NEAGLEY

There's a First Time for Everything

Chapter 1

When the Levee Breaks

Hudson frowned, catching Neagley's gaze at something considerably lower than the back of his head or back in the before-dawn darkened windows in the wall behind the kitchen sink. He twisted himself at the waist so as to not have to look back over his shoulder.

"What is it? Do I have something on my pants?" Neagley looked at him like a deer caught in headlights. "Shit. I thought these were clean…"

Still not finding her voice, Neagley shook her head, smiling as Hudson started pulling and patting at the fabric of his dress slacks, looking at his hand occasionally, trying to figure out what he'd missed. She chuckled quietly. "There's nothing there."

Momentarily confused, he dried his hands the rest of the way off on the tea towel. Understanding dawned on him. "Oh! Okay… you, uh… you…. wanna do something about that look on your face?" He sidled over slowly to stand near her at the kitchen table, close-fitting clothing moving on his body the way it only did in TV cop dramas. No one whose job involved any physicality actually dressed like that. Except California Dreamin' over here, unlike most cops, could pull it off, and he knew it. So, he did.

She swallowed her spoonful of Corn Pops hard. "Like what?"

Hudson shrugged, the corners of his lips turning downward for a split second. He showed her open-palmed hands gently dropping them back to his sides. His way of saying, "I'm here. Whatever you wanna do, *do*." He waited a few seconds while she took a drink of milk she swished around her mouth a bit. "Unless I'm wrong…"

"You're not."

"Okay," he replied, his tone treading carefully. Neagley calmly ran a napkin over her lips, getting up to face him. "Am I gonna be kissed?" He

could see her pinching the inside of her lower lip between her front teeth, her gaze definitely lingering on his mouth. She shook her head and gulped a propos of nothing but carnal need. “All right…” Hudson trailed off as she stepped closer.

Her hands came up, looking like they were gonna slip between his arms and his sides, reminding him of damn a forklift. Keeping a poker face on, he lifted his arms a bit to let her through. Her arms closed around him softly, as she laid the side of her face onto his jaw and the side of his neck. She was tense, through and through, then… the rest of her came to lean flush against him like some kind of magnet had done them up like a zipper from their groins all the way up to their chests. She’d relaxed, and was holding onto him tight.

Wide-eyed in shock, standing still, but not stone-still—tense—he leaned into her a little.

Sturdy. That’s what he’d made himself into. Soft, comfortable, but… solidly supportive. Neagley smiled. Gentle strength.

“Can I…?” Hudson trailed off like he was afraid saying, “hug you?" might scare her away.

Her smile widened, and she nodded enthusiastically.

He breathed, realizing he’d forgotten to lately, and only because he needed more breath in his lungs to keep talking. "I’ll keep my hands up high, all right? Nothing below your lower back. Anywhere I should know about?”

“I don’t think so… no.”

Hudson smiled, closing his eyes as he closed his arms around her and held on gentle but tight. Unthinking, his thumb started brushing soothingly over the dip where her spine lay between her shoulder blades, his other hand moving slowly up and down in the small of her back. His next breath came out shakily, his eyes watering.

"What is it?” Neagley murmured against his neck, like she might be falling asleep there. Her embrace was sure but her hands were still.

He chuffed out a laugh. “I’m having a hard time believing this. You did it!” She started genuinely laughing in his arms now. He kissed her on the hair, figuring that much was safe. She nuzzled in closer and held on tighter. How long they stayed that way, he had no idea.

When the thought occurred to him he started talking, low and quiet, beside her ear. "I know you liked what you saw. Wanna find out if you like what you feel?” Her breathing stuttered. He could feel it on his neck and in

the way her chest moved against his. She didn't say a word, just nodded. The enthusiasm was slightly less, but there all the same.

He slowly took his hand away from her lower back, sending it 'round behind him, briefly and loosely intertwining fingers before he started moving their hands together down to rest on one side of his butt.

He wasn't expecting anything but light, very probably awkward touch, if she even bothered to explore at all beyond where he set her hand down to rest. He left Neagley's hand where he figured she could get a good handful of him if she wanted to and slowly slipped out from between her fingers, going back to holding her close with a hand on her loin, sending his higher hand to just below the base of her neck. He leaned his head onto hers in return, every nerve in his backside tingling hopefully.

If nothing more came of it, he was perfectly happy with that. Still, even though this was monumental and enough, he couldn't help wanting.

The kitchen clock chimed the half hour, startling them both. He had to be at the station by seven. She could show up at the office whenever she wanted. Perks of being The Boss. He sighed loudly. *Goddammit*. They both knew what that sound meant. Trying to separate, at least for him, felt like trying to unstick himself from fly paper. Nothing pleasant about it. Pretty sure a piece of his heart had been ripped out of his chest and stayed stuck to her in the parting. If not for knowing he *had* to, so as not to undo all the good they'd done, he couldn't have managed it.

"I gotta get going." He stepped backward, giving her one last soothing rub on the upper arms before he let her go. Neagley wasn't going anywhere—she stood there staring down at her own body like she didn't recognize it—so, it was on him to…

She seized his wrist as he started to walk past her with a strength that had him scared for a second, until he realized she didn't want him to walk away, taking his touch with him. She hadn't had enough, and by her grip on his arm, fiercely wanted more. He comfortingly put his hand over hers.

"Hey, it's okay. I'm not going anywhere if you don't want me to—!" Shock cut him off.

Quick as a striking snake, Neagley turned him by the arm, had them squared back up again and had him wrapped up in an embrace with surprising strength. So hard, it almost hurt. The next second, both her

hands had a kneading hold of him, one for each butt cheek, holding their hips firmly together.

Hudson couldn't help the high-pitched gasping sound he made. He'd been able to keep a bit of distance and spare her from the reality of his half-hard arousal before. Now, with them pressed so firmly together like this, no space between them for so much as a piece of paper, he became obviously stiffer by the second, while she nuzzled her face into the cleft behind his jaw, underneath his ear.

He dropped his head back and to one side, giving her the access she wanted. Keeping both hands off of her, he didn't trust himself to not over-touch her somehow, he let her enjoy and explore him, barely touching her back. He felt a damp contact with his neck. His eyes flew open as he went rigid in shock. He wasn't imagining it. Those had been her *lips*! She'd *kissed* him!

Neagley let go of him and jump-stepped back, the moment he went taut from head to toe. "I'm sorry! I shouldn't ha…"

"No, no! It's not that. You just surprised the hell outta me! That's all! Ha!" Hudson beamed, laughing. He swooped back in to close the distance between them, he planted another kiss on the side of her head, holding her close with two strong arms roped around her. Neagley was soft in his arms. Not at all scared or stressed, but neither did she continue exploring his body the way she had before. Her hands splayed open wide on his back and held onto him firmly.

He spoke quietly near her ear. "Do me a favour and hold that thought until after work tonight."

He felt her small nods into the crook of his neck.

"Text me later this afternoon? Lemme know what you feel like?" He wrenched himself away for the second time. It was even harder this time around. Somehow, he didn't think it was *ever* going to get easier.

Neagley smiled with an endearing vulnerable sweetness. Something he'd *never* seen her do before. "Yeah. I will."

Hudson backed up, still holding onto her by one hand. His charming wink and smile as he let her go with a soothing stroke from his thumb sliding off the back of her hand, was his stand-in for a good-bye kiss.

She winked back, her smile growing as she watched him don his jacket and pull his keys off the hooks by the door. He sorted through them looking for his car key as he closed the door behind him. It didn't make it all

the way closed before he stepped back inside, holding up a new-cut silver key.

"This isn't my key."

"I know. It's mine." He stood there, open-mouth flabbergasted until he shook himself out of it with a twitch of the head and some hard blinks a few seconds later. He was looking down at the floor, looking for what to say, his gaze leaping back up to meet hers the moment he had it. He shrugged. "See you when I get home tonight."

Neagley nodded subtly, smiling as he closed the door behind him and locked it wearing his own gentle, permanently-on smile.

Yes, he would.

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Hey. Busy day? Three bouncing dots told him she was replying.

Frustrating day. Can't wait to get outta here.

He prefaced his response with the "I see your mischief" face. *Me either. Should I get take out?*

Sure. Thai, please? Smth w. peanuts & chicken. I feel like a movie.

Con Air?

That movie's SO bad.

So bad it's good. It was the "tongue out" face for this message.

Neagley reacted with the "ROFL" face. *True. Inexplicably rewatchable movie.*

So, Thai food and Con-Air. It's a date. See you in a… when do you think you'll be home?

1830-1900. At the latest. Hopefully.

Uh oh. Should I plan to reheat?

Nah. Should be done 1745-1800. But 1830-1900 just in case. Nothing going on that can't wait until tomorrow if it's not done by then. I'll check in. Promise.

'Kay. See you for dinner. He had no idea why he topped it off with a fucking chicken and spicy pepper emoji, but he did.

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Hudson checked the clock on the car dash drumming his thumbs nervously against the steering wheel; 6:15 pm normal-people time. He brought up his text-to-speech. *I'll be at your place soon.*

Neagley started writing back almost instantly. *Just got in. See you when you get here. <3*

He shook his head, chuckling, giving his eyes a roll. A less-than symbol and the number three like it was the fucking 2000s—twenty-six years ago. Fuck, he was getting old. They both were…

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He fumbled for her apartment key in one hand, the brown paper bag toting dinner in the other. It smelled divine. It'd been torturing him all the way here. He was *starving*. He walked in to find Neagley sitting cross legged at the kitchen table, entertaining herself with work she'd brought home until he arrived.

It'd been a *long* time since he'd come home to anyone…

"*Hey.*" There was a heck of a lot more than, " Honey, I'm home!" in his tone. It was the kind of tone that wondered if he could pick the threads of thought from this morning back up or not.

Her head snapped up straight, a smile replacing the focused, off-somewhere-else expression that'd been there staring at her screen. "Hey."

He winked, a small, loving smile on his lips.

She winked right back, eyes going straight to the paper bag. "C'mon dishes and drinks are on the coffee table." He stood there in shock yet again.

"What?" Neagley asked, frowning, freezing in place.

"Are you even fuckin' real? Am I dreaming? Am I layin' dead on the road somewhere between work and here and this is what my Heaven looks like?"

Neagley shook her head smiling and laughing. "If you are, I'll hunt down the driver and even if I have to chase you into the afterlife, I'll *get your ass back*," she threatened, heavily implying it was an ass worth going to Hell and back for. She brought him to the couch with her, leading him on by his tie in one hand, holding their dinner bag in the other. He left his keys on the counter on the way by, relieving himself of his shoes and suit jacket, too. The BluRay menu was already on looping through the criminal roster of the
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fictional flight, chopsticks, fork, spoons, a lightly sweating bottle of Bourbon County, de-capped and fresh out of the fridge, still steaming, and a Smirnoff raspberry vodka cooler over on Neagley's favourite side of the couch.

Hudson chuckled quietly. "Hungry?"

"*Starving*."

"Heh, me too." He undid his cuffs, rolling up his sleeves and getting comfortable.

Neagley started cracking into the appetizers and entrees, splitting it between them. Her chicken, rice, vegetables, and peanut sauce in one bowl, his beef, veggies, and noodles in the other. She went on quickly divvying up the soups and spring rolls while he got the evening's entertainment rolling, sorted out the system sound, setting it to the right source, as he loosened his tie and undid the top buttons on his dress shirt, finally letting himself relax.

He cast a loving look down at Neagley, carrying on about the business of setting dinner up, oblivious. He was *home*.

The military drumline of the Con Air theme came to life from the sound system speakers, as the lightning bolt flashed through the Touchstone Pictures logo circle on screen. He sat down on the couch close beside her, but not touching, getting settled, as she put her first morsel into her mouth with her chop sticks, moaning with pleasure both at the amazing taste, and relief from the clamour of hunger, she collapsed back into the couch's plush cushions.

"Mmm! This is *so good!* Where is this place?"

He mixed the sauce pooling in the bottom of his bowl back into the noodles and meat as he answered. "Few blocks away from the station. Mom n' pop spot. No big name recognition. If you know, you know. If you don't, hard to find, but fantastic food."

"From now on, when I order out at the office, this is the spot." I haven't had peanut chicken this good since I was *in* Thailand." She wolfed down another mouthful, anything but ladylike and graceful but still, utterly adorable.

"Yeah? Wouldn't surprise me if they're from there, originally. Probably why it tastes so good, and why their English is pretty iffy. Sweet folks, though. They sent me home with these, free of charge." He dug a smaller paper bag out of the bottom of the larger one with a soft plastic cold pack in it keeping two sweet mango and sticky rice deserts cold.

“That was nice of them. You *must* be a good customer.” Neagley leaned back onto the couch, tucking her other leg up under the leg nearest to him, leaning his way.

Hudson noticed and carefully scooched himself a little closer, leaning into her, their legs touching from thigh to knee now. “I, uh, I must be. Although, she didn’t offer them to me until I started talking about you.” There wasn't the slightest trace of, "don't touch me," in her face or body. He was exactly where she wanted him. Hudson relaxed into her.

“And she wanted to help you impress me! That was very sweet of her. They really like you!" She nudged him with her hip.

He shrugged ever so slightly, not wanting to jostle the arm she held her dinner bowl with too much. "I order lunch or dinner for delivery from there a couple days a week. She must’ve known my voice from the phone.”

Trisha Yearwood’s sweet, sultry crooning of, “*How do I… get through one life without you…?”* from the movie cut in and Neagley went quiet, snuggling in a little bit tighter and a little bit closer, head canted just slightly his way. Taking a napkin to his lips before he dared for it, he reached out across the space between them for a kiss on the side of her head again. “Couldn’t stop thinking about you, all day today," he murmured, his tone heavy with heated intention.

She called him out on that. "You mean, you couldn’t stop thinking about this morning, all day."

Hudson laughed quietly, leaning his forehead into the side of her head. For her part she seemed glad to lean in a little closer to help him reach. "Say it however you like, it’s true either way. You feel like picking up where we left off?”

“I *feel* like eating dinner and watching a movie, in peace.”

Hudson laughed. There was that mean streak again. He loved her, not in spite of it, but because of it. The directness and honesty. “No, definitely not now. I’m as hungry as you are. But…later. Or whenever. Or not tonight. Is the feeling not there?” His tone was absent any hint of disappointment as a consequence if it happened not to be; he only wanted to know.

She sighed, leaning into him just that little bit closer, taking stock of her head and heart. "It’s still there,” she said quietly.

“Okay. Let’s finish dinner and dessert. We’ll figure out if anything comes after, then." She looked his way and nodded. Smiling subtly, she went back to working on the contents of her plate-bowl hybrid when her

stomach decided to protest no longer being fed right out loud. Neither of them could help giggling at the sound as Neagley's hand went up over her eyes momentarily in embarrassment. Hudson went back to his meal and the movie, part of him quietly lamenting the distance between them again. He particularly disliked it when either of them had to sit forward for their libation of choice.

"*And tell me now… how do I live without you, if you ever go*?" swelled in the background of the movie to overtake the dialogue again. When he'd suggested this film, he'd just been looking for something he knew was fun and not too serious. He hadn't ever really thought of this as a date night movie, but goddamn, listening to this soundtrack again in this light had sure given him a change of mind…

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By the, "put the bunny back in the box," mark, dinner and dessert were done and their drinks were both long empty. "Another one?" Hudson asked sweetly, standing to go for another one of his beers, taking hold of her bottle round the neck with two fingers of the hand already holding his empty.

"Please." For a split second she looked like she wanted to say something but didn't so he started toward the kitchen. The instant his back was turned, she caught him by his trailing hand.

"I want to lay with you on the couch."

He whipped back around to face her, shocked and uncertain. There was more than one way to take that, and one of them seemed like a leap he was pretty certain she wasn't ready for. "You… mean…?"

"I don't mean… sex. Just laying down, resting. Clothes on."

