



CHRISTMAS
LIGHTS
&
SLEEPLESS
NIGHTS
K.C. WELLS

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Keith Braxton has never felt so ill, and for a man who's known nothing but illness most of his life, that's saying something. He's had enough of pain, and the only thing helping him wile away the hours when it has him in its bony grip, is talking with Yuri, the nurse who works the night shift.

Yuri sits with him, listening to Keith's stories, and laughing, crying, and blushing like crazy.

He's easy to talk to, and when Yuri speaks, the pain dims, and those precious hours give him the will to continue.

Keith does most of the talking, about first love, first times, people who came into his life and left their mark... All this talking is having a beneficial effect—Keith is finally able to sleep at night, his pain eased. Which is great, because Keith's favorite holiday is fast approaching, and he wants to see it when it arrives.

There's only one thing that puzzles him.

Why does no one else in the hospital seem to know who Yuri is?

Trigger warning

This story respectfully discusses issues concerning palliative care, end of life and termination of treatment. This story may not be for you right now, especially if you've lost someone you love recently.

Title: Christmas Lights & Sleepless Nights

First Edition

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Warning

This book contains material that is intended for a mature, adult audience. It contains graphic language, explicit sexual content, and adult situations.

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A WELCOME DISTRACTION

Friday, December 16, 2022

Keith Braxton was beginning to get a bad feeling about this.

He knew what was written on his chart—respiratory distress syndrome—but that was only what had gotten him admitted. What had led to his present condition went back three years, and he knew the name off by heart.

Guillain-Barre syndrome.

He also knew the list of possible symptoms and they made for depressing reading.

Breathing difficulties. Residual numbness. Blood pressure fluctuations. Cardiac arrhythmias. Bowel and bladder function problems. Blood clots. Pressure sores.

And let's not forget the one symptom that pervades my every waking hour.

Pain.

He'd been in that hospital bed for over a week, but at least he didn't require help from a machine to breathe.

Not yet.

The nerve pain, however, was proving more problematic to treat, and the meds only went so far in alleviating it.

Nights were the worst. Every few hours a nurse would come to reposition him, in an effort to reduce the likelihood of bedsores.

Sleep? What's that? It was beginning to feel like a distant memory.

And all because his body's immune system had decided to attack his nerves.

Most people recover completely, the first doc said. Even if that may take several years, leaving them with weakness, numbness or fatigue.

Keith suspected he wasn't most people, not with his medical history. And if that were true...

This could be fatal.

He couldn't ignore the possibility. So what if he was only fifty-five? *Death comes for us all, right? It's no respecter of age. It takes old men and babies with equanimity.*

Except the longer he spent in that bed, the more he believed he wouldn't make old bones.

"Hey." Heidi's soft voice broke through, bringing him back into the present.

Keith blinked. "Hey. Is it that time already?" His sister had visited him every day since his admission, two o'clock on the dot, and she usually stayed for a couple of hours. Sometimes she brought her husband Richard, and occasionally Keith's nephew Darrell and his niece Winona. The hardest part of those visits had been watching them trying to school their features, trying not to show their distress at his condition.

They know too, don't they?

They know I won't be leaving here, except in a pine box.

Then he reconsidered.

The pine box comes at the end. The body bag is first.

Such morbid thoughts seemed to plague him with increasing frequency lately.

Heidi pulled the chair closer and sat beside the bed. “How are you today?”

He chuckled. “You ask the same thing every day, and every time I give you the same answer.” He winced, forcing himself not to moan from the sudden crushing pain that spiked through him.

Lord, I hate these cramps.

“I’ll get the nurse.” Heidi was up and out of the chair before he could take a breath. A moment later she returned, and Anna accompanied her, holding a syringe whose contents she added to his IV.

Anna smiled at him. “You’ll feel better now.”

Keith tried to breathe evenly. “Have I told you recently you’re my favorite nurse?”

She laughed. “Sure, but you said the same thing to Jenny, and Lisa, and Sharon, and—”

“Okay, okay, I get it. You’ve all been comparing notes.”

Anna leaned over. “Maybe Santa will bring you a nurse to *really* make you smile.” Her eyes twinkled, the skin crinkling around them. “Maybe a Pete, or a Joe, or a Chris?”

Heidi burst out laughing. “Wow. They sure have *your* number.”

Keith laughed too, although it was cut short when his chest tightened.

Anna studied his face. “Are you up to visitors this afternoon?”

Keith reached for Heidi’s hand and squeezed it. “I’m always up to a visit from my sis.”

Anna smiled. “Then I’ll leave you to it.” She walked to the foot of his bed, added something to his chart, and left the room.

Heidi retook her seat, still holding his hand. “I like her. She seems like a good nurse.”

“She’s awesome. Which is probably why she’s the charge nurse.”

There was a moment’s pause. “Polly and Sandy send their love.”

He managed a smile. “I always think it’s amazing that even though they’re almost fifty, they still look alike. I thought twins would change as they got older, but not those two.” They couldn’t be more different in temperament. Polly reminded him of Grandma, whereas Sandy had caused jaws to drop a few years back when she’d announced she was a lesbian. When all the hugging was over, she’d run to the front door and beckoned. Her girlfriend Laura had been sitting in her car the whole time, waiting for the all clear.

Keith had always believed he’d provide the first same-sex wedding in the family, but Sandy had beaten him to it.

Heidi laughed. “Polly says to tell you she’ll try to visit next week, but—”

“But she’s a grandmother now, with new grandbabies to fuss over.” Keith sighed. “She should be with them. After all, not long till Christmas.” He waved a hand toward the door. “Anna says it looks like a fairy grotto out there.” He scanned his room. “Not so festive in here.” Keith gave her a beseeching glance. “Could you find me a Christmas tree? Even a tiny one?”

“I’ll have to ask if that’s okay,” she replied.

“I need something in here to remind me it’s the holidays.”

Epecially as this could be my last one.

Keith didn’t want to stay in that frame of mind, not when Heidi was there to spend time with him.

“I know.” She stroked his brow. “It’s good to see some things don’t change.”

“Hmm?”

“You. You were always the one who couldn’t wait for Christmas, who clamored for Dad to put up the lights, the tree...”

He smiled. “Yeah. No change there.”

Heidi settled back in her chair and talked, and Keith let her melodic voice roll over him. The words didn’t register sometimes, but the noise provided a distraction from the hum of the monitor, and he’d rather look at her than see the medical paraphernalia surrounding his bed. And if he fell asleep? Heidi wouldn’t mind. She knew how little sleep he got these days.

And while he was thinking about that, sleep snuck up on him and blindsided him.



Saturday, December 17, 2022

Keith had no idea of the time. He only knew it was sometime in the twilight hours between midnight and morning. The hospital was quiet, his night nurse Lisa had just positioned him, and he couldn’t sleep.

As usual.

He hated the pins and needles sensation in his ankles and toes, especially because he couldn’t rub them. He hated the weakness in his muscles that had started in the lower half of his body and was spreading upward. He hated the

paralysis that had reached the muscles controlling his breathing, because in the end, that would be what would kill him.

He fucking *hated* the fact that he knew what AIDP meant. Acute inflammatory demyelinating polyradiculoneuropathy, just one of the forms Guillain-Barre took—or GB as he referred to it in his thoughts.

“Do you need anything?”

The male voice startled him, and Keith gave himself a mental shake. A nurse stood at the foot of the bed. Dark brown hair, hazel eyes, blue scrubs, the collar of a white tee snug against the base of his throat. A beard that clung to his jawline, not thick but dark. He was maybe in his mid-twenties.

Keith couldn't help himself. “Santa sure works fast.”

Dark brows shot up, and the nurse cocked his head. “Excuse me?”

Lord, he was good looking.

Keith bit his lip. “Something Anna said earlier today.” He frowned. “Why haven't I seen you before?”

The nurse came around the bed to stand beside him. “I started here today. And I only work nights.”

“I thought Lisa was the night nurse.”

“She is. But so am I.” He tapped his badge. “The name's Yuri.”

“Welcome, Yuri.” Keith smiled. “You sure make the place look a whole lot prettier.” He caught a smell, a familiar scent that stirred something deep in the recesses of his mind, but he couldn't coax it to the surface to name it.

Yuri grinned. “You're going to be trouble, aren't you?” Before Keith could protest, he came closer. “If you don't need anything, I'll let you sleep.”

“No!” Another pain spike gripped him, and Keith moaned, unable to restrain himself.

Yuri consulted the chart. “Let me give you something for the pain.” He went over to the tray he’d wheeled in, and picked up a vial and a syringe. Keith took deep breaths in an attempt to conquer the spasms, and it wasn’t long before he began to feel the effects of the medication.

“Do you have to go right away?” Keith couldn’t stand the loneliness of those dark hours when sleep eluded him.

Yuri smiled. “I could stay a while and talk until you felt tired.”

Keith returned his smile. “That would be a most welcome distraction.” He waited until Yuri pulled up a chair and sat. “So tell me about yourself.”

Yuri leaned back, elbows on the armrests, fingers laced. “I’m twenty-six, and I’ve been a nurse for four years.”

“Did you always want to do this?”

His eyes sparkled. “Yeah. My mom said when I was a kid, I used to put bandages on my teddy bear.”

Keith chuckled. “That’s cute.” It was also familiar. “I knew someone once who used to do the same kind of thing. A long time ago.” He sighed. “I’ve been thinking a lot about the past lately. Probably because it’s nearly Christmas. I guess we all reminisce when the holidays roll around.”

Yuri nodded. “I know I do.” He cocked his head again. “What do you think about?”

The bandaged teddy story brought one person to mind.

How long has it been since I thought about him? Years? Decades?

“Are you okay?” A gentle hand touched his arm.

Keith smiled at him. “Memories. Sometimes they make you smile, other times they hurt.” He gazed at Yuri. “Forgive a personal question, but... have you ever been in love?”

Yuri studied him in silence for a moment before responding. “Once.”

Something in his expression spoke of unhappiness. “What happened?”

He gave a shrug. “Life got in the way, I guess.”

“But you did love her?”

Yuri’s eyes glittered. “No—I loved *him*.”

Keith grimaced. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed.”

He waved a hand. “It’s okay.” He stared across the bed toward the window. “He was my first love.”

In the silence that followed, Keith closed his eyes in concentration.

There had only ever been one love in his life.

“What are you thinking about?”

Keith opened his eyes and smiled. “My first love. In fact, the only man I ever loved.” He caught the hitch in Yuri’s breathing. “Yeah, you’re not the only gay man in this place.” He blinked. “Or bi... pan....or—” It was a whole new world out there, one that came with many sexualities and differing pronouns, and he did his best not to offend.

“You were right the first time. I’m gay. And I’m sure there are a lot of us around here.” His eyes grew warm. “How long has it been since you loved this man?”

“I last saw him thirty-five years ago.” And a few years after that, he dropped off the face of the earth, or at least that was how it seemed at the time.

Lord, *that* had hurt.

“You haven’t been alone since then, surely?”

“Oh, there were other men.”

“But you didn’t love them,” Yuri concluded.

Keith met his gaze. “You’re very perceptive. And no, I didn’t love them. At least, not like I loved him.” He sighed. “They were just a pale imitation of love. I think they knew that too.”

Yuri leaned forward. “What was his name?”

“Michael. Michael Rawlings.”

“How old were you when you first knew you loved him?”

That brought a smile. “Sixteen. Except he didn’t find out how I felt for another year.” Then he recalled the hour. “You don’t want to hear me prattle on. You must have things to do.”

Yuri smiled. “Yes, I do, and right now that’s sitting here, listening to you talk, and helping you ignore the pain.” He leaned back. “I’ve got time. Tell me about Michael.”

Keith chuckled. “Where do I start? We met in school when we were seven or eight, and we were best friends.”

Yuri’s face glowed. “That sounds amazing. You must have gone through so much together.”

He nodded. “Not all of it good. Michael lost his dad when he was thirteen.”

“Oh, that’s awful.” Yuri shifted his chair closer to the bed. “Then don’t talk about sad times. Tell me about a happy time you remember.”

Keith closed his eyes, homing in on a memory that shone out like a beacon, cutting through the fog of all the other memories taking up space in his mind.

“Well, it was Halloween...”

OCTOBER 1984

Saturday, October 20, 1984

Stillwater MN

Keith had walked around Brick Pond three times, and his head was still an untidy tangle of thoughts and emotions. He kept his coat pulled tight around him, thankful he'd taken his mom's advice and worn his thick gloves and the hat his grandmother had knitted for him last Christmas.

Of course, he could've listened when Mom had told him to stay the hell indoors on a day like this, but he couldn't think straight, what with his sisters howling like banshees. So what if it was almost Halloween? So what if they were carving pumpkins?

He realized he was being mean-spirited. He'd been just as excited when he was their age. That made him smile. There was only a difference of four years between him and Heidi, and six between him and the twins, but in four months he'd be eighteen, an adult, and his memories of being Polly and Sandy's age were already becoming dim.

He had other things to think about, much more important matters to occupy his mind.

Well, one thing, if he were honest.

One person.

Mom had other reasons for wanting him to stay indoors. The forecast promised snow, and everyone in his family knew what that meant. Keith could hear them in his head.

You shouldn't be out in the cold, not with your weak chest.

You want another dose of the flu?

Seventeen years old, and already he had a history of viral illnesses, enough that his parents watched him like a hawk when winter rolled around, checking for any sign of the flu.

Then he froze when Michael Rawlings emerged from Fairview Cemetery, walking slowly, his head bowed, shoulders slumped.

Of all the people to run into, Michael was the only one that left Keith torn between pleasure and discomfort.

He has no idea what effect he has on me. Not that Keith was about to reveal how he felt—*had* felt for a year or more. But he wasn't going to bare his soul, not when there was the possibility his heart could get trampled on.

Smashed.

Broken.

Michael raised his head and Keith knew the second he'd been spotted.

Michael's smile could power Stillwater and maybe half of Minneapolis if it came to that.

Keith came to a halt and waited for Michael to catch him up. He didn't have to ask what Michael was doing there. It had been around this time four years ago when Michael lost his dad, and they'd been close. *Real* close. Keith's mom always said every parent had a favorite kid—the trick was making every kid think it was them. But there had been no disguising the fact that Michael had been the apple of his father's eye.

Michael cocked his head to one side. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be—"

Keith fired him a warning glance. "Dude. Don't go there, okay?" He had enough people on his back without his best friend joining their ranks. "I went

for a walk to Brick Pond.”

Michael shivered. “As long as you weren’t tempted to go for a swim.”

“I was on my way home.” He grimaced. “Except sticking pins in my eyes would be better than suffering my sisters’ caterwauling.”

Michael didn’t say a word. He didn’t need to. He wasn’t Keith’s best buddy for nothing.

“What about you? Where are you going now? Home?”

He nodded. “I’ve got pumpkins to carve.” His eyes gleamed. “I was actually gonna call you to see if you had any ideas. I didn’t want to do the same old face I do every year. And you *are* the artistic one, right?” His face lit up. “Besides, it’s just me at home. My sister is God knows where, and Mom went to visit my grandmother, Bill too.”

It might have been Keith’s imagination, but he felt sure Michael’s face tightened a little at the mention of his mom’s fiancé. The engagement had been announced in June, and while Michael made all the right noises, Keith suspected there was more to the story.

So ask him. You’re his best friend. If he can’t tell you, who can he tell?

“I could help you with the pumpkins,” he offered. And if no one was around, maybe they could talk.

Michael’s eyes brightened. “Yeah? Great.”

They headed for Everett Street South, walking side by side.

“So what’s Bill like?” Keith asked. Michael didn’t talk about him much, and that was a red flag right there. Michael was a talker.

“He’s okay,” he said with a shrug.

“You don’t sound sure about that.”

“He’s been around ever since Dad died, you know? I never even knew he was interested in my mom until last year. And then suddenly they’re dating.”

“You don’t like him?” That was the vibe Keith was getting, and he hoped his instincts were off.

“It’s more that I’m not sure of myself around him.”

Keith frowned. “What does that mean?” Michael went quiet, and a shiver trickled through Keith. “Hey, what’s up?”

“I...I can’t talk about it here. It’s a conversation for when we’re someplace warm, okay? Maybe with hot chocolate?”

Despite his misgivings, Keith grinned. “I knew hot chocolate would figure in there somewhere. Sure. I don’t want to stay out in this temperature for longer than I need to.” He waggled his eyebrows. “I might catch cold, right?”

Michael chuckled, and they picked up speed.

By the time they turned onto Anderson Street West, Keith was more than ready for a little heat.

I am so lucky.

Compared to Michael’s family life, his was idyllic. His parents were really cool, and even though his sisters aggravated the hell out of him, he knew he’d do anything for them, and vice versa. He couldn’t imagine losing either of his parents. Maybe that was why he’d made sure he’d been there for Michael the last few years. They’d known each other since second grade, went through middle school, high school...

Keith couldn’t wish for a better friend.

Which was why he wasn't about to ruin that friendship by opening his big fat mouth.

They reached the house, and Keith followed Michael up the reddish-brown slabbed path to the gleaming black front door, stark against the white cedar shakes and black shutters. They went inside, and out of habit Keith toed off his boots. Michael walked into the kitchen.

The stillness and peace of the house was so welcome after the cacophony Keith had left behind that morning. Three fat medium-sized pumpkins sat on the countertop, along with a kitchen knife, and he went over to them.

“Have you had any ideas?”

“Not so far. Why'd you think I was gonna call *you*?” Michael stopped mid task and left the room. “Let me find you some paper,” he called back.

Keith pulled out a stool from under the breakfast bar and perched on it. He always liked being in Michael's kitchen. It was such a light room, in warm tones that reminded him of summer. Outside, the sky was heavy with clouds.

I hope the snow holds off until after Halloween.

Michael came back into the kitchen, carrying a paper pad and a pencil. “Tell me you've been inspired.”

Keith laughed. “You were gone less than a minute.” He did have one idea, though. “There was a movie on last week, Sinbad and... something. But there was this really cool monster on there, a cyclops. Huge thing with hooves, a horn sticking out of its forehead, and one eye. That might work. We couldn't do the horn, but...” He grabbed the pencil and drew a quick sketch of the design. Michael stood beside him, staring as the hideous face emerged.

“That is so cool.”

Keith coughed. “Hey, you promised me hot chocolate.”

Michael chuckled. “Okay, okay.” He went over to the countertop and reached into the cabinet.

Keith waited a moment before launching into their previous conversation. “You were saying? About Bill?”

This time there was no mistaking Michael’s reaction. His back stiffened.

“It’s okay,” Keith said quickly, backpedaling. “You don’t have to tell me. But if you ever want to talk, you know where I am.” He managed a smile. “God knows there are things I find difficult to talk about too.”

Namely, you. And how I feel about you.

Michael jerked his head around. “Even to me?”

Especially *to you*.

“Yeah,” Keith confessed.

Michael huffed. “Don’t know why I’m reacting like that. There’s stuff I haven’t told you about me. Stuff I haven’t told *anyone*. When it comes to Bill, I guess I’m not sure how he’d react, that’s all.”

Keith had to smile. “Looks as though we both have secrets. That’s okay. There isn’t a law that says I have to know everything about my bestie.” Only, part of him wondered why Michael hadn’t shared whatever it was with him, and before he could put his brain into gear, his mouth swung into action. “Don’t you trust me?”

Michael turned slowly. “Excuse me? I could ask you the same thing.”

Keith’s heart hammered. “Michael...” His palms were clammy. “You know you said you weren’t sure how Bill would react? Well, that’s kinda

where *I* am right now.”

And there he was, at the point of no return.

