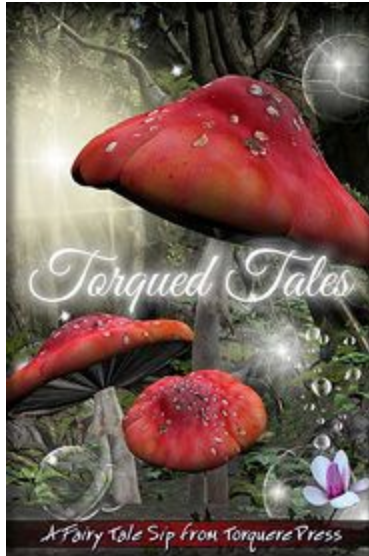




MISTER, MAY I?

A Fun & Games Sip from Torquere Press





Before I Wake
by Eli Easton

Thanks to my beta reader, Kate Rothwell, for her help and encouragement, and to my husband for his constant support.

~1~

Jonesy

They wheeled Michael into Ward C at midnight on November first. I started my shift at eleven and I looked forward to midnight. That's when night really began at St. Mercy Hospital. By then the previous shift had cleared out, and things got nice and quiet. I liked it like that, going from room to room to check on the patients, make sure they were sleeping. I answered requests for pain meds or trips to the bathroom. It was real peaceful most nights.

From the moment I laid eyes on Michael, I knew he was no ordinary patient. His hair was a shock of black against skin so pale it looked like he had no blood at all, or it would have if not for the bruising. His lips and nose were swollen double, and blood was crusted around his nostrils. His eyes were closed.

They put him in room C14 with old Mr. Howser. I followed the gurney and watched two orderlies lift Michael and put him in the bed.

The ward nurse, Sharon, took his vitals and wrote on his chart. She adjusted the ventilator that helped him breathe. Michael looked small lying in that bed. His eyes were shut with such weight, almost gummy or something, like they weren't designed to open. There was a bandage around his head and more under his gown. Sharon flipped through the report and shook her head in disgust.

We didn't talk in front of patients, not even sleeping ones, so I waited until we left the room.

"What happened to him?" I asked.

"Hate crime." Sharon shook her head more furiously now. "Why can't we just box all those Nazi mother-fuckers up and send 'em to Mars?"

Sharon said things like that. I was used to it.

"Is he going to wake up?"

"Well, I guess that's up to him and God. Poor boy's got three broken ribs, a ruptured spleen, a punctured lung, two sprained fingers, and bleeding on the brain. He was in surgery for six hours. They don't know if there's brain damage or not."

"Why do you suppose someone hated him that much?"

Sharon gave me a funny look. "Some people just can't stand anyone being different, Jonesy."

"I'm different."

"I know, Jonesy. I know."

That night I peeked in on Michael a lot, but he never woke up. I tried to imagine what his face was like under all the swelling. For some reason, maybe it was how shapely his arms were; I thought he would look real handsome. I hoped he would heal quickly and I told him so.

My shift was eleven to seven. Michael's parents came just as I was about to leave. When I saw them walk into Michael's room, I guess I was curious. I took some fresh ice and a towel to Mr. Howser.

Michael parents were small and they looked old, too old to have a son like Michael. They were pinched up like they were chewing lemons. His father held a Bible and his mother a handkerchief and they prayed over his bed.

It was not a nice prayer. It was all about how Michael had sinned and the Lord had seen fit to punish him. I hoped that Michael was so deep asleep he didn't hear any of it, it made me so mad.

I don't care what someone has done, you don't say things like that to them when they're broken in pieces and fighting to live, especially not if they're your son.

My Aunt Dee would never have done something like that, no matter how bad I'd been, and I wasn't even her own child.

They left and I went over to Michael. I leaned over and whispered in his ear.

"A truckload of bullshit," I said. "Pardon my French. Don't you listen to them, Michael. All you need to do is get well, okay? My name's Jonesy and I'll be right here, so don't you worry about anything."

I never said stuff like that to patients, but it wasn't right when he couldn't even defend himself.

It was getting cold out, so I spent the morning wrapping the rose bushes in chicken wire and stuffing them with straw to keep them from freezing over winter. There were thirty rose bushes around the house and in the garden. They were Aunt Dee's favorites and I took extra special care of them. I filled all the bird houses with sunflower seeds and put out kibble for the neighborhood cats. This time of year there wasn't much to do in the garden, so after I petted the cats, I went inside and got down my books from nursing school. One said you should talk to coma patients and touch them, let them know you're there.

