

BOYS WITH MATCHES



SHORT STORIES FROM FLINT AND TINDER

GREGORY ASHE

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H&B

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Published by Hodgkin & Blount

<https://www.hodgkinandblount.com/>

contact@hodgkinandblount.com

Published 2023

Printed in the United States of America

Version 1.03

Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-1-63621-055-1

eBook ISBN: 978-1-63621-054-4

HEAT

This story takes place before *Ember Boys*.

1 | EMMETT

“When’s your birthday?” I asked. We were walking outside because in San Elredo, even November is pleasant, and because the rehab facility had been landscaped to death. If it weren’t for the walls and the security cameras, you’d think it was a park.

“Not this again,” Jim said.

“I’m going to find out one way or another.”

“Great.”

“But you could save me some effort.”

“No thanks.”

I kicked an acorn, and it skittered up the path until it caught in a crack. It left a little scuff on the toe of my slipper.

“The month.”

“It’s somewhere between January and December.”

“Ha ha.”

When we reached the end of the path, Jim stretched. He’d always been lean with a nice gym body; now when his shirt and jacket rode up, he looked skinny. He went to the bench—our bench—and sat. After a minute, he said, “Well?”

“I want to like the beard.”

His fingers played with the red and gold scruff. “Today’s like your greatest hits day, huh?”

“It’s just so scraggly.”

“I’ll get out my checklist to make sure we cover everything.”

“Do you comb it?” I squinted; ever since he had come to California, his hair had looked like a haystack. “Do you own a comb?”

“Up next,” he said, pretending to read off his palm, “we’ll talk about my apartment, about my job, about—”

“You’re not as funny as you think.”

“—how stupid it is that you’re here. Hey, maybe you’ll really get on a tear and want to talk about Vie.”

“Fuck you.”

The old me would have turned and walked away. But the old me was losing ground to the new me, and I stayed there, hands in the loose flannel pajama bottoms.

“Sorry,” he said. “It sounded like a joke in my head.”

I dropped onto the end of the bench. He slid over, shrugged an arm around me. He smelled like laundry detergent and french fries. I pushed him away a few times, just for form’s sake, and then I let him give me that one-armed hug.

The old me wouldn’t have.

Our bench looked out over the end of what was politely called *the garden*. The ground sloped down, and a tiny pond butted up against the wall. Lily pads grew there, although these weren’t looking too sharp—any day now, the cold would drop, and they’d be dead.

“Can I see a picture of your apartment?”

He sighed. “I’m going to start coming up with topics in advance. Talk to me about your music.”

“Too late; you already made today’s list,” I said. “What about school?”

“School’s fine.”

“What about the staff directory?”

He side-eyed me. “What about it?”

“Why haven’t they listed your name? And your picture?”

“I don’t know, Emmett. It’s November. It hasn’t even been a semester.”

“It’s because of your hair.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my hair.”

“So this hypothetical apartment that I’ve never seen pictures of, it doesn’t have a mirror?”

He ran fingers through the strawberry-blond chaos. “It has a mirror. And it’s not hypothetical.”

“Ok. No comb, no mirror.”

“I have a mirror. And a comb.”

“Looks like you don’t,” I said, tugging on his scruff.

Swatting my hand away, he said, “Tell me about here. Are you making friends?”

“Oh, yeah. We play Twister and do the Chubby Checker until nine o’clock sharp. They promised if we’re good, they’re going to let us watch the moon landing.”

“Uh huh.”

“All the cool kids are getting their varsity jackets and their poodle skirts. We’re all going to the sock hop.”

“Sounds great.”

“Am I making friends? Am I fucking making friends? What the fuck is wrong with you? Do you even fucking think before you open your mouth?”

His hand came up; he stroked the back of my neck, still staring out at the pond, that fucking drop of water that was all I ever got to look at.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“I know.”

“It’s this place. It’s being off that junk and having other junk in my body instead. It’s my face and ...” I couldn’t finish.

“I know,” he said. “I still dream about it.”

I did too, but better call them nightmares. High in the mountains, fire everywhere, the throb of the motorcycle under my legs.

I started crying. He pulled me toward him, and I fought him again; gotta stay in practice. But eventually, he had my head cradled in the crook of his neck, and he didn’t do anything else, just held me with one arm and let me cry.

“I’m ok,” I said finally.

“I know you are.”

“God, I am such a fucking wreck.”

“No. You’re not. You’re here because you’re getting better. You won’t stay here forever.”

I knew what I was about to say. I had a wound that wouldn’t heal because I kept picking at it. I thought I wanted to be better, but some days, I wasn’t even sure about that.

“Can we?” I said.

“What?”

“Can we talk about him? Just for a little while?” But I was on familiar tracks; I was going to hit all the same stops. I knew it, and Jim knew it. “I just don’t know why he doesn’t email.”

“You know he cares about you,” Jim said, “but he’s been through a lot. Just like you.”

He was hitting his lines just right, which made sense. We’d done this scene before.

2 | EMMETT

“Something’s different about you.”

We were inside, near the windows; still November, still warm enough to be outside, although one of San Elredo’s rainy days kept us from taking advantage of it.

“Let’s play checkers,” Jim said.

“Sure, great. Then we can turn on the radio and listen to President Roosevelt’s fireside chat.”

“Well, how about chess?”

“Something is different. What is it?”

“Nothing’s different. I’ll set up the board.”

I caught his wrist. He was warmer than me—he always was—and I could feel every blond hair that dusted his arm. I’d never known wrists could be beautiful, but his were: wide and flat and a little knobby, kind of insanely masculine.

“Why are you looking at my arm?”

“I’m trying to figure out what’s different.”

“Ok,” he said, slipping his arm from my grip. “What gives?”

“That’s what I want to know.”

“No, what’s going on with you? You’re acting squirrely.”

I sat back. He had these incredible light blue eyes. They were like watercolors.

“Are you taking your medication?”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It’s a simple question,” Jim said. “Are you?”

“None of your business.”

He nodded slowly. Then he picked up one of the chess boards they kept lying around the rec room, opened it, and started lining up pieces.

“I like you coming here, ok?” I said.

He was grouping them first: pawns all together, then bishops, then rooks. I couldn’t figure out why he didn’t just put them in their places.

“I like seeing you,” I said. “It’s nice. I think, for the most part, you’re a pretty decent guy.”

“That’s swell,” he said, looking up just enough so I could see that he was making fun.

“It means a lot, actually. We went through some really bad stuff together. I’m still going through some really bad stuff. And you ... you coming here, I think it’s helped. So I don’t want this next part to sound ungrateful.”

His eyes really did come up this time, calm, expectant.

“Stay the fuck out of my business.”

He held my gaze a moment longer and then bent over the chessboard again.

“Did you hear me?”

“I heard you.”

“So?”

“So I want to know if you’re taking your meds.”

“Oh my God.”

Jim shrugged. “I have a right—”

“Why? Because you were my fucking English teacher? Fuck off. Get out of here. I’m serious: I don’t want to see you today.”

“Everything ok?” one of the caretakers asked—Pete, a big Latino guy with arms the size of my thighs.

“We’re fine,” Jim said.

“No, we are not fine,” I said.

“Maybe now’s a good time to take a break,” Pete said.

Jim didn’t even look up; he just kept grouping the pieces.

“No,” I said, struggling to keep my voice even. “We’re fine. I’m just—we’re fine.”

Pete watched a moment longer and then retreated to his post.

“I have a right to know,” Jim said softly, still not looking up, his slender fingers setting a queen down gently, “because I care about you. And because we’ve been through a lot together.”

I huffed a breath and looked out the window; rain freckled the glass, and beyond the window, beyond the garden, beyond the high, white-washed walls, storm clouds rolled towards us like bowling balls.

I couldn’t look at him when I said, “Yes.”

A beat.

“Ok,” Jim said. “White or black?”

“I don’t want to play chess.”

“It’s a good game to learn.”

“Please don’t make me play chess.”

With an exaggerated roll of his eyes, Jim began putting the pieces away.

“I got in a fight,” I said, my voice small. I was back to looking out the window. Those huge clouds just kept coming. “It wasn’t anything. Just shoving. This new kid, he’s a rich, entitled asshole—sound familiar?—got in front of me at the drinking fountain. And then I had to talk about it and talk about it and talk about it. And I feel shitty, just really shitty.”

“Ok.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Ok.”

“He just—he didn’t have to do that, right? Get in front of me. In front of all of us, I mean. And I don’t even know why it was such a big deal. I mean, I fucking faced down monsters, real living monsters. And now I’m losing my shit over a drinking fountain. And I know I said I don’t want to talk about it, and I don’t want to talk about it.”

Silence. When I finally looked away from the window, he was leaning back in his chair—thin, God, he really did look thin—and he had a little grin hiding behind that godawful beard.

After a minute, I grinned too. And then we both started to laugh.

I laughed for a long time; Jim too. I wasn’t even sure what we were laughing about, not really, but it felt good, like something had been building inside me and now I could breathe. When the laughter stopped, I sprawled in my chair and ran my hand through my hair.

Then I realized and sat up.

“Your hair.”

“Huh?”

“No. Don’t play dumb. Your hair. Your hair.”

He touched the red and gold fuzz on the side of his head. As long as I'd known him, he'd worn it in a traditional, conservative part. Now, he'd gotten an undercut. One side was buzzed down almost to nothing, while the rest was long and flowing, held airborne by some kind of clay or wax. Even thin, even with the beard, he looked so beautiful I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed when he walked into the rec room.

"Is it ok?" he said. "I have a—"

He stopped.

And he looked guilty.

"You have a date," I said.

"I'm having drinks."

"That's a date."

"No, it's just meeting someone."

"Oh my God." I wanted to turn and look at the clouds again; I wanted to put my head through the glass, just one hard crash. "That's great, that's fucking awesome." I pushed back my chair. "Holy shit, I just realized what time it is."

"Emmett."

"I know, I can't believe it. I totally lost track of time."

"Can you sit down for a second?"

"It's just, you never told me you wanted to date someone. You never told me you were looking."

"Come sit down and we'll talk about this."

"No, I've got to go." I laughed. It sounded so fucking insane that I wanted someone to pull the plug on this shit show. "But, like, I am so happy for you. I cannot wait to hear about it. Cannot wait, seriously."

“Emmett, you’re not being fair—”

“Can’t wait, Jim. Seriously. So fucking awesome.”

I backed up until my butt hit the door to the patients-only area, and Pete buzzed me through. I took off at a run, my slippers slapping the linoleum loud enough that I couldn’t hear my ragged breaths.

3 | JIM

I waited in the pick-up lane outside the rehab facility, expecting a surprise. Either a good one or a bad one. I'd had lots of surprises over the last few days. Most of them bad, so I was hoping, really hoping, for a good one. I checked the back seat one last time; nothing to give me away. I had stowed the water jug, the protein bars, the sleeping bag, and the pillow in the trunk.

Emmett came out of the rehab facility, his dark-hair tousled in a way that had probably taken him fifteen minutes, his long, lean frame moving across the sidewalk like it was a runway. He'd been beautiful before the scars, beautiful in a way maybe a handful of people ever were. Now, keloid tissue marked half of his body. Half exactly. Not burns. No, these had been done with a knife. Slowly. Carefully. Intricate whorls and lines carved into his flesh. One of the caretakers, a guy I'd seen rabbit whenever there was work to be done, glanced away as Emmett approached. It wasn't easy for a lot of people to look into a face like that. It wasn't easy for me, either, but not for the same reasons.

"Hi," he said, chafing his arms as he dropped into the seat. He wore a denim jacket, but he already looked cold.

"Do you want something heavier?"

"What? No. I'm fine."

"We're going for a hike."

"Yeah," he said in that way teenagers had perfected to mean *you are too fucking old to realize how fucking stupid you are and this is also a clarifying question to give you one chance to redeem yourself.*

"You might get cold."

“No; I told you, I’m fine.”

“I just don’t want you to get cold.”

He didn’t roll his eyes; he was eighteen, and he’d transcended eyerolling to body language: the casual sprawl of his body, the way he held his head, even the way he breathed, all transmitting the same message: *you are too fucking old and too fucking stupid.*

“Oh,” he said, bending to unzip a bag at his feet. The smell of something warm and buttery floated up. “I brought food for us.”

My stomach growled.

Laughing, Emmett pushed one of the bags at me. “They don’t normally do take out, so I packed it up myself. Lunch, too, in case we stay out long enough.”

“You’re sure this is ok?”

“Absolutely not. I’m planning a huge axe-killing spree as soon as we drive away from here. You’d better hurry because I’m in the middle of a high-pursuit escape.” He gestured to the empty waiting area in front of the rehab facility. “They’re hot on my trail.”

Sighing, I shifted the old Impala into gear, and it creaked and groaned forward. “This is why I like teaching freshmen better,” I said. “They just roll their eyes.”

I ate as we drove; I hadn’t had anything since lunch the day before, and nothing since lunch the day before that. Sleeping in the car had let me stretch my budget, but I didn’t have unlimited funds. The opposite, in fact. Very, very limited. And the breakfast sandwich was good: hot, eggy, the sausage the tiniest bit burnt to give it a crispy edge. Before I realized it, the sandwich was gone.

Emmett was staring at me.

“Here,” he said, shoving another bag into my lap.

“That’s yours.”

“No, I brought three.”

I wanted to believe the lie, so I did; the sandwich was gone almost as quick as the first one.

We drove north, passing through San Francisco, where morning traffic held us up almost an hour.

“This is making us late,” I said, checking the clock in the dash which had been broken when I bought the car and flashed 12:00 no matter how many times I set it. “When do you need to get back?”

“I’m fine.”

“I don’t want to make you late.”

“All I’ve got planned is my axe-murdering spree this afternoon.”

I was going to sigh, just for emphasis, but he looked so pleased with himself, almost happy, that I let him have the moment.

He smiled when we drove across the Golden Gate Bridge. It was like seeing sunrise when you’ve only ever lived at night. It wasn’t a perfect smile; the mutilated side of his face must have had some nerve damage, because the smile was clipped on that side. The effect was even better, somehow. Like a perpetual smirk. Like he had a secret he might tell me one day.

“Never?” I asked.

“Never ever,” he breathed, staring out at the bridge, the bay, the city. He laughed. “Holy shit, this is so cool.”

And then we crashed through a wall of fog, and it was just the two of us, and he was still smiling.

We drove to Muir Woods, another twenty minutes past the north end of the bridge. California hills with low, scrubby growth gave way to the redwoods. They smelled like what they were; I thought of balsam and sap and tar.

Cathedral Grove was where I wanted to take him: the cluster of ancient redwoods where men and women moved like church mice. To get there, we had to walk, and people saw us. People pointed at him. People talked—quietly, but they still talked.

I watched him as we walked toward the grove. He looked at the redwoods, of course. But he also looked at the creek, at the same little bend under a bridge that had drawn my eye the first time I came because it caught sunlight like a mirror. And he looked at the ferns. Once, he leaned down to rub a frond between his fingers, and something—a vole, maybe—darted away, rustling the whole plant. He yelped and stumbled back, grabbing my shirt, his shoulder in my chest.

We both laughed.

He let go of my shirt, but his arm stayed around my waist.

He kept saying all the things he was supposed to say. Cool. Wow. Awesome. Tight. Tough. Sick.

When we got to the grove, we both fell silent. Reverence is a strange thing; it begins as stillness, but it grows in the heart. In that place, where the only noise was the soft click of shoes on the boardwalks, I could feel what I had felt the first time I ever came to these woods: the slow thud of my heart, the air on my skin, the taste of loam and dust from the sequoias' bark. And a heat in me that had nothing to do with the fire I carried.

He pulled my arm around his shoulder and leaned into me like he was falling. He kept looking up, looking around, shaking his head.

“Never?” I whispered.

He shook his head harder and whispered. “Never ever.”

4 | JIM

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t go,” I said. “I’m saying I’m worried you’re losing focus.”

Emmett lay on the rec room sofa, tossing a tiny foam basketball against the wall.

“I never leave.”

“I took you out twice last week.”

He fumbled the catch, recovered by clasping the ball to his chest. He glanced over at me.

“You know what I mean,” I said.

“Like a date,” he said with that clipped smile.

“I’ve got enough trouble with dates,” I said, mostly to myself. “I don’t need any more.”

“Trouble?” He propped himself on an elbow.

“None of your business.”

“It helps to talk.”

I gave him the stink eye.

“You never told me about your dates.”

“I didn’t tell you because it’s not appropriate.”

“I’m a big boy, in case you didn’t notice.”

“Drop it.”

“I’ve got hair on my balls.”

“Ok, now drop it.”

“I even had *the talk*,” he said, his dark eyes huge. “You stick the thing in the other thing and then it explodes.”

“The reason I said maybe we shouldn’t leave the facility today—”

“You did fuck him, right?”

My face felt like it was on fire, but I kept going. “—is because it seems like you’re escaping by inches. You got a taste for freedom, and now you want to leave all the time. And I like spending time with you—”

“Taking me out.”

“Spending time with you. But that means you’re not here, working on getting better.”

Emmett studied me for a minute, tossing the ball, the foam smacking lightly against the drywall.

“One for one.”

“What?”

“One answer for one answer.”

“I didn’t ask you a question.”

“Well?” he asked, tossing the ball.

I shot out of my seat and caught it. “Emmett, this is serious. I want you to get better. I want you to get out of this place. Even though it’s hard, you’ve got to stick it out and do what you need to do.”

He just waited, fingers splayed to catch the ball.

Finally, I dropped it, and his hand closed around it. I shook my head, trying to say no, but instead I said, “Fine. One for one.”

“How many times have you guys fucked?”

“Never mind.”

“Ok, ok. How about—” His face screwed up in thought.
“How serious is it?”

How serious can it be, I wanted to say, when he doesn't want to know my name, doesn't want to talk, just wants me bent over a park bench five minutes after we hooked up.

“Not serious.”

“Why?”

“That's two questions.”

“Is it your beard?”

“Guys like my beard.”

He stuck out his tongue. “It's not your hair, because you finally got it cut. Is it because you're a teacher? I thought that was, like, a fetish. I thought gay guys would be all over you, wanting you to spank them and tell them they're naughty.”

“Ok,” I said, covering my face, feeling the heat of the flush.
“I can never visit you again.”

“Is it your personality? You're kind of a B-/C+. Definitely ish territory.”

“Thanks.”

“But you're pretty, so you don't need a personality.”

