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Contact:

JugumPress@outlook.com

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For Michael W. Frazier

1964–2004

The world has not been as bright since your light went out, but
my love for you has never dimmed.

QUEEN CITY is often used to describe the largest city in a country, state, province, or territory that is not the capital. In 1869, Seattle was given the epithet “The Queen City of the Pacific.” This lasted until 1982, when the Seattle–King County Convention and Visitors Bureau adopted “The Emerald City” as the new moniker. Seattle has many names: Jet City, Rain City, the City of Flowers, the City of Goodwill, the Emerald City. Still, some residents find the old name better recognizes the culture they live in and speaks to the hidden history of their city.

Part One

Summer 1991

1.

Unadulterated

“BUMP?”

At the sink next to Steven, a man with jet-black hair and pale, unsettling eyes offered his hand. A tiny mountain of cocaine rested on the curve between his thumb and forefinger. The steady pulse of Moby’s “Go” was audible through the club’s bathroom walls, the pounding beat subdued just enough to make normal conversation possible.

“Oh, sure, thanks,” Steven said.

The burn made his eyes water. Still sniffing, Steven tipped his head back so as not to smear his eyeliner. The man, smiling warmly, proffered a second bump. Steven took it, glad for the balance of the burn on both sides. He blinked in the mirror as reality slammed home: he’d swallowed a tab of ecstasy before he walked into the club, forgotten in the surprise of the cocaine offer.

Steven was about to be really fucking high.

“Thanks,” he murmured again when the burn passed. He swallowed the bitter drip at the back of his throat, its taste comforting. A Pavlovian response, in anticipation of how he’d feel in a minute.

His cocaine benefactor leaned against the counter and watched as Steven ran a hand through his hair. Pleased with the attention, Steven straightened to show how his tight t-shirt fit his body. A lightness rolled through him, faint waves of pleasure not yet cresting. Either the cocaine was exceptionally good or it had pushed the ecstasy to come on quickly. He closed his eyes, every nerve vibrating with the music.

“I’ve seen you around. You’re hot. Want to dance?”

“Oh.” Steven snapped awake; he’d forgotten where he was. “Yeah, sure.” A dance wasn’t a bad trade for a couple of bumps. Despite his unnerving eyes, the guy was good looking. And Steven wasn’t in a gay bar, all dressed up and high, just to

stand around. Even if it was a fuck the guy wanted, Steven might be up for that.

“There you are.”

Adrian banged into the bathroom, his silvery voice bouncing off the mirrors and tile, breaking through Steven’s haze.

“I’ll be out in a minute,” Steven said to the black-haired man, who gave Adrian an appraising glance and then nodded pleasantly to Steven as he left.

There you are. The same words Adrian said the first time they met six years ago when, naïve for nineteen, Steven ventured out alone to Club Broadway. Adrian had grabbed him and declared, *There you are!* Unsure, Steven quietly asked, *Do I know you?* Adrian pressed his face into Steven’s neck and whispered, *Just pretend, okay? I need you to rescue me from this guy who won’t leave me alone.*

Years later, Adrian still greeted him with *There you are* in a way that sounded like *I need you*. And Steven was always there, whatever Adrian needed.

Now Adrian stood close behind, his hands on Steven’s hips. The same height and similar builds, but their heads side by side in the mirror emphasized their differences: Steven, tawny with freckles and red hair; Adrian, angelic white, translucent skin glittering metallic with makeup, hair bleached to a platinum shock, and ice-blue eyes that froze you in place when he glanced your way. In darker moments, seeing his freckles as smudges that couldn’t be rubbed away, Steven felt like an imperfect copy beside Adrian. Tonight, though, they were both perfect, not mirror images but rather a beautiful positive/negative pair.

Adrian shimmered in the reflection.

“Just you and me against the world,” Adrian said to their reflections, his voice pitched for Steven’s ear and no one else. “Look at us; we have what no one else has.”

The ecstasy had come on and now both drugs pounded through Steven’s veins. His heart raced to match the DJ’s house beat throbbing up through the floor. Cocaine hadn’t been the best idea.