I had a cat once. Her named was Bethany. She died when I was thirteen and I cried for so long, my Aunt Dee swore she'd never let me get a pet again cause she couldn't stand to see me unhappy. Now I just feed the neighborhood cats and that's okay because I can pet them, but I know they're not mine. So I don't think I'd be too sad if they didn't show up one day.

I still miss Aunt Dee, and she died five years ago. She was old and she told me she was ready to go and that I shouldn't be sad. It still hurts.

I usually sleep from three in the afternoon till ten. But that day it was hard to get to sleep because I was thinking about Michael. I decided to go in early see him. I got to work at ten o'clock.

Michael was sleeping. The sound of the machine that helped him breathe was very relaxing. There was still dried blood around his nose. It made him look dead so I carefully washed it off.

"How are you today, Michael?" I asked him as I worked. "Your nose is pretty swollen. I'll try to be gentle."

"He can't hear you," Mr. Howser said loudly. "He's in a coma."

Cats and birds and other animals couldn't understand me either, but that didn't mean they didn't like hearing your voice. I didn't tell that to Mr. Howser. Michael looked less scary once I'd gotten all the blood off.

Sharon pulled me aside when she came in. Her round, brown face was very serious.

"Jonesy, you know that patient in C14, Michael Havers?"

"Yeah?"

Her lips pinched together. "They're taking him off the ventilator at six a.m. The chaplain's coming. I thought you might not want to be here. You can go home early if you want."

"What? Why would they do that? He's going to get better!"

Sharon shook her head in that disgusted way of hers. "His parents signed some papers saying we couldn't use life support. And he's not on their insurance. He doesn't appear to have any insurance at all."

I pulled away from her and ran to the bathroom. I barely made it to the toilet before I threw up.

No insurance. No life support.

They were going to kill him. They were going to kill Michael.

I knew he could live if they just gave him time. But they weren't going to do that, those parents of his that should be sent to Mars. And if the family said no, the hospital had to do it, I guess, had to take him off the ventilator.

I was so upset; I could hardly work that night. I made my usual rounds, but every chance I had I'd go sit with Michael. He didn't have anyone else. I didn't either, really, but at least I had my work and my body wasn't broken. I could take care of myself. He couldn't. I wished I knew a lot of fancy laws or had the right thing to say to stop this from happening. But if the hospital was behind it, what could I do?

“I want to be there,” I told Sharon, “when they turn off the machine.”

“Oh, Jonesy!” She hugged me. “I don’t think you should do that, honey. You’re already so upset. Maybe it’s his time. Maybe Jesus is waiting for him with open arms and he needs to go.”

“It’s not his time,” I said, in what Aunt Dee called my stubborn voice. “And there’s nobody else to hold his hand.”

Sharon’s face scrunched up then and she waved a hand in front of it as if trying to air it out. She just shook her head as if she couldn’t speak and walked away. But I figured it would be okay for me to be there, because Sharon was almost as sad as I was.

The chaplain was there at ten ‘til six that morning. He was out in the hall talking to the doctor so I went in and stood beside Michael’s bed and held his hand. I leaned down to whisper in his ear.

“You can do this, Michael. They’re going to turn off the machine. All you have to do is breathe. I’ll be right here with you, okay? When I squeeze your hand, you breathe in. And when I let it go, you breathe out. That’s all you need to do. I’m right here to help you.”

The doctor came in with a couple of people in suits. My face was scrunched up tight trying to keep everything inside. I wanted to stop them, yell at them, ask what the hell gave them the right. But I was only a nurse’s aide and they were doctors and lawyers and a chaplain and all that. I thought I might throw up again.

I started squeezing Michael’s hand -- *squeeze, release, squeeze, release* - in time to the sound of the ventilator, letting Michael feel the rhythm. The chaplain said a prayer, which I didn’t like either, because it was all about Michael going on to God. He shouldn’t make Michael think that’s what he was supposed to do. So I just kept squeezing, hoping Michael could tell that he didn’t have to go.

The doctor looked at his watch and then turned off the machine. I kept squeezing.

Sharon took the tube out of Michael’s throat. The doctor stared at his watch.

It seemed like a long time that Michael didn’t breathe. I was squeezing his hand so hard, squeezing and squeezing. And just when I thought he was gone, he took a soft breath.

Everyone stood frozen and waited. *Squeeze, release, squeeze, release,* breath.

Michael was breathing on his own.

~2~

Aunt Dee always told me that I was like an Oreo cookie. I had my dad on the outside and my mom on the inside.

My dad was a famous boxer. He was a heavyweight, big and mean-looking, and he won a lot of fights. There's a box in the attic with his trophies in it.