Michael abandoned his task, came over to the other side of the breakfast bar, and stood there, his gaze locked on Keith’s face, his hands by his sides. “I thought we could talk to each other. I never guessed we were both hiding stuff.”

“I... I couldn’t tell you, okay? Because there’s a real chance I could say too much, and then you might... hate me.”

Michael widened his eyes. “Dude. Why would I hate you? How long have we been friends?”

“But what if there are things that shouldn’t be told? Things that might change... everything?”

Michael’s breathing caught, and for some reason that sent a shiver through Keith.

“Then again, they might not.” He looked Keith in the eye. “You’ll never know until you get the words out.” His lips twitched. “You know what would be weird? If we both wanted to say the same thing to each other.”

Keith didn’t believe he could be *that* lucky, but he was never going to get such a perfect opening again.

Maybe it *was* time.

Keith drew in a deep breath in an effort to calm his racing heart. “Michael... the last year or so, I’ve realized something about myself.”

Michael didn’t move. “Me too.”

Another breath. “I... I’m gay.”

There was that hitch in Michael's breathing again, and his eyes were like saucers.

"Me too."

No way.

No freaking way.

Keith breathed a little easier, and for the first time, he allowed himself to hope.

"And as for not telling you, well... that was difficult because... you were part of it."

Oh dear Lord, Michael was so still. "How long have I been a part of it?"

Keith wasn't about to stop now.

"You're the reason I knew I was gay. You're the person I think about all the time. You're the one who makes my stupid little heart do a happy dance whenever you're near."

Michael's eyes twinkled. "A happy dance?"

"I'm being serious here," Keith remonstrated.

"Me too. Because *my* stupid little heart is dancing right along with yours."

Keith's mouth fell open. He was giddy. Excited. Elated.

This was real.

This was happening.

And before he could mumble words that could never capture the depth of his feelings, his emotions, Michael walked around the breakfast bar, tilted Keith's chin up with his fingers, cupped the back of Keith's head, drew him

closer, and finally Keith's life caught up with his fantasy and their lips met in a sweet kiss that he'd dreamed about for so long.

Don't let this be a dream.

Don't let me wake up in my bed.

Don't let him stop.

Michael's lips were warm and soft. His hands were gentle. A scent clung to him, a smell of outdoors, and it filled Keith's nostrils, seeping into him, all the way to his bones.

Then the front door opened, they sprang apart, and the spell was broken.

"You home?" Ellen's voice shattered the quiet.

Michael hurried over to the stove and resumed his task. "In the kitchen."

Damn all sisters. It seemed to be a universal law that they had the worst timing.

Keith did his best to get his breathing under control. His head was spinning, and his heart was doing its little happy dance again.

My first kiss.

What made it perfect was that he'd shared it with Michael.

Ellen walked into the kitchen, shrugging off her coat and scarf. "Hey, Keith." She peered at the paper in front of him. "Ooh, that looks great. Are you guys going to carve the pumpkins?"

Keith forced a smile. "That's the plan."

Inside he was cursing Ellen's timing.

Michael glanced at him. "So you're gonna stay?"

This time Keith's smile felt genuine.

“Yeah, I’ll stay.”



Saturday, December 17, 2022

“What did Michael look like?” Yuri asked.

“He was tall, with brown hair, and eyes that looked like dark chocolate drops, a really rich brown.” Keith chuckled. “He said when he was seventeen that he wanted to grow a beard, but no matter how hard he tried, his face was always smooth and hair took forever to grow. In the end he resigned himself to being clean shaven.”

Yuri rubbed his beard. “I keep trying to get this to grow thicker, but so far it’s not playing ball.” He glanced at Keith’s room. “Looking at this place, you wouldn’t know it was almost Christmas.”

“I said the same thing to my sister only today. Which is sad, because Christmas was always my favorite holiday.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” Yuri’s eyes twinkled. “Sounds to me like Halloween had to have been up there too.”

“That first Christmas was the hardest. We couldn’t be together.”

“Your folks didn’t know about you and Michael?”

Keith shook his head, stifling a yawn.

Yuri rose. “Close your eyes. Don’t fight it. You can tell me about that Christmas tomorrow night when it’s my shift.” His hand was warm on Keith’s shoulder. “Try to sleep.”

“Okay,” Keith got out before another yawn erupted. He closed his eyes.

Maybe he *could* sleep at that.

TALKING ABOUT MICHAEL

Saturday, December 17, 2022

“What have you got there?” Keith asked when Heidi walked into his room, a long box tucked under one arm, and a plastic bag in her hand, its sides bulging.

“Christmas!” she announced, grinning. She placed the items at the foot of his bed. “Anna gave me the go-ahead to get you a tree.”

If Keith had possessed a Christmas list, Anna would have been at the top, closely followed by Heidi. Then he realized he could add another name—Yuri. His late-night conversation with the nurse had resulted in a deep sleep that had lasted until the morning, something he hadn’t experienced for a while.

He was real easy to talk to.

Easy on the eye as well. Santa had exceptional taste, it seemed.

Heidi glanced at him. “You look brighter today. Did you have a better night?”

He nodded. “I think I needed it.”

“So the meds finally worked, huh?”

“It wasn’t meds.” Keith told her about Yuri. “Just what the doctor ordered.”

Heidi’s grin was back. “A conversation with a hot nurse? And he was hot, wasn’t he?”

Keith pretended to appear scandalized.

She laughed. “I was joking about Santa, but it seems he was listening. Anyway, I’m glad you had someone to talk to when the pain got bad. I must

find him and thank him.”

“You won’t find him here. Yuri only works nights,” he told her.

“Then I’ll be sure to get Anna to pass my thanks along.” She peered at the room. “Now, where shall we put your tree?”

“How about on the table by the window? I can see it easily from there.”

“Fine. I also brought lights, and some of the decorations Mom gave me, from when we were kids. You can tell me where to put them.”

Keith passed a pleasant hour watching Heidi adorn the tree. The lights reflected in the shiny baubles, sending shafts of color around the room, decorating the white walls and ceiling. When she was done, she stepped back with a flourish.

“Ta-da!”

He smiled. “It’s perfect. Thank you so much.”

Anna came into the room, her eyes shining when she saw the tree. “That’s great. You’re a lucky man, you know. We usually don’t allow things like this in the patients’ rooms.”

“But I’m a special case, aren’t I?” It was the closest Keith had ever gotten to saying the words out loud.

You’re letting me have the tree because this is going to be my last Christmas, isn’t it? Assuming he made it to Christmas Day.

Keith had always been the most positive of people. A glass-half-full kinda guy, Michael used to say, and it was true—then. But the last few years had robbed him of his optimism.

Who am I kidding? It began long before that.

He’d lost his positivity when he’d lost Michael.

“When you see Yuri, please thank him,” Heidi said with a smile. “His chat last night helped my brother go off to sleep. Better than a glass of warm milk.”

Anna frowned. “Yuri?”

“A nurse who works nights. Keith met him for the first time last night.”

“He must be new. I don’t recall seeing his name before.”

“He said he only started yesterday,” Keith remarked.

Anna rolled her eyes. “I’m always the last to know.” She turned to Heidi. “I’ll be sure to pass on your thanks—assuming I ever get to meet him.” She checked Keith’s chart, then listened to his chest, her brow furrowing. “Are you finding it more difficult to breathe?”

“I do get a little short of breath,” he confessed. “Especially when I lie flat.”

“And it hurts to breathe?”

He nodded. “What happens when the pain gets to be too much?”

“The doctor will discuss that with you later.”

Keith persisted. “Can’t *you* tell me now?”

Anna bit her lip. “When that happens, the next course of treatment would be a tracheostomy.”

“I’d breathe through a tube in my neck?”

She nodded.

“Would I be able to talk?”

Anna didn’t reply right away. “Yes. It’s not easy but it can be done. The only thing is, repositioning you would become more difficult—you’d be on

the ventilator all the time—so you'd need round-the-clock nursing care."

He sighed. "Bedsore?"

"Yes."

"But we're not there yet?"

Anna's smile was kind. "No, we're not." She replaced the chart. "I'll leave you to enjoy your sister's visit." With a nod toward Heidi, she walked out of the room.

Heidi settled in her usual chair, and it took him a moment to realize how quiet she'd become.

"Are you all right?"

She sighed. "That conversation with Anna was a cold splash of reality."

"Welcome to *my* world." His stomach did a flip. "I'm sorry. But can we change the subject? I don't really want to think about bedsores."

She shuddered. "Neither do I. So what did you and Yuri talk about?"

"Would you believe, Michael?"

Her mouth fell open. "Now *there's* a name I haven't heard you mention in a long time."

"You do remember him, then?"

She laughed. "Of course. You two were in and out of each other's houses for years. I always liked him." She frowned. "Funny how he just disappeared."

"He didn't disappear—he moved."

"And then stopped writing."

“Not right away.” There’d been a year or two of communication before it dried up altogether.

“Have you ever thought about trying to find him? It’d be easier now than it was then, what with the Internet. You could probably find him in seconds.”

Keith smiled. “And discover he’s been happily married for the last two decades—or at least the closest anyone could get to same-sex marriage before the law changed. Why rock the boat?”

“But what if he *isn’t* happily married? What if he’s been miserable ever since he left Stillwater, and—”

“And hasn’t been in contact.” Keith shook his head. “Not that I’m blaming him. I’ve been just as bad. Leave it, sis. Let the past stay the past.”

Which was easier than it sounded.

His conversation with Yuri had opened the door to memories he’d thought long forgotten. He’d woken that morning thinking of Michael.

Specifically, the first Christmas they were together.

It had been frustrating as hell, until Michael had made a suggestion that had changed everything.

It was a tale he’d share with Yuri if he got the chance.



Sunday, December 18, 2022

Keith had no idea how long he’d lain awake waiting for Yuri to appear. He’d almost given up hope when the door opened and Yuri walked in, smiling when he caught sight of the tree.

“That’s pretty.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Keith raised the head of his bed a little higher. “Where I grew up, every year there was a huge tree down by the river, covered with thousands of lights. There was a skating rink too.”

“Where was that?”

“Stillwater.”

Yuri grinned. “You didn’t stray far from home, did you?”

He smiled. “Why would I want to move? It’s a beautiful place to live.” Stillwater had everything: a river, an ever-changing canopy of leaves... If he needed culture, there was Minneapolis. “When I was your age, I never imagined I’d still be living here when I was in my fifties.” Keith peered at Yuri. “Where did you grow up?”

That smile was so attractive. “Right here in Stillwater, just like you. And I’m still here.”

“Do you think you’ll stay here?”

“To quote you, why would I want to move? It’s a beautiful place.”

Keith recalled their previous conversation. “You said you were in love once. What was he like? Seeing as I told you all about Michael.”

“I don’t think you told me *everything*, but you’re right, turnabout is fair play.” Yuri sat in the chair. “He was the best person I ever knew. And I was a fool to lose him.”

Keith stilled. “Now listen to me. Don’t dwell on the past. Don’t fixate on the one that got away. Do that, and no other guy will ever be as good. And before you know it, the years will have flown and you’ll have let happiness pass you by. Don’t do that. I did that, and look at me now. I should have a

partner visiting me, a husband even, but I'm alone. Don't make the same mistakes I did."

"No one ever matched up to Michael, did they?"

He smiled. "I think you already know the answer to that."

"You were going to tell me about your first Christmas with Michael."

"So I was." He sighed. "We weren't out."

"But why not?"

Keith studied him. "It was a very different time. You've grown up in an environment—a time—that was nothing like the one we knew." He shrugged. "What it all boiled down to was we didn't want to worry our parents."

"Why would they worry?"

Keith locked gazes with him. "Because of AIDS. Everyone thought it was a death sentence."

Yuri nodded. "You're right. It was a very different time. There's a man I know, who was diagnosed with HIV twenty years ago. He's married, he has kids, and he lives a normal life, thanks to his meds. That was probably something you wouldn't have believed possible when you were my age." He leaned forward. "I still want to hear about your first Christmas." He smiled. "Was it wonderful?"

Keith chuckled. "Wonderful? It was freezing."

CHRISTMAS 1984

Saturday, December 22, 1984

As long as Keith could remember, Christmas had been his favorite holiday. As soon as Thanksgiving was over and everyone had eaten as many turkey sandwiches as they could stand, the decorations would come out of storage and Keith's excitement would shift into overdrive. Each weekend brought something new in Stillwater: the huge tree erected by the river; the tunnel of Christmas lights; the ice slide; and the ice-skating rink by the Water Inn.

Christmas was always magical.

This Christmas, however...

Keith wanted to walk through the tunnel, holding Michael's hand. He wanted to stand in front of the town tree and gaze up at its twinkling lights before he leaned in to kiss Michael and wish him a merry Christmas. He wanted to skate around and around the rink, Michael at his side.

But he could do none of those things. Because someone might see.

More importantly, someone might see and tell their parents.

Keith hadn't realized how much energy and effort it took to act as though they were just friends. He wasn't keeping silent because his family would turn out to be a bunch of haters. He was reasonably certain they'd be okay with it.

No, what kept his mouth shut now had a name—AIDS.

The news was full of it, and he knew his parents would worry their asses off if they found out their teenage son was gay. Not that they had anything to worry about on that score—all he and Michael had done so far was kiss, and

that was when each of them came over to the other's house to 'study'. Okay, they really *did* study, but a fair proportion of that time was spent locking lips. As for Michael, he had a whole set of other reasons for keeping quiet.

Well, one reason, and his name was Bill.

And while a lack of opportunity prevented him and Michael from moving beyond making out, there was also a hefty amount of fear. They didn't know enough about the 'gay cancer' and the thought that having sex might end up killing one or both of them was more than they could handle. Keith knew a large number of their classmates were already sexually active, but the idea of being caught having sex underage was another blast of ice-cold water that quashed any rumblings of desire.

A knock on his window hurled him back into the present. Michael stood outside, shivering in the snow.

Keith opened the window. "We do have a front door, you know," he said in a low voice. "Get your butt in here." It had to be forty below out there.

Michael clambered in, snow falling from his shoulders and boots. Keith hurriedly shut the window. "Something wrong?" he asked.

"Can you sneak out tonight?" He rubbed his arms briskly.

"Why would I have to sneak?"

"Because it would be almost midnight, and I can't see your folks letting you out so late."

Keith blinked. "And where would I be sneaking to?"

"The river."

He bit his lip. "Bit cold for swimming, don'tcha think?"

Michael rolled his eyes. “I did some investigating. They turn the tree lights off at midnight, and there’s usually no one around at that time.”

“Yeah, they’re all tucked up in their beds, nice and warm, that’s why.”

Michael took a step closer, and the warm, comforting smell that always clung to him pervaded Keith’s nostrils. “No people means no one to see us. So if you wrap up warm and wear your jacket with the fur-lined hood, you won’t be recognized. I’ll do the same.”

“You want me to get out of bed to go stand in the freezing cold and look at the Christmas tree?”

That earned him another eye-roll. “God, you don’t have a romantic bone in your body, do you? No, I want you to get out of your bed to join me at the tree, so I can hold hands and kiss you with the Christmas lights on your face.”

Keith’s breathing hitched.

Michael smiled. “That got your attention. So... are we on for tonight?”

He nodded. “It sounds...”

Magical.

Michael went to the window. “And now I have to get back before I’m missed.”

Keith grabbed his arm. “Hey. No kiss?”

Michael grinned, pulled Keith to him, and held him close while he kissed him, slow as you please, as if they had all the time in the world. Then he released him. “Eleven forty-five, by the tree. I’ll be waiting.”

“I’ll be there,” Keith assured him.

Michael opened the window, hooked his leg over the sill, and scrambled out. Keith darted forward to plant a quick kiss on his mouth, and then he

closed it.

A midnight assignation.

Michael had it wrong. Keith could be romantic—he just never got the chance.

Well, he'd get it that night.



Keith stood by the tree, amazed that there were still people out and about. Not that he recognized any of them, but he kept his face in shadow all the same. Lord, it was freezing, and that was with two sweaters and a thick jacket.

“Hey.”

Michael stood next to him, smiling.

“You know, the day you turn up without that smile, I’m really gonna worry,” Keith told him.

“I’m smiling because you’re here.” Michael gazed up at the tree. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

Keith had to agree.

Michael glanced around them before stepping closer.

“And now it’s even more beautiful because I get to do this.” He removed his glove, tilted Keith’s head up with his fingers, and closed the gap between them, his lips warm and soft on Keith’s. Snow fell on them, caught in the different colors of the lights, and a breeze picked up, causing them to swirl

around him and Michael. He looped his arms around Michael's neck, and deepened the kiss, unwilling for the moment to end.

His happiest holiday, and he was sharing it with Michael, the way he'd been dreaming of ever since the lights had begun to appear around town. So what if he was freezing his ass off? That didn't matter. He was standing in the snow, multicolored snow at that, and Michael's lips were on his, Michael's hand cupped his nape in that way Keith loved, and between them they created warmth.

Then all went dark, and he realized their moment was over. The lights had been extinguished and the magic was lost.

"And now you go home and get back in your warm bed before you catch your death," Michael whispered. "I'll be over at some point tomorrow, once I know I won't be missed."

Keith smiled. "Technically it already *is* tomorrow." He cradled Michael's head and pulled him into one more kiss. "Thank you for the Christmas present."

"I haven't given you anything yet," Michael protested.

Another kiss, slow and tender.

"Yes, you did."



Sunday, December 18, 2022

Keith sighed. "If I close my eyes, I can still feel his lips on mine, the snow falling on us. I can still see the lights."

“The tree is just as beautiful this year,” Yuri told him.

“I know. I saw it going up.” Keith gestured to his bed. “That was before they brought me here.” He glanced at Yuri. “So you said you live in Stillwater?”

He nodded.

“Where did you go to school?”

“Stillwater Area High School.”

Keith gaped. “No way. That was my high school too, and Michael’s. There’d be no teachers left from when we were there.”

Yuri tilted his head to one side. “The word was that Mrs. Ellis had been there forever, so I took a peek in some old year books. She first appeared in the 1984 edition, but then her name was Miss Bantry.”

Keith stared at him. “That’s right. She taught Art. She was the one who encouraged me to become an architect.” He chuckled. “She said she couldn’t bear the thought of me as a starving artist, so I’d better make my talent pay.” He yawned.

Yuri was out of the chair in a heartbeat. “And that’s my cue to say goodnight.”

Damn it, he couldn’t stop yawning. “Will you stop by tomorrow night?”

Yuri smiled. “Of course.” He gave a mock glare. “But only if you get some sleep.”

Keith promptly closed his eyes. “Already getting there.”

He didn’t want to jeopardize his chances of another conversation. Yuri made the night seem more tolerable, somehow. Except maybe it was more than Yuri.

Maybe it was reliving the past.

Remembering Michael.

A MORE PERSONAL CONVERSATION

Sunday, December 18, 2022

The previous night might have been a restful one, but the morning had brought concerns. Anna had noticed an irregular heart rhythm, and she'd monitored it for about three hours. It had finally settled by the time Heidi arrived. Keith didn't miss the whispers in the hallway. He figured Anna was telling Heidi the good news.

He didn't want Heidi worried.

She came into the room, removing her hat and scarf. "It's so cold out there. Another five inches of snow fell last night."

He forced a smile. "I always loved a white Christmas."

And there I go, already talking in the past tense.

He wasn't dead yet. And there was one more Christmas to come.

Heidi sat in her chair, scraping its legs across the floor as she inched it closer to the bed. "How are you feeling?"

"Why are you asking? You already know the answer. Anna told you."

She flinched. "Of course she did. I asked her to keep me in the loop." Heidi settled against the chair's padded back. "That's okay, isn't it? For me to know how you're doing?"

"Of course it is." He hated how prickly he was sometimes. He had no right to take it out on Heidi.