Adrian moved from behind Steven. Even their clothes were opposites, coming from both ends of the color spectrum. Steven wore a tight black t-shirt with four narrow pink stripes around

the chest, and fitted, suggestive black Levi's, black boots, black eyeliner, pink Swatch on his right wrist. Adrian, ethereal in tight white leather pants and a white fishnet t-shirt, wore bright turquoise boots that matched his belt and thin leather collar. A shadow across his back, under his shirt, seemed to move with him.

"Did you hear me?"

"What?" Steven dragged his attention from Adrian's body and that mysterious shadow.

"I *said* get a condom if you don't have one, and come here."

Adrian pointed to the last stall. Obedient, Steven dug in his pocket for the condom he'd grabbed (just in case) when he left the house. He followed Adrian into the stall. The drugs drove his body to action way ahead of his brain: flushed, warm, and ready to fuck, not caring about the predictable aftermath of Hurricane Adrian.

"What do you—"

Before Steven could ask, Adrian slammed him back against the door, his hand closed tightly under Steven's jaw and his mouth on Steven's in a brutal kiss.

"Oh, Ade, I never knew you cared," Steven teased, breaking the kiss.

"I care about getting fucked," Adrian breathed, his voice low and soft, his forehead pressed against Steven's, "and you're the easiest option right now."

"You say the most romantic things."

Their teeth clicked when Adrian kissed Steven again, forcing his tongue into Steven's mouth, his hand pressed against the placket of Steven's jeans, making him rise. The cocaine and ecstasy helped as much as Adrian's fingers.

"You're beautiful," Adrian said. "The best friend I've ever had. And the only person in this entire place good enough to fuck me. Happy now?"

Steven laughed. Adrian's idea of *amour* was as blown as his pupils, but it didn't stop the rush of pleasure Steven felt at being chosen, the one Adrian needed in this moment. Steven gazed into those black eyes, the irises only a tiny ring of pale blue.

"What did you take?" Steven asked, turning away as Adrian tried to kiss him again.

“Really good MDA, and couple hits of speed. Because MDA is always too mellow, you know?” He kissed Steven, deeper and gentler this time. Steven tasted vodka and cranberry.

Adrian held Steven against the door with one hand while he reached in his pocket and pulled out a one-inch square of pink plastic. Confused, Steven leaned down to see what it was. Adrian laughed.

“It’s lube, dollbaby. Single sized. I only have two so you better make this one worth it.” He reached for Steven’s zipper. “God, I can’t remember the last time I wanted to get fucked like this.”

Steven’s cock twitched in the heat of Adrian’s hand, making Steven harder, but it was Adrian’s impatience for satisfaction that spurred Steven on. In this grim cubicle with raunchy graffiti scrawled across all its surfaces, only Steven could please him. A rare and perfect bubble enclosed them, Steven willing to give Adrian what he most wanted, the two of them taking and giving pleasure.

They struggled to find room for arms and elbows in the small space, though Adrian pushed down his white leather pants and bent over with grace. Steven rolled on the condom and filled his hand with cherry-scented lube from the pink packet, its sweet chemical fragrance filling the cubicle. Steven slicked it over his hard dick and rubbed the rest of it over Adrian’s ass.

Steven pressed a finger inside the tight heat of Adrian’s body. Adrian moved back against him. Since the beginning, Steven had never been able to resist Adrian’s flame. But they were only friends. Fucking was a new blip in their long history together. In these rare, close moments, Steven was merely the wire, lit by Adrian’s electrifying charge. This close to Adrian, smelling his fine sweat and tasting the soft, tantalizing skin of his neck, the switch deep inside Steven jolted to *on*. The rushing current of their connection coursed through Steven harder than any drug, reminding him of why he put up with Adrian’s bullshit and confounding bouts of cruelty.

As he fingered Adrian’s ass, he shivered with the sensation of being elevated above his everyday life just by touching Adrian, just by being the one Adrian needed right now. Ready to

be inside the voracious heat of Adrian's ass, Steven pushed in a second finger.