My mom was small, blonde, and real pretty. Aunt Dee said she had a tender heart. She fell in love with my dad and that was that.

My mom loved my dad so much that when he died in the ring, it broke her heart. She got cancer a few months later and passed real quick. Aunt Dee said sometimes cancer is the way a broken heart 'manifests.' It's the body's way of doing what the heart wants when the heart doesn't want to keep living anymore.

I was five the year they died and I came to live with Aunt Dee. I remember them, but sometimes it's hard to know what are real memories and what are things I made up from the photos in the photo album.

I look a lot like my dad's pictures, except my nose was never broken. I'm as big as a house like he was and I scare people sometimes. Like if I'm walking in town at night, just thinking about things, and I get too close to someone, they look all nervous.

I could never box like Dad did. I don't like the idea of hurting anyone. It would make me feel real bad because life is hard enough, you know?

~3~

I guess it was a problem for the hospital that Michael didn't die, because there was no one to pay his bills. The director moved him to the smallest room on our floor, one we used for storage. There were no windows.

I found some nice posters of winter scenes at a Hallmark store and I put them on the wall.

"Look, you can pretend this is your view," I told Michael. "It's going to be Thanksgiving soon, and maybe we'll get snow. I like snow."

When I got off work at seven a.m., I went to Michael's room and stayed with him until after lunch, when I had to go home and sleep. It was winter anyway, so there wasn't any work to do in the garden. And it bothered me that no one came to see Michael. I read to him. I like things that make me laugh, and so I read him the funny pages and a couple of joke books I had. I held his hand because the nursing book told me to, and Sharon said it might be comforting to him.

I took my time washing Michael. There's a way you roll an unconscious patient in bed so you can change their gown during the bed bath and not get everything too wet. First I would roll him onto his right side and undo the ties on the back of his gown and remove his adult diaper. I used a nice warm, soapy washcloth and washed his back in firm circles. That helps blood circulate under the skin and keeps him from getting bed sores. Plus, I thought it must feel nice. I washed all over his back, his behind, legs and arms, feet and hands. I checked his stomach tube.

I paid a lot of attention to his feet, massaging them. He wasn't using them, and you don't want them to get too tender. Plus I figured maybe his feet were ticklish and being touched there would make him laugh. But he never did.

When he was all clean and dry on that side, I put lotion on, massaging the skin and muscles. I pretended he liked the massage, even though he never moved or anything. I'd talk to him the whole while; tell him about the other patients on the floor, about the nurses and doctors and what it was like outside that day, stuff like that.

When I was done I turned him onto his back again and removed his gown. I covered him up with a sheet so he wasn't just hanging out there. Then I washed and massaged his front side and put on a fresh diaper and gown.

I gave him a bed bath every day. Sometimes, if I got bored reading, I'd give him a light massage later on, on his hands and legs with lotion, or sometimes propping him up and doing his back. I knew when you were sick it felt nice, and I thought he appreciated it, even if he didn't move.

~4~

One night close to Christmas, I came back from going home for a nap and shower, and I saw someone leaving Michael's room. It was a young

guy with red hair.

“Do you know Michael?” I asked him.

He nodded. His mouth was all twisted up like he might cry, but there was something hard about him too.

“I’m his roommate. The nurse said they don’t know if he’ll ever come out of the coma.”

I didn’t say anything about that.

“I take care of Michael. I’d like to know what he was like before he came here.”

The guy snuffled. Maybe he’d been crying in Michael’s room, because he seemed to have a lot of snot.

“Okay,” he said. “But I have to go right now. I’ll give you my number.”

Michael’s roommate was named Randy, and he let me come over to see where he and Michael lived.

It was a dinky place in a bad part of town. There was one bedroom, which was where Randy slept. He said Michael had slept on the couch. I forget sometimes that people have to live in places like that. I’m so lucky to have the old pile, and that was just because Aunt Dee left it to me.

“Michael’s parents kicked him out because he’s gay,” Randy told me. He picked at the hem of his shirt, like he didn’t want to look me in the eye. “He was hanging around outside a club when I met him. At first I thought he was competition and I tried scaring him off. Then I realized he had no place to go. I let him sleep on my couch for the night. He ended up staying here for six months.”

“That was nice of you,” I said, because it was, even if it wasn’t a great place.

“He bused tables at a restaurant. Earned jack shit though.”

“Did he go to school?”

“Nah. He’d finished high school but didn’t have the money for college. He wanted to, wanted to be an architect or work in construction or something like that. He loved houses.”

