there was nothing left at all of my crushed heart, so I had no forgiveness to give her.

I just hang out in my room and... do what? Wallow, I guess. Sleep. Look at the photos from last summer. Cry a little. Wallow some more.

Eventually I realize if I don't make an effort to dig myself out of this pit of self-pity, I won't get out at all. It's not my first broken heart, I tell myself, maybe this one hurts a little more, but I can do this.

I need a distraction, and I know where to get one.

An hour later, showered, shaved and wearing a pair of tight jeans and a black t-shirt, I walk into the local club. I haven't been here for a while, but security hasn't changed. They recognize me and nod as they let me pass.

Once inside, I head to the bar and take a look around as I wait for the bartender to fix my drink. This isn't a gay bar. The population at this end of the peninsula isn't big enough to support a purely gay club, but it's usually pretty easy to see who's in the market for whom. For one thing, you never catch the gay guys checking out the girls. Oh sure, they look at them, because that's what people do, we look at who's around us, but there's no more interest displayed than that. With straight guys it's not always so obvious. Sometimes the straight guys check out other guys because they're checking out the opposition.

I sit at the bar, sipping my beer, and watching.

There are a few couples on the dance floor, gyrating and jiggling with the music. There's a bunch of guys in the far corner of the room and a few smaller groupsspread out around the back wall. A few lone guys sit at the bar like me.

I order another beer and wait. As the night wears on, more people wander into the club. More people begin to dance. The place starts to get crowded.

Eventually, I spot a familiar figure leaning in close to some guy further down the bar. A loud laugh. Then another guy comes up and shoves him away. It's embarrassing and I look away.

A moment later, someone materializes at my elbow. I feel his presence, rather than see it.

"Hey," says Jordy.

"Hey."

"Haven't seen you in a while. Mind if I sit down?" He sits without waiting for an answer.

An hour later, we've had a couple of beers each but are nowhere near drunk. We've even had a decent conversation much like we used to before we first got together. I can see Jordy has moved on, and maybe it's even possible for us to be friends again.

He's established that I'm alone now, so when he turns to me and suggests, "Wanna fuck?", I think, why not? I know he's not good for me long term, but I'm fairly certain he's not interested in a relationship with me anymore, and one night I can handle. I can scratch that itch and maybe it'll even help me move on from... no, not thinking about him.

"Sure. Let's get out of here." I tip the bartender, check I have my wallet and my keys in my pocket. Neither of us have drunk enough to worry about being over the limit, so we both drive back separately to my place.

Sex with Jordy is kind of familiar and kind of not. We were with each other long enough to know how to get each other off pretty fast. The sex is quick, rough and hard, and afterwards we lie side by side on my bed, panting heavily as we recover. There's nothing tender or sweet or loving about our interactions, like there was with Justin, and neither of us has felt the urge to kiss. The physical release is good, but no other part of me is satisfied.

“Mind if I have a shower before I go?”

“Sure. Towels are in the bathroom.”

Jordy hasn't forgotten the layout of my house and he gets up and goes for a shower without hesitation. Now we're done, I'm keen for him to leave, so after wiping myself down with last night's dirty shirt, I pull on some trackpants and wait for him to finish getting dressed. I'll clean up after he's gone.

Less than ten minutes later, I'm holding the front door open for him.

“See ya round,” he says as he leaves, “It was good to catch up.”

We're sort of friends again, so we fist-bump as he heads out the door.

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Sydney

AXEL

Jordy's only been gone thirty seconds, when he's back ringing the doorbell.

"What the fuck did you forget?" I snap as I grudgingly open the door. It's late, I'm tired, we've fucked, I feel empty and I don't want him hanging around.

Only, when I open the door, it's not Jordy standing there.

A familiar figure with dirty-blond hair is on my doorstep with the bleakest look on his face.

"Justin?"

Oh fuck. It's so soon after Jordy left that there's no way they haven't run into each other on his way in.

"Was that...? What's he doing leaving your place in the middle of the night?" he demands. But he knows. I can read his face easily and the hurt I see there crushes me. I feel completely and utterly sick. I'm sure my guilt is written all over my face.

"You got over me pretty quick," he says bitterly, when he finally speaks. My heart twists. That's not how it is.

"It was just a fuck, it meant nothing," I whisper. "I didn't think I'd ever see you

again.”