Hudson smiled. Laughing quietly, he gave her a small wink. "Snuggling. I gotcha. Be right back," he promised, giving her fingers a reassuring squeeze. The gentleness with which her fingers slid off his hand was in stark contrast to the slightly intimidating strength with which she'd held onto him when she first stopped him.

He came back, drinks in hand, setting hers down on the coffee table. She was sitting there, eyes forward, hands clasped, not reaching for it, and he didn't figure this was quite the time to be demanding she respond to him.

"Frances…"
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“Don’t call me that. Only my Dad or my childhood friends ever called me Frances. Everyone else calls me Neagley." She'd said it like that was something reserved for her father, and her father alone.

"Okay. Sorry. I won’t do it again. It just… feels a little strange to call you by your last name at a time like this," he explained sitting down facing her, one leg folded in front of him on the couch. It occurred to him he’d know in the next few seconds if his feet smelled bad or not. Thankfully, there turned out to be nothing offensive there to worry about.

“Yeah. I get that. I’ve just never had time like this, with anyone, so I’ve never had to figure out something else…” She was wringing her hands hard, a physical manifestation of her nervousness.

“How about… Francey? Or Frankey? Portmanteaus of your first and last name.” He took his phone out of his pocket and wrote the variations on the lock screen note. He tried them out for her again. “Francey…" She grimaced, shaking her head emphatically. Whatever the name recalled must’ve been unpleasant; her expression turned a little sad, if he wasn’t mistaken. He chuckled warmly. “Okay, no. How about Frankey?" She hesitated, a slight smile appearing on her lips but disappearing just as quickly. He reached out, resting a soothing hand on her thigh, intentionally avoiding touching her skin. He started from the top. “Frankey…? How do you wanna do this?”

Neagley smiled, nodding, still not quite looking Hudson in the eye, her hands loosening their grasp on one another. Yeah. That was it. That was the one. She turned toward him, the heat in her eyes blazing hot. “Lay all the way back. Put your leg out of the way." She damn near shoved him backward onto the couch’s side cushion. Taking hold of his ankle and knee and almost all by herself, she moved his leg for him.

"Whoa, easy. Just gimme a sec, here. I’m not saying I’m not all right with being handled like this…” He was right. Without thinking she’d just spread his legs wide open, putting his groin on full display. She backed away apologetically, looking away bashfully. He reached out for her, stopping her from recoiling any further. “Hey! If it makes you feel any better, I kinda have to get used to this, too. And please, take it easy on giving orders. I’m beginning to think I may have a bit of a kink, but this is definitely not the time to be figuring that out.”

Neagley started smiling and laughing, her expression incredulous. "Are you serious?”

"Yeah… yeah, I am," he replied, shifting himself carefully, laying in a much more comfortable position.

"And you're only just figuring that out? Don't take this the wrong way, but I would've thought this is something you'd know about yourself before now."

Hudson snickered, kneading at couch cushions beside and behind him. "Yeah, me too. Not like I haven't tried it out before, but I dunno, I guess no other dame I've been with actually sounded like they had any kind of authority. Sure, they could tell me what to do, but there was no force behind it. You have it or you don't, and, heh, you actually *do*." He was as surprised as she was by this realization. Hudson stopped squirming and laid back, one leg up on the couch, less severely bent than where she'd first stationed it, his other foot still planted on the floor, arms wide open. Giving her this little, "Where do we go from here?" flare out to the side with his hands, eyebrows hopping up to emphasize the question.

Neagley looked him over. His cheeks were flushed from one hell of a lot more than the ethanol in one beer, his chest—his breathing—coming and going in unsteady jolts. Where his slacks usually kept the shape and size of his genitals tastefully obscured, there was now the obvious heft of his balls and well-defined swell of his penis straining his seams.

"Frankey…"

Neagley cleared her throat, reaching for her cooler and taking a long drink, setting it down where she could reach it while laid down on his chest. "Sorry."

"You don't have to apologize. It's okay. But if looking is what you wanna do, maybe… warn me. Just so I know." He could only comfortably take so much of bein' left hangin'.

Neagley nodded, starting to take her belt off as she stood up. He realized that yeah, if she planned to lay down on him in any way, whether it was her stomach or the small of her back, maybe having a hard bundle of metal and leather between them wouldn't be terribly comfortable. So, he followed suit, laying his belt over the back of the couch. He watched as Neagley got to her knees on the couch and started walking over him on all fours.

His breath caught. There was probably an eighty-five percent chance she wasn't gonna kiss him, but that fifteen percent was enough to have blood burning in his cheeks. Neagley smiled coyly at the sight.

By *God*, she was awe-strikingly beautiful.

Then, somewhat unexpectedly, she turned her hands and the underside of her forearms up, sliding them underneath his back, then underneath the plush couch cushion under his back as she came to rest with the softness of her stomach resting directly on his cock and balls, her breasts underneath his, her cheek using the upper slope of his chest for a pillow, the crown of her head coming to rest under his chin so that he had to strain his chin just a little higher to accomodate her and still be able to turn his head to see the TV screen.
Her little shimmy to get herself perfectly in place massaged his dick and sack in a way that had him taking in a small gasp of breath.

"Did I hurt—?" *you*? He didn't let her finish.

"*No*. Anything but. It felt good. Just, take it easy, or I'm not gonna last the movie."

Neagley smiled subtly and took a deep breath, nodding and nuzzling into his chest. He laid a long, *long*, I-love-you-*so-much* kiss on the back of her head, alongside her braid…

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Within twenty minutes she was shivering on top of him. It wasn't that cold in the room, but her back was to the open air… "You cold?" She shook her head. If it wasn't that, then… his stomach sank. "Is this, too much? Hey, don't force yourself…!" He started trying to gently wriggle out from under her, but that only had her holding onto him tighter.

"*Don't*… don't go." she said quietly into his chest.

He went limp and settled back down. "I won't, but, are you okay?"

Neagley took in a shivering breath. This wasn't fear or cold. It was a carnal desire so potent it had her shuddering like she'd been tossed out naked into the freezing cold. Something way beyond her experience, and utterly out of her control. As the seconds ticked by, Hudson seemed to realize it, something pinging in his memory. A bygone partner so turned on, she'd convulsed underneath him like she was in the grips of some kind of seizure. He began slowly working the blanket over the back of the couch free from under his side. She buried her feet under the arm cushion on the far end as he threw the blanket over them. She pulled it close around her shoulders and snuggled in tight. He wrapped his arms and legs around her, soothing out tremors when they cropped up in places he could reach. "You're okay, Frankey. I've got you…"
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The force and frequency of her shaking fits slowly wound down, eventually coming to a stop. They'd managed to get through. Hudson put one hand back where it'd come from, resting on her tricep, the other caressing the back of her head. "Better?"

"Mmm hmm." She sounded happily groggy. The violent shivering had taken a lot out of her. He planted a kiss on her hair nearing the crown of her head and shimmied himself into a slightly better place before settling in to let the rest of the movie play through.

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At first, he thought she was just trying to get comfortable. Maybe that had been the case the first time… even the second… but when it happened a third time, and with a definite, slow, up-and-down then side-to-side squirm that weighed heavily on his cock, sending fiery jolts of pleasure shooting through his nerves, he knew beyond any doubt she was mimicking thrusting down onto him, whether there was clothing between them or not. He slipped his arm down into an embrace over her shoulder blades, holding her close, answering her squirming thrust with one of his own, scratching an itch in his nerves that had him growing stiffer, his riotous flesh demanding even more.

Neagley went still in his embrace.

"Stop?" he whispered into her sweet-smelling hair. She shook her head emphatically. "Okay. Take it real slow, only every now and then. I might scratch an itch once in a while, too, so you know…"

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The sound of Trisha Yearwood's, "How do I live without you…?" swelled over the moment when Poe and his wife found each other in the chaotic aftermath of the crashed plane for the first time in years. She hadn't meant this one the way she had all the others, but when Neagley—Frankey—cinched her embrace tighter around him, drawing herself up against him in a way that thrust her hips down against his body but only because she trying to get as close as she physically could, the spark of something inevitable lit in his nerves and he couldn't shut it down. Not this time. He went rigid with fright and ecstasy. To make matters worse, one only seemed to feed the other.

“Get off—” He caught himself. The words landed utterly wrong and he saw it the same instant they left his mouth. “You gotta let me up. I can’t… shit!” he winced and folded protectively over his groin. She mistook the urgency with which he sat her up off him for violence and recoiled. “I’m *sorry*,” he emphasized, his touch going perfectly gentle again, “I can’t…” Hudson tumbled gracelessly off the couch, almost knocking their drinks over as he found his feet and swaying, limped to the bathroom with an urgency that sent her heart to live in her stomach.

Had she *hurt* him and he was just sparing her feelings?

He kept himself from falling over forward with a hand landing heavily on the corner of the wall as he rounded it, half falling, half lunging down the hallway when a spike of orgasmic pleasure nearly took his legs out from under him. The bathroom light went on almost the self-same instant the bathroom tap flipped on, then the door slammed behind him and the light was gone, the movie paused, the room silent except for the muffled sound of running water…

When he walked back into view he was moving languidly, like he was dazed. The silence in the room was ringing loud in her ears. He leaned against the wall corner, his thumbs hooked into his slacks’ pockets. The flush in his cheeks was anything but gone, though nowhere near as deep as it was when he’d beelined for the bathroom. There was a loving smile on his lips, and a heat in his eyes, despite the overwhelming impression of relief he also seemed to give off.

“I hurt you, didn't I…?”

Hudson chuckled, dropping his head and leaning even harder into the wall. “Far from it.” He ran a hand back through his hair, trying to figure out how to explain himself. "You caught me by surprise. Just… hit the right spot and I couldn’t stop myself. Didn’t figure you’d appreciate me doing that without warning, and soaking us both with it. Maybe even the couch," he explained, more than a little embarrassed. “I, uh… tidied up the bathroom, too," he was quick to add, pointing a thumb back that direction.

Neagley’s expression had gone from concerned, to relieved, soft, and caring. "Thank you.”

Hudson smiled, laughing. “You don’t have to thank me for it. I’m a lot of things, but that kind of asshole ain’t one of them. That’s basic courtesy.” Neagley’s shoulders fell, the worry and tension leaving her in an instant. “Look, I didn’t mean… I wasn’t telling you to ‘get off me’, not like

that. It just happened so fast…" He crossed the room back to the couch. "Can I…?" he checked, pointing to where he wanted to sit on the couch.

Neagley scoffed, all traces of uncertainty or defensiveness evaporated. "Of course you can."

"Okay. Are you still okay to let me touch you?"

Smiling subtly, she nodded. He sighed in relief. Thank *Christ* he hadn't scared her too badly or handled her so roughly he'd fucked this all up. He sat down close beside Neagley, gently guiding her as she fell into his embrace. "I'm sorry I worried you. I'm *fine*. You didn't hurt me, or do anything wrong. I promise. I just… had no time. I had to get to the bathroom before… you know." He started gently swaying them, holding her close, laying his cheek on the crown of her head. "Are we okay?" Hudson asked quietly, fear finding its way into his voice.

Neagley smiled, sagging completely into his embrace. "We're okay." She put her arms around his waist and held on.

"Wanna lay back down? I'm good for it. Just no more foolin' around. Gonna be a little tender after being that hard for that long."

He could feel her smile against his chest and nod. He smiled, planting a kiss on her hair, relieved. *Right on*. Hudson laid back, legs splayed and arms wide open once again. He winked, beckoning her closer with an up and backward nod, wearing an impish grin. "Bring it on home."

Neagley smiled and laughed quietly as she slid carefully back into place, gingerly careful once her stomach came close to resting where it had been and coming down to land without moving in the slightest thereafter. They sorted the blanket situation and settled in for the brief remainder of the movie…

With the credits rolling by, Hudson rubbed the drowsiness out of his eyes and checked his watch. Nineish. Not early but not exactly time for bed, either. "You wanna watch another one?"

Neagley made no reply other than to shake her head.

"Should we go to bed?" Nope. Not interested in that either. Bed meant going to separate rooms. "Stay here?"

She nodded and went still, wrapping herself around him a little tighter and wedging herself so that she had to put no muscle effort into staying that way.

Grinning and chuckling, he strained for the remotes, turning off the TV and sound system. "All right." Inhaling deeply and exhaling completely,

he wrapped himself around her better, settling in with his cheek resting on top of her head for the long haul.

Mere minutes went by before he worked up his nerve and took the plunge. "Something's been on my mind…"

"Hm?" Neagley was half-passed out, barely listening.

"Eh, wake up. This is… important." He gave her a gentle nudge with his leg.

"What's on your mind?" she mildly groused, sighing.

"It kinda feels like we managed to open a flood gate this morning, but… I know full-on sex is gonna be way too much any time soon." He could feel Neagley tensing up. Somehow he even thought he could feel her closing herself off in ways she'd hadn't been, emotionally, just seconds earlier. "I'm not trying to ask you when, or put any pressure on you…"

"Sort of feels like you might be…"

"Okay. Uh, just… let me get this out. I don't know how to put it, exactly, but I know it's too much, and it occurred to me there are gonna be steps between here and there. If you even want to get there, at all. I'm not asking you to tell me one way or the other. If it's too early to know, or you don't know… *do* you feel like that's something you want?" Neagley stayed quiet. "Listen, no matter what you tell me, I'm *never* gonna regret or resent the time we spend together. There isn't anyone alive I'd trade a single minute of it for. You're a once-in-a-lifetime woman, Frankey." He'd expected her to reject it when he put his arms around her and gently squeezed her closer, planting a kiss on the top of her head. She melted into the embrace instead. "If you don't wanna talk about it, just tell me to shut up and I'll doze off—"

"I think I can get there. I haven't been abstinent, just never been with anyone. I… do feel that way about you." Her reply was so quiet it was almost hard to hear. She nuzzled deeper into his chest.

"I feel that way about you, too." He felt her smile against his chest. "I, uh, I saw your toy collection the other day. Impressive."

She scoffed. "You try getting through your adult life without sex…"

Hudson chuckled quietly. "I'd rather not, if I can help it. You don't have to explain anything to me, Frankey. Maybe, if you're… comfortable with toys, there are… kits we can get that make a silicone replica of a partner. All of me is way too much right now—we haven't even kissed—but something like that might get us a little closer without going too far. Something you can try, even if the urge takes you when I'm not around. Or,

without the pressure of me being there.” He’d been absentmindedly rubbing a soothing hand over her shoulder blade the whole time. "You still awake?” She gave him a few tiny nods against his chest. “You don’t have to say anything right now. It’s just something to think about. If you even want—
"

“We should get one made. A really nice one."

Hudson shimmied himself to the side underneath her so he could look her in the eyes when he asked her to repeat herself so he knew she meant it and wasn’t just telling him what he wanted to hear. He helped her prop her head up on his hand. "Really?”

Frankey nodded, smiling gently, affectionately, laying her cheek heavily on his palm. “Yeah, really. I mean it.”

Hudson laughed, smiling lovingly. “You have no idea how badly I wanna kiss you right now—I won’t—but I want to."

She smiled a little wider, giving him a slow wink, affection plain on her face. He winked back, laying his hand over hers, stroking his thumb over her skin, holding her hand over his hammering heartbeat. "I know a place that does custom work. The Hell with ordering something cheap off some stag shop site or Amazon, if we’re doing this, we’re gonna do it right. Wanna sleep on it over the weekend and if you’re still excited about it, I’ll get it started next week?”

“Take me there this weekend."

His eyes were watering so badly he had to wipe them clear. "All right.” He gave her another wink, with this adorable dopey-happy grin on, sinking back down onto the couch, all tension and nervousness leaving him. “It’s a date."

Neagley dropped her head back down, planting a kiss on his chest through his dress shirt, determined to sleep this time. Smiling, she snuggled firmly into his solid chest and within minutes left the waking world behind.