"I thought—we *all* thought—you'd gotten through this."

He blinked. "GB? You *know* there's no cure."

"But you recovered. It's been three years since the first onset."

He sighed. "Yes, and I did recover a little. But that bout of flu a few

weeks ago triggered it again.” Flu had been a part of his life for as long as he could remember.

“But you were vaccinated!” she protested.

“And vaccination can be one of the triggers,” he replied. “In my case, catching the flu was a greater risk than a vaccination.” Then he caught his breath as another pain spike lanced through him.

“Should I get Anna?”

He nodded, unable to speak. The meds made the pain a little more bearable, but not by much.

Heidi returned with Anna, who went straight to the IV stand and injected the contents of a syringe into it. She gazed at him with concern. “I was on my way to administer this when Heidi came and found me.” Her fingers were cool against his forehead as she watched the monitor. Finally she smiled. “It’s eased off, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Anna squeezed his hand. “I’ll leave you two alone.” She left the room, her low heels making little sound on the linoleum.

Heidi stood beside his bed. “Do you want me to raise your head a little?”

“Please. Can’t seem to find the strength to operate the button this morning.”

She pushed it, and the head of the bed rose a bit higher. Heidi sat once more.

“Why are you getting weaker?” she asked quietly.

He arched his eyebrows. “Didn’t Anna cover that in her morning recap?” Except that was mean and he knew it. He sighed. “I’m sorry. The thing is,

AIDP—you remember what that is?” She nodded. “Well, the body’s nerves are covered in a protective sheath—a myelin sheath—and AIDP damages it, preventing the nerves from transmitting signals to my brain. And *that* causes paralysis, amongst other things.”

Keith knew this stuff like the back of his hand. He’d had time to read up on it when GB was first diagnosed.

Heidi took his hand in hers. “Anna says you slept better again last night.”

He managed a smile. “Yeah, I did, thanks to another late-night chat with Yuri.”

Her eyes sparkled. “I’m intrigued. Just how old is this Yuri?”

“He’s twenty-six.”

She gave a mock gasp. “You cradle robber.”

He glared. “Hey, all we did was talk, okay?” He wagged his eyebrows. “I didn’t have the strength to manage more than that, more’s the pity.”

Heidi laughed at his joke. “I find it interesting that you know his age.”

“He grew up in Stillwater. Still lives there. He went to the same school as us.”

“Local boy, huh?” She leaned in. “Is he a looker?”

Keith smiled. “He’s cute. A bit too young for me. Now, if I was about ten years younger and not in this bed...”

She laughed. “What did you guys talk about this time?”

“The first Christmas Michael and I were together, except no one knew that. I told Yuri about how I sneaked out of the house to meet him at the tree by the river.”

She gaped. “I never knew that.”

He chuckled. "That's because I never told a soul. Until last night."

"So when did you and Michael really get together?"

"Halloween." He couldn't resist. "I went to his place seeking sanctuary from my sisters."

Heidi gave a rueful smile. "Yeah, we did go overboard a little, as I recall."

He raised his eyebrows again. "Ya think?"

She fired a speculative glance at him. "Was that the only sneaking around you guys did?"

Keith placed his hand over his heart. "Why, what can you be suggesting?"

Heidi snorted. "You were seventeen. I know what seventeen-year-old boys are like. I had one of my own, remember?" She shuddered. "I lost count of how many stiff socks I found in Darrell's hamper. Then he caught me one day. After that, I had to empty the trash can in his room more frequently, because he'd filled it with tissues."

Keith laughed. "He must have been mortified. I know *I* would've been, if Mom had done the same. And to answer your question, no, I never snuck him into my room, and he never snuck me into his. Not that we even thought about such things for a long time."

She arched her eyebrows. "Now I *know* you're lying."

He sighed. "You were only thirteen at the time. I don't expect you to remember what it was like. And by the time *you* were thinking about getting it on with a boy, neither of you would be worried. Back then AIDS was

thought to be a disease of gay men.” He shuddered. “That myth met with a swift death.”

Heidi stilled. “Oh. I get it now. You’re right. A lot of what was in the news went over my head.” She gazed at him, her eyes filled with compassion. “I never thought about that.”

It was all he and Michael thought about, for a long time.

Heidi brightened. “I knew I had something to make your day.” She picked up the remote from his nightstand and aimed it at the TV.

“You want us to watch TV?” Keith chuckled. “Tired of my scintillating conversation already?”

Heidi rolled her eyes. “No—I thought you might like *this*.” She hopped through the channels, and Keith grinned when he saw something very familiar.

“*Miracle on 34th Street*. The original.”

She smiled. “You always loved this one. I checked the TV guide before I left the house, and I knew you wouldn’t want to miss it.” She chuckled. “Now all we need is popcorn.”

Keith watched as Santa cracked his whip over the make-believe reindeer, his sleigh the focal point of the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade.

A little bit of Christmas was just what he needed.



Monday, December 19, 2022

Keith wasn't sleepy. Ever since his conversation with Heidi, he'd been reliving a particular memory, one that sent warmth surging through him. He played it on a loop in his head, seeing every little detail with crystal clarity, as if it had taken place yesterday, rather than thirty-seven years ago.

He was so beautiful.

As beautiful as the act itself.

"What planet are you on?"

Keith jumped. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack, Yuri? I didn't even hear you come in."

He grinned. "I have ninja skills. You were pretty much zoned out there."

"Reliving the past again."

Yuri sat on the bed. "I've been thinking about what you told me last night. In fact, I couldn't get it out of my head. It must have been difficult, not being able to be open about your relationship with Michael."

"It was." Keith had hated all the secrecy.

Yuri regarded him keenly. "I did a little reading when I finished my shift. About HIV in the eighties." He shook his head. "Frightening times."

"Yeah." Keith shivered. Thank God things had changed. "My sister and I were talking about it this morning. She thought Michael and I were having sex every chance we got. I told her the truth—when we got together, we were too freaking scared."

Yuri stared at him. "So you weren't physical?" He flushed. "Forget I asked. That was way too personal."

Keith patted Yuri's hand. "It's okay. I don't mind. In fact, you're probably the only person I know in this place who I *can* talk to about these

things.”

He smiled. “There *is* that, I suppose.”

“And to answer your question, do you *really* think two horny teenagers could ignore their urges for long?”

Yuri laughed. “So how long *did* you wait?”

Keith didn’t hesitate. “From that first kiss? About eight and a half months.”

Yuri widened his eyes. “Wow. I’m impressed.”

Keith studied him. “Do you remember your first time?” He stiffened. “Sorry. There I go making assumptions again. You could be celibate for all I know.”

Yuri chuckled. “Definitely *not* celibate. And yes, I remember. I think everyone remembers their first.” His eyes took on a faraway look. “I’d thought about it for so long, but when it actually happened?” He smiled. “It was better than I’d dreamed possible.”

Keith squeezed his hand. “I can relate to that.”

He’d dreamed of his and Michael’s first time too, fantasized about what it would be like, but that was all it was, a fantasy. Neither of them had gotten up enough nerve to suggest that they might actually have sex. And when the day came, Keith hadn’t seen it coming. Michael had chosen one of the most momentous days in modern history to lose their virginity.

A day Keith would never forget.

JULY 1985

Saturday, July 13, 1985

Keith knocked on the front door. If there was a record for the fastest breakfast, he figured he'd beaten it in his hurry to get to Michael's house in time for the start of the concert at the JFK stadium. Except of course the Live Aid concert had started a couple of hours before in London. Once they'd learned about the event, Michael had researched how they'd get to witness it. For his eighteenth birthday July eleventh, he'd begged his mom to get him the special stereo receiver that would allow him to access MTV, who was broadcasting the entire concert.

A whole day of Michael and rock music. Heaven.

The door opened, and Ellen stood there, grinning. "You're late, it's already started."

Keith rolled his eyes and stepped into the house. "He's got it working?"

"That receiver thing? Sure. Except Mom's made him set it up in the basement. She said she couldn't put up with rock music all day long, so she's letting him use the old TV set down there." Ellen grinned. "She also says she's gonna keep the door closed. Mom isn't a fan of rock music."

"Hi, Keith." Michael's mom emerged from the kitchen, holding a bucket. "I thought you might like these."

He peered into it and broke into a smile when he saw the bottles of soda. "Aw thanks, Mrs. Rawlings."

She made a clucking sound with her tongue. "How many times must I say this? Call me Isabelle. You've been coming to this house since you were how old? Mrs. Rawlings makes me feel ancient."

He flushed. "It just feels weird, I guess. Sort of... impolite."

She handed him the bucket. "That's because your parents brought you up well." She inclined her head toward the door under the stairs. "Michael's already down there. I made sure you have plenty of snacks, and if you can drag your attention away from the TV, there's stuff for sandwiches in the refrigerator. I won't be around most of today, but you're both old enough to feed yourselves."

Keith bit his lip. "Have we driven you from the house?"

She laughed. "Bless you, no. Ellen and I are going to visit my mom."

"Is Bill going too?"

Isabelle shook her head. "He's at a business conference this weekend." She narrowed her gaze. "Now, I'll say the same to you as I said to Michael. No playing the TV so loud that the house shakes, okay? I don't want the neighbors complaining either."

"We'll keep it at a decent level," he promised.

Isabelle beamed. "You're good boys." She chuckled. "Except you're not boys anymore, are you? You're both young men." She shook her head again. "Eighteen. I remember when you were both in second grade, and that seems like five minutes ago." Isabelle glanced over his shoulder at Ellen. "Are you ready? Because I don't want to hit traffic."

"I was ready a half hour ago," Ellen protested. "I was waiting on you."

That earned her another narrowed gaze. "You may be twenty-one, young lady, but that does *not* mean you can speak to your mother like that."

Keith thought it was time to escape. "Thanks for the sodas," he said as he made a dive for the door that led down to the basement. He maneuvered the

narrow wooden stairs, careful not to drop the bucket. From below came the sound of cheering.

“Has it started?” he demanded as he reached the bottom step. Michael was seated on the familiar old, battered leather couch they’d played on for years, the TV set facing it. On the screen was the stadium, the camera panning around the thousands of people assembled there.

“About to. The first act is a singer I’ve never heard of. Joan Baez.”

Keith grinned. “I bet your mom would know who she is.” He held out the bucket, ice clinking against the bottles. “Sodas.” He joined Michael, placing the bottles on the floor next to the couch.

Michael handed him a sheet of paper. “I wrote down the schedule of who’s playing. It’s a real mix.” His eyes sparkled. “This is going to go down in the history books.”

Keith didn’t care. He liked music, sure, but the real pull of the event was the chance to spend the day with Michael.

Alone, it now seemed.

Oh. *Oh.*

Michael cocked his head to one side. “What just went through your head?”

“Nothing,” he said quickly.

Michael’s eyebrows shot up. Then he gave a shrug. “Are your folks okay with you staying until the concert ends?”

“Mom said it was fine, as long as I don’t wake everyone when I get home.” He grinned. “She says only this once, though, as it’s a pretty special day.” He perused the list. “I don’t know who some of these guys are, but

they've got some heavy hitters on here." He pointed to the afternoon slots. "Simple Minds, Pretenders... Madonna? This is gonna be awesome."

Michael peered at the staircase. "Has Mom left yet?"

"Not yet."

He lurched up off the couch. "I'd better say goodbye." His eyes glinted. "Don't eat all the goldfish. I know you."

Keith let out a mock gasp, then laughed when Michael grabbed the box of crackers from the little side table next to the couch. "Wow. That hurts." He was still laughing when Michael bounded up the stairs, the box rattling.

When Michael had invited him over for the day, all he'd thought about was music and being with him.

Now? He was thinking about something else entirely.



"You hungry yet?"

Keith chuckled. "Are you kidding? We've eaten half the box and a bag of chips." On the screen, Bryan Adams had given way to the Beach Boys who were singing about California girls. Keith was curled up on the couch, his head resting on Michael's chest.

Michael pressed a kiss to the top of his head. "You think this is what it's like to be married?"

Keith blinked and sat up. "Where did that come from?"

He smiled. "I was just thinking how cozy this was, sitting on the couch, the two of us, watching TV..." His face glowed. "I like the way it feels."

Keith resumed his previous position. "Me too," he said with a sigh.

"Of course, we do have the house to ourselves. Mom'll be gone for hours."

"Okay," he enunciated. He shivered when Michael slid his hand down Keith's back. The light touch felt kinda... sexy.

"You know I went shopping with Mom last weekend?"

The randomness of the remark stopped him in his carnal tracks. "Er, yeah? She dragged your ass to Minneapolis. You were bitching about it the week before."

"Right. Well..." Michael cleared his throat. "The thing is... I..."

Keith sat up. "Spit it out."

Michael's cheeks were flushed, his eyes bright. "I was bored out of my skull, so she said I could meet her later. I mean, I only went with her because I needed new sneakers."

"Are you going anywhere with this?"

Michael sat up too. "I... I went to a bookstore." He coughed. "It was a special kind of store."

Keith was lost. "What was so special about the books?"

The color heightened in Michael's cheeks. "They were... you know... gay."

His jaw dropped. "You went to a *gay* store?"

Michael nodded.

Keith was impressed. "And? What was it like?"

He bit his lip. “Oh my God. Some of the stuff I saw... But I was looking for something specific.”

Keith grinned. “Tell me more.”

Michael reached under the cushion at the end of the couch and removed a book. He handed it to Keith without a word.

Keith stared at the cover. “*The Joy of Gay Sex*,” he read aloud. “An intimate guide for gay men to the pleasures of a gay lifestyle.” He glanced at Michael. “Whoa.”

“I know, right?”

“I can’t believe you had the balls to buy it.”

Michael snorted. “The guy at the cash desk took one look at me and asked me how old I was. When I told him I’d be eighteen on Thursday, he laughed and said, ‘Well, at least I know what you’ll be doing to celebrate.’ Then he stuck it in a brown paper bag, handed it to me and said ‘Happy Birthday.’”

Keith got up enough nerve to peer inside. There were drawings done in sepia tones, images of men talking, kissing, cuddling... Then his breath caught in his throat. “That’s a dick.”

Michael chuckled. “There’s more than one in there, trust me. I’ve read it from cover to cover about four times.” His eyes widened. “There’s some stuff in there that I didn’t expect.”

“Like what?”

He shuddered. “Stuff I don’t want to even think about. But most of it was pretty informative. And speaking of informative...” His gaze locked on Keith’s. “You know why I bought it, don’t you?”

“You... you want us to...”

Michael nodded. "Is that what you want? I mean, we're both legal now."

"But what about..." Keith lowered his voice. "AIDS?" It felt as though saying the word out loud would be tempting fate.

Michael reached under the cushion again, only this time he brought out a packet. He placed it on the seat between them.

Suddenly everything had gotten real.

Michael had bought condoms.

"I didn't buy these from the local drugstore," Michael told him. "I got on the bus and went to one I hadn't visited before. And then I had to find another one." He stuck his hand under the cushion one more time, and removed a tube, placing it next to the condoms.

Keith glanced at the white tube with its blue center panel. "KY jelly?"

"Yeah. We'll need it for... you know. At least, that's what the book said."

Humor seemed the only way to assuage the rampaging butterflies in his stomach. "You got anything else under there I need to see?"

Michael laughed, and Keith knew his instincts were solid. They were both nervous.

"You haven't answered my question." Michael took a deep breath and placed his hand on Keith's thigh. "Do you want us to—"

Keith stopped his words with a fervent kiss, his hand on Michael's neck, and Michael let out a low moan. Their foreheads touched. "Yes, I want that. If you're sure."

Michael shivered. "In that case..." He straightened. "I'll be right back." He stood.

"Wait—where are you going?"

He pointed to the ceiling. “Bathroom. Something I’ve gotta do first, now I know we’re gonna—”

His words sank in. “Me too.” Keith was on his feet in a heartbeat. There was something he needed to do too. By the time he reached the bathroom on the second floor, his heart was pounding, and only one thought reverberated in his head.

We’re gonna have sex.



When Keith reached the bottom of the basement stairs again, he stopped. “Did it get warmer in here?”

Michael smiled. “I thought a space heater might come in handy.”

The temperature wasn’t the only thing that had changed.

The table in front of the TV set was gone, and in its place on the floor was a comforter and pillows. The condoms and KY stood next to them.

“You know, you have a perfectly good bed upstairs,” Keith quipped, retreating into humor. Because the sight of that comforter conjured up images that made him hot and cold at the same time.

Michael’s cheeks were tinged with red. “I know. But we’ll be left alone down here. And if anyone opens that door we’ll know about it. In my room we’d have no warning.” His eyes twinkled. “You know, in case we’re... doing something.” He sat on the comforter and gazed expectantly at Keith. “Well? Are you going to join me? Or did you change your mind?”

Keith walked to the makeshift bed and sat. “Jesus, my heart...”

Michael lay on his back, his arms wide. “Come here and kiss me.”

As if he could refuse an invitation to his favorite pastime.

Keith lay beside him and lost himself in Michael’s kisses, all of them slow and sweet. He loved that. It was as if every time they did this, they seemed to rediscover each other all over again, and each kiss felt like the first.

“I wanted to wait until we were both eighteen,” Michael murmured against his lips. “But I have to tell you, it’s been hard.”

Keith laughed. “Oh, I’m sure it has.”

Michael swatted him on the shoulder. “You know what I mean.” He flushed. “But yeah, you’re right. It has been. So, so hard.” He grabbed Keith’s hand and drew it to his crotch. “Like it is now, when I’m thinking about finally getting naked with you.”

Keith caught his breath at the feel of stiffness beneath the denim. “I want to see it,” he whispered.

Michael nodded, and sat up to remove his T-shirt. Keith couldn’t resist. He knelt up, placed his hand to Michael’s chest, and stroked the warm flesh, his fingertips brushing over Michael’s nipple, creating an eruption of bronze pebbled skin around it. That taut little nub called to him, and he leaned in to kiss it. Michael’s soft exhale told him his instincts were sound, and he flicked it with his tongue.

“Oh Lord, who knew that would feel so... amazing?”

Keith sucked the nipple, feeling it harden. Then Michael grasped the hem of his T-shirt, pulling it up over Keith’s head and flinging it aside. Michael fumbled with the button on his own jeans, and his feet got caught as he tried to remove the garment. Both of them laughed. Keith got in on the act,

struggling to free his legs from his jeans. All that was left was their underwear, and he couldn't stop staring at Michael's crotch, his hard dick tenting the soft blue cotton.

Michael's chest rose and fell as he pushed his thumbs under the waistband and eased the briefs over his hips, his cock springing up. He knelt, his dick pointing toward Keith, waiting.

Keith copied his actions, and at last they were nude, both of them trembling. Michael gave him a gentle push, and Keith ended up on his back, his head on a pillow. Michael straddled his thigh and leaned over him, his weight on his hands as he lowered his head and kissed Keith, as slow and measured as before. Keith kissed Michael's lips, neck, and shoulders before moving his hand lower to touch Michael's dick that was just within reach, loving the shiver that coursed through him with each glide of his fingers along the silky-soft shaft.

He gazed into Michael's eyes. "Does that feel good?"

Michael shuddered out a breath. "It does. But I think I know how to make it feel even better." He shifted position, moving higher up Keith's body, until his cock rubbed over the base of Keith's dick. Michael rocked his hips, sliding his solid shaft over Keith's balls and the underside of his cock, and Keith couldn't stop the joyous laughter that bubbled up. Michael laughed too, and that felt *right*.

Keith wrapped his hand around both dicks and rubbed them together, and synchronized soft moans escaped from his and Michael's lips. "God, that feels good," he breathed.

Michael stilled above him, his lips inches from Keith's. "Gotta tell you, I'm nervous."