“Thanks.”

“Is it—”

“My turn: what are you going to do to make sure you get out of here soon?”

He chewed the mutilated corner of his mouth. He ran the back of his hand across his forehead like he was checking for a fever. “Please take me somewhere tonight.”

“Answer the question.”

“Tomorrow. Just—please? Tonight? The doctors will sign off, and we can go to that Greek place we saw last time.”

“Swear?”

“I swear.” He crossed his heart and held out his pinkie finger, hooking it with mine. “I’ll start taking it seriously tomorrow. I’ll get out of here as soon as I can. I’ll tell them whatever they want to hear.”

“Good.”

“Please?”

I could feel the ground giving out under me.

He smiled, that huge smile clipped on one side where the scars were too deep.

“Dinner,” I said.

He let out a whoop.

“Just dinner.”

He let out another whoop, stretching like a cat.

“And we’re coming straight back.”

Rolling off the couch, he set himself like a sprinter. Then, tossing a grin over his shoulder, he said, “Race you to the car.”

5 | EMMETT

I kept an eye out as we drove slowly through the parking lot. Slow enough that people saw me. People pointed. People talked. People laughed.

“Ignore them,” Jim said, touching my elbow.

I was ignoring them; I was too focused on something else.

Escape.

I had picked the Greek place because Jim had mentioned it, because he looked too thin, because my parents had given me a credit card and thought they were being strict when they put the monthly limit at a thousand dollars. Back home, I probably would have—as Vie might have said—pitched a fit. Here, I didn’t have anywhere to spend it. Or anyone to spend it on. Except Jim.

But I had also picked it because it was one of the anchors of a large outdoor shopping mall, the kind with water fountains for kids—dry because of the drought—and water stations for dogs—still running.

Jim drove the Impala, which now made a high-pitched squeaking sound, like a dog going crazy with a chew toy.

“I’m going to get it fixed.”

“It’s fine.”

“Just waiting for the next paycheck.”

I blew out a long breath and let my head fall against the window. The glass was cool when everywhere else I felt like I was sunburned.

“Right,” I said.

And for some reason that made him laugh.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“What?”

He shrugged, smiled. “It’s nice to know you’re still a kid sometimes.”

I ran a hand through my hair and gave him my best fuck-me eyes, pulled my lower lip between my teeth, and just breathed. I knew how to do it right, every inch of me relaxed and tight by turns. I remembered what it had done to Vie every time. Every single time.

His pupils widened, and he turned to look ahead. He rolled his shoulders once, as though throwing off something, and then he swore and slammed on the brakes. We missed the Subaru ahead of us by an inch.

I laughed. I wanted him to ask me why I was laughing so I could say something shitty about being a kid, but he just drummed his thumbs on the wheel and tried to pretend he didn’t have a boner.

When we got out of the car, I started walking.

“The Greek place is that way.”

I kept walking.

Jogging, Jim caught up and said, “The Greek place is that way.”

“I want to look around.”

“That wasn’t the deal.”

I shrugged. “We’re here now. I want to look around.”

“Emmett, that wasn’t the deal.”

“Oh, teacher voice.”

“Don’t mess around. We talked about this. We had an agreement.”

“Big, bad teacher voice.” My eyebrows shot up as I spotted a pretzel cart. “What are you going to do if I’m bad?”

“Emmett.”

“Say please.”

“Please.”

I hemmed and kept walking. “Nah.”

“Stop it,” he said, grabbing my arm and spinning me around.

That wasn’t his teacher voice. That was Jim. Raw. Angry. Hearing him lose control like that—no, fuck, making him lose control like that—was better than heroin, better than anything except maybe Vie.

“I’ll think about it,” I said, but when I took another step, he locked my arm at the wrist and forced me up against one of the walls. People drifted past us, but they were too busy focusing on my face, on the crazy fuck-up of scars, to notice a little thing like assault.

“Get the fuck off me,” I said, but low. For the first time in months, I felt something tumbling in my chest right where my heart should have been.

“I’ve really tried to be cool about this.”

“Cool? How fucking old are you? Why don’t you just say groovy? Why don’t you say you’ve been fucking radical?”

“What is going on? I thought we were having a nice time.”

“Fuck off.”

“Emmett—”

“Fuck. Off.”

His pupils were blown again, but not with lust this time. Embers stirred in the golden-blond wave of hair. Heat poured off him; November, and I was sweating.

“Fine,” he finally said. “Let’s go back to the facility.”

“Fine.”

But neither of us moved.

“Jesus, Emmett. Just say you’re sorry and we can go have dinner. We can still have a nice night.”

“You’re a fucking tool,” I said. “And you’re hurting me.”

He was having a hard time controlling his breathing. His hair was almost copper colored now.

“You’re burning me,” I whispered.

He let go like he was the one being burned. I hadn’t been lying; a red imprint in the shape of his hand marked hand and wrist.

“Oh my God. Emmett, I—oh my God. I didn’t mean to—I’m sorry, I’m really sorry—”

“Don’t touch me,” I said, twisting away.

“Let me see.”

But I twisted away again, and this time, he didn’t follow.

“Come on, we need to get that looked at, and—”

“I want to put some cold water on it.”

“Ok, um, bathrooms are—”

I slid along the wall, watching him. “No. I don’t want you near me.”

“Emmett—”

“I’ll scream.”

“Please, I—”

“Just give me five fucking minutes, ok? You can watch the hallway the whole time.”

When he nodded, I slipped down the hallway that led to the bathrooms. I’d picked this place for a reason: the hallway ran all the way through the shopping mall and exited in the food court on the other side. Jim could stand there all night, waiting for me to come out, and he’d never see me again.

I told myself all the reasons I was a shit. He was the only one who had ever come to see me. He was the only one who had ever cared about me. Tonight, he’d called me a kid, and I’d paid him back by making him feel like a monster. I pushed his buttons. I made fun of him. I treated him like dirt. And now, tonight, I was leaving him on the hook while I got the hell out of here. A thousand dollars wasn’t a lot, but it could get me somewhere else. For a little while.

I didn’t look back, but I could feel him behind me, like a fire on a hill, and the whole world dark.

6 | JIM

I had hurt him.

No, worse: I had burned him.

I stood at the end of the hallway that led to the bathrooms, shoved my hands in my pockets, and then yanked them out again; smoke wisped up. The smell of burnt cotton mixed with butter and cinnamon; a high-powered fan was spreading the aroma from the pretzel stand. I dropped onto a planter, and cold wormed up from the terracotta.

Everything had been going so well. Not just tonight; for a while. Emmett was getting better. And I was ... I was stable. At the very least, I wasn't getting any worse. The nights were cold, but once I rolled up the windows and snuggled into the sleeping bag, I stayed pretty toasty in the Impala's back seat. Not that I had to worry about body temperature. And I picked up odd jobs. Task apps, mostly. Just enough to eat, put gas in the Impala, move the car night to night. Enough that I could keep seeing Emmett. A day here. A day there. I hadn't meant to stay; I was going to pop in, see him, and move on. And then we'd sat across from each other at a wobbly table in the canteen. He'd looked at me from a mile away. He was just a kid. He'd seen the same things I'd seen. Worse, maybe; I didn't know everything he'd been through.

Just like that, I found myself talking to him about all of it, the parts we'd shared, the parts we hadn't. And having someone to talk to made it easier.

So I stayed. One night, I told myself. And one night turned into many.

Everything had been going great until I hurt him.

Burned him.

He wasn't going to forgive me; he'd been hurt too many times by too many people, and now he was just looking for a reason to—

He'd been gone too long.

I walked down the hall. Briskly. It was a long hall, and I saw it went on past the bathrooms, extending toward another part of the mall. Part of me thought I already knew what he'd done. Part of me hoped I was jumping to conclusions.

“Emmett?” I stalked the length of the bathroom, once, back again. “Emmett?” I went down the row of stalls again, hammering on the doors. “Emmett?”

“What the hell's wrong with you?” an old voice called back.

A guy with a unibrow stared at me over the urinal divider.

At the sink a potbellied guy in a pelican-print shirt was drying his hands. “Buddy, is it your kid? What's his name? Emmon? Hold on, we'll find him. Emmon!”

I ran past him, back into the hallway, following it away from the bathroom, away from where I'd been waiting. Waiting like a chump. A great big trusting chump. Thinking that because we'd shared things with each other—things I hadn't told anyone, couldn't tell anyone—that he wouldn't lie to me. Thinking that because he knew how much I cared for him, he'd care enough back that he wouldn't do something like this. You should have known better, I told myself as I jogged. You know kids, so you should have known better.

The hallway opened onto the food court. The sky had already darkened; bright lights illuminated kiosks selling hair

extensions and ear piercings and sunglasses; plate glass storefronts displayed scarves and jackets, shirts and pants, a cowl neck sweater. In one window, someone had soaped *GOING GOING GONE!* Like fuck, I thought. He's not getting away this easily.

I scanned one direction, then the other. Plenty of people. Lots of people. He'd been smart; he'd picked this place on purpose. He'd played me.

Heat tingled along my palms, in the soles of my feet. I smelled campfire smoke.

Calm, calm.

Not here.

After a few more deep breaths, I managed to get my phone out of my pocket. I pulled up a map. The shopping mall was only a few blocks from the ocean. He wouldn't run west, not unless he was planning on swimming to Hawaii. He wouldn't run north; the coast cut in too sharply. South, maybe. But the Pacific Coast Highway was only half a mile east. Why not hit the PCH and see if some granola driver would give him a lift? Even with the scars—maybe especially with the scars—he was pretty enough that he could get a ride.

I headed east, past a Gap, past a Tommy Hilfiger, past a bulk tea discounter and a place that only sold gummy worms, but a million flavors of them, past an RC Cola machine with a washed-out *SORRY* sign taped to the front.

Then I hit the end of the shopping mall. A chain-link fence separated the mall's neat cement walkways from a field of California scrub. Even at night, there was nowhere to hide; acres of ground with nothing big enough to hide him. And he wasn't there.

I'd guessed wrong, and he'd gotten away.

Someone whistled.

When I turned around, I saw him sitting on a low wall, his feet propped on a trash can. He was eighteen. He was legal. And I suppose, technically, it was ok for me to think he was so hot it made the fire I carried inside seem like nothing. But it didn't feel ok, so I focused on the fact that he was pouting. The pouting made him look fourteen, which had never been a good look for anybody.

I walked over to him; he tried to lock eyes with me, and then he looked away and ran both hands down his face. After another moment, when he was scrubbing his palms on his jeans, I pulled myself up to sit next to him.

"Cold," I said.

"It's not too bad."

But then he shrugged and jerked his head, and I slipped an arm around him. He wiggled closer, his head coming to rest low on my shoulder, almost on my chest. He smelled like shampoo, tea tree oil, deodorant.

"Can I see your arm?"

"It's fine."

"Can I see it?"

He held out his arm and pushed up the sleeve.

"God. I'm sorry."

"It's no worse than a sunburn."

"I shouldn't have done that."

He set one fingertip on my chest, just above my breastbone, and traced a circle. Slowly. Carefully. Like it meant something.

“I ... might have had something to do with that; I wasn’t exactly being nice to you.”

“I thought you were going to run away.”

“I did run away. I just didn’t get very far.”

“Good. I’m glad. I know I’ve said this, but I want you to get better, Emmett. I need you to get better. I care about you. I’ve watched you grow up, and I feel responsible—”

He put his hand over my mouth. Then he sat up.

“Don’t do that,” he said, and his eyes were steady, but his voice was shaking. “This is more than that; you know that.”

When he didn’t say anything else, I reached up and pulled his hand away.

“Emmett, we’re friends. I hope we’re really good friends. And I do care about you—”

“Don’t.” He shook his head. “Just—please. Don’t.”

“I just want to be clear—”

“Oh my fucking God,” he said, laughing and throwing back his head. He had that inflection down, the still-teen inflection, *you are so fucking old, you are so fucking stupid*. “Ok. Message received. Just stop talking.”

“Why’d you change your mind about running away?”

He looked at me, locked eyes with me, and I was the one who looked away.

“I was never running away. I just needed you not climbing up my ass for a minute. Here.”

He reached down, picked up something, and set it in my lap. A paper bag.

“What is it?”

“It’s a bag.”

“Smartass.”

When I opened it, I saw a collection of small jars and bottles.

“Hair,” Emmett said, holding up one. Then he grabbed another. “Beard. Cologne. Body wash. And this goes on your dick and balls, but like, right before the date so if your guy goes down on you—”

“Ok.”

“I wish I’d gotten some for Vie because that boy—”

“Ok.”

He was smiling. “Happy birthday, since I don’t know when your birthday is and you won’t tell me.”

“Thank you,” I said.

He rolled his eyes, and I thought maybe he really was getting better. Getting back to being a kid. Rolling his eyes had to be a good sign, right?

Sliding off the wall, he shrugged and said, “I’m doing a public service; you need to get your brains fucked out before you start a forest fire.”

“That’s not exactly how it works.”

With a smirk that could have boiled asphalt, he said, “Only one way to find out.”

SPARKS

This story takes place before *Queer Fires*.

1 | EMMETT

Five days before Valentine's, Jim still hadn't made his move.

It was a Sunday, and I waited until he left for the grocery store. He walked; he didn't have to—he could have borrowed the Tesla—but in San Elredo, walking was an option in a way it hadn't been in Wyoming, and Jim liked taking advantage of it. I started a five-minute countdown on my phone. Then I went into his bedroom.

He was tidy without being a neat freak, and I moved through the room quickly. We'd gotten all the furniture secondhand when we'd moved in, and only now, months later, was the garage sale smell fading. On top of the battered chest of drawers, the little tray where he kept his wallet and keys held only a few crumpled receipts and a bracelet that he wore sometimes. Not today, obviously. Next to the tray, though, was something interesting. A bottle of cologne. New cologne. Expensive cologne. I sprayed some on my wrist: it smelled dark and musky, and I imagined what it would smell like when Jim's body temperature rose.

After replacing the cologne, I kept moving. Since the last time I'd searched Jim's room—hey, I had to do something to keep myself busy while he went to work every day—he'd added a mirror to the back of his closet door. Interesting, interesting. Normally, he combed his hair in the bathroom, and that was that. He had one of those nice, responsible haircuts with a nice, responsible part, the kind that the nice, responsible boys—or, in this particular case, a nice, responsible, thirty-three-year-old schoolteacher—wore on TV.

He had new clothes hanging in his closet. Not just new clothes. Nice clothes. A button-up printed with cars, and a pair

of khakis. They were cute. The light blue print of the button-up would look fantastic with Jim's eyes.

Ok, I thought. New clothes for the guy who saves the Tomorrow Taco napkins so we don't have to buy paper towels.

In the top drawer, I found a Valentine's card. Blank.

It was like in those movies—they were always about submarines, I was pretty sure—when lights started flashing in the control room, and a siren began to wail.

My five-minute timer went off.

I took out my phone. I hesitated. In his new mirror, I could see myself: the gym shorts, the tee I hadn't changed in a couple of days, one of my tube socks fallen halfway off. And, of course, the scars.

Then, because I was trying to be brave, I started to text him. There was something from those submarine movies they said, but I couldn't think of it, so I wrote, *Emergency! Need you ASAP!!!!*

I started the five-minute timer again. Then I kicked free of the falling sock, stripped off the other one, and hopped out of my shorts on my way to the bathroom. At nineteen—ok, eighteen and a half—I wasn't exactly bristling with body hair, but I did a quick buzz with the groomer.

A text came in from Jim, which I ignored. He'd come back. He had to; he was Jim.

Next, I dug around in the vanity until I found the tub I'd bought in November, because I hadn't expected Jim Spencer to sit on his hands for months. It was called Feast, and it was, uh—well, the label said booty balm, and it smelled like eucalyptus. According to the label, the whole point was to *create confidence for intimate moments* and *protect your skin from bacteria and odors*, but with

a name like Feast, I don't know who they thought they were kidding.

When I'd finished, I washed my hands, brushed my teeth, and started lotioning up. I had nice skin—well, the half of me that didn't look like it had gone under a butcher's knife did, anyway. But the lotion was designed to *improve the appearance of old and new scars*—again, according to the label—and at this point, I was willing to try anything. I was breathing faster, and I was aware of my balls and my dick when I moved, aware of the timer running down in my peripheral vision.

I started the water, and then I stood there, bouncing on the balls of my feet as I waited for it to warm up.

The trick to looking sexy-I-just-stepped-out-of-the-shower instead of wet-dog-I-just-stepped-out-of-the-shower? You don't actually get in the shower.

When the water was warm enough, I stuck my head under the spray. I let the water continue to run as I stepped back in front of the mirror; that was part of the illusion. Drops of water fell to glitter on my chest and shoulders.

As I started working on my hair—we were going for playfully tousled, not drooping muskrat—I said, “Hey.” And then I heard how deep my voice was, and I had to avoid my own eyes in the mirror. I tried, “Hey, Jim,” instead, and that sounded even worse. My Adam's apple moved in my throat. “Hey,” I said again. Not so deep this time. And then, softer, “Hey.”

And then I thought, He's Jim, and I realized I wouldn't have to say anything at all.

My timer went off. I dismissed it, and less than a minute later, the front door opened.

“Emmett?” Jim called. “What's up? Everything ok?”

I counted to ten in my head. I grabbed the shower curtain and rattled the rings while the water continued to pound—drought be damned, this was my sex life we were talking about. Then I wrapped a towel around myself, low on my hips, and opened the bathroom door.

“Hey, Em—”

When I stepped out of the bathroom, I ran into Jim—which would have been a nice touch if I’d planned it. Instead, I almost fell, clutching at the towel like I was some virginal maiden.

Jim caught me. He was shorter than me, just a little—you couldn’t really tell, looking at us side by side, but I made sure to remind him as often as I could—and even though he’d put on weight since we started living together, he was still thin in a way that accented the hard, adult masculinity of his body: shoulders, chest, belly, rawboned hips. He had this perfectly smooth complexion, and for a guy who was blond with a hint of red, he had a disappointing lack of freckles. Right then, in the Pepsi tee and jeans, he looked rougher than school-day Jim, in his button-ups and sweaters. I thought of the new outfit on the back of the door.

I knew the moment his brain caught up with the rest of him: his hand tensed on my bare back, and he angled his body away from mine as he set me on my feet. I looked at him, and his eyes skated away. When I swallowed, I saw in my mind’s eye how my Adam’s apple had bobbed in the mirror.