Chapter 2

Strange Animals

Well they say I should approach you with caution
But not to let you be aware of my fear
Never know what you'll find
Don't understand your kind 'round here

Watching your moves, they look so radical
Hearing your words, they sound fanatical
Something inside reveals you're magical
How can I get enough

You're a strange animal, that's what I know
But you're a strange animal, I've got to follow
They've been trying to stick a line in your system
Analyzing the defenses you hold
Trying to open wide, hoping to step inside
Your soul

But everything here is unfamiliar
Nothing they've seen remotely similar
How can it be you're so peculiar
How can I get enough…?

~
Gowan's
Strange Animal

They have space for us @2pm Saturday. I won't confirm it unless you're sure. Hudson followed it up with a message made up of emojis only. A red 'X' and heart, read: *Cross my heart*.

Neagley promptly replied with an "eyeroll" face. *For the last time, I want to do this. Book it*. Realizing that came across exactly as harsh as it sounded she sent a stand-alone "wink" face a solid forty-five seconds later. It had the intended effect. If she'd been standing there beside him and able to summon up the desire for a kiss—she still couldn't—it would have been one.

He sent her a wink right back, following up a few minutes later with, *We're penned in @2pm Saturday*. He debated adding, *Don't feel like you can't call it off. If your mind changes, I'll cancel,* but decided against it. He had a feeling this was one of those times he had to take her at her word. Besides, she knew she could call it off and he'd turn around at the dungeon door if her feet went cold.

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The entry bell to the shop rang loud above their heads as they stepped inside. They were a bit early. Had twenty or so minutes to kill. Neagley had insisted on browsing ahead of time. Likely also trying to get a feel for the place and shop keeper. The boutique openly, proudly, catered to the LGBTQIA+ community. The other couple in the store were men. Neagley clocked it with a minute narrowing of her eyes. Her hands went into her coat pockets.

Making sure he stood between her and the other shoppers, he explained, "There isn't any other store in town that offers this. Lucky for us, gay guys have exacting quality expectations for their dildos."

"Not surprising." Neagley smiled, laughing quietly as she dropped her head bashfully. Her laughter stopped momentarily when her eyes came to rest on a pair of hand cuffs.

Hudson sucked in a reluctant breath through his teeth. "Nope. Can't do it."

She looked up at him, wide-eyed, eyebrows up, asking, "Why?" without having to utter a word.

"Yeah, I've, uh…" He cleared his throat, clearly disturbed by his memories. "…seen one too many people beaten half to death cuffed to something or other. Back when. That, or cuffed to a bedframe by their partner or rapist and murdered."

He'd witnessed his father doing unspeakable things to victims in the name of criminal enterprise as a child and teenager, except in his case, he'd seen it and *never* forgotten a single moment. Add to that mix what he did for work…

Expression softening instantly, she nodded, eyes immediately roaming, looking for the next implement or silicone oddity that might catch their eyes.

Her hand drifted up out of her pocket, fingertips dancing over the silky-soft black feathers of something resembling a feather duster. A remarkably full head of genuine plumage, the handle wrapped in intricately woven, real suede. A very high quality sensory stim. Before her hand could fall onto a boxed piece, Hudson snatched one up in hand. She looked back at him, wide-eyed with surprise. A tiny smile appeared on his lips for a moment before his poker face came back, his gaze returning to the shelf.

Next to it stood something a little… harsher. One foot or slightly more of dozens of true suede lace strings, black, bound tightly inside a

varnished walnut handle. The wood glowed. It had been polished to a glass-like shine. By the way he eyed it, it wasn't lack of interest or money that was the reason for his hesitation.

"Ask me about that next time."

One eyebrow shooting up, intrigued, Neagley nodded—it was a silent promise. She would. A smile started on her lips. It hadn't been, "if there's a next time." *Next time*. A foregone conclusion. She was certain he could see the heat rising in her cheeks.

Curiously absent from the shelves was any kind of kit for creating a silicone replica of a sexual partner. Hudson realized, without a word said between them, that was what she was searching for. He tucked his hands in his dress pants pockets as he stepped in a little closer so he didn't have to speak so loudly as to be heard by anyone else. Half because he didn't want to make the mistake of unconsciously giving in to the temptation to put a hand on her back, half because it helped her know he wanted the proximity for something other than touch.

"They don't sell 'em. Not exactly a service they advertise, either. Gent who owns the place helped me out with a case a while back. Advertising a service like that, you get some asshats who get off on having a stranger handle their family jewels, and come in for that without actually paying for the product in the end. They quickly started charging up front, but it still doesn't weed them all out. They've had to call in uniform once or twice. I told him I was coming in for something special for someone special, and he knows me well enough to know I'm being straight with him."

"'Special', huh?"

He stood firm in place, fixing her with a sarcastically questioning look and an impish smile. "Yeah. What? You're *not*?"

Her expression turned unseriously aloof as she moved along the aisle. "I guess I am," she said, one eyebrow going up in brattish emphasis, a mischievous smile forming on her lips.

Grinning and chuckling, he gave her a tolerantly loving wink. He looked past his shoulder to make sure he was still well-positioned between Neagley and the other two customers as they exited the store. Within seconds another couple—lesbians—walked in going straight to the counter.

"So, what do they… do?"

Hudson swallowed nervously. "Well, they…" If they were going to have this done, there was no point in talking around it. "You have to be clean

shaven—baby's-bottom smooth—penis, sack, and a few inches out from the bottom all 'round. The base is gonna be shaped exactly like my pelvis, apparently. It has to be fresh so skin isn't irritated or bumpy. Skin has to be moisturized. Something that keeps me from being glued to the silicone applied. And, well, I'll have to be hard once the moulding process starts and throughout." The alarm on her face was almost immediate. "You don't have to do *anything*," he quickly assured her. "I took Viagra before we left. Have another one on me. Between that, fantasies, and memories, I oughta be able to make it happen. Hopefully."

His fondness for the way she smiled so subtly in appreciation for the consideration sent a smattering of colour into his cheeks.

"The studio they use for it is pretty damn clinical. Leather seat. Looks like a hybrid masseuse table and tattooist's station—"

"Detective?"

Hudson snapped his gaze up, standing attention-straight, like someone had stuck a shock prod into his side. The store was empty of all other visitors. He hadn't even heard the bell when the last couple left.

"Our technician's ready for you." Neagley quickly made her way to a spot at the end of the aisle where Hudson could get by without making contact. "It's good to see you again, Detective, under considerably better circumstances," the owner said, accepting the "duster" and setting it aside behind the counter. The gentleman's Russian accent was real. Neagley laid eyes on the business cards on the counter by the register. Alexei Asimov. Quite the last name.

Hudson smiled gratefully, extending a handshake. "Thank you for doing this for us. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it."

"My pleasure," Alexei emphasized, taking a slightly firmer and longer hold of Hudson's hand and upper arm than she knew was socially usual. One corner of her lips turned up. Man apparently couldn't help himself. For her part, her heart didn't hold it against him. She was fighting a potent, lifelong phobia for the chance to touch and be touched by the same man. Turning his attention to her, Alexei bowed his head slightly in genuine respect. "You must be Ms. Neagley." His hand went to his chest as he held his arm up, gesturing demurely for her to move past him. She eyed him hesitantly. "Please, don't be alarmed. Mr. Riley informed us you're not to be touched by reason of a phobia. You're safe here. There's a waiting room ready opposite the studio. Water, alcoholic beverages, appetizers, and fruit are in the fridge and complimentary."

Relieved, nodding, she found her smile was real. Neagley was beginning to get the feeling she didn't want to know what the price tag was for this. "Thank you."

Hudson began shrugging out of his ebon leather jacket as the interior of the moulding room came into view. Gritting her teeth, Neagley reached out, taking hold of him by the arm he'd managed to set free from his coat. He turned toward her, eyes wide in vulnerable surprise. Her gaze fixed on where they touched at first, her touch became a subtle, soothing massage, her thumb moving in gentle circles on the tender underside of his forearm. His skin was… *amazingly* soft. The sweater he was wearing, somehow even softer. A slight smile found its way onto her lips.

"Frankey…"

Her breathing quickly turned short and shallow, colour rising in her cheeks. The long, loose yet dashingly stylish sweater and breezy slacks he'd worn for the occasion were beyond their capacity to hide the swell of his medically-induced erection. "I'm with you on this," she promised, looking him square in the eyes, her affection for him shining neon bright from her face.

He grinned. Nodding and giving her a long, slow wink. Even though he couldn't physically kiss her, his eyes did, too. He stayed with her touch and gaze until she gently let him go.

A male nurse waited stoically inside the mould room. Neagley kept her eyes on Hudson until the door closed between them with a palpable finality. The luxuriant carpet in the slender hall was decorated with a rich blue design that evoked light dancing on bare skin below tropical water; she stepped over the threshold into the waiting room, leaving the Rubicon's shores behind.

Alexei's soothing voice cut into the silence. "The hall and waiting room are free of surveillance. There are soundless cameras in the moulding room for customer protection and for our staff's wellbeing. The walls and doors are perfectly soundproofed. You're able to speak freely with each other in perfect discretion, if need be. You'll hear three taps from the door knocker once the procedure is finished. If there's anything you need, please let me know. I'll be in the store front."

Neagley surveyed the luxuriously furnished waiting room appreciatively. The kindness in his demeanour was real. She smiled gratefully. "I should be all right. Thank you, very much." He gently closed the door behind her. She heard no locking mechanism activate.

Closing her eyes in the dimly lit room, she took a deep breath, exhaling slowly, and once again. She shed her jacket, throwing it over the back of one of the lounge chairs. Walking the room for a minute, deciding on a bottle of water from the fridge, she plopped gracelessly though not heavily down into the seat. Digging her phone out, she brought up her conversation with Hudson, one leg dancing loosely back and forth on her boot heel. Her heart was beating considerably faster than normal.

Tapping the text field she watched the cursor blink. She had no idea what to say. Eyes watering, a half smile starting on her lips, she tapped one emoji, her thumb slowly finding and hovering over the other.

Tap. She exhaled deeply closing her eyes. Opening them again after a few long moments, she hit send.

A wink and a bright red heart. She felt herself breathing in short, stilted breaths.

Within seconds, three bouncing dots popped up.

In quick succession, his answers came back.

Three large red hearts.

A wink and a hug.

Relaxing, she started breathing deep and slow, leaning back in the chair. Holding her now-locked phone against her stomach, elbow propped on the seat arm, she rested her cheek and the side of her mouth and on her curled down fingers, thoughts dwelling on the exhilarating, paradoxically weightless heaviness permeating her heart and nerves.

We're in love…

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At the sound of three solid, metallic knocks on the door she was out of her seat, ripping the door open in three seconds flat. Hudson recoiled, taken aback. As her arms went up over his shoulders, he took a hard hold of her hips keeping them apart so as not to make contact at or below the waist. He gladly sagged into her embrace everywhere else. When he trusted she understood he needed the space, he brought one hand up pressing their torsos tight together, burying his face into the crook of her neck. The mould room door was closed behind him.

"How'd it go?"

The warmth of his breathy laughter heated her shirt and the skin underneath. "Turned out great."
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There was a rawness to his voice that concerned her. Neagley frowned. "Are you all right?" She withdrew, still keeping him in her arms, getting a good look into his eyes.

Hudson chuckled, bowing and nodding his head. The raw edge to his voice was arousal that had gone on too long, turning pleasure into erotic misery. "I need to get home," he confessed. The Viagra hadn't worn off yet. Turned out he'd rarely needed the help.

Neagley nodded, her expression serious with concern. "I'll drive." Leaving one arm around his neck she held up her palm. Offering up no argument, he dug into his chest jacket pocket for his car keys, setting them in her upturned hand. He held himself up on the door frame when she dove back to the seat for her jacket and phone, putting it on as she came back to him, keys in hand.

Her arms went up around over his shoulders, one hand on the back of his shoulder the other stroking soothing on the nape of his neck. She pressed her cheek hard against his, her voice low right beside his ear. "Thank you." When she looked him in the eyes again, he frowned. The instant before he started to say, "I asked *you* for this," she shut him down. There was a kindness he hadn't expected to her voice. "Shut up and accept it."

Hudson's smile was slight as he nodded, affection plain in his eyes. "Okay," he whispered. A frown reformed his expression. Like… he wanted to ask her for something but doing so might be wrong.

"What is it?"

"I, uh…"

Neagley stood squarely before him, looking him dead in the eyes. "Whatever it is, ask me."

"Yes, ma'am." He chuckled and shrugged. *Fuck it. Here goes…* "Can I hold your hand?" He started speaking again almost instantly. "You don't have to—" He cut himself off short when Neagley's severe expression morphed into something much, *much* softer.

"Sure." She almost whispered it. She reached for his hand intertwining their fingers and holding on hard, her knuckles going white. Almost as though it was a stand-in for so much more than she could do at the moment. He smiled, holding back water from his eyes. He held her back just as firmly, his touch somehow still tender. Her other arm came back up and held him close.

"Give me a couple minutes?" Neagley eased up her grip on him and stayed there for him until he stood straight up as he could, feeling collected, and ready to walk out of the boutique with his shields back up and his erectile predicament effectively obscured.

They emerged into the brighter lights of the shopfront. Alexei stood to one side of the counter so as to make sure customers coming down the aisle had no chance of coming into contact with Neagley on their way out. He glanced down at their entangled hands. "I see you're in good hands."

Accepting the black paper bag discreetly packed with tissue paper Alexei handed him, Hudson nodded, casting a fond glance at Neagley. "I'll be all right."

"You should hear from us in the next four or five business days. Thank you for your patronage." He was the picture of discreet professionalism. Neagley gave him a slight smile and a nod, making straight down the aisle for the door with steady, even pace, keenly aware that Hudson seemed to be needing her hand to keep his awkward gait from showing…

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The moment they were inside the apartment, door bolted behind them, Hudson gave her tender wink, making a fast beeline for the washroom, losing his jacket and sweater along the way, keeping only his off-white v-necked cotton undershirt on. Neagley collected his jacket and shirt, hanging them neatly on their respective hook and hanger. She leaned backward against her kitchen counter, holding up and examining the hand she'd held onto Hudson with all the way home. It was a strange thing, feeling the nerves in her skin remembering a human touch that was no longer there like it had never remembered anything other she could recall. Though the sensation had her on edge, she knew one thing above all else: she wanted it back.

What was more, she didn't want to wait…

The first creak of the bathroom door he dismissed as a draft, keeping his hand hard at work. When the second creak came, he stalled out, suddenly much more concerned about keeping his hard, pre-cum weeping penis out of her sight. He managed to get the hem of his t-shirt over himself just in time. "Frankey…?"
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"Hey, yeah…" she trailed off.

Hudson frowned, confused. "Can you give m—?"

She stepped almost all the way into view, out of the darkness in the hallway. "Can I keep you company?"

"You… want to…?"

She nodded, her line of sight dropping to the backs of his legs, climbing up his back. The lust in her eyes so potent, he swore he could feel it every time her gaze touched on something about his body on the way up; the swell of his thighs, the stacked muscles of his ass, his loins showing above the waist of his briefs, the flare of his ribcage, following the side of his body up to the back of his upper arms, his shoulder blades, finally the nape of his neck.

"C'mere." He reached back for her.

She stepped in closer, the hand that held him all the way home coming looking for his. At first, he wasn't sure about this, but the moment her hand found his side, slipping under his arm, around to hold him close to her with a firm press on his stomach, he was finished. He slipped his fingers between hers and held on for dear bloody life. She didn't so much as flinch at the sensation of slick dampness on his hand. He saw her smile behind him in the mirror. Relaxing his shoulders, he leaned back into her and she welcomed it, wrapping herself close around him wherever she could.

"You want to fee—"

Neagley abruptly, violently shook her head twice, squirming in discomfort against his back, but at the same time, refusing to let go. In fact, holding on tighter. Hudson took a series of deep, slow, relaxing breaths, and began rubbing his thumb over her skin on the hand he held against his stomach. *You're all right. Nothing's going to happen you don't want.* Neagley's body settled against his and the need for release came roaring back to the forefront of his mind.