Keith cupped his nape. "Me too." He kissed Michael's mouth, then glanced between their bodies at his hand full of cock. "So this is sex, huh?" Michael's dick was cut like his, but it was wider than Keith's, and the feel of it nudging his balls and rubbing against his belly while Michael rocked back and forth was sexy as hell. Seeing it sliding against his own shaft brought only one thought to mind. "Can... can I suck your cock?"

Michael's eyes widened, and he dropped onto his back, his shaft rising into the air as if clamoring for Keith's attention. Keith moved down the bed, his arm pressed against Michael's hip as he kissed Michael's stomach, working his way south until he reached his dick. Keith paused, drinking in the sight, then leaned over to kiss the head.

Michael groaned, and the sound emboldened Keith to take him into his mouth, an act he'd fantasized about doing for several months but hadn't had the nerve to ask if he could. It was like nothing he'd imagined, but what made it amazing was the obvious pleasure he was giving Michael. His hands were gentle on Keith's head, urging him to go deeper, but not exerting more pressure than Keith could handle.

When he stilled his hands, Keith pulled free of his cock and turned to look at him.

Michael's eyes gleamed. "Could I give it a try?"

Keith was on his back so fast, he was certain he'd pulled a muscle.

Michael's fingers were gentle on his dick and balls as he worked Keith's shaft with his mouth, slow and steady. Keith shivered, pushing up with his hips, undulating his body, desperate to experience more of the exquisite pleasure Michael's lips and tongue delivered.

Michael gave the head of his cock one last hard suck before meeting Keith's gaze.

"I can't wait anymore." He knelt, sliding his hand up and down his shaft. "Can I put it inside you?"

Oh Lord.

Keith was on fire. "As long as I get to do the same."

Michael's breathing hitched. "Works for me." He reached for the tube of KY. "But there's something we need to do first." He flipped the cap and squeezed the clear jelly onto his fingers. "I have to get you ready for me, the book says."

"And then I do it?"

Michael nodded. He stretched out at Keith's side, raising one leg onto his shoulder, and then rubbed his slick fingertips over his pucker. The alien sensation made his heart beat faster, and he held his breath as Michael penetrated him, moving in tiny increments, until finally one finger was buried all the way inside. Michael didn't move it but leaned over to kiss him.

"You know I love you, don't you?"

Keith nodded, his breathing erratically. "Like I love you."

"I've been waiting for this moment, to show you just how much I love you." Michael kissed him again, only this time he withdrew his finger, still taking small steps before sliding it in again. The initial sensation of discomfort soon morphed into something more adult, more intimate, and Keith moved with him, heat building between them, swelling into a passion that overwhelmed him.

"I'm ready," he whispered.

Michael nodded once more. He pulled free of the confines of Keith's body, then shifted closer, rubbing the head of his cock against Keith's waiting entrance. Michael emptied the packet of condoms onto the floor, grabbed a wrapper, tore it, and spent a second or two figuring out which way to put it on. Keith tried to help, aching to feel Michael inside him. At last the latex glove was in place, more KY was applied, and Michael pressed the warm slippery head to his hole, his breathing shallow, his gaze flitting between his dick and Keith's face.

"I'll take it slow, okay?" He swallowed. "The book says breathe."

Keith managed a nervous chuckle. "Sounds like good advice." He forced himself to take long, deep breaths as Michael pushed, pushed again, and *oh dear Lord* he was in.

"Oh *fuck*," he said weakly.

Michael froze. "Want me to stop?"

Keith gaped at him. "Not on your life." It burned a little, but now he knew that would fade. "Feels kinda full," he managed to get out.

Michael's eyes were huge. "God, it's so tight." He shuddered. "Can't believe we're finally doing this." He didn't move, and Keith took more deep breaths, forcing himself to relax. "Gonna take it real slow, okay?"

He nodded, unable to get his brain to function enough to form words. All of his consciousness was focused on Michael's cock filling him, stretching him.

Michael pulled out a little, then slid back in, an inch at a time, and Keith laced their fingers, wanting more of that connection. His eyes were still large and round, and his awed expression echoed Keith's feelings perfectly.

“Oh my God, yes,” Michael said with a sigh. “So good.” Then his breathing caught. “I’m as deep in you as I can get.” He leaned forward, the back of Keith’s knee against his shoulder, and kissed him, their tongues dancing as he began to move with a delicious rocking motion. Keith’s hand was on his nape as Michael moved in and out of him, gathering speed, and he rolled his ass up off the floor, folding himself in two. Michael’s thrusts were deeper, each one punctuated by Keith’s moans.

“Holy shit,” Keith gasped as Michael filled him to the hilt.

“Too much?” Michael paused.

“God, no, keep going.” Keith grabbed his dick and tugged on it, recognizing the telltale signs of an imminent load. They kissed as Michael fucked him, hips rolling as he moved so fluidly, and he knew he couldn’t last much longer. “So close.” Michael’s thrusts quickened, and he groaned. “Yeah, just like that.” He gripped Michael’s shoulder, trembling as he shot hard, unable to rein in the noises that poured from his lips.

“Oh God.” Michael kissed his forehead, his cheeks, his lips. “That feels amazing.”

Keith shuddered as the last drops spattered his belly. “Lord, it does.” Then Michael sped up, and he knew his orgasm wasn’t far behind. Keith cradled Michael’s head and kissed him, moaning at the feel of Michael’s cock throbbing inside him. “Oh God, that’s so cool.”

Michael held him, both of them covered in a sheen of perspiration, and Keith closed his eyes as if to burn the moment into his memory: Michael’s body covering him, his shaft filling him, the smell of him, the taste of his kisses, the touch of his hands...

“I don’t wanna move,” Michael confessed after a few minutes.

“Well, you’re going to have to, unless you don’t *want* me to—”

Michael gasped and slid out of him. “No way.”

Keith chuckled. He glanced at the box of condoms. “You only bought three?”

“Hey. At least I bought some.” He sat up and tugged the latex from his spent dick, tying the end in a knot before dropping it onto the torn wrapper.

“Come here.” Keith held his arms wide, and Michael didn’t hesitate. They lay together, their bodies entwined. On the TV screen, the Beach Boys were singing about good vibrations. Keith chuckled. “Yeah, boys. I know exactly what you mean.” He kissed Michael’s forehead. “How long do we have until your mom gets back?”

“She said she’d be home around four.”

He grinned. “Think we might manage to do this again in the next two and a half hours?”

Michael’s fervent kiss was all the answer he required.

When they parted, Michael sat up and grabbed the book. Keith laughed. “Something else you want to try?”

“No—something I need to do.” He got up, scanning the room. “Ah, there’s one.” He lurched naked across the basement and picked up a pen, then sat on the couch.

“What are you doing?”

Michael opened the book and wrote something inside the cover. He handed the book to Keith. “If anyone ever finds this, that won’t mean anything to them.” His face glowed. “But it’ll mean something to us.”

Keith peered at the inside cover. Michael had written *July 13, 1985*.

He smiled. “Yeah, it will.” He pressed the book to his chest. “Think we’ll still have this when we’re old and gray?”

“Does that mean I’ll still have *you* when we’re old and gray?” Michael’s eyes twinkled. “Because I can so deal with that.”

Keith was enough of a realist to know the chances of them being together were slim. They were only *eighteen*, for God’s sake. They had their whole lives ahead of them.

That didn’t stop him from liking the idea of growing old with Michael.

Who knows? Maybe we’ll stay the course.

Not all teenage romances had to end, right? Some had to have a Happily Ever After. And right then, still warm from his exertions, his skin flushed, his cock already filling for round two, he wanted that for him and Michael.



Monday, December 19, 2022

Yuri fanned himself with the newspaper Keith had been reading the previous day.

“Whoa.”

Keith gave a quiet laugh. “Now you see why it was an easy day to remember.”

“I take it you weren’t interrupted by his mom’s return.”

He grinned. “Well, we did have to put our clothes on pretty fast when she came back a little earlier than we’d anticipated. By the time she stuck her head around the door, we were sitting on the couch, the comforter and

pillows stuffed out of sight.” He chuckled. “I had to distract his mom while he snuck them upstairs to his room. I mean, who could explain needing a comforter in the middle of July?”

“I imagine Michael had fun finding places to hide that book,” Yuri commented.

It had been years since Keith had thought about the book.

Maybe he still has it. Maybe he and his husband still read it together, if it's still in one piece after years of use.

He pushed aside his torturous imaginings. They didn't help.

“The sad thing is, there used to be quite a few bookstores in Minneapolis like the one Michael visited, but not anymore.” Yuri sighed. “Sometimes it feels as if we're going backward, not forward.” He peered at Keith. “Were you able to spend the next Christmas together?”

Keith gave a wry smile. “Yes, but not in a way either of us had anticipated.” He closed his eyes as a wave of fatigue rolled over him. He was dimly aware of the mattress moving as Yuri stood.

“Go to sleep, Keith. Dream of Michael.”

Before he knew it, he was asleep.

HEIDI IS CONFUSED

Monday, December 19, 2022

Heidi arrived later than usual, and she didn't seem her normal calm self. She wore a perpetual frown and appeared to be watching him closely, as if looking for something.

After half an hour of this scrutiny, Keith had had enough.

"What's wrong?"

Heidi blinked. "What makes you think something's wrong?"

He chuckled. "Because I *know* you, sis. So come on, 'fess up."

She bit her lip. "When I got here, I spoke with Anna." She held her hands up. "Nothing heavy, just getting an update. But then I mentioned Yuri, and how much you enjoyed your conversations with him. I really think they've helped."

"I don't understand. How would my late-night chats with Yuri worry you?"

Heidi took a deep breath. "Anna did some checking."

"On what?"

"Yuri."

Keith stared at her. "Why would she do that?"

"Because I was talking about a nurse she had no knowledge of, and it bothered her. So she did a little digging." Heidi covered his hand with hers. "There is no nurse with the name of Yuri working in this hospital."

What the—

Keith struggled to find words. "So what are you suggesting? Some guy is dressing up as a nurse to sneak in here at night and *talk* to me? Do you know

how weird that sounds?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m not saying that at all. Because that *would* be weird.”

“Then what *are* you saying?”

The furrows in her brow deepened.

“I’m saying... maybe there *is* no Yuri. Maybe you... imagined him.”

For a moment he was struck dumb. “You think I’m making him up? Or worse still, *hallucinating*?”

She shrugged. “I don’t think you’d lie about him. That last one is a possibility, however. And it’s not unheard of with your condition.”

“How would you know that?”

Another bite of her lip. “Anna told me. She’s seen it before.”

Keith gaped at her. “So I’m imagining it when he touches my hand? Because let me assure you, he feels as real as you do.”

“I’m certain it seems very real. But what other explanation is there?”

That was the part that foxed Keith.

Heidi spent the rest of her visit talking about the preparations for Christmas, but Keith wasn’t really listening. He knew one thing for certain—he wasn’t going to share Heidi’s extreme theory with Yuri. Because how weird would *that* be?

Hey, Yuri, my sister thinks you’re a figment of my imagination.

Yuri was the one thing keeping his mind off the pain. When Keith talked about the past, the pain spikes lessened, and the weakness seemed to diminish.

Yuri was doing more for him than any medication, and he wasn't about to jeopardize that.

But what if she's right?

What if he isn't real?

What if this is what happens near the end?

He shoved that last thought aside. He didn't want to think about that.

He wanted to enjoy Christmas when it arrived.



Tuesday, December 20, 2022

“Is something wrong?” Yuri asked, standing beside the bed. “You seem troubled.”

Heidi's words had stayed with him all day. But seeing Yuri there, so real, so solid, he knew she was wrong. He preferred his original theory, even if it did mean Yuri wasn't really a nurse and was wearing a costume.

It was better than the alternative.

“I'm fine,” Keith said with a smile. “Where did you train to be a nurse?”

Yuri blinked. “That was random.”

“Just curious.”

“The University of Minnesota—Twin Cities.”

“How long did you train for?”

“Three years. Bachelor of Science in Nursing.” Yuri's eyes twinkled. “Do you want to see my diploma? I can bring it with me tomorrow night.” He

grinned. “If you wanted to make sure I’m qualified to be here.”

Keith felt foolish. “No, I don’t want you to do that.”

Yuri perched on the edge of the bed. “What brought all that on?”

“It’s nothing, honest.” He changed the subject. “How will you be spending Christmas?”

“Probably in here, working.”

Keith gazed at him. “Not with your family?”

“No. There’s just me now. And working takes my mind off that.” He peered at Keith. “You said you spent Christmas with Michael.”

Keith sighed. “Yeah, I did. What I didn’t tell you was that I spent it in the hospital.”

Yuri’s eyes widened. “What happened?”

“When I was younger, I got the flu a lot. And yeah, one time it was so bad, I ended up in the hospital.”

Yuri nodded. “So you have a history of a weak respiratory system? That makes Guillain-Barre easier to explain, then. You were predisposed to it.”

“That’s what the doctors said when I was first diagnosed. Anyhow, in December 1985, I was admitted to the hospital.” He shivered. “And I was scared.”

Yuri caught his breath. “You came close to death?”

Keith nodded. “When the crisis had passed, they let me have visitors.”

He smiled. “Michael.”

“Yeah. I spent a couple of weeks in the hospital—I was there for Christmas—and he came every day. We still weren’t out to our families.

They just thought he was being a good person, visiting his best friend.”

“He must have been worried about you,” Yuri murmured.

“Yeah, he was.” Keith managed a smile. “He was also pissed at me. I’ll tell you why in a minute. By then we’d just had our first semester in college.”

“Where did you guys study? And what?”

“I went to the same university you did, to the College of Design, school of Architecture.”

Yuri smiled. “That’s so cool. So you design buildings? Have you designed any I’d know about?”

“Probably, but that’s for another night. Michael was heading for medical school. He wanted to become a doctor.”

Yuri grinned. “You went to the same university? I guess that made it easier to be together, away from the eyes of parents.”

Keith nodded. “We were out in college. It was our first taste of freedom, and we loved every minute. That didn’t mean we were reckless though. We kept our heads down. But that winter, I got sick. We’d planned to spend our winter break seeing as much of each other as we could, but as soon as I got home…”

“You had to be admitted,” Yuri concluded.

“Yeah. I had two weeks where I didn’t see anyone.” Two weeks where he’d thought he’d never see Michael again.

Longest two weeks of my life.

CHRISTMAS 1985

Monday, December 16, 1985

It took Keith a moment to realize he wasn't alone. He wasn't sure what alerted him. Maybe it was some special sense that revealed the presence of someone beside his hospital bed. He opened his eyes.

Michael stood there looking gorgeous in a red roll-neck sweater and jeans, clutching a bag. His furrowed brow smoothed out and he smiled. "Hey you." Keith tried to sit up, but he stopped him with a gentle hand. "You stay put, mister."

"It's just the flu," Keith protested, the words coming out as a croak.

"Yeah right. Well, I hate to be the one to break it to you, but... Do you know how *rare* it is for a vaccinated person to get a case of flu? And the chances of having to be intubated are even more rare. And yes, I know about that part. Your mom told me." A spasm crossed his face. "Most people don't come close to death because of flu. So you just stay put, you hear me?" Michael grabbed the chair and pulled it toward the bed. He placed the bag on the floor, sat, then took Keith's hand in his.

"Nurse sees you doing that, I'm never gonna hear the last of it." Hell, even his parents didn't know what Michael was to him.

"Let 'em talk." Michael leaned in. "And now you've got me thinking. You *did* get your flu shots this winter, didn't you?"

Aw crap. "No."

Michael scowled. "Keith... you know better. You have *asthma*, dude. That makes you a high-risk candidate. And it's not as if this is the first time you've gotten sick, right?"

“If all you came here for was to bawl me out, you can—”

Michael laid a finger against his lips. “Hush. I’m here because they finally let me in to see my boyfriend in the hospital, okay?” He leaned over and pressed his lips to Keith’s forehead. “I’m here because I love you, doof.”

Keith couldn’t stop the tears that trickled down his cheeks. “I was so scared. I thought I was gonna—”

“Hey, hey.” Michael got out of the chair and sat on the edge of his bed, kissing him on the lips. “You’re going to be fine. Your mom said so.”

“But I might have *died*.”

“But you didn’t, okay? And you’re not going to die until I get the chance to tell the world I love you.” He sighed. “Especially our parents.”

“They’d only worry. You watch the same news I do. It’s getting worse.”

“But if we told them, we wouldn’t have to sneak around anymore,” Michael remonstrated.

Keith managed a snort that morphed into a cough, making his chest ache.

“And you think they’d say, ‘Sure, Michael. Stay over this weekend. You can sleep in Keith’s bed. We don’t mind if you fu—’”

Michael stopped his words with another kiss. His hand was warm on Keith’s cheek.

“When I remember those times we’ve been together—not that there’ve been many, but I can still recall every moment—I never, *ever* think of us fucking,” he said in a low voice. “In my head, in my memories, we’re always making love.”

Keith smiled. “Me too. I was just trying to make a point.”

Michael glanced at his room. “How long do they want to keep you? They’ll let you go home for Christmas, won’t they?”

“I don’t know. They say they’re watching my progress.”

Michael straightened. “Then I’ll be here every day. Even if it means spending the whole holiday in the hospital. I’d rather be here with you than at home anyway.”

Keith studied him. “What’s happened?”

Michael was silent for a moment but laced his fingers through Keith’s. “They’ve set a date for the wedding. Next summer. June twenty first.”

Keith’s chest tightened, and it was nothing to do with the flu. “You knew it was coming, right? I mean, they’ve been engaged for a while. Did you think they’d change their minds?”

“Maybe part of me hoped my mom would see what *I* see and come to her senses.”

“You still think he wouldn’t be supportive if you came out?”

Michael worked his lower lip with his teeth. “I’ve got nothing concrete to go on, just a feeling, but yeah. I know I said I hate the sneaking around, but coming out? I’m deluding myself. Bill’s the reason I’m still in the closet, why I can’t tell my mom about us.”

“Has he said anything?”

Michael fell silent.

Keith squeezed his hand. “Hey. You can tell me anything, remember?”

He sighed. “When the news comes on and they’re talking about AIDS, I... I watch his face. He’s good at keeping his feelings to himself, but now and again? The mask slips and I get a glimpse.” Another shiver. “And I don’t like

what I see. But whatever it is, my mom is blind to it. So I guess I'm gonna have to suck it up and act happy for her." He squared his shoulders. "But enough about my troubles." He stroked Keith's hand. "I can't wait till we're back in school, and I'm sneaking into your room again, or you into mine." He grinned. "We might not be in the same classes, Mr. I'm-going-to-be-an-architect, but at least we're in the same university."

Thank God. School gave them the chance to be together. Not that they were the only gay couple on campus—Keith had seen two or three since the semester had begun—but they still kept a low profile.

Keith smiled. "Take a good look around, Mr. I'm-going-to-be-a-doctor. One day you might be working here."

Michael chuckled. "Do you know how long I have to study before that can happen?"

"Hey, I have five years ahead of me," he protested.

"And I have longer still." Michael's face glowed. "All the more time to spend with you." He reached into the bag. "I brought something with me."

"If you've got condoms and KY in there, I hate to disappoint you, but I don't think I'm up to that, not even a sneaky hand job under the covers."

Michael laughed, and the sound lifted Keith's spirits.

"Doof. I brought a book to read to you."

"Ooh. Which one?" He narrowed his gaze. "If it's a certain book about the joy of something, you're gonna be in trouble. Because that would just be too cruel, teasing me when I'm in a weakened state."

Michael chuckled. "I'm saving that for when you're well again. But I *have* been reading it. Found something else I want us to try."

When nothing else was forthcoming, Keith glared at him. “Don’t make me beat you.”