"Just fuck me," Adrian said. "Don't worry. I want it hard."

Equally eager to skip the usual prep, running on instinct, Steven pulled Adrian's hips into place as Adrian braced his hands on the wall. Steven entered slowly, letting Adrian get used to the breach. Adrian's tight heat sent waves of pleasure over Steven.

Steven tugged up the thin fishnet t-shirt and ran his hand down Adrian's spine. The shadow proved to be a new tattoo: angel wings across the plane of Adrian's back. A delicate, complex tattoo that perfectly suited Adrian—and that Adrian hadn't mentioned. Steven suppressed a spark of jealousy at being left out. One more secret not shared between them, one more piece of the mystery that was Adrian.

"When did you get this?" Steven asked, staring at the lacy lines of the feathers, tracing the pattern to feel the faint line where it wasn't quite healed, hadn't fully melded into Adrian's pale skin.

"Oh god, not now, please," Adrian huffed. "Move."

Steven grabbed Adrian's hips and began to thrust, hard and insistent. He burned, a white-hot ember, as Adrian thrust back against him and claimed his pleasure. Steven dropped his free hand from the wall and traced the line of those wings with his thumb. Swept into the strength of their physical connection, Steven felt like he was part of Adrian, a creature so inexplicable he might as well be an angel. Or devil, in a different mood. Adrian either seared you or froze you out. Never a middle ground.

"Oh god, Steven. Fuck. Yes. Fuck me. Want you. Want you like this in me."

The low, rough growl of Adrian's voice drove Steven on, drawing their connection deeper, so much more than just the heat of Adrian's body gripping Steven's cock, more than his own gratification. Adrian laid bare, open to pleasure only Steven could provide. "So good, dollbaby. Oh yes. Just fuck me. Please. Please."

Determined to keep Adrian begging for him, Steven twisted to push deeper, pounding him, their bodies carried forward in syncopated rhythm. Steven braced his hand on the wall to keep

from crushing Adrian against it, feeling his body to be a finely-tuned machine made to move like this, to be connected to the steady, searing engine that was Adrian. Steven kept thrusting, varying speed and building intensity, desire pounding through him like the house beat vibrating in the wall under his hand.

The unadulterated high of having Adrian want him surpassed the drugs in Steven's bloodstream. Adrian met him, perfectly in sync, their rhythm now everything. Time slipped away in their steady thrusts. The house music drummed, setting a pace that matched Steven's heartbeat. Only Adrian's low patter broke through into Steven's thoughts.

"Steven, baby. Please. Oh god. I didn't think I was gonna be able to come. But you're gonna make me."

Steven's cock was rigid as steel in the hot, slick press of Adrian's ass. The exquisite sense of winning a rare prize shivered through Steven, having realized his duty: bringing Adrian to the brink.

"Make me come. Fuck me until I come. Jesus Christ, Steven. Fuck yes. Yes yes yes." Adrian's patter drove Steven on, ready to fulfill Adrian's demands.

Yet Steven wouldn't come, not even with Adrian praying his dirty litany below him. It hadn't been that much cocaine. Just enough to make him hard and keep him that way, without coming. He closed his hand around Adrian's cock, ready to bring him off.

"Steven, please. Talk to me."

From the half dozen times they'd fucked, Steven knew the script, hated that he thought of it that way, but it was only a role Adrian assigned. Steven talked dirty only to please Adrian. The words came out in mixed French and English, allowing Steven to keep his secrets, to say what he wanted to say, though surely Adrian guessed.

"Oh yeah, you like that? *J'te veux! Toi, tu m'excites!* Want to make you come so hard."

"Yesss," Adrian hissed. Steven stepped up his pace. His hips ached, bruising with each hard slap against Adrian's ass. The stall's metal wall rattled with each thrust as Adrian's shoulders banged against it, his face shoved hard against the graffitied panel.