He felt unsure he could get it done like this, but in the face of her braving her worst fear, he would damned-fucking-well give it his best shot. Bowing his head, not sure he could look her in the eyes, his free hand returned to his penis and started chasing down the orgasm he'd been within sight of when the door opened.

Neagley's chin came up to rest, latched over his shoulder, and he nuzzled his head into hers. Her other hand came up outside his arm and over his shoulder, holding him flush against her. Once, twice, and on the

third try he found the nerve to find her eyes in the mirror. Her eyes held his for a brief moment, then fell to his slowly shuttling hand, never looking away.

Maybe… even though she didn't want to touch him, he could still show her, at least for so long as he could take it, *how* he liked being touched.

Hudson slowed his hand. Drawing this out. He had to be *out* of his damned mind. Neagley's breathing had turned deep and yet unsteady against his back. The tip of her tongue slipped slowly from between her lips, wetting them down as she took in the sight of him.

For someone with such pale skin otherwise, she hadn't expected him to be so dark. Though, the strikingly deep red, she suspected, had more to do with Viagra's effects than his own natural colour. Thicker than she thought he'd be, though not longer but by no means on the shorter side. She collected his t-shirt up higher under her fingers, until little more than the garment hem separated his skin from hers.

True to Hudson's word, he'd been shaven bare. To the technician's credit he had tried to give the hair he left behind a pleasing taper from the navel to well above where his cock branched out from his trunk or shaved to where Hudson's pelvis ended and his legs began, body hair abruptly reappearing.

Beginning moving his hand, he watched her, watching him, sending his fingers down one side of his cock and balls, taking his sack in hand giving them play that had his eyes drooping closed, and him leaning into Frankey, dropping his head back and nuzzling in against her cheek. She held him a little tighter, hands getting just a little braver about where they stayed. His fingers sliding back up, tickled a nerve beside the root of his cock. It felt like opening a curtain to the bright morning sunshine, light chasing shadows of his doubts and fears about sharing this with Frankey away. He laid his head against her, somehow finding the perfect fit, comfortable as though she were a pillow on his bed and let his mind, while at once intimately focused on her with him now, wander to somewhen in the future where it wasn't his hand, or hers, but her thoroughly aroused body swallowing him whole.

He sent his fingers and palm straight down the length of him, fingertips brushing over and around his head. Up, giving the skin around the roots a light, grazing touch. He nearly never had skin there this bare to feel the pleasure of being touched without the sensation of pubic hair in the way. His touch sank down the length of him again, playing with the head giving his cleft a few pressing strokes from the pad of his middle finger.

First… mistake… women often made: how hard to hold a cock. It's not as though sending his penis into a vagina meant he was filling an already-wide-open space. The way into a woman's body was tight. But, a little—or a lot—of lube, and you slipped inside a sensory wonderland through a tight passage.

One that, if she could and would, cinched even *tighter*. He relaxed his grip, finding it no challenge at all to imagine her going loose to let him squeeze into her, then, when he'd patiently worked his way inside her first few inches, pulling all the way back one last time before sliding into her all the way down to the ground, feeling her close herself tight around his cockbase, like she was trying to hold him deep inside her. Now that she'd lured him inside he was captured, her vagina's happily trapped plaything, free to nuzzle his cockhead up against the slippery, ribbed roof of her down south mouth, to playfully wallow in the slip n' slide waterbed of soft tissues contracting around the hard spine on his dick's underside…

It occured to him there was something he'd forgotten. What it felt like to nuzzle his cleft and the weeping eye of his cock against the swollen bud of her pleasure, feeling her racing heartbeat inside it…!

Folding in on himself, a sudden explosion of pleasure ripped through his body, such that Frankey holding onto him was dragged forward with him.

She watched, a dark, carnal shadow over her eyes, a subdued smile on her lips, as Hudson's hand, holding himself tight, buried his cock to the hilt inside her imaginary double, the length of him not held in hand obscenely wagging and bobbing, ejecting days of unspent, thick semen splashes, the relief coming onto his face between roiling waves of pleasure a *beautiful* sight to behold.

His nerves' seas calming, he wrapped his hand over his balls and sagging penis, his cockhead slowly putting its jacket back on, cradling them close to his body. There was a sore price to pay for such potent, prolonged arousal and he was paying it now, happily, gladly, and gratefully. He lay back against Frankey—the softness of her chest and stomach, her cheek, her hair—and let go of the tension in his body. Feeling a peace he hadn't for a long, long time, he closed his eyes and basked in it.

"*Frankey*…" Just the sound of his voice was an aural deep tongued kiss and a passionate embrace. Hudson's breathing juddered with overwhelm, his pride and defenses cast aside.

She held him snugly, an island among rolling seas, on whose beaches he lay washed up under the sun of her affections…

When he started coming to, Frankey brought her hand up, an odd, assessing look on, gaze fixed on the sizeable cum spatters crisscrossing the back of her hand. Thoroughly ready for her to express disgust, Hudson started rinsing his hands so he could attend to hers.

"I'll wash it—" Frankey's expression softening into blushing affection cut him off. Her graceful fingers bowed down so her thumb could reach the cum they wore. He watched as she smeared his semen over her skin her thumb could reach like lotion. She smiled, giving the back of his shoulder a kiss, the expression on one of satisfied curiosity.

"I don't know why I thought it would feel any different than what my body makes. There's just more of it—a *lot* more." Almost as one they started laughing quietly. She started taking a few deeper breaths in. Getting to know the smell of him, he realized. Nothing offensive, not exactly appetizing—she'd know one day what he tasted like, of that she was sure—but by no means revolting either. She closed her eyes nuzzling her face into him.

Hudson took her hand, bringing her close enough to the tap he could fill a cupped palm and rinse his mess away. The blush in her cheeks turned redder. She was sorry to see it go, and she thought that for the first time in her life, she was feeling what she could only describe as overpowering, observable instinct; her groin, vagina, and the whole reproductive works burned with wanting what he'd spilled all over the sink, counter, the mirror and themselves inside her, serving the purpose for which it was made. Something not sparked by intention but a compulsion so powerful it became intention. She knew in that instant the dildo made for her today was genuinely a first step and she yearned not just for it, but for the very real, whole man from whom it was fashioned.

"I'm glad you're with me, tonight." The deepening colour in his face and neck, and the look in his eyes in the mirror, said it clear and plain; *thank you*.

Not caring in the slightest whether her hand was dry, she brought it back to his chest, holding him desperately close. Hudson covered her hands and arms with his, holding them snug against his body. Frankey said it with her arms, torso and kiss rather than her voice knowing people could be *funny* about hearing these three words if they weren't ready.

I love you.

◇

Riley felt his phone vibrate Neagley's rhythm under his hand on the briefing room table. He turned it up and saw the blank blackness of a video with a play symbol where words or emojis ought to be. One eyebrow going up, making doubly sure the volume was silenced, the screen angled away from anyone else, he pressed play. Her face was half hidden in her pillow, the yellow light of dimmed morning sun on her face. No makeup on. The blinds were mostly closed. There was a bright redness to her cheeks, unless that was something in the saturation of the video. Hard to tell. Shoulders bare. No bra on. She had this—if he didn't know any better—sex-sated heaviness to her eyes. She gave him a long, smiling wink and turned the phone down, ending the recording.

She'd come home late and he'd been up and out of the apartment before she woke up. The first thing she'd done when she woke up this morning was make up for not seeing him off. The feeling he'd spent months avoiding naming burned a little hotter in his chest.

He tapped the "wink" face and sent it back just as three typing dots appeared from her end. He locked down his screen, mentally checking back in with the case briefing, making sure he'd missed nothing. His phone vibrated again. Then again almost immediately. He frowned, half of his mouth starting to smile. He gave in to curiosity turning his phone up toward his chest like a poker hand.

A picture of an artfully exacting replica of his own dick positioned to stand arching backward under her bedside table lamp glowed at him on the screen, two words underneath: *No lube.* His breath stopped. He tapped the picture so it filled the screen. A milky white, beading and smeared liquid sat pooled under his corona, sitting in the wrinkles in his cleft, the swell of the shoulders and spine just below the neck wiped almost clean as they left her body, staying behind only in the lee under his swollen veins. Upward-pointing glistening streaks of clear and white arousal rose up from a pool collected in the valleys between his erection and balls.

His breathing started again and he choked on his own spit, hacking out a violent cough in the midst of the briefing.

"Something to add, Detective?"

Keeping his face stone straight, he shook his head, clearing his throat. He forced out the least-affected, "No, sir. Sorry, sir," he could

muster, locking his phone and tucking it away in his jacket's breast pocket—the one over his heart…

Dismissed not long after, he beelined it to the nearest dark, quiet place he could think of: the janitorial closet. The door clicked shut behind him and he roughly took hold himself at the groin, trying to put the brakes on and reverse the arousal trajectory of his inconveniently rebellious yet perfectly honest sex organ. Idiot that he was, he took his phone out of his breast pocket and looked again. He hung his head, laughing, overjoyed, holding himself up with an elbow braced on an industrial strength shoulder-height storage shelf as his leg twitched out underneath him.

Fuck!

He stamped his heel down—hard—hoping the slightly uncomfortable impact could distract his groin long enough for him to get a hold of himself. That did the trick. He registered a pair of heavy footsteps stopping outside the closet door barely in the nick of time. His body instinctively stood itself up as naturally straight as it could before his brain could figure out the rest. The door swung open wide, his Captain standing there with a perplexed look on his face.

"Riley, what are you *doing* in here?"

Turning around as smoothly as possible, taking his elbow off the shelf, locking his phone screen, expression inscrutable, his hidden hand came into view holding a roll of toilet paper. The Captain's expression quickly turned less severe.

"Looking for this." When the Captain said nothing, he kept going. "Can you… excuse me, sir? I *really* need to take a piss."

The Captain immediately stepped back out of the way, waving Riley past him. Poor guy looked like he'd stood up from being hunched over like he'd had to piss his pants when he'd opened the door. "Haul ass, Detective."

"Thank you, sir."

His brain was so switched off he had to figure out where the bathroom was the old fashioned way: looking. Down the hall from the kitchenette. Right. Without so much as acknowledging the uniformed officer already in there, he slammed one of only two stalls in the room closed behind him and locked it. The rest were fucking urinals. He set the paper wrapped toilet paper down on top of the already full dispenser. They were topped up almost nightly by the custodial staff.

Getting a hold of his breathing, his arousal well on the way down and in no need of attention, he took his phone out of his pocket, opening it up again.

*You **really** are a morning person, aren't you?* He signed it with a wink and a hug, hitting send. There were so many questions for her coming to mind, but this was *not* the time.

She sent back a wink and a red heart. *Something to brighten up your day.*

Hudson smiled, giving his head a disbelieving shake. How, considering the dice he'd been handed at birth, he rolled a woman like Frankey into his life, he had no fuckin' idea. *Dinner tonight. Fancy casual. I have a place in mind.*

She sent back a pair of question marks.

This isn't something to celebrate?

She sent back a beaming, blushing face. He smiled fondly. She should be damned proud of herself. This case had just gotten a lot worse but this was too important to put off. Having someone to go home to made it bearable. *I'll pick you up at 1930?*

She sent back a pair of hugs. He tacked a red heart reaction onto her message and left the bathroom without washing his hands, earning him a judgemental eyebrow and headshake from the officer at the sink counter.

◇

Neagley slipped gracefully out of her dress shoes. Tall heels. A surprisingly comfortable woven mesh over her toes. Sleek black short pants that hugged her legs. A soft, v-necked bamboo knit sweater three sizes too big in a shade of light green that suited her immensely. His. Her jet black shoulder strap and the upper edge of her satiny bra showed above the neck line that dropped off her shoulder. She'd taken to wearing his clothes. It felt like wearing a hug that never ended until she had to undress. Or so she'd told him.

Her eyes found his. Then, they found his lips and shamelessly glommed onto them like he'd never seen from her before. She moved forward slowly.

"Frankey--" he quietly started asking her what she was thinking. That was as far as he got.

Across the kitchen, she put one finger to her lips, her open hand remaining raised to ward off anymore sound as she came nearer, gaze dropping from his mouth, to down *lower*, both regions locked in a tug of war for her interest.

Shocked, he blinked hard. *Oookay…* he had a feeling this was one of those, just let it happen, whatever *it* was, kind of moments. Her hand came up to his face, fingertips touching his cheek, then facial hair, then finding their way up onto the bridge over his lips. He stopped breathing, his heart revving up beating. A small smile started forming on her lips. Her fore and middle finger slipped gently onto his mouth, tracing the ridges, top and bottom, where his skin turned from one colour to the other. He stamped the gentlest of butterfly kisses onto her fingertips. The smile and the lust-clouded look in her eyes he received in return was worth it, even if she didn't end up kissing him.

Closing his eyes he let himself be explored and watched, focusing all his attention on wherever her fingertips touched. He took in a gasp of breath through his nose in anticipation when the sensation of the tip of her nose touching his, appeared. Sliding to one side, figuring out how to fit them together, meant she was coming closer. Her forehead touched his. His eyes shot open, awed. Hers were closed. She withdrew in the slightest of ways, a grimace twisting up her features for a second. His beard hair had tickled her lips. His heart did a flip in his chest when, seconds later, her lips did a tiny, amused shimmy in front of his then touched. It wasn't really a kiss, though. She just made contact.

His heart was thumping out long, hard beats in his chest. "Franke—" he breathed, eyes darting frantically over her face.

"Kiss me."

Thank merciful God in Heaven. He let himself fall into her, lips reaching for hers, gently finding, pressing, and relaxing, hearing the tick of breaking suction, mouth falling ajar in the slightest, slowly taking in shaky breath he sorely needed. He stayed there, his lips shivering against hers, nervously unsure. More? Enough? He wasn't sure that if he started all-out kissing her, he'd stop if she told him to, and he'd sooner kiss a stinking yak than barge beyond her comfort.

Her smile was slow and small but, without question, it was there. She nudged him with her nose and lips, asking, and he broke down.

The grateful laugh he chuffed out was one quarter a joyful sob. He dove into the kiss such that there was no way to abort. Everything or

nothing, and everything it was. Almost six months of wanting, never taking, over in an electric instant. The way she fell into him in kind only left him sinking deeper into her. Tasted her lips with a slight but firm graze of his tongue and letting himself make a moaning sound he was none too proud of, but beyond caring as he poured months of needing this with her into holding onto her lips with his own, the fireworks of pleasure going off in his head, heart, and hopeful groin burning blinding white hot.

He gasped, surprised when her hands found his wrists, thumbs drawing soothing rounds on his skin. Suddenly, there was a nervous tongue, not his, on the underside of his top lip. Closing their mouths together, he sent his to coax her deeper inside. Withdrawing in surprise at first, she quickly came back, following his retreating tongue inside. He closed his lips loosely around her, giving her tongue a gentle stroke with his own. Deciding she liked it, she came back for more, deeper still. The tip of his tongue, grazed the underside of hers such that she let out an involuntary, explosive laugh, turning her face away, putting a hand over her mouth to contain the rest. All from the delicate membrane under her tongue having been tickled.

Wearing a shit-eating grin, Hudson wiped the spit-spatter away from around his mouth with the back of his fingers. "Sorry. I'll lay off the mischief. I think we started out all right, though."

Smiling, Frankey came back in hot. "I think it's too early to tell." Eyes narrowing, she hovered against his mouth. "I'm going to need a larger sample size." It had to be nearly impossible that those words had ever left a human mouth sounding any more sensual than they did leaving hers. Or maybe he wanted this so badly she could have recited the periodic table and he'd feel the same way.

This kiss was a whole different animal. Her lips and tongue came looking for his and both well and truly kissed, holding on to each other. Hotly diving back in deeper and closer when things began to slip. Then, she gave his tongue a teasing flick, retreating. He gave chase, rewarded with her mouth and tongue around his, giving him a savouring caress. Taking a moment to regain her breath, her hands fell to the sides of his waist and brought them together. She reached up, giving him an adoring peck on the lips.