Still not looking at me, Jim held up a hand. “I told you,” he said. “You left them in the junk drawer.”

It took me a moment to realize what he was holding: my keys.

His eyes connected with mine for a moment. “That’s why you texted, right?”

My throat was too tight to swallow, but I managed: “Right.”

2 | JIM

It was, frankly, a relief to go to work on Monday, even though it meant dealing with spoiled, ass-hat high schoolers whose parents had never told them no. Which, I suppose, wasn't all that different from what I dealt with nights and weekends. Maybe I had a type.

After walking in on Emmett, I'd tried to act normal. That was what people did, wasn't it? I should have apologized for barging into his bedroom, I guess, but he'd texted me for help, and in theory, it could have been an emergency—although texts like that from Emmett were fairly common. Once, the emergency in question had been that he wanted a milkshake, so could I pick one up on the way? Still, in all fairness to me, he had said it was an emergency, and so, when I'd gotten home, when I'd heard the shower running, it was only logical to assume that something bad could have happened. He could have fallen. Maybe he had his phone, and he'd managed to text me for help, but he couldn't stand. I had to check on him.

Sure, Jimbo, said a voice in my head that sounded a lot like Emmett. Sure. Just check on him. That's why I'd stood there like a creep, my hand pressed to the tight muscles of his back, the feel of soft skin under my palm. That's why I'd stood there, staring at the water beaded on his shoulders, in the hollow of his throat, on the dark rose of his nipple.

I'd heard the shower, and I'd walked into his room anyway. Not even anyway. Because.

And that's why, for the rest of the day, no matter how hard I tried to play it cool, a weird tension had built in the apartment. Because Emmett knew, or suspected, that I'd walked in on him

on purpose. And because he had—in not so many words, to be fair, but pretty clearly anyway—made it known that he was not interested in me, that all the flirting and teasing was just to screw with my head, and that he was still in love with Vie, his high school sweetheart. If you could call either of them sweethearts, which was a bit of a stretch.

I mean, for fuck's sake, I'd walked in on them kissing.

So, when I got home from school, I sat for a moment in the Tesla—Emmett's Tesla, which was technically Emmett's parents' Tesla, and which I was only driving until I could save up enough to get my own car—and tried to recalibrate. I'd walk inside. I'd smile. I'd ask how his day was. His days were uniformly the same because he didn't work and he didn't go to school, didn't even leave the apartment unless I made him. But if he was in a good mood, he'd still tell me all about it. And if he was in a bad mood, he'd pick a fight, or stare at me until I retreated to my bedroom, or God only knew what.

After another bracing breath, I grabbed my briefcase and headed up the stairs.

The living room and kitchen were empty, but there was a light on under his door. "Hey," I called. "I'm home."

No answer.

I went to my room, and I changed out of my slacks and shirt into sweats; if you went by the numbers, San Elredo's winter was technically mild, but it was that pervasive, wet cold that seemed to get into everything, and I was—in a lot of ways—warm-blooded. I tossed my work clothes in the hamper, where I had a pile of laundry that needed washing, and went back out to the living room.

The light was still on under Emmett's door.

I grabbed my copy of the reader we were using for my juniors, found “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” and hunted down a pencil. I’d read the poem before, of course, but teaching it was something else entirely, and I needed to get as much parsed and annotated as I could tonight so that the kids didn’t chew me up and spit me out the next day.

I was less than a page in, though, when Emmett’s door opened. He padded out into the living room; I recognized the sound of his bare feet, since apparently he was immune to the cold. When the sound stopped, I looked up.

The thing about Emmett is that he was beautiful before a crazed supernatural monster went to work on him with a knife. He was beyond beautiful, actually—he had that kind of tall, lean teen perfection that you could tell was only going to get better as he reached adulthood. Then someone had taken that away from him, left half his body a maze of scars. And no matter what I tried to tell him, how I tried to explain, he didn’t understand that he was so much more beautiful now than he’d ever been in his Armani t-shirts, driving his Porsche.

“Hey,” I said with a smile. “How was your day?”

“How was my day?”

I pressed harder on the page with my thumb, pinning it in place. “Ok. Look. Emmett—” I took a breath. “I’m sorry about yesterday.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to walk in on you—”

“You didn’t mean to walk in on me.”

“No, I—why are you looking at me like that?”

“You know what?” Emmett said, breathing funny, his hands opening and closing at his sides. “You know what’s really funny, Jimbo? You know what’s a fucking riot?”

I closed the reader. Sometimes he threw things, and I didn’t want to tear the page.

“Even though you are the stupidest fucking man I have ever met in my entire life, someone is paying you to be a teacher.”

He slammed his bedroom door behind him.

3 | EMMETT

By Tuesday, I'd cooled down enough to try again.

It had been a misunderstanding. Jimbo could be dense sometimes, didn't get the message. He was, after all, sensible and responsible and annoyingly good, which meant he still got hung up on stupid stuff like the fact that he used to be my teacher. In spite of everything we'd been through. In spite of the fact that we'd kissed, that we'd shared a bed, that I'd seen his spectacular (and disappointingly unfreckled) ass.

Three days to Valentine's.

I made my move when he was grading. He sat on the couch, papers spread around him, with a blue pen behind his ear and a red pen in his hand. He squinted when he read, and I was really looking forward to being the one who told him he needed cheaters. He got this line in his forehead sometimes, and I wanted to smooth it away and watch it come back again. That was the kind of stupid stuff that got into my head around Jim Spencer, which was one more reason to make his life difficult.

The yoga pants were so thin they were practically sheer; when I'd picked them out at the store, I'd put my hand inside them and held them up to the light, and I could see every finger. Jim was going to see a lot more than my hand. The matching top was made of the same material. They were loose on me, comfortable, and when I was freeballing, walking around did interesting things to the head of my dick. To all of my dick, actually. Which helped because it was cold, and I didn't want Jim to be disappointed with the show.

“Do you mind?” I asked, and I unrolled the yoga mat before he could answer. I bent over, legs wide, and pretended to make some adjustments. “My bedroom is too small.”

“Hm?” I heard the moment Jim looked up. He didn’t actually gulp like a cartoon character, but there was this click in his throat, and he must have moved because the blue pen fell to the floor.

I adjusted my dick. A couple of times, actually, since I was leaning over and it was swaying and, well, whatever other reasons I could pretend were legitimate. Then I stood up and looked over my shoulder. “Jim?”

His face was red. His throat was flushed. Even for a guy who could call up fire and whose body temperature always ran high and who occasionally, accidentally, made things blow up, he was looking noticeably warmer than usual.

“Jim?” I said again.

“Huh?”

It was an inside-only smile, but it still felt really fucking good. “Do you mind?” When he still didn’t answer, I waved my phone at him. “I just need the video—no sound, so it won’t bother you.”

His lips were parted; they were chapped sometimes, dry, which I remembered better than I wanted too. He was breathing softly through his mouth. And then somebody must have turned all the breakers back on because he blinked and said, “Uh huh.” He tried again. “Yeah. I’ll just take this in my room—”

“No,” I said as I got down on the mat and started the yoga video. “Don’t. I’m going to be totally quiet.”

Pages rustled. A pen clicked. He moved, coming into my field of view as he stooped to recover the fallen pen, and if

anything, his face was redder.

After the warm-ups, we started with bridge pose. A nice amount of flexibility, my crotch on display, gravity molding the yoga pants around my dick and balls. My body started to loosen, the familiar warmth of movement kindling in my muscles. I could feel myself starting to swell, my dick lengthening visibly under the thin fabric of the yoga pants.

Paper rustled. I snuck a look; Jim was white-knuckling a student report on, of all things, virginal knighthood.

The video changed to cat pose, so I got on my hands and knees, facing away from Jim. I raised my back like the woman in the video, dropped my tailbone, let my head hang down. Between my legs, I could see Jim's knee bouncing. When the woman in the video changed position, I copied her: cow pose, my belly lowering, my chest and sternum coming up, my ass rising. I was hard, the pants stretching until they were translucent, visible between the vee of my legs.

I heard the unmistakable sound of a pen dragged across paper and then: "Oh shit."

Pages—including one covered by a long line of red ink—fluttered to the ground as Jim lurched to his feet. He stumbled past me, and a moment later, the door to his room shut. Hard.

Dropping into child's pose, my forehead cushioned by the mat, I gave myself a moment to consider the ache between my legs. "Well," I said. "Fuck."

4 | JIM

It couldn't be my imagination.

One day to Valentine's, and that was all I could think about.

At lunch, I took my twenty-six minutes and raced home. I'd stumbled through my morning classes, trying to explain adjectival phrases, flopping—completely flopping—the plot of *Of Mice and Men*, oblivious to the boys who had drawn penises all over the class set of *Moby Dick*.

It couldn't be my imagination; that's what I kept coming back to. For months, Emmett had been operating at usual Emmett levels, which meant he was prickly, combative, and, occasionally, perceptively cruel. At least, when he wasn't being sweet, or sad, or trying to make it (whatever it was) up to me. Those bouts lasted somewhere around five minutes, so I'd learned to enjoy them.

But this—the shower, the yoga—it couldn't be just in my head. I mean, yes, I'd been out of the dating game for, well, a while. And yes, the year before, when I'd stopped in San Elredo to see Emmett at the hospital where his parents had stashed him, when I'd stayed because he didn't have anybody else, things had seemed like they were heading in a different direction. I wouldn't have lied to myself. I wouldn't have said he'd forgotten Vie. But I would have said he was moving on, which was healthy, and I would have said—not out loud, maybe, but to myself—that maybe there had been something between us. Something beyond Emmett's need to seek approval. Or, at least, attention. We had kissed, hadn't we? And that kiss had felt like it meant something.

And then I'd seen him kissing Vie, and that had been that.

Which was better than Emmett imprinting on me because I was the only adult male who had been positively involved in his life. He and Vie would break each other's hearts all over again, because it was inevitable, and then Emmett could find someone his own age. So, like I said: it was better.

It was definitely better.

Definitely.

Until I'd seen cat pose.

I sat in the car. Twenty-six minutes shrank to nineteen. Nineteen shrank to eleven.

He texted me, I told myself. He wanted me to catch him stepping out of the shower.

He's nineteen and one time he left his keys in an old McDonald's bag, another part of my brain argued.

He didn't have anything on under those yoga pants. Nothing.

Yeah, and he answered the door in a jockstrap one time because he thought it was the cute pizza guy.

I chewed my nail to the quick.

Finally, I pushed open the door and got out of the car. Eight minutes. Halfway up the stairs, I turned around. Then I stopped. I went back up. Down again. The door on a ground-floor unit opened, and Mrs. Hanover poked her cap of white hair out.

Letting out a weird half-laugh that was mostly despair, I turned around and went up.

Is something going on? No, I decided; that was too confrontational, too combative. And Emmett loved a fight, so he'd latch on to it. What's up? Was that better? I groaned that half-laugh again and pushed a hand through my hair. Sure, *what's*

up? sounded so much better; maybe I should put on a baseball cap backwards and wear my trousers halfway down my ass.

Do you love him, or do you love me, or can it be both?

In Wyoming once, when a big storm came through, I'd seen a bolt of lightning split an oak down the center.

When I pushed into the apartment, his voice came from his bedroom at the back. The words were indistinct. Then, unmistakably, Emmett giggled. His voice rose in protest, and then he giggled again. Two giggles. In one day. From Emmett Bradley, who had once spent an entire weekend making fun of me because I told him I had cried the first time I watched *Old Yeller*.

I am a lot of things, few of them good. I tightened my hand around my keys so they wouldn't clink, and I eased the door shut behind me, and I toed off my brogues.

“—I said shut up!” The words became clearer as I crept down the hall. His tone was right, but he undermined it by laughing again. “You're such an asshole. I knew I shouldn't have called you.” His silence suggested he was listening. “Blond,” he said promptly. “I know; don't start.” And then, in a voice I'd only heard from him a few times—stripped of the mocking distance, the perpetual razor-blade edge—“It's hard. Well, he's making it harder than it has to be, but it's hard no matter what. Complicated, I mean.” He stopped again. I was close enough to the door to see that it was still open, and through the crack, I had a view of his bed. He lay there, one arm propping up his head, a blush filling his face. As I watched, he pulled his phone away to look at it. Then he said, “I've got to go.” He laughed again, said, “Fuck off,” and disconnected.

In the silence, I could hear his phone buzzing.

He studied the screen for a moment, the color in his face rising. Then he swiped the screen. For a moment, nothing. And then, in a voice I'd never heard from him before, so neutral it sounded like steel under tremendous stress, he said, "Hey." He took a breath. "What's up, tweaker?"

The silence lasted a heartbeat too long, and then I heard Vie Eliot say, "Hey."

5 | EMMETT

On Valentine's, I made myself go out.

I didn't normally leave the house, not unless I had to. It wasn't *Grey Gardens*-level shit; it was just smart. People didn't like staring at me any more than I liked being stared at, so I figured I'd make it easy for both of us. But on Valentine's, I had errands to run, and that meant leaving the house. I put on a hoodie, pulled up the hood, and slid my hands into my pockets. If I kept my head down, I might even pass as human.

Vie was right, although I wouldn't give the tweaker the satisfaction of telling him that.

First, CVS, where their display of Valentine's chocolates had been ravaged—a single, misshapen box remained. I bought it, tried to fix the cardboard as best I could, and kept going.

My next stop was Trader Joe's, for the flowers, but the same horde that had gotten to CVS before me had also pillaged TJ's. I tried Whole Foods next, and then I tried a corner florist—appropriately named Flower Hut.

Then Beach Blossoms.

Then Everlasting Garden, which sounded like a place you'd have a funeral.

I finally lucked out in the Safeway. The roses were small. Some of the petals were starting to fuse to the plastic wrap because they'd been in there too long. They were red, technically, but the color looked washed out, and you could tell these had been the roses rejected by places like Flower Hut. But they were roses—again, technically—and I paid the exorbitant price. Or, rather, my parents did.

We needed dinner, but when I called around on the walk home, nobody had any openings. I offered to pay for a seat. No takers. I tried to bribe one lady, and she just laughed. I thought about calling Vie for advice again. But that would have been moving backward, and I wasn't going to do that anymore. I could have bought pre-made stuff at the grocery store, but by this point I was already halfway home, and I didn't want Jim's roses to smell like rotisserie chicken, and the thought of walking back into the Safeway, with everybody looking and pretending not to look—no, thanks.

The day was getting colder, the marine layer moving in, fog thickening between the houses and then gathering in the streets. Getting darker too. I walked faster. Maybe a sushi place would have an opening, I thought. Maybe an Indian place. Those weren't—well, most people went American or French for Valentine's. But Jim loved American. He'd want a steak. Or a huge salad and then a steak. I could make him a steak. Probably. It just meant going back to the Safeway, where the woman at the self-checkout had pretended to inspect her nails while darting glances at me.

The sound of the ocean was much louder now.

My phone vibrated with a text from Jim: *Where are you?*

I dismissed it. The clock read quarter to five, so, of course, Jim was home. He'd be there when I walked in with the flowers that were literally decomposing with every step I took. He'd be there when I walked in with the mashed box of chocolates, before I even had a chance to make them look decent. I stopped next to a house with cedar shake siding, and I thought, for a moment, about screaming.

My phone vibrated again: *Can I ask you a favor?*

I dismissed that one too. No, I thought. No, I'm not going to pick up milk. No, I'm not going to run to the dry cleaners. No, I'm not going to do anything nice for you, Jim Spencer, because I love you, and I'm trying to tell you I love you, and it turns out I have royally fucked myself over by waiting until it was too late, so please let me panic for five fucking minutes.

My phone vibrated again; I pushed it deeper into my pocket and refused to look at it.

I stood there, breathing, my hand too tight around the flowers. The fog was wet on my face, and a car swept past, and when the headlights washed over me, for one moment the fog refracted the light, and I was standing in a neon cloud. Then the car drove on, and I took a breath, and then another, tasting the ocean and the fading hint of exhaust.

Ok, I thought. Flowers are fucked, check. Chocolates are shit, check. Alrighty then.

I walked the rest of the way home.

When I got to our building, I took the steps two at a time. My heart was pounding in my chest, and my face felt greasy, and I didn't even want to think about my hair after the hood and the humidity. There were still a couple of thorns on the roses, and they bit into my hand through the plastic. When I'd had Jim—as a teacher, I mean, my junior year—I'd totally fucked over an essay on *The Great Gatsby*. No interest in doing it. I'd written the thing in an hour, tops, based on movie clips Jim had shown and what I remembered from class discussion. I was smart, so it would have been a B. But Jim had always been a softie.

As I flew up the stairs, I thought, That's what I'll say. I'll say, *This is like that Gatsby paper, remember? And it should have been a B, a B+ tops, but you're always kind, and you're always generous, and you know I'm a fuckup but you don't hold it against me, and you know I can do better*

—you know I would do better if I weren't such a fuckup. So, this is my fuckup attempt, the flowers, the chocolates, don't even look at them. It's my B+ attempt. But I'm going to do better because you deserve better. I can do better.

And because he was Jim, he'd let me slide and call it an A-.

The door was unlocked, and I stumbled into the living room-kitchen combo at the front. And then I stopped.

Candles.

Flowers—good roses, the kind you know are meant for Valentine's—in a glass vase.

The smell of something full of carbs and cheese floated in the air. Italian, a numb part of my brain noted. I should have thought of Italian.

Music played in the background, quiet, acoustic indie stuff that was all sad girls with smokey eye makeup and guys in flannel and beanies, no matter the weather.

I had time for one thought, bright and blazing: It's perfect.

And then Jim laughed in his bedroom—he had a nice laugh, quiet, moderated, always so controlled. That was Jim. Always locking himself down, battening the hatches, trying so hard to keep control. I didn't hear him laugh much. Maybe that said something about me.

A campy voice said, “Oh my God, you are so hot! Like, literally!” And then high, nervous laughter. Jim said something that I couldn't hear, his voice low and assured, and the laughter cut off.

When I heard the springs on the bed, it was like waking up. I shuffled out of the apartment, pulling the door shut behind me. I

took the stairs down. I was moving on autopilot, not really seeing anything, rolling back the film on the last sixty seconds.

I made my way to the dumpsters and opened the lid on one.

Then I stopped.

I had thought—

Yeah, a part of me said. You sure did.

I laid the flowers and chocolates inside, and the lid fell shut with a clang, and I pulled up my hood and walked out into the fog.