He pointed out a few cardboard boxes. “That’s his stuff. He paid a little rent and I got used to it. ‘Spouse I’ll look for someone else to take the

couch.”

He sounded like Michael was never coming back, and that he was already used to the idea. And when I asked him a lot more questions, like about Michael’s favorite foods and what TV shows he liked and stuff, Randy didn’t know. I didn’t think he was a very good friend.

“How did Michael get hurt?” I asked him.

Randy looked down where he was grinding the toe of his sneaker into the floor. “It was just bad luck. I hook all the time, and I never had anything like that happen. I talked Michael into doing it, for the money. He didn’t want to. So the second time he tries it, some crazy dude almost kills him.”

I tried to figure out what he’d just said. “You talked Michael into having sex for money?”

Randy looked at the wall. “**Really** shitty ass luck.”

For the first time in my life, I wanted to kill someone. I wasn’t sure if it was Randy I wanted to hurt or the guy who’d done that to Michael or both. I stuffed my hands in my pockets, hard.

“Maybe you could take his stuff with you,” Randy said.

All Michael had in the world fit in three cardboard boxes. There were some clothes and two big, old books on houses that maybe Michael got from a library sale. He had a DVD of **Lord of the Rings** and some books with dragons and men with swords on the covers. There was an iPod and headphones.

I took them with me and I put everything neatly in Michael’s hospital room. I thought it might make him feel better, having his stuff.

I brought in a small TV with a DVD player that had been in Aunt Dee’s room. I played **Lord of the Rings** for Michael and talked about all the characters. But Michael still didn’t wake up.

~5~

One day in January, I was washing Michael’s back. His hand, which was laying on his hip, twitched. I got so excited; I probably scared him with my squawk.

“Michael! Can you do it again?”

He didn’t at first, so I kept moving the washcloth over his back. A few minutes later he twitched again.

It felt like the best thing that ever happened in the history of the world, as Aunt Dee used to say. I was so happy as I turned him over so I could do the front. Then I noticed that his dick was not as soft as usual. As I washed his legs and thighs, it got bigger.

Of course, I'd seen this happen before. Sometimes men got it up when you bathed them, even old men, but it'd never affected me. I just ignored it. But this was Michael.

I looked down at him and lost my breath. With his gown off and the sheet at his thighs he was so beautiful. He looked like a statue, all milky skin, thin but still muscular from before the accident. His nipples were dark brown. His face was healed and his cheeks were so pale next to his pink lips and black hair. His penis was long with a pretty little cap on it, and it was sticking up against his belly.

I got hard.

That had never happened with a patient before. My face burned with shame. I continued to wash him, not paying any more attention to that area than I had to. I put him in a fresh diaper and gown.

I sat beside his bed afterwards, trying to stop shaking.

I'd been with men before. Right after high school, a friend of mine started taking me to this bar where you could meet men who liked other men. I could always find someone to have sex with there. I guess they liked how big and tough I looked. At first it was great, because it felt real good, and I liked being touched. But the men didn't want anything more to do with me after sex, and that made me feel sick inside.

I talked to Aunt Dee about it. She said I needed to find someone who cared about me. She said being in love made sex worthwhile. I didn't think I'd find that person at the bar so I stopped going. The thing is - more men like women than like men. Add the fact that I don't go out much, and I figured I had little chance of ever finding someone.

It's okay. I try not to think about it. But I do wish I had a companion to live in the house with me, like Aunt Dee did, maybe a friend. And sometimes I wished I had more than that, someone to hold and kiss and touch, someone who would do those things to me too.

But it wasn't fair to feel like that about Michael. He was asleep. And it was wrong to think about doing something with someone when they're sleeping, even if their body asks you to.

It was a bad idea to start thinking about Michael like that anyway. He was young and beautiful. His chart said he was twenty-one, five years younger than me. Even if he did wake up, he wouldn't want me that way.

I was like a goblin warrior and he was an elven prince.

~6~

Michael

I was in a dungeon. It reminded me of the inside of Dwarf Mountain in *The Hobbit*. The walls were stone and there were torches and precipices and endless rooms. It smelled bad -- like mold and dirt and a little like antiseptic. And it was cold, always so damn cold. There were dark shadows at the edges of the light that shifted and always made me feel like they were about to eat me.

I was scared. And I was alone. I didn't understand how I'd gotten there. I kept trying to find my way out. But time was strange. I kept losing myself, as if in sleep, then I'd find myself in the dungeon again. Sometimes it felt like I wandered for hours.

I tried leaving marks on the dirt floor, 'X's to mark where I'd been, but they faded away as soon as I marked them. I thought I might be trapped there forever. What had I done to deserve this? Was this hell?