"I love you." Neagley backed her face away, wearing what he could only describing as loving surprise, still at somewhat of a loss for what to say. He knew what was coming back at him, he just had no fucking clue when or

how. Whatever it was, her face started changing, seeming like it might be funny. "I swear, if you say, 'I know'…"

Neagley laughed at being warned off the Star Wars reference. The thought had occurred to her, but only ever that. She needed something better. Still, she had known, for a while. Thinking back, she smiled, kissing Hudson with a heat that left him feeling high as a kite and weak. "We're in love." Said another way; "I know. I have for a while now." Leave it to Frances Neagley to find a way to slip that over-used nerd reference in there anyway.

"I love you, so much, I don't know what to do with it all." He said it with a heart-wrenching helplessness. A sudden, potent tension rolled through his body starting in his hands born from emotion he usually expressed throwing himself head-first into recklessly passionate lovemaking. Grimacing, he held himself at bay.

She gulped down the lump in her throat. "Same for me." She reached out to him, sliding her tentative hands up to his neck, resting her fiery hot palms behind his jaw, middle fingers meeting on the nape of his neck, thumbs settling in behind his ears.
Sagging against her when, at long last, the riptide of physical need with nowhere to go let him be, Hudson bowed his head into the crook of her shoulder and neck, hand going up onto her shoulder blade holding her close.

They were two people who loved one another alike, kept apart by a psychological blockade. Knowing that made it easier to bear and had them leaning and holding onto each other ever tighter. He kissed her and this time it was her need for it that was on fire, her lips holding onto his reaching tongue, her tongue sliding up under his. Receiving her caress on a membrane that tender sent a dizzying pleasure through him.

She slipped away, keeping their foreheads pressed together, expression playing out her discovery of a sensation she wanted more of.

Hudson opened his mouth and took a quick breath in like he was about to speak, abruptly deciding against it. Eyes on his lips, Frankey smiled blissfully. "What…?"

He leaned into her forehead, his head wobbling slightly, taking a few deep breaths to help him gather his wits and nerve.

"You… liked it?"

There was a vulnerability in his eyes that took her by surprise. There was only one thing he could possibly mean that carried that kind of weight

for him. "Test of any choice being having to make it again…" Hudson started grinning when he remembered what came next. Neagley started grinning and laughing. "I feel really*… really* fuckin' good about it." She leaned into him for a kiss that left him no choice but to wrap his arms around her if he wanted to hold her in any way. He did, hauling her up tight against his chest. The counter made a slight cracking noise under the unaccustomed weight. Laughter didn't keep their mouths apart long.

When their lips parted again for want of breath, they gave in to the need to go easy for a minute, laying against each other, cheek to cheek, giving one another a nuzzle every now and then, as need in their flesh demanded.

He watched her face as she started to pull away. Her eyes left his lips, wandering along his jaw, tracing down his neck to linger on his shirt buttons. He frowned slightly. There was no way—serving in the military—she hadn't seen a man's naked upper body before… but it was true she'd never seen *him* with anything less than a t-shirt on. He glanced from her face down to her hands coming up to the front of his shirt and back. She got the first button… then the second. Untucking his shirt as she worked, by button four, he held his arms up behind her undoing his cuffs. That was the last piece of the puzzle he needed. Tugging his shirt off over his head with a grip on the turned-down collar, he let it fall away onto the counter.

Neagley leaned her torso back, staying with him at the hips, seemingly bashful about even touching him with her gaze. He was by no means worried about what she'd think. He wasn't a Special Forces trained, six-foot-five stack of walnuts stuffed into an ultrathin condom, but he spent more than his fair share of time on keeping himself dangerous enough to come through the back alleys and mean streets of Chicago in one piece over a thirty year career. Even more lately, since he'd come to blows with one of his brothers in blue and been confronted with the unpleasant reality he had to be formidable enough to be confident he could overcome even the best of them, too.

Hudson reached out to her with both arms, taking hold of her underneath her elbows. By the look on her face she hadn't expected his chest hair. Her gaze trickled down his chest, lingering below his belt. Mischief curled up one side of his lips. "It's grown back in, if you're curious…" She smiled. Her expression changed, having landed on deciding she liked what she saw. Still, she couldn't seem to get her hands to leave where they rested, wrapped over his forearms. Letting go of one of her arms he

gently rested a soothing hand over hers. If she didn't want to do anything other than look that was thoroughly fine by him.

"You wanna know what the differences between this morning and the real thing are gonna be?"

Neagley nodded slowly, squirming a little. She could imagine, and anatomically she knew enough about both their bodies—she'd also seen enough pornography—to have no real questions, but she wanted to hear him say it anyway. "Sure."

"Heating silicone under hot water doesn't do it justice. It'll be a *lot* hotter." He took hold of her by the wrist putting her hand over his heart. She could feel his hard, fast thrumming pulse clear as glass through the skin, muscle and bone between them. The heat there was already unreal. The prospect of how *hot* so much blood under such thin, taut skin would feel had anticipation dancing through the nerves inside her groin. "At first, I'll be much, much softer. If you feel like giving me… *a hand* with changing that, I'd love it," he asked, running his massaging thumb and forefinger along and over each of her graceful, slender fingers splayed on his chest. Wasn't hard to imagine what it'd feel like, having them wrapped around him, taking him past the point of no return. Hoping for it had him genuinely red in the face. He sent his other hand around behind her lower back, that little bit of extra weight holding their pelvises together a little heavier. Frankey's breathing turned shallower and uneven. He was speaking from close enough to kiss but didn't look like he would.

"When… *I'm* inside you… it'll have a heartbeat. This one, right here." He gave the back of her hand a firm tap, holding it tightly against his chest, over his heart. As hard as the organ was beating, there was a nervous flutter to it, too. The colour rising in her cheeks was obvious even in the dim light. She nodded, shivering, the same way she had that first night on the couch. Her fingers started moving slightly underneath his, getting a feel for the short hairs under her touch; a feeling she plainly liked. "When it's real, it's part of a whole person who wants to spend all goddamn night touching you… holding you… *kissing* you, wherever he can, for as long as he can…" Just the tips of his fingers slipped between her pants waist and her skin, pulling her pelvis snug up against the swell growing on his. "However you'd like. Even down here—if you want me to." There was hardly any space between their mouths now, but he had no intention of closing the distance. Lips curling into a mischievous grin, he gave her lower stomach a solid, unexpected, teasing tap with the flat of one fingernail. The

guttural, shocked, high-pitched moan she let out was one of the stranger sounds he'd ever heard a woman make, but it spoke to her hopes better than any word she could ever utter.

He let out a quiet laugh, giving her a playful wink. "How does that sound?"

It was way, *way* too much, but it also sounded like something she'd *really* like to know what it felt like.

"It sounds like… *a lot*." Voice wavering, she was tense and shuddering in his arms, her body writhing uneasily now, one shoulder shrugging up high out of his sweater's neckline.

Enough playin' around; she was done for the night. Hudson smiled taking a deep, levelling breath, surfacing from under the haze of carnal want between them. Bringing his hands up to her face, he stroked his thumbs soothingly over her cheek bones, helping her know he wasn't going to push any further. He waited until she found the courage to look him in the eyes. He kissed her, closed-lipped, loading all the loving into it he could. "The first time *always* is." The way he said it carried a whole lot more meaning than the words alone. No matter who it is, what your mind is like—haphephobia or not—it's *always* an overwhelming experience. *Always*.

The act would be even more raw and potent for her.

Her eyes started watering as her hands left his and started to drift down to hold him around the waist. He gently caught her hand, stopping her mid-air before she touched his bare skin, shaking his head. "Not tonight… or tomorrow. Or even anytime in the next week. When you feel the same way you did about kissing tonight? Maybe even stronger? That's when. Not a minute sooner. Want to snuggle in my bed until your nerves calm down?" Neagley looked hesitant. "More comfortable than the couch…" he reminded her.

She nodded, smiling gratefully, suddenly looking dead tired, but still, somehow, radiantly beautiful.

"I'll be in your room," she promised.

"I'll be there soon. Gotta take care of… something," he said with a slightly silly smile, pointing his eyes toward the bathroom. Felt a little odd to be talking in metaphors at this point, but he had a feeling that wouldn't last much longer.

There, again, was that drowsy-with-love smile he loved so well. Neagley nodded slowly, feeling the tension she held all through her body leave. It was his rule; one he never broke. He refused to share a bed with

her unless he'd gotten off first, so any erotic urge was quiet as it possibly could be…

His routine was quickly becoming her lullaby. The subtle, restrained sounds of his ecstasy a counterpoint to the hum of running water. Water splashing in a chaotic rhythm with hands underneath the stream. Sounds of water running changing as he wiped the counter, sink, maybe even his own body, down. The brushing of teeth, a good rinse, flip of the light switch, then, in the near-darkness save for a hallway night light, the steady, hasteless, heavy beat of footsteps crossing the hall's wooden floor boards and at long last, into the room with her. She knew, by the sound of his foot falls alone if it was him in the apartment with her, or someone other.

His sweater and her bra and pants lay on the dresser neatly folded. She'd never shared a bed with him without her clothes on. "Frankey…" he whispered. He *had* to know she was sure about this.

Though groggy, she opened her eyes immediately, a tiny, contented smile moving her lips at the sight of moonlight from the window on his bare skin. He reached out, wordlessly asking for her hand and she gave it to him. He stood there leaning across the bed, shirtless, nothing but loose white boxer shorts on. They were fresh. Not the ones he'd been wearing before. She smiled, pulling him into bed with her. He rolled back the sheets only so far as he needed to get underneath. The room was cold. They kept it that way so they could sleep under the same covers and not sweat through the sheets.

They both ran hot. Go figure.

She never let go of his hand, pulling him closer with it, slipping closer under the sheets herself. She slipped her leg under his, eager for his warmth even if it was too much. She put her hand on his cheek, beginning to shake again but ever so slightly this time. His hand came up and laid down over hers, soothing away her tremors. She snuggled in close, both of them laying on their sides, until their foreheads and noses lay touching with no effort at all.

Laying there, he enjoyed her nuzzling her face into his, kissing his refreshed, mint-scented mouth, her lips and mouth still smelling of vanilla ice cream, strawberry syrup and sweet wine, her hand holding onto his cheek, until sleep's inevitability became apparent…

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He woke the next morning to her angelic sleeping face for the first time.

Chapter 3

Another Day in Paradise

"Johnny Cage WINS!" boomed the deep, resonant voice of victory.

Hudson half-jumped out of his seat on the couch. "YES!! Hngh!" Frankey covered her mouth and started laughing raucously, falling over sideways on the couch. Not only had just he won against her in Arcade Mode for the first time—after she'd bought him his new tournament-calibre controller for his birthday—but he'd pulled off a near-perfect impression of Commander Data as his victory dance, and she couldn't stop laughing. He plopped back down onto the couch, face still flushed by the rush, looking like he almost didn't believe it. This time—*this time*— it was real. He'd actually beaten her!

Having slid almost all the way down onto the couch, she gave him a loving wink and a playful nudge on the upper arm with her knee. "Good game, Detective."

"Whoo! Yes! *Yes*, it was!" he declared, leaning over her, one arm planted heavily on either side of her, eyeing her over, what he was feeling a need for as plain on his face as his exercise of self-restraint. Her Cap'n Crunch t-shirt sat hiked up off her stomach, belly button showing, the shorts she was wearing were… *short*. Little better than underwear. Which… she wasn't wearing underneath. Unless she was mistaken, Hudson had just caught on to that fact. The look in his eyes and colour on his cheeks getting even hotter. He ducked down, dropping a long, heavy kiss onto her stomach where her skin was still covered. Seemed he'd decided to file that knowledge away for later.

While he entertained himself, nuzzling into her stomach, giving her kiss after, slow, meticulous kiss, she combed gentle, smoothing strokes through his hair. It was *so much* nicer when he didn't wear products in it the way he did for work.

The side of his neck and t-shirt collar came into view when his kiss started up the underside of her unconfined breasts. Her eyes came to rest on the gold clasp and chain peeking over the collar of his t-shirt. She saw him in casual clothing so rarely, she hadn't even clocked he wore anything under his dress shirts, always buttoned all the way up. She frowned, reaching for his neck. Puzzled at first, he quickly realized what she was going for and figured he could let himself enjoy whatever little bit of

tickling touch her curiosity gave him. She brought it all the way up out from under his shirt her fingers sliding down the delicate gold chain, letting the tastefully simple gold cross hang before the centre of his chest. Swallowing nervously, she didn't know how to feel about it.

"You believe in God?" she asked. To his surprise there wasn't a trace of derision or even judgement in her tone. She'd known him long enough to know that if he held something in his heart, there was usually a damned good reason. Hudson's expression turned reflective. She sat herself back up, coming to rest beside him.

"I don't know if I'd call it *believing*… I did when I was young, like any good son, but…" Hudson turned his gaze away, a melancholy on his face that found its way into her heart just looking at it, while he looked for the words to go forward. "I think I've come to terms with the fact that it's a comfort blanket against the heinous shit people can do to each other, and the things we suffer through life. You're never gonna find me in a church confessional—if you need fear of losing your place in some unproven paradise to enforce your ability to do the right thing and admit you were wrong—you're not a good person and no amount of confessing changes that." Hudson scoffed. "I'm unconvinced it's not a literal power-play by clergy, collecting people's worst guilts as leverage. A form of state surveillance from the fuckin' Dark Ages." Hudson shook his head, thoroughly squicked right the fuck out by the thought. "It makes the things I see sometimes a little more bearable *hoping* that there *might* be something… *nicer* waiting for innocent souls who deserved precisely none of their fate." He closed his eyes, gritting his teeth, forcing water to stop coming up into his eyes. "I'm not remotely ashamed of needing that." He took a deep, unsteady breath, looking to Neagley. She had this tiny, sweet, accepting smile on. He hadn't expected that. She smiled a little bigger when she caught on to his surprise.

"I'm not against religion. Well, that's not entirely true." She shimmied closer on the couch, keeping her hand on his chest. It started moving in this subtle, soothing way. "I'll never be agnostic about someone who lives out their faith by trying to force it on others. Or institutions that shield sexual predators. You're right. It is a tool to control a population, even though the exact psychological tools used vary congregation to congregation and faith to faith. Faith practiced like you do, though…? If someone's going to make it a part of their lives, that feels like one of the thoroughly right ways to do it, and for some *very* right reasons." She put a

comforting kiss on his shoulder. Whatever had come to mind when he started getting a little emotional hadn't gone away quite yet.

It felt a little strange to be saying it but… "Thank you, for letting me have that."

Frankey shook her head. "Oh no. Don't have to thank me. I'd be in the wrong trying to walk you away from it. Period."

Hudson nodded slowly, happy this wasn't a point of friction, unsure why he'd thought she'd be anything other than empathetic and logical about it. He slumped down into the couch, holding her hand onto his chest rearranging himself slightly so he could lay his head down on her shoulder and have some closeness with her.

"There's this movie—a line from it—the short of it is, God's Kingdom is in your head, heart, and the world around you. Not in man-made structures built by cutting down, quarrying, and destroying His actual church to create gaudy, opulent buildings with blood money and slave labour to worship Him in. Maybe not slave labour these days, but whenever I look at a massive church, all I see is vanity and greed taking money from people in visceral need of hope and community. Last I checked, that's a fuckin' sin. Churches like those are nothing more than an appetizing, unblemished façade over a colony of maggots."

An *apple* being eaten away at and rotted through from the inside out. An apt metaphor. Neagley smirked, snuggling in closer. "The Kingdom of God is inside you and all around you." Hudson turned his head up, face awash with amazement, watching her recite it flawlessly, cadence and all, from her shoulder. "Not in mansions of wood and stone. Split a piece of wood and I am there. Lift a stone and you will find me…" She smiled softly. "If I *did* keep a faith, that's a pretty good description of how I'd want to go about it."

