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# DAISY HARRIS

## TOWNIE AND THE TWINK

MEN OF  
HOLSUM COLLEGE 3

*The*  
ManLove  
Collection

**Men of Holsum College 3**

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# Townie and the Twink

Insightful to a fault, Gabe Ashton knows Nick Flynn's gay even if Nick doesn't. And after seeing how the townie looks at his "buddy," Gabe knows Nick is in love with a guy who'll never love him back. So Gabe invites Nick to campus parties and to hang out with new people. But soon their friendship turns physical, and Gabe wonders if he's in just as much denial as Nick is.

Nick's straight—or so he's always assumed. But he can't deny that the things he's doing with Gabe are hot. More than that, he likes Gabe in a way he's never liked anyone else. Well, anyone else except his high school friend, John.

The hardest thing to give up is a fantasy, and the hardest thing to face is the truth. But if Nick wants the man standing in front of him, he'll have to give up the one he never had.

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Daisy Harris

EROTIC ROMANCE MANLOVE



Siren Publishing, Inc.

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# DEDICATION

Thanks to my beta readers, Brien Michaels, Annabelle Blume, and especially Annabeth Albert. I couldn't do it without you guys!  
And thanks to my fabulous family who supports and encourages me no matter what craziness I find myself writing. Kisses and hugs.

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# TOWNIE AND THE TWINK

*Men of Holsum College 3*

DAISY HARRIS

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## Chapter One

Gabe Ashton didn't have superpowers, but sometimes it felt like he did. He preferred to think of his ability to read people as some kind of ESP, instead of constantly wondering why the fuck no one else saw things that to him seemed completely obvious.

Like the fact that the guy from his statistics class sitting across the pub from him was gay. Gabe had never spoken to the guy and had only seen him in class for a month, since it was October, but he didn't understand why his friends didn't agree with his estimation that the dude was completely same-sex oriented.

More importantly, he thought as he watched the guy fiddle with his coaster and order buffalo wings, Gabe wondered if the guy himself knew.

That was the freaky thing about Gabe's brand of ESP— he could never tell if people knew about themselves the things he knew about them. Unfortunately, it was the folks who were the most in denial who always seemed to project their aura, or emotions, or whatever it was Gabe saw, the loudest. It was like they were crying out for help and only Gabe heard.

Sometimes it made Gabe feel powerful, other times annoyed. He wasn't sure which thing he was feeling at that moment, but he couldn't stop himself from grabbing his messenger bag full of books and walking across the pub to talk to the guy. After all, they were the only two kids from Holsum College at the neighborhood pub.

Students generally hung out at the hipper Café Vermont down the street. The pub was more of a local hangout, which is why Gabe liked to study there. When he needed to concentrate, Gabe preferred to be around people

he didn't know. The place smelled like stale beer, but the light was good. Plus, they had some of the best fries around.

"Hey." He walked up to the little square of a table and held out his hand. "You're, um...Nicolas, right? Nicolas Flynn? From Professor Feinstein's Behavioral Stats class?"

The guy looked up, a little confused at first, but then his face relaxed into something that wasn't quite a smile but more a nervous quirk of his lips. "People call me Nick. You sit on the right near the front. With that guy..."

"Chris," Gabe offered. He hadn't expected Nick to remember him, so it wasn't as if Gabe was offended. "Didn't you transfer in this year?" Gabe knew for sure Nick hadn't been at school his freshman year, but they did seem to be sharing a class populated mostly by juniors and seniors.

"Yea h. Just started this fall." Nick shifted in his seat. He seemed uncomfortable, but Gabe couldn't put his finger on why. Gabe read people's emotions like they were flashing billboards, but he was just as crappy as everyone else at figuring out the reasons.

"Where from?" Gabe took another sip of his megasized Diet Coke. Nick was cute, he realized as he watched him closer than he ever had before. He had reddish-brown hair and freckles, and though it could have made him look like some kind of 1950s parody, it worked on Nick's compact frame. His coloring made him look like a firecracker—cute and quick.

"North Central."

Gabe heard defensiveness in Nick's answer, though he wondered if most other guys wouldn't have noticed. So—Nick had transferred in from a local community college. "So, you're from around here?"

He felt stupid the second after he asked. Of course Nick was from the area, otherwise he wouldn't have been going to school at North Central.

"Yeah, just across the highway." Nick blushed a bit when he said it, a hint of color darkening under his freckles. He didn't look happy, and Gabe figured Nick had had enough of being interrogated.

"Cool." Gabe hitched his book bag over his shoulder. It was getting dark out, and he wanted to walk back to campus before it got too late. He paused for a moment, just to see if Nick would offer to walk him back or invite him to sit or something. "I should let you get back to...um, whatever." He met Nick's eyes. They were blue and just as button perfect as the rest of him.



“No.” Nick blinked as if he had just remembered his manners. He shoved one of the chairs away from the table. “I mean, you can hang if you want. I was gonna meet some guys, but they couldn’t make it.”

Gabe tried to suss out what Nick meant about the people who hadn’t showed, because there was something in his posture that said Nick was on edge about his friends bailing. But Nick’s expression was fixed, friendly but not quite smiling.

Nick was just cute enough that Gabe really wanted to sit with him a little longer and figure out whether he and Nick batted for the same team. “Sure. Thanks.” Gabe dropped into the chair. He scanned the rest of the pub, watching the locals filing in to sit at the bar and families wrestling kids into high chairs.

Middleton only had a handful of restaurants along the strip of Main Street. Families and working folks from the town itself seldom went to the places frequented by college kids. They stuck to the pub, the pizza place, and the diner out on the highway.

“So, you liking Holsum so far?” Gabe looked up as Nick’s hot wings arrived. For a second, Nick looked sad. Gabe followed the line of his sight and realized something about the wings made him unhappy.

“Yeah, the classes are amazing,” Nick said to his basket of food instead of Gabe. He picked up a wing but put it down without taking a bite. “It’s a lot to get used to, though.”

“I can imagine.” Gabe studied the basket of hot wings, wondering if it would be rude to ask for one. He’d only had time for a snack before his volunteer shift at the assisted-living home earlier and was getting hungry. “Most of my freshman year is a blur.”

Nick gave him another half smile, his lips twitching as if they didn’t dare to move too far. Then he pushed the basket in Gabe’s direction. “You’re welcome to have some. I sorta thought I was gonna be sharing them…” His gaze faltered again. Clearly, he was annoyed his friends hadn’t shown up.

Gabe understood. It was hard enough being a student at a new school. Nick probably felt out of sorts already without people bailing on him. “Cool, I’m starving.” Gabe picked a wing out of the pile and bit off some of the sweet, sticky meat. Around his mouthful, he said, “I’ll pay for half. Don’t mean to mooch.”

“Thanks.” Nick sounded relieved, as if he had been worried about covering the cost of the wings alone. It made sense—a lot of kids who

transferred into Holsum had done so for financial reasons. In fact, Gabe was a little surprised Nick was eating offcampus at all. He'd have been able to eat on campus for half the price of the pub. That was, unless he was meeting people who weren't students.

"So. You're a junior ,too, right? Who've you been hanging out with so far?" It was a thinly disguised way of asking if he was gay, but Gabe was grasping at straws. Nick gave off a really conflicted vibe, like he was so closed off he couldn't even smile without getting nervous.

"Oh, I don't go to too many campus parties. Mostly still hang with my buddies from high school." Nick twirled his coaster, staring at the table.

His answer didn't help Gabe at all. "Got a girlfriend?" Gabe wasn't sure if straight men ever asked that kind of question, but it didn't matter. Pretty much everyone on campus knew Gabe was gay. If Nick hadn't figured it out,he wasn't paying attention.

Nick let out a little huff that might have been a laugh if the guy wasn't wound so tight. "No." Then he added, "Not right now."

Gabe sat back in his chair, sizing Nick up. He was just about to flat-out ask if he was gay when the door to the pub swung open, and Nick's attention snapped to the guy walking in.

The hint of a smile that had played on Nick's lips spread, blooming across his face. His color rose up bright under his freckles. He looked positively buoyant. Gabe followed Nick's line of sight and almost let out an audible groan.

Doorway guy was gorgeous. Tall, handsome, imposing. He crossed the restaurant in a few long strides and held out a hand to Nick. "Hey, sorry I'm late." He smiled down at Nick, but it was nothing compared to how Nick grinned back.

Gabe closed his eyes, knowing he could have gone his whole life without seeing something so pathetic. Whoever Nick's friend was, he was straight. Not straight like Nick—who seemed like he was trying so hard with his tattered jeans and baseball cap and his careful swagger.

His friend was a different ilk altogether. His eyes shone with the kind of entitled confidence only granted to the very attractive, very charismatic, and very, very heterosexual.

Nick slapped his friend's hand, but when his friend gave him a good-natured pat on the arm, Nick shuddered like he was trying not to go stiff but couldn't quite help it. "John," Nick addressed the Adonis. "This is Gabe.

He's um..."

Gabe crossed his legs and looked the "John" guy over. John was most guys' wet dream. Well, most guys who were gay. Gabe smirked. "Nick's in a class of mine."

"Nice to meet you." John didn't make eye contact. He seemed to be focusing just over Gabe's left shoulder. Then he turned to Nick. "How you been?"

Nick and John launched into conversation, and though Gabe didn't participate, he managed to glean the salient fact that John and Nick had been friends since grade school. He could also tell, studying Nick's nervous hands and John's mellow chuckle, that Nick had the most pathetic crush known to mankind.

Gabe finished the last of his soda. "Hey, it was nice running into you, but I gotta go." He stood from the table and grabbed his bag. Then he glanced at Nick, hoping the guy would at least have the grace to look apologetic for blowing Gabe off, but Nick was too busy darting nervous glances at John.

"Yeah, nice seeing you." Nick's wave was jerky and careless. Probably, Gabe thought uncharitably, the same way Nick would fuck.

"Bye." Gabe turned toward the door and was readying to leave, but John leaned forward, his body language a warning even though he wasn't exactly meeting Gabe's eyes.

"Wait a sec." John stared past Gabe to the door, where jingling bells signaled that some new customers had entered. His eyes widened a tiny fraction, and he spoke to Nick out of the corner of his mouth. "You want to get your friend out of here?"

Nick nodded. He touched Gabe's arm and eased him back down to sitting in his chair. "Dude. You've really gotta leave."

Gabe would have argued that he was about to do exactly that, but he was starting to be able to read Nick's understated facial expressions. Nick's tiny frown meant he was scared or at least concerned.

"What?" Gabe tried to look at the guys who had just come in, but Nick tugged at his arm.

"Don't look, dumb ass," Nick whispered.

Confused, Gabe kept his eyes on his empty soda glass. He used his peripheral vision and watched the men who'd walked in make their way to the bar. Whatever showdown John and Nick had been expecting didn't seem like it was going to happen, and Gabe kept chancing looks at Nick to

figure out when it was safe for him to leave. Unfortunately, Nick had shut down worse than ever. His face conveyed nothing, just blank disinterest.

“Um, can I leave already?” Gabe asked in quiet voice. He looked to John for hints, since Nick didn’t seem capable of expressing anything helpful.

John clenched his fist on the table. There was a determined and angry gleam in his eyes that made him crazy attractive. No doubt about it, he was hot. Gabe could completely understand why Nick was interested.

“Yeah, but you should go out the back way,” John muttered. He darted a look to the guys at the bar.

Gabe only saw the hems of their jackets, since he was following the other guys’ lead and not looking at the enemy directly. With trepidation, he glanced at the bathrooms then scanned the upper walls of the pub looking for the emergency exit. His heartbeat picked up as he realized he didn’t actually know how to get out of the pub other than the main entrance. In a single painful moment, Gabe realized he was alone, away from campus, sitting with guys he hardly knew. And from what he understood in Nick’s and John’s awkward glances, he was a few feet away from gay bashers.

“I...” Gabe heard his voice faltering and hated himself for it. He wasn’t a coward. In fact, he wasn’t even a weakling. But the truth was, he’d gotten pretty darn complacent on campus. Gabe tried to steady his voice. “D’you guys know another way out?” He tried to add a laugh to his whisper and failed pitifully.

John shot Nick a meaningful look. “You wanna take him?”

There was a hint of mutiny in Nick’s eyes when he said, “Yeah. I’ll show him the way.” Then he scooted back in his chair, making a god-awful screeching noise that sounded inordinately loud after their hissed conversation.

Nick gestured to Gabe to get up, but when Gabe started walking Nick got behind him, shielding Gabe from sight of the guys at the bar.

“Ya coming back?” John asked Nick.

“Yeah.” Nick glared at Gabe. Then he said to John, “Be back in a second.”

\* \* \* \*

Nick shepherded the queer kid from his class down the hallway that wound past the kitchens. He knew the way like the back of his hand since he worked four nights a week as a busboy.

When they got to the emergency exit, Nick lowered the panic bar and tried to shove it, but the door stuck. Through the slice of opening, Nick

could see a thick chain holding it closed. He closed his eyes and cursed whoever hadn't remembered to take the lock off. The pub could get shut down if anyone found out the emergency exit was blocked.

"So, who were those guys?" Gabe crowded close to him. Gabe was a little taller than him but skinnier by at least twenty pounds. He was probably strong—all the gay guys Nick saw around college worked out. But Gabe Ashton wouldn't stand a chance against the guys Nick had seen walking into the pub.

"That's Chuck Carver and his crew. They..." Nick didn't want to say "they hate gay guys" any more than he wanted to say "they hate college kids." Instead, he let his eyes wander from Gabe's floppy haircut, over his too-tight clothes, and down to his purple sneakers with red laces. With a sigh, he settled for, "They're kinda bullies."

Gabe stared at him for longer than a straight guy would. Hell, Nick wondered if anyone did as much staring as Gabe did. It was like Gabe was peering into people and trying to figure out how they worked. Nick wasn't sure if he found it creepy or just plain weird.

He didn't want to tell Gabe that the doorway was barred in case the spoiled college brat called the health department. And it weirded Nick out that Gabe was standing so close to him in the tiny space where the hallway ended. Nick took a step back and glared at the guy. "I don't mean to be rude, but what are you staring at?"

"You don't know, do you?" Gabe didn't seem at all concerned that they weren't actually walking through the exit. Instead, he was studying Nick's face like he could unravel Nick's insides.

"Know what?" Nick backed up to the wall. He heard the dinner shift gearing up in the kitchen and felt steam from the dishwashers billowing down the corridor. Sometime soon one of the servers would come out the back way to take out the afternoon's garbage.

Gabe cocked his head to the side, and, following Nick's body language, he backed up to the opposite wall, where he leaned with one ankle crossed over the other. He smiled from beneath the curtain of his dark, emo hair. "You don't know you're in love with him."

Nick scrubbed at his neck, his attention on the sounds in the kitchen. "In love with who?" He'd known Gabe for all of fifteen minutes. He had no idea what the guy was talking about.

“Your high school buddy, stupid.” Gabe rotated so he leaned sideways on the wall. He had the wicked expression of an unholy being who somehow saw one’s darkest desires and wanted to draw them out. Gabe’s eyes flared wider, and he asked in an excited voice, “Shit, you really don’t know, do you?” He stared at Nick like a science experiment, like some kind of bacteria spore he was fascinated with but also grossed out by. “Oh my God, you don’t.”

“What?” Nick tried to chuckle, but the sound died in his throat. “John? Naw, we just played football together...” He looked away, letting his voice trail off. He stared desperately at the door’s panic bar and wondered if their voices echoed to the kitchens from their hiding place between the walls. “He’s just a friend.”

“Let me guess, he was the quarterback?” Gabe’s smile was too sharp, the lift of his eyebrow too cutting.

Nick slid his jaw forward, grinding his teeth. His life wasn’t a motherfucking cliché, and he hated Gabe for making him feel like it was. All the kids at school did that, passed judgment on him the second they learned he was from town. They took one look at his clothes and one listen to how he talked and decided they knew every damned thing about his life. “Yeah, he was. But that’s not why we’re friends. We...”

“Had sleepovers in junior high and rubbed out your puberty boners together?” Gabe smirked. “I don’t care what you tell yourself. But don’t feel like you need to lie for my benefit.”

“I’m not lying.” Nick wasn’t sure why Gabe even fucking cared. “It’s not like I have anything against gay dudes, okay? But I’m not one.”

“Hey.” Gabe raised his hands in apology. “I didn’t mean to give you a hard time.”

Nick hadn’t realized until that moment that he was shaking. Maybe he was just hungry or tired. “It’s fine.” Nick looked desperately toward the kitchens. He knew his face was bright red and hated his reaction. “Listen, I’m not offended. But, I’m not gay. And I’m definitely not in love...” He let his voice trail off, not even wanting to finish the sentence.

“Okay, fine.” Gabe shrugged, taking a step back. His posture was less aggressive, but he rolled his eyes. “I won’t bring it up again.”

A clatter sounded down the hall, and Nick heard the kitchen doors jostling open. A split second later, one of the kitchen staff wheeled a trash can full of broken-down boxes their direction. When she saw the two of them

standing there, she looked up from her work. “Hey, what’s up? Can’t get out?”

Nick knew the girl by sight but not by name. “Yeah, someone must’ve forgotten to take off the lock when they opened this afternoon.”

The girl sighed, dragging a set of keys out of her pocket. “Crap. I’ll let the manager know.”

Gabe and Nick pressed into opposite sides of the wall and let her pass between them. Gabe held the door open for the girl to get by with her trash can.

While she loaded cardboard into the Dumpster labeled recycling, Gabe gave Nick a nervous glance. “You wanna walk back to campus together?”

A weird part of Nick did want to walk back with the guy. Nick didn’t really have any friends at school, and despite Gabe’s suggestion that Nick was gay and in love with his best friend, Gabe seemed fairly nice. After all, Nick figured most gay guys thought everyone else was gay, too. It wasn’t surprising Gabe would have seen whatever he wanted to see in Nick. “No, I told John I’d be back.” Nick hoped his best friend wasn’t too pissed that he was gone so long. “In fact, I should head back inside.”

Gabe gave him one last searching look, like he was trying to see something that Nick knew wasn’t there. But it didn’t bother Nick as much as it had before. He was starting to realize Gabe was just like that. Some guys farted or belched, others stared. “Yeah, cool. See ya in class.” Gabe walked off down the alley, his book bag hitched over his shoulder.

Nick waited until the girl from the kitchens had maneuvered the garbage can back through the door, and then he went back to the pub. It had filled up a bit in his absence, with families coming in to beat the dinner rush. Chuck and his friends were still at the bar, and though John was still sitting at the table where Nick had left him, John’s girlfriend had joined him.

“Hey, that took a while.” John smiled up from the table, his eyes shining with good-natured teasing. “Did that kid give you a hand job out back or something?” John snickered, his easy expression showing that he didn’t really think Nick and Gabe had been doing anything of the sort.

Still, Nick worried his face was turning red.

“Ew, that’s so gross!” John’s girlfriend chimed in. Nick couldn’t quite remember her name. John had started dating her right around the time Nick started school.

“Oh hey,” John said to the girl. “I’m not sure you guys have met. “Stacey,

this is Nick.”

It occurred to Nick that John was introducing him to his girlfriend and not the other way around, and though Nick knew it was stupid, he couldn't help but feel slightly dissed.

“Hi, Nick.” Stacey was pretty, Nick guessed, but a little hard looking. Her hair was blonde with generous dark roots, and she wore too much makeup.

“Hey.” Nick reached for the basket of hot wings and found it empty.

“Sorry, man. Stace was starved from her shift.” John put his arm around his girlfriend. “Do you want to get another order? Me and Stace are heading out, but if you're hungry...”

Nick shook his head. “No, it's cool.” He could eat cheaper on campus anyway. So he just sucked down the last of his pop, trying not to glower at his best friend's girl.

## Chapter Two

“I told you he wasn't.” Chris pulled his notebook out of his bag and unzipped the outer flap to pluck out a pen. He glanced over his shoulder to check out Nick. “You just think he's gay because he's cute.”

Gabe kicked Chris's shin. “Stop looking at him,” he whispered. He dug around in the bottom of his bag for something to write with, but in the end, Gabe held out a hand. “Can I borrow a pen?”

Chris blinked, his expression annoyed. “Why don't you ever bring your own?” Still, he grudgingly handed over a mechanical pencil. With another quick peek over his shoulder, Chris leaned into Gabe's side. “Seriously, though. I'm actually kind of interested. What makes you so sure he is?” Chris's eyes were wide and blue, and he looked at Gabe with honest enthusiasm.

“Well, before it was a mixture of things but mostly what he *didn't* do. Like he didn't ever check out girls...But you didn't see him yesterday. When his ‘man friend’ walked into that pub, it was like the sky opened and sunlight shined through onto his smiling face. His very gay, smiling face.”

“Oh, c'mon.” Chris folded a leg under himself and opened his notes. The professor had walked in but was still getting organized near the front of the class. “I was real close to some of my buddies back home.”

Gabe scoffed. “Yeah, but you *were* gay.” He loaded a new piece of lead into the pencil, the scent of it reminiscent of SATs and other standardized



tests.

Chris socked him in the arm. “Dude. Most guys have close guy friends. It’s not just a gay thing.”

“Says the queer.” Gabe snickered, loving to get a rise out of his friend. He knew Chris was right. Hetero boys could be crazy homoerotic in how they wrestled and fought and joked. Gabe had spent plenty of glorious hours furtively watching members of Holsum’s football team messing around on the college lawns.

“Says everyone, dufus.” Chris had to murmur, since the professor was clearing his throat by the blackboards.