He frowns, like something doesn't compute. I can see him turning thoughts over in his mind, and the question he wants to ask, but won't.

“You were never just that for me,” I tell him, pleading with my whole being for him to believe me. Now that he's finally here, is he going to turn and run?

He takes a deep, stuttering breath, and draws himself upright. He doesn't look at me.

“Can I come in?”

“Of course.” I mumble, opening the door wider and stepping aside to let him pass.

He makes as if to go to my bedroom, like we've always done when he's been here, but then he falters. I shake my head. I don't want him to go in there. The bed is messed and the room will smell of sex. If he goes in there, I'll lose him forever, if I haven't already.

I steer him towards the couch and sit down. Justin lowers himself cautiously onto the opposite end. As far as he can get from me. Clearly, he's come to talk, but finding Jordy here has thrown him. I desperately want to bridge the distance between us, but I daren't touch him. I don't even know why he's here.

“Why are you here?” I need to know.

Instead of answering, he asks a question of his own.

“If you were so upset that I was going to stay at my parents' that night, why didn't you just say so? Why did you ghost me? And then you left without trying to work things out with me. You just left. And then... nothing.”

I draw in a deep breath, trying to centre myself and keep what's left of my composure, although I'm kidding myself if I think I'm more than one step away from completely breaking down.

"But you sent me that text," I stare at him, brows scrunched in confusion. "You told me not to contact you again. And then you blocked me!"

"What are you talking about? I never fucking did that. Why would I do that?"

"You can't fucking deny it now it's not convenient for whatever reason. I called you. I texted you. Even though your text said not to. Why are you here anyway?" Confusion is giving way to anger, and I've raised my voice, but this is stupid because if I want to get back together with him, this is not the way to do it.

"I'm here because I want to sort this out. I don't know what's going on. You ghosted me ! And I swear to you, I didn't send you any break up text!" Justin retorts.

His whole face is flushed, and he looks panicky. I want to get back together, but not if he's going to gaslight me. I start rifling through my phone.

"I heard you talking in the kitchen," I admit, while I scroll to the app I'm looking for. "I know I shouldn't have been listening, and I didn't mean to, I was just bringing some dishes in. But I overheard your mum tell you that you had to choose between your family and me. It sounded like you chose your family. Then you gave me that story about spending a night with them to sort things out, and then later that night you sent me this text..."

I frown, peering down at my phone. I'm in my messages now, but I can't find Justin's last message to me.

It's gone.

"Show me," Justin scoots across the couch and leans in close, trying to see my screen. My skin tingles from the brief contact of our shoulders brushing up against each other, even through the fabric.

"Wait. It's... it's gone. It's not there anymore." I narrow my eyes at him. "Did you erase it before coming here?"

"What???" he sounds exasperated.

I shake my head. But I have a habit of taking screen shots of anything I want to think about later, so I flick over to my photos and find the screenshot I took that day. I hold the phone out to Justin. His face pales and his eyebrows shoot up. If he's faking his surprise, he's doing a wonderful job of it. Still, the evidence is there on the screen. It can't be denied.

Justin frowns, and gets a distant look as if he's trying to remember exactly what happened that day. He blinks rapidly a few times as he concentrates.

He pulls out his phone, checks his messages.

"It's not here." Justin shows me his screen.

"Well if you deleted it, it wouldn't be," I snark.

"I'm telling you, I never sent it. I never sent it and I never deleted it," he insists. "And I never got any messages or calls from you. And yeah, I did have that conversation with my mom. She did give me an ultimatum, and I told her I wanted to be part of the family, but that if I had to choose between the family and you, that I'd choose you."

I'd missed that part of the conversation. If I'd listened just ten seconds more instead of running off with my pathetic hurt feelings, maybe we'd be in a different situation

now. Or maybe not. It still doesn't explain the rest.

I try to explain. "I came to the house the next day, you know. You weren't there. Your dad told me you didn't want to see me anymore. And with everything else that had happened... I... I believed him." I shrug, but I'm not feeling quite so confident now.

Justin frowns. "He told me you came around, but he said you told him you were done with me, tired of 'all my drama'," and he uses air quotes around the last three words. "You hadn't texted me..." he holds his hand up to stop me interrupting, "I thought you hadn't texted me, 'cause I never got that text, and with all the trouble I'd caused you... well, it just made sense..."