"Wanna watch it?" he asked, one side of his lips going up in this slightly astonished smile, glad of an excuse to fill time he wanted to spend beside her anyway with some quiet entertainment.

Frankey nodded. "Yeah. It's already on the server. You gonna let me up?" she asked, giving the back of her head a scratch. She needed to sit forward to reach the remotes.

His groan as he moved his body away from her was a half-serious protest. Sure she needed to get things set up, but at the price losing the feeling of her body heat? He didn't like it. "Want something to drink?" He got to his feet, needing something for himself at least.

"Glass of water. Tall. Popcorn… please." She sent him off with a wink.

"As you wish."

Frankey started giggling, shaking her head as she dropped it backward onto the couch cushion, looking up at him from there. "You did fucking *not*…"

"I did fuckin' so," he lobbed back, grinning and laughing. He mentally filed The Princess Bride away on their "For Later" watchlist, too.

She *liked* watching him go. Finding a man like this among over four billion at nearly forty years old and on the first try? Odds like that looked something like hard proof there was more than physics and randomly decreasing entropy to life, the universe, and everything.

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Frankey came in the door quietly. The apartment was dim, no more than twilight outside to brighten it. Hudson sat on the couch with a novel in hand, waiting. The blu-ray disk was already in, looping the main menu, a holy choir sound clip over the images flashing across the screen. She didn't have to say a word. He stirred, smiling before he'd even laid eyes on her. "Hey. You made it."

She nodded coming over to the couch on sock feet, giving him a greeting kiss before heading back to the kitchen for water, filling a snack plate that was nutritious enough for a meal yet edible uncooked. "How's your drink?" she called over to him.

"Nearly full."

"Cold?" She held onto the freezer door with one hand, waiting. Hudson started chuckling quietly.

"I could use a cold pint glass." Smiling, she grabbed one from the freezer, happy with her craft bottled soda as was. She made her way to the couch both hands full.

"You ate?"

Hudson nodded in quiet answer, running a hand up and down the side of her leg in thanks for her consideration, putting the book aside. Neagley sat down, cozying up close with him. She'd felt like a movie night, but couldn't choose. He said he had one she owned he hadn't seen for a while and wanted to see again. It was in her top five of all time, making the choice easy. Once they settled in, Hudson set the movie rolling.

Gregorian voices raised in holy song set the aural atmosphere over a backdrop of dilapidated factories and project housing somewhere in South Boston. It was, according to the timestamp, Saint Patrick's Day. Smiling, Frankie started shuffling around, Hudson gladly accommodating, getting as much contact with him as she could without actually laying on him. As much as the exercise had him smiling, the moment he looked back at the screen, his air turned downright sombre. Frankey couldn't go more than thirty seconds without making sure there wasn't something wrong. "Why so seeerious?" she teased.

Hudson took a hard swallow of his beverage, like he was uneasy about answering. He did anyway. "For me, this is one *hell* of a lot more than a movie. It's the reason I'm laying here with you."

Frankey suddenly had a lightly teasing, incredulous look on her face. "Come on…! That's insanely cliché."

Hudson smiled, shrugging, giving her body a rub with one hand that gave them both a little bit of a blush. "Maybe… doesn't mean it's not true."

The humour drained out of her expression fast. Whatever was on his mind, it was genuinely *heavy*. "Can you… talk about it?"

Taking in a long breath, nodding, Hudson agreed. "Yeah, if you wanna pause the movie."

Neagley snatched up the remote instantly, freezing the frame in place.

Herding her into a more comfortable position, better suited to talking to each other, Hudson took a few relaxing breaths, like he was staring down a long road ahead. "I saw it with Mickey when I was thirteen. The same putz who tried to make it sound like he had an inroad with the police through me. That sermon… first time I saw it, it gave me this insane *rush*, like it filled me up with something amazing, but at the same time gave me these ice-cold chills. I took my allowance and bought a copy. Watched it until I couldn't anymore for all the scratches on the disk, then bought another. At first, it was just this fun vigilante story, but that feeling at the start only kept getting stronger. Eventually I figured out that the people The Saints were exterminating, were exactly like the family I loved. People I thought the world of.

"When my dad started grooming me into the fold, I was about fifteen. Bigger than most guys my age— not all, but most. Leaner and meaner. Quickly found out that my dad wasn't some businessman who travelled with this great-paying job he couldn't say much about. Saw him beat a

couple of guys so badly… pretty sure their legs and arms never worked right again. Didn't see him or his buddies kill anyone, but I know they did. Pretty quickly I had a B n' E and some possession on my record. Figured out how not to get caught pretty quick after that. I wasn't just shaping up to be good at what we did, almost had to hide the fact I was better at it than my old man. His ego and temper couldn't have taken it and at that point, he could still thrash the shit outta me.

"I was walking through a neighbourhood on the way home one night, saw this guy giving a girl some trouble. Trying to get some head or a hand job out of her from the sounds of things. I was no Saint, but… no way do you treat a woman like that in my presence and it stands. I started walking over fast to put a stop to it. When I got close enough to see who she was…"

"Tracy…" Neagley guessed quietly.

There were tears coming into Hudson's eyes. He nodded. "When I saw her, I lost it. I don't even remember being able to see him after a while. I started swinging and I couldn't stop. She started runnin' and screamin' herself hoarse for help, not for herself—or me—she needed someone's help to stop me before I killed the guy and wound up going down for murder. Couple of my cousins and a good friend weren't far behind me leaving the pool bar. It took all three of them. I don't think it's fair to say they got to me just in time. Some miraculously talented paramedics, ER doctors, and very probably the literal hand of God, saved his life."

Laying a hand over his mouth subconsciously, like that had any chance of hiding his words away, he confessed. "Frankey, I killed a man that night." Hudson dug a pair of fingers into his chest, double-tapping his heart, so hard it probably hurt him. The man in her arms might never attend a church service in his adult life, but he held himself most seriously responsible for the worst of mortal sins, even though the man lived. He didn't have to say a word of the rest and Frankey understood. *In my heart, I killed a man that night—I know I did. God just kept him here to serve the rest of his sentence in the care of merciful jailors.*

"He walked again, but his vision never recovered—lost one eye eventually, the other's fucked, too—hands and arms were messed up for good. His brain suffered damage and it showed from the start, never really getting better. He's in a wheelchair permanently now. Doesn't hear so well. I serve him lunch almost every time I volunteer for a couple church lunch kitchens in the area. Gave me a heart attack the first time he came

through but he can't recognize me. They charge a pittance for the amount of food they give each person, and he *never* has to pay. I usually find a way to sneak some extra in there, too. They agreed to let me serve him whenever we see him."

Hudson swallowed. "Trace was strongly haphephobic before that, but after that night, she got worse, a whole lot worse. He hadn't outright raped her—thank God—but being accosted and forced to touch him through his clothes was bad enough. She might've been somewhat normal—lived a normal-adjacent life, found a man good enough to be with—if not for that night. It was never going to be me. After she'd witnessed me beat him down, just seeing me terrified her for years after. She's *still* not comfortable around me alone. *That's* why I asked you to see her. He was never the same, but… neither was she. She hasn't gotten much better. I call that *natural justice*."

The softness of Frankey's features felt like absolution. Hudson winced, looking away. He's wasn't sure he deserved or wanted any. The man's penance for sexually attacking his friend was unequivocally just. What weighed most heavily on his conscience, what was most frightening, was looking in the mirror and knowing, every time, his own personal Mr. Hyde was in there lurking under the impeccably tidy grooming, handsome, kind face, trustworthy eyes, gentle hands, and professed deputy-to-the-law ethics. He still didn't know, one way or the other, if he was just someone who refused to tolerate the abuse of others, feeling righteous rage witnessing it, or if he was his father's savage son, and what had showed through was his true self—one not worthy of the position of trust he held and the woman he so dearly cherished.

"I was arrested, charged, arraigned. Never denied what I'd done, but wouldn't plead guilty either. In the process of that, an interviewing officer I gave a statement to, said something or asked me something—I don't remember what it was—but things I'd been keeping buried somewhere under the rock bottom of my heart started coming out. Once I learned where my family's money came from—money that paid for all the boisterous, happy, bountiful family gatherings, more food and booze than a poorer family can afford and eat in a month all in one night, piles of gifts at Christmas and birthdays—instead of looking forward to times like those, I dreaded them. It felt like sitting at a gathering surrounded by a macabre jackals masquerade, each posing as loving people. One wrong word and the mask comes off, and they rip your face off. It was all fake. This

grotesque veneer of piousness and generosity plastered over the sickening violence that paid for it. It felt like I was being chained down and forced, every day of my life, to eat this beautiful, pristine apple that should have tasted deliciously sweet, but even one bite and you've bitten deep enough to realize there's this colony of writhing maggots inside, and some of them in part and whole are already in your mouth, but you can't spit it out, you've gotta chew, savour, swallow, and smile like everyone else. Worse, you have to eat the whole fucking thing. Then, do the same thing all over again when you wake up the next day. And the day *after that*. Not only that, you realize you *are* one of those maggots, eating away the healthy tissue of the world around you. You're just another mindless maggot and all you know how to do is feed, fuck, shit, and sleep."

Neagley had gone conspicuously quiet. He didn't meet her gaze as he kept on. "I confessed to that officer like I was talking to a priest, almost word for word as I've told you. When I was done he was sitting stone silent and still across the table from me, nothing I could make out as one thing or another on his face. Probably working out whether he should believe me or not. He left. I was sent back to my cell. I didn't ask him outright for anything. It was like he knew I couldn't see that far ahead. Next day, I was brought back to the interview room. *Must've* talked to the prosecutor. He spelled it out for me: I'd indisputably come to the defense of someone I clearly loved, I hadn't intended to kill him, but that didn't change the fact that I had beaten a man to the precipice of death. That had to be answered for and that kind of violence sworn off. I plead guilty to a lesser charge, time served counted and I served six months more. If I'd had to serve a full sentence for anything more severe, it would have to appear on my adult record. That I serve the time well was his condition for helping me. I showed him how serious I was about wanting out by going through the sentence a model prisoner. When I got out, after I turned eighteen, he'd give me a letter of reference for job applications and co-sign an apartment so I could get clear of my family if I wanted to—so I know exactly how critical it is that Keno have somewhere to fall back on where he's safe from whoever might try to get their hooks into him. I never re-offended—or came even close. I got out. And here we lay, because of this movie, and that selfless man."

Neagley looked on him, affection in her eyes if nowhere else in her expression. Hudson had served his six month term, but he'd given *himself* a life sentence—and that was just for evening out the score between a friend he profoundly cared for and her attacker. Her eyes started

watering to the point of crying. "I'm sorry I called you cliché." Sniffling, a tear fell from each of her eyes and her head and neck squirmed, trying to keep from crying any worse.

"Hey, hey! There's no need for that!" Hudson, cleared the water out from under her eyes with his feather-light touch, lightly giving the underside of her chin a lifting tap. *Chin up*. "I call this one helluva a happy ending."

Frankey smiled, nodding, coming in for a long, savouring kiss. "Me too."

By unspoken agreement they settled down to watch the movie and hit play. The Father's sermon was just beginning after the guest priest—Father Macklepenny—opened the service with a grace prayer. They listened in heavy silence as though attending the church themselves.

"I am reminded, on this holy day, of the sad story of Kitty Genovese. As you *all* may remember, a long time ago, almost thirty years ago, this poor soul cried out for help, time and time again. But no person answered her calls. Though many saw, no one, so much as called the police. They all just watched as Kitty was being stabbed to death in broad daylight. They watched, as her assailants *walked away*." That in-universe fact, and the Father's devil-may-care tone in telling it gave her an evil chill, every time. "Now…"

Hudson's voice rumbled in his chest under her ear in unison with hers, as they recited the holy Father's admonishment of his congregation: "We must all fear evil men, but there is another kind of evil which we must fear *most!* And that is; the *indifference of good men*."

◇

"I can't believe you suggested watching this. It's so gooey and cheesy you could pour it over nachos. The *acting*—!" Frankey sat down in front of Hudson, already reclined back into the corner of the couch so that she could lay back on him, handing him his craft bottled cream soda, leaving the popcorn within reach on the coffee table.

"Let me have my pulp fiction detective flicks, all right?" he insisted, taking his first sip of the fizzy pop. "'Sides, I chose it from *your* collection!" Frankey smiled, laughing under her breath as the truth shone light on her hypocrisy. She liked it just as well as if not better than he did. Gave him a heated wink before getting her self up close to his groin and leaning back

slowly enough he could protest if something started to hurt. Not a hint of discomfort. In fact, clearly enjoying himself, he put a hand over her stomach and womb, getting her as close against him as possible and keeping her there. She gave her hips a little shimmy against him. He sighed out his pleasure, stamping a kiss on the back of her shoulder.

"Guilty as charged, Detective," she confessed. She'd lost count of how many times she'd seen it in her lifetime. The bad guy was so cliché and simplistic the second hand embarrassment was hard to stand. Took talent to act that out and still give it visceral menace. Which the actor had. Even though the action could have used some polish, until you realize that harkening back to shows like the original Batman with the cheesy choreography might have been intentional. That was what made it rewatchable. Those moments where you realize there are some decently talented people creating a very specifically envisioned tableau that, at least at some point, had to have fully intended to make fun of itself. Despite its flaws, it managed to be good fun.

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"This guy is ridiculously good-looking. I wish we'd seen more of him like this on screen." Hudson said, quietly, squirming around underneath her.

Neagley choked on her sip of soda pop. "Come again?" Her expression turned quizzical. That wasn't getting comfortable. It felt… sexual.

Hudson shrugged, laughing. "What? He is. These work, you know…" he said, pointing at his eyeballs.

Her heart started beating a little faster, and just a little unevenly. A frown and a slight wince played out on her face. Dots were connecting and she didn't seem to like where they led. "Is… this… *why* you needed almost no help from Viagra when you had the dildo made?" They'd been laying down on the couch, back to chest. She sat up and turned around. The way Hudson looked at her… and then wouldn't anymore. "I… sorry. Nevermind," she mumbled. The answer was obvious but he didn't want to say anything. Now, she wasn't sure she should even lay back down with him. What had been a wonderfully cozy evening over a cheesy comic book hero slash detective flick felt like it had gone up in smoke like a lighting matchhead that instantly died. She found herself potently wishing she'd exercised better discretion over what came out of her mouth.
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Then, a little smile quirked up one side of Hudson's lips for a split second. When he spoke, he did so slowly, like he was talking to a creature easily spooked. "It… is." He was breathing shallower, colour coming into his cheeks that wasn't there before. "He was attractive. Good with his hands, and looked like he took good care of 'em, too."

Something in Neagley sank a bit. If she had to hazard a guess, this was what jealousy and possessiveness felt like. The emotions were brand new and un-fucking-pleasant. She grimaced, but the question had come to mind and something in her needed an answer. To get rid of an unknown. "Did… he… help you out?"

Hudson fixed her with a cool, assessing stare, suddenly looking as though he was standing on ground he was prepared to defend, even if it meant doing so against her. "*If* he did, is that a problem?"

Frankey grimaced and winced in earnest now, eyes watering. She was looking down eyes racing around at a fraction the speed of her mind, but she wasn't looking at his body. Her field of vision didn't even make it that far. It wasn't that the "technician" might have given him a hand that was the worst part of what she was feeling. Something ugly in her was railing against it, and… had they made it this far only to find out she wasn't a very good partner? Or maybe even a good person about something this intrinsic to who he is? Hudson shimmied back away from her on the couch. Not all the way. Slightly, but still, he did.

Realizing the unfairness of the hypothetical, Hudson course-corrected. "Did I fantasize about him instead of you? *No*. Did he use his hand to keep me hard at any point? No. Whenever it was needed, I did it, thinking about *you*. But, he definitely had to have his hands on me to work, and whenever he did, he made sure it felt pretty good, and that helped."