The professor started his lecture, so Gabe tried to focus his attention on the front of the room. Still, he felt acutely aware of Nick’s exact location in the back. He kept wanting to turn around and see if Nick was looking his way, though of course Nick would be staring his direction, since they were seated in his line of sight. Gabe reminded himself that he had in no way sat in that location on purpose.

Gabe glanced over to where Chris was scribbling furious notes. He didn’t feel too guilty about not paying attention to the lecture. After all, he could copy Chris’s notes after class. So Gabe quietly scrawled “\$50 says he’s gay” into the corner of his notebook. Then he eased it to the edge of his desk and nudged Chris in the arm.

Chris flinched then looked at Gabe with confusion. Gabe gestured discreetly at the note until Chris had read it. Then Gabe scribbled under the first words, “What do you say?”

Rolling his eyes, Chris wrote in the top margin of his notebook, “I don’t have \$50.” Then, when he heard Gabe’s muffled snort, he wrote in his neat cursive, “And if I did, I wouldn’t go up against a guy with better gaydar than mine.” He ended the note in a little smiley face.

So Gabe drew a little sad face under his smiley one. But he redirected his attention to the professor lest they get called out for acting like fourteen-year-old girls.

Gabe spent the rest of class doodling in margins and trying not to think about Nick. Truth was, Gabe learned more from reading Chris’s notes and the textbook than he did from class. He was one of those people who remembered what they saw but forgot what they heard. He mostly came to class because Chris was nice and Nick was hot.

The forty-five-minute period passed extra slowly, and when class ended,

Gabe shoved his stuff into his backpack.

“Geez, hurry much?” Chris laughed as Gabe tried to beat the crowd to the door.

Gabe smirked. “Just trying to get in my community service for the day—I’m a psych major, and he can call me Doctor Love.” He waggled his eyebrows before jogging up the stairs to where Nick was pushing out the door. “Hey. What’s up?” Gabe felt stupid the second he’d said it. Obviously nothing new would have occurred in Nick’s life since Gabe had seen him the evening before. But the words were out, so Gabe decided to leave them.

“Not much.” Nick kept his eyes downcast as they walked through the building and into the quad outside. When they got into the open air, Nick slowed down a little. “How about you?”

Gabe smiled. “Not much.”

Nick seemed to be making a small effort to be friendly, and that made Gabe happy. “Hey, are you going to the homecoming thing at DeltaPhi Friday?” It was the biggest party on campus that night, so Gabe figured asking about it was a fairly neutral topic. But Nick surprised him by shrugging and saying, “Nah. I don’t think so.”

“Why not?” Gabe followed as Nick walked. It didn’t seem like Nick was trying to get away from him. Gabe figured Nick just had to get to another class or something.

“Well, I have to work until ten and then drive my mom’s car back home. It would be a pain in the ass to get back here on the bus. Then I’d have to haul back to my mom’s place again after the party.” Nick led the way to another building where Gabe assumed he had his next class.

“So you don’t live on campus?”

Nick lifted his chin, his expression defiant. “No.”

“Well, that sucks.” Gabe leaned against the wall. “Hey, if you need somewhere to crash, we’ve got a couch at my place.”

Nick narrowed his eyes, his expression suspicious. “Dude, you don’t even know me.”

Gabe rolled back his shoulders. “No, but I’m pretty sure you’re not going to steal our shit or murder us in our sleep.” He winked, not really flirting but just being friendly. “Why go to college if you can’t make it to the best parties?”

“Um...to get a better job?” Nick’s sarcasm sounded like he was trying to be

pissy but couldn't quite work up the venom.

"Yeah, well part of getting a better job is networking. And parties are great for that."

Nick snorted. "Yeah, I'm sure vomiting in public looks great on your resume."

"Here." Gabe grabbed Chris's pencil out of his pocket and fished a scrap of paper from his backpack. Then he scribbled out his information. "Here's my number and address. Seriously, you should go to the party Friday." He wasn't sure whether to add, "It'll be better for you than hanging out with the guy you're not in love with," but Gabe resisted.

Still, he was pretty sure Nick got his meaning, because that telltale blush darkened under his freckles.

*Damn.* Nick was pretty.

"Maybe," Nick said. He tucked the slip of paper into his pocket and opened the door for his next class. "I'll text you if I decide to go."

\* \* \* \*

Nick stood uncertainly on the edge of campus, watching students file along the walkways. He wondered if his jeans were too ripped or his shirt too boring. With nervous hands, he pulled off his hat and turned it backward. Then, wondering if the backward-baseball-cap thing made him look like a loser, he flipped the hat around to the front again, bending the rim so that it hid part of his face.

A knot of girls approached, giggling and wearing tiny skirts, and Nick picked up his pace to avoid them. It was one thing to go to a party on campus, something else entirely to have to deal with drunk and flirty girls at the same time.

He walked in long strides in the direction of Delta Phi and, before he could think about it, climbed the steps up to the front porch. He felt like everyone was staring at him.

The frat house had high ceilings and wood-paneled walls. The place was packed with people, all holding blue or red plastic cups. Music thudded through the room, and people seemed to be trying to dance, though there wasn't enough space.

Nick pressed into the rush of students, glad to be just one more body in the crowd instead of some sideliners staring in. He bet no one even noticed what he was wearing, since he couldn't see anything lower than anyone's shoulders.

He followed the crush of people to the back of the party, where a row of kegs lined up against the wall. Though it took some jostling, he managed to get a cup and pour himself a drink. But once he'd succeeded in completing the task, Nick wasn't sure what to do.

"Hey!" A cute girl with brown curls looked up at him, seemingly dragged to his side by the crowd. "I'm Mandy. You new here?"

She was all smiles, and a little group of girls was positioned right behind her, studying Nick with appreciative stares.

He felt a blush heating his neck. "Yeah." Nick took a long drink of his beer. "Yeah, just transferred in this semester." It wasn't that he was uncomfortable talking to girls, it's just that normally when he went to bars or parties, he was with John or one of the other guys from high school. Mandy seemed nice enough, but she was with five others. Nick had no idea what he'd say to all of them, especially since he could hardly hear his own voice above the noise.

"Where were you in school before?" Mandy asked. She brushed up against his side, shouting in his ear.

He would have asked her to go outside to talk, except Nick worried she'd think he was trying to get her alone. That could lead to an uncomfortable conversation about how he still lived with his mom and would have to go home on the bus or sleep on a gay guy's couch.

"I went to North Central the past three years." He'd had to work full time while going to school to save up money, so what should have taken two years had taken three.

"Oh..." Mandy seemed to be gearing up to say something, but Nick decided to opt out of the conversation before it led anywhere weird.

"Hey." He leaned into her ear. "I've really got to meet up with some friends of mine."

She pursed her lips. "Oh..."

Nick smiled in what he hoped was a friendly way. "Maybe meet up later?" He didn't want to lead her on but also didn't want to be mean.

"Yeah, no worries." She seemed a little annoyed as she turned back to her gaggle of friends.

"See ya." Nick jerked his phone out of his pocket as if he'd just gotten a text or a call he couldn't ignore. He stared at it, pretending to compose a message until she left. Then, furtively, he pulled the slip of paper Gabe had given him out of his pocket. Nick typed in Gabe's number and then the text

message, *Went to party. You coming?*

A hint of worry went through him as he wondered if his note sounded like a come-on. But honestly, if they weren't going to meet up at the party, Nick would feel like a jerk just showing up at the guy's house later.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and Nick checked it like a lifeline. The text was from Gabe and said, *Yeah. We're in basement. Meet us.*

Nick wondered who the "we" were in Gabe's message. Likely, Gabe was hanging out with some of his gay friends, and the basement was a code for the "gay room." Then Nick wondered if he was being a total douche for thinking that.

He filled his cup again before working his way through the house. Nick felt like an idiot, having to ask some passerby where the basement was, but the kid pointed good-naturedly to an arch down a hallway.

Nick downed another measure of beer and jogged down the stairs. The room below was darker, and a disco ball flashed colored lights against the walls. The music was the same as upstairs but was coming out of a different set of speakers. And the crowd was a bit more male and a lot more fashionable.

"Hey!" Gabe's call was mostly drowned out by the music, but he smiled as he stood up from where he'd been perched on the side of a couch. The basement had furniture like a living room, though most of the students mulling around were standing.

The guy who Gabe had been sitting with gave Nick a harsh look as Gabe abandoned him to cross the room.

Nick smirked to think it was the same look Mandy had just given him.

"Hey, man." Nick gave Gabe a wave and a smile. Truth was, he was glad to see someone he actually knew. Then as Nick scanned the room, he recognized Chris from his statistics class wrapped around a tall guy with black hair and swaying in time with the music. Nick tried and failed to drag his eyes away from the two guys. He never in a million years would have guessed Chris was gay. Sure, the guy sat next to and talked to Gabe. But Chris played soccer and looked...well, maybe not tough exactly. But definitely not...the other way.

"You didn't know, huh?" Gabe followed his line of sight to Chris. He smirked. "So your lack of gaydar extends to other people, too, huh?"

Nick scoffed and gave Gabe a light push. He wasn't annoyed so much as amused. Still, he couldn't let Gabe razz him without some form of

retaliation. Nick darted a look at the guy sitting in the chair, who was obviously still watching Gabe. “Pretty boy is getting pissed I’m talking to you.”

The guy across the way had sharp, petulant features, and though he looked buff enough in his tight T-shirt, he seemed like someone who spent time at the gym and under a tanning bed, not outdoors.

“Oh, Brooks?” Gabe fluttered his hand a little. The move made him seem extra faggy, but Nick couldn’t tell if he was doing it on purpose to be funny or if the move was subconscious.

Gabe shouted over the music, “Couple of hookups and the guy thinks he owns my ass.” He peeked over his shoulder at Brooks but then leaned in conspiratorially. “Fuck, I left my drink over there. Come with me to get another?”

“Yeah.” Nick gulped down the last of his beer. He could tell that Gabe was a little buzzed, because there was a sway in his walk as he led the way to a table covered in bottles. It wasn’t a drunk sway, more of a happy, not-really-caring-what-people-think-of-me lope. For some reason, the walk drew Nick’s eyes to Gabe’s waist and the parts of him directly below his waist.

“So, d’you bring any of your townie friends?” Gabe set two cups on the table and filled them with liquor and mixers.

Nick didn’t know what he was making, but it looked pink and very alcoholic. “Nah.” Nick assessed the crowd in the basement. It wasn’t all gay kids, some were girls and some were guys hitting on those girls. But Nick knew John and his other football friends from high school would have been totally uncomfortable. “Nah. I didn’t even know you could bring people who weren’t from school.”

“Well, they’re not exactly checking student IDs at the door.” Gabe handed him the fruity concoction, lifting his own glass in a cheers. “But I guess someone might have said something if there were enough people no one recognized.”

Gabe swallowed some of his drink then winced at the flavor. “Eek, that is no joke.” His eyes watered. “Too strong for you?”

Nick took a sip, his lip curling against the bite of alcohol. “Shit, man. That is harsh.” He took the cup out of Gabe’s hand and set both their glasses back on the table. Then he added copious amounts of canned orange juice to both. He handed Gabe back his drink. “Here. I won’t have a place to crash if you pass out before you can let me into your house.”

“I never pass out.” Still, Gabe gave him a laughing wink before tasting his drink. He closed his eyes. “Oh, that’s a lot better. Thanks.”

“No worries.” With Gabe at his side, Nick felt a lot more confident. “So, you here with your housemates?”

“Yeah.” Gabe tugged at Nick’s sleeve, urging him to follow. “Let me introduce you around.”

\* \* \* \*

A couple hours later, Nick trailed along with Gabe and a few of his friends, heading back to Gabe’s place. He’d met a few people at the party—among them Chris, who Nick found he liked even more now that he’d gotten to know him outside of class. He’d also met Chris’s boyfriend, Peter. Nick found Peter a little intimidating. He was from New York and had every inch of that grating, aggressive New York way about him.

Chris fell back behind the others to walk at Nick’s side. “So, are you planning to get a place closer to campus eventually? Or are you gonna save money living at home?”

“Probably stay living at my mom’s place. I can’t see spending on rent when I don’t have to.” Nick didn’t mind talking to Chris about his financial situation, because Chris was in the same boat. He’d transferred into Holsom after a couple years of community college, too. And, like Nick, he was on scholarship and maxing out his financial aid. The main difference was Chris was from Tennessee, too far away to commute.

“Yeah, I can see that. Sucks, though, without a car.” Chris shoved his hands in his pockets. “My scholarship only covers housing if I live in the dorms, but Peter is basically covering my rent.” Chris blushed, obviously embarrassed about relying on his boyfriend. He rushed to add, “He was going to live off campus anyway, and we share a room, so...”

“Hey, I’m not gonna pass judgment.” Nick’s ancient Buick had bit the dust right around the time school had started, and even with his job working at the pub and his workstudy on Holsom’s landscaping crew, he hadn’t had the money to get it repaired. “I’d live around here if I could, but since I’m local, financial aid won’t cover my housing, even if I did live in the dorms.”

“Well, you’ve always got a place to crash with us.” Chris gave him a friendly punch in the arm. “Our housemate, Nathaniel, spends half his weekends at his boyfriend’s place in Montpelier.”

Nick wasn’t sure why, but he thought he’d feel awkward staying at Chris and Peter’s place. Probably because on some level he would feel like

he'd have to justify to them that he wasn't gay. Gabe was different. First off, one of his housemates was a girl. Secondly, he was already defending his straightness to Gabe, so somehow it seemed like no big deal.

"Thanks for the invite, but I don't spend too much time on campus besides classes." Their group crossed the main lawn and then veered down the street separating campus from off-campus housing. Chris and Peter broke away from the pack and went to the right, while Gabe and his housemates eased to the left.

"See you guys later." Gabe waved at Peter and Chris. Then he stepped to Nick's side. "So, you ready to call it a night?" Gabe asked.

"Yeah, sure." Nick wasn't all that tired, but he didn't feel any need to hit any of the other parties he'd seen. He'd met enough people for one night.

"Cool. We could play poker or something," Gabe's housemate, Sarah, said. She was short, with huge boobs and an attractive but somewhat manly face. Nick couldn't figure out whether she was gay or straight, but she definitely seemed to be a fag hag. Of course, he wasn't sure if it was okay to say "fag hag" out loud. He never would have called her that to her face.

Gabe's other housemate, Matt, rolled his eyes at her. Matt was extremely quiet and a sophomore. He towered at around six and half feet tall but seemed constantly nervous. Nick got the sense that Gabe and Sarah had rescued him from the freshmen dorms the way one might save a Great Dane from the pound.

"We're not playing poker," Matt said in his low, serious voice. Gabe swore up and down that Matt was gay, but Nick didn't know if he believed it. He wondered if it was just one more figment of Gabe's imagination.

"You don't have to do anything special on my account." Nick followed as the three of them turned down one street, then another. As they walked, he realized they lived a pretty decent way off campus, near one of the more upscale subdivisions. The grass smelled freshly mowed.

"Nah, we almost always hang out for a while when we get back from a party." Gabe took Sarah's hand, swinging it back and forth in a mockery of boyfriend and girlfriend. He tried to take Matt's hand, too, but Matt took a measured step away from the two of them and lined up on the sidewalk next to Nick.

Matt rumbled, "We mostly watch movies."

Sarah piped up, "Or porn."

Nick blushed and would have expected Matt to do the same, stoic as he was,



but Matt was unreadable. He only said, “Porn ismovies.”

Gabe reached back to poke Matt’s belly. “Says the film major.”

Nick had to laugh at that, and he found himself really enjoying hanging out with the group of them. They were sort of like his friends from high school, in that they gave each other shit and joked around, though Nick noticed that a lot of their jokes were more...He didn’t want to think “intellectual,” because his old friends weren’t dumb or anything. But Gabe and his housemates teased each other about college and classes and things they all knew from being in school together. Nick had to admit that he wanted friends he could talk to about the new things in his life. The crazy professors and the big showdown between the Asian Studies and the Romance Languages department, and the way the school cafeteria served Lucky Charms but, for some reason completely unknowable to Nick, refused to stock Frosted Flakes.

“So what do you want to watch?” Gabe asked.

It took Nick a second to realize Gabe was talking to him. “Oh, um...” Nick wasn’t sure how to answer. He had a thing for older movies, and though he figured Matt the film major would appreciate his choices, he didn’t think Gabe or Sarah would go for anything involving Cary Grant. “Whatever you guys want to watch.”

Gabe slowed in front of an older brick house with bicycles tied to the porch. “If you leave it up to these guys, Sarah will vote for something with full-frontal nudity and Matt will refuse to watch anything that doesn’t involve subtitles.” He climbed the porch steps and unlocked the door.

Nick filed behind the others, stepping into a small living room connected to a kitchen and dining space. The only furniture was a big, comfy-looking couch and a gigantic television. “So why don’t you compromise and watch something with both nudity and subtitles?” He hadn’t ever watched a foreign film, but Nick was open to anything. “I don’t care as long as it’s not horror.”

He’d taken a lot of shit from his friends over the years about his fear and hatred of horror movies. Nick had watched plenty of them just to stop John and the guys from calling him a pussy. But he wasn’t worried about being cowed by Gabe and his friends.

“Horror?” Gabe screwed up his face in disgust. “Ew. No. I can safely say we’re not watching that.” Gabe chose that moment to pull off his sweatshirt, and the dress shirt he’d been wearing to the party rode up to his shoulders.

He was slim, but his shoulders were broader than Nick would have thought. And his body was...well, it was really beautiful. Nick had seen a lot of guys in changing rooms over the years and had developed a sense of appreciation for the male body. Not that he'd given Gabe's body much thought before, but now that he'd looked, he had to admit Gabe was pretty hot.

"How about that new one from Argentina?" Gabe crossed the room and started down the hall. As he walked, he called over his shoulder at Nick. "The bathroom is this door here, by the way. Make yourself at home."

Nick walked over to the couch and sat down. It was squishy and homey. Gabe's housemates shuffled around, putting clothes away, changing into pajamas or sweats. Sarah brought Nick a glass of water, and Matt grabbed a six-pack of soda out of the fridge and carried it into the living room, where he set it down and took up residence on the floor.

Sarah sat on the floor, too, leaning against a pillow propped against the couch. The two of them seemed to be leaving space for Gabe to sit on the couch with Nick. And true to what Nick suspected, when Gabe came out of his room wearing boxer shorts and a T-shirt, he crossed right to the couch and dropped next to him.

"You gonna start it up?" Gabe asked, pointing to the remote by Matt's side. He swiveled so that he was leaning against the opposite arm of the couch from Nick and his feet were right next to Nick's leg. Gabe looked at him, his expression lingering somewhere between amused and flirty. "You don't mind, right?"

Nick shook his head, getting a little nervous. He didn't think Gabe was going to expect anything from him, but it was obvious his housemates thought Gabe and him were together. Nick didn't really want to tell them any differently. To do so seemed kind of assholeish—like he was making some kind of homophobic point about not being attracted to their roommate.

In an effort to fit in, Nick grabbed Gabe's ankles and pulled so that Gabe's calves and feet hung over his lap. "No. I'm cool."

"Um, okay." Gabe smiled a little at the corner of his mouth, like maybe he was embarrassed, but Nick decided not to give it much thought since Matt was starting the movie.

The story started with a guy watching a man and woman talking in a park. It was obvious the guy was jealous, though the action was subtle and quiet. There wasn't much talking in the film, which Nick liked since he had to

read subtitles for the words. Mellow music and rustling background noise made up the soundtrack.

The film was pretty interesting. Or maybe *interesting* was the wrong word. It was...nice. The story took a weird twist as the jealous ex-boyfriend decided to seduce the man. And though Nick knew a story like that would never fly with his high school friends unless it was a raunchy comedy, somehow in the quiet foreign film it worked.

He was so caught up in the movie that Nick was surprised when Sarah stood up and shuffled toward her bedroom. It wasn't long afterward when Matt unfolded himself from his spot on the floor, mumbled how he'd already seen the movie for one of his classes, and then went to bed.

On screen, the two guy friends were sitting together, staring off into the distance and talking about stuff from their childhoods, and for some reason, Nick was enjoying it too much to shut it off. "You don't mind if I keep watching, do you?" he asked Gabe.

Nick expected Gabe to be ready for sleep, but Gabe watched him with soft eyes. It was different from the intense way Gabe normally looked at him, and Nick found that he liked this mellower version of Gabe better.

"Nah. I really did want to see it." Gabe stretched a little, shifting on the couch and pointing the toes that were resting right near Nick's hand. "Can I watch with you?"

"It's your house." Nick smiled. He felt a lot more comfortable touching Gabe than he had before. Probably because the guys on screen were sitting right up against each other, their legs and shoulders brushing.

Nick had always been taught that it was weird and a bit perverted to be cool with touching another guy. But as he watched the familiar-yet-strange foreign guys on the screen, Nick felt like his fear of touching Gabe was puritanical or at least small-minded.

He twisted around, getting his legs up on the couch and his back to the armrest. The couch had enough space for them both to recline, especially since Gabe lifted one of his legs onto the back, making their sandwiched limbs three legs instead of four.

"Yeah, it's my house, but you're the guest. If you want to go to sleep, let me know." Gabe rubbed his leg against Nick's, not so much sexy as joking around.

Nick liked it. It felt familiar and comfortable. He smiled and turned back to the movie. The guys on screen were on the porch of an apartment, and the

one guy had realized he was in love with the other. It didn't seem as weird to Nick as he would have thought—because really, the movie had been going that direction for a while. And it wasn't like their love was physical. It was more that the two guys understood each other, were two halves of one person. Nick might not have been into the physical stuff, if the movie ever got there, but he could understand feeling like that about a best friend. There was something so beautiful about the movie, too. Nick couldn't figure out if it was how it was filmed or what, but the whole thing was totally calm and engaging without ever having any of what an American film would have called “action.” It was just people in apartments or outside, like normal people doing normal things. Though, of course, these people were in Argentina, and they smoked constantly, which was a little different than the people Nick knew.