FUEL

This story is technically not canon, but I liked it so much, I'm including it here anyway. I wrote it for an anthology, but when I came back to write *Queer Fires*, I realized this story didn't line up with the book I wanted to write. I hope you enjoy it anyway—in this alternate universe version, the story takes place between *Ember Boys* and *Queer Fires*.

1 | EMMETT

The apartment was in a small building half a mile from the coast. The doors were no longer square, and when a breeze picked up, some of the shingles flapped up and down. The board-and-batten siding had gone gray from sun and salt and age. I didn't mind not being able to see the beach; just being able to see Jim was enough. It was May, and the weather warm, and he was wearing a T-shirt with Hansen Moving on the sleeve. The shirt was big and boxy on him, but it didn't hide his biceps or shoulders or the muscles in his back when he lowered a box. He had dark circles under his eyes; he probably thought he'd hidden it, but I knew he hadn't been sleeping.

Straightening, he wiped his face and said, "Am I doing all the lifting today?"

"Looks like it."

"Get your butt off the couch," Jim said. He pushed some of his blond hair out of his eyes; it had gotten longer. "And get downstairs."

I did—not because he was the boss, but because it was fun to pull the rug out from under him when he thought he was.

We actually didn't have much to move. I had just gotten out of the psych ward of San Elredo Hospital, and Jim had been living out of his car. He had rented a truck, however, and we had bought furniture from a series of garage sales and secondhand stores around town. None of it matched: one of the beds was a queen with an old headboard that had gingerbread carving on the top; another was a twin with a pale pine frame and a safety rail that had obviously been put in for a child. Jim thought it was

funny to say that one was mine. We each had a dresser, and we found an old plaid sofa at the St. Vincent de Paul thrift store. It smelled like the garage in my Wyoming house, the weekend before my dad had found a nest of mice in there. When I pointed this out, Jim just rolled his eyes.

“With your knees,” Jim said, squatting to grab the sofa at the base.

“I’m young,” I said. “That’s really more of an old man thing.”

“With your knees.”

“We’ll get you a nice bath with Epsom salt tonight.”

Jim didn’t always respond, but I liked it when I got a bit of color in his cheeks.

He had insisted on a two-bedroom unit, which seemed ridiculous, especially considering the fact that one, we had kissed, and two, we shared a bed before, and three, he knew I was ready to take things to the next level. But Jim said two bedrooms, so we got two bedrooms.

After we put down the sofa, I headed into my room. I started putting together the pine bedframe using one of the screwdrivers Jim had purchased—it had come in a bag of tools he had bought in bulk at a garage sale. I didn’t make particularly good time with the project, and in the front room, I heard the door open and close several times. Jim’s steps echoed as he went up and down the stairs. I was just screwing one of the bed rails into place when he changed course and came towards my bedroom.

“Could you help me with something?” he asked from the doorway.

I looked up. Jim’s face was red.

“Now?” Jim said.

And instead of doing what any sane person would have done, instead of nodding or getting to my feet or asking how I could help, I flopped back onto the floor, scratched my stomach, and made sure to pull my shirt up a few inches to expose my abs. “Now?”

“Get up, Emmett.”

“I’m right in the middle of something.” My shirt rode up a few more inches. “Unless this is a sexual favor you’re talking about. Then I’m interested.”

Jim’s hair had flecks of red in it. He took a long breath through his nose, and then he turned and left.

I finished putting together the bed.

When he came back five minutes later, his footsteps made the floor shake. It was a cheaply built frame building, and I figured a few more of these Jimbo temper tantrums would send the whole thing to the ground. He stood in the doorway again, arms crossed, and said, “Get off your butt and come help me.”

“Sure, Jimbo. Let me just finish putting the sheets on the bed.”

“No, Emmett. Now.”

“Oh,” I said. “Yeah, I like that. Yell at me.”

He left.

The next thing I heard was the something heavy falling on the stairs and then Jim swearing. I dropped the screwdriver and headed out of the apartment. From the landing, I could see down into the stairwell. Jim was pinned in the corner, favoring one foot. The massive gingerbread headboard had fallen against him. A long gouge in the plaster showed where the headboard had hit the wall and then slid.

“Are you okay?”

Jim tried to stand normally, easing his weight onto his foot, and then he hissed and pulled it up again.

“You hurt your foot.”

“Yes, Emmett. Excellent observation. Why don’t you go finish putting on your sheets?”

Instead, I hurried down the stairs, caught the headboard, and held it while Jim got himself clear. He tried to put weight on his foot again, and again pain flashed across his face.

“Stay here,” I said, “while I get this in the apartment.”

“No, hold on. I’ll help you.”

“Jimbo, stay.” I wagged my finger at him. Then, softening my voice, I added, “Please?”

With a sigh, Jim nodded and leaned against the wall.

The headboard was awkward and heavy, but it wasn’t so heavy that I couldn’t lift it. I maneuvered it up the stairs and into Jim’s room, where I saw that he hadn’t had time to set up any of his stuff because he’d been bringing everything in while I was fooling around with my bed. I went back to the stairs and found Jim trying to hop up the steps. In spite of his objections, I got him to put his arm around my shoulders, and together we got him upstairs and into the apartment. I settled him on the couch, and then I went to the fridge and opened it.

“We don’t have any ice.”

“It’s fine,” Jim said, massaging his foot. “I don’t think I did anything serious to it. I’m just an idiot.”

“No, I should have helped you. I’m sorry.” The last part was hard for me, but it was getting easier. More importantly, I knew

that it was the kind of thing that worked on Jim.

“No, I’m sorry.”

“Oh, definitely. You definitely should be sorry.”

Jim rolled his eyes. “I’ve just been in a bad mood, and I’m tired, and I took it out on you. I should’ve asked you more nicely.”

I moved over to the couch, dropped onto it, and said, “You’re finally ready to talk about it?”

Jim shook his head. But then he said, “It’s nothing. I shouldn’t even be worried about it. I’ve just gotten out of practice, I guess.”

“So it’s a work thing?” I hadn’t been sure about that; I had wondered if it was an us thing. I wasn’t sure if I was relieved or disappointed that it was a work thing. “How are you out of practice? You forgot how many letters are in the alphabet?”

“Ha ha,” Jim said. “It’s nothing.”

“Well, that’s the second time you’ve told me it’s nothing, which definitely means it’s something.”

Jim blinked. “You realize that makes no sense?”

“Start talking,” I said, “before I have to resort to torture. I’ll sing you some more of my songs that I wrote.”

Jim covered his ears.

“Asshole,” I said, punching him in the ribs.

Pretending to be injured, Jim covered himself, and then he said, “It’s these kids. I just haven’t had to teach kids like this before.”

“Like what?”

“Bullies.”

“I’m a world-class bully,” I said. “You taught me.”

“It worries me that you’re so proud of that fact.”

“I’m just saying it’s not really anything new. And I don’t see how you could be out of practice because you have to deal with me all the time.”

“I guess.” Jim shrugged. “But I never had to deal with tech savvy kids who hijacked the smartboard and put gay porn on the screen.”

“Were the guys hot, at least?”

Jim stared at me.

“What? It’s a valid question.”

Sighing, Jim got to his feet and hobbled into his room.

“I’ll get you some ice,” I called after him.

“My foot’s okay,” Jim called back.

“It’s for your wiener. From watching all that gay porn with your students.”

Jim slammed his door.

2 | EMMETT

“Not there,” Jim said, shaking out his towel. “Move over.”

“Why?” I looked up and down the beach.

In spite of Jim having hurt his foot the day before, we had walked to the beach. The beach because it was a rarely perfect day. Walked because Jim was cheap as shit, and although he limped the whole half mile, he insisted it was better than driving.

Northern California beaches weren't exactly what I'd grown up with, but the beach was still the beach. The day was warm, and the sun was out, which meant people crowded every available inch of sand. It felt like most of San Elredo had turned out to enjoy the first really nice day of spring. A pair of young women were setting up a beach tent next to us. Both of them had butch haircuts, and one of them was wearing a leather bikini with metal studs. The other was wearing a polka-dot bathing suit that wouldn't have embarrassed my grandmother. They were laughing a lot as they set up the tent; from time to time, one would reach over and grab the other an arm, a hand, a brush on the shoulder. I turned my attention back to Jim, who had very carefully left a yard between our towels. I moved my towel a little closer. It only took a couple of minutes before Jim scooted away again.

Rather than press the point, I lay down on the towel, closed my eyes, and tried to soak up the sun. Northern California was beautiful in many ways, and I'd enjoyed my time with Jim, but at heart, I was a Southern California boy. I'd missed the sun.

We spent some time like that, both of us just stretched out, me pretending not to peek at Jim, enjoying the hard lines of

muscle, the scattering of red gold hair on his chest and belly, the baggy swim trunks, the muscle definition that made me feel like a kid and him look like a man. The air had a pleasant, clean ocean tang today, and it mixed nicely with the sunscreen that Jim was wearing.

As though reading my thoughts, Jim said without opening his eyes, “You’re going to get a sunburn.”

“Looking forward to it. You’ll be in charge of putting aloe over every square inch of me.”

Jim didn’t have anything to say about that, but I had my eyes open, and I saw him swallow.

I must have dozed for a while because I woke to the sound of Jim’s voice, unusually tight, as he said, “Damn it.”

I was still waking up. The sun was higher now, turning the sand pale brown, white in places. I was sweating. Rough, hard laughter competed now with the sound of the waves. Boys’ voices. And then, loud enough that it was meant to carry, “Told you he was a fag.”

Next to me, Jim muttered, “God damn it.”

Blinking to clear my vision, I scanned the beach and found the boys. There were five of them, and I knew the type: tanned, toned, expensive sunglasses, designer swimsuits. They must have been juniors or seniors because they were past the stage of skinny coltishness and entering that transitional stage where I still found myself, somewhere between being a teenager and adult. I also recognize the breed: purebred assholes.

“Is that them?”

Jim was lying down again, an arm over his eyes.

“Jimbo?”

A gull screeched.

Someone down the beach was playing *cumbia*, the beat echoing up the sand, and somebody else was grilling hotdogs in defiance of the local order against beach fires. The smell of searing meat made my stomach grumble.

“Either you talk to me, or I move my towel over and get all snuggly with you.”

Jim didn’t move, but he said, “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, Jimbo.”

I enjoyed watching the struggle on his face. Then I said, “I’ll put my hand on your leg. Then I’ll slide it up. See if there’s anything under those trunks. Kiss your pecs. Really give those kids the full junior-year health class they should have had.”

Jim groaned.

“Yeah,” I said, unable to fight the smirk. “You’ll make a noise like that, I think.”

“Just leave it, Emmett.” Jim kept his arm over his eyes, but his voice was hard. “I’m telling you to leave it alone.”

“Definitely. I will definitely leave it alone. All you have to do is answer one question: are those the boys?”

“I have absolutely zero proof.”

“Just like you had zero proof that I cheated on my *Great Gatsby* vocabulary quiz.”

Jim finally rolled onto his side and stared at me. “I suppose it was a coincidence you wrote supercilious on your arm and forgot to pull your sleeve all the way down.”

My smirk grew into a grin. “Maybe I just wanted you to look at my arm.”

Jim shook his head, lay down again, and turned onto his stomach.

I waited for him to fall asleep.

3 | EMMETT

The thing about bullies—and I should know—is that the best way to handle them is one-on-one. Jim was snoring softly, and that was no surprise. He rarely slept through the night, and things had been worse ever since he'd started teaching. Now, warmed by the sun and comfortable on the sand, and—if I flatter myself—maybe feeling a little safer with me by him, he was completely sacked out.

When one of the boys broke off to go to the bathroom, I got up from my towel.

The kid I was following with probably fifteen or sixteen, his hair bleached by salt and sun, his body the deep tan that came from long hours outside or in an expensive tanning bed. He had maybe twenty yards on me, but I didn't try to close the distance. For now, I just wanted to watch, wait, and see.

As I'd expected, he headed for the public bathrooms, which was the name for a glorified row of porta potties. The kid went into the one on the end and shut the door behind him. I walked a loop around the row of porta potties, spotted a trashcan, and dug through it. Near the top, I found a long plastic bag, the kind they sell popcorn in, and I shook it out. Then I filled it with half a pound of sand and twisted it, forming a compact ball of sand at one end. I walked back to the porta potty and stood there, waiting.

When the door opened, I moved in. At first, the kid was shocked. His brain was already trying to find an explanation, and the most likely explanation was that I just had to pee really bad. He made a face, tried to stumble sideways, obviously thinking he just needed to get clear of the door.

Instead, I grabbed him, shoved him back, and followed him into the porta potty.

“What the fuck?”

My answer was to smack him in the head with my popcorn bag full of sand. It hurt, no doubt about that, but the surprise was more effective for what I wanted. He stumbled back, and the seat of the porta potty caught him at the knees. He sat down hard. I swung the popcorn bag again, not caring if I hit him this time, and he shrank away. That gave me the opening I needed to plant my foot on his chest. Bracing one hand against the side of the porta potty, I applied as much force with my foot as I could. He slid through the opening of the toilet seat until his hips caught.

He opened his mouth to scream, but I spoke first. “Make any noise, and I’ll club you until you’re unconscious and swimming in shit.” I smiled. “Understand?”

The kid stared at me. He was breathing through his mouth, exposing teeth that had probably cost three thousand dollars’ worth of orthodontic work, and I saw now that I had split his lip. A trickle of blood ran down to his chin.

“Do you understand the situation?”

He opened his mouth wider.

I raised the bag of sand.

“Okay, okay,” he said. “What the fuck?”

“Name.”

The mouth-breather just stared at me.

“What is your name?” I asked more slowly.

“Jeff—Jefferson.”

“Okay, we’re off to a good start. Now, Jefferson, I want you to explain in one hundred words or less why you’re fucking with my friend.”

“With your friend? I swear to God, that bitch is lying, she was begging for—”

“Jesus.” I held up a hand and tried not to breathe too deeply. Outside, a gull called, and then I said, “That settles one thing: you are a real piece of shit. No, I’m talking about my friend Jim. Jim Spencer. Your new English teacher.”

“Mr. Spencer?”

I sighed. “Jefferson, I have to say, if you are America’s future, we are in some deep, deep shit. Now: why are you fucking with Jim?”

Someone knocked at the door, and Jefferson’s mouth opened. I raised the bag of sand, and Jefferson snapped his jaw shut. Over my shoulder, I said, “Ocupado.”

After a moment, steps crunched away in the sand.

When Jefferson spoke again, there was a pleading note in his voice. “Look, man, I didn’t do anything.”

“Not a good idea. You do not want to lie to me, not today. I just moved into a new apartment, I’m trying to seduce an older man, and I do not have time or patience for this.”

“No, look,” Jefferson said. “I swear, I didn’t do anything. It was Angel.”

“Which one is Angel?”

“He’s got the huge nipples. And he’s trying to grow a mustache.”

“Okay,” I said. “Why is Angel fucking with my friend?”

“Because Angel popped a boner in the locker room,” Jefferson said with a tone as though that explained the whole matter.

“Oh. Shit.” I thought for a moment and said, “And who’s been giving Angel shit?”

“Isaac.” Jefferson anticipated my next question and added, “Blond. He’s got the red swimsuit.”

I thought for a moment. “What’s he drive?”

“Dude, I’m falling!”

“His car?”

“It’s a Corvette—seriously, I’m about to fall!” When I didn’t say anything, he blurted, “Red. It’s a classic, 1967. Bro, come on!”

I nodded and lowered the bag of sand. “Today, Jefferson, is your lucky day. You did the smart thing. Now, keep doing the smart thing and don’t tell your friends about our little conversation. I’m gonna take care of Isaac and Angel.”

I was unlatching the porta potty door when Jefferson said, “Man, like, what the hell?”

Over my shoulder, staring at him as he scabbled to keep from falling through the toilet seat, I said, “Oh. Yeah. Good luck with that.”

4 | EMMETT

When I got back to the towels, Jim was sitting up, his arms loose around his knees as he studied the water.

I sat down on the towel next to him, and when he glanced over, I said, “How are you?”

“How am I?”

“You know.” I gestured at Isaac and Angel and the other boys from his school.

Jim shrugged. “They haven’t bothered me so far.”

“Except for directing homophobic slurs at you.”

“It’s a beautiful day, Emmett. I’m not going to let them ruin it.” Then, with a frown, Jim said, “Where were you?”

“Had to use the bathroom.” Out of the corner of my eye, I was studying Isaac and his pack of wild dogs. They were playing touch football on the sand, three on two, because Jefferson was still halfway to a watery grave. Although four of the five boys clearly understood what touch football meant, Isaac, with his red trunks, was enjoying hammering into the other kids crashing against them, knocking them to the ground, and then getting to his feet and whooping in triumph. “God, was I that awful?”

To my surprise, Jim laughed and shook his head. “Not even close. Although, I’m not going to say you were easy, either.” He got on one knee, hesitated, and seemed to be gathering himself to stand. His injured foot was black and blue where the headboard had hit it. “I think I want a hotdog and something to drink,. Do you want anything?”

“No.” I caught his arm before he could stand and tugged him back onto the towel. “And you’re not going anywhere. I still can’t believe you insisted on walking here.”

“Walking doesn’t cost any money.”

Rolling my eyes, I got to my feet. “So then: a dog. Ketchup, relish, mustard? Please don’t tell me you’re disgusting and you want tomatoes.”

“Relish and mustard. Please don’t tell me you’re disgusting and you actually put ketchup on hot dogs.”

I grinned. “Ice cream?”

“Later,” Jim said, already digging through our small pile of belongings. “Hold on, I’ve got cash.”

I was already moving up the beach, and over my shoulder, I said, “Sorry, I only trade in sexual services.”

The sand was hot under my bare feet. The beach was getting busier. A couple of kids, probably still in elementary school, were tossing a beach ball back and forth. They were directly in my path, so I jagged right. One of them noticed me, his eyes widening as he took in the scars that covered half my body, and he fumbled the ball when it came at him again. His friend noticed too, his jaw dropping. I give them a wave and walked faster.

Near the beach’s parking lot, an old malt shop offered dogs, burgers, ice cream—and, of course, malts. The building was painted turquoise, and although the paint looked new, the building still somehow managed to look old. It was low and squat, with a roof that projected over the patio to provide shade. People sat at tables outside, enjoying the warm air in the breeze off the ocean, while more people lined up at the takeaway windows. I never went anywhere without being noticed, not

anymore, and I told myself I was used to the stares. Used to them, yes. But I didn't have to like them.