He snorted. “As if you could.” He stood and leaned over, his breath warm against Keith’s ear. “It’s called rimming.”

Heat spiked through him. “Oh. Yeah, I might have read about that too.” He stared at Michael. “You really want to try that?”

Michael bit his lip. “Yeah—once we’ve both used what I bought us for Christmas. Except we won’t be able to use them until next semester.”

Keith gaped. “I don’t think I wanna know anymore.” Except he did. He was dying of curiosity. “So which book did you bring?” Michael held it up, and Keith laughed. “*The Stand*? You brought a book about a *flu* plague that wipes out most of the world’s population? Man, you are a piece of work. With a twisted sense of humor.”

“I know, but you still love me.” Michael grinned.

There was no denying that.

“Yeah, I do,” he said softly. Keith waved his hand. “Okay then. Read to me about Captain Trips.”

Michael retook his seat in the chair, opened the book, and began to read. Keith closed his eyes and listened, letting Michael’s voice roll over him, settle on him, as warm as a blanket, as soft as silk. And when sleep took hold of him, he went willingly, knowing Michael would still be there when he awoke.



Tuesday, December 20, 2022

“How long were you in the hospital?” Yuri asked.

“Another two weeks. So yeah, I missed Christmas. And Michael came to visit me every day.” Lord, he was tired all of a sudden.

“Telling that story has made you sleepy,” Yuri observed. “I think I should leave you.”

“I’m not tired,” Keith protested before he gave a huge yawn.

Yuri chuckled. “Yeah right.”

“But I was going to tell you about the wedding. Which was pretty memorable.”

“And you can—when I come back.” Yuri’s hand was gentle on his head. “Now go to sleep. You need your rest.”

“Mm.” Keith couldn’t keep his eyes open.

“Sweet dreams, Keith.”

“Mm.” He caught the sound of a door opening and closing.

Hey, Heidi. Am I hallucinating about that too?

At that hour of the morning, his thoughts weren’t exactly clear, but the one that filtered through his head at that moment made perfect sense to him in his sleep-befuddled state.

It didn’t matter if Yuri was real or not. Having him there was better than being alone in the dark.

He was asleep in seconds.

CLOSURE

Tuesday, December 20, 2022

“Keith? Can you hear me?”

He felt as though he was swimming in deep waters, struggling to rise higher, desperate to reach the surface and break through. The voice was muffled, but he homed in on it, pushing upward, higher, higher...

He was in his bed.

Keith caught sight of Anna leaning over him, but when he tried to greet her, no words came out. Then he realized why.

They did a tracheostomy, remember? That surgeon came in, told me it was my best option, and explained exactly what he was going to do— then did it right there at my bedside.

Keith had known it was coming, but realizing he was no longer able to breathe sufficiently unassisted was still a blow.

Anna nodded. “All over now. When we’re happy with your progress, we’ll change you over to the porta-vent. I showed that one to you, didn’t I?”

He nodded. The mini vent would allow him to speak, but he’d be fed through a nasal tube.

Anna squeezed his hand. “How’s the pain?” He squeezed it back, hard, and she gave another nod. “I’ll give you something for it. Then I want you to try and rest.” Keith gestured to the tube, and she gave him a sympathetic glance. “I know, it’s not easy, but right now, rest will bring you closer to getting off the ventilator.”

That was all the incentive he needed.

Keith closed his eyes, and waited for the glorious feeling of pain diminishing.



He knew it was a dream, but *Lord*, it was wonderful.

Keith held Michael in his arms, they were in the middle of a dance floor, and they were moving to something slow and sensual. He recognized their surroundings immediately, and realized his brain was creating an event that had never happened.

We couldn't have done this, not then.

Dream Michael smiled. “When did you learn to dance?”

“Never had a single lesson. I’m a natural.”

Michael laughed. “Yeah, right.”

“No, really. Besides, this isn’t dancing. We’re just holding each other close and moving to the music, while avoiding stepping on each other’s toes.” Keith grinned. “Which is no mean feat. It requires intense concentration.”

“Do you think all these people would be scandalized if I kissed you now?”

If this had been real, then yes, that was definitely a possibility, but Keith knew they were safely locked in a dream.

And in a dream, all things are possible, right?

He closed the gap between them, shivering at the jolt of static electricity when their lips met. Michael claimed his mouth with a fervor that sent heat

barreling through him, and Keith pressed closer, aware of the warmth of Michael's body radiating through his white shirt.

When they broke the kiss, Keith smiled. "In case I forget to tell you, you're the sexiest man at this wedding."

Michael's eyes sparkled. "Funny. I was thinking the same thing about you." Then he froze, mouth open, and it was as if unseen hands yanked him back, forcing them apart, the ballroom gone.

"Michael!"

Keith watched in horror as Michael got further and further away, until he was nothing but a pinprick on the horizon.

And then he was gone.

Keith tried to call out, but there was sudden pain and discomfort. He struggled to wake up, to put distance between himself and that unexpected ending.

"Keith?"

He knew that voice.

"That's it, all over now." Anna's hand was on his. "Just a word of warning. When you try to talk, you won't sound like you. Your voice will be raspy, but you can still speak clearly, okay?"

He raised his fingers to his nose.

"Yes, there's a feeding tube. It goes into your stomach. That's the way you'll get nourishment from now on." The image of Anna's face sharpened, and he saw her smile. "Hello there."

"Hi." The rasping sound was harsher than he'd anticipated.

Anna adjusted his tubes and raised the head of his bed. “Heidi will be here soon.”

“I’m going to be on this from now on, aren’t I?” he croaked.

She nodded. “Remember what Dr. Perez told you? Guillain-Barre is a progressive illness.”

“That means I don’t get better, only worse.”

It was hard to swallow.

He rolled his eyes. Right then it was impossible to swallow anything.

Keith switched the TV on and tried to focus, but his mind was pulled in two different directions. He didn’t want to think about the porta-vent. Better to accept it. But his dream lingered. Michael had seemed so real...

A new goal formed, one he’d refused to pursue, but time was running out.

When Anna came into his room, he signaled to her.

“Can you find me a notepad and a pen?”

“Sure.” She walked out of the room.

He wanted to be ready for when Heidi arrived.

Anna returned with the items, helped him sit, then pulled the table closer across his lap. “If you need anything else, press the buzzer.” She moved it onto the blanket beside him.

“Thanks.” When she was gone, Keith wrote down what details he could remember, dismayed at how difficult he found it just to move the pen across the paper. He had no idea how long the task he had in mind would take—Heidi’s assumption it could be completed in mere seconds wasn’t realistic—but he hoped there was enough time.

There has to be.

When Heidi arrived, he was ready.

He didn't miss the momentary spasm that crossed her face, and he knew the porta-vent was the cause. She got over it quickly and leaned over to kiss his cheek.

"That's new," she said, her tone light.

"It means I can breathe. Talk, even. We couldn't have done that this morning." As soon as she sat in the chair, he launched into the words he'd prepared. "There's something I'd like you to do for me, and it's important."

Heidi blinked. "Of course. What is it?"

He grabbed the notepad and held it out to her. Heidi took it, flipped the cover up and read the top sheet. She jerked her head up, her eyes wide.

"You want me to find Michael, don't you?"

He nodded. "That's all the personal information I have. I know what city they moved to, and that's as much of the address as I can remember. It was a long time ago."

She closed the pad and slipped it into her purse. "I'm on it. Better yet, I'll get Darrell on it." She bit her lip. "His tech skills put mine to shame." Heidi leaned forward. "One question. If I find him, what do you want me to do?" She squeezed his hand. "Do you want to see him?"

He heard the words she didn't give breath to.

Before it's too late.

Keith nodded. "If he can get here. I know it's a lot to ask, but—"

"Hey, it's fine. We'll see what we can do, all right?" She paused, and Keith suddenly knew what was coming. "So... last night... did you—"

“Did I see my imaginary friend Yuri again? Is that what you want to know?” She flushed. “The answer is yes. And he seemed very real to me. So if my mind is playing tricks on me, it’s doing an amazing job.” He couldn’t resist poking her. “There *is* another alternative, you know.”

She stared at him. “I’m all ears.”

Keith smiled. “He could be a ghost. Except if that were true, my hand would go right through him, and he feels as real as you do.”

“I’m not going to talk about this.” Her face tightened. “I *can’t* talk about this.”

Keith squeezed her hand. “Hey. Hey…”

Heidi’s eyes glistened, and Keith didn’t have to see inside her head to know she was thinking about what was coming around the corner right at them.

“Find Michael for me,” he croaked. “Don’t give me updates, just let me know when you have definite news. And if your search proves fruitless? I want to know that too. Either way, I need closure.”

She nodded. “I’ll pull out all the stops.”

“You’re a good sister.” He sagged against the pillows, worn out from the conversation.

Heidi stood, leaned over him, and kissed his forehead. “You know what? I’m going to get on this right away.” Before he could protest that she’d only just arrived, she hurried out of the room, but not that fast that Keith didn’t spot her wiping her eyes.

A poem he’d studied in English came to mind, an ancient poem by a guy called Andrew Marvell. Keith couldn’t remember it exactly, but he knew it

contained lines about the writer always being aware of Time creeping up on him from behind.

In Keith's case, Time was armed and dangerous.

And running out.



Wednesday, December 21, 2022

Keith watched as Yuri checked the monitor, his tubes, and his blood pressure and heartbeat.

If my mind is conjuring him, it's working overtime.

He waited until Yuri scribbled notes on his chart before speaking.

“So I'm still here then?”

Yuri smiled. “Definitely.”

Keith couldn't put a brake on his mouth. “But the more important question is... are you?”

Yuri blinked. “Interesting. Do you see me?” Keith nodded. “Hear me?” Another nod. Yuri held Keith's hand. “Feel that?”

Keith squeezed it. “Yup.”

“Then I must be here,” Yuri concluded.

Keith could have asked why Anna didn't know who he was, why there was no one called Yuri working there, but he didn't. He wasn't sure what innate sense kept him from sharing Heidi's assumption. He only knew if this was all an illusion, he didn't want it to end.

“I had a dream earlier.”

Yuri sat on the bed. “Was it a good dream?”

“It started out that way, but then it changed.” Keith stared at the ceiling. “It was about Michael. Actually, it took place at the wedding I mentioned last time.” He closed his eyes. “I haven’t thought about that day for years.”

He hadn’t thought about *Michael* for years, but the floodgates had been opened, and he couldn’t stop the memories from cascading through.

“You said it was memorable.”

Keith opened his eyes and smiled. “It certainly was for my dad. And it proved pretty *momentous* for me and Michael too.”

He could almost hear the music, smell the roses, taste the champagne...

He could also recall that heart-stopping moment when their world changed.

A SUMMER WEDDING

Saturday, June 21, 1986

Greysolon Ballroom, Duluth, MN

Isabelle and Bill stood in front of the celebrant, a wall of three arched windows at her back, draped in flimsy fabric that diffused the light, giving them a kind of glowing aura. Chandeliers hung at intervals, and ivy and white roses circled the pillars, rising all the way to the sculpted ceiling. Every white-covered chair was occupied. Michael stood beside his mom, tall and handsome in his suit. Keith had watched as he escorted Isabelle down the aisle toward the front where Bill and his brother Charles waited. Isabelle looked radiant in a long cream dress, its color matched by the flowers in her hair and in her right hand.

I had no idea Michael's family was so huge.

Michael had warned him there would be aunts, uncles, cousins, great aunts, friends, coworkers etc., pouring out of the woodwork to attend the wedding, but Keith hadn't been prepared for a room full of at least three hundred guests. Bill's side was well represented too. He and his brother were so alike, it was uncanny: five years separated them, but they could have been twins.

When applause rippled through the room like a wave, he realized the ceremony was over. Bill and Isabelle stood side by side, facing their guests, both grinning like crazy.

They seem happy.

He prayed Michael was wrong. Bill gave the impression of being a nice guy.

Then the happy couple walked back up the aisle, holding hands, Michael and Charles following them. At the other end of the ballroom, a bar had been set up, along with a long table filled with champagne flutes and a lot of bottles. All the guests filed toward that end, while behind them, the chairs were moved into position at the round tables covered in snow white tablecloths. At the center of each table was an arrangement of white roses, their perfume pervading the air.

Keith made his way through the chattering guests, heading for Michael. When he reached him, he smiled at the proffered glass of champagne.

Michael grinned. "It's a wedding. Everyone's allowed to drink champagne at a wedding."

Keith wasn't about to argue. "You did good," he told Michael before sipping the bubbling golden liquid.

"I couldn't believe it when she asked me to give her away. But with Grandpa gone, I guess I was the only option."

Keith chuckled. "She could've asked one of your many uncles, y'know, but she didn't." He nodded toward Michael's sister. "Ellen looks fantastic. Who's that with her?" The guy was tall and as dark as she was fair. Judging by the way he had his hand at her back, they were an item.

"That's Dante, her new boyfriend. He's pretty cool." Michael scanned the assembled guests. "So how long do you think we should wait before we sneak out of here?"

Keith almost choked on his champagne. "Dude, they only just got married."

"So? They've got all these people to mingle with. They won't notice if we disappear." He sighed. "She's kept me so busy these past two weeks. I've

hardly seen you.”

“Well, you’re seeing me now.” Keith knew he shouldn’t tease, not when the longing in Michael’s expression matched his own. “Okay, here’s an idea. We eat, mingle a little, and as soon as everyone hits the dance floor, I take you back to my room at the Sheraton. We can’t go to yours, not if you’re sharing with your cousin. Then we get back here before the festivities end and show our faces.” He cocked his head. “Think you can hold out that long?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll try,” Michael muttered.

Keith couldn’t help laughing. “Dude, we’re talking about a couple of *hours*. But we’d better be quiet. Mom and Dad are in the room next to mine, and they might decide to take a nap before the party really gets going tonight.”

Michael grinned. “I can always gag you with my tie.” Keith gasped and he laughed. “Don’t you act all innocent. Why is it my roommates always know when you stay the night? Hmm? Might that be because you’re not exactly quiet?” Before Keith could fire back at him with an equally damning truth, Michael smiled, and all words were lost.

I could drown in that smile.

The tinkling of silverware against a glass brought their conversation to an end. It was time for a speech, not that Keith heard a word. He stared at Isabelle and Bill, their faces wreathed in smiles.

What shocked him was that he wasn’t thinking about getting Michael in his arms, in his bed... inside him.

He was thinking about the future.

One day I want us to be the ones standing in front of the celebrant.



They lay between soft sheets, Keith's legs wrapped around Michael's waist in his favorite position, Michael so deep inside him, connecting them. His hands were on Michael's back, clinging to him as Michael filled him again and again with slow, measured thrusts that Keith knew would increase in speed when Michael got closer to coming.

"Love you," he murmured between kisses, moving his hands to cradle Michael's head.

"Love you too." Michael quickened the pace and Keith groaned.

"Oh yeah, just like that." He moved with Michael, the two of them locked into a moment of spiraling heat and desire, their moans filling the air, Michael raising Keith's ankles and placing them on his shoulders, driving into him, faster, harder—

"Oh dear Lord."

Keith froze, Michael froze, and both turned their heads toward the voice.

His dad stood by the door that connected the two rooms, his mouth open, his expression of shock almost comical.

"Dad!" Keith hadn't even heard the door open. Michael was out of him in a heartbeat, dragging the sheet over them.

Dad blinked. "Well, *that* was something I won't be able to un-see." He cleared his throat. "Your mom sent me to check on you, see if you were okay." Another clearing of his throat. "I'm going to head back to the

ballroom. I'll... er... I'll see you both there when you're... done." And with that, he was out the door.

Keith looked at Michael, blinked, and burst out laughing. "Well, I guess *that* cat is out of the bag."

"Do you think he'll say anything to my mom?"

Keith shook his head. "But this might be the moment to tell her and Bill about us."

Michael gaped. "To quote you, they only just got married!"

"And that works in our favor. Think about it. They're in a room with three hundred people. Say you're right, and Bill isn't gay-friendly. He isn't going to cause a scene when he's surrounded by family and friends, is he? Hmm?"

Michael glanced at his crotch. "So much for this idea." He tugged the latex from his wilting erection.

"There will be other times, I promise. Even if we have to wait till we're back at school."

"I'm not gonna wait that long!" His look of abject horror had Keith laughing before he could rein it in.

"It won't kill us." Keith kissed him on the lips. "In fact, it'll make our next time all the more special."

Michael chuckled. "You really are a glass-half-full kinda guy, aren't you?"

"I didn't used to be. *You* made me like this." Another kiss. "For which I'm extremely grateful." He sighed. "And now we'd better get cleaned up and

head back to the party.” He stroked Michael’s cheek. “Time to face the music.”

It’ll be okay.

Lord, he wanted to believe that.



As soon as they entered the ballroom, Keith’s dad stood and gestured for them to join him and Mom at their table. Keith spied Isabelle and Bill sitting at a table in the center of the room, talking animatedly with guests.

A perfect spot for revelations, but they could wait.

Keith led the way through the tables to where his mom rose as they approached, her arms outstretched. She hugged him.

“How long has this been going on?” she asked as she released him.

Keith coughed. “That depends on what ‘this’ refers to. Michael and I have been boyfriends for nearly two years.” It was a relief to finally say the words out loud.

Her eyes were huge, and then she frowned. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“We had our reasons.”

She studied him for a moment. “Are you... are you being careful?”

Keith took her hand in his. “And that right there is one of the reasons. Don’t worry, Mom. We’re not stupid.”

Dad shook his head. “I don’t suppose it’s that much of a shock. You two have been joined at the hip since you were little.” He smiled. “And if you’re going to fall for anyone, your best friend seems like a good choice.”

Keith hugged him. “Thanks, Dad.”

Dad regarded Michael warmly. “Welcoming you to the family hardly seems appropriate. You’ve been part of it for years.” But he gave Michael a hug. “Still gonna say it though. Welcome.”

Keith knew how much that meant to Michael. His dad couldn’t replace Michael’s, but as substitutes went, he was pretty good.

“Michael, do your parents know?” Mom asked.

“No, Mrs. Braxton.”

She rolled her eyes. “Jean. You can call me Jean, all right? And it’s not Mr. Braxton either, it’s Marshall.” She grinned. “He might even let you call him Marsh.”

Michael blushed, and it was an adorable sight. “Thank you... Jean.” He glanced toward the center of the room. “Speaking of my parents...”

Mom smiled. “I guess this will be a double celebration. They get married, and then they discover their son is in love.”

Keith couldn’t have wished for better parents.

He threw his arms around her. “In case I haven’t told you lately, you’re awesome.” He looked at his dad. “Both of you.”

Dad coughed. “But some things will have to change.” Keith frowned, and Dad sighed. “Next time Michael stays over, he’ll be in the guest bedroom. No more sharing a bed.”

“Dad!”

He held a hand up. “I’ll be saying the same thing to Heidi when she gets a boyfriend.”

“Marshall,” Mom interjected softly. “They’re nineteen. They’re almost full-grown men.”

“You wouldn’t be saying that if *you’d* been the one to walk into that hotel room,” he argued, raising his glass to his lips.

“And how different is that to my mom walking in on us that first Christmas when you stayed with us? Hm?” Her eyes sparkled.

Dad’s cheeks were scarlet as he spluttered champagne over the table.

Keith tried not to laugh. “Don’t worry, Dad. We won’t embarrass you again.”

“Who was embarrassed? I just didn’t expect to get a lesson in how guys... *you* know.”

Mom laughed, and it wasn’t long before Dad had joined in.

Keith tugged on Michael’s sleeve. “Come on. Let’s go do this.”

They weaved a path through the tables to where his mom and Bill were sitting. Isabelle’s face lit up when she saw them.