“The guy with the straight hair is really cute,” Gabe observed. He was rubbing his foot absentmindedly against Nick's arm.

Nick looked at the actor Gabe was talking about. Yeah, he could see Gabe's point. “I guess, but the other one is sexier.” He was surprised to hear those words come out of his mouth, but he didn't feel awkward about it. It was just a movie.

The characters were whatever the filmmaker wanted them to be. After all, Humphrey Bogart was a pretty ugly dude, but he'd been cast as a heartthrob a bunch of times.

“Hm. So you like toppy guys.” Gabe smiled. “Shoulda known.”

“I don't even know what that means.” Nick shifted to get his leg into a more comfortable position. His thigh brushed Gabe's calf. It felt nice—not in a gay way or anything—but nice, all the same.

“You like takecharge guys. The type who'll tell you what do.”

Nick shrugged. “Everyone likes guys like that.” He crossed his arms, trying not to get too defensive.

Gabe chuckled. “How right you are.”

Even in the dark room, Nick could see Gabe's eyes sparkle like he knew something. “I don't mean that in a gay way, y'know. I just mean, like—as friends.”

“Oh, of course not. Not in a *gayway*.” Gabe kicked him lightly. He was grinning like crazy, and it made Nick want to smile back.

“Dork.” Nick tickled behind Gabe's knee until Gabe squirmed. Then, thinking he'd get kicked in the nuts if Gabe kept moving, he grabbed

Gabe's leg.

Gabe froze in place, his eyes wide.

Nick swallowed hard. Hewasn't sure what had happened—why the air had shifted—but something had changed. His body was warm and aware. He felt sexy and a little horny. Nick guessed it was just being close to another body. Tickling and wrestling often got him hard. But he didn't want to give Gabe the wrong idea.

Next to them, the movie kept playing, so Nick turned back to the film. He figured that Gabe would go back to watching, too. And he tried to ignore the sense that Gabe was staring at him across the couch.

### **Chapter Three**

Gabe tried to watch the action on screen. The supposedly straight boys dancing around each other was hot, and both guys were good looking enough to normally hold Gabe's attention. But Gabe was painfully aware of every inch of his body that touched Nick and how Nick's eyes widened every time the characters on screen shared a soulful glance.

He knew he had to be imagining it, but he felt like he could smell Nick's skin. The warm flavor of it washed over his senses until Gabe thought he would sigh out loud.

The worst part about it was that Nick kept rubbing Gabe's leg. He was pretty sure Nick wasn't aware he was doing it. But that made it all the more infuriating. Nick ran his fingernails over the coarse hair on Gabe's outer calf, then he tracedgentle circles around Gabe's kneecap.

Gabe's leg was hitc hed over the back of the couch, and he knew that if Nick actually bothered to look,he'd see Gabe's hard-on through his boxer shorts. Gabe wanted to scream, because even if Nick did realize it, he probably didn't care.

"D'you wanna take off your jeans?" Gabe figured Nick had to be uncomfortable still completely clothed. He shifted in case Nick wanted to get undressed,and also to get his crotch out of Nick's line of sight.

"Um...I don't want to make you uncomfortable." Nick rotated to sitting. He pulled his sweatshirt over his head.

In the blue light of the movie, Gabe couldn't tell if Nick was blushing, but his shoulders were lifted like he was nervous.

"Nah." Gabe wrapped his arm around the back of the couch, adopting a

relaxed posture. He fixed his attention on the film so Nick wouldn't think he was watching. "It's nothing I haven't seen before." He laughed, though his throat felt a little dry. Gabe leaned over the edge of the couch to where they kept a footlocker with blankets.

"Here." He tossed the fleece blanket at Nick then went back to staring at the screen. He tried not to notice when Nick finally gave in and skinned off his jeans under cover of the blanket.

Then, as if he had something to be embarrassed about, Nick pulled the fleece up to his chest before dragging his shirt over his head.

"Dude, I'm not going to launch across the couch and rape you or something." Gabe tried to sound funny and not offended.

"I didn't think you were gonna." Nick must have heard Gabe's annoyance, because he shoved the blanket down to his lap defensively. "I just didn't want to make you feel awkward, okay?"

Gabe wasn't sure what he meant, and he couldn't help but study Nick's face, looking for a hint as to why Nick would think Gabe would be uncomfortable. "Do you think seeing you with your shirt off would get me hard?" He'd meant to ask it as a serious question, but somewhere along the line it became a tease.

Nick shuffled around so that he was lying on the couch again, taking up more than his fair share of space. "Why, does it?" Nick cocked his eyebrows, teasing Gabe right back.

"Huh." Gabe wasn't sure how to respond, so he answered honestly. "Maybe a little." Nick had a great body. His frame was square but muscled. Other than his face, arms, and a ring of darker color around his neck, he was extremely pale. Gabe had to get that boy outside with his shirt off and get rid of his farmer's tan.

"Hmm. I'll take that as a compliment." Nick gave him a little smile as he turned back to the movie. On screen, the actors had parted ways because of a fight. There was a lot of cigarette smoking and gazing into the distance.

Gabe found it a bit boring, though it was clear from Nick's rapt expression that he loved every second. He wondered if the best friends on screen made Nick think of John. Gabe shuffled around so he and Nick were lying like they were before, but instead of cocking a leg up on the back of the couch, Gabe let one leg hang over the edge and braced his foot on the floor. He laid his other leg in between Nick's legs. And if Nick minded, he didn't say so.

"So..." Gabe watched Nick watching the movie. The film had a fair amount

of nudity and attractive people making out, and Gabe figured that alone was a foray into what he wanted to ask. “What turns you on?”

“What?” Nick looked up from the movie, and this time his blush was obvious.

At least he didn't jump off the couch, though Gabe could tell he considered it. “You don't have to freak out, man. I was just making conversation.” That wasn't technically true. The topic was turning Gabe on, especially since Nick's foot was only a few inches from Gabe's cock. “I don't know what gets straight guys off.”

“Really?” Nick tilted his head, his voice sarcastic and his expression disbelieving. “You've never seen straight porn? Or a woman?”

Gabe flashed him a sly wink. “Well, yeah, but that's not what I mean. I mean, are you one of those guys who likes titties and doesn't bother to look any lower? Or an assman? D'you get off on munching rug?”

Nick kicked him in the thigh, though not hard enough to hurt. “Nobody even says ‘munching rug,’ you dork.” He laughed, rolling his eyes.

“It's just, when you watch straight porn there's a lot of close-ups of cocks.” Gabe eased the conversation in the direction he wanted it to go, hoping he was being subtle enough Nick wouldn't notice.

“So are you asking if I want to suck one?”

Gabe decided to pull back while he was ahead. “Nah. Nothing that extreme. I just mean, I've always wondered if straight guys liked to think about cocks or maybe see them while they whacked off.” He tried to make it sound like a scientific question, like he was running surveys for the Kinsey Report. “Or even men's bodies. I mean, do straight guys think other guys are hot, or gross, or...?”

“No, men can be attractive,” Nick said without hesitation. He seemed very sure of himself when he added, “A guy with a good body is like...” His gaze got unfocused, and Gabe could perfectly well guess who Nick was thinking about. “Well, it's like a work of art. Like that Italian statue.” Nick crossed his arms, as if maybe he'd said too much.

“No, I totally get it. Like, girls are pretty. Some are flat-out beautiful. I don't need to want to fuck them to appreciate it.” Gabe twisted around, trying to get more comfortable on the cramped couch. His dick ached, and he wasn't sure whether to ramp down the conversation before he embarrassed himself or whether to push it to its logical conclusion.

“Yeah, I get it.” Nick shifted. Then he reached under the blanket and looked

like he was adjusting his dick. Or it could have been just him getting his balls out from some weird position between his legs. Still, Gabe chose to believe Nick was getting hot.

“But watching something like this is great.” Gabe nodded at the TV. “The girl is cute, and the boys are sexy. It’s got something for everyone.”

Nick’s lips were parted when he nodded his head in agreement. He visibly swallowed.

And Gabe was absolutely sure he’d just given Nick permission to be turned-on. He smiled, watching as the sort-of-straight, sort-of-gay guys on screen were trying to have some kind of reconciliatory conversation. Then, knowing Nick was peeking his way, Gabe put his hand under the blanket they were sharing and pressed his palm to his dick.

“Hey.” Nick sat up, slightly. He looked alarmed. “Are you...?”

“What?” Gabe blinked at him innocently. “You’re not cool with it? I thought straight guys did this all the time.” He wasn’t going to define what “it” was on the off chance that whatever he said sent Nick running for the hills. “I can stop if you want. But I don’t want to miss the end of the movie, and I really sorta want to...” He let the corner of his mouth curl up naughtily.

“Oh.” Nick’s blue eyes darted to the side in confusion. He itched his hair as if he was trying to make some kind of decision. “Well, I don’t know any guys who’ve...y’know, done that around each other. But, I’ve heard guys do.”

Gabe believed Nick. He seemed way too nervous to have ever jerked off with a guy before. But now that Gabe had given him a “straight guys do it, too” excuse, he was settling back down on the couch.

“I think they normally whack it to porn. Not foreign films.” Nick tapped his foot on Gabe’s thigh, causing shivers to run up his leg.

“Meh, porn, indie films—same difference.” Gabe smiled. Then he reached into his boxers and grabbed his cock fully. It felt so good to squeeze it for real after all the teasing he’d been doing with Nick.

He closed his eyes for a few tugs, enjoying the feeling too much to let Nick’s discomfort ruin the sensation. But when he peeked at Nick’s end of the couch, he saw that Nick’s eyes were heavy lidded, his lips were wet, and his left hand was under the blanket.

Gabe smiled. He’d forgotten Nick was a lefty.

The guys on screen were fighting, and it was really obvious that they were



going to start kissing and fall into bed together any second, so Gabe decided to up the ante. “Hey, you don’t mind if I take the blanket down, right?” He was going to make some lame excuse about not wanting to get precum on Sarah’s fleece, but he didn’t want to freak Nick out with talk of actual semen.

“Um...nah. That’s fine.” Nick lay on his side, watching the men on screen get closer and closer. Meanwhile, his hand bounced under the fabric.

Slowly, Gabe pushed the blanket lower, until it was bunched up under his balls. Nick didn’t look right away, so Gabe took the chance and tugged up his shirt a little, so he could rub his belly while he slid his foreskin along his shaft.

Nick glanced away from the screen just long enough to focus on what Gabe was doing. When his eyes landed on Gabe’s dick, he froze. But he didn’t bound off the couch or anything. Instead, he just looked at Gabe’s body, from his rib cage to where his hand held still on his cock. His expression was thoughtful. “You’re kinda hung, huh?”

Gabe hoped he wasn’t smiling too broadly. Actually, he wasn’t that big. Maybe bigger than average, but not by much. Then again, he figured Nick probably hadn’t seen that many erect dicks up close. “Flattery will get you everywhere.” Gabe rubbed his foot against Nick’s leg.

It didn’t seem like Nick was going to bolt out of the room or shout that Gabe was trying to turn him gay, so Gabe decided it was safe to flirt. “So, I showed you mine. You gonna show me yours?”

“Um...sure.” Nick didn’t seem anywhere near as reluctant as Gabe would have expected. Then again, what guy didn’t want to show off his dick?

With a shy grin, Nick pressed the blanket down off his hips. Then he pulled his boner out of his briefs and held it aloft from the base, smiling proudly.

It was about the cutest thing Gabe had ever seen. And now Gabe was certain he could smell Nick’s musk—a mixture of sweat and soil and grass. “Not so bad yourself.” Gabe could tell Nick was a little thicker than he was, though about the same length. But it wasn’t really Nick’s cock he was looking at. It was Nick’s tentative eyes, his little smile, the way his neck and chest were dark from his blush.

He couldn’t tell if Nick was straight or gay in that moment, only that Nick was amazing.

“Coming from a gay dude, that’s quite a compliment.” Nick pulled his dick to his belly and started stroking.

“Oh, we’re talking about coming for a gay dude, are we?” Gabe worked his shaft in earnest, watching Nick the whole time. It was like the best porno ever, especially since Nick was writhing a little, his legs hairy and tense against Gabe’s.

Gabe wished he dared take off his boxers, as they were trapping his thighs, but he wasn’t sure how far he could go and keep Nick on board. He wasn’t even sure why doing this with Nick mattered so much to him. It was obvious that Nick had some kind of same-sex feelings, and if Gabe really wanted to point it out to him, he easily could have. But it had stopped being about proving a point and started being about him and Nick getting closer.

Nick craned his neck and met Gabe’s eyes. In a move completely out of character with the cautious guy Gabe knew, Nick winked. “You want me to?” His smile was wicked and his hand sped up on his lusty shaft. Nick was cut, and the top half of his dick was a lickable shade of pink.

“Wa...want you to what?” Gabe panted out his words. His cock pulsed hard in his hand, and his balls tensed. As he and Nick stared at each other, Gabe felt the dynamic between them shift. Nick got bolder, his muscles clenching and bunching as he pumped. He leaned almost imperceptibly closer, lifting almost to sit.

Gabe, on the other hand, shifted lower on the couch. He could almost imagine Nick climbing over him, the heat of Nick’s dick next to his own, and the hard way Nick would kiss.

“Hey,” Nick said, shocking Gabe out of his thoughts. “Don’t close your eyes.”

As much as the words got him hot, Gabe couldn’t help but gasp out, “Gotta. When I come...”

“Yeah, well, don’t yet.” Nick puckered his forehead in concentration, putting on a show. He licked his palm and then rubbed himself in quick, focused jerks until his face screwed up and he arched his neck. His cum shot out in quick spurts, the first landing on his belly then dribbling over his hand.

He exhaled, all the tension leaving his body as he lazily stroked out the last of his climax. When he was flaccid and stretching like a sated cat, he cracked open his eyes and pinned Gabe with a sexy gaze. “Now you.”

Gabe had stopped touching himself altogether and was almost surprised by Nick’s suggestion. He felt his face and neck heat. His body tingled all the way from his nipples to between his thighs, still trapped by his boxers.

Gabe felt like a schoolkid caught by a bully and forced to whack off for his sick enjoyment. And...the idea got him so excited he could barely breathe. “Uh...okay.”

He closed his eyes and rubbed, fighting against the worry he wouldn't come with someone so obviously watching him. But his cock and balls decided to cooperate, and soon his dick filled and trembled. Right as Gabe felt the first pulse of climax sizzling between his legs, Nick pressed his foot right up to Gabe's balls—almost hard enough to hurt—and Gabe went off like a rocket. He bit his lip to stop from shouting as his back arched and his hot cum splattered on his belly and his hand.

Every bit of his skin felt tight, and Gabe wanted to throw off all his clothes and the blanket and climb on top of Nick for a good cuddle. But he knew Nick wouldn't go for it, so Gabe forced his breathing back under control. When he could make his muscles work again, he opened his eyes. Gabe worried Nick would be freaking out, but Nick had gotten off the couch and walked to the kitchen to grab some paper towels.

By the time Nick got back, he'd cleaned off and pulled back on his bikini briefs. They were navy blue and more stylish than Gabe would have expected from a boy who thought of himself as straight. “You want some?” Nick tossed the roll of towels Gabe's way.

“Yeah, sure.” Gabe tried to be cool when he caught it. He mopped up the jizz and tossed the paper towels in the trash can with as much casual bravado as possible. By the time he got back on the couch, Nick was already rewinding the movie.

“You don't mind if I replay that last bit, right? I wasn't really paying attention.”

Gabe's mood dropped like a ton of bricks. He fell back on the couch and decided to watch the end of the movie. “No, I missed it, too.”

The characters on screen finished their fight and leaned in for a kiss. It was sweet, and passionate, and so tender Gabe wanted to punch the TV. Because Nick's eyes were misty as he watched the men on screen, and Gabe would've bet a fair amount of money he was thinking about his best friend—a guy who wasn't in the room and yet got Nick off more than Gabe had. A guy that was hot, and sexy, and would never, ever be what Nick needed.

## **Chapter Four**

Nick wasn't sure what had happened at Gabe's place the night he slept over. Some straight guys rubbed off together...he guessed. But he'd been horny ever since that night, thinking all kinds of crazy things about guys and girls...and guys. It had been way too long since Nick had gotten laid.

Maybe that was why it was so hard to duck away when Mandy approached him in the cafeteria.

"Hey, Nick." Mandy bounced up from her place by the cereal dispensers. Her tray held whole-grain flakes and a bowl of salad without dressing. She bumped Nick's arm. "Did you have fun at the Delta Phi party? It was so crowded! We went over to Cal House instead."

"Yeah, um...I hung out with some friends in the basement for a while. But we didn't stay late."

"The basement" must indeed have been some kind of code for *gay*, because Mandy cocked her head to the side. "Oh, I didn't know you were—"

"Oh, I'm not," he rushed to correct her in case she got the wrong idea. "I, uh...I just don't know too many people around campus, and I was hanging with a friend of mine from class." He felt a little guilty classifying Gabe like he was some kind of friend of last resort. Nick really liked Gabe. If nothing else, Gabe was supernice. He'd made everyone at the house breakfast the morning after the party, with omelets and fresh-squeezed orange juice and everything. It was a little weird for a young guy like Gabe to cook so well, but he'd seemed to enjoy it, wearing his apron and blathering on about how you needed to sauté onions and peppers before you put them in eggs.

"Oh, that's totally cool." Mandy jolted him out of his reminiscence. "I don't mean that just because you hang out with guys who *are*, that you have to be."

"No, I didn't think you meant that." Nick picked up his tray and moved it from one assembly line to another, hoping to get one of the fresh chocolate-chip cookies still steaming from the oven. He offered one to Mandy, who shook her head.

She chirped, "So, are you going to Clark on Friday? They've got a band playing. There's a cover, but it's only five dollars, and it goes to charity." She smiled up at him with hope in her eyes.

Nick wondered if he was being asked out on a date. He bit the edge of his nail as he realized he probably was. "Um...yeah, I could go." Nick carried his tray toward the checkout counter. He knew Mandy would follow, and he didn't want to get dragged to her table and talk to her group of friends.

Hoping she'd take the hint and let him go to his own table, he said, "Yeah, I'll see you there."

\* \* \* \*

Nick jogged down to the front row right after class. "Hey, Gabe."

Gabe smiled, batting his eyes a little in a mock tease. "Hey there, townie. Enjoy class today?"

"Um, yeah." Nick stopped short. Chris was standing right next to Gabe, and he wasn't sure what Chris thought about his and Gabe's relationship. Nick hadn't explicitly told Gabe not to tell anyone about their wank together, but he really hoped Gabe hadn't spread it around or insinuated Nick was somehow more than his friend.

"Hi, Chris, how ya doing?"

"Fine thanks." Chris took a few steps away from the two of them. "Hey, catch you later. I've gotta grab something to eat before next class."

"Dude, you're like a vacuum cleaner during soccer season." Gabe gave his friend a smile.

"That's what *he* said." Chris snickered. Then he wove both his arms into his backpack and spun it onto his shoulders before leaving.

When he'd gone, Gabe started shoving his stuff into his bag. "So, what's up?"

"Um... Well, I wouldn't ask, but you did sorta offer that if I ever had a party I wanted to go to on campus, I could crash again..." Nick pushed his hands into his pockets. He hated asking for charity, and now that the words were out he felt like he was imposing.

Gabe patted his arm. "Naw, it's fine." When he saw that Nick wasn't convinced, Gabe added, "Seriously. I wouldn't have extended the invitation if I wasn't for real." He leaned in, conspiratorially. "And I think Sarah misses you. She asked about you."

It had only been a few days, so Nick was pretty sure Sarah hadn't really said anything, but he liked that Gabe was making something up to make him feel better. "I miss her, too. Had a blast with you guys. Depending what time I get back on Friday, maybe we could do another movie night."

"Sure." Gabe tossed his backpack onto his shoulder. "So where are you going, if you don't mind my asking?"

Nick wasn't sure if he wanted to say. He didn't really know why he'd agreed to go to the party with Mandy except that he'd thought he should. She was a nice girl, but nothing about her really attracted Nick, and she was

too nice to fuck just because she was there. “Well, this girl asked if I wanted to meet up with her at the Clark party.”

Gabe pressed his jaw forward, like he was trying to get something out of his teeth with his tongue. “Oh, so it’s like a date.”

“No.” Nick raised his hands. “No, just as friends.” Dude, what was he, in high school? Who did anything with a girl “just as friends”?

But Gabe didn’t seem to believe his excuse any more than the little voice in Nick’s head. He rolled his eyes and started up the incline toward the door. “Whatevs. Just be careful walking back, drivers don’t look where they’re going on Post Road.”

Nick grinned. “Yeah, I know. I grew up around here, remember?”

“Oh, yeah.” Gabe bit at one of his nails. He looked stressed out about something. “Well, someone should be home by one thirty. But don’t show up before then, because I wouldn’t want you to be standing around outside.” Gabe said it grudgingly, like he didn’t really want to act likesomebody’s mother but couldn’t quite stop himself.

“I can grab something to eat at the bookstore’s café if I get sick of the party and it’s too early.” Nick followed Gabe out the doors of the building. He worried about the way Gabe’s shoulders looked tense. Gabe couldn’t be jealous, right?

Nick pushed the thought from his mind—after all, Nick wasn’t even gay. Gabe could have been annoyed for any number of reasons. The guy probably had a big test or something.