It felt like there was an angry little prey animal scratching around in her chest. She… started thinking back. The way Hudson had stayed with her, taking every moment of her touch with him he could into the room with him before they let the doors close between them. How, when he'd knocked and she'd opened the door, holding him and thanking him, there had been something about it she couldn't stick a pin in. Almost like… he'd come home from somewhere he never should have been. When he came back home to her… he'd embraced her *so* tightly, as though holding on to something—someone—he couldn't stand losing. Like he'd returned home from a battle hard-fought and won, and the woman he'd fought for was still at home waiting for him, even though he'd been gone for too long. She

remembered the way he'd held her hand, and asked her to keep hugging him until he could get himself together and walk through the storefront without giving too much away to someone who had no business knowing anything that closely guarded.

He watched, as a warm, fond smile found its way onto her lips. Her eyes watering when she met his gaze again, all traces of what might have been jealousy gone, washed away by loving gratitude. He breathed again, shivering. The danger had passed. She moved closer on the couch, right up against the underside of his groin, sliding her hand under his waist, staying there giving the side of his back a soothing touch. She swallowed nervously, meeting his eyes. "It's not a problem. At all. Even if he had actively helped you. The way you held on to me afterward, I thought you'd been through something more unpleasant than you anticipated. But… it was *more* enjoyable than expected, and looking back on it in this light… seems like you were returning home to someone… you needed to hold onto."

Hudson's tension left him entirely. Yeah. That was it exactly it. The perfect metaphor for it, too. Still, he couldn't find any words to say. He took in a shaking breath.

This time, it was Frankey talking like she had a creature in need of soft tones and a gentle touch on her hands. "How strong is it?"

He frowned slightly. "What d'you mean?"

A smile formed and disappeared on her mouth on and off like she was finding things going through her head funny, but this was not a time to laugh about any of it. "On a scale of 'I might watch gay porn once in a while and get off to it'… to 'I'm going to need to go to a bar at least twice a year and pick a guy up for a night to get it out of my system'… to 'we'll have to talk, eventually, about regularly inviting someone *we* choose to have his penis up my ass while I make absolutely mad love to you'… how *strongly* do you like other men?" Her fingers and thumb were moving under his flesh, with this subdued scratching motion. Felt good and he sank onto her hand a little more.

Hudson bowed his head and started laughing. Her ability to construct scenarios on the fly like that was something fuckin' else. "More like… if I'd never met you and the opportunity presented itself, there isn't much I wouldn't do to or take from Jensen Ackles. Even then, I won't be needing a Get Out of Jail Free card for him anytime soon. Or ever." He took hold of

her forearm, running his thumb back and forth over it, but still wasn't looking her in the eyes.

Frankey ducked her head down fishing for his gaze and he gave it to her. "Me neither."

He took in a relaxing breath, kissing her forehead.

"Would you… ever *need* to have another man in bed with us?" She was fairly certain she knew the answer, but getting it out of the way and understanding his thoughts, seemed like a solidly good idea.

"Forcing you to have to adapt to a whole second person? I *never* have and never will need it that badly. It just… tickles my eyes and dick every once in a blue moon," he explained, relaxing all the way down into the couch, and into her. *Nothing* an orgasm with her couldn't completely satisfy.

Looking him over like she was trying to figure something out, she had this slightly impish, subtle smile on. She leaned in closer, bringing their bodies half way back together. "I have slimmer toys I'd be willing to consign… you have a prostate. Maybe the two should meet?"

He couldn't meet her eyes while he waited for everything he was feeling about it, to take on a form he could express. He was never going to ask her to strap on a dildo even if it was only four or five inches long and an inch or less in diametre and peg him, but he had a feeling that if something vibrating gave that pleasure trove even a feather light graze, he'd get off almost instantaneously and it would burn him down like a firecracker. That sounded like something worth feeling at least *once* in his life.

He closed his eyes, dropping head back onto the couch arm, nodding, adrenaline crashing. They were small, but true. He didn't know when, but he knew wanted to try. He felt her moving but didn't open his eyes. When she settled, her lips were hovering over his. "Are you okay?" Not, *are we okay*—no concern for herself whatsoever—it was, *are you?*

"Yeah." He smiled blissfully. "I'm good. I'm *all good*."

She kissed him deeply even though her lips stayed closed. He wrapped himself around her every way he could while it lasted. When it broke at last, she held their mouths together a few seconds longer. Eyes closed, they could feel each other smiling. She slid down his body like a seal back into the water, snuggling tightly into his chest. She reached out from under the blanket for the remote, rewinding back to start of the scene with Billy Zane, shirtless in the Skull Cave, so they could fully appreciate every moment of the sight of his beautifully built torso, unreasonably appealing arms, clean shaven face, charming smile, gorgeous dark hair

that harkened back to handsome men of a bygone era on the silver screen, and that adorable Clark Kent curlicue hanging over his forehead, *together*.

◇

"You're not even doing this for me! You're doing it so a woman you wanna get your dick into will think you're some kind of fuckin' sai—" Keno stopped mid-word when Riley charged back at him only to stop short inches from his face like a thousand pound bull before a chute gate.

Riley locked his gaze onto him in a way that told Keno if he so much as looked away, he stood a very high chance of leaving the room in a body bag. "*Never* say something like that to me again. I don't like you, kid, and I don't dislike you, either. I like people I can trust, and the jury's still out on what kind of man you have it in you to be. I know *exactly* what it's like, to be on the outside looking in, with no way out of the rats nest you were born into." Hudson jabbed a pair of fingers into his own chest. "I wouldn't be where I am today—*who* I am today—if some damned fine men and women hadn't taken some fuckin' *long* shots on me when they did. I'm not doing this for me. I'm not even doing it for Neagley—even though it's true she thinks one helluva a lot of me for it—I'm doing it for *you*."

The pair of fingers at his chest turned on Keno. "I'm doing it to honour the people who helped me get free of where I started out in this world. I figure maybe—just fuckin' *maybe*—you're my shot at paying just a fraction of what's been done for me forward to help someone I see way too damned much of my younger self in." He stopped himself giving what he was saying a chance to be absorbed and digested. He sighed deeply, expression hardening. "Do not fuck this up, 'cause if you do, there will be no second chance." He kept his eyes fixed to Keno's as he took a step back, letting the kid go from the state of fear he looked to be in. Giving his head a few disappointed shakes he turned his back on the boy, heading to Neagley's office to fill her in and try to figure out what to do for him. He had a few ideas, and a favor or two in his back pocket that could come in handy, but…

"Hudson?" Riley stopped in his tracks. The next words outta the kids mouth would be telling. He owed it to himself as much as the punk behind him to at least hear him out. "I'm sorry. That was right the fuck outta line for me to say. You're right to be pissed off. I don't know if you can forgive me… but… *fuck!*"When Hudson didn't move, turn around or give even the

slightest sign he'd think about accepting the apology, something in Keno broke. It washed over him in one terrifying second that it really was possible to lose everything he had here, and there were lines that could never again be crossed, and never should have been in the first place. His understanding of all that, came out in that single, panicked curse.

Riley laughed, shoulders sagging, taking a deep breath as he turned around. There was hope for the boy after all. "Kid, I'm not pissed. I'm irritated, and more than a little scared for you. If I'm ever pissed off with you, I'll break your pretty face in six different places before you figure out what's happenin'."

Keno started laughing. "Bud, you have some *serious* anger issues."

"I'm aware of that," Hudson assured him, giving his head a little tilt to one side. Hudson sat the edge of Renee's nearby desk, sorting out in his mind how to explain himself to the kid. "Look, lemme explain this to you; I'm in your corner, Keno. All right? So is Neagley. But I've stuck my neck out for you with a woman whose respect and trust I value more than I'm ever going to value you. You burn me in her eyes, my patience for you will run out. Don't think I got where I am today without my fair share of fuck-ups and backslides. She appreciates that, same as I do. Being able to genuinely apologize and learn fast, exactly like you just did, has saved me more times than I count. Making the right choice, more often than you'd think, feels like shit. It might be the hardest thing you ever do. Let that be your guiding light." Hudson sighed, collecting his patience back together. "If you can believe there's something waiting for you on the other side of getting out that's more worthwhile than you can possibly grasp right now, you'll save yourself a lot of grief. So you know; that is the voice of experience talking. No, I will not elaborate." Hudson gave him a gentle waving off. "Go make yourself scarce for a day. I've gotta call in a favor."

Keno came at him, hugging him. Sighing, Riley solidly hugged him back then cinched it up just a little tighter. The care in it was real.

"Kid, you're street smart as hell, and you've got a solid gold heart, but your luck is so fuckin' bad its should be statistically impossible. Now, get off me. You smell like a fuckin' fish market dumpster. I don't even wanna know why." Keno let him go right quick. Giving his suit jacket lapel an exploratory lift, holding it closer to his nose, he gave it a sniff. "Gonna have to change and shower before goin' home tonight. *Just* had this fuckin' dry-cleaned…" Hudson groused, rolling his eyes. He could only hope it didn't rub off in his car, too. Keno took that as his cue to skeedaddle.

"Hey, kid…"

Keno turned around. "Yeah?"

There was a kindly smile on Hudson's face. "Look, *relax*. It's a solvable problem. Go shower, throw those clothes and shoes out and tie the bag so they don't stink up the place or the washer, and get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow morning will be a perfectly clean slate. I promise."

Keno grinned. He'd probably never get to know what it was like to have a father—it was way too late in life for that—but he was beyond any doubt this was what having an older—way older—brother who genuinely loved him would've felt like.

Riley sat down at Neagley's desk, collecting himself, taking out his phone. He sent Neagley three flashing red klaxons. Translation: *three alarm fire*.

She was back to him in seconds. *Keno?*

Who else? He signed it off with an "eyeroll" face. Neagley reacted with an "ROFL" face.

All in rapid-fire succession…

How bad is it?

We can talk it over when I get home.

Is it fixable?

Yeah. It is.

All right. Do it. Fill me in when you get here.

You don't want to know what it is first?

Don't need to. I trust you. Help him.

Yes, ma'am. Riley tacked a red heart on the end. She instantly reacted the same.

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Hudson knelt beside the couch on his haunches. "Frankey… *Frankey*. C'mon, wake up." The one thing he couldn't do to wake her was touch her. The first and only time he'd ever done it she nearly punched his nose clean off his face. He still remembered what the wind wake from the punch felt like and how narrowly he'd dodged. One more try and he'd have to let her…

"Mn… hey," she whispered, her voice strained from disuse. The more awake she got, the wider her smile became. "You're home."
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"Thank you. I was wondering where I was," he quipped lightheartedly, leaning into the kiss she was coming at him with. His expression quickly turned serious.

"Is… Keno…?" she asked, rubbing sleep out of her eyes.

Hudson quickly put her worry about the kid to rest. "No. He's fine. He's gonna have to stay scarce for a day—or two—but it's all right." He gave Frankey a reassuring wink.

"Good. I'm not sure I want to hear about it tonight."

Hudson laughed. Understandable. Completely understandable. He needed to start getting how disappointed he'd been out of his system. Until…

"Was it… illegal?"

"There room for me?" He put a hand on her forearm, stroking his thumb over her skin.

Frankey frowned, sitting up and back. "Yeah. C'mere."

Hudson stood, his jacket, shoes and belt coming off quick, he slotted himself down onto the couch beside her as quickly as he could. She was laid against his chest, looking up, as he settled in, a dark shadow over his face, as he sorted out his thoughts. Clearing his throat, he started laying out his thoughts. "It was. Misdemeanour. I would've arrested anyone else."

"Then why didn't you?"

"He's not juvenile. If I arrested him, he'd be charged and it'd stay on his record. He couldn't go into law enforcement, law, or any other career along those lines."

Frankey genuinely frowned. "Then maybe he shouldn't."

Hudson sighed. "When it comes to helping him, we're late to the game, Frankey. His situation is a lot more delicate than mine was."

He had her undivided attention know. "What happened?"

"He asked me to meet him at the office. When I got there…"