I shake my head. "I never said that. I would never. I promise. I thought you were letting me go. So in the end I just left."

We look at each other, both stunned, I think. Thinking about what Justin had just been through, how confused and unsure he had been when he'd come to me after escaping the Centre, how certain he was that I wouldn't want to see him... it would have been easy to make him think I didn't want him.

"Fuck!" I swear, barely containing my anger. I feel like I'm going to explode.

Justin grinds his teeth together, managing to look both furious and vulnerable at the same time. "They just keep lying to us, don't they?" he rasps. It's not just his dad... there were also Justin's letters with his desperate pleas for help that lay hidden in my mother's desk for months too.

"That doesn't explain the text, though," I remind him. "And did you really block me?"

His dirty blond locks swish around as he shakes his head. He puts his screen in front of us both and goes to Favorites. Clicks on 'info' beside my name, scrolls down and

shows me the number's not blocked.

"Hang on! That's not my number," I burst out.

"What?"

I grab his wrist, and run my finger down the screen until the number shows again. I stab my finger at it.

"Look! The last digit is wrong... it's a 2 when it should be a 1."

"That's weird. I haven't even been in Contacts recently. I wonder how that got changed. That explains why you didn't get my calls or texts, but it doesn't explain why you couldn't contact me," Justin speaks slowly, frowning. "And it doesn't explain why you think I sent you that text."

We're both puzzling over how any of this could happen, when suddenly I have an idea.

"While you were at your parents' house, was there ever a time when you didn't have your phone with you?"

Justin gets that distant look again. Then he nods, super-slowly.

"Y-e-ah. You know... that night... after dinner my dad made me leave my phone in the kitchen while he and I went out and worked in the garage together. It was still there when I came back but..."

"Do you think your mother could have done it? You have a lockscreen, right? How could she have gotten past that?"

Justin humphs. He purses his lips and screws up the side of his face in annoyance as realization hits.

"Yeah...Well... I think I know when it happened. We were in the kitchen earlier that afternoon, and there was a lot going on. They got me to show them something on my phone, and I remember thinking they were standing uncomfortably close. When I unlocked it, they could've seen the code."

We look at each other.

"Fuck!" exclaims Justin. He goes back to his phone.

"What's your actual number?" he asks.

As I tell it to him, he types it into the search bar of his contacts. When he types the final digit, a contact appears on the screen. The name is 'XX' so it was unlikely to show up in a normal search, and when we scroll down, sure enough, it's my actual number and the number is blocked.

So much misunderstanding between us. So many lost opportunities.

"Fuck," Justin says again, his voice barely a whisper. His shoulders sag.

Ultimately, Justin answers my original question, but he looks shattered.

"You asked why I came... I came to ask if we could try again."

My heart breaks.

Despite everything, we'd had a chance. And I've screwed it up by fucking Jordy.

Sydney

AXEL

“Fuck,” I bury my face in my hands, pulling my own hair in my anguish. “Do you still wanna try? Because I do, more than anything.”

He’s not going to though. I can’t expect it of him. I’ve betrayed him in the most hurtful way possible, though at the time I didn’t think there was even the remotest possibility that we would get back together.

So I don’t have the faintest idea why he lifts his chin, looks me firmly in the eye, and breathes “Okay.”

I’m stunned, but I’m not going to argue. If the universe is throwing me a line, I’m grabbing it with both hands.

I take both his hands in mine, as a lone tear snakes down the side of my face.

“Let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah.”

“Give me a minute. To get dressed,” I add, embarrassed to remind him he’s found me half-naked with another man just leaving my house.

Justin purses his lips in a hard line, because he is remembering, and I hurry to my

room to change and grab my things before he comes to his senses and leaves. I remember to pass via the bathroom on the way, to clean up.

It's a relief when I re-enter the living room and he's still sitting on the couch where I left him. He's awfully quiet though. This is going to be hard.

"Let's go." I hand him my spare helmet and a jacket. I know he loves the bike. I don't even know why he's giving me a second chance, but I will do anything, anything, I can, to win his heart again. I won't lie to him or anything like that, but if there's any sneaky trick that will give me an edge, I'm using it.

He puts on the jacket without saying a word. I don't like this quiet, sad version of Justin, and although we both want to try, I'm afraid there may be no hope for us.