Gabe said, “Listen, I don’t mean to be a jerk, but don’t bring her back to our place, okay?”

Now, *that* had sounded jealous. “What?” Nick grabbed Gabe’s arm and tugged him around.

Gabe’s brown eyes were sad and guarded, and Nick felt like complete shit for putting him on the spot by asking for a place to stay—especially if Gabe had some kind of crush on him. “Dude, I would never do that. But seriously, it’s probably better if I don’t crash. Maybe Mandy has a couch or something—”

“No!” Gabe cut him off. Then he cleared his throat. “I mean...You can totally stay over. I just didn’t want to make Sarah and Matt uncomfortable by having to step around some girl they don’t know in the morning.”

The explanation was fine, although Nick was still a little offended that Gabe would think Nick would be such a douche as to bring a girl to fuck on his

couch.

Gabe shrugged. “But, would you do me a favor and text if you decide to spend the night at her place?” He looked like he hated asking. “I can’t leave the door open all night.”

“Yeah, sure.” Nick wanted to vehemently reiterate how it wasn’t a date and he was *under no circumstances* going to hook up with Mandy that night. However, that would make it sound like he didn’t like girls, and Nick didn’t want to give Gabe that idea.

\* \* \* \*

It wasn’t much past one when Nick crossed the wide street next to campus and started in the direction of Gabe’s house. As expected, the party had been loud and raucous. Mandy had been drunk but sweet. Not sloppy, falling-down drunk but tipsy enough that Nick had fought off her roaming hands all evening.

Not that it was unpleasant getting rubbed and almost fondled by a cute girl. Nick’s cock had responded well enough. But he really hadn’t wanted to hook up with her. Nick knew how girls got—a guy slept with them and they wanted to be a couple. And Nick was in no way up for a girlfriend.

He liked Gabe’s way of hooking up better. Have a little fun and let it go. Gabe had been totally cool afterwards. Not calling or getting clingy.

Of course, he and Gabe had n’t had sex, or even anything like it. But if Nick were honest with himself, he liked his hand about as much as he liked fucking most of the time.

He crossed his arms as he walked, trying to keep warm in the early-fall chill. It was only mid-October, but the leaves were already red and gold.

As he neared Gabe’s house, Nick was happy to see that lights were on. He smiled, jogged up the steps, and then rapped quietly.

After a moment, the door cracked open. Gabe blinked at him from the doorway. “Oh.” A blush colored Gabe’s cheeks.

Nick only realized in that moment how Gabe had really pretty eyes. They were dark and rimmed with thick lashes—adding softness to his face, since his jaw and mouth were hard.

“Uh, I didn’t know you’d be here so early.” Gabe stayed in the doorway, so Nick looked past him into the house and to the couch. The guy, Brooks, from the party was sitting there, his face angry.

“What’s the deal, Gabe?” The guy got up. Something about him rubbed Nick the wrong way. He was too cocky, and the way he looked at Gabe was

all wrong—like Gabe was a thing, not a person. Like Gabe was an object he only wanted because it was pretty.

“Oh, hi.” Nick eased forward until Gabe didn’t have any choice but to let him into the house. He held out a hand for Brooks to shake. “I’m Nick. I don’t think we met the other night.”

Brooks rolled his gaze over Nick, staring at his worn-out sneakers, sneering at his faded jeans and the Tshirt he’d gotten in high school. “Uh, yeah.” He didn’t shake Nick’s hand.

Instead, Brooks gave Gabe a withering stare. “Why don’t you call me sometime you don’t have a friend coming over?” Then Brooks grabbed a jacket off the back of a kitchen chair. It was some kind of fake black leather and obviously expensive.

“Later, Brooks.” Gabe said it to Brooks but was staring right at Nick. He had his hand on his hip and his lips pursed. He waited until Brooks had shut the door before narrowing his eyes.

Nick felt like he was going to get chewed a new asshole. “Listen, Gabe. I didn’t mean to mess up your—”

“Oh, shut it.” Gabe walked across the room and picked up the beer Brooks had left on the floor. Next to it was a can Gabe must have been drinking, because Gabe lifted it to his lips and swallowed a generous measure. He frowned at his beer. “Do you have an issue with me getting laid or something?”

Nick rubbed the back of his neck. “Why the hell would I care?”

Gabe waved his hand, like he was trying to shut Nick up. “I don’t know, Nick. Why would you care?” He must not have been that mad, though, because he walked to the kitchen, where he opened the fridge and pulled out another beer. He handed it to Nick.

“Not like it’s my business, but you said yourself he’s kind of a jerk.” Nick popped open the top of his can, then sucked in the foam before it spilled. “I mean, don’t you think you’re better than that guy?”

“You’re not my parent.” Gabe walked into the hallway toward his room, and when Nick didn’t follow, he waved him forward. “Hey, I don’t really want to talk in the living room. Sarah’ll be home soon. She’s got PMS, and she’s a bear to be around. D’you mind?”

“No. It’s cool.” The house was all on one level, with three bedrooms off a hallway that led from the living room. Sarah’s and Matt’s rooms were side by side on the right, and Gabe’s room was next to the bathroom on the left.



Nick stepped into the room behind Gabe and then closed the door. He surveyed the space, noting the IKEA furniture and the trendy bedding.

“Gay men aren’t like girls, Nick.” Gabe sat on his bed and reached over to turn on the fan on the nightstand. “We can have sex, and it doesn’t have to mean anything.” He made an exasperated face. “And if you must know, I wasn’t planning to fuck Brooks Price.” He shivered, as if the idea was as repulsive to Gabe as it was to Nick.

“See, I don’t get that.” Nick unzipped his sweatshirt and balled it up before sitting in the chair by Gabe’s desk. He didn’t want to sound like a judgmental prick, but he still had to say, “Messing around with someone you don’t even like seems...” He knew thinking it made him somehow unmasculine. But around Gabe, Nick thought he could be honest. “Well, it seems...wrong.” His voice got softer. “Seems like it would take something away from you.”

Gabe bounded off the bed and stepped up to Nick’s chair so that their knees were almost touching. “And what about you? Have you only hooked up with people you were in love with?” His beer was still in his hand, and he took another mutinous drink.

Nick recoiled, surprised by Gabe’s sudden anger. He leaned back in his chair. “No, not necessarily. But I at least *liked* the girls I’ve slept with.”

“And did you sleep with Mandy?”

“No.” Nick answered before he could think about why Gabe had asked. “No. I wasn’t planning on it, and I didn’t. Does that make you happy?” He didn’t know what the fuck he was defending to Gabe. “What are you so pissed off about? I didn’t do anything to you.”

The look in Gabe’s eyes was wild and angry. “Well, you stopped me from getting my rocks off.” He downed the rest of his beer and then fell onto his bed. Gabe reached over his head to set the can on the floor, and in the process, his tank top rode up, exposing his hard lower belly.

“I could make it up to you.” Nick was mostly just joking. Well, mostly. Truth was, Nick could stand a little sexual outlet himself, and now that he thought about it, he liked Gabe a lot better than he did Mandy. Not in a *gay* way—but as a person.

Of course, he didn’t actively dislike Mandy the way he knew Gabe disliked Brooks. But Nick enjoyed Gabe’s company. Gabe was like his best friend on campus. Nick could see them hanging out more. Jerking off together, or...whatever. It didn’t seem wrong so long as it was with someone he

liked.

Gabe lifted his head off the bed, catching Nick's gaze. "Really?" He seemed a little tipsy but no more than Mandy had been. Gabe rolled onto his side and shrugged his shirt up over his head. When his torso was bared, he cocked an eyebrow. "So, straight boy. What are you going to do to make it up to me?"

## Chapter Five

Nick wasn't scared. He didn't know why. After all, a lot of guys he knew were totally freaked out by any sex that could be remotely considered gay. But after the previous night, Nick figured that making Gabe come was probably not much different than getting himself off. Assuming he didn't end up getting fucked or something, it wasn't a big deal.

He eased off his chair and moved to perch on the side of the bed. Nick looked over Gabe's torso, appreciating the flat planes of his muscles and the dip of his hips. "I dunno. What did you get Brooks over here to do?"

Gabe looked skeptical. "I dunno, suck my dick maybe?" He glanced over like he was checking Nick out.

"Well." Nick thought about it. He didn't quite think he was up for going that far, even if the idea of Gabe returning the favor was kind of intriguing. He settled for something he knew he'd feel comfortable with. "How about a hand job?"

"Really?" Gabe rolled onto his side and leaned up on his elbow.

Nick mirrored him, leaning onto his side. "Yeah, I guess. Why not?" He hoped Gabe didn't actually answer that question.

Gabe chewed his lip. "Sure, why not?" He fixated on his bed's brown-striped comforter. "Um, should I get undressed? Or..."

"Oh." Nick hadn't really thought about how they were going to get into it. The night before, he could have imagined reaching over and touching Gabe's dick, but it seemed like an odd thing to do without any buildup like they'd had with the movie.

"You want to turn off the lights first or something?" Gabe asked.

"Only if you want," Nick rushed to say. He didn't want Gabe to think he was disgusted or something. Gabe was a good-looking guy. "I'm cool either way."

"Oh." Gabe tilted his head. It made the long parts of his hair fall in his eyes.

“Well, let’s turn them off anyway.” He hopped off the bed and flipped the switch on the wall. The room went completely black, and Gabe stumbled back onto the bed. “Uh, I could turn on the reading lamp if that’s too dark.” Nick smiled in the direction of Gabe’s voice. Even though Gabe was nice to look at, Nick had to admit he felt more comfortable now that they didn’t have to see each other. “No. I’m sure my eyes will adjust.”

“Okay.” The bed shifted as Gabe rolled over. The room looked more blue than black, and Nick could make out that Gabe was lying as he had before, but closer, only inches away. Before Nick could second-guess the whole thing, he reached out and touched Gabe’s arm.

It was hard and warm. Lightly haired. It didn’t feel anything like a girl’s arm, and though Nick had touched guys before—wrestling and in football and stuff—he’d never touched one in a sexual situation. It was different but nice. He roamed his fingers higher, tracing the bump of Gabe’s bicep, and then over his shirt to his shoulder.

Gabe wasn’t beefy. In fact, Nick’s friends from high school might have called him scrawny. But he felt solid. A little bony, maybe, but strong. When Nick traced his collarbone and then the hairless dip of his sternum, Gabe let out a long breath.

“You okay with the touching?” Nick liked it—feeling his way across Gabe’s body. But he wasn’t sure if gay guys felt each other up or whether they normally just went in for the kill with the sucking and fucking.

Talking to his friends, Nick thought the only thing stopping them from going straight to fucking was that girls wanted some kind of foreplay.

“Yeah.” Gabe’s voice was breathy. He inched a fraction closer, so that the contours of his body sank into Nick’s hand. Gabe reached out, like he might want to mimic Nick and roam his fingertips over Nick’s shoulders. But he pulled his hand back to his side. “Yeah, it’s nice.”

Nick smiled. “You can touch me if you want.” He hoped Gabe would stroke him. It had been a while since Nick felt the hands of someone he actually wanted.

Gabe made a sound that might have been a stifled groan. And Nick couldn’t tell if he was flattered or if he was getting hot. His cock plumped in his jeans even before Gabe made contact. But when Gabe rested his hand on the tender skin of Nick’s throat, Nick’s erection went from chubby to battering ram in no time flat.

“S’okay, right?” Gabe asked.

Nick would have thought Gabe was going to move his hands lower, over Nick's pecs and down his belly to his cock. But instead, Gabe slid his fingers to tangle in the back of Nick's hair. It felt good, but now that Nick had imagined Gabe touching his dick, his erection felt like it was about to bust out of his pants. Before he knew what he was doing, Nick scooted closer, so that in one of his fitful movements, he felt the front of Gabe brush his bulge.

The sensation was electric, sending shivers through his body and down his thighs. Nick wanted to get closer—rub his dick against Gabe's leg or maybe Gabe's crotch—grind it against hard, hot skin.

Gabe tugged on Nick's hair, and the slight jolt of pain brought Nick back to reality, where he was palming Gabe's ribs and they were hardly even touching. Nick opened his eyes and saw that Gabe's were still closed. And Gabe looked... Well, *pretty* wasn't the right word. But, he looked *something*. He looked like something Nick wanted.

"Were you gonna let Brookskiss you?" Nick asked.

Gabe opened his eyes. They were dark and shining. "No. I wasn't going to let Brookskiss me."

Nick was surprised how let down he felt, but then Gabe pinned him with a soulful gaze. "But you can." He hitched his shoulder up in a shrug. "If you want to."

As if pulled by some kind of irresistible force, Nick eased closer. They were too close to watch each other, so he closed his eyes. He felt Gabe's breath on his lips. Nick considered how he felt about it. Better to stop now than to freak out midkiss and hurt Gabe's feelings. But it didn't feel weird to have Gabe's face so close or to have Gabe's hand in his hair. So, Nick wound his arm around so his hand rested right between Gabe's shoulders. Instead of crossing that last distance himself, he pulled Gabe into him so their lips sealed.

Neither of them moved for a moment, but then Gabe opened his mouth. And though it felt like maybe Gabe was about to say something, maybe that they shouldn't be kissing, Nick seized the opportunity to lick the inside of Gabe's mouth and then nip his top lip. He tasted like beer and something salty, and his mouth was soft and sweet.

Gabe relaxed, his muscles softening in Nick's hold. He sighed. And when Nick started kissing for real, slanting his mouth against Gabe's and lapping at his tongue, Gabe responded with enthusiasm. He shimmied closer, so

their chests brushed together, and their hips rubbed with delicious friction. Gabe kissed in a way that was slow and intense, tempering Nick's aggressive tongue with slow suction and gentle nips.

Then Gabe dragged Nick's hand lower, until Nick felt the swell of Gabe's cock pressing through his pants. Gabe thrust, grinding at the end of the movement. When he pumped forward a second time, Gabe moaned.

Nick had never been with a woman so aggressive, and it totally turned him on. He rubbed Gabe through his pants, hoping Gabe would take the hint and reciprocate. "Take off your clothes."

Gabe humped into his palm a couple more times before whispering, "You, too." Then Gabe unbuttoned his pants and shoved them off. He paused with a hand on the waistband of his briefs. "Just get my dick out or all the way off?"

"Off. All of it." Nick pulled off his shirt then he shucked his jeans to his ankles and kicked them away. He'd never been so happy in his life that his jeans were loose.

"God, you're really sexy." Gabe pulled Nick into another kiss the second he was done undressing. They stayed side by side, which worked great since Nick was left-handed. It was like they were made to jerk off each other, though Nick realized he was crazy for thinking that. After all, Gabe was far from the only right-handed person on the planet. It was just—Nick had never felt before like he and the person he was with in bed were so well suited.

Gabe was almost his size and every bit as horny. He palmed Nick boldly, not like he was just doing it because he thought he was supposed to, as so many girls Nick had fooled around with had. No—Gabe fisted Nick like he loved it. Like he couldn't get enough of touching Nick's cock and he was thinking about swallowing it whole.

"Crap, you ain't bad yourself." Nick kissed his way down Gabe's neck to his shoulder. He'd stopped worrying about whether he was doing things right, because Gabe moaned or panted or wiggled every time he liked something. And it didn't take Nick long to realize that Gabe would press his dick up to Nick's hand or his hip or his leg no matter what Nick did. But that was okay, because Gabe worked Nick's cock the whole time with hands that were bigger than a girl's and twice as strong.

"Are you going to freak out if I try to blow you?" Gabe asked.

*Oh, thank fuck!* "Not at all." Nick licked Gabe's nipple. When Gabe

squirmed, he did it again. “I want it.”

“Oh, thank fuck.” Gabe said out loud what Nick had been thinking, and Nick would have laughed if Gabe didn’t take that moment to skim down his body and close his mouth over the top half of Nick’s cock.

Nick arched his back, trying to get more and deeper. Gabe’s mouth was amazing. And, yeah, he felt a bit bad reducing a guy to the space between his lips, but *oh my God*, it was like Gabe could teach a class.

Gabe sucked on his tip with hot friction and then slid his mouth lower with wet, firm pressure. Never once did he stop the quick, sure jerks on Nick’s base. He made these quiet, low murmurs, like Nick was the best thing he ever tasted. Then Gabe switched hands, shuffling his right one low on his body and matching his strokes on Nick’s cock with quick jerks of his own.

“You don’t have to do that.” Nick touched his shoulder. When Gabe paused for a second to look up, Nick wondered if he could come just from the look of Gabe’s wet lips and his wide eyes.

“What, jack off?”

Nick blushed. “Yeah, I’d do that for you after. If you want.” With girls, Nick knew it was usually the guy’s job to get them off. Nick wasn’t sure what the etiquette was with guys.

Gabe smirked. “You can. But honestly, I like it this way.”

“Oh.” Nick’s lip twitched up in a smile. At that moment, he couldn’t think of anything he’d rather be doing than getting more of that spectacular mouth while watching Gabe get himself off. It was like the best of both worlds. He touched Gabe’s cheek and said, “Well, as you were then.”

“Smart-ass.” Gabe must not have been too pissed, because he dove back onto Nick’s cock right away, sucking and moaning and being sexy as all fuck.

Nick groaned, and he tried not to buck his hips off the bed. He wasn’t going to last long. But just when he was starting to wonder whether he was supposed to be trying to hold his load, Gabe made a muffled noise like he was coming, and Nick went off like a rocket.

His dick pulsed once before pumping cum into Gabe’s mouth. Even though Nick hadn’t given him any warning, Gabe swallowed it down, even making these little desperate sounds as if Nick’s cum was making Gabe orgasm more.

Gabe knew exactly the right time to pull off. He rolled to the side, semen dribbling at the corner of his mouth. Before Gabe could wipe it away, Nick

leaned over and kissed him, tasting his bitter cum on Gabe's lips.

Nick hadn't planned to do it, and he hoped Gabe didn't think he was a pervert. But Nick had always kind of liked the taste of jizz. Not so much he would have eaten a whole load or anything. But whenever he whacked off, Nick always furtively tasted himself. He didn't know why, but it always got him hot.

"Not too bad, right?" Gabe smiled against his lips. "The blow job, I mean."

"Dumb ass." Nick lay back on the bed and chuckled. He felt tired and happy and completely ready to fall asleep. He hoped Gabe wasn't going to kick him out of the bed. The couch was comfortable as far as couches went, but Gabe had a queen. "You know, you're really cool."

Gabe socked his arm but then cuddled close to Nick's side. "I'm glad you noticed."

Nick kissed his head, right on top of his ridiculous hair. "You mind if I stay?" He wrapped his arms around Gabe's shoulders.

"Um...sure." Gabe rolled off to grab a towel.

"Cool. I'm beat." Nick stretched his hands up over his head. A little hint of worry crept into his mind—some kind of free-floating anxiety he couldn't even place.

But Nick chalked it up to the same kind of worries he'd had since coming to school. He was always a little keyed up about passing classes and fitting in. At least with a friend on campus, he didn't have to feel alone.

## Chapter Six

Nick kissed each of Gabe's fingers. He wasn't quite sure how he'd gotten to this point—gone from feeling weird even touching Gabe to wanting to climb all over him. But he figured it had something to do with great orgasms. That, and Gabe was just a really nice guy.

It wasn't a *gay* thing, either. Nick didn't feel like a different person from who he'd been before they started fooling around. The stuff he was doing with Gabe was like bonus hand jobs. Or maybe extracurricular blow jobs. Honestly, Nick didn't give a shit what to call it, because it felt too good to stop.

Gabe moved his knees apart so that Nick could slide in between. "Do you need to go home and get a toothbrush or something?"

An empty pizza box teetered on Gabe's desk, and several three-liter bottles

of soda lay wasted on the floor. They'd spent all of Saturday in Gabe's bed, fooling around and watching movies on Gabe's computer.

Gabe wrapped a hand around Nick's nape and kissed him.

Nick felt Gabe's breaths on his cheek and heard the quiet murmurs he made when he got horny. He ran his hand down Gabe's chest, circling his nipple. He'd never thought much before about whether men might like their nipples played with, but as he listened to Gabe's breath catch, he knew Gabe enjoyed it. "D'you like this?"

"Maybe." Gabe yelped. "Which will make you keep doing that?"

Nick pinched the tip between his teeth. Then he lapped gently. It didn't seem like Gabe wanted it hard. Instead, Gabe shivered and writhed for licks and nuzzles.

"D'you wanna have sex?" Nick looked up at him, all dark eyes and black lashes.

Nick kissed his way lower, to Gabe's belly, where his dark trail of hair led to his cock. He didn't know if he was up for sex. After all, penetration fell into the *pretty darn gay* category. But he supposed that if he were on top, he might feel okay about it.

And Nick figured that when Gabe said "sex," he meant for Nick to be the one on top. He didn't even know how he knew. It was just the way things seemed to work with them. "I dunno," he answered. Nick stroked Gabe's erection. His uncut cock was damp at the tip and dark with arousal.

"You don't have to go down on me." Gabe shifted. "I know some guys are weird about doing it if you're uncircumcised."

"Wusses, man." Nick gave a little, derisive snort. Since he'd never gone down on a guy, he hadn't thought about which type of penis he'd prefer. But he got the sense that someone had made Gabe feel bad about his body. Nick hated whoever that person was. He buried his face in the crease of Gabe's thigh, smelling his musk and feeling him quiver. Then he kissed his way up the side of his cock, over the skin that was looser than the flesh on his own, and to his salty cap. When he brushed his lips over Gabe's helmet, Gabe jerked.