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"The way he sounded when he said it, I think it hit him—really hit him—that this kind of thing is a No Fly Zone. He violates it again, I'm gonna have to put things right and arrest him." Hudson was biting the inside of his lip. This was weighing on him more than Keno had any right to forgiveness for, yet here he was, choosing to carry it for the kid's sake.
~~~

Ducking her head down, Frankey planted a kiss on his chest over his heart. Smiling, she looked him in the eye. "When you said you didn't like him, that wasn't true."

Hudson shook his head, putting his hand over hers, moving it back and forth. "I figured out a long time ago; you're not always lucky enough to like your family, but no matter what, you love them and you don't want to see anything bad happen to them." Neagley threw her lithe leg over his lap, leaned in, resting her ear next to his heart. "What… are you doin'?"

"Listening to what a heart that big sounds like."

"At least let me—" *Get comfortable*.

"Shh!"

Scoffing, Hudson obeyed, sinking into the cushions and laying his head to the side as he figured out where to rest his arm and hand, settling on the bottom of her ribcage and on her ankle.

"Frankey, I really am sorry I'm late. Look, if you ever feel like it's sticking in your craw, at all, please, at least tell me so I can try to make it right?"

Taking in a breath to wake herself all the way up, she looked at him quizzically.

He sighed out a deep breath. "I've had a couple relationships fall apart because of it, and I don't want you to think I don't respect you or value your time…"

Frankey started laughing quietly. "You're talking to someone used to disappearing to another city for nine or ten days at a time to go make sure a giant hobo with a knack for finding trouble—or being found by it—gets through whatever he's gotten into. Someone who keeps no regular hours and has to work to all hours of the night if something comes up. I haven't stopped being that person, and you're still here. We don't have fixed working hours. You're not late. You're done when you're done."

Hudson leaned in, giving her a heated kiss. Just one more reason he loved her. "Thank you."

Unsure he fully understood her, inhaling, Frankey fixed him with as serious a look as he'd ever seen from her. "Hudson, it's not as though you're subjecting me to some kind of one-sided temporal mistreatment. When I *choose* to wait for you, I'm reciprocating. You wait for me, in other parts of our lives, every single day, for months, with no end in sight, and no sign of impatience or resentment. This is my way of saying *thank you*. I will *always* wait for you."

"Yeah?" Neagley nodded emphatically, smiling. Hudson closed his eyes taking in an uneven breath, the look in his eyes when he opened them again watery, like a weight had been lifted he was very happy to no longer be afraid of. He leaned over, giving her a kiss he probably shouldn't have but couldn't help. Frankey came back at him even hotter, and if tonight was heading for a rub down from her that was the best news he'd had today.

His stomach gurgled long and loud, the two of them freezing at the sound.

Frankey smiled, giggling. "I'll reheat dinner. Want a beer?"

"Please."

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"How tired are you?" Frankey crooned from close by his ear.

One hand in his pocket, her hands and arm wrapped around his arm, he smiled, laughing quietly, giving her hand a few sensuous strokes. "I'm feelin' frosty enough. What d'you have in mind?" Leaning in close enough to be kissed, he waited. A loud scraping and clattering sound from the sidewalk ahead fractured the rapture between them, had both their undivided attentions. There was a woman on the street ahead. Nicely dressed—if your destination is a rave nightclub. The scraping and clattering sounds… she'd dragged her feet hard and dropped her phone, and she was bending down for it. His eyes really *didn't* need to know she wasn't wearing underwear, but they did now. He averted his eyes slightly. Whatever she was under the influence of she was in for the mother of all hangovers. He positioned himself well between the girl and Frankey as they walked nearer.

He whispered next to Frankey's ear, "There's a kit in my trunk. Let's get the car and come back for her." Neagley nodded. Girl couldn't get very far.

Late at night, after businesses closed, this turned into a rougher neighbourhood. It wasn't unusual to have to walk past one or more vagrants bent over double, hands dragging on the ground, leaning against a wall in the throes of a drug high. A fraction of a second after she fell behind his peripheral vision…

"Sir-r…? Can you help me?" She'd grabbed the arm of his jacket, holding on to keep herself standing. The look in her eyes was that of an

animal who'd been kicked and downtrodden too many times for too damned long.

They stopped in their tracks, and Frankey let him go. "Y-yeah, sure. Can we call you a cab? Whoa!" Almost the moment he finished the question, she started taking a nose dive for the pavement and he wound up holding her up by an accidental handful of her chest. He balled up both hands trying to hold her up with his forearms instead. She perked up violently, a look of revulsion on her face.

She shoved him away with surprising force. Frankey braced him against stumbling further backward. "Get your hands off!!" she shouted viciously, stumbling backward, smacking against the glass behind her hard enough it was amazing it hadn't cracked or shattered. She sank, sitting precariously on the brick window sill, holding the back of her head.

Hudson put both hands up, taking slow, small steps closer. "Okay, *okay*. I'm *really* sorry. I didn't want you to fall and hit your head. You know what… stay right there. Let us call you an ambulance. I'll pay for it. Just…"

She spat on him. Landed on a pant leg. "Piss off, asshole."

He sighed. Fact of the matter was, he couldn't call an ambulance for someone who could tell him not to. "All right. I will. We'll go. I'm sorry."

Backing away, stuffing his hands into his pockets, he came back close by Frankey's side. "She doesn't look good," Neagley said unsurely, quickly taking him by the arm.

"No, she doesn't." He sighed heavily, looking back over his shoulder, assessing her condition. She might be closer to passing out than they were to their car. "Do me a favor—"

"Walk slowly?"

Hudson half-smiled, chuckling. He put a caressing hand over hers on his forearm. God in Heaven he loved this woman. They walked on in silence a good hundred metres or so, hearing a few staggering footsteps, a skittering beer bottle, a tumble of a piece of scrap wood, then… nothing. Hudson frowned, looking backward. "Where'd she go?"

Frankie, narrowed her eyes, scanning the street. The only other person on the road was two blocks and behind them. "Inside the bar? Calling a cab?"

No… he hadn't heard a door open. It was the instinct of any vulnerable animal to find a secluded place when they were too ill or injured to survive. Human beings were no exception. He turned around, moving at the fastest walk he could manage without running, coming to the mouth of a

slim alley between buildings. There was only enough room for dumpsters and various refuse on one side of the passage. Neagley came up behind him. He dug his phone out of his pocket turning on the flashlight, the brightest area of the beam pointed down the open side of the alley. Nothing. No one. He panned down to the recycling bins, trash cans, discarded wooden palettes, the dumpster…

"*Shit!*" They said it as one. A pale-skinned foot, half-in, half-out of a pretty, heeled, glittering shoe was clearly visible sticking out from behind the dumpster. Hudson handed Frankey his phone and sprinted over to the girl. No matter how physically impressive Frankey was, she couldn't move as quickly in heels. He skidded to a stop standing over the young woman—she couldn't have been more than nineteen, seventeen even—getting down on one knee, pulling her up from where she lay limp, among reeking restaurant garbage bags and water-logged cardboard, into the light Frankey carried with her. Ducking out of the light, he held her face up. Hard to tell if she was turning blue or if she was just that pale because it was wet and chilly. Gently as he could he held her face turned toward the light and opened one of her eyes. The only person who could ever have fit anything through a pupil that small was the dude in the Bible who threaded a camel through the eye of a needle.

"She's overdosing, badly. Call nine-one-one." Patting his pockets, Hudson's stomach sank. Neagley didn't have her purse; he was carrying her phone 'cause dinner and the movie had been on him tonight. As he stood up, mind racing, Neagley got down beside the girl, emergency services call already dialling, evening dress ripping, tights ruined almost on contact with the pavement. He ran out onto the street going to the nearest bar. The sign had been on when they walked past, hadn't it? It wasn't now. He tried the door. Locked. Pounding on the door he waited. Tried again. One more time. "*POLICE! OPEN UP!* There's a girl out here overdosing!" Ten seconds. Twenty. Nothing. He checked his watch. Late enough it was early. Closing time. Everything else was restaurants and retail stores closed hours ago. He sprinted back to the mouth of the alley. There were sirens in the distance, but they were… distant. "Frankey?"

"Ambulance is on the way. ETA ten, maybe twelve minutes. I'm staying on the line." Neagley had the girl over on her side, covered in her ruined dress jacket. Neagley fixed him with a grim stare, giving her head a subtle shake. If this girl had that long she was one in a million.

Stripping his jacket off as he rushed back to them, digging for his car keys, he handed it to Frankey to cover her better, keep her warmer. He knelt, taking the ankle piece he carried out of it's holster, offering it to her. Neagley took it carefully.

"I'm going for it." He stood as Neagley nodded.

Hudson beat feet like the Hounds of Hell were on his heels. The lot was two blocks away. He had five doses of Narcan in the First Aid kit in his trunk. His lungs and throat burned within seconds of hitting a dead sprint. Vaulting the lot's fence, hardly slowing down, at the same time he tried to remember where the fuck they'd parked, he scanned the lot pressing his alarm button. On the second press his black Ford five cars away lit up and let loose a blaring cacophony. He course-corrected toward it, beelined to the trunk, he popped the hatch and snatched up the First Aid checking to know it was there before running back. If it wasn't he'd have to break into another car and the roll the kid's dice on finding some there. Seven doses. Plenty. Slamming the trunk closed he made it back over the fence a little slower. Hard to pick up speed running through cars with their rear view mirrors sticking out.

Snatching the First Aid kit up off the pavement where he'd dropped it to keep both hands free, he tear-assed it back to the alley. His mouth and throat tasted like blood, ears ringing.

The phone's light in the alley was out. "*Frankey*!?" He sprinted the last few steps to her side. Frankey was on her back beside the girl, thousand yard stare in her eyes, shivering weakly. "*Oh God!* The *fuck* did you do!?"

"Sh-sh-e…d-mn… um s-sorrry…"

Hudson ripped into the kit making sure he had track of all seven doses, donning a pair of durable nitrile gloves. For a split second he considered dosing the girl first. Lord forgive him, he didn't. "Do *not* die on me, soldier. Do not *fucking* die on me!!" he shouted, holding her head in hands pointing her eyes toward him. Hand under Neagley's head to hold her steady, he put the spout up her nose. "Breathe, Frankey. *Heave*." He pressed the dose the exact moment she hauled in every cubic centimetre of air she could. "Hold… Breath out." She did. "In." She did, he emptied the cartridge and went for a second one. "Last one." Up the other nostril, and they had it empty in another two breaths. He watched Frankey's eyes get just a little clearer under the full moon's light. That had to do. He'd give the girl four if she wasn't already dead, and save the last one for Frankey if the first two wore off.

He lay the First Aid kit beside the kid's head, holding her up. She looked bad, eyes vacant, skin blue. If she wasn't already dead, she had *seconds*. "Kid, if you can hear me, when you feel something go up your nose, breathe. As hard and deep as you can. Here it is." He sprayed the dose. No breath. Giving her chest three hard, deep pumps, he went back and emptied the first one. Then the second, the same cycle, up the other nostril. No breathing. There was a sickening grinding sound and feeling coming from her chest. Bones in her ribcage were already broken. Frankey had started giving her proper CPR and rescue breathing. *God, if there is any mercy in you, give her the strength to breathe*. "Come on, kiddo. There's a whole beautiful life out there worth living for. Come *on*! *Breathe*!" Third one. Full speed chest compressions, a chance to breathe. Nothing. He genuinely debated saving the last two for Frankey if this poor kid showed no signs of life. "*Breathe*! *Fucking breathe*!" he shouted at the girl, giving her head a solid shake, depressing the plunger. Unless he was wishfully hallucinating, her face twitched, and he'd felt her chest rise. Barely, but it had. "That's it, sweetheart. One more. *Breathe deep*. I know it hurts." He emptied it. She had to be in agony, breathing in with a crushed ribcage, but she was doing it—fighting for her life. He took a comforting hold of her hand. She didn't want to die. Her breathing was weak and shuddering, but it was there. He gave her the fourth one, each breath as feeble and stitled as the one before, but definitely happening.

It wasn't his imagination, the sirens were getting much louder.

"Mn… *sorry*." His own heart damned near stopped. Nearly properly formed words. Frankey was coming to. He cast his gaze skyward. *Thank you.*

"Hey, Frankey! It's okay. You're gonna be okay. Help is almost here." He fought the powerful urge to kiss her. Likely exactly how she'd been dosed. Residue of something on the kid's mouth. He held onto her hand, giving it a warming massage. The kid started making these god-awful sounds. Either she was beginning to cry in agony, every breath and now sob disturbing her fractured and broken ribs, or… something his grandfather on his mother's side, born and raised in the Netherlands before World War Two, once told him about men dying in battle came into mind. In the losing throes of a person's struggle for life—their "deatjocht" or death fight—they sometimes made these terrible, guttural moan-like wailing sounds, and he might now know for himself what that sounded like. He looked from the

young girl's face, to Frankey, and back to the young woman grappling with death.

Giving Frankey's hand one last squeeze, he laid her hand on his thigh, pressing it down flat. "Hold on to me, Frankey. *Never* let go." Her fingers started to curl down, into his thigh, almost to the point of pain.

Between the young girl's haunting wails—where she *had* to be breathing in to make sound—he gave her their last Narcan dose. Flashes of light appeared on the far wall of the alley. Blue and red. Paramedics on the street nearby. Only just now did he begin to hear the screaming sirens again. Red and blue lights became white headlights seconds later.

"*WE'RE OVER HERE! DOWN THE ALLEY! BESIDE THE DUMPSTER!*"

Silhouettes of two men ran into the headlight's beams.

"Sir! Calm down and tell m—" A paramedics kit hit the pavement beside Frankey.

"My wife was overdosed with something giving this girl CPR. She's come around slightly after two doses and has got hold of my leg. This kid has five doses on board, breathing again, *barely*. Spent anywhere from five to six minutes with low or no breathing, unresponsive. Her ribs are fractured from CPR." He checked his watch. "We found her already ODing but still breathing shallow when we called nine-one-one eleven minutes ago. She lost consciousness approximately twelve to thirteen minutes ago. I ran for the naloxone in our car parked down the road. When I arrived back here, they were both down."

One of the paramedics was gently taking Frankey's hand off his leg, and needed him to let go of her wrist. "Sir, we need you to give us space."

"Yeah." He stood and backed away, facing the the ambulance headlights. Another one pulled up at the alleyhead. He hadn't even realized there were more sirens. "Careful. There's an ankle piece on the ground, and one of our phones here somewhere…" The headlights were blinding. He couldn't see a damn thing.

"I'll help you find them. Sir, what's your name?"

"Hudson Riley—"

"Detective Riley." One of them said his name like they knew and admired him, but he couldn't clearly see anyone's faces.

He nodded, still blinded even with a hand in front of his eyes. He fumbled for his badge. It was in his jacket with the dying girl. "Yeah. Chicago Police. My badge is the right breast jacket pocket." Wincing against the light, he heard some rustling.

"Sir, your wife is in *rough* shape, but she's going to be fine." He nodded. The two incoming paramedics went straight to the young woman without hesitation. "We've given her a third dose and she has an IV in. Heart rate coming down."

Hudson nodded. "The girl?" No one answered. The sounds of her wails had gone quieter. "Fuckin' *tell me*—" They had her wrapped in a blanket, oxygen mask on full tilt, IV line in, being lifted onto a collapsible gurney and loaded into the leading ambulance.

A hand took hold of his shoulder. "Detective, I don't make promises I don't know I can keep. Her vitals are weak and getting weaker. We're doing everything we can, and they'll run red lights all the way. If you believe in this sort of thing; she's in God's hands now."

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Someone… was… messing with his hair…? Hudson jerked himself awake and his head up, something warm sliding off his shoulders. His jacket was laid out over Frankey's feet and lower legs. Someone had put a folded bedsheet over his shoulders while he was passed out. The hand lazily tousling his hair belonged to Frankey.

She smiled, groggy. "Morning, sunshine."

He put a hand to his face. Dried salt streaks from copious tears run dry. Running nose. He let out a sarcastic laugh. *Lovely*. Frankey had crashed again after arriving at the hospital. No one was quite sure why, but there might have been something she unconsciously licked off her lips that hit her again. Once they got her stabilized, they'd cleaned her up best as anyone could and she'd been monitored closely over the hours since. Giving her hand a loving squeeze, he stood up, stiffly going over to the sink to at least get the salt stinging his skin and snot hanging from his nose rinsed off. Couldn't give a fraction of a shit what he looked like right this minute. Hudson stood there, braced on the sink, letting the water drip off before splashing on more. "Frankey…" The bottom of her stomach fell out at the tone of his voice. He dried his face with brown paper towel. "*Christ in Heaven*…" he whispered under his breath, turning around to face her. "*Why?* You *know* touching her without gloves or a dam could kill you!"

Frankey had this oddly unconcerned look on her face. His expression turned to incredulity. Was she still high? Couldn't be, with every
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counteragent they'd dumped into her system. Then, she frowned, her expression quickly turning into a grimace and tears. "*I'm sorry—*"

He was back around the other side of the bed holding onto her hand hard before a sob cut her off. "No, *no*… you don't have to be sorry. It's all right. You're still here and that's the *only thing* that matters. I…" He kissed the back of her IV-free hand like a penitent kneeling before a saint. She was shaking. "I'm just trying to understand." He reached for a box of cheap-ass Kleenex on the bedside cabinet, bringing it to the bed for them both, plucking two and wiping away her tears.

She wouldn't look him in the eyes while she thought back to the alley. Then, she gave him this strange look, letting out a weak yet incredulous laugh. "I know *exactly* how stupid it was… but her breathing stopped, pulse gone, blue in the face, she went dead-limp… and I couldn't do it. I couldn't watch her die and not try." She put her hand curled into grasping claws over her heart, looking for the words to say something had a hold of her by it, but finding none.

A soul is what gives us feelings. It's like a conduit through which the Lord speaks to us. The words echoed around in his mind.

"The ambulance was at least halfway there… even with a forced heartbeat moving blood she needed air. I don't know if it was this insane attack of hubris or what it was, but you *had* to be nearly back. If she could still make it after being in her condition, I stood a damned good chance of being able to take it. It was this overwhleming instrusive thought, and a feeling in my heart *so potent*, I did it. State of mind I'm in now? I *never* would have…" Frankey shrugged. "She'd be dead." Suddenly the thought hit her, dread taking over her expression. "Did she…?"

Hudson smiled, water coming up into his eyes. He nodded. "She's still here. On life support, and unresponsive, but she made it. If she'd made it to the hospital a minute or two later, she'd have been beyond saving. Brain scans look normal. We'll have to wait until she wakes up to know if there's been any cognitive impairment those scans can't register. They're having a hard time finding her family."

Frankey smiled, amused, speaking slowly. "We're waiting on her, are we?"

Hudson immediately had this look on; *fuckin' of course we are, after everything you just put me through!*

Her smiled spread to her eyes, turning lovingly fond. Frankey's expression suddenly changed. She took especially caressing hold of his

hand bringing him close as she could, holding his hand to her sternum. "My *wife* was overdosed…" she repeated with a kind of loving certainty that sent a thrill skittering up his back.

He laughed, hanging his head but nodding, giving the back of his neck a good scratch. "Frankey, I…" He shook his head. "In the moment, I needed them to understand perfectly how much you mean to me. Friend with *serious* benefits? Girlfriend? Lover? Partner? Life partner? Fiancée? Significant other took too fuckin' long to get out of my mouth more than once and felt ridiculously… clinical?" Hudson gave his shoulders a shrug. "No other word fit. Wife doesn't fit without your say-so, but I had a fuckin' split-second to choose, and *that's* what came out." He leaned his cheek on his palm, wearing this so-sue-me, love-doped look.

There was a sudden gravity to her loving expression. Putting up the finger with the heart monitor clipped on, she ordered him, closer… *closer*… and *closer still*, until…

She pulled him into a dizzying kiss. When their lips came apart… "It fits."

Hudson stood there, leaning above her, astonished. "It—"

"Fits," she purred against his lips, kissing him again, this time getting back even better than she gave.