While I waited in line, I thought about Isaac and his wild dogs as a way to distract myself. The problem with bullies, aside from the general problem of them being total dicks, was that they thrived in a structure like the one Isaac had provided. In order to deal with Angel, I had to get him away from the rest of the group.

A cheap speaker system set up under the eaves of the malt shop allowed the staff to announce when an order was ready. A buzzing, staticky voice informed anyone listening, "Order number sixty-seven is ready for pickup."

I tried to remember what kids like Isaac and his wild dogs thought was important. I tried to think about what I'd been like and what I'd thought was important just a few years before. Girls. And boys. Cars. Clothes. Attention. Envy. Pretty much all of it seemed meaningless now, after what I'd seen, except for maybe the part about boys.

"Order number sixty-eight is ready for pickup."

When I got to the window, the woman standing on the other side had to be at least 60, her hair in a neat bun, wearing a T-shirt that said *San Elredo Malt Shop - A Summer Tradition*. The shirt was the same turquoise as the building. The wrinkles around her eyes and mouth deepened as she studied me, took in the scars, and did a mental adjustment.

"Yes, sweetie?"

I ordered. I paid. And then, just as I was about to step away from the window. I realized I had the perfect opportunity.

"Could you do me a favor?"

"Sweetie, you just name it."

“I already called the police, but I saw that someone’s car had been broken into. Would you mind announcing it on your speaker so that the owner will be ready when the police get here?”

“Oh dear. Oh dear. Well, I think we absolutely have to.”

I described Isaac’s car, which Jefferson had told me about. Then I stepped to the side to let the next person order.

“Will the owner of a 1967 red Corvette please come to the malt shop? Will the owner of a 1967 red Corvette please come to the malt shop?”

When my order was up, I grabbed the dogs and drinks and sprinted to drop them off with Jim.

“Did you see any relish up there?” Jim asked as he considered the dog in its waxed paper wrapping.

“Shit, I forgot. I’ll be right back.”

“No, it doesn’t matter—”

I ignored him and sprinted back toward the malt shop. Isaac and his gang were already almost there, and to judge by the look on Isaac’s face, he was both terrified and furious that something might have happened to his car—or, more likely, his dad’s car. As I got closer, it was easy to pick out which one was Angel. He matched the description that Jefferson had given me: the big nipples, the wispy mustache. I used the oldest trick in the book.

“Angel!”

And, as usual, it worked. People love the sound of their own name, and Angel was no exception. He stopped, glanced back, and spotted me waving. I could tell from his face that he didn’t know me, but he was curious.

“Hold up,” I shouted.

Isaac and the other boys left Angel behind.

When I reached him, he was considering me. His arms were crossed, his eyes narrowed, and he looked at my chest a little longer than he should have.

“Angel, nice to meet you, all that stuff.”

“Who are you?”

“I’d love to give you the whole song and dance, but we don’t have a lot of time, and we need to have a little chat. I understand you’re the one who decided to make my friend’s life difficult the other day.”

Unlike Jefferson, Angel had no difficulty understanding me. His eyes skipped past me to where Jim was still stretched out on the towel, eating his hot dog. “Your fag friend, you mean.”

“Now that’s the kind of thing I’m talking about. That’s the kind of thing that’s going to stop right now. Any questions about that?”

“Fuck off,” Angel said. He turned to go.

I was faster, cutting around him in a half circle. My back was to the malt shop now. The sun was high overhead, and the beach flooded with light. “It’s shitty,” I said. “What Isaac’s doing to you, making you feel that way, maybe even blackmailing you. That’s about as low as it gets.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure you do. Pop in a bone in the locker room, high school. I get it. And you want someone else to look bad, you want somebody else to be the joke. I understand. A little. So, I’m going to make you an offer: I help you deal with Isaac, and you leave Jim alone. Or, here’s the alternate deal: you keep bothering Jim, and I fuck your life beyond recognition.”

Something changed in Angel's posture. His chin came up. He was breathing faster. "I don't know what you're talking about, but Isaac's my friend. I'd never do anything to hurt him."

Too late, I heard a step behind me in the sand.

"What the hell's going on here?" It was the same voice that had called out about Jim being a fag.

I turned, and I had only a moment to register the sneer. The red swim shorts. The sun-bleached hair. Then the punch caught me right in the eye, and I went down.

5 | EMMETT

“Do you want to try explaining that again?” Jim asked, holding ice against my eye.

I shook my head.

“For someone with the ability to make himself invulnerable,” Jim said, “you have a tendency to get hurt.”

“I like to stay in practice. Ow.” I reached for Jim’s wrist to pull his hand away, but he shushed me and adjusted the ice again.

Down the beach, Isaac and his boys were laughing, shoving each other, joking. More than once I saw them reenact the punch, all of them bursting into gales of laughter at the part when I went down. Jefferson was back with them, and he and Angel were the ones who seemed the least comfortable with the performance. Both of them held themselves stiffly, throwing frequent glances in my direction.

“What did you say to them, anyway?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I just said I wanted to know if that was a barracuda in his shorts.”

Jim sighed and rolled his eyes. He was very gentle. The sunlight glittered in the fine blond hairs on the back of his arm.

“You can’t fix kids like that,” Jim said softly. “Not quickly, anyway. People who have built up that kind of shell, they need time, they need love, they need to know that’s not the only way they can get attention or feel good about themselves.”

“People like me?”

Jim sighed again and repositioned the ice. After a moment, he said, “There’s nobody like you, Emmett.” Then he got a little

grin on his face. “Thank God.”

I laughed even though I didn’t want to. “You know what I hate?” I asked. “I hate what people say about bullies just being bullies because they’re scared. Some bullies are just bullies because they’re jerks.”

“Are you speaking from experience?”

“Oh no, I’m definitely the scared, helpless, unloved kind. That’s why I’m Jim Spencer kryptonite.”

“I knew I should’ve gotten a different roommate,” Jim muttered.

While Jim continued to complain and baby me in equal portions, I studied Isaac and his gang. It was obvious why Angel was bullied; he was gay and closeted. That was what gave bullies power. It was equally obvious that the other boys in the group had reasons for following Isaac. People followed bullies because it gives them a sense of power, and everybody wanted power. But Isaac—well, there was something about Isaac I couldn’t put my finger on, and it was driving me crazy.

“Thank God we don’t have to tell your parents about this,” Jim said, finally pulling the ice away. “Your dad would have my ass.”

Then I had it. The phone call home. The Corvette. The dad.

“Oh, fuck.” I got to my feet stiffly, ignoring Jim as he tried to catch my arm. “Hey, are you still into all that bullshit about sending parents emails and talking nice about kids, even the ones who are real butt holes?”

“That’s not exactly what—”

“Great. Perfect. That’s what I thought.”

I jogged toward the group of boys; Jim called after me, but I kept going. The boys saw me coming—Jefferson was the first, and he called a warning—and they formed into a half circle to face me. I stopped ten yards out, hands on my hips, and waited.

“The first time I let you off easy,” Isaac said, tossing his blond hair in the sea breeze. “But don’t think I feel sorry for you because you’re some cut-up freak. If you keep fucking around with me. I will seriously mess you up.”

“I want to talk to you,”

“Fuck off,” Isaac said. But when silence followed, he glanced around, laughed nervously and crossed his arms.

“Two minutes,” I said, beckoning him forward.

A particularly large wave crashed on the shore, and surf rushed up the beach. Isaac had his hands in the pockets of his swim shorts now. After another glance around, he took a few wary steps forward, then a few more, then a glance back at his dogs, and then he came forward again.

“Here’s the deal,” I said, pitching my voice so it would carry only as far as Isaac. “You’ve got a shit setup at home. I’m sorry about that. But you’ve got to stop taking it out on everybody else.”

“What the hell are you—”

“If you leave Jim alone, if you leave Angel alone, if you quit being a fucking terror at school,” I said, “you might find out that you can have a pretty good life. But I don’t think you’re really open to that suggestion right now, are you?”

“No, cocksucker, not really.”

“Kind of what I thought. Here’s what’s going to happen, then: on the one hand, you could keep this behavior up, and

Jim's going to come back at you just as hard, and it's going to get back to your dad. And you know how that's going to go."

Color rushed into Isaac's cheeks. He looked at the sand.

"Or," I said, "you chill out at school. I'm not saying you change everything, but you don't give Jim shit anymore. In return, because Jim is probably the most perfect human being I've ever met, he is going to send positive emails to your dad. Every week. And they're going to be good emails. Specific. About you."

"My dad doesn't give a shit about emails."

"He'll give a shit about these. Trust me."

Isaac glanced back at his dogs, shifted his weight, and then tried to meet my eyes. Something softened in his face, and for a moment, a child peeked out. "Could he say something about how I'm smart?"

"Yeah," I said. "And the thing is, Jim will mean it."

6 | EMMETT

We walked the half mile back to the apartment, Jim's arm around my shoulders when the pain got too bad.

“I told you we shouldn't have walked.”

“I told you that you should've put on sunblock.”

The sun was setting behind us, throwing long shadows and golden light up the street. The smell of sea salt persisted, but now it mixed with the smells of daily life: someone frying onions; the breeze shifted, and then it was the smell of someone washing with Tide; on the next block, gasoline, where an old man was running a string trimmer along his property line. The whine of the small engine followed us all the way home.

On the stairs, Jim did a lot of swearing.

“I thought English teachers were supposed to have good vocabularies.”

It turned out Jim had a pretty good range of swearwords.

Once we were upstairs, I got Jim on the couch and propped his foot up with a pillow to elevate it. The ice in the trays was finally ready, so I emptied it into a plastic bag, wrapped it in a towel, and carried it to Jim.

His face was unreadable as he accepted the improvised ice pack. He set it on his foot, adjusted it a few times, and then leaned back.

“You need a pillow,” I said, “or you'll mess up your back.”

I got the pillow from my bed, fluffed it, and helped Jim sit up so I could wedge it behind him.

His face was still impossible to read.

“I guess I’ll make dinner,” I said. I hesitated. “Do you know how to make dinner?”

A crack in the façade. Jim smiled.

“I know you’re mad that I talked to those guys,” I said. “But I promise—I promise—I will listen to you in the future.” I took a breath. “Sometimes.”

When Jim spoke, his voice sounded like it was coming from a long way off. “It’s just been a while.”

“Since somebody give you trouble for being gay? I don’t think anybody knew in Vehpese.”

Jim shook his head. “No.” He seemed to be struggling, and then he wiped his mouth. “It’s been a while since anybody... took care of me.”

The hum of the refrigerator was very loud. I suddenly wanted to cry.

“Well,” I said, my voice thick. “Don’t get used to it.”

Jim rolled onto his side, his eyes never leaving my face.

“I’m very selfish,” I said. “I’m not going to be looking out for you.”

Jim ran his hand through his hair.

“And if you’re expecting dinner, you’re out of luck. I’m not learning to cook just because your dumb ass hurt your own foot.”

“Emmett?”

I grabbed the hem of my shirt, twisting it.

“Thank you,” he said.

I had to go to my room. I had to shut the door. I stood there in the dark, my back to the wall, my eyes squeezed shut. I clutched the jamb because I felt like I would go flying off into space if I didn't.

After wiping my face on the bedding, I went back out.

Jim was decent enough to stare at his phone, not even looking up.

"Maybe we could order pizza," he said in a neutral tone.

"Fine," I said. "Just don't put anything gross on it."

After tapping his phone a few times, Jim said, "It looks like the closest place doesn't deliver. Never mind."

"I'll walk down there and get it," I said, slapping his good leg so I could sit on the couch. "Make me do everything."

OXYGEN

This story takes place before *The Whole World Tinder*.

1 | JIM

Sex was supposed to change things, but as usual, we'd done it all backwards. Not the actual sex. Not that I was even thinking about sex. Or, at least, I hadn't been.

We were sitting on the couch in our apartment. I was sitting. Emmett had his head in my lap. It was January, and in San Elredo, in northern California, that meant that the light was spongy gray and the sky pressed flat against the window. You couldn't smell the ocean, not right now, but you could feel it. It seeped into everything, a sensation of perpetual damp that, when you investigated more closely, seemed to be only in your mind.

Emmett shifted his head and said, "Huh."

Pushing your significantly younger boyfriend out of your lap to hide your erection was not exactly good manners. So, instead, I laughed and squeezed his arm and moved like I wanted to stand up.

Emmett, being Emmett, rolled onto his side and grabbed the remote for the TV.

I squirmed again, tapping his hip, but Emmett only made a disgruntled noise. On TV, an old white man was talking about his preferred continence aid. Emmett pressed a button, and the image switched to a black woman sweating on what I knew, from listening to Emmett talk about it for a week, was an expensive exercise bike.

The problem wasn't the sex. The sex was great. The problem wasn't even the mixture of embarrassment and discomfort from having Emmett's head resting on my half-hard dick—although I knew odds were good Emmett would find a way to tease me

about it. The problem was that everything had changed a month ago, when we'd gone from roommates to...this. And the problem was that nothing had changed.

“What’s new with your family?” I asked. Blurted, technically.

“What?”

“Your family.” The commercial changed back to our regularly scheduled programming, which in this case, appeared to be a family of swamp people—mostly white men with gnarly beards and white women with skin disorders. “What’s, you know, going on?”

“I don’t know.” Emmett pressed another button on the remote, and the channel changed. This time, it was professional athletes crammed behind a desk, while footage from a football game ran behind them. “Nothing.”

“Everything’s ok?”

He made a vaguely affirmative noise.

“What’s your mom doing?”

“Swimming,” he said as he clicked through a few more channels. “Pool boys.”

I laughed. It sounded too high. “Emmett.”

He found golf, and we watched that for a few minutes.

“Does your dad like golf?”

He waited a beat too long before answering. “Yes, Jimothy. My dad likes golf.”

And that, I realized with a blind, scrambling panic, was the end of that line of conversation. I’d done this before. I’d done this a lot, actually. Every year, when you were a teacher, was a new year, which meant new students, new relationships, new

effort to get to know them, to build a bond that would carry you through *Romeo and Juliet* and *Of Mice and Men* and coordinating conjunctions.

“What have you been up to lately?”

This time, the pause was definitely a beat too long. “Fucking.”

On TV, the old white guy had found his way to this channel too, telling us about his favorite—and discreet—overnight pads. Why they had to be discreet, if they were meant to be worn overnight, he didn’t explain.

“I thought you were there for that,” Emmett said. “What? Don’t you remember?”

“Uh.”

“The fucking?”

“Yeah, yes, but—”

“That’s my hobby. I used to be pretty good at it. It’s fun to be getting back into it again.”

“That’s not exactly what I meant. I was thinking, you know, when I’m at work. You know. Whatever.”

Emmett rolled onto his back. The hand with the remote hung off the side of the couch. He’d made a choice a few years ago—made a sacrifice was probably a better way to say it—and part of the price had been the scars he wore now. They divided his body in half: one side covered in the raised lines of tissue, the other smooth and unblemished. The scarred corner of his mouth pulled down now.

“Oh. Gotcha.” He tugged on his joggers. “You mean jerking off.”

“Come on, I’m being serious.”

“Serious? Fingering my hole.”

“Ok,” I said. I pressed his shoulder for him to sit up.

“Anal stretching.”

“Got it,” I said. “Never mind; forget I asked.”

“These huge cones, Jimbo.”

“I said got it.”

I nudged him again, but Emmett only watched me with dark eyes. “What’s going on?”

“How do you feel about—” The question slipped out before I could stop it, and too late, I tried for damage control, searching for the least sappy version of what I wanted to ask. “—things?”

Emmett stared at me for another moment. On TV, the athletes were back, and they were arguing and laughing and talking over each other. Then Emmett sat up, scratched fingers through his hair, and padded toward our bedroom.

“What I meant—” I tried.

He slammed the door, and the crash echoed through the apartment.

2 | JIM

On Monday, when I got home from work, he was tearing the foil off a pudding cup and holding a spoon in his mouth. I hadn't planned it. I didn't even really mean to do it. But it was habit after so many years. And habits were hard to break.

“How long have you been eating pudding cups?”

After tossing the lid in the trash, Emmett took the spoon from his mouth. He watched me for a moment, stirring the pudding. Then he said, “How long have I been eating pudding cups?”

I shrugged. “How many do you think you eat in a month?”

“Thirty. Or thirty-one. Or twenty-eight. Depends on the month.”

“Vanilla or chocolate.”

He snorted. “Chocolate.”

“Tapioca?”

“Give me a fucking break.”

“Tapioca is good,” I said with a laugh.

“A, tapioca is gross. B, tapioca is, like, from the Depression. C, tapioca is disgusting.”

“Ok, no tapioca. Rice pudding?”

He considered this for a moment, spoon hidden in his mouth again, suspicion tracing his eyes. Finally, he said, “Rice pudding is all right.”

I heeled my loafers off, set them by the door, and went to change.

On Tuesday, he had ear buds in, and he was lying with his head halfway off the couch.

I sat next to him as I loosened my tie. “What are you listening to?”

He thumbed down the volume on his phone, but instead of speaking, he held it screen-out toward me.

“Ok, young Dylan or old Dylan?” I asked.

“What am I listening to? Young, obviously.”

“Young Dylan or Springsteen?”

Emmett rolled his eyes, which I figured meant Bob Dylan.

“Do you have a favorite song?”

“Do you?” he asked.

“You’re going to be disappointed.”

“What?”

“You’re going to lose all respect for me.”

“It’s not ‘Blowin’ in the Wind,’ is it? God, Jimothy, please don’t let it be ‘Blowin’ in the Wind.’”

I shook my head and started to stand. “Never mind; it’s too embarrassing.”

He half-fell off the couch, righted himself, and scrambled to his feet. “Now you’ve got to tell me.”

Hesitating, I shook my head again. But I said, “‘Girl from the North Country.’”

Emmett’s eyes were unreadable. “I thought that was a Johnny Cash song.”

“They sing it together, but Dylan wrote it.”

“Huh,” Emmett said, and something moved in the depths of his eyes, and I fished my tie out from under my collar as I started down the hall.

On Wednesday, he was wearing a Nike sweatshirt. My jacket was wet from the fog, and as I shook myself out of it, the light broke on the beaded water like a rainbow.

“I haven’t seen that one before,” I said.

He stared at me.

“The Nike sweatshirt.”