“I wondered where you two had disappeared to.”

Michael took the empty chair next to hers. “Mom... Bill... there’s something I need to tell you.”

Bill frowned. “There’s nothing wrong, is there?”

“No, sir.” Michael met Keith’s gaze, his eyes shining. “Far from it.”

On impulse, Keith held his hand out and Michael grabbed it.

Isabelle’s breathing hitched. “Oh my. Does this mean what I think it means?”

“If you think I’m about to tell you I’m gay, and that I love Keith, then yes, it does.” He glanced at Keith. “I’ve loved him for a while now.”

His look of naked adoration tightened Keith’s throat. Then the moment was lost when Isabelle let out a squeal.

The only word to describe her expression was joyful.

She sprang to her feet and enfolded Michael in her arms. “Oh sweetheart. I’m so happy for you.” She kissed his cheek, then let go with one hand to extend it to Keith. “And I’m so happy it’s you.”

He squeezed it. “Thanks, Isabelle.”

Bill rose slowly. “I suppose congratulations are in order.” He held his hand out to Michael, who shook it. “Though this is where I say I always had an inkling.”

The joy in Isabelle’s face and voice was nowhere to be seen in Bill’s, and Keith’s chest constricted a little.

Maybe Michael got it right after all.

Isabelle sat down, tugging Michael with her, and began asking questions, her eyes bright, her smile refusing to quit. Michael answered, and Keith wasn’t surprised to see glistening eyes as they talked. He glanced at Bill and stilled.

Bill was staring at Michael, a neutral expression fixed in place.

Keith suppressed a shiver.

What goes on behind that façade?



Wednesday, December 21, 2022

“So Michael was right about Bill?” Yuri asked.

“That night I thought it was possible. Later, when events took a different turn, it was the only explanation that made sense, although his decision was a little extreme.”

“What decision?”

Keith closed his eyes. “That’s for another night.”

The thing was he had no idea how many nights he had left.

“I dreamed we were dancing together at the wedding,” he murmured.

“That’s sweet.”

“Not that we could’ve. Not then.” He opened his eyes and peered at Yuri. “No one batted an eyelid when my sister Sandy married Laura.” He smiled. “There were so many LGBTQ couples at their reception, my dad said he felt as if he was in a minority.”

Yuri smiled. “I’ve been to a couple of same-sex weddings. I guess they would’ve been a dream come true back then.”

“I would have lived with Michael as his husband,” Keith blurted. “That was *my* dream.”

“You said you last saw him thirty-five years ago. What happened?”

“His family moved away. We stayed in touch for a year or two, but then the letters stopped. I have no idea why.” He met Yuri’s steady gaze. “So today I made a decision. I’ve asked my sister to find Michael—if she can.”

Yuri said nothing, but clasped Keith’s hand. “I’m sure he’ll want to see you. It sounds—to me at least—as though he was very much in love with you.”

“Then why did he stop writing?”

Yuri’s face grew solemn. “I don’t know the answer to that question, but I hope your sister finds him. And I can understand why you need that—now.”

Keith covered Yuri’s hand with his. “You’re a good man, Yuri—what’s your last name, by the way?”

“Komarov.” Yuri gave a wry smile.

“What’s so funny?”

He chuckled. “It’s a Russian name, though the family has been in the US for generations. It means gnat or mosquito.” He flushed. “I don’t usually share that.”

Keith grinned. “I can’t think why.” He didn’t release Yuri’s hand. It was warm against his cool skin.

It felt *real*, damn it.

Yuri pushed Keith’s hair back from his brow. “Now go to sleep. I’ll be here same time tomorrow.” And before Keith could say another word, Yuri leaned over and pressed a kiss to his forehead. He drew back, smiling. “And that’s something else I don’t usually do.”

“I won’t tell a soul.”

Besides, Heidi would have a field day.

A figment of my imagination just kissed me.

She’d be asking Anna if he needed psychiatric evaluation.

“TELL ME ABOUT YURI.”

Wednesday, December 21, 2022

“Keith?”

He switched off the Hallmark Christmas movie he wasn't really watching. Anna wasn't alone. There was a doctor with her, one Keith didn't recognize.

Anna gestured to him. “This is Dr. Williams. He's come to have a talk with you.”

The first thought to flit through Keith's mind brought an icy chill to his skin.

He's here to discuss palliative care.

It made sense. Hospitals needed beds, right? And perhaps the best place for him would be a hospice. A sobering realization, but one he couldn't escape from.

“Sure. Hello there, Dr. Williams.”

“I'll leave you gentlemen alone.” Anna gave the doctor a nod before leaving the room.

Dr. Williams was younger than Keith, maybe in his thirties, with a smooth jaw line and eyes hidden behind metal-framed glasses. He pulled the chair closer and sat, a tablet balanced on his knee.

“Some of my questions might seem a little strange,” Dr. Williams began, “but I promise, they will help me gain a full picture of your present state.”

Keith blinked. “I'd have thought that was already known. I have Guillain-Barre Syndrome, and it's killing me.” The words came out blunter than he'd intended. “I'm sorry. That was rude.”

Dr. Williams waved a hand. "It's understandable in the circumstances. You must be feeling stressed." He gazed at Keith as if awaiting confirmation.

"I'd say that's a fair assessment."

"And in such circumstances your behavior can be explained by many factors."

"Behavior?" Keith frowned. "Exactly what behavior are we talking about?"

Dr. Williams leaned forward. "Tell me about Yuri."

He blinked. Blinked again.

Then a light came on inside his head.

"This is a psych evaluation, isn't it?"

Dr. Williams smiled. "I just want to know more about the nurse you've been talking to these last few nights. How many nights, by the way? Five, isn't it?"

"That sounds about right." Keith had a feeling he knew who lay behind this visit.

Heidi.

"Do you know his full name?"

"Yes. Yuri Komarov."

Dr. Williams tapped the screen. "And if I were to tell you there is no one by that name working in this hospital? How would that make you feel?"

"I suppose a little confused. I know what my sister thinks, Doctor. She thinks I've been talking to someone who isn't really there. So how do you explain the fact that I know Komarov means gnat or mosquito in Russian, something I did *not* know until Yuri told me last night?" He cocked his head.

“Not a thing I could’ve looked up on the Internet, seeing as I haven’t even looked at my phone in days.”

“I can’t explain it, other than to suggest to you maybe you *did* know. It might have been something you learned a long time ago. The knowledge was stored in your brain.” He smiled. “Knowledge that stays there, waiting for us to access it.”

Keith stared at him. “You want to know if there’s any history of mental illness in the family, don’t you? Well, there isn’t.” At least, none he knew about.

“But you *have* been through a number of traumatic experiences, linked to your health.” Dr. Williams studied him. “I’m sensing a degree of hostility. That could be because you don’t want to accept that Yuri isn’t real. You want to hold onto the illusion because it comforts you.”

“You asked me to tell you about Yuri. Fine.” Keith rattled off a description, followed by all the information Yuri had shared. “So if I’m hallucinating, it’s a real humdinger.”

“Were you talking to Yuri last night?”

Keith nodded. Then he remembered. “He wrote on my chart. I watched him do it.”

Dr. Williams arched his eyebrows. “Well, that’s something we can verify right now.” He tapped on the tablet screen again and studied it for a moment.

Keith’s heart pounded. His chest ached.

“Well?”

Dr. Williams raised his head. “I see entries by Nurse Standford and Nurse Remyne. There’s no entry by a Nurse Komarov.”

“Maybe he didn’t sign it.” Keith clung to the hope.

Dr. Williams shook his head. “Nurse Stanford checked for bedsores at three o’clock this morning. The next notations here are by Nurse Remyne at six o’clock and eight o’clock. Nothing else.” He put down the tablet. “Severe pain can cause your brain to play tricks on you. I know you don’t want to accept that, but there’s no other viable explanation.”

Keith didn’t want to hear anymore.

“Thanks, Doc. I’ll be sure to tell him he doesn’t exist the next time I see him.”

The doctor stood, but Keith wasn’t done.

“Dr. Williams, wanting to confirm a weirdo isn’t hanging out in my room is one thing, but this discussion? It’s starting to feel as though I’m being attacked for something that’s beyond my control.”

“Mr. Braxton, no one is—”

“If Yuri is a hallucination, is it a harmful one? No. Is he a result of my declining health? Perhaps. But in the end, if it’s not hurting me, then maybe you should stop trying to ‘help’ me,” he air-quoted. “Because a dying man could perceive that help as cruel.”

Dr. Williams paled. “I can understand how you might feel like that. I think we’ve discussed this enough.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Keith aimed the remote at the TV, and resumed watching his movie. Dr. Williams walked slowly from the room, and when the door closed behind him, Keith pressed the buzzer.

The pain was almost unbearable.

I don’t think I can cope with much more of this.



When Heidi arrived later that day, Keith was more than ready to give her a piece of his mind, but one glance at her face stopped him in his tracks.

She removed her coat, scarf and hat, then perched on the edge of the mattress.

“We need to talk.”

His heart plummeted. “You’ve found out something about Michael.”

Her eyes widened. “No. Nothing like that. Darrell’s still looking for him. No, we need to talk about... Yuri.”

His earlier anger bubbled close to the surface, and he had to work hard to keep it in check.

“Spare me. I already had one psych evaluation today. But you probably know all about that, don’t you?”

She flushed. “I asked Anna about it yesterday before I left. How did it go?”

“You already know that too, don’t you?” Jesus, he hurt, but pain relief could wait until he’d had this out with her. “So what do we need to talk about?”

Heidi fiddled with the strap on her purse. “I spent the morning at our old high school.”

“What were you doing there?” Then it came to him. “You were checking their records, weren’t you? To see if Yuri really was a student there.” Her

silence sent cold spreading through him. “You’re about to tell me there was never a Yuri Komarov at Stillwater Area High School.”

She nodded. “Now will you believe me? Will you believe the doctor?” Her gaze grew compassionate. “There’s no hot gay nurse, Keith. Your brain invented him.”

He glared at her. “Why did you have to go digging? What harm was it doing, for me to have someone to talk to when I really needed them? Someone I could relate to, someone who understood me? Well? Couldn’t you let me just enjoy my delusions while I still can?” He covered his eyes with his arm. “Just go, will you?”

“Keith, I—”

“I mean it. Go.”

He didn’t uncover his eyes, but lay there and listened to the door opening and closing, tears welling up and spilling onto his cheeks.

I don’t care if he’s not real. He felt real to me.

Yuri helped him cope with the pain, helped him to not think about the inevitable.

What’s better, sis? An imaginary friend who brings a smile? Or a truth that brings a tear?

Keith knew which one he wanted.



Thursday, December 22, 2022

Keith watched Yuri go about his habitual checks, except now there was a voice in his head that wouldn't go away.

He's not real.

He's not here.

The realization left an ache in his heart no medication could assuage.

“Keith? Are you in pain?”

It was no use. Keith couldn't ignore the truth any longer.

“It's okay, I know.”

Yuri arched his eyebrows. “That's an enigmatic statement. What do you know?”

“About you.” He forced himself to fall silent, waiting on Yuri.

Tell me the truth.

Yuri came around to the side of his bed and sat on the mattress. “And what do you know about me?” His voice was low, gentle.

“Yuri Komarov doesn't exist. He isn't a nurse. He wasn't a student at Stillwater Area High School. He didn't study at the University of Minnesota.” He looked Yuri in the eye. “My brain invented you. You're not really here.”

Yuri said nothing for a moment, and with each passing second Keith's pain multiplied. Then Yuri laid his hand on Keith's arm, and warmth radiated through him, pushing back the pain, sending relief surging over him in a wave.

“Does that feel better?”

Keith managed a nod. “How... how are you doing that?”

He smiled. "I can dispense with the act of pretending to give you pain relief. This is *my* doing, not meds."

It worked faster too. The pain was already beating a retreat.

"Does it feel better when you talk about Michael? When you share memories of the past?"

Another nod.

Yuri smiled. "I can't explain my presence here, but I do know my purpose. I'm here to help you. If you want to think of me as a hallucination, that's okay. It doesn't matter. What *does* matter is the job I came here to do—to take care of you when you needed me most."

In that moment, Keith didn't care if Yuri was an illusion brought about by misfiring circuits in his brain. He wanted to forget the events of that horrible day and cling to the relief from suffering that occurred whenever Yuri was near. Perhaps some higher power had sent him. Because Yuri spoke the truth.

Keith needed him.

"Do you know how weird this makes our conversations?" he said in an attempt at humor.

"Forget everything I just said. Talk to me as you did before." He smiled. "Tell me a funny story about you and Michael. You must have some of those, right?"

Funny stories were the farthest thing from Keith's mind.

Then he smiled. "There *was* one time when we were both counselors at a summer camp."

This had to be the most surreal conversation ever.

"When was this?"

“July, right after the wedding. Michael had said something earlier in the year about doing stuff that would look good on our resumés. So we did a little research, and found a camp in Wisconsin. It was only about an hour and a half’s drive from Stillwater. Thirty or forty kids, for four weeks.” He glanced at Yuri. “Except knowing what I do, I’m not going to ask if you ever did anything similar.”

Yuri’s lips twitched. “A wise decision. But I want to hear about that summer. What made it funny?”

“It wasn’t at the time.”

If anything, it had been scary as hell.

THE SUMMER OF '86

July, 1986

Camp Pepin, Deer Island, Pepin, Wisconsin

Keith stared into the flames of the campfire, watching to make sure he didn't cremate his marshmallow like the last time. "Whose idea was it to become camp counselors?" The kids sat all around the fire, mostly in silence except for the screams now and then when head counselor Lloyd got to a scary part in his tale. Above them the sky was inky black, stars twinkling like diamonds on velvet.

Beside him, Michael laughed quietly. "You've sure got a selective memory. It was yours." He glanced at Keith. "What's wrong? You *were* expecting sunshine, swimming, archery, and crafts, weren't you?" The firelight sparkled in his eyes.

"Yeah, but I didn't realize how little time I'd get with you." Three weeks so far, and one more to go. There were six activity periods each day, and they each got one of them off, though not necessarily the same one. Keith blamed that on Christopher, the group leader. He figured Chris had worked out how the land lay between Keith and Michael, and was determined to keep them apart, the asshole. What was the use in having a full day off if Keith didn't get to leave the camp, or spend it with Michael? And although their cabins were next door to each other, they might as well have been miles apart. As for sex? They'd managed two blow jobs so far, and those had been risky as hell.

Keith couldn't wait to get home.

"Be honest. It *has* had its moments, hasn't it?"

Keith gestured to his sore nose. “Oh, you mean like getting hit in the face when Dale spiked the ball during this morning’s game? Yeah, that was a fun moment. Of course, I couldn’t see it that way while I was waiting for the swelling to go down.” He touched it tentatively and winced. “You sure it’s not broken?”

Michael sighed. “Cathy said not. And stop touching it.” His lips twitched. “What about the hike on Sunday?”

Keith chuckled. “Okay, yeah, that *was* funny.” The walk through the woods that bordered Lake Pepin had provided an unexpected laugh, even if the three boys involved hadn’t found it amusing at the time. They’d been walking in front of Keith and Michael, and at first Keith had thought they’d stepped on a long stick lying across the path. Except the stick had turned out to be a snake—not a rattler or copperhead, and certainly nothing venomous—and the boys had managed to step on its head, middle, and tail before they turned and ran screaming to Keith and Michael, who assessed the situation and realized their charges were unbitten but shaken.

When they were alone, Keith admitted keeping a straight face had been the hardest thing he’d had to do since their arrival.

More screams shattered the quiet, and Keith shook his head. Lloyd seemed to have an unending supply of scary stories, but he didn’t have to deal with the kids in Keith’s cabin when everyone went to bed. The campers couldn’t sleep, chatting about the story until Keith had been forced to tell them that the next person to talk would be spending the night out in the forest with the wolves and the bears.

That had soon shut them up.

The night air was filled with the aroma of toasted marshmallows, and he wondered how many bags they usually got through during the four weeks of camp.

“I love how they’re all gooey on the inside,” he murmured, removing his marshmallow from the end of his stick, trying not to burn his fingers on its melted innards. “I love the smell too.”

Michael choked out a gasp. “I don’t think you’re the only one,” he whispered, pointing over Keith’s shoulder. “Lloyd. *Lloyd!*” he shouted urgently.

Keith turned to look—and froze at the sight of a huge black bear lumbering leisurely toward the circle of campers. “Oh shit.” He sprang to his feet.

By then, some of the kids had seen it too, and the screams started again.

“Freeze, everyone!” Michael yelled. His voice carried and most of them complied.

Lloyd stood. “Okay, kids, let’s stay nice and calm, all right?” He grabbed three bags of marshmallows, tore them open, and threw the contents in the bear’s direction. “We’re going to walk calmly to the dining hall. We’ll be fine in there. It has shutters and wooden doors.”

“Don’t you have anti-bear spray or something?” Keith demanded. “Have you had any training in how to deal with bears?”

Lloyd glared at him. “Can we talk about this inside the dining hall? Because, you know... bear.”

All the counsellors helped shoo the kids away from the approaching bear, ushering them to the dining hall. Once inside, Keith, Michael, and the other counselors did their best to calm the frightened kids, assuring them the bear

couldn't get into the hall, while Lloyd went to the phone to call the local game warden.

Michael and Chris made hot chocolate for everyone, and Cathy got the kids singing. Lloyd kept watch through a crack in the door.

“How often do bears get close to the camp?” Keith asked him while the kids went through yet another rendition of “B-I-N-G-O.”

Lloyd huffed. “Let’s just say they’re not very common, but they’re not rare either. And all the *training* I’ve had amounts to doing exactly what I did—calling the game warden.” He went back to his watch.

The kids launched into a loud rendition of “Five Little Speckled Frogs”, followed by “I’m Being Swallowed By A Boa Constrictor”, which resulted in a lot of laughter. Bags of chips appeared, and the kids crunched happily. Keith groaned when they started on “The Green Grass Grew All Around.”

“That one lasts forever,” he complained.

From the door, Lloyd called for attention, and the dining hall fell silent. “It’s okay, everyone. The game warden has tranquilized the bear and it’s been taken away.” He glanced at his watch. “And it’s too late to go back to the fire. Time for bed.”

That earned him a chorus of groans and a couple of boos.

He flung the door open, and the kids headed out, although several of them searched for sticks that they carried on the way back to their cabins.

Michael chuckled as they followed the kids. “Do you think we should tell them carrying a stick would only anger the bear?”

Keith shook his head. “What are the chances of another one showing up?”

“That depends on how many more times we roast marshmallows. Because do you know what else is soft, warm, and gooey on the inside?” Michael grinned. “Kids.”

Keith let out a mock gasp.

Michael shivered. “Okay, now that it’s over? I can tell you I’ve never been so scared.”

Keith longed to put his arm around Michael, to hold him close, but that was not going to happen.

Michael peered at him, his head cocked to one side. “Would you have tried to save me from the bear?”

Keith couldn’t lie. “Hey, if it had gone for one of us, *I’d* have been the one to get munched first.”

“What makes you say that?”

He snorted. “I get out of breath much faster than you, and I’ve never been a good runner.” He stared in the direction of the campfire. “It hasn’t been *that* bad an experience, I guess. And the bear story is something we’ll be able to tell our kids.”

Michael stilled. “*Our* kids? Something you wanna tell me?”

Keith wished he could hold Michael’s hand. “Ever heard of adoption? Can you imagine bringing up kids who think two guys being in love is normal? Doesn’t that sound cool?”

Michael smiled. “It does, but I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you. I can’t see them letting gay guys get married anytime soon.”