But there was a room with a hole in the ceiling and a bright white light shining down. Every time I found that room I thought about going up there, but something held me back. The voice. The hole was a way out, but I knew if I went up there I could never come back. And I was curious about the voice. Every time I decided not to climb up to the light, I told myself I could always come back to this room anytime I wanted to, if I got too scared. But if I could stand the dungeon a little longer, maybe I could find that voice.

The voice has a name -- Jonesy.

Jonesy

After that day when Michael twitched his hand, I'd hold his fingers in mine and ask him to squeeze. One day he did. I was excited, but I wanted to be sure before I told Sharon. We worked out a system, Michael and me. One squeeze meant 'yes' and two quick squeezes meant 'no'.

Michael would only respond sometimes. Even though he never opened his eyes, I could sense when he was deep asleep, and he wouldn't squeeze my hand. Other times he seemed closer to the surface, and he could respond. At first, those times were very short, maybe only ten to twenty seconds. It was as if squeezing my hand was hard work, and he would soon slip back down again, like disappearing under black water.

I repeated myself a lot. "Hi, Michael. My name is Jonesy, and I'm your friend."

Squeeze.

"You're in St. Mercy Hospital. Do you remember I told you that before?"

Squeeze.

"That's real good! I bet you'd like to eat something. They have a tube in your stomach now, but that's boring, isn't it? You can eat some real food if you open your mouth. Can you open it for me?"

Squeeze squeeze.

"No? Your mouth is stuck, huh? That's okay. We'll try again tomorrow. Would you like to hear some music? I have your iPod. I bet it has all your favorites on it, huh?"

Sharon brought in this dock thing she had, and when I put Michael's iPod in there, he and I could listen together.

Michael got stronger and started to respond for longer periods. I told myself when he got to five minutes it would be what Sharon called a milestone. The first time he did, I went and got her.

"How you doing, sweetheart?" Sharon asked him when she came in. She took his hand just like I told her. "Can you squeeze my hand for me, pumpkin?"

He did. Sharon smiled at me real big.

“That’s good! You’re practically ready to run for president! Jonesy here told me you were feeling better. He’s not giving you a hard time, is he?”

Squeeze squeeze.

“Two squeezes means no,” I told her hurriedly.

“You two have a system, huh? Think you can open those pretty eyes for me, pumpkin?”

Michael didn’t open his eyes. Sharon moved back the covers to show his foot. She put her palm against his sole.

“Can you feel my hand on your foot? Wanna push against it?”

He pushed just a little.

“Excellent! Look at you with your bad self! I’m going to talk to your doctor and tell him the good news, and we’ll see what he says, all right?”

She wrote on his chart and was smiling when she left.

The doctor wasn’t as impressed. I heard him talking to some interns in the hall. He didn’t like the fact that Michael wouldn’t open his eyes, said there might be some ‘primitive responsiveness’ but that was no guarantee there wasn’t significant brain damage.

I wanted to tell him that Michael could understand things fine, and his answers made sense. He just wasn’t ready to wake up all the way yet.

Maybe the fact that he seemed better was a bad thing, because the administrator told Sharon they’d found a place for him. They were going to move Michael to a charity institution for the permanently disabled in two weeks. When Sharon told me, she was angry and blinking back tears. That told me everything I needed to know about what kind of place it was, a place for someone with no insurance and no family and no hope. I wouldn’t be there to take care of Michael; no one who cared about him would.

~8~

My Aunt Dee used to say there’s all kinds of intelligence. I think she was trying to make me feel better. I’m not as smart as some, but I graduated from high school and I got my certificate as a CNA, a Certified Nursing Assistant. I wanted to become an RN, but the classes were too hard. Aunt Dee said that if what I wanted was to help people, being a little cheese was

even better than being a big cheese, because big cheeses got too full of themselves and stank.

I don't like tests, see. Some people are good at stuffing a lot of facts in their head and spitting them back out on a test and then forgetting them, but that's not me. When I learn something, I learn it for keeps. It takes me longer than most people, but once it's in there, it's stuck. And when I have a test, I get all nervous and worried and my mind goes blank. So I pretty much sucked at school.

What I like most is fixing things. Aunt Dee got me a set of home repair books when I was twelve, and I've done nearly everything in those books at least once. I've done a lot to the old pile, as Aunt Dee called it. It's a really big house with seven bedrooms and two round turrets on either end. Aunt Dee's parents bought it when she was a little girl. I stripped out and redid most of the plumbing and electrical in the main part of the house and I redid a couple of bathrooms real nice. I've painted most everything at least once. I put in new storm windows and insulation and refinished the original wooden floors, which had been covered up by ugly carpet. Most of the house is done now, so I spend my time out in the garden. I like to be outside.