"Wow. That's..." Gabe stared down at Nick with something like reverence in his eyes. "It's different with you." His eyes were soft and dewy.

Nick couldn't help but smile. "Yeah, it's different for me, too." Nick licked him up the side then around the cap before winking. "Y'know, with you having a dick and all."



Gabe rolled his eyes. He scrubbed his hand through Nick's hair— rough, the way Nick liked it. "Shut up and suck my cock, straight boy."

"Your wish is my command." Nick grinned. He opened his mouth and fit it over Gabe's tip. Gabe tasted salty and bitter with pre-cum, and Nick growled at the taste. He was a little scared of accidentally using his teeth, so he took his time screwing his lips lower, until his mouth was full of Gabe's cock and there were still a few inches he'd missed.

"Damn, that's good." Gabe rubbed Nick's head, his shoulders, like he was channeling his energy all over the place in order to avoid pumping between Nick's lips. "You should rub it, too."

Nick wasn't sure why he hadn't thought of that. Maybe it was just that having a dick in his mouth was such a new experience that he hadn't really thought about how to get Gabe off once he'd started. He pulled off slowly, his lips damp and his mouth feeling empty when he popped off the tip. "Let me know if I'm doing it wrong, okay?"

"Oh, hon, donot worry." Gabe rubbed his thighs, as if he couldn't wait for Nick to get back to business. "You're amazing."

"Cool." Nick's lip twitched up in a cocky grin. He liked impressing Gabe. He dove back on, suckling the cap while he wrapped his hand around Gabe's base. Of all the things they were doing, rubbing Gabe's cock was the hardest, since his left hand was along the edge of the bed. He gripped the covers with his right hand, trying to hold steady, but Nick nearly lost his balance.

Gabe touched his shoulder. "So really, d'you wanna?"

"Yeah, maybe...If you'll let me." He felt weird making a veiled reference to what roles they'd have in bed. Nick had heard gay guys were totally straightforward about that kind of thing, and he wondered if he was being a wuss not just saying outright that he wanted to pitch.

But Gabe didn't seem to mind, because he just batted those beautiful eyes at him and pinched Nick's side. "I wouldn't have it any other way, tiger."

Gabe's eyes twinkled with laughter, and Nick wondered if he'd missed some kind of joke. "What, you always..."

"Bottom?" Gabe raised his eyebrows. He smirked. "No, not always. But I know there's no way you could handle bottoming." He wiggled, shaking his ass on the bed.

Nick felt a little offended. Sure, he didn't want to be on the receiving end, but he didn't like the insinuation he couldn't take it. "Hey, is that a dis?"

He wasn't sure at what point in the conversation his dick had gone from hard to oh-my-God-I'm-gonna-blow, but he thought it was somewhere between the talking and the talk about fucking. He adjusted his cock to a more comfortable position.

"No. It's just that you can't just shove a dick up your ass and have the guy start sawing away right off the bat. You need to work up to these things." Gabe crawled up the bed to his bedside table. Unlike the rest of his furniture, it was worn, and the paint was cracking off into dust on the floor. The drawer creaked when he pulled it open.

"Not that I'm interested necessarily, but what do you mean?" Nick tensed, but his dick didn't seem to share any of Nick's reservations. It stood straight as a ruler from between his legs, leaking.

Nick tried not to touch it at first, thinking that would be embarrassing. But then he remembered he was with Gabe—who wouldn't be mean or grossed out no matter what Nick did. So Nick took his cock in hand and squeezed it in a long, languorous pump.

Gabe tossed a bottle of lube on the bed, followed by a few sex toys. When he saw Nick's confused expression, Gabe snickered. "Perhaps now is not the best time for sex ed, but I'm pretty sure your health teacher didn't cover butt plugs."

"Um...no." Nick imagined the gym teacher who'd taught the boys in his junior high the basics of reproduction. On the upside, it put a damper on Nick's erection.

He looked over the stuff Gabe had laid out. "So, you use these, um...all the time?" He really didn't know all that much about gay sex except what went where, and even that he only knew by process of elimination. Men only had so many holes.

"Not always." Gabe leaned over and kissed him. It was soft and sweet but tinged with desire. Gabe was rock hard, so obviously he was excited, but he seemed to want to take his time. "I thought maybe I'd show you." He walked his fingers up Nick's arm, over his deltoid, and to his neck. All the while, he drew little circles with the pads of his fingers. "Lay back." His voice was seductive, his mouth warm. Gabe kissed his way down Nick's chest and, when Nick lay down on the bed, his belly.

"Um, what are you—"

"Don't be a baby." Gabe feathered a touch up between his legs. He smiled wickedly. "If you wanna be on the giving end, you should have an idea how

it feels.”

Nick swallowed. “Really?” His mind swam, and Nick wasn’t sure whether to go with things or protest harder. He knew Gabe wouldn’t hurt him. Nick could break the guy in half if he wanted. But Nick didn’t want to pussy out. Still, he had to admit that Gabe’s touch was starting to border on a little bit gay.

“I’m just gonna get you off.” Gabe nuzzled a path down Nick’s hip and then between his clenched legs. “Nothing scary.”

Slowly, Nick opened, just giving Gabe enough room to get his nose, and then his tongue, under Nick’s sac.

Gabe shuffled to between Nick’s knees, though he kept kissing and suckling the whole time. He looked so sexy, especially once Gabe started working his own cock and Nick’s at the same time.

That was cool. Gabe had sucked him while jerking off before. Nothing too gay about that.

“Damn, that’s good.” Nick thought about turning around so they could sixty-nine. But then Gabe’s touch feathered lower, past his balls to his taint, and Nick lost the ability to think.

The gentle probe of his fingers felt different than Nick would have imagined. Namely, it felt surprisingly good. Like a million tiny nerve endings were lighting up and sending blood and heat to his cock.

Gabe grabbed a bottle off the bed and dripped lube on his finger. When he slid his touch between Nick’s cheeks again, Nick wanted a mouth on his dick so bad he was tempted to grab Gabe’s hair.

“Not yet.” Gabe stared deep into his eyes, as if he’d read Nick’s mind. Gabe was weird that way. He always seemed to know what Nick was thinking.

Nick had thought Gabe’s mind reading was weird at first, then annoying. But now that Gabe was tormenting him with slippery passes of his fingertip over Nick’s rim, Nick thought it was fucking amazing.

“Take a deep breath.”

Nick tried but couldn’t quite drag in the air. This was a little...maybe a little too...

“Now blow it out and relax.” Gabe forced his fingertip through his pucker. Wincing, Nick said, “Shit. That hurts.” It wasn’t horribly painful or anything. But it wasn’t as pleasurable as Nick had expected. Then again, he was sort of glad he didn’t enjoy it too much. After all, he was just doing this to learn what it felt like, for when he’d be giving it to Gabe.

His finger still inside, Gabe took Nick's cock into his mouth and bobbed up and down in slow, long strokes.

Somewhere in the middle of that delicious friction and pressure, Nick relaxed for real, and Gabe used that chance to ease his finger in and out in slow probes. Nick couldn't tell if it felt good or whether the pain was just adding an edge to the pleasure of the blow job. But either way, he didn't want Gabe to stop.

"You know that's just my finger, right?" Gabe whispered when he pulled off in between sucks.

"Yeah." Nick twisted his hips, trying to get more of Gabe's mouth. He wanted Gabe to start stroking off, too, and for both of them to spray jizz all over each other and then lick it off and start again.

Gabe kissed Nick's cap. "Well, I like to think my dick is a lot bigger."

Nick chuckled under his breath. But then Gabe pulled out and shuffled with something between Nick's legs. Nick got nervous for a second, but Gabe started blowing him again, and he forgot to clench, even when he felt something smooth and rounded against his hole.

That something pressed, and it fit easily into Nick's pucker. It wasn't uncomfortable or all that much bigger than Gabe's finger had been. Once Gabe had pressed it inside, he let go, and for some reason it stayed there.

"S'okay, right?" Gabe kissed his way up from Nick's hips, over his chest. He lay on top, his erection flattened between their bellies. His smile was so warm it melted Nick into a puddle.

"I guess." Nick tightened his muscles around the small toy. He couldn't quite describe the sensation other than it felt full and tight and like it pressed on his dick from behind, making Nick feel like he was going to come any second. Nick tugged Gabe closer, thrusting into his hip.

"You want to fuck me now?" Gabe murmured into Nick's neck. He rubbed up against Nick's body, though with less desperation than Nick felt.

Nick shook his head. "I'd shoot the second we started." He was already set to come just from dry humping Gabe's belly and from the hot passes of Gabe's cock against his.

"Okay, then." Gabe nipped his ear. "Give me a sec." Gabe fumbled around at their sides until he found what he was looking for. Then he rubbed some lube onto a toy of his own. It looked a lot bigger than the one Nick felt in his ass, but Gabe didn't seem to have any trouble with it, because he reached behind himself, and, with nothing more than a crease between his

eyebrows to show his discomfort, he pushed it inside. He bit his lip, apparently in pleasure, but then his eyes cracked open, and he blushed. “You don’t think I’m a perv or anything, right?”

“No.” Nick dragged Gabe on top of him, rubbing his aching erection against Gabe’s. When that wasn’t enough, he flipped them over until he was on top and could pound into Gabe’s hip. Every thrust felt like he was fucking Gabe and getting fucked in return and was so hot Nick thought his head might explode. “No, I think you’re perfect.”

“Oh God.” Gabe kissed him with passion and heat. He writhed, bucking into Nick, as if he couldn’t imagine anything better than their bodies pressed together and their cocks bruising with their thrusts.

“Next time I’m going to fuck that tight little hole of yours,” Nick murmured. He didn’t know where that rough and dirty part of him came from. He’d certainly never talked like that to any of the girls he’d been with.

“Crap, you’re amazing.” Gabe panted. He laved his tongue lower and sucked on Nick’s nipple. At the same time, he grabbed Nick’s ass and pulled him tight. That extra pressure echoed from his ass through his cock, and Nick felt the first pulse of orgasm.

He slid his hand under Gabe’s body and grabbed Gabe’s butt cheek. He spread him wide as he spilled his cum all over Gabe’s dick, and he was pretty sure Gabe was coming, too, because Gabe wrapped his legs around Nick’s hips and threw back his head to groan. And then Nick’s dick wasn’t just wet, it was drenched, and he was thrusting into a warm, slippery puddle.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck.” Gabe held Nick’s shoulders, easing him to stillness. When he’d caught his breath, he relaxed. Slowly, he unwound his arms and legs. Gabe smiled, and his chest and face were flushed and sexy. “Shit, that was good.”

Nick rolled off to give him some space. His stomach felt cold and wet, and he reached to the bedside table for some tissues.

“Can I have some?” Gabe snatched a few tissues out of Nick’s hand and mopped his front. Then he grinned and kissed Nick’s lips. “You perv.”

“Oh, I’m the pervert here?” Nick rolled Gabe onto his back. He felt so good and so horny, he wasn’t sure he’d get fully soft before going for round two.

\* \* \* \*

“Hey, you ever play Ultimate Frisbee?” Gabe rolled over and lifted onto his elbow.

“Well, I’ve played Frisbee here and there but never an actual game.” Nick shuffled higher, so that his head was on the pillow. It would have felt presumptuous pulling up the covers, but he wanted to drop a hint about sleeping over again.

Gabe gave him a look that said he knew exactly what Nick was trying to do. He kicked his leg, nodding at the bed. “Since you put out, you can crash.” He smiled. And when he dropped next to Nick, he went back to his previous train of thought. “Sarah and Matt play on an intramural team. I mostly go for moral support, but they have a game tomorrow, and I thought maybe you’d like to come. Someone’s out sick, so maybe you could sub.”

Nick gave it some thought. “Well, I’m not sure I’d be any good.” He still played pickup games of football sometimes with John and the guys down at the neighborhood field. Nick liked football, but he hadn’t been good enough to tryout for Holsum’s team. Mostly, he just liked being outside running around.

“Oh, they’re just playing for bragging rights and for bracket ratings. Though sometimes the losers buy the winners beer after the game.”

“Oh. Well then cool.” He knew how competitive some sports could get and didn’t want to be the cause of any upset. “You don’t think the other guys are going to get mad, right?”

Gabe lifted an eyebrow. “Believe me, hon, they’ll be happy to have you.” He smirked. “They always play shirts against skins, and they’ll be gagging to be skins just to check you out.”

“So is the team entirely...”

“Queer?No.” He grinned. “There are some girls on it that are straight.”

Nick bunched up the pillow under his head then pressed his feet down under the covers. “Oh, good.”

Gabe’s eyes narrowed, and he looked angry, but Nick wasn’t sure why. Gabe rolled away from him and said, “I’m going to sleep now.” But Nick got the sense he didn’t nod off for a while.

## **Chapter Seven**

Gabe tried to still be angry when he woke up, but Nick looked so cute splayed out in his bed that he couldn't quite manage. Nick was all pink from sleep, his beefy arms crossed under his head and the outline of his ass drawn in a delectable curve under the sheets. He was heavier than most queer men Gabe knew on campus. More like "straight guy" weight. But Gabe was surprised to find he liked that Nick had a little meat on his bones. It made him seem solid and like there was more to his life than his jean size.

Before Nick could wake up, Gabe slipped out of the room and down the hall to the kitchen. No one was awake yet, and Gabe grinned that he had the place to himself to cook.

He searched through the cabinets until he found the ingredients for waffles and then stood on a chair to reach the shelf where he kept the waffle maker. Gabe knew he was a bit of a freak for having flour and sugar on hand. Most guys he knew in school—hell, most girls, too—could barely boil water. But Gabe liked to cook. He always had. And after his mom and dad's divorce, he'd done a fair share of the housework back home.

In a moment of wild inspiration, he grabbed a few bananas and the last of the rum. He mixed up the waffle batter and started the first batch before searching his phone for how to make bananas flambé.

Nick stumbled out of the hallway and into the living room, his face creased from sleep. "Oh fuck, that smells amazing." Nick scrubbed at the back of his hair—all crimson armpit fuzz, bunching muscles, and innocent smile.

Gabe realized he was fucked. Completely and totally fucked. Because he was nuts about the guy. "Oh, well...Um, I make a big breakfast most days on the weekend." It wasn't a total lie. Gabe was a fan of brunch. That was the main reason he'd decided to share a house off campus instead of living in the dorms.

"Yeah, I remember. But, dude, I was impressed just with the eggs the other day." Nick sauntered into the kitchen. He was wearing nothing but his worn, button-fly jeans that looked dangerously close to falling off his hips. Nick poured himself a glass of water from the tap. The way he swallowed it down in a few gulps made Gabe's pulse race. He seemed completely unaware of the effect he was having on Gabe's nerves though, because he brushed right past him to get to the waffle iron.

Nick closed his eyes, his nostrils flaring like he couldn't get enough of the smell. "Mmm...Clearly, you know the way to a man's heart."

Gabe blinked, unable to move away from Nick but not willing to risk touching him, either. Before he could say anything embarrassing, like “Oh my God, I love you,” Gabe tossed his hair out of his eyes and said, “I thought that was through his dick.”

Nick gave him a mock punch in the arm. It didn’t hurt, though. “Well, with the way you suck, I wouldn’t be surprised if that’s true for you.”

Gabe felt his face heat, and he buried his head in the refrigerator before Nick could see. “I think we still have some OJ left. You want some?” The cool air felt good against his skin and braced him for whatever mixed signals Nick was going to throw at him next.

“Yeah, sounds good.” Nick rounded to the other side of the counter, and he sat on one of the high stools. He stretched, which caused all sorts of trouble in Gabe’s pants and made Gabe think maybe he should rub one out in the bathroom before breakfast, but then Matt and Sarah wandered into the living room, each still in their pajamas.

“Ooh, pancakes or waffles?” Sarah plopped onto the stool next to Nick. She was smiling her normal, friendly grin and clearly had no idea of Gabe’s turmoil. But Matt looked from Nick, to Gabe, and back to Nick again, his serious eyes missing nothing. When his gaze finally landed on Gabe, Matt raised one shoulder almost imperceptibly, as if to say, “Sucks to be you.”

“Waffles.” Gabe spun around and plucked the second round out of the waffle maker. Then he poured in more batter before slicing the bananas. “D’you need any help?” Nick asked.

Gabe knew he’d only feel more confused with Nick hovering by his side in the tiny kitchen. “No. I got it.” He focused all his energy on the food under his fingers and not on wondering what the fuck was going on with him and Nick.

Breakfast passed without too much awkwardness, since as soon as everyone had a plate of food, the four of them sat in front of the TV and watched cartoons. It was nice and relaxed and provided a good way to pass the time as they took showers. On weekdays, Gabe and his housemates has a fairly strict schedule for who got to use the bathroom. Since they all had different classes, usually it wasn’t too hard to accommodate everyone.

However, on the weekend they all tended to wake up around the same time, and no one ever wanted to get dressed right away. When his turn came to use the shower, Gabe shot after about ten quick strokes. It wasn’t sexy or even that enjoyable but instead felt like he was



just taking the edge off his excitement. The worst part about it was Gabe wasn't just horny for Nick, he was...He didn't even know how to describe it. It was like Gabe was hungry for the guy, like he couldn't wait to be around him again, and even taking a shower felt like a sacrifice, because it meant being away from him for a few minutes.

Or maybe the issue was that any second Nick would wise up that Gabe was in love with him and take off.

By the time Gabe had dried off and dragged on his clothes, he was half expecting Nick to have left, storming off with maybe some harsh words to Matt or Sarah about how Gabe had been trying to indoctrinate him into an immoral lifestyle. But when Gabe got out to the living room, Nick was still on the couch, joking around with Matt about movies.

"I've never understood the appeal of *Big Fish*." Matt shook his head.

"Yeah, to include it in the same class as *The Untouchables* seems nuts." Nick leaned back on the couch, pointing the remote at the screen. When he saw Gabe, he smiled. "Hey, how long is *Ultimate*? AMC is playing *Casablanca* at four, and can you believe Matt hasn't seen it?"

Matt was lying sideways on the couch, though his long legs were bent. He kicked Nick in the thigh. "All the professors expect everyone to have seen it already. That's probably why I've never heard of it being assigned for class."

Nick rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I'm going to choose to believe that, instead of thinking it's some kind of conspiracy against Bogart." He clicked around, programming the DVR to record.

"They're usually done by four, but sometimes we go out until maybe six." Gabe watched the screen. He felt a twinge of jealousy over Nick's friendship with his roommate. "Do you care whether you watch it right at four?"

"Nah." Nick hopped off the couch. "I don't want to have to rush back." He'd borrowed some shorts from Matt and a loose tank top from Gabe, and Gabe wondered if it might be a good idea for Nick to start bringing an overnight bag with him when he came to stay.

But Gabe didn't say anything about Nick's lack of clothes—or toothbrush—because he didn't want to jinx Nick's easy familiarity in the house. "Cool, let's head out."

They all walked together through campus and over to the soccer field the intramural teams used for their games. It was a cool fall day, and though it

was warm in the sun, the trees had already changed colors. Holsum looked exactly like what Gabe had always imagined college would look like—brick buildings, New England autumn, rolling lawns. When he glanced at Nick standing with the other guys waiting for the game to start, he realized Nick was exactly the type of guy Gabe imagined meeting in college, too. Nick was strong, and sweet. The only thing wrong with him was he didn't think he was gay.

Suddenly, Gabe couldn't stand that one piece of the puzzle was missing. After all, he'd known since he'd first seen Nick in class that Nick swung his direction. And it was only because Gabe was coddling him that Nick was getting away with this whole "I'm straight" charade.

"Hey." He walked over to where Nick stood talking to Chris. Gabe tapped his arm. "Can I talk to you for a sec?"

Nick gave him a casual smile. "Yeah, sure." He followed Gabe a short distance away, and when they stopped walking, Nick tilted his head with gentle interest. "What's up?"

Gabe took a deep breath, trying to formulate the right words. "Well, I know it's a weird time to talk about this, but..." He closed his eyes. "Could you not go out of your way to talk about girls, or being straight, when you're around me and my friends?"

"Yeah. I guess." Nick didn't look mad, just pensive. He rubbed at the back of his neck. "But I don't see why it matters."

"Well, it makes me look kinda dumb if we're fooling around and then you tell people you're straight." Gabe bit his lip, wishing he hadn't said that.

Nick crossed his arms. "You're telling people?"

"No!" Gabe held up his hands. He wasn't sure how to say what he meant. *Shit*. He didn't even know what he meant. But he decided to say what he felt and let Nick draw his own conclusions. "No, it's not about them. It makes *me* feel stupid. I didn't and won't tell anyone. But..." *God*. He felt like an idiot.

"Like, you want us to be together or something?" Nick loosened his hold on his arms. He didn't seem disgusted, though, which made Gabe glad.

"Well, not necessarily." Gabe knew he was lying through his teeth, but he refused to lay his heart out for Nick to stomp on. "But...maybe I want it to be a possibility." *Shit*. Gabe knew he'd gone too far.

"Huh." Nick scrubbed at his hair as if considering what Gabe had said.

"Listen, forget I said anything—"

“No.” Nick held up a hand. He let out a slow sigh. “Listen...I can’t...I mean, I’m not going to rush into being like Peter and Chris, or even Brooks.”

“I don’t want you to—”

“Wait.” Nick let his hands fall to his sides. He glanced at the ground, but after a long moment, he looked up and met Gabe’s eyes. “I’m not like them. But I do think of you...” He shrugged. “Well, you’re like the guy in the movie we watched. Like my friend, but more. Like, special friends.”

Gabe thought he was going to cry. He forced himself to calm the fuck down and not say something pathetic. “That’s all I mean,” Gabe said. “I just mean that we’re like those guys.” Okay, now he sounded like an after-school special. But as much as Gabe felt like an idiot, he added, “I don’t want to share you.”