“This what you want?” Steven clenched his teeth. *Tell me you need me. “Tu veux que je te prenne? Dis-moi que tu me veux.”* A fiery mess of needy desire, he burned hotter with the potency of his own words, another shared force that joined them, even if Adrian didn’t understand. Steven thrust, determined to keep the physical and mental connection between them.

“Love you in my fucking hole. God, I want that cock.” Adrian ground back against Steven as he spoke.

Shuddering, Steven rapidly stroked Adrian’s dick. He moved his other hand up to Adrian’s shoulders, over the rippling muscles that made the new tattoo flex and move. Steven gripped hard, digging into the skin there, owning Adrian’s power to fly, keeping them locked together. Steven’s soaring lust burst forth in his muddled languages, words blurring together.

“*Que c’est bon! Need you like this, mon Amour. Saute-moi!* Fucking take me!” Steven said, playing a game where he was never sure of the rules.

“Your fucking French is hot. Like I broke you down.”

Steven bristled at that and thrust into Adrian with punishing intensity, jerking him off harder.

“Oh god. You feel so good. Don’t stop,” Adrian demanded.

“Come for me, *like you never come for anyone else, just for me.*” French overtook English in the rush of Steven’s lust.

“Just fuck me. Fuck me.”

Steven obliged. He felt Adrian shudder and hoped he was close. Adrian pushed Steven’s hand away and grabbed his own cock.

“You never do it hard enough,” Adrian grumbled. Adrian brought himself off rough and fast, his ass clenching around Steven. He sagged when he was done. Steven pulled Adrian’s back to his chest, holding him up, pressing his nose against the soft hair at the back of Adrian’s neck, their huffing breaths melting together with the blistering heat of their bodies.

“Get off,” Adrian complained.

Steven pulled out, still hard. He tossed the condom away while Adrian cleaned off lube and come, and then fixed his clothes. When they were both righted, Adrian grabbed Steven’s face and kissed him again, sweetly this time.

“Thank you,” he said against Steven’s lips. “Always there when I need you and your cute French mumbling. So reliable.”

“Always.”

Contentment fluttered and broke through the surface of the sparkling high shimmering through his blood. His own release didn’t matter now, when he’d made Adrian come like that, like he’d given up his own orgasm for Adrian’s.

“Do you need a hand?” Adrian pressed Steven’s cock through his zipped jeans.

“It’s okay,” Steven said. “I couldn’t get off right now anyway.”

A couple of guys were talking at the sink when Steven and Adrian came out of the stall. Looking them both up and down, the taller one caught Steven’s eye and said, “Nice trick.” Steven grinned back at them, perversely pleased that they had the wrong impression.

Adrian washed his hands and checked himself in the mirror. Steven hovered behind him, untethered as their connection flickered and dimmed. The face in the mirror was his own and yet altered. More than just the flush of the recent fuck. The cocaine and ecstasy turned him into someone else, someone bold and daring—no, that was bullshit. Steven’s lip turned up in a disdainful snarl. Drugs and Adrian made him into someone willing to do whatever it took to have a share of Adrian’s glimmering power. For one moment, bound to Adrian by sex, he’d been invincible, hovering in a magic doorway that he hoped to step through one day, permanently coupled with Adrian.

“See you out there,” Adrian called, sashaying out the door.

The sound of the slamming door severed the tether that sex had tied between them. The other men followed, still talking. And just like that, Steven was alone, the glow of invulnerability slipping away, only his true face reflected in the mirror. The flickering, faintly green fluorescent lights washed him out. He fixed his eyeliner with a paper towel, pressing lightly in case his exterior fractured and chipped, like his heart. The grimy bathroom shuddered with the beat of music. Steven let it roll through him, pulsing into the space he’d opened for Adrian, who carried away pieces, leaving a raw, jagged hollow cavity in Steven.

He washed his hands, focusing on that small task, and then turned his attention to his body, to the hard-on still aching in his jeans and the cocaine roaring in his system while the music did its job, driving back the ache of Adrian's absence. He took a deep breath, letting the drugs buoy him up until his body shimmered with the ecstasy, pleasure flowering under his skin. He needed to move.