No one lives here but me, so I guess it's a waste to keep it nice, but it gives me something to do.

Mr. Locklear was supposed to help me with the place, but something about the way he talked about numbers reminded me of taking tests, so I ignored his calls. But now, it was really important that I go see him.

"How are you, Jonesy? I'm so glad you finally came by," Mr. Locklear said.

"I'm sorry I haven't come to see you, but I really don't like to talk about money."

"Yes, I got that feeling." Mr. Locklear frowned at me. "You know, you're lucky that I'm an old friend of your aunt's, and that I've been managing her estate for so long. You shouldn't trust someone to run your finances without a monthly look over. A less honorable man could rob you blind."

"But Aunt Dee trusted you, so I do too."

He sighed. "Sit down, Jonesy."

So then I had to sit there and sweat while Mr. Locklear told me all the things he'd been wanting to tell me, about stock this and mutual that and rates and things. I hated it so much; I wished I could take his letter opener and stick it in my eye just to distract myself.

"You're been very frugal, Jonesy. Your aunt didn't leave you a great fortune, but you have a sizable nest egg in the bank and you never touch it."

"Aunt Dee told me I should be careful with the money. Because I don't earn that much, and if I spend it all, I might have to sell the old pile. I don't want to sell it. It's my home."

"Well, I can't see a need for that. You're doing very well. But you might--"

"Except now I need money, so I wanted to ask if I could have some, and if I'd need to sell the house if I took it."

"What is it that you want, Jonesy? A new car? A vacation?"

"I need a lawyer. Right away. And a hospital bed and some other stuff for the house. Oh, and I need to hire an in-home nurse for when I go to work."

Mr. Locklear stared at me. "Maybe you'd better start at the beginning and let me advise you."

So I did.

Mr. Locklear advised me not to take Michael home, but I didn't listen. One good thing he said, though, was that it would cost more to pay an in-home nurse than I make going to work. I didn't want to give up my job at St. Mercy's, because I liked it. But I remembered some of the other nurses had taken a leave of absence to have a baby or go back to school and such. So I figured I could ask for a leave of absence to take care of Michael for at least a few months. Maybe he would wake up by then. Mr. Locklear said I had enough money for that, and for the lawyer and the other things too, and I wouldn't have to sell the house. I am so lucky.

The lawyer that Mr. Locklear sent me to was real smart. I told him I couldn't let Michael go to that institution. He said I'd need permission from Michael's legal guardians or permission from Michael himself since he was

twenty-one. He said the hand squeezing was good, but in order for it to count Michael needed to be able to sign his name.

I knew Michael's horrible parents wouldn't let me take him. So that left Michael.

That night at work I told Sharon what the lawyer had said. She came in with me to see Michael.

"Michael, it's Jonesy. The hospital wants to move you to an institution because you have no insurance. But I don't think it's a very nice place, and I thought you might like to come home with me instead."

Squeeze.

"You'd like to come stay at my house? I'd take really good care of you, I promise."

Squeeze.

Sharon spoke up. "Jonesy talked to a lawyer and he said that we need you to sign your name, pumpkin. Do you think you could do that?"

I felt bad that we had to ask him, because I didn't want Michael to get upset if he couldn't. But we had no choice. Michael finally squeezed my hand once.

"Okay. Do you want to try now?"

Squeeze.

"Bless your heart, pumpkin," Sharon said with a sniffle. She came over with a pad. I raised Michael's hand off the bed and put the pen in his fingers while she tried to hold the pad steady. Michael weakly gripped the pen. He managed two scribbles on the paper before his hand dropped, shaking.

"That's real good for your first try!" Sharon said. "Don't worry, we've got almost a week to practice, and God knows Jonesy here is as stubborn as they come."

It was a Tuesday morning when they came in -- the hospital director, the hospital's lawyer, Michael's doctor, and my lawyer. Sharon had stayed past her own shift to support me, which was real nice of her.

The two lawyers talked and then the doctor took Michael's hand and asked him if he wanted to live with me or go to a nice care facility with doctors. He must have asked him twenty times. I could count the squeezes

and I knew Michael said me every time. I was getting worried that Michael would become exhausted and fall asleep before he could sign. Finally they brought out the form and Michael signed it, without ever opening his eyes, very slowly and very carefully.