It's a still, warm night, and there's no-one else on the roads. The bike takes the bends with ease, as we lean into the curves as one. Justin's body is warm against my back, his arms firm around my waist. For the ten minutes it takes to ride to the beach, it's easy. No words. We are one. Just him and me, the bike, and the rush of the air against our bodies as we power through the bends and the night.

When we crunch to a stop in the beach carpark, it's deserted. No cars in the carpark, no people on the beach.

We dismount and hang the helmets on the bike. Hesitantly, I take his hand. He doesn't resist but he doesn't look at me either. I lead him down towards the rocks at the end of the beach near the rockpool. It's so late that the light next to the pool has gone out, but there's a partial moon in the sky which gives us enough visibility to cross the rocks safely.

Just past the pool, I find a large rock where we can sit looking out across the restlessly shifting sea. A mosaic of moonlight glints on the bumpy surface of the

water and shines in the tiny puddles of seawater pooling in the rocks.

I sit behind Justin and wrap my arms around him. I rest my head on his shoulder, burying my face in his warmth.

“I missed you,” I whisper.

He doesn't say anything, but he pulls my arms tighter around him, and we sit like that for a while.

After long minutes, I break the silence.

"I'm sorry, about Jordy." I pause. This is hard. I press my face into the nape of his neck. My voice breaks. "Why are you still here, after what I've done?"

For a moment, I think he's not going to answer, and when he does, he answers with a question. "Tell me something... do you have some sort of Islander in your heritage?"

“Um. Distantly. Why?” I ask confused, wondering what this has to do with anything. He slips his finger under the collar of his shirt and pulls out the neck chain I gave him months ago. The starfish gleams in the moonlight, wobbling on the white coir chain, the sea serpent's mouth gaping in a threatening but silent hiss.

“Oh,” I breath. Suddenly I understand. Something in my heart settles. “You know about that?”

“Yeah.”

“How did you...?”

“It was weird. Someone recognized it. I did some googling after that. It was hard to

find anything but yeah, eventually I did.”

A profound silence falls between us. The night is heavy with unspoken emotion. Maybe the serpent's mouth isn't threatening at all, maybe it's guarding, protecting. This tiny chain has been faithfully holding the link between us these last few lonely months - my heart connected to his by the finest of threads. My task will be to gently tug the links to bring us together again without breaking the fragile connection.

"Is that why you came to find me?" I whisper.

"Yes."

“Can you forgive me?” I ask, my lips close to his ear, my words scarcely more than a breath in the night air. He is my heart’s chosen one. He must know that. If he can’t forgive me...

“Yes.” The word is little more than the faintest whisper above the sound of the ocean, but it carries the warmth of summer to my heart.

I kiss his neck, the skin warm against my lips. Grateful tears leak from my eyes and fall silently on his skin. Justin leans back into me, his strong back settling against my chest and I tighten my arms around him, holding him close.

We remain like this for hours, as the moon makes its way across the sky and the dark begins to fade with the approaching day. We’re still sitting here as pink streaks illuminate the clouds and the sun slowly eases over the edge between sea and sky.

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Together

JUSTIN

I wake to sunshine, the caroling of magpies, and a warm body beside me. For a minute I lie still, remembering where I am.

A strong arm slips around my shoulders and pulls me close. I breathe in Axel's familiar scent. It's soothing. We've found our way back to each other. We've hurt each other, and our hearts carry a few more scars than before, but we're here now.

I press a kiss to the nearest bit of skin, which is Axel's chest, and he runs his hand through my hair. With my head cushioned against his chest, he can probably feel my smile. And with the way our lower bodies are pressed up against each other, he can probably feel the morning wood I'm sporting. When I shift my thigh across his hips, I notice he's in a similar state.

Surprised he hasn't made a move to do anything about it, I look up. And frown. Axel looks unsure of himself.

"What's wrong?"

He takes a deep breath, opens his mouth as if to speak, but then reconsiders.

"Axel?"

He sighs. "I, ah, wasn't sure you'd want to do anything after," he shrugs, looking

away, “last night.”

Oh, right. Jordy.

Now it’s my turn to sigh. “I won’t lie. I hate that it happened. But... well, I guess I understand.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s done. I don’t want to think about it.”

“Okay.”

“But I could do with a distraction.”

A pause.

“I can help with that. May I?”

“Please.”