Nick nodded, his forehead creased in thought. “Yeah.” He waited a long minute, and Gabe could practically see the puzzle pieces rearranging in his head. “Yeah, I guess I don’t really want to share you, either.”

Gabe might have floated right off the field, he was so happy.

“Uh, can we go back to the game now?”

He didn’t think Nick was trying to blow him off but more that he didn’t want to keep up this awkward conversation now that they’d reached a consensus.

“Yeah, they should be starting soon.” Gabe wasn’t sure if he should, but still he touched Nick’s arm. “And thanks.”

When Nick smiled, it was with a lot more confidence than he’d had before.

“Yeah.” He patted Gabe’s arm. “Yeah, buddy. No worries.”

\* \* \* \*

“Damn, man. I still can’t believe you caught that!” Chris raised his glass to Nick at the pizza place after the game.

Nick blushed.

Gabe beamed. Sure, no one at the table knew he and Nick were together, but it didn’t matter. Gabe knew. During the whole game, Gabe had peeked Nick’s way, smiling to himself about how lucky he was. The few times Nick looked back, he’d smiled, too.

“Yeah, why didn’t you tell me before you were such a ringer with a disc?” Chris asked. He snagged a slice of pizza off the tray at the center of the table and shoved a bite in his mouth before adding, “I would have asked you to play weeks ago.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Nick rolled his eyes, his smirk flirtatious. “Flattery will get you everywhere.”

Gabe didn't miss the way Chris lifted an eyebrow. Matt already figured Gabe and Nick were together, but Gabe hoped Chris wouldn't say anything about Nick's rapid shift to gayer. Nick had come a huge way in a short amount of time, and the poor guy didn't need to be swamped by a posse of queer kids trying to welcome him into the fold. Gabe joked, “Well, I hope you'll consider playing for our team on a regular basis.” He closed his eyes and cursed his double entendre.

But Nick didn't seem to have noticed, because he was staring past Gabe's shoulder to the entrance of Slices and Brew. His eyes were wide and hopeful, and his mouth parted in a way that left Gabe with no doubt as to who had just walked in.

Gabe looked over his shoulder. *Yep*. It was John.

Nick pushed his chair away from the table so fast it screamed along the floor. “Hey, guys, I gotta go say ‘hi’ to a friend.” He didn't make eye contact with anyone, especially not Gabe, when he stood up and went over to talk to John.

Gabe stared at his pizza and tried not to let his hurt show on his face. After all, it wasn't like Nick was leaving with John or something. He had just gone over to talk. But all the justifications Gabe could think of didn't erase the fact that he felt hurt. Balled up and tossed out like class notes after the final.

Sarah bopped his arm from her seat next to him. She leaned into Gabe's ear. “Hey, you okay?” She was all wide-eyed concern, and Gabe had to admit it was nice that his friend cared.

With a quick shake of his head, Gabe murmured, “That's his best friend from high school.” He darted another look behind him, measuring the span of John's shoulders, the fit of his jeans. Other than being macho, and tall, and confident, John didn't have anything Gabe didn't have. Well, except for Nick's love.

“So? What's the problem?”

The rest of the table went back to their conversation in an obvious attempt to let Sarah and Gabe have their whispered natter in peace. Gabe told her out of the corner of his mouth, “Nick's got a thing for him.”

She made a show out of being subtle as she looked over her shoulder at where Nick and John were talking. “Ya think?” She stared at them more

openly, her head tilted.

“Stop it.” Gabe slapped her arm. “For the love of Pete, yes. Nick has a thing for him. Can’t you tell?”

Sarah frowned. “But he’s straight.”

Gabe rolled his eyes. “Yeah. Tell me something I don’t know.”

“So what does Nick think is going to happen?”

“I don’t know.” Gabe grabbed the pitcher off the table and poured himself more beer. He scowled at his glass. “He probably thinks they’re going to be *special friends*.”

Sarah raised her eyebrows. “Huh. Really?” She glanced at Nick and John again. “Considering he keeps checking out my tits, I think he’d rather be special friends with me.”

Against his will, Gabe snorted a laugh. “Yeah, I bet he would.” Sarah had spectacular boobs. Any straight guy in a half-mile radius always noticed. She might not have been as perceptive as Gabe was, but she had her own built-in way to measure who was straight versus gay.

Gabe sucked down his beer in long gulps, but he’d only drained half the glass when Nick came back to the table.

“Hey, I’m gonna take off. Thanks for the game.” He addressed the table at large.

“Cool.” Gabe wasn’t going to fucking look at him. He wasn’t going to give Nick the satisfaction of knowing he’d hurt Gabe’s feelings.

“Uh...I left my clothes at your place.” Nick hovered at his side, but Gabe wasn’t sure of his expression, because he refused to meet his gaze.

“I’ll bring ’em to class next week.” He made the words as deadpan and unfriendly as he could.

“Oh.”

Gabe could tell from Nick’s tone of voice that he’d gotten the message Gabe was pissed, and maybe Nick even felt a bit hurt. But Gabe didn’t care. Nick probably didn’t even understand that he was acting like an asshole by ditching Gabe to run after his high school crush. But Gabe was sick of being the only one in their relationship who had any idea what the fuck was going on. “So why don’t you go, then?” He knew he sounded bitchy, and maybe had even embarrassed Nick in front of the other guys, but he didn’t care.

“I will, then.” Nick tossed a couple dollars on the table and walked away. If

he looked sorry, Gabe didn't know, because he was pressing hard on his eyes so no one would see they were wet.

## Chapter Eight

Nick checked his phone again before jogging up the stairs to Gabe's porch. He didn't know why he bothered—Gabe hadn't returned any of his texts since Sunday night.

He stopped at the door and stood on tiptoe to look in Gabe's window. But it was too high above his head, designed to let light into the room, not allow stalkers to see inside. Growling out a breath, he knocked on the door.

At first no one answered, and he wondered if maybe Gabe hadn't headed back to his house after first period. But then there were muffled noises behind the door, and it opened to show Gabe standing in just his sweatpants, as if he'd decided to catch a nap after class.

"What do you want? I told you I'd bring your clothes to class tomorrow." Gabe hung his head forward so his dark hair fell around his face and Nick saw only one of his eyes.

"C'mon, man." Nick bent his knees so he could meet Gabe's gaze. Gabe wouldn't look at him, and it made Nick's insides feel shrunken and heavy. "Talk to me, man. What did I do?"

This time Gabe did look at him, his chin tilting up. "Oh please." He waved his hand dismissively. "Y'know, I'm sick of your denial."

"Can I come in?" Nick wanted to talk more, maybe even admit some stuff he hadn't been ready to say on the Frisbee field, but he wasn't going to do it standing outside.

"Fine," Gabe snapped. If he were one of Nick's straight friends, he might have called him a drama queen, but he didn't know if it would be offensive to say it to someone gay.

Nick stepped past a scowling Gabe and into the house. "Are you alone?" He looked around for a sign of Gabe's roommates.

"Yeah." Gabe crossed his arms across his bare chest. He looked so pretty half naked. Even mad he was fucking adorable. "Just you and me."

"Okay, then." Nick wished he could smile. He'd looked forward to getting Gabe alone again, though he hadn't banked on Gabe being in such a pissy mood. "So, are you mad about me not wanting everyone on the planet to know we're making out, or does this have something to do with John?"

“Don’t play stupid.” Gabe narrowed his eyes so much it was like he was sneering.

“I’m not playing fucking stupid, Gabe. I don’t know what your fucking problem is.” Nick wished he wasn’t shouting. He wished he wasn’t so damned frustrated. Things with Gabe were changing too fast. And some of it was good—heck, most of it was good. But it was a lot to process. “So what is your issue?”

Gabe closed his eyes. “You’re still in love with John.”

Nick smacked the counter. “I was never in love with John. I’m not even gay.”

“Really?” Gabe raised his eyebrows. His expression was sarcastic, but as he watched the words sink in for Nick, Gabe’s eyes shifted to looking more guarded. As if Gabe wasn’t sure whether to be upset or sympathetic.

“Okay, even if I have feelings for some guys...” Nick cleared his throat, starting again. “Even if I have that kind of feeling for you, that doesn’t mean I want stuff to be that way with John.”

Gabe slumped, as if all the energy had drained out of him and he was nothing but sinews. Then he took a few steps and folded onto the couch. “Nick...” He crossed his legs in front of him like a shield and wrapped his arms around his knees. “If John asked you to have sex with him, would you?”

Nick’s first thought was “of course,” and that odd realization shocked him enough that he took a long time answering. He didn’t want to lie, but neither did he want to hurt Gabe with the truth. “He’d never ask me that.”

“Yeah.” Gabe nodded. Then he laid his head on his arm. “Well, at least you’re not in denial about that part.” His chuckle was sad.

“Listen.” Nick got on the couch, sitting next to Gabe’s feet. “I like you, okay? I like being your friend and doing other stuff. And I don’t want to stop doing it, either. But, I mean—I’m gonna have other friends.” Nick shook his head, suddenly feeling like a cornered animal. Why did Nick have to change everything about himself and his life to be with Gabe? “You have other friends. I wouldn’t ask you to give up Chris or Matt or Sarah. I don’t see why it’s such a big deal.”

“Well, I don’t want to fuck Matt or Chris or Sarah.” Gabe peeked out above his knee, dark eyes crinkling in the corners. “Well, maybe except for Chris.” Nick smiled, leaning closer. He rubbed his nose on Gabe’s knee, and then he pressed his cheek against Gabe’s hand. “C’mon. Stop being mad.” Nick

didn't fully understand Gabe's jealousy, but it did make him feel flattered. Smiling, he pecked a kiss onto one of Gabe's fingers.

Gabe pressed on Nick's chest, stopping him from moving closer. "Hey, Nick?"

Nothing good ever came of being called by his name. So, with trepidation, he asked, "Yeah?"

"I need you to figure out what your deal is with John."

"I told you, we're just—"

Gabe stopped him with a hand on his cheek. "I'm not going to argue with you about this. I know you're holding a candle for him, and if you told him you were gay—"

"I'm not." Nick smacked his hand away. "I'm not planning to tell him fucking anything." What he had with John had nothing to do with Gabe. And there was certainly nothing John needed to know about him and Gabe making out.

"Well, maybe you should." Gabe rolled off the couch. He put his hand on his hip, and his eyes were hard and judging. "Maybe you should tell him. See what he thinks about your friendship when he knows you like cock."

Nick stood, walking up to Gabe so they were only inches apart in a sick parody of how he wished they could hug. "Why the fuck do you care what I do with John?"

"Because I love you, you fucking idiot." Gabe clamped a hand over his mouth. His eyes filled with tears.

"Aw, Gabe—"

But Gabe spun around and walked into the bathroom to slam the door, leaving Nick to wonder how things had so quickly spiraled out of control.

\* \* \* \*

Nick wasn't sure what to think when he got back to his mom's house that night. He sat in his room, staring at the posters he'd had since he was a kid and the pictures of him and his high school teams. Finally, his attention landed on the picture of him and John the day they'd started together at Middleton High. They stood together with grins on their faces, so proud. And Nick wondered about how he really felt about his best friend.

Even the words *best friend* rang untrue. Gabe was Nick's best friend. Or...maybe Gabe was his best friend in his new life, and John was his best friend in his old one.



A knock sounded on his door. “Hey, Nicky? I didn’t hear you come in.” His mother paused. One of the best things about her was how she never barged in like some parents.

“Come in,” Nick called, and when she’d opened the door he added, “Sounded like you were in the shower when I got home.”

“Oh yeah.” She rubbed her eyes. Nick’s mom almost never wore makeup. She didn’t normally need it—she was beautiful for her age, Nick thought—but dark rings hung below her eyes. He hadn’t seen her since the previous Thursday afternoon, and she looked more tired than he remembered.

“You look beat, Mom. You should catch some sleep.” The setup of Nick still living with his mom was wearing on them both. She worked at the bakery starting at four every morning, and he worked three nights a week at the pub, plus every other Friday evening. Half the time the car didn’t have time to cool down in between when Nick got home from work and she had to leave. And though she always swore he wasn’t waking her up when he got in at night, her haggard face told a different story.

“Oh, I’ll go to bed after my TV shows. You want some dinner?” His mom looked at Nick, her expression questioning. He could tell she was wondering about more than whether he was hungry.

“Nah. I made myself a sandwich when I got in. Don’t worry about me.” She smiled sadly and then ruffled his hair. “I always worry about you, honey. It’s my job.” Then she kissed his cheek. “You were gone all weekend. Did you have a project to work on up at school?”

Nick had absolutely no idea what to say. “Yeah. Um, needed to look up a lot of stuff at the library.” He wasn’t sure if she’d buy it. After all, most of the stuff he needed for class was online. But she seemed to want to believe, because his mom smiled.

“Good for you. I knew you’d do well. You worked so hard for it.” She beamed at him with pride, and it made him feel like crap for lying to her.

His mom had spent her whole life sacrificing for him, especially after his dad left. And unlike some of his friends’ parents, she never rubbed it in or acted like a martyr. “Thanks, Mom.” He hoped she didn’t see the guilt flashing in his eyes.

She perched in his doorway. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, fine. Just tired.” Nick stared at the floor, and though it made him feel like a coward, he waited for her to leave.

Hardly aware he was doing it, Nick thumbed around on his phone and drew up John's number. He told himself it was normal to want to hang out with his friend. After all, he and John hadn't made too many plans to gettogether since he'd started school. It was always, "Oh, hey, haven't seen you in a while" or "maybe I'll be at the pub, see you there if you show." Those weird half plans had strained Nick and John's friendship, and Nick wondered if the tension Gabe saw between him and John was nothing more than awkwardness because they didn't spend as much time together as they used to.

Nick opened a bubble to text message but at the last minute decided to call instead. John could ignore a text more easily than a phone call. The phone rang a couple times before John picked up.

"Hey, Nick. What up?" John asked in his low and friendly voice.

Now that he'd gotten John on the phone, Nick wasn't sure what to say. Gabe's question kept batting around in his head. *Do you want to have sex with him?* And though Nick had never thought that he had before, just the sound of John's voice over the phone was making Nick hard.

"Not much. What're you up to tonight?" Nick forced his voice to sound casual.

There was a pause on the other end of the line and the sound of muttered talking. Nick thought he heard John's girlfriend in the background and maybe a few other people. "Didn't have any plans, exactly. Did you want to meet up?"

That was exactly what Nick wanted, but he wasn't sure now that John was offering. If they hung out, Nick might have more of the uncomfortable sense that Gabe was right about him being attracted to John. And that could lead to a conversation Nick didn't feel ready to have.

But if he didn't talk to John...

If heleft things the way they were, Nick knew he'd lose Gabe. And he didn't want that. Besides the physical stuff, which was better than Nick had ever had with anyone, he liked Gabe a lot. "Yeah, you wanna grab a beer later?"

"Sure,man. At the pub? Seven's cool."

Nick could tell he was going to hang up, so he rushed to say, "D'you mind if it's just you and me?"

John laughed, but it sounded nervous. "Yeah, man. That's cool. Nothing's the matter, right?"

It made sense that John would ask. He probably thought Nick was going to tell him he had cancer or his mom was dying or something equally tragic. “No, not that. It’s just we haven’t hung out in a while.”

“Cool, man. Just you and me. Like the old days.” John sounded like his former self—the guy he’d been in junior high and high school, when Nick and him had holed up in their clubhouse in the woods behind Greenfield Elementary. They’d talked for hours, about games and cars and the future. It had been just them.

“Great.” Nick smiled, and he wished doing so didn’t make him sad. He wondered how long it had been since he’d really known that version of John. Whether he’d ever known him. It seemed like a dream now that he’d gone to college. “See you then.”

\* \* \* \*

Nick was still fiddling with his coaster at seven forty-five when John appeared in the doorway and ambled across the room.

“Hey, man.” He held up a palm for Nick to slap, and although Nick wanted to tell him to fuck off for being so late, he reluctantly grabbed his hand.

“Hey, thanks for coming.” The words felt fake. John *should* show up if Nick asked. That was, if they were as good friends as Nick thought they were.

John took a seat next to him. He scanned the space behind the bar for the bartender. “Anytime, man. How you been?”

For a second, Nick thought he’d said *Who you been?* Nick blinked, rearranging the words in his head, and realized his misunderstanding had been one of those things when the thoughts inside your head made you hear things incorrectly. Freudian something or other...Gabe had explained it to him once. “Fine. School’s good. Hard as fuck, but interesting.”

“Cool.” John caught the bartender’s eye and gave his order. “A Bud and a whiskey back,” he told the girl. Then he waited until she set his shot in front of him before turning back to Nick. “You want one, too?” He held up his glass.

“Um, no. I’m cool.” He looked at the beer he’d been nursing for over an hour as he watched John down his liquor. The guy didn’t even wince. Nick wasn’t sure when John had become such a hard-core drinker.

“Suit yourself.” John lifted his beer and drank a few swallows.

Nick glanced over John’s body, for the first time noticing how his middle had filled out a little since their days on the football team. John was still

hot, with his broad shoulders and his handsome face. But maybe it was because Nick had been seeing Gabe naked lately that he was more aware of men's bodies. John had clearly changed.

"So—how are things with you? Have you started working on that mall down by the highway?" Nick knew the construction firm John worked at was supposed to be starting a new project.

"Nah. That fell through because of some storm water thing. We're working on an apartment complex north of Freely Ave." John finished his beer and waved for another. "Too bad, though. They had to lay off some guys." He fisted his hand on the bar, and Nick understood a little of why John might have been drinking more. John's fortune was tied to Middleton Construction, and if they couldn't find new contracts, he might not rise to foreman as fast as he wanted. He might even lose his job.

"Oh yeah, I heard about that." Nick had gone to a seminar by a famous geologist on campus who had talked about erosion and flooding. It had been amazing—probably the coolest thing Nick had learned about so far in school. He might have told John about it if John wasn't looking at his next beer as if it held the answer to a lot of problems.

But then John smiled, albeit sadly. "Don't want to drag you down, man." Nick shrugged. "No worries." He slugged John's arm, and it felt like old times. "And it seems like the housing market is in recovery, so I bet more money starts pouring into construction soon." He stopped talking when he saw the mutinous look in John's eyes.

"What, are you quoting *The New York Times*?"

"No." He wasn't sure why John was pissed. "*The Wall Street Journal*." When John gave him a skeptical look, he said, "Dude, I have to read it for class." It was true. He'd tested into third-year economics and was expected to read at least the headlines in every issue of the major financial papers.

"Well, *The Wall Street Journal* doesn't give a shit about whether or not we go under."

Nick couldn't really argue with that. Though he was annoyed at John for being angry. It's not like Nick could control what he needed to learn to pass his classes. "So, how's..." He tried to remember the name of John's girlfriend but couldn't.

"Stacey? Oh, she's fine. She wants to have a baby, though."

"What?" Nick's neck snapped around. He stared at John like he was someone he'd never seen before. I mean, yeah, he and John had talked

about how they wanted to have kids together some day. Well, not together, per se. But how they would hang out together as dads when they both had kids. “Aren’t you kinda young?”

In Nick’s mind, he’d be maybe thirty by the time he was a dad.

“Yeah, but she’s not. Stacey’s twenty-six, and her sister’s only twentythree and just had one.” John took another drink. His heroic shoulders were bent, like they held the weight of the world. On the one hand, Nick wanted to rub those shoulders, help him carry that burden. But on the other hand, he imagined Gabe’s light walk, weekends with omelets and foreign films. He didn’t know if he could give up one for another.

“So, I’m dating a guy now.” Nick couldn’t believe the words had come out of his mouth. Before he could see John’s censure or shock, he waved over the bartender. Luckily, she came right over. “Beer and a shot.” If John was taking the express route to wasted, Nick was going to be right there with him. He wasn’t going to get through this conversation any other way.

There was a long moment where Nick waited for his drinks to appear in front of him and John didn’t say a damn thing. But when he’d downed his shot and couldn’t put it off any longer, Nick rotated on his stool to see John’s reaction.

He didn’t know what he’d been expecting. Maybe surprise. Or, much as he hated to admit it, desire. But what he saw when he looked in John’s eyes was none of those things.

No. Instead, John smirked. “Fucking knew it, man.” He snickered unkindly. “Shit, Halowes me fifty bucks.” He sneered at his beer and then downed the rest of it.

Nick’s heart felt like it was squeezed in a fist. It didn’t beat for several long seconds. And when it did, those thuds felt heavy. Like it wasn’t sure it even wanted to bother. “You knew?” The answer was written all over John’s face, but Nick still needed to know.

“I suspected.” John shrugged. “Especially when I saw you with that fag from the college.”

“He’s not a fag.” Of course, Gabe was. But not the way John said it. As if it was a bad thing.

“Okay, then. *Gay*.” John said it with an exaggerated eye roll. Like he thought it was completely okay to call someone by a derogatory slur.

“Well, yeah. He’s gay.” Nick tried to get back on his footing. John wasn’t a homophobe. If anything, he always seemed pretty cool about alternative

lifestyles when they'd been in high school. "But...haven't you ever thought about doing anything with a guy?" He wasn't sure why he asked, because John was as straight as an arrow. Of course, Nick had thought the same about himself up until recently.

John's lip twisted into a smile like a snarl. He leaned forward in his seat and then spoke in low tones. "Why? You offering to blow me?" His words were low and suggestive, and they confused Nick like crazy, because he couldn't figure out what John was asking.