I looked at the form before they took it away. You could read the word 'Michael' even if it was shaky. I was so proud of him I cried. The doctor looked annoyed, but I don't think the director cared as long as he got Michael out of his hospital. My lawyer promised him there couldn't be a lawsuit since Michael had signed the form.

After they left I hugged Michael and told him we were going home.

Sharon came over to help me get Michael settled. She kept looking around the house with wide eyes. "You're a dark horse, aren't you, Jonesy?"

I didn't know what she meant so I shrugged.

"Why do you suppose Michael doesn't open his eyes?" I asked. "I mean, if he's awake enough to understand what we say and squeeze my hand?"

"I don't know, Jonesy. Maybe he's still trying to make up his mind if he really wants to come back or not. Sometimes people give up on life. They decide to let go."

"But if Michael wanted to die he could have already."

"I don't know, Jonesy. But I tell you what, I didn't much like the look of those parents of his, then the poor boy gets himself beaten nearly to death by some ignoramus. I'm not sure I'd be racing back to life, either."

"Michael wants to live," I said firmly.

"Jonesy." Sharon put her arm around my shoulder, which was funny because she had to stand on tiptoe. "You know if that boy does wake up, he's gonna want to go off and live his own life."

"Sure."

"So don't you go getting too attached to him and letting that big, soft heart of yours get broken. Remember, he's not yours, he's his own person."

"He's not mine," I said, knowing it was true no matter how much I wished it wasn't.

Michael

I could see Jonesy now. I knew that in some other reality we were at Jonesy's house. I couldn't see it, but the dungeon felt warmer and the light was brighter. The big difference, though, was Jonesy himself.

He was tall and big and wore a suit of armor that looked like a Gondor knight. But he didn't wear a helmet and I could see his face. His hair was short and he had brown eyes and a kind face, even though it was a bit lumpy and rough. He glowed and I could see through him, but he was there.

The weirdest thing was, the Jonesy I saw never opened his mouth, even though I could hear him talking and talking all the time. Still, he was beside me in the dungeon, and that made me feel *so* much better. The shadows hardly ever came out anymore.

I loved Jonesy. He was really funny and sweet. I didn't understand where he came from, because I couldn't remember knowing him before the hospital. But there was a period I'd forgotten, so maybe I met him then.

Maybe Jonesy was my boyfriend? That would be amazing.

When I felt his hand in mine, that was the best. My hand glowed bright when he held it. When I looked down at myself in the dungeon, more of me was glowing now -- my legs and feet where he massaged me. And even my dick. I think I got hard when he washed me and sometimes when he just held my hand, but nothing seemed to happen with it, more's the pity. Anyway, my whole hip/dick area glowed now. The only part of me that wasn't glowing was the area from just below my ribs up to my chin. I didn't know why.

When Jonesy was with me in the dungeon, sometimes we entered a room I'd never seen before. There was a door in the wall, and it had a green light around the sides and top. Jonesy looked at me and at the door like he wanted me to do something. But I couldn't, because the door was crawling with black snakes. God, I hated snakes. At first, I couldn't even be in the same room as the door. But the snakes never came off of it, so after a while I was able to stand on the other side of the room at look at them.

The snakes were cold and slimy and they writhed all over each other. It was just disgusting. I had a weird idea that all the shadows that used to be in the dungeon turned into snakes and were now on this door.

I think Jonesy wanted me to open the door. And I thought maybe, if I did, I could find him for real. **But.** Snakes.

Why did it have to be snakes?

~10~

Michael was responsive for longer and longer periods. It was so great having him in the old pile. It was just me and him, and I felt so much more relaxed. I think Michael did too. How he could be more relaxed than laying in a bed with his eyes closed, I couldn't really say. Maybe it was just a funny idea of mine.

“Sharon says maybe you haven't fully woken up because you're not sure if you want to live,” I told him. “I don't blame you. It's terrible that someone beat you up like that. You must have been so scared.”

“Maybe you don't want to come back because you don't want to be hurt again. Or maybe you don't think it's right that you like men. There's nothing wrong with it. I like men, too, and my Aunt Dee told me I was born like that, and that if everyone were the same it would be like a diet of Twinkies.”

“I promise I won't let anyone hurt you, so it's safe to open your eyes. Besides, it's almost March and soon it'll be spring. It's beautiful here then. There's a big garden with all kinds of flowers. There's a whole row of pink azaleas that bloom in April and in front of them are yellow daffodils. You'll want to see that.”