And he really needed a drink of water.

2. Ecstasy Zen

STEVEN CRUSHED HIS FEELINGS FOR Adrian into a small box at the back of his mind, best left unobserved until the next crashing hook-up smashed the box open again. He stepped out of the bathroom a new man, with only the blooming rush of ecstasy, wanting to dance under colored lights until nothing but music existed in his head.

Ecstasy Zen: shake your ass and your mind will empty.

At the bar, Steven ordered water, drinking it and watching the dancers. His dick pressed at his jeans, but not uncomfortably so. The beats from the dance floor throbbed through his bones. The slow promise of a new song came on like a rising tide, new beats filtering through the old. As he finished his water, his black-haired drug patron from what seemed like hours ago beckoned to him from the dance floor. Steven went to join him.

Steven moved deep inside the song, perfectly in sync with his partner, with everyone in the bar, with the universe. Each bass thump was a heartbeat, the melody jangled in his muscles, and the steady rhythm swept away his thoughts until nothing bad was left.

The man, Don maybe, it had been hard to hear over the music, was much more beautiful with the lights swirling rainbows over him than Steven remembered from the bathroom. Every time Don smiled, Steven was charged with a burst of his positive energy.

Don's body was a thick, tight wall of muscle that shielded Steven from thinking about anything else. His breath was hot across Steven's cheek when they moved close, their lips nearly touching before Don pulled back with a teasing smile.

Suffused with the warm glow of Don's obvious interest and apparent goodness, Steven felt as bright as the light he saw in

Adrian. When Don's hand pressed on Steven's hip, Steven's gaze met those unnaturally pale eyes and moved closer until they ground together. The songs played on, each one better than the last, bringing them closer, dancing toward the possibility of a dirtier grind later.

Then all the heavy bass dropped away and the rising intro melody of Madonna's "Vogue" hummed through the room. As the beats kicked in, Steven was twisted around by firm hands on his shoulders. Steven's heartbeat skipped, losing the tempo of the music, seeing Adrian glowing like an angel in the lights. He leaned close to Steven and yelled past him to Don.

"What?" Steven yelled into Adrian's ear.

"I told him you were mine for this one." Adrian ground his hips against Steven, raising his arms to catch the song's rhythm. "It's our song, dollbaby."

Joyful, Steven brightened. Together Steven and Adrian radiated enough to light the early summer Northern sky. A perfect union on the dance floor, their movements were timed flawlessly. Steven wanted to taste the glitter that accented Adrian's cheekbones. He wanted to touch Adrian again, feel the heat of his skin, learn how gentle his kiss could be. No one else was ever this beautiful. Adrian smiled like a sun that shone only for Steven, who for a moment was the most valuable, precious thing ever.

But that light went out, as it always did.

By the third song, dark-haired Don wandered away, eclipsed by the glow of Adrian, though Adrian's search for his next partner was already under way. The warm exhilaration of their dance-floor fusion faded. Adrian asked Steven to help him choose his next target. Then Adrian was gone.

Frozen out again, Steven used the drugs to cushion the letdown as Adrian walked away with a broad-chested brunet dressed in a perfect black leather accompaniment to Adrian's ethereal white outfit.

Shoving aside disappointment so he could float the good ecstasy high over it, Steven went to find more water. He leaned against the bar and surveyed the room. Don had a new partner, and Adrian had disappeared with his new companion. Steven surrendered to loss.

Just good friends. Who had sex when no one else was available. No jealousy when either of them found someone else. It wasn't like Steven was in love with Adrian, who was impossible: flighty, unreliable, sometimes outright mean, though never to Steven. Yet Steven hadn't found any other man engaging enough to pull him from the gravity that kept him in Adrian's orbit.