“Do you have all my clothes memorized?”

“No, I meant—”

“Then is it a big surprise? I mean, is my sweatshirt so fucking unreal that you have to say something about it?”

“No, but—”

“Do you always have to say something about everything?”

Before I could answer, he got up from the couch, walked stiffly down the hall, and shut himself in our bedroom.

It didn’t always work.

On Thursday, the smell of onions and butter met me at the door. I let myself inside slowly. I was waiting for the jaws of the trap to snap shut.

Emmett stood in the kitchen barefoot, scratching one ankle with the big toe of his other foot, pushing onions around in a frying pan. He looked up. He had little spots of red in his cheeks, and he looked back down again.

“You’re late,” he said. And then, so quickly he was almost talking over himself: “I mean, I know you had to work late. So, I thought maybe omelets tonight. And toast. Because it’s easy and fast, and I’ll put spinach in there so you think it’s healthy.”

“They probably are pretty healthy,” I said as I hung my bag on the hook near the door. “Thank you.”

“I’m putting an assload of cheese in, too.”

“Maybe a little less healthy.”

“And bacon.”

“How’d you learn how to make omelets?”

“It’s called the internet, Jimbo.” But the red in his cheeks deepened, and he gave the onions a few hard pushes with the spatula. “They’re going to turn out like shit.”

“Do you like cooking?”

He made a face.

I laughed. “Yeah, me neither.”

“Grilling is all right.”

“Spoken like a true man.”

He flashed me a smile—there, then gone again as he turned his attention back to the pan.

“Favorite thing to grill?” I asked.

“Ribeyes.”

I winced. “I forget you’re spoiled.”

Too late, I recognized the landmine I’d stepped on, but Emmett burst out laughing. “Fuck yeah. I’m accustomed to a certain quality of life, Jimbo.”

“I hope that quality of life includes the hot dogs I found in the manager’s special case.”

Emmett laughed again, sudden and startled, as though it had caught him by surprise again.

In our room, I smiled as I dug out a t-shirt and sweats.

Friday, he was on the couch, wrapped up in a blanket as he scrolled social media on his phone.

“What’s the tea?” I asked.

“Oh my God.” He kicked free of the blanket. “Don’t.”

“What?”

“You know what.”

“That’s what people say.”

“Not you. Never again.”

I grinned in spite of myself as I took off my bag. Emmett got up from the couch. I thought he was headed for the kitchen until, at the last minute, I realized he didn’t intend to pass me. He came to a stop in front of me. The scarred corner of his mouth twitched.

I opened my mouth, but he spoke first.

“How was work?” he asked, and he kissed me—light, a brush of lips, and if it had been anybody else, I would have said he was scared. And then he said, “You’re supposed to do that every time you come home.”

I nodded.

“Well,” he said after a moment. “I asked you a question.”

I grinned and started to tell him.

3 | JIM

“No, no, no, no, no!” Emmett fell back on the couch, covering his eyes. “Jim!”

I tapped buttons. I pushed the little joystick thing. The Xbox controller still felt strange in my hands, and I adjusted my grip. I tried the triggers. “I think it’s broken.”

“It’s not broken.”

“It’s not doing anything.”

Emmett groaned—a bit theatrically, in my opinion. Then he dragged himself upright. “It’s not doing anything because you’re trying to walk through a wall—”

On the screen, a big guy appeared behind my character—at Emmett’s instruction, I had chosen an Asian girl, although I had no idea why he’d recommended her. The big guy chopped me, slung me over his shoulder, and carried me around for a while.

“You’re supposed to be struggling,” Emmett said.

“Which button is that?”

“You’re supposed to be mad that he’s going to hook you again.”

“Do I do this?” I tried a few more buttons.

“Oh my God, please stop. You’re using my gamer tag. People are going to think this is me.”

At that point, the big guy hung my character on a giant metal hook. Ominous music played. The angle of the camera changed—again, all very theatrical. Someone—not the big guy, but another character—darted past me. Then they came back. They

were doing something, standing up and crouching down again. It looked kind of like they were humping the air.

“Am I supposed to do that?” I said. “How do I do that?”

Emmett muttered something under his breath.

“What?”

“No,” he said a little too loudly. “He’s being a dipshit.”

“He is?”

“He’s making fun of you.”

“By humping the air?”

“Yes, obviously.” Emmett blew out a harsh breath. Then, directed at the TV, he shouted, “Yeah, fuck-brains, we get it. Either help us down or go suck a cock.”

After some more dry humping, the character sprinted away.

“Jesus Christ,” Emmett muttered. “You got the worst fucking group of survivors.”

I’d never been interested in video games—not that I had any objections to them, but I’d never found one that I wanted to play. Emmett, on the other hand, had become something of a video game connoisseur over the last couple of years. It made sense, in a way. He had a lot more spare time. Well, basically all his time was spare time. And although he wasn’t agoraphobic, he didn’t go out as much as he used to. Online games took up a fair amount of his day, I guessed, and it was clear that he’d made—well, if not friends, then at least acquaintances.

This game was one of his favorites. Emmett’s characters had all sorts of points and levels and costumes, which he had shown me for a while until he must have realized I had no idea what any of it meant, and then he’d given up. The point of it seemed to be

to stay alive while a monster or a killer or something came after you, but there were all sorts of tricky things like jumping through windows and knocking over pallets—things that didn't look tricky at all until, in my case, you did them, and Emmett groaned and moaned and muttered all sorts of uncomplimentary things to let you know you'd done them wrong.

As I watched the screen, a character who looked identical to mine sprinted into view. She came over to me and fumbled around, and a moment later, my character slid free from the hook. My character was injured, which meant she was hunched over and limping. The music changed.

Emmett sat up straight and said, "He's right behind you! Run!"

I jammed one of the joysticks, and by sheer luck, my character moved in the right direction. I watched as she stumbled through the cornrows, leaving a trail of blood spatter behind her.

"Run, run, run, run—no, turn! Through that window. Now down the stairs—Jim, down!"

It was luck again. The killer appeared on screen and took a swing at me, and at that moment, I did something to the controller, and my character juked left.

Emmett whooped with excitement. "Fuck yeah! Take that, motherfucker! Go away from the totem—Jim, away!"

Of course, whatever I did, it didn't make my character go away from the totem. I wasn't even sure what the totem was.

But apparently, my mistake turned out to be my good fortune. The music slowed, and Emmett said, "You've got to be kidding me. I was sure he was going to come for the totem."

Someone screamed, and at the edge of the screen, the third player's portrait changed to a skull. Emmett scooted forward on

the couch, his knee bumping mine, and he slapped my arm.
“Come on! Come on!”

“Come on, what?”

“The hatch!”

“Emmett—”

“Oh my God, just run around blindly, and I’ll tell you what to do.”

That much I could handle.

The game felt strangely empty without any of the other players. I didn’t even see the killer-monster-whatever it was. It was strangely soothing, actually, running through the corn, not having to worry about some psycho jumping out of nowhere—

“The hatch!” Emmett screamed.

It was a black, box-like thing on the ground.

“Jump in the hatch.”

“I thought the whole point was—”

“Jim!”

I’d never heard pure despair from Emmett before. It was kind of gratifying.

As I turned my character toward the hatch-box-thing, Emmett latched onto my arm, nails digging into the flesh. At the corner of the screen, movement drew my eye. The killer-monster-thing lurched toward my character, swinging whatever the hell it had been hitting me with.

“No!” shouted Emmett.

I reached the hatch, and my character jumped inside. Inky darkness swirled up.

The next thing, my character—and the other three—were running across an empty field. We (or at least I) had survived.

“Oh my God,” Emmett said.

Points and levels and other numbers appeared on the screen.

In mixed horror and disbelief, Emmett said again, “Oh my God.”

“We won, right? That was a good thing?”

“Are you kidding? That was fucking amazing. Did you see at the end, he almost got you—” Emmett stopped. He gave a surprisingly wry smile. “Thank you for indulging me. I know you hated it, and you never have to do it again.”

“I don’t mind. It was kind of fun, actually. Once I wasn’t trying to climb into that barrel.”

Emmett didn’t just laugh—he guffawed. He tried to restrain himself, but a grin spread across his face. “No, you can’t play it again. Ever. I’d shit my colon out from pure nerves if I had to watch you play again, and besides, right now you’ve got a perfect record.”

“It was fun. I definitely need to learn how to do that trick with the flashlight.”

Skepticism shadowed his face. Or maybe he hadn’t been joking about his nerves. “Yeah. Ok.”

Raising my eyebrows, I passed him the controller. “How about, this round, I learn from the master?”

4 | JIM

“You’ve been wearing that hoodie for a week.”

Emmett didn’t move. Not at first. He stayed on the couch, perfectly still. Then he looked at me.

The best I could come up with was, “I’m just saying.”

He waited another eternity. “It’s comfortable.”

“We’ll have fun.”

“Lies; I never have fun.”

“We can get lunch and make it a date.”

“It’s broken in. That’s why I wear it all the time. That’s the whole point of breaking something in.”

“It’s glued to your body is what it is.”

Two dark, slender eyebrows arched.

“That is—”

“Noodles.”

It took me a moment to catch up. I nodded. “Sure.”

“Fine,” he said, swinging his feet to the floor with an ominous thump. “Let’s have fun.”

He went to the bedroom. I stayed in the living room. There were a lot of thumps, and I wondered how many sneakers I’d find thrown around the room.

“Sure,” I said under my breath. “Fun.”

The boutique was a little jewel box of a place, with antique wrought-iron accents and tall windows, and inside it smelled like

sandalwood, but only if you paid attention.

Emmett was already making a face. “The Serpent Notch.”

“It’s upscale.”

“It sounds like a whorehouse.”

One of the salesmen—Rudy, whom I’d worked with before—was coming towards us. He was my height, and probably my age, but with his stooped shoulders and oily hair, he looked ten or fifteen years older.

I motioned for Emmett to be quiet.

“A gay whorehouse,” Emmett said more loudly.

A mother-and-son couple near the ties looked over. I shrank down a little and gave Emmett a pleading glance. He looked satisfied with himself.

“Mr. Spencer,” Rudy crooned. “What a treat! And who’s this?”

He devoured Emmett.

“This is my—” I said it without even breaking stride. Almost. “—boyfriend, Emmett.” I finished the introductions with, “We’re just looking today.”

“Of course.” Rudy was glowing, and he kept looking at Emmett, and then at me, his smile getting bigger. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“If he comes over here again,” Emmett said as Rudy drifted away with lots of backward glances, “I won’t be responsible for my reaction.”

“He’s actually very helpful.”

“He was eye-fucking you.”

“If anything, he was eye-fucking you.”

“Let’s see about that,” Emmett said.

I wasn’t sure what that meant, so I tried a preemptive, “No —”

But Emmett was too fast for me. He grabbed a shirt from the closest display table, clutched it to his chest, and camped, “I love it! Thank you, Daddy!”

The mother-and-son couple—the mother in the iron grip of her fifties, the son in the rather more soft, fleshy, cherub-cheeked grip of his thirties—looked over. A lone man in the back of the shop looked over. Rudy looked over, eyes huge.

One of those classroom things I’d learned? Rolling with it took all the fun out of it for them.

“I’m so glad, baby boy,” I said, matching Emmett’s volume. “But what did I tell you happens to bad boys who don’t use their indoor voices?”

Emmett scowled at me and pitched the shirt onto the table.

“You don’t like that one?” I asked.

“You ruin everything.”

“At least I’m consistent.”

Emmett opened his mouth to reply, but his eyes snapped to the mother-and-son combo, and he barked, “Take a fucking picture.”

The mother let out a horrified gasp. The pink-cheeked thirtysomething son’s eyes actually rolled back in his head. It took them about two minutes of throwing down neckties and shoving hangers back onto racks and whispering to each other

indignantly before they made their exit. Behind the counter, Rudy rolled his eyes.

“This is stupid,” Emmett said. “I don’t like clothes. I don’t care about clothes. Maybe I used to, but that’s not me anymore.”

“Well, it’s still me.”

I started down the aisle, moving between the racks and displays.

Emmett caught up to me. “You don’t like clothes.” Then he said, before I could respond, “You only wear button-ups.”

Laughing, I shot him a look. A hint of color had come into his cheeks.

“Ok,” he finally said. “What are you shopping for?”

“You,” I said.

“I told you—”

“I heard you. But I like clothes. I like looking at them. I like dressing nice. Maybe that’s super gay—”

“Says the guy who refuses to watch RuPaul.”

“Grading papers isn’t refusing. And this is fun for me. So, you’re going to be Daddy’s good little boy and try on whatever I pick out for you.”

It turned out Emmett could glare for up to five minutes at a time.

“This one first,” I said, holding out an ivory-and-black buffalo check flannel, and I packed him into the little booth at the back that served as a fitting room.

“Go away,” Emmett said from behind the curtain. “I don’t want you perving on me.”

Grinning, I went off to pick out a few more items. Rudy sidled up to me at one of the display tables. He smelled like some sort of hair maintenance cream—minoxidil, something like that.

“He’s quite spirited, isn’t he?”

“You could say that.”

“I can hear you motherfuckers,” Emmett shouted from the booth.

The only other shopper burst out laughing before waving Rudy over to help him with something.

“What am I?” Emmett asked when he stepped out of the booth, gesturing to the flannel. “A fucking lumberjack?”

I handed him a hunter-green wool sweater. “It’s Merino, and it looks great with your skin.”

When he came out, he struck a pose. The wool clung to him like a second skin. Then he mimed jerking off.

The laugh came in spite of my best efforts. “Ok,” I said. “That’s a no. How about this?”

He stared at the rust-colored terry sweatshirt for a long moment. Then he looked at me, his eyes dark steel.

“Try it on, please.” My voice turned syrupy. “Baby boy.”

He shoved a stiff hand through his hair, yanked the curtain shut, and swore like a sailor for a minute solid. When the curtain rings rattled on the rod again, he was still pulling on the cuffs and hem and trying to look like he hated it.

“Rudy,” I said. “We’ll take this one.”

“I can pay—” Emmett started, but I waved him off.

We were halfway through our noodles at the little ramen shop when he said, “So, uh, thanks.”

I bumped his knee under the table.

He rolled his eyes and added, “Or whatever.”

5 | JIM

“I’m not saying you couldn’t,” Emmett said as we were going to sleep. He plumped his pillow. “I’m saying not on purpose.”

“I couldn’t make you laugh on purpose.”

He shrugged, which was kind of impressive since it was February and he was buried under the covers.

“I could make you laugh,” I said.

“It’s not a big deal. I don’t like funny guys. You know who thought he was funny? Kaden. It’s fucking exhausting, that’s what it is.”

“I’ve got a good sense of humor. I’ve made you laugh before.”

His dark eyes roved my face. Then he said, “Oh. Yeah, you’ve got a good sense of humor. You’ve totally made me laugh.”

“Emmett Bradley.”

He reached for the lamp.

“Do not patronize me,” I said.

He turned off the light and, because he was still one sprawling tangle of teenage limbs, was asleep almost immediately.

Not on purpose. I lay in the dark, looking up at the ceiling. But maybe if I was carrying a cake and tripped, or if I got nailed in the nuts, or hell, if I slipped on a banana peel.

The next day was Sunday, and we’d both been making up excuses not to go to the grocery store when Emmett cheated.

He stood at the fridge, inspecting the empty shelves, and said, “I’m hungry.”

I was flipping pages in *The Great Gatsby*, trying to find a quote for my lesson the next day. “Hi, hungry. I’m Jim.”

Emmett burst out laughing—high-pitched, manic, totally fake laughter. Thirty seconds, and the laugh kept going. He was rolling on the kitchen floor. He was holding himself—I guess his sides were splitting.

“Ok,” I said and went back to *Gatsby*.

“See, Jimbo? You’re fucking hilarious.”

I tucked a pencil behind my ear.

“A dad joke?” Emmett said not quite under his breath as he headed down the hall. “Come on.”

Later that night, though, he was laughing. Hard.

Not at me. At his phone.

“What are you watching?” I asked as I perched on the couch next to him.

He angled his phone toward me. On the screen, a portly white man in slacks and a button-up was jumping on a trampoline. He was having a great time, probably a little too uninhibited for an adult—a lot of the jumps included ballet poses. And then, as I watched, he went through the center of the trampoline.

Fresh laughter rolled through Emmett.

“Oh my God,” I said. “Is he hurt?”

“What?”

“Did he break his leg or something?”

Still laughing, Emmett shushed me as the next clip began. The next clip was a Latino teenager doing parkour: running up walls, doing backflips, jumping down from walls. And then, in keeping with my prediction the night before, the boy somehow fell directly on top of a sandwich-board sign. He straddled it as he fell, and you could see in the video the exact moment when crotch met plastic.

Emmett laughed so hard that he had to wipe his eyes.

“Seriously?” I asked. “Emmett, he threw up a little.”

“I know, right?”

I decided to go to the grocery store.

When I came home from work Monday, I was ready.

“You won’t believe what happened.”

Emmett looked up from his phone. “This better not be boring.”

“I’ve told you about Seth, right? In my sophomore honors class?”

Emmett was already looking back at his phone, and he made a noise that could have meant anything.

“We were picking out books for choice reading, and he stops right in front of a copy of *13 Reasons Why*, and he looks at me with this huge smile, he’s so happy, you can tell he’s surprised and thrilled and all that. And then he says, ‘I didn’t know Netflix wrote a book.’”

I laughed again, thinking about it.

Emmett tapped his phone.

Hanging my bag on the hook near the door, I said, “He thought Netflix wrote it. Instead of Jay Asher.”

“He’s a moron.”

“It’s funny.”

“I’m sorry, Jim,” Emmett said, looking up long enough to meet my eyes. “It feels kind of mean to laugh at someone’s ignorance.”

“When that guy tried to do a hoverboard jump and hit the wall face first, you laughed for half an hour. I thought you peed yourself.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Emmett said, and he rolled off the couch and carried the blanket and his phone into our bedroom.

That night, he made me watch four episodes of *The Ranch*. In between ogling Ashton Kutcher and sending sniping texts to Vie and Austin, he laughed. Pretty much constantly.

“I can’t do this,” I said, and I wasn’t sure which part I was referring to. “I’m going to bed.”

The sign at school gave me the idea, but there was no way I was going to do it. No way.

Not until I came home Friday and could tell he’d been crying.