“It's a lot to take care of, but I don't mind. If you're better when spring comes, I can take you outside and you can sit in the sun and watch me work. You'd find that funny, wouldn't you? Watching me sweat my behind off. It'd feel good sitting in the sun. I'll make us cold lemonade. My Aunt Dee's recipe is real good. It's made with lots of lemons and brown sugar. Not too much sugar, though. You need to be able to taste the lemons.”

Michael squeezed my hand.

“Does that sound good? I tell you what, when you open your eyes I'll make you a big pitcher of that lemonade. Even if it's still winter. Even if it's in the middle of the night!”

Squeeze.

“Okay, then. It's a deal.”

One day when Michael had been living with me for almost a month, he got hard again while I washed him. I took his hand. I'd been thinking about it a lot, because it happened now more often than not. For a long time I ignored it, but then I started feeling sorry for Michael because he couldn't touch himself. His hands could squeeze mine but his arms didn't move much. I had to be sure.

"Do you want me to take care of that for you?" I asked nervously.

He squeezed my fingers real quick and as hard as he'd ever squeezed them. I dunno, it made me laugh.

"A big yes, huh? Are you sure? 'Cause I don't want to take advantage of you."

He squeezed me hard again. *Yes.*

"Maybe I should have you sign a form or something." I was teasing him. I think he liked that. He squeezed my hand twice real fast, and I could swear I saw the corner of his mouth tilt up.

"Okay," I said. My mouth was suddenly like cotton.

I used lotion and I stroked his dick until he came. It didn't take long 'cause it had been awhile for him. Just touching him like that was so hot. I nearly came when he did.

"That was real sexy. You're beautiful, Michael." My voice was shaky as I cleaned him up.

Then Michael did something he'd never done before. He reached up his fingers for me. I took his hand and he tapped my palm -- *you*.

I stood there in shock. "You want to feel me too?" I whispered.

Squeeze.

"That's not... Are you sure?"

Squeeze.

Maybe it was wrong. But by then I'd spent so much time with Michael. There was something between us, even if I wasn't sure what it was. I loved him. But I knew it wasn't fair to ask anything from him when he needed all his strength just to heal.

I pulled back the covers and took off my pants. I got on the bed. I pulled up Michael's gown so he could feel me and I brought his hand over to rest on my hip. I put my face in his neck and touched myself, putting my hand

and my dick against his side so he could feel me doing it. Michael squeezed my hip. I knew he understood what was going on.

It was amazing to be with him, even like that. I could burst for loving him. When I was done, I cleaned myself up and pulled him to me, holding him and taking his hand in mine. I felt something wet on my face. Michael was crying.

“I’m sorry. Are you upset that I did that?” I asked, feeling terrible.

Squeeze, squeeze.

I thought about it. “Are you crying because you wish we could do it more normal like?”

Squeeze.

“It’s okay, Michael. You’re getting better all the time. We will one day if you want. You’ll see.”

Michael let his head fall back on the pillow. I looked down at his face. He seemed to be waiting for something so I kissed him. He kissed me back, moving his tongue slowly and sucking a little. I thought my heart would pound itself to death from happiness. I broke away.

“You’re going to wake up soon,” I choked out. “And if you want to go live your own life, that’s okay. That’s what you should do, because you’re perfect and beautiful. But I love you, Michael. So, you know, you have a home here with me as long as you want one. And you don’t have to worry about anything, I promise.”

~12~

Michael

I stood in front of the door with the snakes and the green light. Jonesy was with me. I looked down and noticed that my chest was now glowing, just like the rest of me.

Jonesy loved me. I looked at him.

“If I go through that door, can I hold you? Really hold you?” I asked him.

He squeezed my hand once. ***Yes.***

“And you promise it’ll be all right?”

Squeeze.

“We’ll sit in the garden in the sun and have lemonade,” I said. “And when I’m better we’ll make love, and no one can tell us what to do because

we'll be safe at your house, right? And besides, you'll get all big and bad ass if they try, won't you?"

Squeeze. Jonesy smiled. It was a beautiful smile.

"Do you really want me to come?"

Squeeze.

"Okay."

I steeled myself. God, I hated snakes, but they didn't look as real as they once had, or as big. I reached for the door handle and they slithered away.

Jonesy

I fell asleep in the chair next to Michael's bed. When I opened my eyes, bright sunlight was coming in through the window. Outside, the ice on the branch of the big oak tree was melting *drip, drip*. I turned to look at Michael -- and stared into big gray eyes.

They were so beautiful, so clear and loving, that I felt my face crack trying to smile and cry at the same time.

"Michael," I said. It came out all funny sounding.

"Jonesy." His voice was raspy.

Then Michael smiled.

END.

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Before I Wake

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