Nick eased as close as he dared, protecting John's privacy but not being obvious. "You mean, yeah? You're into guys?" His pulse beat fast, but it felt more like fear than excitement. "Is that what you mean?"

"No. I mean, if you want to go out back and suck me off, I won't say no." There was no excitement in John's voice and certainly no happiness. Only something cold and angry. And maybe a little broken.

"Uh, no thanks, buddy." Despite John's sneer and his dickishness—Nick almost wanted to do it. Just to feel close to John one time. But instead, Nick eased away and took a bracing sip of beer.

Emotion billowed in his chest, like he was losing something important. Like some story he'd told himself or thing he imagined was being torn from his very being.

Maybe John had never been the guy Nick remembered.

"What, you think your queer boyfriend is better than me?"

Nick shrugged. Gabe wasn't really his boyfriend. But yeah, at least Gabe... he didn't know. At least Gabe was nice.

John waved for another beer. "You've wanted my cock for so long, I'd think you'd be gagging for it."

Nick forced his body to stay loose and his voice to stay low. "I know it's hard to imagine, but not everyone wants you." Even as he said it, Nick knew it was a lie. Everyone did want John. That was part of his appeal.

"Maybe not. But you've always wanted to bend over for me."

Nick blinked. It wasn't John's words or even his offhand tone that hurt. It was the way John took it for granted. Like Nick's friendship, and maybe even his sexuality, was John's for the taking just because he'd been hot shit in high school. *Well, fuck him.* "Sure, man. Maybe once I did." Nick pulled a few bills out of his wallet and tossed them onto the bar. Then he leaned in close enough to be obnoxious and whispered, "But not anymore."

He stood up and walked out of the pub, his mind swimming. His legs

carried him away from Main Street and into the dark roads near campus. And though he hadn't meant to go there, the next thing he knew, he was at Gabe's front door.

## Chapter Nine

Gabe stopped short when he saw the look on Nick's face.

Nick was flushed, his eyes flashing and angry. In a rush, he pressed into the house and crushed his lips onto Gabe's mouth.

"What?" Gabe took a step back, putting his hands on Nick's chest to stop his assault. He wiped off his mouth. Whatever emotion Nick was throwing at him, Gabe had a distinct impression it wasn't about him. "What the heck's up with you?"

"Nothing." Nick blinked as if he just then figured out where he was and what he was doing. "Oh, yeah." He shook his head. Then Nick reached out as if to grab Gabe again. "I just want you." His expression was confused, like he couldn't figure out exactly why he wanted Gabe and wasn't sure he wanted to know. So when Nick snatched at Gabe's shirt, trying to force him into an embrace, Gabe smacked his hand.

"Fucking stop it." He wrestled out of Nick's hold, trying to put space between them, but Nick kept coming, as if he was in a daze. Gabe grabbed a chair from the dining room table and got it between them. As calmly as he could manage, he asked, "Nick, what the fuck happened?"

"I don't fucking know." Nick stepped around the chair, taking off his jacket as he went.

Trying hard not to show how freaked out he was, Gabe curved into the kitchen to get away. "Well, how about you tell me where you came here from?"

Nick glared at him, and he didn't answer right away. But then he closed his eyes and stopped his approach. "The pub." When Gabe didn't follow up with another question, just waited patiently for Nick to stop being a pussy with the information, Nick relented. "With John."

"Oh." Gabe was a little surprised he hadn't guessed. Usually, he was pretty sharp about that sort of thing.

"I didn't hook up with him or anything." Nick took another step toward him, and only then did Gabe realize that there was only one way out of the kitchen and Nick was blocking it. "We didn't kiss or fuck, if that's what

you're thinking happened."

"No." Gabe nibbled at a bit of skin that was peeling off his bottom lip. "I wouldn't have thought you had."

"So what the fuck is your issue?" Nick's face screwed up in anger, as if he could channel whatever had happened with John in Gabe's direction.

"I'm not the one with an issue, asshole." Gabe backed up to the stove. Nick had stopped trying to kiss him, but he still looked like he might come at Gabe any second.

"Oh please," Nick sneered. "You said you wanted to fuck the other day. So why are you acting like you have some kind of bug up your ass?"

Gabe launched away from the counter and got right up in Nick's face. He was sick of this running around and was inches from kicking Nick's delusional ass out of his house. "Dude, do you hear yourself? 'You put out before, why not now?' What kind of abusive, caveman bullshit is that? Would you ever—in a million years—say shit like that to a girl?"

Nick had the grace to blush from the collar of his sweatshirt up to his forehead. Then he scrubbed at the back of his neck. "Shit." He blinked. "I'm sorry. That was out of line."

"Fine." Gabe's lips pinched on the word, but the wind was sort of out of his sails now that Nick had apologized. Gabe pushed past him out of the kitchen. "I'm not a doll you can play with when you're bored. And I'm certainly not a consolation prize when you don't get the guy you really want."

"I don't think of you like that." Nick frowned. Then he blurted out, "He knew, all right. I told him I liked guys, and John said he'd figured as much." Nick hung his head, looking sadder than Gabe had ever seen him look.

"Did he know you wanted him?" Gabe asked quietly. He suspected John did know. It was hard to be the focus of someone's affection and not sense it, even if the sense was vague.

Nick shrugged miserably. "Yeah, pretty much."

*Crap.* Gabe had to feel bad for the guy. He moved to Nick's side and put a hand on his shoulder. "Hey. It's no big deal. Now you know, and he knows, and maybe you can be friends eventually."

"Are fucking joking?" Nick sneered. "He was an asshole about it. A complete..." Nick rubbed his eyes. "I don't know when he got to be that way." He frowned. "He used to be a nice guy. I think."

"Yeah." Gabe rubbed Nick's arm. He hated seeing Nick so hurt. "I'm sure



he was great.” Then Gabe urged Nick onto the couch and started massaging his shoulders. “And I’m sure he liked you just as much as you liked him when you were kids.”

Nick made a sniffing noise, but his head was bent, so Gabe couldn’t see his eyes. He scrubbed his face. “I just don’t know now.”

Gabe laid his head on Nick’s shoulder. It wasn’t a sexual thing but more for comfort. John hadn’t ever been Nick’s boyfriend, but there was no doubt he’d been the most important friend in Nick’s life for a lot of years. It was never easy losing a friend, even if you realized you’d really lost them long ago. Gabe whispered, “I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not.” Nick chuckled under his breath.

“I’m serious. I’m sorry you lost a friend.” He didn’t know how else to explain what he meant. Sure, he hadn’t wanted to share Nick with some imaginary relationship with his high school buddy. But that didn’t mean Gabe didn’t understand Nick’s pain.

“Well...” Nick leaned into Gabe’s belly and rested his head on Gabe’s shoulder. He sighed. “Thanks, I guess.”

\* \* \* \*

Nick stopped acting like he wasn’t Gabe’s boyfriend after that night. So much so that he held Gabe’s hand the whole way home from breakfast at the cafeteria the following weekend. When they got inside, he pushed Gabe gently into the wall. He strummed his hands under Gabe’s shirt, tasting the remains of coffee and maple syrup on Gabe’s lips.

“Hey, can I ask you a favor?” Gabe asked.

“Yeah. Of course.” Nick pulled back just far enough to talk, keeping their bodies pressed close. He smiled at the tentative look on Gabe’s face.

“You remember when you came over and were all pissed off about John?” He nibbled his lip.

“Yeah?” Nick asked nervously. They hadn’t really talked about John since that night, and he hoped they wouldn’t fight.

“I know it sounds crazy...” Gabe shook his head, and his hair fell into his eyes. From between the part in his bangs he said, “But remember how you came barging in, wanting to rip my clothes off?”

Nick felt his cock harden further. Yeah, he’d been really ready to go that night. And though he was glad he and Gabe had talked things through, he was still a little sad about the lack of clothes ripping.

“D’you want to do that now?”

“You mean, like be rougher?” Nick could do that. He already had Gabe up against the wall. He grabbed his hips and pulled him tight.

Gabe gasped. “You’re gonna think I’m crazy.”

Nick kissed him once. “No, I won’t.”

“Well, could you leave? Maybe for five minutes? And then bang on the door?”

Laughing, Nick pushed off the wall. “Is that all?” He pinched Gabe’s chin. Gabe was six months older than him, but he always seemed younger. “Sure thing.” Then he winked at Gabe and opened the door. “But...um, you don’t want to go all the way, right?” They hadn’t had full-on sex yet, though they’d done *everything but* several times over. “I mean, you want the first time to be special, right?”

Gabe blushed a little. “You barging in and fucking me sounds pretty special.” He blushed a deeper shade of pink. “You don’t think I’m a perv, right?”

Nick grabbed the front of his shirt and dragged him into a kiss. After a long moment, he smiled against Gabe’s lips. “Well, maybe a little.” When Gabe tickled his belly, Nick eased out of his reach. “C’mon, you know I like it.”

Rolling his eyes, Gabe said, “Yeah, you do.” But when Nick turned to go, Gabe pressed up behind him. He whispered in Nick’s ear, “You can think of him if you want.”

Nick held still for a second, considering whether Gabe was serious.

Gabe’s arms were still around him, wrapped from behind, and Gabe felt so strong and warm. Nick wanted to trust Gabe and not try to psychoanalyze his reasoning—Gabe was a lot of things, but he wasn’t ever deluded. So Nick didn’t ask any questions, he just walked outside.

When Gabe closed the door behind him, Nick thought about just standing on the porch for five minutes. The air was cool and crisp with sunshine and smelled like fallen leaves. It seemed stupid not to walk around and enjoy it, so Nick jogged down the steps and headed toward campus. It made his walk longer than five minutes, but he thought Gabe might appreciate the anticipation.

When he saw the red-brick buildings of the quad, he took a moment to stare at the school, taking it all in. This was what he’d worked for since grade school. Some of the buildings had actual, honest-to-God ivy growing on them, for fuck’s sake.

Of course, ivy wasn’t the status symbol folks tended to think. Most species

destroyed whatever they were attached to, and the school was on a nonstop mission to pull vines off ledges and dig up tenacious root systems.

He veered left to skim the buildings on the south side, riding the crest between campus and the off-campus housing. Nick walked for as long as he felt he needed to——trying to figure out what it was Gabe needed from him and what he needed from Gabe.

It wasn't like he'd been actively thinking about fucking John when he came home to Gabe. However, in the lineup of images and thoughts sprawling through his brain that night, John had certainly featured prominently.

But Nick didn't love John. He knew that now. He loved Gabe and didn't want anyone else——probably not ever. But did that mean he was over John? Over all the pent-up emotions and years of denial?

All too soon, he was in front of Gabe's door again, having taken a wide loop. Nick was sweaty, adding to his excitement. His fist landed on Gabe's door every bit as hard as it had on that night when he'd been blind with lust. Gabe opened the door, and all Nick saw was his eyes. They were wide, like a deer caught in headlights. And Nick didn't care, because he shoved Gabe up to the wall. He didn't kiss him, just ripped his shirt up over his head and then shoved his pants down his legs.

Gabe's cock was ironhard and batted Nick's hip.

Nick spun Gabe around, then reached between Gabe's legs and found that his rim was wet and supple, like he'd been getting ready the whole time Nick was gone. Nick tugged open his button fly and got his jeans out of the way. He'd never been happier that they'd already talked it through and decided not to use condoms. Nick was practically a virgin, and Gabe had gotten tested at the start of the school year. Nick had been surprised, and kind of pleased, when he learned Gabe hadn't had sex since the previous year.

With rough hands, he fit his cap to Gabe's hole and, after a moment of hesitation, shoved upward.

Gabe grunted. He grabbed his cock, while with the other hand he braced himself against the wall.

His dick buried deep, Nick rested his forehead on Gabe's shoulder. Just for a second, he allowed himself to imagine that it was another man he was touching, that it was John's body he was pressed up against.

He pictured John shirtless, running down the football field, laughing and throwing a pass that Nick was running to catch. He envisioned John's face

late at night during one of their sleepovers, when they'd whisper secrets. And finally, as he started thrusting, he tried to imagine John's grin as he opened his pants.

And Nick found he couldn't.

He pulled almost all the way out and then speared inside again, trying to force with his body an image his mind couldn't conjure—a John who might have been his lover.

Nick shuddered, his eyes welling with tears. He couldn't believe he was going to cry with his cock buried in Gabe's ass—but he couldn't think about John anymore, not even since Gabe had asked him to. "Gabe..." Nick touched his shoulder, thinking maybe they should stop.

"Shhhh..." Gabe took Nick's hand and pulled it lower.

Nick felt the sweat on Gabe's belly, then the crisp hair of his groin. Finally, he felt Gabe's cock in his hand. And it felt so right, Nick's heart hurt.

He pumped forward, feeling the answer of Gabe sliding through his fingers. Gabe was hard and his cap was wet. Thinking about it made Nick's mouth water, and he rolled his hips. This time, when Nick reached the hilt, Gabe mewled. "Damn."

"Yeah." Nick thrust into him harder. He didn't let go of Gabe's dick. He felt like if he did, something would break between them. The pair of them moved in time, connected on every level. And when they neared the end, Nick slowed his strokes, trying to keep them in that place where they were both high on the need to climax and balanced on the razor's edge.

He rested his forehead on Gabe's shoulder, his whole body wracked with feeling. "Fuck, Gabe. How do you always know?"

Gabe cocked his head around for a messy kiss. When he broke away, he breathed, "Did I ever tell you about my superpower?"

Nick chuckled, and it only brought him that much closer to coming. "No."

"Well..." Gabe let out a moan and then put his hand on top of Nick's. Gabe worked Nick's hand in harder strokes. "Fuck. I'll tell you later." He whistled his breaths while Nick worked him, and then Gabe shouted and his cum coated Nick's hand.

And just like always, Nick couldn't stop from coming right with him.

He bucked through his orgasm, not sparing a thought for whether he was loud or slamming Gabe into the wall. His lover had given Nick this gift, and he wasn't going to waste it. "I love you so damn much."

Nick held still, letting the orgasm wash over him—out his cock and up his

back and down his legs.

It felt cleansing, like he was letting go of something he'd trapped too long and like Gabe was taking it so he didn't have to.

Nick crushed into Gabe's back, wrapping his arms around his waist. Both of them leaned into the wall, since their legs were shaking.

"I love you, too," Gabe said. He wove his fingers with Nick's and squeezed him tight. And Nick knew that this was forever.

"Y'know, I may be able to swing rent money next year. D'you know anyone who needs a roommate?"

Gabe turned around, leaning his back to the wall. He put a hand to Nick's chest. "Could we at least take a shower first before we start talking about living together?"

Nick smiled and then kissed his nose. "Yeah." They were covered in jizz, and Nick was still wearing most of his clothes. He looked down at himself, laughing. "Yeah." He kissed Gabe again. "We have all the time in the world."

## Chapter Ten

"So. You and Gabe, huh?" Chris sat next to him on the grass, stretching his hamstrings and wearing a snarky smile.

"Don't pretend you didn't know already." Nick tossed a sweatshirt at the guy's head. He was getting tired of everyone pretending to act surprised when he or Gabe mentioned that they were now officially a couple.

"I didn't know, actually." Chris clamored to his feet and started stretching his quads.

Nick hadn't been into dudes long, but he had to admit that Chris had some pretty nice legs. "What, no gaydar?" Nick took a drink out of his water bottle. Halftime was almost over in their Ultimate Frisbee match, and he needed to be at 100 percent going back into the game. They were down by a point, but Nick had been late because he'd been pulling an odd morning shift at work.

Since he'd joined the team, they'd won every match, and Nick was more than a little proud. That, and he was glad to be back out on the field playing sports, even if Ultimate was only intramural.

"Me?" Chris chuckled. Then he held out a hand for Nick's water bottle.

"Dude, I didn't even know I was gay until last year. Don't ask me to read

other people.”

Nick cocked his head to the side. “Really?” Chris and Peter seemed like such an established couple. “How’d you figure it out?” It seemed like kind of a personal thing to talk about, but Nick wanted to know more. Not just about Chris but about himself. “Didn’t you even suspect?”

Chris laughed. “Oh yeah. I suspected.” His cheeks reddened. “I mean...I told myself I wasn’t, but looking back, I’m surprised I believed it.”

“I’ve liked girls.” The words sounded like Nick was defending himself, but he wasn’t. Nick had genuinely liked some of the girls he’d gone out with in high school. It wasn’t like the few times he’d had sex had been horrible.

“Hm.” Chris grabbed his water bottle, since Nick had lost his train of thought and not handed it over. “Well, I’m sure it’s different for everyone. Me? I pretty much dated girls because they were there and everyone expected me to.”

Nick thought about it. He wasn’t sure if that described his situation or not. He frowned. “I think I like girls more than that.” Oddly, sometimes when he was with Gabe, a thought of a girl would flash through his mind. Not like he would rather be with them but more as part of the myriad of fucked-up shit he thought about when he was getting off. But the weird thing was, when he used to fool around with girls, he’d thought about guys all the time.

“A lot of people say everyone is bi to some extent.” Chris’s lip curled into a smile. “I’m pretty sure that’s true in college.”

Nick couldn’t help but laugh. Yeah, a lot of the guys he knew could fuck anything.

“But it comes down to who you want to spend your time with.” Chris’s gaze became faraway and his smile pensive. “Who you want to spend your life with.”

“Yeah, I could see that.” The referee waved to the team captains, and the game was going to start any minute, but Nick rolled around Chris’s words in his head. Chris and his boyfriend Peter certainly seemed set for life. He couldn’t even imagine them with anyone else. As for him, Nick didn’t know what he wanted for the future. He’d always thought that eventually, he’d find a girl that he liked well enough to marry. But given how lukewarm he’d felt about his past girlfriends, he wasn’t so sure any longer.

And then there was Gabe, who Nick thought about all the time. Who he wanted to spend time with and have sex with, who he couldn’t wait to see

again when they were apart.

“You okay?” Chris patted his arm.

Nick blinked his eyes back into focus. “Oh. Yeah. I’m fine.” Nick had known that he loved Gabe, but it only then dawned on him what that meant. He was, at least for the moment, a gay man. Well, maybe he was somewhat bisexual. But, he was planning on being with Gabe for... Well, as long as Gabe would go out with him. So if he was going to live his life with a man, that pretty much only led to one conclusion. “I’m gonna have to tell everyone, aren’t I? Like, including my mom.”

Chris gave him a sad smile. “Yeah. Hate to say it, buddy. But you will.”

Nick groaned. “Shit. That conversation is gonna be fun.” His mom wasn’t as religious as some of her family, but she still pursed her lips every time something came on the news about gay marriage.

“You don’t have to tell her right away. I mean, you guys have only been together a few weeks.” Chris looked over to where the rest of the team was huddling. He shouted, “Give us a second.” Then he said to Nick, “I didn’t tell my dad and brothers for months once I figured it out.”

“Dude, she lives across town.” Nick shrugged. “She’ll probably hear about it any day now from a friend of a friend who works on campus.” He was hit with the horrifying realization that his mother might already know. “Man, I gotta talk to her, like tonight.”

Chris put a hand on his shoulder. “D’you want me to come? I mean, I can see if you want to take Gabe, but—”

“No, I think it would be better if I do it alone.” Nick didn’t want his friends to witness it if his mom lost her shit. After all, she might not be the most open-minded person in the world, but Nick loved his mom.

“It’s up to you, man. But I’m around if you need someone to talk to that you’re not fucking.”

Nick chuckled and reached out to sock Chris’s arm, but Chris dodged out of the way and jogged over to the rest of the team.

\* \* \* \*

Nick must have played like shit, because he couldn’t remember who won the game.

He walked to the front door of his house as if in a daze and fumbled with his key for a whole minute before he realized it was unlocked. When he got inside, his mom was in the kitchen.

“Hi, Nicky.” The house smelled like meatloaf, and the sound of her voice

made him feel like he might break down and cry like he had when he was ten and had to tell her that he'd gotten in trouble for cursing on the playground.

"Mom." He knew that the most surefire way of making someone think you were going to have a fight was calling them by name, but Nick was surprised he hadn't called her "mommy" instead.

"Yeah, honey?" She turned when he came in the kitchen. She was wearing an apron over her jeans, and her hair hadn't been colored in a while. White was showing a half inch under the red.

He rummaged through the cabinets, more because he was trying to put off the inevitable than because he was hungry. However, Nick was pretty hungry, too. He hadn't eaten after the game. "Um...do you have any bread?"

"Oh, yeah sure." She reached into a paper grocery bag on the counter and handed him a loaf. "You want some ham?"

"Yeah." Tension thickened the air, but Nick tried to ignore it long enough to make his sandwich.

His mom said, "Y'know, I've been meaning to talk to you," in a nervous voice.

*Oh shit.* She knew. Nick's heart stuttered, beating like it was trying to bust through his chest. But Nick didn't seem to be able to say anything, because all he could mutter was, "Yeah?"

"Well...You know I like having you here. But it seems silly for you to be taking the bus back and forth to school every day."

He blinked, wondering how this had anything to do with him liking men.

Her hands fluttered as she reached for a jar on the counter. She picked it up and handed it to him. "I know you've never asked for any money for school, but I think if you want to live on campus, you should. The point is for you to study hard. You can't do that if you're commuting two hours a day."

With shaking hands, Nick opened the lid. Inside the jar was a pile of bills, mostly ones and fives, with a few tens.

His mom turned away, busying herself with the stove. "I know it's silly to have saved cash instead of putting it in a bank, but...Well, it was easier to drop a few dollars in when I could spare it. And with all that brouhaha with the banks a few years ago..."