Axel slides down the bed. I think he’s going to go straight for my cock, but instead he nibbles and licks around my hips and slides his tongue down the crease between my pelvis and thighs. He’s teasing me. Or enjoying me. Maybe both.

Finally, he runs his tongue over the crown of my straining dick. A shudder runs through me. He sucks me into his mouth and takes me deep. My hips lift off the bed automatically, and he hums approvingly. He bobs his head up and down, sucking and running his tongue on the underneath of my shaft. Then he breaks off and flings the bedcovers away.

I whimper as the cold air hits my wet dick.

He leans over me, stretching to reach the top drawer of the bedside table. He does nothing to prevent his own erection from rubbing across my belly, pressing into me and leaving a wet stripe, as he rummages in the drawer and pulls out a bottle of lube.

Before going back down again, he pulls himself up and gives me a sloppy open-mouthed kiss, followed by a heated look, then he resumes his work on my cock which is desperate for more attention. The pre-cum is leaking freely, and it won't take much to make me come. When his slicked-up hand finds its way between my legs, runs along my taint, and a finger lazily circles my hole, I bite my lip hard and struggle to maintain control. I don't want this to end too soon.

He adds more lube and his finger presses against me, then slides in, my body stretching greedily to accommodate him. The sensation is... wonderful. I've missed him so much. And now we're here and he's doing this, and suddenly it's two fingers. I'm feeling full and stretched and when he crooks his fingers and thrusts against the spot and takes my swollen cock in his mouth at the same time, there's no hope for me.

I buck as an unearthly groan escapes my throat, and what feels like streams of cum shoot into his mouth before I can warn him. Axel swallows everything and sucks me through my orgasm, until I'm lying helpless and sated on the mattress, completely wrung out and unable to move.

"Fuck." I mumble. I know I should be doing something to take care of Axel, but I'm too boneless to move right now. "Give... give me a minute."

Axel laughs, a soft, low, self-satisfied chuckle, as he slides his warm body over mine.

"Think you need more than a minute. But," he's arranging the covers over us and the

pillow under my head, “we have all the minutes in the world.” And he kisses my cheek.

After the world stops spinning and my head begins to clear, I slide my hand down and find his cock which is still rock hard. I close my fingers around it and stroke gently. My hand is too dry for this to be comfortable for him.

“Where’s the lube?” I ask.

Axel feels around with his hand, then nudges something up the bed with his leg.

“Here.”

I squeeze some into my palm and go back to stroking him. He thrusts into my hand. He feels so good in my hand, but I want to be closer.

“Axel?”

“Yeah,” the word barely scrapes past his lips.

“Would you... I want you to fuck me.”

Silence.

“Please,” I add.

Axel chuckles, but it’s a ragged sound.

“So polite,” he says and I’m afraid he’s going to ask me if I’m sure. But he rolls away to the bedside table, pulls out lube and condoms and throws them on the bed. I’m glad that he doesn’t question that I’m ready, that he accepts I know my own mind on

this. There's nothing more that therapy can do for me right now. There will be difficult days ahead, I'm sure, but it's time to get on with living. And I need the love - both emotional and physical - this beautiful man can give me.

"Get your ass up here," he pats the bed beside him and I shimmy further up the bed.

"Lie on your back," he instructs. I'm surprised, because this isn't how I'd thought it would be done.

"I want to see your face while I'm inside you," he explains, gently.

When I lie on my back, he slips a pillow under my hips and places my feet down flat on the bed. I hear the lube bottle open, and a moment later he presses a lubed finger against my hole. I suck in a breath, but then will myself to relax, as he slowly presses inside. There's barely any burn, because I've already been slightly used this morning, and my body readily accommodates the invasion. He fucks me with his finger and I moan, pressing down. I can never get enough of this. And I want more.

Axel adds more lube and easily works a second finger in. Again my body accepts him, and this time when he finger-fucks me, he hits my prostate, making me cry out. It's wonderful, but more, I need more. I want his dick, and I want it inside me now.

"Please," I grind out between clenched teeth. Sweat is forming on my forehead.

Axel goes for a third finger, and oh, that's a real stretch, but he takes it slowly and we get there. But almost immediately he withdraws his fingers completely. The empty feeling inside makes me whimper.

There's the crinkle of a condom wrapper opening, and a moment later, Axel hitches one of my legs up over his shoulder, lines up his lubed and sheathed cock with my hole, and gently presses in.