He did a good job of covering it up, but his eyes were still the tiniest bit red, and instead of his usual jabs and digs, he was too quiet. A few months before, I would have guessed Vie, the boy he had been—and maybe still was—in love with. But they’d reached some kind of understanding, which meant the only other option: his parents.

Offering to order pizza didn’t work. Asking him about a song he’d been working on didn’t prompt a reply. When I suggested that maybe, possibly, he wanted to talk about something that had

upset him, he shuffled into the bedroom, blanket wrapped around him like an old man, and shut the door.

I sat in the living room, still in my shirt and tie, and realized I was going to have to do it.

“Go away,” Emmett said when I went into the bedroom. He had most of the blankets over his head, turning him into an Emmett-shaped lump. “Do you honestly not get that I want to be alone?”

Stretching out on the bed next to him, I let out a sigh. I shifted around a few times, folded a pillow under my head, and toed off my shoes. They hit the floor with quiet clunks.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Emmett said, and he sounded like he was close to tears again. “So, fuck off, or whatever you’re supposed to say in a healthy, supportive relationship.”

I laughed. Then I said, “Did I ever tell you about prom?”

“Oh God, please, I cannot handle another chaperoning story about you catching somebody getting his knob polished.”

That made me laugh again. “My prom.”

There was a lot of squirming, and then his head popped out. His hair was a haystack. He blinked at me.

“I went with a girl,” I said as a teaser.

He snorted. “Duh.”

But he didn’t retreat. I didn’t talk much about my life before Emmett had come into my class—in part, because it reinforced the gap in our ages, but mostly because there were a lot of things I preferred to forget. If forgetting wasn’t an option, I still didn’t want to think about them.

“Her name was Bekka. With two K’s.”

Emmett groaned.

“Is this too boring?”

“If you stop, I’m going to cut your balls off. Was she a cheerleader?”

“Actually, she was.”

“Were you a nerd?”

“I was not a nerd.”

“Were you cool?”

“It was a small school.”

He stared at me for a moment. Then horror came into his face. “Oh. My. God. You were popular?”

“Is that really so hard to believe?”

“Uh, yeah, actually.”

I pushed a pillow at his face. He grinned and tucked it under his head and watched me. Waiting.

“So, at least back then, the big deal about prom night was that you were supposed to have sex. I don’t think all that many people actually did it, but a lot of people said they did, and the pressure was real. Or it felt real.”

“I know you’re bi or whatever. If that’s the point of this story, I’m going to be super pissed.”

Outside, the first spritzes of rain tapped the windows.

“Bekka and I hadn’t been going out that long, but it was serious, and she brought it up. You know, were we going to have sex after prom, had I done it before.” I listened to the rain. “I lied.”

“You were a virgin?”

“A little less disappointment, please.”

“You were this big, hung high school stud. What the hell were you doing?”

“Well, trying to figure out why I stared at Kyler Drake in the locker room, for one. Anyway, the point is, I told her I’d had sex before, and yes, we were going to have sex, and I’d have a condom, and all that stuff.”

Emmett wriggled his way up the pillow a few inches, eyes bright.

“And I couldn’t take her home because my parents’ house was tiny, and we couldn’t go to her place because she had all these brothers and sisters. So, I asked my buddy Kelly. He had his own place—he was eighteen, he’d graduated the year before, and it was his grandma’s house, but she was in a nursing home by then. He said sure, he had a spare room.” I stopped. The spritzes of rain picked up, and the glass rattled in its frame. I shook my head.

“If this is, like, sad, you don’t have to—” Emmett began.

“This room, Emmett, I swear to God.” I stopped myself again. “It was right next to the furnace, which meant it felt like it was a hundred degrees in there. And there was no furniture, just a mattress. I hadn’t even thought to ask him about sheets.”

“He didn’t have sheets?”

“So, we’re both sweating, and it’s not comfortable, and it’s kind of embarrassing, and—I swear to God, if you ever bring this story up again, I will break up with you and become a monk or a hermit or something. Do you understand me?”

Emmett bit the corner of the pillow, trying not to grin.

“Emmett Carson Bradley?”

“Yes, fine, jeez.”

“I’d had way too much to drink. I was nervous. No, I was terrified. I mean, this was my first time. And a lot of the practice sessions had been about Kyler, you know?”

Emmett made a face.

“And we started, uh, being intimate—”

“Good Lord,” Emmett muttered.

“—and all of a sudden I realized I was about to pass out. The heat and the beer and the panic. My vision started to go black.”

“What’d you do?” I covered my eyes until Emmett pulled my hand down. He was grinning. “Did you pass out?”

“Oh, sure. But not before I faked it.”

“Wha—” And then he froze. “You faked it? Like, it?”

I nodded. “First time wasn’t even my real first time.”

Laughter tore out of him. He laughed until he cried, and then he kept laughing, burrowing into my chest as the laughs shook him to pieces.

It was a nice sound, with the patter of the rain.

And when he’d finished, he said, “Have you ever faked it with me?”

I smacked his ass through the bedding, and he laughed some more.

We lay like that for a while until he whispered into the hollow of my throat, “Hey Jim?”

I made a small noise.

“Thanks.”

BOYS WITH MATCHES

1 | EMMETT

“If her skirt flies up one more time, I’m going to stick my head under there and say, ‘Ooogity-boogity.’”

Jim said, “If you hate it that much, you should stop looking at her legs every time it happens.”

We were on a tour of the University of California-San Elredo. It was a beautiful day in May; the sun was out, the breeze was cool, the air smelled like redwoods and some strong weed that a gang of white boys in hoodies were enjoying on the quad. I wondered if they’d share. Hell, I wondered if they’d let me pay for a hit, just one.

“If you hate it so much,” I said to Jim, “you shouldn’t be looking either. You’re old enough to be her dad.”

He shrugged. “I’m not dead yet.”

For that, I headed off toward the hoodie gang, but Jim grabbed my arm before I could get away.

“And this is where they play a special game called redwood frisbee golf,” our tour guide said. She was young, which meant she was probably my age, minus the extra years I tacked on for the emotional hardship of putting up with Jim every day. Blonde, long legged, she had a prancing, coltish gait, and it was clear too

many people had told her she should model. “Can any of you guess what that means?”

“It means it’s like frisbee golf,” I said. “Only instead of the, uh, baskets or whatever they’re called, they use the trees.”

A stout, flushed man who was escorting his equally stout and red-faced son shot me a dirty look. Our guide—I wanted to say her name was Kaylie or Kayla or Kierstie or Kirsta or maybe Klove—beamed at me. “That’s right! It’s a tradition here at UCSE. But don’t go telling other people about it; it’s our secret.” She mimed a finger against her lips, and the ruddy-cheeked dad actually nodded.

Jim was giving me a look.

“What?” I said.

“You know what.”

I made a lot of wild gestures meant to show my complete and utter helplessness at this baseless accusation.

“Nice try,” Jim said, taking my arm again—kind of like how a guard might march a prisoner around in an old movie. “But we’re not getting accidentally left behind just because—”

“Whoopsie,” Klove squealed, and she laughed as she pulled her skirt back down. “Almost got away from me there.”

The father-son duo laughed. Everybody in the group laughed. They all loved Kornelia, or whatever her name was.

I elbowed Jim.

He pulled his eyes away, and he had the decency to blush.

“Ok,” I said. “We’re done.”

He hadn’t released my arm, so he started us after Klaymeth and the rest of the group. I was learning firsthand that it was

harder to struggle than I had expected—especially when your prison guard also happened to be your former English teacher and gave off some seriously sexy authoritarian vibes when he forgot how nice and kind and patient he was supposed to be.

“This is a waste of time,” I said.

“You’re not thinking about this logically.” Jim was very carefully not looking at Kiernen, and he kept his voice down as she rattled off a list of facts about the humanities building. “You’d get in-state tuition.”

“Don’t care; parents are paying.”

“We wouldn’t have to move.”

“One way or another, we’re moving. I’m not going to spend another weekend listening to Stephen and Roger rail some poor guy.”

“But it wouldn’t have to be a big move.”

“It all goes in boxes. Boxes go on a truck. Why does it matter if it’s next door or across the country?”

“They’ve got a great music program.”

“Do they?”

“I asked her before the tour started.”

“Hey,” I called up to the front of the tour. “Kayman!”

She perked right up. “Actually, it’s—”

“How’s UCSE’s engineering major?”

“Great,” she said with a glowing smile.

“How about their women’s studies program?”

“Really, really great.”

“Uh huh. And their puppet performance major?”

A tiny frown wrinkled her perfect forehead. Then she smiled. “Oh, it’s great.”

Jim shot me a dirty look and asked, “Is your music program competitive?”

“That’s such a great question.” She made a sweeping, showgirl movement with one arm. “Our next stop is UCSE’s famous Millworth Conservatory, named for noted cotton industrialist Moriah Millworth—”

“Did he have slaves?” I asked.

“Could you ask your son to be quiet?” the red-faced dad said to Jim.

Meanwhile, Kaylord picked up the pace like she could out-prance my question.

“Yeah, Daddy,” I said to Jim. “Ask your son to be quiet.”

He tightened his hand around my upper arm.

“He spans me when I’m bad,” I told the father and son duo. They let out identically disapproving huffs and hurried to keep up with the tour.

I opened my mouth, but Jim said, “No. We’re not leaving this tour until we hear about the music program. Then, if you want, we can duck out early.”

“Thank you, Daddy.”

“Keep it up, Emmett.”

I smirked and let him drag me forward.

Klorned was rattling off something about how many cubic feet of soundproofing they’d used in the conservatory, which was one of those things that made sticking a paperclip in your own ear sound like a trip to Disney World in comparison.

When she took a breath, Jim said, “What’s the teacher-student ratio in the music program? And are they available outside of class for additional help?”

Our guide pursed her lips and said, “You know what? Nobody’s ever asked me that before.” A sunny smile flashed out. “I’ll have to get back to you about that.”

I made a face that Jim ignored.

“How flexible is the curriculum at UCSE?” he asked. “In general, I mean. Do students have a lot of choice when pursuing a major? Do they have the option of a double major?”

Kamilee laughed. “You’re just full of questions, aren’t you?”

Jim didn’t exactly look at me, but he was starting to sweat a little. “Do you know if the music program is audition-only, and if so, can they submit recorded auditions?”

“It’s not just about your boy,” the red-faced dad said.

“Really,” an older white lady said. “I’m not even bringing a student. I’d just like to enjoy the tour, if that’s not too much to ask.”

“You know what?” Kiersted said, and with an airy flourish, she produced a dogeared, wrinkled pamphlet. “I have this. I bet you’ll find the answer in here!”

The tour group drifted on, everybody else giving us dirty looks.

I read from the pamphlet’s cover: “Your Body and Your Voice: Everything You Wanted to Know about Consent.”

Jim wadded up the pamphlet, turned, and stalked away.

“Hey,” I called after him. “I need that. What does it say about English teachers who come home straight after work and, quote,

‘have needs’ three or four days every week?’

2 | JIM

We'd picked a weekend to visit Berkeley so that I wouldn't have to take another half day. A nice day, warm, the walkways quiet in the post-semester lull. It wasn't exactly peak season for campus visits either—the application cycle was long since closed, and for most of the places Emmett was interested in, he wouldn't be able to apply until the fall, and he wouldn't matriculate until a year after that.

Non-peak season meant smaller tour groups, and smaller tour groups were good because there were fewer people to turn and stare when Emmett said things like, “If she doesn't like mayonnaise, she doesn't have to eat any fucking mayonnaise, but we don't have time to go through the whole fucking menu.”

That was after the fourth time a parent had asked about the dining hall options.

“Let's keep moving,” our guide said.

His name was Chance. He was tall, lean, and he had a dazzling smile. The t-shirt had the Berkeley crest on it, and his seersucker shorts were about six inches long, which left a lot of long, brown leg to look at.

“We're going to get a reputation,” Emmett said. “They're not going to let us go on any more tours because word will spread about the pervert who only visits colleges to stare at the students.”

“When he put his foot up on that fountain, his dick fell out.”

Emmett snorted a laugh. “Right?”

“Huh,” I said. “You saw that too.”

He scowled at me and went after the tour.

“Have any of you read *Thinking Fast and Slow*?” Chance asked. “That’s by Daniel Kahneman. He’s another of our Nobel-prize-winning alumni.”

Lots of murmurs. Lots of excited nodding. One older white man in a campaign hat and, no joke, a backpack, actually raised his hand.

“Let’s see,” Chance said. “How about Saul Perlmutter? Have you heard of him?”

Campaign Hat waved his arm excitedly.

“Nice.” Chance laughed. “Yep, he’s another one. Nobel Prize. What about, um, Selman Waksman? Oh man, you know them all. Here’s a tricky one. What about Joseph Erlanger?” When Campaign Hat’s hand shot up into the air again, Chance threw back his head and laughed again. “Well, maybe I should let you give the tour!”

“Did any of your alumni not win the Nobel Prize?” Emmett asked. “Maybe that would be a shorter list.”

“Great question, buddy,” Chance said with a huge, plastic smile. “Sure! A lot of our alumni went on to win other prizes. The Turing Award, the Academy Award, the Pulitzer, MacArthur Fellowships—you ever heard of that one? Let’s keep moving, everybody. We don’t have time to talk about prizes all day!”

Our little cluster of people hurried after him.

Not Emmett. Because I had a finger hooked through one belt loop. It was, most likely, the only reason Chance still had all his hair.

“Buddy?” Emmett said. “Buddy? He called me Buddy. Did you hear that?”

“Uh huh.”

“I should—Jim, let go!”

“How about you take a couple of deep breaths before you claw his eyes out?”

Emmett opened his mouth, and then he must have seen something on my face because he grimaced and took a deep breath, and then another. Some of the heat left his face, and he raised both hands in surrender. I unhooked him.

“And no,” I said before he could ask. “We’re not dropping out of the tour.”

When we caught up, Chance was laughing and showing all those shiny teeth and shaking his head. “Nope,” he said. “Guess again. Well, hey slowpokes! We’re playing a game!”

“I love games,” Emmett said. “I know a few myself.”

I put a hand on Emmett’s shoulder and said, “What’s the game?”

“We’re guessing what they keep in that gorgeous tower overlooking the bay?” Chance went for silly. “Is it gold?”

Everybody agreed it wasn’t gold.

“Is it lab equipment?”

Doubtful murmurs.

Chance laughed at the sheer ridiculousness of his own question: “Is it cheeseburgers?”

Campaign Hat answered vigorously, “No!”

“No,” Chance echoed with another laugh. “It’s dinosaur bones!”

That Chance, what a joker. They were all in stitches.

“I don’t have to kill him,” Emmett said. “The universe is going to do it for me.”

I sighed. “Ok.”

“There is such a thing as cosmic justice, Jim.”

I nodded and nudged him after the flock.

“It’s called karma, and that shit catches up to you.”

It seemed safer not to say anything.

At the end of the tour, our band of misfits broke up, and I popped into the men’s room while Emmett defaced a map with his car key. When I came out, he was gone.

“Seriously, it’s going to be lit.” It was Chance’s voice, pitched lower and lacking that high-voltage tour guide enthusiasm. “I can get you in.”

“Maybe,” Emmett said.

“We’ll have fun. You want to study music, right? My friend’s in a band, and they’ll be playing. I can introduce you.”

Emmett hemmed.

“Text me,” Chance said. “You can ditch your dad for a night, right?”

I followed the voices around the corner. Chance had maneuvered Emmett into a corner, and he had one hand on the wall, penning him in. It looked like his pet snake was making a break for it again.

Emmett saw me, and the scarred corner of his mouth quirked. He ducked under Chance’s arm, came toward me like hot-tar sex, and kissed me. He used a lot of tongue.

Then, lacing our hands together, he tugged me toward the door. “My dad and I have plans,” he called back. Chance’s jaw

dropped. “Sorry, buddy.”

3 | EMMETT

“I’ve been poisoned,” I said. “Someone is trying to kill me.”

Only what came out instead was a long moan.

“We’re going back to the hotel,” Jim said as he wiped my face with wet paper towels. They were blessedly, miraculously cool; I didn’t know what deal he’d struck with the devil to get them, but it had been worth it.

Salt Lake City was pretty enough, if you liked everything one or two stories high, everything painted brown, and everything dropped in the middle of the fucking desert. Even though it was only late May, the sun hammered down, and the air was hot enough to broil me.

The University of Utah hadn’t exactly been high on my list, but it was on the way, and Jim had insisted we add it as a stop—to break up the long drive, if nothing else. When we’d gotten into town last night, we’d found a Mexican place with amazing reviews—Lagartija—and I had, as I’d promised Jim, eaten the shit out of some mole chicken.

A phrase, it was turning out, that had come back to haunt me.

“Can you walk?” Jim asked. “Or do you want me to pull the car around?”

“I’m fine,” I managed.

“You’re not fine. You have food poisoning.”

“That’s what I said.” I struggled to sit up straight.

We sat on one of the benches outside the student union, waiting with a motley mix of parents and prospective students. A

Utah mom with a tower of blond hair was fixing her son's tie. A tie. For a campus tour of the University of Utah. Now she was scrubbing his cheek with spit and Kleenex. In some cases, I've heard, it's a mercy to put the child out of its misery.

"I'll get the car," Jim said.

At that moment, a golf cart motor whirred, and the sound of tires on pavement came toward us. When the cart came around the corner, I stared. It was massive—like someone had looked at a yacht and thought, *Why hasn't anyone done that for golf carts yet?* And then that same person had immediately known why the good Lord had created him and had set out to create this monstrosity.

The girl driving it was the kind of Mormon you can order by the dozen: blond, with glittery tinsel woven through her hair. The quality of her orthodontic work suggested while grace and charity might cover a multitude of sins, they wouldn't get you a husband, which was why God gave us braces. She offered us a mechanical smile and waved her arm in a clockwork hello. Her eyes clicked like phoropters. I thought I could hear her processor fan kick on.

"Well, hi, everyone!" She waved again. "I'm Treely! I'm going to be your tour guide today. How's everybody doing?"

Everybody was doing great, it turned out. None of them looked at me, like pretending I wasn't in my death throes might keep them from catching whatever was wrong with me.

When Treely turned her phoropter eyes on me, I saw the click-click-whirr as she tried to make sense of what she was seeing.

"Does not compute," I said and gurgled a laugh that immediately threatened to turn into a, er, blowout.

“Everybody ok?” she asked with heavenly sweetness.

“We’re not going to be joining you,” Jim said.