Keith sighed. “You always say I’m a glass-half-full kinda guy. Well, this is me being positive. Because if enough people want it to happen, it will. I

know it.”

That memory of Isabelle and Bill getting married had stayed with him.

I want that too. With Michael.

“I love the way you think.”

Keith smiled. “I just love you,” he whispered.



Thursday, December 22, 2022

Yuri smiled. “You and Michael had something special, didn’t you?”

Keith gazed at him. “You know, ever since you showed up, I’ve been remembering more and more.” A thought occurred to him. “Is that why you’re here? Is that why someone sent you? To make me think about him?” He stilled, his heart hammering. “And now I know why. Heidi’s going to locate him, isn’t she? You’re here to make me relive what we shared, aren’t you? Before Michael gets here.”

That had to be the reason. Nothing else made sense.

Yuri was so still.

“I’m here to ease your pain and help you sleep.”

But Keith didn’t believe that, not now he’d worked it all out.

Yuri glanced at the monitor. “That’s enough for now. You’re getting excited. Your heart rate is too high. You need to sleep.”

“I’m not tired.”

Yuri wrapped warm fingers around Keith's wrist, and a delicious feeling of calm swept through him. "Yes, you are." He didn't let go, and Keith closed his eyes, unwilling to fight the wave of fatigue anymore.

He could sleep, especially if it brought Michael to him all the faster.

A DAY OF PAINFUL REFLECTION

Thursday, December 22, 2022

Keith stared at the window blinds. The sunlight managed to filter through, and he yearned to walk outside, to feel it on his face, see it reflected in the dazzling snow.

It was time to face facts.

I can't do this anymore. I don't want to do this anymore.

His skin was breaking down, despite the nurses' efforts to prevent it from occurring. The pain was excruciating at times, and meds only took the edge off it.

They're doing their best to care for me, but they can't fix me.

Blood thinners had been added to his growing list of medication, to prevent blood clots, something he'd expected would happen. He could barely move, his muscles were so weak. His irregular heart rhythm was a cause for concern, and constant checks were made. It seemed as if there was always a nurse in his room.

He wanted to taste cold water again, to eat food that didn't come through a tube.

He wanted to be comfortable again.

Dr. Perez had visited him that morning, and Keith had lain there, doing his best to take it all in, but in the end, his mind retained only three words.

Termination of treatment.

He'd known it was coming. All their medical interventions were not achieving the desired outcomes. Dr. Perez had told him their goal was to

optimize comfort, but more importantly to honor Keith's preferences, even if that included the removal of ventilatory support to allow a natural death.

It was to be his choice. And seeing Christmas Day dawn looked increasingly less likely.

Anna appeared for possibly the tenth time that morning.

"Your sister is here," she said quietly. "If you don't feel up to a visit, tell me, and I'll let her know."

His stomach clenched as he recalled their last words. "I want to see her."

He needed to apologize. He didn't want Heidi's final memories of him to be recollections of angry, bitter exchanges.

Anna nodded before injecting the contents of a syringe into his IV. "We'll move to morphine soon, if this doesn't help. It will make you more comfortable, and it will make the work of trying to breathe easier."

"Comfortable sounds good," he rasped.

She patted his arm, and left him.

Moments later, Heidi was at his bedside, her eyes puffy and reddened.

"Hey." Keith held his hand out and she took it. "Don't let yourself get so upset, sis. I'll be out of it soon, and that'll be a good thing, right?"

But not before Michael showed up. That was the only reason Keith had said no to extubation.

He wanted to see Michael one last time.

She wiped her eyes. "Keith, I... I have some bad news."

Her words fell with all the swiftness of an ax through wood, killing his hopes on impact.

“Tell me.”

“Darrell finally found something. A news report from a Melbourne paper, back in 1989.” She swallowed.

Sharp pain lanced through him.

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” Keith had been deluding himself. He knew that now.

Heidi nodded.

“How did he die?” Keith prayed he hadn’t suffered. Then the date registered. “1989? He was only twenty-two.” That explained the sudden radio silence.

“He and his mom had taken a trip to the outback. They were driving along a road at dusk. Apparently, kangaroos come out to feed at that time, and sometimes they get dazed by the lights. Anyhow, that’s what happened. One of them hopped across the road and catapulted into the windshield.”

He gaped at her in horror. “Oh God.”

Fresh tears fell. “The article said that if the kangaroos aren’t dead on impact, once they enter the car, they kick and struggle violently to escape. Darrell did a little research. Their claws are razor sharp and can inflict massive damage. Some of the big red kangaroos stand well over six feet tall.” Another hard swallow. “Neither of them survived.”

“Isabelle died too?”

She nodded. “Darrell also managed to locate Michael’s sister, Ellen. He spoke with her husband, Dante.” She gave a hard swallow. “He said Ellen never really recovered from losing her mom and brother like that. She had a kind of... breakdown, and it affected her mind.” Her face tightened. “Dante

kept apologizing for not getting in touch with you all these years. He said he believed you'd been told about Michael's death, and that you hadn't wanted to get in touch because it was too painful."

"Who would have told me?" Then it hit him. "Bill. He told Dante he'd see to it, didn't he?" Bill would be eighty by now, if he was still alive.

And if he was, Keith hoped there was a lingering death in store for him.

Hot tears pricked his eyelids, and he wanted to cry out with the pain that speared through his heart once more. Although he grieved to hear the manner of Michael's death, his prevailing thought was a selfish one.

He's never coming back here.

He'd lost Michael forever.

He couldn't speak. He didn't want to see anyone.

Heidi didn't sit. "I'll be back tomorrow. I know there's nothing I could say that would help. I just wanted you to know." She kissed his forehead. "I'm so, so sorry, Keith. He was a lovely person. He didn't deserve to die so young or in such a shocking way. He had all his life ahead of him."

A life that could have included me.

Bill had put a stop to that, whether by accident or design.

Keith grabbed her hand and squeezed it. "Thank you. You're right. I need to be on my own right now."

She nodded, kissed him again, then left the room.

Keith closed his eyes.

Oh Michael. I loved you so much. I could have spent the rest of my days showing you how much I loved you.



Friday, December 23, 2022

Keith had no idea what time it was. All he knew was that he couldn't sleep, and he needed to see Yuri one more time.

He had one memory left to share before it was too late.

Minutes ticked by, swelling into hours, and for the first time, fear gripped him that Yuri wouldn't come.

Don't tell me your visits are over. Not tonight, Yuri. I need you.

A gentle hand touched his brow. "Hey. I'm here." Yuri leaned over, his eyes warm.

Keith tried to speak, but his voice cracked and his tears started afresh.

"It's okay, you don't have to tell me. I know." Yuri plucked a tissue from the box on the nightstand and wiped Keith's damp cheeks.

Keith stared at him. "Did you know when we spoke last night?" Speech came slower than before, and that was down to his breathing.

Yuri bowed his head.

"You did. And yet you let me... talk about Michael coming here."

"I'm not allowed to reveal anything. Those are the rules. You had to learn by other means." Yuri raised his chin, and Keith saw his glistening eyes. "I'm sorry for your loss. I know how much he meant to you—and how much you wanted to see him one last time."

"And now I'll never get the chance." Keith sniffed.

“Do you want me to go?”

Keith shook his head. “I want to talk about Michael—if you don’t mind listening.”

Yuri’s smile was kind. “That’s what I’m here for, remember?” He took Keith’s hand in his. “I’m also here to make it easier for you to talk.”

Keith stilled, allowing warmth and calm to trickle through his body from head to foot. “If you could bottle this, you’d make a fortune.”

Yuri leaned in and whispered, “It’s not for sale. And only available for very special people.” He pressed his lips to Keith’s forehead, then drew back. “The last time we spoke, you were telling me about the summer of 1986. What happened next?”

Keith smiled. “One of the happiest years of my life. We were out, my parents loved Michael as if he was their own son, Isabelle was overjoyed about our relationship...”

“And Bill?”

Keith scowled. “I guess there always has to be one fly in the ointment, right? He was cool, and not in a good way. There were times when I caught Isabelle staring at him, and I could see his attitude upset her. Michael just accepted that Bill would never be supportive of a gay stepson.” He smiled. “But there were good times too. School was great, Michael was top of his classes, and I loved my studies. Best of all, we were together.”

In February 1987, they’d spent Keith’s twentieth birthday in New York, courtesy of Isabelle and Mom. The two mothers had clubbed together and paid for seven nights in a wonderful hotel. Keith and Michael crammed a lot of sightseeing into their week, taking in a couple of shows, with visits to Central Park, the Empire State, museums—and a gay bookstore or two.

They crammed a lot into their nights too: *The Joy of Gay Sex* was looking tattered and well used, but by then they'd found other material.

Reaching the age of twenty had started a train of thought that was never far from Keith's mind, and he let it ferment for six months before finally mentioning it to Michael.

"I asked him what his plans were for after graduation. Of course, I would graduate first—medical school took far longer." Keith smiled. "His answer was perfect. He said he didn't care where he lived or worked, just as long as I was living with him." Another smile. "I wanted that too. We couldn't get married, but we could be a couple. As far as we were concerned, we'd be husbands."

"Way before such a thing was legal," Yuri added. "You wouldn't have been alone. I know of one gay couple who've been together since 1971, and all this time they've considered themselves married."

Lord, he was tired. But he needed to finish the story.

"The day after Michael's twentieth birthday, everything changed." And the more he thought about it, the more convinced Keith became that Bill had done it on purpose.

THE SUMMER OF '87

Sunday, July 12, 1987

Sweat covered Keith's body as he pushed the lawnmower through the dense grass. He swore his dad had let it get this long on purpose, just so he could spend his summer mowing it. There were so many other things he could be doing with his time.

Except he knew that was a lie. There was only one thing he wanted to be doing—spending time with Michael. He was being greedy, of course. He got to see Michael all the time in college, now they were roommates, but the summer had brought an end to that. He'd have to make do with whatever moments they could snatch here and there.

I can't wait to go back to school.

It was a selfish attitude, one he berated himself for constantly, but being home meant noise and bustle and chores. College meant Michael, cuddles, morning sex, all-night-long sex, walks in the park, movies... Hell, even shopping for groceries was more fun than spending time with his fourteen-year-old sisters, when all they could do was yap about boys, poke Mom about letting them use make-up, demand a bigger allowance...

Was I ever that obnoxious when I was their age?

Not that they really *were* obnoxious—it was just his perspective as the oldest child and the only boy.

Another year of school under his belt meant another year closer to his and Michael's shared goal of setting up a home together—starting a life together.

Almost three years since that first kiss. And so many years still to come.

He paused when Michael's car pulled onto the driveway. Keith switched off the lawnmower and hurried over to the fence where he'd hung a towel. He wiped himself down, grinning as Michael got out of the car.

"Aren't we going to the movies tonight? Couldn't wait that long to see me, huh?" Then all humor died when he saw Michael's face. "What's happened? What's wrong?"

Michael walked across the newly mown front lawn. "The movies might be off. I'm not really in the mood." There was no light in his eyes. "Can we talk someplace?"

"Want to go inside? It's a damn sight cooler than it is out here." AC and ice-cold beer were better than mowing any day.

He nodded, and Keith led the way into the house, toeing off his sneakers and leaving them on the doormat. "Heidi, Polly and Sandy have all gone to the fair." They'd talked of nothing else since its arrival had been announced in the local paper. Keith might complain about mowing, but it was preferable to going on rides that made him want to throw up, eating way too much junk food, and not being able to win a damn thing on any of the side shows.

"Where are your mom and dad?"

"Shopping. They'll be back in about half an hour." He closed the front door behind them and headed for the kitchen. "Beer? Soda?"

"Beer. I need one. But we'd better not let your dad catch us."

"He lets me have one now and then, but only because Mom reminds him of what *he* was like when he was our age." Keith opened the refrigerator and removed two cans. He gestured to the kitchen table. "Sit." He handed Michael the can and pulled the tab on his own, chugging back the icy brew. Then he sat, his stomach churning when he met Michael's gaze.

Michael's grave expression hadn't changed.

Keith couldn't repress the shiver that coursed through him, and it had nothing to do with the temperature of the beer. "You're scaring me."

Michael opened his beer and drank, his Adam's apple bobbing. He set the can down and wiped his lips. "Lord, this is such a mess."

"What is?"

Michael studied the grained surface of the wooden table, and with each passing second of silence, Keith's unease grew.

"Whatever this is, it's bad, isn't it?"

Michael raised his chin and met Keith's gaze. "I won't be going back to school this fall."

Keith's heart plummeted. "You... you're dropping out? But why? You're doing great. And that's not just my opinion. Your classmates say the same thing. They all want your brains."

"I'm not dropping out, okay?" Michael drew in a deep breath. "Bill's got a new job. BP are transferring him—and Mom and I are going too."

Ice crawled over his skin. "You're *moving*?"

But you can't move. We're going to finish college and live together.

"Yeah. I don't want to, of course, for obvious reasons, but it's not as if I have a choice. I'll be continuing my studies at another university. I'm not giving up on becoming a doctor."

"That's a relief." Keith struggled to remain positive. "Okay. Wherever you end up, I'll come visit. Hell, I'll ask Mom and Dad if I can transfer to your new college."

Michael's face was a mask of misery. "You can't."

Keith stared at him. “Of course I can. They’ll let me. Students change schools all the time. Look at Gary Wingett. He just transferred here last semester.” He forced himself to appear cheerful. “See? It’s not as impossible a situation as you think. We can—”

“Keith!”

The note of panic in Michael’s voice stopped him cold.

Michael sighed. “Bill’s new job is in Melbourne.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in. “Australia?” Michael nodded and Keith gaped. “Why would he accept a transfer to Australia?”

Michael swallowed. “He didn’t accept it. He *requested* it. At least, that’s what Mom told me.”

Keith’s mouth fell open. “But *why*?”

He gave a shrug. “He said he has family out there. Says it’s a fantastic opportunity. BP are providing him with a house—it’s huge, by the way, with a pool—a great salary... He’s forty-five. He said if he doesn’t do it now, he never will. And Melbourne does look awesome.”

“It might very well *be* an awesome place, but not if you don’t want to go there.” Keith frowned. “Is Ellen going?”

Michael shook his head. “She’s twenty-three. She’s engaged to Dante. Of course she isn’t.”

“But you’re twenty. *You* could stay. You’re old enough to get a job, you could—”

“Mom *asked* me to go with them, okay?” Michael was pale. “And no, I don’t want to go.” His chest heaved. “You never know. They might hate it and move back.”

“And what if they don’t?” Keith retorted. “What then?”

He squared his shoulders. “Then I guess we both start saving up for a ticket so we can visit each other. That might have to wait a while, though. I’ll still have medical school, you’ve got three more years before you qualify as an architect...”

The front door opened, and Keith froze at the sound of his mom’s voice. “They’re back early.”

“Great. Just in time to hear the good news,” Michael remarked with a heavy hint of bitterness.

Keith grabbed his hands and squeezed. “Now you listen to me. This is *not* going to tear us apart, do you hear me? We will find a way to be together. And while we’re working on that, we’ll write, okay? A letter a week.” He managed a smile. “So you’d better stock up on writing paper and envelopes because you’re going to need them.”

Michael laughed, his eyes glistening. “Have I told you lately how much I love your attitude?”

“You might have mentioned it once or twice.”

“Are we interrupting something?” Mom asked as she came into the kitchen, loaded down with bags.

“Tell you when we’ve unpacked the groceries,” Keith told her, standing. He and Michael took the bags and placed them on the table.

“You’re good boys.” Mom kissed Michael on the cheek. “Can you stay for dinner?”

Keith stared at him, nodding.

Michael smiled. “Sure, Jean. I was going to ask if I could stay anyway. I’ve got some news to share with you.”

“That sounds ominous,” Dad commented as he brought the remaining bags into the room.

“I thought so too,” Michael confessed. His eyes met Keith’s. “Except someone persuaded me to look on the bright side.”

Love you, Keith mouthed.

Love you too, Michael mouthed back.

Mom chuckled. “I might not be a lip reader, but *some* things are pretty easy to spot.”

Keith listened as his parents told Michael about Heidi’s boyfriend who was three years older than her, which worried them to no end. He watched his boyfriend’s familiar mannerisms, the way he scraped his fingers through his hair, the way he bit his lip. Michael’s habitual smile was back, thank God, and Keith vowed he would do whatever it took to keep it there.

Australia needs architects too, right?



Friday, December 23, 2022

“I think Bill having family over there wasn’t the real reason he asked for a transfer.” Keith could never prove it, but it was what he believed. He could confront Bill with his suspicions if he could locate him—if he *was* still alive—but it would achieve nothing.

“I think it’s a momentous step to take to break two people up,” Yuri commented. “If that were true, he must have been a very vindictive man.”

“Well, we’ll never know the truth, will we?”

Learning Michael was dead had broken him, and he was ready to leave all the pain and misery behind.

“Yuri...I’ve made a decision.”

Yuri didn’t speak, but laced his fingers through Keith’s, and in a sudden flash of insight, Keith knew what lay behind his silence.

“You already know what I’m going to say, don’t you?”

Yuri studied their joined hands. “You’re going to tell them to switch off the ventilator, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I want the tubes gone. I want one last day where I can eat and drink like everyone else. I want to bundle up in a heap of blankets and have someone wheel me outside so I can see the snow one last time. After that, I’ll be ready to go, and they can give me as much morphine as it takes to make my final hours pain free.” He gazed into Yuri’s eyes. “You know I’m doing the right thing, don’t you?” Then he smiled. “Listen to me. I’m asking for reassurance and confirmation from someone who isn’t real.” He stared at their hands. “Except you’ve been the most real person in this place.”

Yuri kissed the top of his head. “You’re doing the right thing. But can I just point out that some of your wishes might prove a little difficult to fulfil? Even impossible?”

Keith knew he was right. “Then I’ll take whatever they can give me.”

“You’re going to say goodbye to Heidi first, though, aren’t you? And give anyone else in your family who wants it the chance to say their

goodbyes too.”

He managed a nod. “I’ll tell her when she visits. I want to say my own goodbyes.”

Yuri pressed his lips once more to Keith’s head. “Then rest. And this time, I’ll stay with you until you fall asleep.”

Keith closed his eyes, his mind at peace, the decision made. He lost himself in Yuri’s warmth, Yuri’s comforting presence.

I don’t know where you came from, but I thank God for you.

IT'S TIME

Friday, December 23, 2022

Heidi stared at him as though he'd grown a second head overnight.

"You can't."

Keith blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You can't do this. Supposing I can't get Richard and the kids here until tomorrow. Do you realize when you'll be saying goodbye? Christmas Eve. You can't do that to them. Think about it. Every Christmas Eve after that will be the day you died."

If he could have laughed, he would have, but he'd never felt so tired.

"Is there a problem?" Anna's calm voice was a welcome intrusion.

Heidi whirled around to glare at her. "How can you be a part of this? Isn't there a law against assisted suicide?"

"Heidi." Keith stared at her in dismay.

Anna became very still. "Yes, there is, but this is *not* assisted suicide."

"It sure looks like it from where *I'm* sitting," Heidi fired back.

Keith's stomach churned. He thought they'd gotten past this but apparently not.

Anna took a deep breath. "Mrs. Farrow, what we have here is a challenging situation, both psychologically and ethically. I realize it may seem like suicide to you. But the law deems that if the quality of life is unacceptable to the patient, removing a ventilator from an awake patient is ethically equivalent to removing a ventilator from a patient who is unaware. This is called palliative termination." She glanced at Keith. "Your brother has the right to refuse care. So I'll tell you exactly what the law says, as it applies

to him.” She read aloud from her tablet. “Palliative or compassionate withdrawal of mechanical ventilator support at the end of life aims to optimize comfort, alleviate suffering, and allow a natural death in patients for whom life supports are not achieving desired goals. Palliative withdrawal is a medical procedure and must be treated as such.” Anna’s smile was compassionate. “This is not the first time I’ve had this conversation, and I don’t suppose it will be the last.”