Slowly, Nick lowered the jar to the counter. His eyes filled with tears. He wanted so badly to take those few steps up behind her and hug her like he



had when he was a kid. But Nick knew if he did, he wouldn't stop hugging her and thanking her, and then he wouldn't say what he needed to say. "Mom, I'm gay." His voice cracked as he said it, and Nick didn't know why, but the moisture in his eyes overflowed, and before he knew it he was sobbing.

He pressed his thumb and forefinger into his eyes. "Shit, I'm sorry. I didn't think I'd get like this." He blew out a long breath and forced himself to look at his mom. She hadn't turned around from her place at the stove. Nick tried to figure out what she was thinking from her posture or the way she was stirring the tomato sauce. But Nick wasn't like Gabe. He'd never been able to figure out what was going on with people from just looking. "Mom?"

Her voice was measured when she asked, "So, I guess John came around, huh?"

For a long moment, Nick was stunned. "You knew about that?"

She sighed. "I'm your mother, of course I knew." She didn't sound happy, though. When she did turn around, she frowned. "I..." She looked at the linoleum tiles of the floor like she was trying to count them. "I guess I'd hoped you guys would just keep on being friends and that's it." His mother shrugged. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't want you to be unhappy..."

Nick scratched his neck, trying to force feeling back into his stress-addled body. At that moment, someone probably could have cut off his hand and he would have hardly noticed. "Nah, Mom. I get it." He wasn't going to blame her for being in denial about something he himself had been doing his best to ignore. "But, I'm not with John."

"Oh." Her forehead creased, though she didn't look up from the floor. "I always thought... Well, I thought it was just him."

"Yeah..." Nick spun his plate, wishing he could bring himself to take a bite of the sandwich. He was shaking, and he knew low blood sugar couldn't be helping. "I woulda thought that, too." He pictured Gabe and his dark eyes. The way he smiled and how he got excited about weird things like cooking spices and cleaning supplies. The way he always knew what Nick wanted before he knew himself.

"He's a boy from school?" His mom studied his face like she could read his mind.

Nick cleared his throat. "Yeah." He was a little worried she'd get on his case about dating someone from "the college" as everyone in town called it. His mom had never said anything bad about the students at Holsum, but a

lot of Nick's friends had.

His mom cracked a smile. "Well, I guess that makes sense." She smoothed her hair back. Her hands were shaking. "Is he nice?"

"Oh, yeah." Gabe was one of the nicest people Nick knew. Besides cooking for his housemates, he volunteered at the assisted living program in town. Gabe always said he did it because he was a psychology major and it would look good on his resume, but Nick knew Gabe just liked helping people. "He's really great."

"And do I get to meet him?" His mom crossed the kitchen and poured herself a glass of wine. She wasn't a big drinker but generally had a bottle of something in the house. "You're twenty-one now. Would you like some?"

Nick smiled. "Yeah, sure." Then, before he accepted the glass from her, he took a giant bite of his sandwich. Around his mouthful, he said, "Oh, and I'm on an Ultimate Frisbee team."

She took a sip of her drink. "Well, aren't you just trying all sorts of new things?" Her lip quirked up as she tried not to smile at her own joke.

Then, like a dam had broken, Nick was snickering into his wine. He didn't much like the taste, but it was nice to be doing something with his mom that didn't involve him feeling like he was going to have a heart attack. He wanted to ask if she was okay with him being gay or if she still loved him. But she wasn't yelling or telling him she hated him or even calling him names.

In fact, after a few more sips of her drink, his mom went right back to cooking dinner. And though Nick knew everything had changed, he was happy to know that it had also stayed the same.

\* \* \* \*

Nick had seemed so weird all through the game Saturday and then bailed right after. But Gabe was still happy when Sunday morning his phone buzzed with Nick's message.

*Hey, you around?*

So, Gabe texted back. *Yeah.*

*Wanna go to breakfast?*

Gabe grinned at his phone like an idiot. *Yeah. Meet at the diner? Sure. My mom'll give me a ride.*

*Great.* He rushed to throw on his clothes and get out the door. Gabe wondered if he should have invited Nick over and offered to make

breakfast, but he didn't have much food in the house. And anyway, he didn't think Nick would want to be dropped off at Gabe's house by his mom.

However, when Gabe got to the diner, he found Nick standing outside an old sedan next to a woman who looked a lot like him but older. Gabe slowed his strides, thinking that he should have worn something less colorful or less tight. Thank God he wasn't wearing a Pride Parade T-shirt or anything, but he still looked fairly obvious.

"Hey, Gabe." Nick waved. Next to him, his mother narrowed her eyes. "Hey, Nick." He looked at the woman, not sure what to say. "Um...?" "I'm Stephanie." She held out her hand. Nick's mom was a head shorter than him but shared his compact build and his pale complexion. "I just came to drop Nicky off, but I wanted to meet you, since I wasn't sure when he'd be able to bring you by."

*Nicky?* Gabe grinned. *Oh, lord.* He was definitely going to have to start calling Nick that. "Well, it's nice to meet you." He shook her hand. Gabe wasn't sure whether she knew he was Nick's boyfriend or just thought they were close friends, but the way she was staring at Gabe like she was sizing him up suggested she knew they were *something*.

"Mom! No one has called me Nicky since I was eight." Nick blushed, and even though he dwarfed his mom, it was adorable.

"That's not true and you know it." His mother winked at Gabe.

Yeah, he was going to like her.

"So, are you from around here?" she asked.

Gabe worried that maybe she'd be annoyed Nick was dating an out-of-towner, though it occurred to him that after finding out he was dating a man, the nonlocal part shouldn't have been a stretch. "Nope. New Jersey."

"Mom." Nick stepped between the two of them. "I'll bring him for dinner sometime, and you can ask your twenty questions then."

Sherolled her eyes, again at Gabe. He got the sense that she'd been waiting a long time to have someone to take her side when she teased Nick.

"I'd love to." Gabe waved good-bye as Nick dragged him up the stairs to the restaurant. When Nick shoved him through the door, Gabe laughed.

"Dude, she's nice! Why the drama?"

Nick waved over the girl who seated people at their tables. "Don't think I didn't see what you two were doing." He frowned, though it was obvious he was more amused than pissed off. "You guys are gonna make it your life's

work to mess with me, aren't you?"

Gabe's belly did a little flip at the word *life*. He smiled. "I hope so. You stole Chris away from me. I need someone else to bitch about you to."

"Sit down, dumb ass." Nick shoved him playfully into the booth. Then he took a seat on the other side. The table was damp, and Gabe picked up a napkin to wipe it dry.

Nick looked at him like he was crazy for bothering. Overall, he wasn't a slob, but Gabe had learned that Nick tended to expect other people to deal with things related to food or eating. At least, when he wasn't at work and getting paid for it.

Gabe had lived with his dad after his parents split and learned all about doing housework. "Let me just grab another napkin." Gabe slid out of his seat.

He'd just plucked a few thin pieces of paper out of the dispenser and turned to go back to his table when he ran into a broad chest. Gabe looked up slowly, his mood plummeting. When his gaze met John's, he took a step back. "Um...hey." He didn't know what to add. It's not like they were friends, and they had only met the once.

"Oh. Uh, hi." John stepped to the side to let Gabe pass.

Gabe was going to walk away and go back to his seat, but he was struck with just how weird it would be to sit in the same diner as John and pretend he wasn't there. "Hey. Um, I don't know who you're here with, but d'you wanna sit with me and Nick?"

John's cheeks colored a little, but on his square face it looked less cute than severe. "I'm not sure Nick would be cool with that." He winced a little, like he was recalling the last time he'd hung out with Nick and he regretted what had happened.

"Nah, man. It's fine." Gabe wasn't sure whether to pat his arm or hit him or what. He hadn't tried to bond with any straight guys since tenth grade. Still, he wanted to make things right for Nick, so he did his best. "At least come by our table and say hi."

"Uh...sure thing." John darted a look to the bathroom, making it clear that that's where he'd been heading when Gabe had smashed into him.

So Gabe let him go and then wandered back to their booth, wondering if Nick would be pissed or pleased.

## Chapter Eleven

“You did what?” Nick lifted out of his seat just far enough to look out over the booths. He didn’t spot John, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t there, maybe somewhere in the back. “Why would you think I’d want to talk to him?”

Gabe laid a hand over his and squeezed. “You’re not going to want to avoid him forever.”

Nick barked out a rueful chuckle. “I don’t have to ignore him forever. Just for another two years until I graduate.” Even saying that, Nick knew he was being stupid. He ran into John constantly.

“I didn’t know you were planning to leave town after graduation.” Gabe leaned back as he said it, as if he was trying to act like his comment meant nothing when it obviously did.

“I dunno. I thought I wanted to do poli-sci as a major. But now I’m thinking environmental studies.” He looked out the window, at the hills and the sunshine. He’d been thinking of political science as a major because he figured he could land a good job in New York or Washington. But now Nick wasn’t sure he wanted to move. “I don’t think working in an office in a big city is really my thing.” He smiled. “Not sure, really, where I’ll be.”

“Oh.” Gabe chewed his lip nervously. “Well, I was hoping to get my masters and maybe even a PhD after I finish undergrad. And I’d probably want to go to one of the programs in the area, since I know some of the professors.”

Nick reached over and touched his hand. “We’ll figure it out.” He rubbed his thumb in circles on Gabe’s palm. “We’ve got a couple years to think about it.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Gabe locked fingers with him. He nibbled his lip, his expression thoughtful. “But really, you don’t have to be John’s enemy. Maybe he is a total douche—”

“You didn’t hear the shit he said.” Nick clenched his fist on the table. He tried to keep his voice down. “He...I’m pretty sure I can’t ever think of him the same way again.”

Gabe shrugged. “You don’t have to think of him the same. But, y’know... sometimes people say or do horrible things. It doesn’t always mean they’re a bad person.”

“Maybe...” Nick tried to think of a way to explain how John had been—how hurtful and cruel—but he lost his ability to think when, over Gabe’s shoulder, he saw John approaching.

Worse, John was with Chuck Carver and a few other guys. It made sense, since they worked together at Middleton Construction. Still, Nick was annoyed about John's taste in friends.

He stared straight ahead while the group of them passed, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw John motion to the guys, pointing them to the door.

After the guys had left, John sauntered over to their table. "Hey, Nick." His confident air faded. "How you doing?"

For a second, Nick wanted to snap at him—tell him to go fuck himself or demand an apology. But he found he couldn't. Instead, he pretended he wasn't seething under his skin. "Pretty good, man. How about you?"

John reached out his hand. Nick decided to throw him a bone and shake it.

"Things're okay, y'know," John said. "Looks like the mall is going to go through after all. Just in a new location. So that's good." Indeed, John looked a lot happier than he had the last time Nick had seen him.

"That's awesome, man. Glad for you." Nick gestured at Gabe. "You remember Gabe, right? You met him a while ago down at the pub."

"Yeah." John looked in Gabe's general direction, though his gaze landed somewhere around his ear. Then he turned back to Nick. "Hey, I sorta wanted to, um..." His jaw slid forward, and John hunched up his shoulders like he was embarrassed. "I was outta line the other night."

Nick blinked. It wasn't an apology exactly, but it was the closest Nick had ever heard John give. "Oh." He struggled to think of something to say.

"Yeah, no worries." Nick didn't have time to consider whether he really forgave John before John turned back to Gabe.

"So...you're in Nick's classes, right?"

"That's how we met." Gabe scooted farther into his bench. "D'you wanna sit down? We're gonna be waiting a while for our food."

Nick saw the hopefulness in Gabe's expression, and he loved the guy so damn much for it.

"Nah. I've got to pick up Stacey. We're visiting her grandma at the nursing home this afternoon."

That's when Nick saw it—John was a good guy. At least in some ways. He just wasn't going to be all the things Nick had hoped for—a lifelong partner or a lover. John was those things for someone else. He and Nick might never be friends again, but they didn't have to be enemies. "No worries. Maybe some other time."

John pursed his lips, like things were rearranging themselves in his mind. Then his shoulders seemed to relax, and he smiled. “Yeah. That would be cool. I’ll give you a call.”

Nick wasn’t sure if he wanted John to call him or not, but his food had arrived, and the smell of pancakes and syrup distracted him from his worries.

\* \* \* \*

Gabe sat behind Nick on the bed and tried to give him a back massage. The guy deserved it after their drama-filled breakfast. But the closeness of Nick’s body got him too hot, so Gabe shifted so Nick wouldn’t feel his erection. “Sorry about the woody.” Gabe smiled. “I don’t mean to molest you or anything.”

“That’s okay. You’ve let me molest you before.” Nick took Gabe’s hand and moved it to between his legs, showing Gabe he was hard, too.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Gabe stroked Nick through his jeans. He was glad his housemates weren’t home, and he and Nick hadn’t been asked about breakfast.

He pressed a kiss onto Nick’s neck. Nick tasted salty from their walk back to campus. “So, do you want to start over and attack me?”

Nick tugged Gabe so he was sprawled across Nick’s lap. Nick seldom used his superior strength when they fooled around, but he didn’t seem afraid anymore. He moved Gabe where he wanted him and gave him a long, slow kiss.

Gabe struggled to keep himself up, thinking that Nick was going to drop him or complain about how heavy he was. But slowly he relaxed into Nick’s hold. As he let his muscles, one by one, stop straining, he realized that Nick was every bit strong enough to know what he was doing.

“Nah, I don’t want to attack you.” Nick lowered Gabe’s torso onto the bed and then shuffled around to straddle his thighs. He rubbed Gabe’s cock through his pants. “We never had our slow first time.” Nick leaned down and kissed him again.

He rolled his hips in a languorous dry hump and then roamed his hands over Gabe’s body—up his sides, over his shoulders, fingers whispering up his neck. Nick wove his fingers into Gabe’s hair to hold him still for a deeper kiss.

Gabe thought he’d pass out from emotion.

Nick slowly peeled off Gabe’s shirt and then licked Gabe’s nipples until he

squirmed.

“Oh God.” Gabe didn’t think he’d ever been so turned-on and not naked. It was like he was under a spell, and the scariest part was he felt like Nick was right there with him.

“Yeah. I know,” Nick whispered, like he felt exactly the same way, like it really was their first time.

“Lift up?” Nick got his hands under Gabe’s waistband and tugged down his sweatpants inch by inch, kissing each bit of newly exposed skin.

“You’re still dressed,” Gabe whined. He snatched at the hem of Nick’s shirt, urging him to take it off. When Nick crossed his arms in front of him and dragged his shirt over his head, Gabe felt like he was seeing Nick shirtless for the first time.

He sat up and buried his face in Nick’s chest, licking a path between his pecs and then tracing his way over to Nick’s nipple.

Nick palmed his face and dragged his mouth to the other side, and Gabe sucked the pink tip into his mouth then used his teeth to make Nick whimper.

“Shit, that’s just...” With a groan, Nick pushed him down on the bed, and then shucked off his jeans before climbing on top. His body was hairy and hard and perfect, and his weight made Gabe open his legs and grind his cock up into Nick’s belly.

“God, God, God, God...” Gabe’s prick was so hard it hurt. “I need you.” He tried to reach for his drawer, but Nick beat him to it.

“Hold on.” Nick kissed him back onto the bed, all the while fumbling open a bottle of lube. Though Nick’s touch was messy, it was sure and insistent. His fingertip slipped easily into Gabe’s pucker.

“Oh God.” Gabe whimpered as Nick started pumping in and out. He writhed, hoping Nick would get the message to hurry up.

“Fuck, you feel so good.” Nick pressed his forehead against Gabe’s, his hand ceaselessly working between Gabe’s legs. He breathed. “Tell me when, okay?”

Gabe nodded, and their damp foreheads rubbed together. He reached between their bodies and palmed Nick’s cock. Nick was as stiff as he was, and Gabe tried not to stroke him too much as he spread lube over the head and drew Nick’s tip where it needed to go. Then, closing his eyes and trying to relax, Gabe wrapped his legs high on Nick’s back and pulled Nick in for a kiss.



Nick's lips were soft, but the insistent thrust of his cock pressed into Gabe's hole a little too hard and a little too fast. Enough to force Gabe's breath out in a whistle but nowhere near enough that Gabe wanted Nick to stop.

"Okay?" Nick asked against his lips. His hips bucked in short, slow thrusts, like the rocking of a boat. Each wave forced him deeper. If it wasn't only their second time, Gabe might have asked him to wait. But Gabe didn't want to stop. So he hitched his legs higher and let his muscles melt back into the mattress as Nick sank in to the hilt.

"Oh, fuck." Nick held himself on stiff arms. He stared down at Gabe like something was changing for him, maybe everything. "Thank you," he said. Gabe wondered if he meant about the sex or about helping him come to terms with being gay. But it didn't matter, because Nick was stroking into him. And every time he reached the deepest point, he'd let out a low moan before pulling back.

His balls tensed and ached. He felt seared from the inside out. Just the stroke of Nick's hard body along his cock was enough. Just Nick's breath on his lips could push him over the edge. "God, I normally last longer. Sorry..."

Nick responded by groaning out a curse and picking up his speed. His hips snapped and his hands were everywhere, as if he couldn't touch Gabe enough, couldn't fuck him enough, and like he was racing to the finish right there with Gabe.

Gabe's gasped and shot cum all over Nick's chest.

Nick grabbed Gabe's hips and pulled them tight. He held them together while his cock pulsed inside Gabe, and he shivered his orgasm into Gabe's body.

In a long, breathless moment they were the only two men in the world. No, they were the only two people in the world.

"Fuck." Nick collapsed on top of him, breaking the fall with his arms. His belly sealed to Gabe's as if Gabe's cum was a sticky glue. Nick lay there for so long that Gabe wondered if he was going to have to ask him to get off.

But then Nick started chuckling. His body bounced on Gabe's chest and his dick jostled in Gabe's ass. And even though Gabe had just climaxed a minute or two earlier, he thought he could have gone again.

Nick pressed up onto his arms. He gave Gabe a little grin. "Should I pull out, or do you wanna go again?"

Gabe couldn't stop smiling, knowing Nick had been thinking the same thing

he had. Yeah, Gabe almost always knew what people were thinking. But he'd never had the experience of them thinking the same thing he was. It was kind of awesome. "Yeah. Well, we've got all day." He tucked his hand between them and urged Nick to pull out.

Nick flopped onto his back on the bed.

"Dude." Gabe pointed at the semen smeared all over his front. "You could offer me a tissue."

Nick looked a little nervous for a second, but then he rolled onto his side. He smiled shyly. "Oh, I was gonna help you clean up." Before Gabe could figure out what he meant, Nick bent to Gabe's belly and licked a path through the smeared cum. The whole time, he murmured contentedly.

"Ew." Gabe giggled as he watched Nick lick another corner of white, this one right by his hip. Gabe was all for swallowing, but he hoped Nick wasn't expecting him to return this kind of favor. He watched Nick more closely, noticing how much Nick seemed to be enjoying the task, and Gabe grinned. "You're a complete pervert, aren't you?"

"Ya think?" Nick looked up, and his nose and lips were shiny.

Gabe could have kissed him forever. "No, you freak. Of course I don't really think so." He scrubbed his hand into Nick's reddish hair, stroking him like a cat. And Gabe wasn't surprised when Nick made a low growl like a purr and went back to his licking.

Nick rubbed his lips lower, to the crease where Gabe's thigh met his groin. He kissed his way to Gabe's cock. Gabe wasn't fully hard, and Nick hummed happily as he sucked Gabe's dick into his mouth.

"Man, a guy could really get used to this." Gabe closed his eyes and reveled in the sensation of Nick blowing him to erection. The nice part was that like this, his whole cock fit into Nick's mouth, and Nick could stroke him with just his tongue.

After several more licks, Nick pulled off. "Yeah, right?" He winked at Gabe. Then he climbed up his body to kiss him again. "And we're for real, right?" Nick asked. "Because I don't want to lose this. I..." He blinked. "I don't want to lose you. Ever."

Gabe feared his heart might spill out through his lips. "Yeah, me neither." He wrapped his legs around Nick's back as if he'd never let go. "You'll really move in with us, right?"

Nick kissed his nose. He smiled this goofy grin that bunched up his cheeks under his freckles. "Well, I already am, most days. But yeah, I can start

paying rent and move my stuff over from my mom's place over Christmas break."

"Good." Gabe rubbed his arms, ran his fingers through Nick's hair. He could hardly believe Nick was his for real. And they could start planning their lives around each other.

"Yeah." Nick ground them together, this time more roughly than before. It seemed as if they'd had their heartfelt first time and now he was ready to drop his restraint. But even as his calloused hand reached down and grabbed Gabe's dick, he mumbled in his ear, "Really good." And then, so quietly Gabe wasn't sure if he heard it, Nick said, "Love you."

Gabe smiled. "Yeah." He grabbed Nick's ass right back and gave it a lusty squeeze. "You know I can read you like a book, right?" Nick looked offended but also amused. "Geez, you're conceited."

"It's just a fact." Gabe rolled them over so that he was on top. He squeezed Nick's hips between his legs.

"So? What does this have to do with me loving you?" Nick raised his eyebrows.

Gabe was pretty sure Nick was going to wrestle him back to the bottom in a second, but he was glad he hadn't yet. He pressed a kiss onto Nick's freckled nose and told him, "Because, I probably shoulda seen all this coming."

**THE END**

**WWW.THEDAISYHARRIS.COM**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Retired party girl and science fiction enthusiast, Daisy Harris spends most of her time writing sexy romance and plotting the fall of Western civilization. Her books can be found on Amazon, Nook, and wherever else fine erotic romance is sold.

Ms. Harris lives in Seattle, where she tortures her husband by making it rain. She enjoys watching bridges cause traffic, watching football games cause traffic, and blithely wearing wool socks with sandals.

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