“Breathe,” he coaches me.

As I breath out, I relax and he pushes in slowly. He maintains the gentle pressure and as my body relaxes to accept him, slides in all the way. Then he stills, giving me time to accommodate to the sensation of fullness.

“Are you okay?” Axel asks me, looking me right in the eyes.

“Yes,” I gasp.

He rocks his hips a little, thrusting gently. “This okay?” he checks, eyes never leaving mine.

“So good,” I assure him, though it’s a strain to get the words out.

After that, he starts to fuck me in earnest, thrusting all the way in and almost all the way out, never taking his eyes off my face and watching for the slightest sign it’s too much. But it isn’t. I want this. I want him. And I want him to fuck me hard. I think we've earned this.

“More,” I plead.

Axel thrusts faster and harder. Perspiration runs down the side of his face and he grunts as he pushes into me. I feel his balls hitting my ass and hear the slap of skin on skin, as he fucks me hard until I almost can’t take any more. He groans and his rhythm stutters and he stills as he spills his seed inside me.

The world stands still for a moment, silent except for our gasping breaths. Then Axel leans forward and kisses my mouth.

“You’re amazing,” he murmurs against my lips.

I must have fallen asleep, because some time later when I open my eyes, the sun has made its way across the room, and the light is blinding. Soft snores beside me in the bed remind me of what we've done.

I lie still, checking in with myself, and apart from a sore ass – or maybe including that - I'm feeling amazing. No doubts, no regrets. I feel good about my body. I feel happy about what we've done. And I feel full of love for the man beside me. I lie there smiling happily until I need to get up to go to the bathroom.

I ease out of bed, wincing slightly as my body reminds me it's been delightfully used. Grabbing a towel off the back of the chair, and wrapping it around me, I wander out in bare feet. There's a wetness between my ass cheeks and for some reason that just makes me feel happy.

On my way back to the bedroom, I glance towards the living room. Axel's mother is standing there. We look at each other. She doesn't say anything.

I'm not afraid, and I'm not ashamed. I'm not even angry anymore.

I turn and enter the bedroom, where I rejoin Axel in his bed.

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6 months later

JUSTIN

Even six months later, there are good days and bad days, but the good days far, far outnumber the bad ones.

On a bad day, it's a struggle to get out of bed.

Axel asks me, "What do you need?"

I always tell him when it's a bad day, because although I hate to be a burden, I know that my bad days affect him as well.

Sometimes what I need is to lose myself in him, to touch and make love and lose myself in the sex and the closeness of our bodies. Other times I need to quieten my mind and focus my thoughts on my art. On those days, I sit at my art table and draw and paint for hours, until my mood lifts and I'm able to rejoin the world. Axel sits with me and reads or works on his computer, a reassuring presence in the background. When I'm ready to reconnect, he welcomes me back with a smile and a hug.

I still see my counselor, but the sessions are becoming less and less necessary as time goes by. I'm healing, sorting through my thoughts, and re-learning my own worth.

Axel has never doubted it. He tells me daily how amazing I am, and how perfect I am for him. I suspect he's a little biased, but it is Axel, so I should believe him, right?

I know I'm one of the lucky ones. They didn't exert their influence over me for terribly long, and I have the best support structure in the world – a loving boyfriend, his friends, and a borrowed grandma who treats me as her own.

Soon I'll be starting university. It turns out someone important at one of the private veterinary colleges owed Axel's friend Shannon a very big favor.

They disregarded my final exam scores that weren't up to scratch for entry and gave me 'special entry due to extenuating circumstances'. There's also a new scholarship to support a veterinary student throughout their course, and I'm the first beneficiary. I have a suspicion if this hadn't happened that Axel would have found a way to fund it himself. But I'll never know.

What I do know, is that I cried when he said he would move to Melbourne to be with me. I know how much he loves the sea, and it's no small thing to leave his childhood paradise to live inland in another state. That he would do it for me is humbling.

We rent a two-bedroom house together near the university, though we rarely use the second room unless we have visitors.

I reach up and touch Axel's neck chain which I still wear, will always wear. Does it really have the mystical powers it's claimed to have? Who can say? All I know is it drew us back together, and it's a symbol that proclaims I'm his, and always will be.

We met far from my home, lost each other, found each other again, and now I can safely say, wherever Axel is, that's my home.