“Oh.” Even disappointment, it turned out, could be sweet. Then, to me, she added, “You’re not feeling too good, are you? Well, you’re lucky you have a great dad to take care of you.”

Jim took a deep breath.

I wondered how long it took to get someone officially sainted.

Somehow, I lurched upright. I bared my teeth at Treely. “I’m fine.”

“I think we’ll see how we feel about an afternoon tour—” Jim began.

“I’m fine,” I said through gritted teeth. But I did undermine myself, a tiny bit, when I had to hold on to Jim’s arm as I hobbled toward the cart.

Treely cooed. She made soft, sympathetic expressions with her humanized skin-substitute interface. I heard that last bit and wondered how sick I was, and how many of those fucking *Star Trek* things Jim had made me watch. Or maybe it was *Star Wars*. The fact that I knew they were different was bad enough.

Then she stomped the accelerator and drove like a bat out of hell.

We whipped around two buildings when I realized, with the kind of apocalyptic vision that the truly damned must experience, what was going to happen. There was no stopping it. There was no going back.

When Treely braked to a screaming stop in front of the next building, I launched myself out of the golf cart and into a clump of scrubby brush. Then I was violently sick.

“Emmett, are you—”

“Get the car.” I wiped my mouth. My gut was still clenching, and my chest ached, and my head was pounding, but I could already tell I was feeling better. “And some trash bags. And a fire hose.”

“Hey there,” Treely called. “Everybody doing ok?”

“No,” Jim snapped. “Everybody is not doing ok. He’s sick; did you miss that somehow?”

I wiped my forehead and let Jim help me upright. “I love you.”

He grunted, and it was so un-Jim-like and said so much about how annoyed he was that I laughed in spite of everything. And then a twisting agony corkscrewed through my gut, and my bowels clenched, and I got a death grip on Jim’s arm and whisper-screamed, “Jim, you have to get me to a bathroom right now!”

4 | JIM

“You shat yourself in the bushes?” Austin laughed, and Vie covered his mouth with a napkin and tried not to spray beer.

Emmett glowered. “I didn’t shit myself in the bushes! I didn’t shit myself anywhere!”

The restaurant was called Zippy Za, and every college town had a place like it: the low ceilings, the dim lighting, the smell of cheap beer infused into the wood, dart boards missing their darts, TVs tuned to every sporting event possible, and the unending swell and dip of voices. I’d been here once on a date with a girl I’d met online. Not that I was going to tell Emmett that. Any part of it, actually.

After the tour of Wyoming State University, we’d snagged a booth at the back, and Austin and Vie had joined us. It had been lucky timing for us to visit in that slice of free time between the end of the semester and the start of their summer jobs. Or, more likely, not luck at all.

“Did you get pictures?” Austin was grinning. “Jim, I swear to God, you can have our firstborn if you got pictures of him in the bushes.”

Austin was too busy smirking at Emmett, and Emmett was too busy staring daggers at Austin, so I might have been the only one to see Vie. The blond boy wasn’t exactly expressive, but it was hard to miss the tightening around his eyes at the words *our firstborn*.

Then Emmett reached out, grabbed the slice of pizza on Austin’s plate, and licked it from tip to crust. Austin shouted wordlessly, and Emmett tossed the slice back onto his plate. He

grabbed Austin's beer and drank deeply until Austin wrestled it away from him.

“Jesus Christ, Emmett!”

Emmett reached for a piece of pepperoni on Austin's pizza.

Jerking his plate away, Austin reared back on the bench. He glanced at the pizza and then back at Emmett. “I was going to eat that!”

“It's fine,” Vie said in his quiet voice, barely audible over the shouts from the foosball table and the general din of drunk college students. “Here, I'll eat it.”

“Yeah, you will,” Emmett said. “Eat it, big boy. Eat my meat.”

“I changed my mind,” Austin said. “It's not good to see you. Fuck off so Jim and Vie and I can have a nice night.”

I took Emmett's plate with its untouched slice. I swapped it for Austin's while Austin glared at him.

“Spoilsport,” Emmett said.

“Take it down a notch,” I whispered. “He was teasing you.”

Emmett plucked a piece of pepperoni from the pizza, tilted his head back, and dropped it into his mouth. Apparently to show me how dramatically he was ignoring me.

Vie's eyes narrowed, and Emmett whipped his head down so fast that he choked on the pepperoni. He coughed for a moment, sucked in air, and stabbed a finger at Vie. “Not funny!”

A tiny smile creased Vie's cheek.

“Stay out of my head, tweaker.”

But whatever it had been, Austin was smiling now too, and the moment seemed to have passed. Music filled the silence

—“Video Killed the Radio Star”—and then Austin looked at me and, in that adult-pleasing voice he still hadn’t quite shaken off, asked, “So, how was the tour, Jim?”

“Fucking awful,” Emmett said.

“Fine,” I said.

“The tour guide was this fucking cowboy—” He paused to do a forearm jerk in Austin’s direction, and for some reason, that made both boys break out in crazy grins. “—and he had this portable speaker he was wearing on a strap, and I shit you not, he screamed into it the whole time. I’m here for the music program, and this asshole blows out my fucking eardrums.”

“For a state school, it’s got a lot of exciting opportunities,” I said. “They have a lot of new money, and they’ve got scholarships for out-of-state students, which Emmett would technically be, and the music program is small.”

“Micro-fucking-scopic,” Emmett said around a mouthful of pizza.

“Which means Emmett could get a lot of personalized instruction from the faculty.”

“It’s a public school in the middle of the asshole of Wyoming, which is the asshole of the West,” Emmett said and drank deeply from his beer. He didn’t quite meet Vie’s or Austin’s eyes. “It’s whatever. All these schools have been fucking drips.”

“Just because the tours are bad doesn’t mean you won’t like the schools,” Vie said. “You’ve got to go somewhere.”

Emmett grunted and wiped pizza grease from his mouth with a napkin.

A chorus of shouts rose from the foosball table. Two boys with belt buckles the size of dinner plates bumped chests and

whooped with excitement.

Emmett mimed shooting himself in the head. Vie hid a smile in his beer, and Austin rolled his eyes.

“How’s everyone doing?” I asked.

“Ok,” Vie said.

I laughed in spite of myself, and a small, self-conscious smile tugged at Vie’s lips.

Austin bumped heads with him, grinning, and said, “We’ve got a tiny bit more information than that. Becca has her own startup, believe it or not.”

“I believe it.”

“So what?” Emmett asked. “I could have my own startup if I wanted to.”

Austin paused just long enough to show he was ignoring Emmett and said, “It’s something to do with scraping personal data from the internet. I guess she got interested in that stuff when she was helping—well, you know. With the weird stuff.”

“She’s going to do great,” I said.

Vie nodded.

“She’s so smart,” Austin said. “She’ll make a fortune. Um, let’s see. Kaden is running this cannabis farm just across the border in Colorado. He’s stoned, like, ninety-seven percent of the time, and he’s making a fortune too, by the way. His parents would be mad if it wasn’t such a huge success.”

“And he hooks you two up whenever you want,” Emmett said.

Austin looked at me, of all people, and blushed, and Vie noticed and elbowed him, smirking.

In a rush, Austin said, “Jake and Temple Mae are, you know, the same.”

“They’re engaged,” Vie said.

“They’re engaged?” I asked.

“They’re, what, seventeen? Eighteen?” Emmett said. “What the fuck?”

“They’re not engaged,” Austin said, and the look on his face said he and Vie had skirted arguments on this before. “I mean, technically they are, but it’s just, I don’t know, a phase. They break up. They get back together again. They break up. They get engaged. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It means they’re planning on getting married, dumbfuck,” Emmett said in what he probably considered a helpful tone.

“That,” Austin said heavily, and he rubbed one cheek, “would be a disaster.”

No one had much to say after that; TV voices droned, and the foosball game broke up, and somebody must have killed a lot of quarters on the jukebox, queuing up every Madonna song they had on the machine, and all through the restaurant, people were groaning and swearing and calling for somebody to unplug that fucking machine.

When I heard “Like a Virgin” for the third time, I got out of the booth. “I’ll settle up.”

“I’ve got to pee,” Vie said. He stopped halfway out of the booth, and in that voice where you couldn’t tell if he was serious or joking, he said to Austin and Emmett, “Don’t kill each other while we’re gone.”

For the first few steps, I thought Vie might have been making an excuse to follow me, that he wanted to talk about

Emmett. Tension knotted between my shoulder blades, and I had to fight to keep my face forward instead of turning to watch the blond boy. But when we passed the restrooms, he broke off without a word, and I kept going. The relief was so intense that I forgot, for a few seconds, where I'd been going.

I figured it out eventually, and I paid. I was almost back to our booth when I heard Austin's voice pitched hard and clear enough for me to make out what he was saying. He and Emmett were crouched over the table, face to face, and Emmett's mouth was locked into an uncompromising line. I recognized the look; that was the way he looked the last time I'd brought up seeing a therapist.

"—rolling admissions," Austin was saying, "and we both know you'll be here in the fall. So, I want to know what you're going to do."

"Worried I'm going to steal your boyfriend?"

"Yeah, actually."

"Well, that's fucking pathetic."

"I'm afraid to lose him; I can admit that. I don't know what he'll do. And I don't know what you want. But I don't want him to get hurt again."

"I'm sure you're real worried about him getting hurt."

"What about Jim?"

Emmett's silence was like an undertow.

"He's got a job," Austin said. "He's got a life. You're going to make him pack up and change everything, and then, whenever it's convenient, tell him goodbye and fuck off?"

"You know what, Aus? You don't know a fucking thing about me anymore. Or about Jim. Or, I'm starting to think,

about Vie. So, why don't you do us all a favor and shut your fucking mouth?"

"I'm not wrong. That's why you're getting pissed; because you know I'm right. These are real people, and you're fucking around with their hearts—"

"Jesus. Don't you ever get tired of it? Don't you ever get sick of being everybody's white knight?"

Madonna was singing in the background. "Material Girl." Dishes clattered in the distance, and someone swore.

In a different voice, Emmett said, "He's happy with you. And he's doing so much better. And—and things are different now, for all of us. Whatever you're worried about—" He stopped again. "It's over."

Austin sat back, shaking his head. He barked an unhappy laugh. "I don't know which one of you is better at lying to yourself," he said as he slid out of the booth. He saw me when he stood, and his face hardened.

As he passed me, I said, "Austin."

He shook his head. His eyes were wet and held tiny neon reflections, and he kept walking. "Tell Vie I'm out in the car."

5 | EMMETT

We drove to the motel in silence. It didn't feel like silence, though. Austin's words were ringing in my ears.

"How much did you hear?" I asked.

Jim's face was ghostly in the light from the dash. "Enough."

I dropped my head back. And, after a while, I said, "Fuck."

It was a little, two-story horseshoe with stucco painted dove gray, although it was hard to tell in the weak light. Jim checked us in, and I waited in the parking lot. The wind had picked up; I'd forgotten that about Wyoming, about that fucking wind, how it never seemed to let up. Above me, the sky was brushed thick with stars everywhere except where the Bighorns loomed to the east. The air smelled like new sage and that familiar dustiness of the high steppes. My cheeks were flushed. I wanted another beer.

When Jim came back, we carried our suitcases into the room. It was like every other roadside motel I'd ever seen: the double beds, the polyester coverlet, the real-life lesson in irony of the stale smoke smell and the NO SMOKING sign. They'd chained the TV down, and the remote was velcro'd to the dresser. Through the thin wall, women were laughing, and one of them screamed, "If Julia Roberts doesn't marry him, I will!" and then they all burst out laughing again.

A shadow of a smile etched Jim's face, and he shook his head as he laid his suitcase on the bed.

"He doesn't know what he's talking about," I said.

"Let's talk about it when you're not upset."

“I’m fine. I’m telling you, he has no fucking clue what he’s talking about.”

Jim unzipped his suitcase.

In the next room, one of the women said, “I’m getting more wine if I have to walk to town,” and that sent them all into hysterics again.

“What?” I said. “You think he’s right?”

“I said I want to talk about this when you’re not upset.”

“Too fucking bad. We’re talking about it right now.”

Jim laid a hand on the clothes in his open suitcase, and the rest of him was very still. Then he straightened and turned to face me.

“He has no fucking idea what he’s talking about. Vie and me, we’re done.”

Jim came toward me. His face was unreadable, those boyish good looks shadowcast in the light from the room’s solitary lamp.

In spite of my best efforts, I took a step backward. “I love you. I’m with you. If you’ve got any fucking questions about that —”

“Stop talking.”

“No, I’m not going to stop talking—”

He reached for me, and I slapped his hand away. The next time, he was faster, and he caught me by the jaw. I grabbed his wrist and tried to pull him away, but he held on—not too tight, not hurting, but not letting go either. He was stronger than I was. And warmer, too. I could feel the heat rising in him.

“I said—” He spoke in a level tone, each word measured and sawn off. “—stop talking.”

I breathed through my nose—harsh, ragged breaths. I clawed at his forearm.

He met my gaze. My heart pounded in my head. Then he released me, and he caught the hem of my shirt and turned me out of it. I tried to slap him, but he caught my wrist and spun me to face the door. He leaned into me, holding me in place while he reached around to undo the button on my jeans. When he yanked, the zipper stuttered down, and he forced jeans and boxers to my knees. The air was cold against my ass, against the small of my back, anywhere he wasn't touching me.

“Get the fuck off me,” I said, trying to twist out from under him. “Get off!”

“You know how it works,” he said, using his foot to push my jeans down the rest of the way. “Say no.”

“Fuck off.”

“Say no if you want me to stop.”

“I'm going to murder you.”

“Keep shouting,” he said. “I bet the ladies next door will enjoy that.”

I couldn't get enough air. My whole body felt like it was on fire, but when he touched me, he was so much hotter by comparison that I realized I didn't know what fire was anymore. He maneuvered me over to the closest bed and forced me down across it, and then he rummaged around in the suitcase. A lid cracked open, and a moment later, his hand was sliding between my cheeks, the lube warm on his superheated skin. He teased me with his thumb and then, slowly but irresistibly, pressed in.

With my jeans looped around my ankles and with Jim already halfway to cornholing me, I couldn't do much besides buck lightly and writhe across the coverlet. My dick was hard, and the writhing turned into rubbing. Jim laughed softly, turning his hand, his thumb scraping sparks inside me until he found that spot, and my whole world went white. I was distantly aware of making an embarrassing—and loud—noise, and when he eased up, I said raggedly, “Jim.”

“Ask nicely.”

I wrestled with that as he slid his thumb out. Then his first two fingers were pressing against me, breaching me, and “P-please,” broke out of me before I could stop it.

He laughed again and bumped a pillow over to me, and I bit down on the corner.

Two fingers turned into three. I was a wet, moaning, humpy mess by the time Jim pulled back. I'd started crying at some point, God only knows why, and the sudden emptiness made me cant my hips in Jim's direction. The mattress shifted as he crawled up onto it. Denim scraped the sensitive backs of my thighs. He was still dressed, I realized. Then the head of his dick pressed against my hole, and his hands caught my thighs, adjusting the angle, turning me for his convenience and enjoyment. He pressed into me.

With Jim, it always felt like too much at the beginning: he was big, and then, on top of that, there was the intense heat of his body. He gave me time to adjust, and then he began to move. Chewing the pillow, I turned my face into the scratchy cotton, fighting to be quiet and losing over and over again. The slap of his balls against my ass kept measure with my groans, and then, as he sped up, my wails. He shifted, a hand between my shoulder

blades, forcing my face into the mattress as he moved up to ride me harder.

“Go on,” he grunted.

I slid my hand under myself, and I came across my fingers, the whole world dissolving. For the next minute, and the one after that, the stimulation was too much as Jim continued to pound into me, and then I felt his body stiffen, heard the muttered “Fuck—shit—fuck,” and he pistoned into me as he nutted.

Ten seconds later, maybe twenty, he eased out of me, and then he lay and pulled me to him. My face got his t-shirt wet, and the heat of his body was pleasant, like a sun lamp.

I finally managed to croak, “Oh my God.”

He stroked damp hair away from my forehead. Then he cupped my cheek, the cradle of his hand unyielding.

I fell asleep, believe it or not.

When I woke, the room was dark, and Jim’s breathing was slow and even. The radio clock said it was five in the morning. I untangled myself and padded into the bathroom, and I took care of business and cleaned up with a warm washcloth, and then the air was cold against my wet skin, and I shivered as I let myself out of the bathroom.

Instead of bed, I sat at the little table, my legs curled up under me, the rough weave of the upholstery scratchy against my bare ass. I slid the curtains back. The high plains rolled out toward the darkness, but the sky was starting to lighten. Already, it was easing to gray. The Bighorns took on definition, dimension, mass. Day swept the stars away.

The mattress creaked when Jim propped himself on an elbow. He wiped his eyes, and then he found me, and he smiled a

question at me. I nodded. He scooted across the mattress and sat on the edge of the bed, his legs wide, and after a moment, I joined him. I sat between his legs, and he wrapped his arms around me, and between the warmth and the fact that my ass wasn't getting scratched to hell anymore, it was definitely an upgrade.

"I like that you tell me," he said into my ear. "But you don't have to be so worried. I know. I'm not going to forget."

"If you fuck me like that again, I won't be able to tell you." I let my head loll back, my cheek scruffing his. "I'll be in a coma."

He tightened his arms around me. Outside, a pronghorn picked its way through the prairie grasses, a stick figure of compressed energy, head raised and wary as it scented the air.

"This is too much, coming back here," I said. "This was a mistake."

He kissed the nape of my neck. His lips were dry and chapped, the delicate rasp when they met my skin raising goose bumps. Dawn opened like a sail, a great white canvas unfolding against the sky. The pronghorn froze. Held itself. Trembled. I was trembling too when Jim's lips followed the swell of vertebrae. He held me tighter. He held me together.

"I think we were always coming here," he said, and there was so much gentleness in his voice that my eyes stung. "It's going to be ok, Emmett; it's time to come home."

Acknowledgments

My deepest thanks go out to the following people (in alphabetical order):

Ruth Cannon, for catching even more of my errors, for her appreciation of Jim wanting to know all the tea, and for giving me the Ashton Kutcher square!

Raj Mangat, for all her love for these guys, and for helping me proof the final version of this text.

Mark Wallace, for his thoughtful reading of these stories, using his teacher brain to spot my many errors, and for doing it all in a pinch!

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