Keith took Heidi’s hand in his. “Sis... I’m in pain. So much pain that I couldn’t even begin to describe it to you. I can’t get out of this bed. A machine is breathing for me. Not *helping* me—it’s doing all the work.” He looked her in the eye. “Do you *really* want me to lie here and die an inch at a time? Because that’s what it boils down to. I’ve run out of options. You can at least allow me my dignity.”

Heidi said nothing for a moment, but gazed at Keith with stricken eyes. Finally she sighed, her cheeks flushed. “I’m sorry. I should have thought before I blurted out like that.” Tears trickled down her face and she swiped at them with her fingers. “Ignore me. I’m thinking about losing my brother, that’s all.” She gazed at him. “This is really what you want?”

He nodded. “And as to what you said before... It doesn’t matter when I go, does it? There’ll always be a first Christmas, first birthday, or some memorable date or other.”

Tears sparkled on her lashes. “You’re right, of course.” She stood. “I’m going home to talk to Richard, but I’ll be back, okay?” She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

As soon as she’d left, Anna was there, accompanied by Dr. Perez.

“You’re sure you want to do this?” the doctor asked. “It has been known for patients to change their minds.”

Keith shook his head. “But I’m not going to do that. What happens now?”

“Your case will be passed to our palliative care doctor for them to sign off. If all goes well, tomorrow we’ll take you off the ventilator and put you on a morphine drip.” Dr. Perez patted his arm. “That’ll make breathing easier.”

“What about my last wishes?”

Dr. Perez blinked.

“Mr. Braxton wants to see the outside world,” Anna explained. “And eat and drink normally.”

Dr. Perez nodded. “I think that can be arranged. Although be aware, you won’t manage more than a taste.”

“One taste is all I want. Then you can make me as comfortable as you like after that, but let me feel the sun on my face first.”

The doctor took Keith’s hand, patted it, then gave a nod before leaving.

Anna checked Keith’s monitor. “Do you need something for the pain?”

“It shows, huh?” The need for meds was almost constant.

She reached into the tray beside her, and Keith waited for the relief he knew was coming.

Making the decision had been difficult—waiting for the following day to arrive was infinitely harder.

“What would you like to do today?” Anna asked as she annotated his chart.

“Christmas movies sounds like a good way to go.” Anything not to have to think about what was coming.

“There’s a TV channel showing nothing but. My favorite Christmas movie of all time is on there.”

“What’s that?”

Her eyes twinkled. *“It’s a Wonderful Life.”*

Keith smiled. “It’s mine too.”

Anna picked up the remote and aimed it at the TV screen. “I’ll be back shortly.”

And there he was, alone with his thoughts.

Will I see Yuri one more time before I go?

He hoped so. He had no idea what greater power had sent Yuri to him, but it comforted him to think Someone was watching over him.

Maybe Michael sent him.

Now *there* was a thought.



Keith opened his eyes to find Anna at his bedside. “Did I fall asleep?”

She nodded. “You missed the part where James Stewart meets Clarence, but I think you already know what happens.” Anna smiled. “You have some visitors.”

His heart pounded, and she regarded the monitor closely. Keith made an effort to stay calm, and Anna waited for a moment before she gave another

smile. “That’s better. Let’s make you presentable, and then I’ll let them in.”

“How are you going to do that? Put a Santa hat on me?”

She laughed, and raised the head of his bed a little more. Then she smoothed his blanket and tidied his nightstand. “There. Now you’re ready.” Anna went out of the room.

Keith couldn’t help but smile when Heidi, Richard, Darrell and Winona came through the door, and behind them were Polly and her husband David, followed by Sandy and her wife Laura. They gathered around the bed, taking turns to kiss his cheek and squeeze his hand. He didn’t miss their tight faces, their reddened eyes, and he had to fight the urge to cry.

Darrell held up a newspaper he’d brought. “Did you know you’re up for another award?”

Keith blinked. “I am?”

He nodded. “The new law court you designed, about five years ago? It’s been put forward for the Architectural Design of the decade.”

Keith smiled. “That’s wonderful. Maybe I’ll even get a building named after me.”

The conversations were a little strained at first, but Keith strove to maintain a smile, acting as normally as he could in what was such a bizarre situation. Polly kept hugging him and Winona wiped her eyes constantly. He was shown countless photos of Polly’s new grandchildren, and he strove not to comment that every picture was almost identical to the previous one.

It was Sandy who reduced him to tears.

She produced a parcel wrapped in shiny red paper, and placed it in his lap. “This is from all of us. We didn’t want you to miss Christmas.” She

swallowed.

Keith regarded the pretty gift. “Oh. I didn’t expect this.”

“You can open it now,” Heidi told him.

He wasn’t sure he could do that without bawling his head off, but that wasn’t an option.

Don’t let that be their last memory of you.

He tore the wrapping paper and set it aside to gaze at a framed picture. He recognized it immediately. It was a family photo from 1986, the last Christmas he and Michael had spent together. Everyone was gathered around the Christmas tree, with Michael and Keith sitting on the floor in front of it, Michael’s arm around his shoulders, both of them grinning like maniacs.

Hot tears pricked his eyes. “This is beautiful.”

“We wanted to give you a photo that included Michael.” Heidi’s eyes were full of tears too.

He swiped his cheeks. “Thank you.” A wave of exhaustion crashed into him, and he knew he was done.

“We’ll say goodbye then.” Heidi leaned over to hug him, careful of his tubes, and kissed his forehead. “Merry Christmas, big brother,” she whispered.

Her words almost unraveled him on the spot.

One by one, his family said their goodbyes, and no one bothered to hide their tears anymore. They filed out a few at a time, until only Heidi remained. She didn’t say a word, but pressed more kisses to his brow. Then she straightened, pasted on a smile, and shuddered out a breath.

“I’m not worried about you anymore,” she declared. “You’re going to be with Michael.” Heidi managed a smile. “So you’ll end up being a cradle robber after all.” And with that she walked out of the room, not looking back.

God, he hoped so. Keith had never been a great believer in the Almighty, but that view had changed a little in the last week.

Because *Someone* had sent Yuri, right?

He gazed at the photo. *Look at us.* They’d been nineteen, their whole lives spreading out before them. And it had promised to be a good life.

Keith studied Michael’s smiling face. “I’ve had a good life. The only thing missing from it was love, and to be honest I didn’t expect to find it again. I think you were my only shot at it, and when you left, you closed the door to love and took the key with you.” There’d been a couple of relationships that had lasted a while, but as he’d told Yuri, they seemed like pale imitations of what he’d shared with Michael.

You were it, mister.

Anna came into the room. “Are you okay?”

He nodded and held the photo up for her to see. “They gave me this.”

She peered at it. “Oh my. Is that you?”

He smiled. “Yup. And the gorgeous guy next to me is Michael. He was my boyfriend.” When she didn’t speak, he glanced at her. “Something wrong?”

“On the contrary. I’ve just received news. They’ve signed off on your request. So whenever you give the word, Keith, we’ll take you for a spin.”

“In a wheelchair?” Except he thought he already knew the answer to that question.

She shook her head. “On a stretcher. This is a big undertaking. I’ll be there, the respiratory care department will come, and Lisa, the night nurse will be there too.”

He glanced toward the window. “What’s it like outside?”

She chuckled. “Hovering somewhere around minus two. Sure you want to go out there?”

Keith smiled. “Only if I’m wrapped in about five million blankets.”

Anna laughed. “I don’t know about five million, but I’ll make sure everything is covered except your face.”

“Thank you. How far are we going?”

“To the meditation garden behind the hospital. It has a view of the lake—it’s not called Lakeview Hospital for nothing—and if it’s frozen over enough, there’ll be ice skaters out there.”

“I’d like that.” Keith squared his shoulders, even though it took real effort to do it. “Can we do it now? I don’t want to wait any longer. I’ve said my goodbyes.”

“You don’t want your family around you?”

Keith shook his head. “Let them remember me as I was today. You can call Heidi when I’ve gone, but no, I don’t want her here.”

Anna studied him. “It’s your decision. And yes, we can go to the lake, as long as we don’t stay out there too long. You’ll still be on the porta-vent.”

“Okay.” He smiled. “I’m ready for my last look at the world.”

Keith had entered the final leg of his journey, and he was more than ready to see it to its conclusion.



It was a short trip, and already the icy air had frozen the tip of his nose, but he wouldn't have missed it for all the world. His body was hidden beneath a swathe of warm blankets, and although it was way too cold to feel the warmth of the sun, he turned his face toward it, eyes closed.

“Ready to go inside?” Anna asked from beside him.

Keith nodded, unable to speak. He caught the chirping of birds in the stark branches of the trees. The sun hung low in a cloudless sky, heading toward sunset.

It was all he'd hoped for.

“We'll soon be back in your room,” Anna said, bending to speak in a low voice. “Then I'll make you comfortable.”

Keith managed a nod. He'd had enough pain.

Back in his room, Anna, Lisa, and two of the other nurses helped him back into his bed. Anna left him for a moment, but returned with a tray containing a glass of water and a bowl with steam rising from it.

“It's turkey soup,” she told him. “I thought you might like to try a mouthful.” She set the bowl down on his table. He watched as she hung a small plastic bag on his IV stand, then connected it to the main IV tube via a port.

“This is the morphine drip. It's administered a drop at a time so it will infuse slowly. You should feel its effects soon. It relaxes the work of

breathing so you won't choke." She brought her hands to his neck. "I'm going to remove the porta-vent now."

He tried not to panic as she disconnected him from the machine. Lisa handed him a spoon, and he brought a mouthful of soup to his lips.

Anna nodded. "You can swallow with the trach in."

He swallowed, and almost instantly erupted into choking. He wiped his lips. "It was worth it for that one taste." Anna handed him the glass with a straw, and he took one sip. Then he leaned back against the pillows, suddenly tired beyond measure.

Anna's expression was kind. "You'll sleep now. It won't be long. You can probably already feel the effects of the morphine."

Keith grabbed her hand and squeezed it. "Thank you for... everything you've... done for me."

She swallowed. "Thank you for being such a good patient. Now close your eyes and rest. I'll be right here."

He closed his eyes, and realized Anna had been correct—he could feel the pain melting away, taking with it any discomfort he'd suffered when he'd tried to breathe.

I wish I could have seen Yuri one last time.

And with that thought, he fell asleep.

MIRROR, MIRROR, ON THE WALL

Saturday, December 24, 2022

Keith opened his eyes, surprised to find Anna wasn't beside the bed.

Yuri stood there, however. "We have to stop meeting like this."

"I didn't expect to see you." Keith gazed at his surroundings. "In fact, I didn't expect to wake up again."

Then he realized what had changed.

His voice didn't sound breathless, the way it had done for weeks. In fact, this was the best he'd felt in a long time. The lungs he'd believed paralyzed by GB seemed to be working.

Is that because of the morphine?

Anna would know.

"Where is Anna? She said she'd stay with me."

"And so she did." Yuri smiled. "She isn't here because time is standing still for a moment." He held his hand out. "Come with me."

Keith blinked, then managed a chuckle. "Seriously?"

He nodded. "You can get up, Keith. Try it and see."

Keith threw back the sheets and blanket, swung his legs over the edge of the bed, and grasped Yuri's hand. Yuri held on tight as Keith set both feet on the warm, smooth floor.

"There, you see?" Yuri's face glowed. "You did it."

Keith allowed Yuri to lead him a few feet away from the bed, but then his words finally registered. "What do you mean, time is standing still?"

Yuri placed his hands on Keith's shoulders and turned him toward the bed, where—

“Oh my God.”

He saw himself lying there, asleep.

Keith jerked his head toward Yuri. “Am I dreaming this?”

“No, Keith. This isn't a dream.” He pointed to the bed. “And you're not sleeping, but I think you already knew that.”

Keith stood still, mentally assessing every sensation. There was no pain, no discomfort. In fact, he felt amazingly well. He glanced again at the monitor, noting the absence of a heartbeat.

“So that's it? I'm dead?”

Yuri nodded.

Keith placed his hand on his chest. “But... I'm breathing.”

“I know it seems that way.”

It's over. It's really over. He hadn't expected anything to follow.

A rush of wellbeing flooded through him. “Thank you for being here at the end. And for all those nights when you provided me with relief from pain. You made my last days bearable.” He couldn't resist another glance toward the bed. “I look so... peaceful.”

Of course he did. It was all over.

Then his heart quaked. “And now I feel bad for telling Heidi and the others that they couldn't be here. Because that means I've subjected them to wondering how my last few minutes went.”

“Don't worry. They're all coping better than you think.”

“Easy for *you* to say.”

Yuri smiled. “Tell you what. How about I prove it to you?”

Keith frowned. “You can do that?”

“Of course.”

“When—now?”

Yuri shook his head. “There’s something else I need to do first.”

He gave a knowing nod. “I suppose this is where you tell me what happens next.”

Yuri’s eyes sparkled. “Not exactly.” He took Keith’s hand and led him toward the sink, standing beside him.

Keith laughed. “You have to wash your hands first before they let you enter the afterlife?” He stood in front of it, marveling at how he could feel the cool porcelain beneath his fingertips. He raised his head to gaze into the mirror, and—

The Keith Braxton who stared back at him was the same face he’d seen in the family Christmas photo.

Keith touched his cheeks, his nose. “This can’t be real,” he whispered. He looked at Yuri’s reflection, and his knees almost buckled.

Michael stood beside him, the nineteen-year-old Michael he remembered.

Keith moved so slowly, as if speed would shatter the blissful illusion.

It was still Michael standing there.

“This can’t be real,” Keith repeated.

Michael smiled, and it was as though the years rolled away. “I’ve been waiting for you for so long.”

It was Michael's voice. Michael's smile.

"But... why didn't I recognize you?"

"Because I didn't want you to, not until the right moment." Michael paused. "Which is now."

And then Michael closed the gap between them, and Keith lost himself in a kiss that seemed to go on and on, Michael's arms around him, Michael's body warm against his.

It was too much.

Keith broke, tears trickling down his face.

"This isn't real, is it?"

Michael gripped his shoulders. "This is as real as you want it to be. And it will *stay* real for the rest of eternity." He leaned in and claimed Keith's lips in another sweet kiss. "That's if you want to be with me forever."

Keith gaped at him. "I don't understand."

"We can be together, Keith. Wherever you want." Michael smiled, snapped his fingers, and all of a sudden Keith was standing in the snow, in front of a familiar tree covered in colorful lights that caught in the swirling snowflakes.

"This is Stillwater," Keith exclaimed.

Michael nodded.

"But when?"

"Right now? It's 1984, but it can be any year we choose."

Keith stared at the people gazing up at the tree. "Can they see us?"

"No."

“So it will be just us? For the rest of eternity?”

Michael smiled. “As I said before, not exactly.” He gestured to their surroundings. “I chose this as a way to introduce you to the idea, something familiar...”

Keith cocked his head. “*What* idea?”

“Which is it to be first—showing you your family, or showing—”

“I want to see Heidi,” he blurted.

“Then you shall.” Michael snapped his fingers, and Keith found himself standing in Heidi’s living room. Richard and the kids were there, along with Polly, Sally, and their partners and kids. Heidi stood beside the fire, and the first thing Keith noticed was her peaceful expression.

“When is this?” he whispered.

“Christmas Day.” Michael chuckled. “And there’s no need to whisper. They can’t hear you.” He pressed a finger to his lips and pointed to where Heidi raised a glass.

“To Keith.” The others echoed her action and repeated the toast, everyone taking a sip. “He’s finally happy, because he’s free from pain.”

The love in her quavering voice brought tears to his eyes.

Richard smiled. “And I have no doubt that wherever he is right now, he’s in Michael’s arms.” Everyone murmured in agreement.

Keith’s throat tightened as Michael slid his arm around his waist.

“They got that right on both counts,” Michael said in a low voice.

Keith stood and listened as his family shared stories, and while there were plenty of tears, there was also a lot of laughter, not to mention a few tall tales that made him gape, one in particular.

“I never said that!” he said with a gasp.

Michael laughed heartily. “Yes, you did, because I was there. And can I remind you about them not being able to hear you?”

Keith didn’t want to leave that room, filled as it was with love and joy and laughter. But finally he turned to Michael.

“It’s okay. I’ve seen enough. We can go now.”

Except he had no idea where they were going.

Michael pulled him close. “Hold onto me and close your eyes.”

Keith did as he was told, his heart pounding.

His heart was *pounding*? But how could it? How could he even be breathing?

This was surreal.

“You can open them now.”

Keith opened them. They stood on a cliff top, the waves crashing onto the rocks below. Gulls soared above their heads, catching the warm breeze that caressed his skin.

“Where are we?”

“I don’t think it has a name.” Michael kissed his cheek. “Look behind you.”

He turned, and the breath caught in his throat.

Before them lay a green valley, with hills rolling in toward a small town filled with warm stone buildings and lush trees around its borders.

“Do you like the look of it?”

Keith smiled. "It's pretty." He chuckled. "It reminds me of Stillwater." Then he caught movement. "There... there are *people* down there."

"Yes, there are. Lots of people, just like us."

Keith glanced at him. "Dead people?"

Michael chuckled. "I prefer to think of them as people who've been given the chance to find the happiness that eluded them during life." He gestured to the town. "Right now it's spring, but you should see it in deepest December." He grinned. "What am I talking about? You *can* see it." He snapped his fingers, and the green hills disappeared under a thick layer of snow. At the heart of the town, a tree rose majestically, covered in lights, and even at a distance Keith heard Christmas carols, carried on the breeze.

He stood still, enraptured by the sight and sounds. "I still don't understand."

Michael turned Keith to face him. "I've been waiting for you so we could be together. Forever. We don't have to stay as we are. If you want that, fine. If you want to age a little, that's fine too. But Death is not on the horizon. You've already passed through it." He smiled. "For the rest of eternity, we get to love each other. The way we *would* have loved each other if our lives had taken a different path." He locked gazes with Keith. "We shared something not many people get to experience. We had *true love*, Keith. It was unselfish, honest... The kind of love that lasts a lifetime, if you're lucky enough." He pointed to the town. "That's what we have in common with all those people down there. They all loved someone the way we loved each other." Michael's smile was serene. "We've been given the chance to let that love grow and flourish." He took Keith's hand in his. "I love you. And now I get to tell you I love you for more days than there are stars in the heavens."

Keith looked toward the ocean. “And I’ll love you for more days than all the grains of sand on that beach.”

Michael laughed. “So it’s a competition? Bring it on.” He blinked. “Oh. I almost forgot.” He reached into the air and plucked a book from nowhere. He handed it to Keith. “Remember this?”

Keith gazed at the book’s worn edges. He opened it reverently, and his breathing hitched when he read the date.

July 13, 1985.

“This was our copy.”

Michael nodded.

“And can we still...”

Michael chuckled. “There’s a house down there, waiting for us, with a wide, comfortable bed. Why don’t we find out?” Another kiss, only this one held the promise of heat. “We’ve waited long enough.”

He led Keith by the hand toward the town, Keith’s heart thumping all the way.

So much lay ahead of them, and he couldn’t wait to discover it.

With Michael at his side.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.C. Wells lives on an island off the south coast of the UK, surrounded by natural beauty. She writes about men who love men, and can't even contemplate a life that doesn't include writing.

The rainbow rose tattoo on her back with the words 'Love is Love' and 'Love Wins' is her way of hoisting a flag. She plans to be writing about men in love - be it sweet or slow, hot or kinky - for a long while to come.