Steven's body pulsed with lesser waves of pleasure, the hard rush of the cocaine gone, sweated out on the dance floor. He wanted to be elsewhere, somewhere quieter, but if he left now he'd be alone in his apartment peaking on ecstasy. Which could be okay, but there had to be better options out there. He saw Don heading out the door hand-in-hand with a butch blond. He watched the writhing crowd of half-dressed men, glittering under the lights, to see if there was anyone he should try for. The dance floor was still crowded, so Steven could probably find a partner just by going out there alone. But then he wouldn't get to choose.

At the end of the bar, blond hair verging on white caught his eye. Streaked with dusty gold, but real, not like Adrian's platinum shock. The guy looked like an actor in an old movie. Solid, classic man: chiseled jaw, sharp cheekbones, broad brow. And a wide, full mouth made for kissing. His fitted black shirt was buttoned low, showing a light patch of hair on his chest, and the short sleeves gripped the curve of his biceps. His faded, well-worn jeans looked custom made, displaying his narrow hips and the solid curve of his ass.

The man turned, seemingly aware of Steven's regard. Their eyes locked for a second and Steven gasped, unprepared for the intense, appraising gaze. Heart hammering, Steven stepped forward, ready to speak, right at the moment another man approached, handing the pale blond a drink and leaning next to him, blocking Steven's view.

Chest tight, unable to tear his eyes away, Steven moved down the bar to get a better view. When a spotlight drifted over the man's aristocratic face, Steven's breath huffed as if he'd taken a blow. The guy was at least ten, maybe fifteen years older than Steven, with a confidence in the way he moved, as if he always knew exactly what to do.

Butterflies fluttered softly in Steven's belly, rushing up higher until they thumped in his chest. He'd never sought out older guys, but when the man laughed at his friend's joke, Steven longed to be the cause of that gorgeous smile. This guy's face told a story about open, sincere kindness.

Steven moved across the room, knowing it was creepy, but not letting the guy out of his sight as he watched the two men talk. A glorious feeling crackled through him, filling his hollow emotional spaces. Steven laughed, giddy with this beautiful discovery.

Another guy arrived, tall with black hair and a stern expression. He dragged the first interloper on to the dance floor when New Order's "Temptation" pulsed through the bar.

The ecstasy rolled through Steven in a cresting wave, making him aware of how brilliantly, crisply beautiful everything was. Not just this exceptional man, but the colored lights of the dance floor and the men dancing under them, the shimmering sparkle of the racked bottles behind the bar, the gloriously uniform pattern of the black-and-white floor tiles. So much exquisite beauty in this room.

Fighting the newly blossoming high, Steven focused on the man again. No, it wasn't just the drugs. This guy had *presence*. He didn't belong in this room—even relaxed and dressed like everyone else, the man was too classy for it. Steven finished his water and walked back to the bar, headed for the opening next to this guy, his natural rhythm carrying him smoothly through the dancers to the bar edge.

In this moment, Steven did the hardest thing he remembered ever doing: acting casual while he ordered water and leaned on the bar beside this man, so close that he could feel body heat at his shoulder. Tempted by the proximity, Steven closed his eyes and inhaled, smelling cedar, the bright green of cut summer grass, and the scent of clean skin. Vibrating with the effort to appear calm, Steven leaned over, his face tantalizingly near this guy, mouth by his ear.

"Are you here with someone?"

Steven's body resonated with the force of the man's commanding presence and discerning glance.

Breath hot on Steven's ear, his voice rich and deep, the man said, "Some friends. They're dancing." Even over the music

Steven heard a huskiness that shot straight to his groin. Fuck, he was half hard again.

“Do you want to dance?” Steven asked, surprised how much he wanted to hear the word *yes*. He rarely pursued anyone, while never lacking for someone vying for his attention. Standing on the other side, pursuing instead of being pursued, was disorienting.

The man smiled gorgeously. Steven’s heart would break if rejection accompanied that smile. He knew even less about accepting rejection than he did about conducting an active pursuit.

“Thank you,” the man said gruffly. “I’m happy you asked me. But I’m not much for dancing tonight.”

The lilt of the man’s phrasing and the loud music caused Steven to mishear. Dazzled, his mind put nonsensical French translations to the sounds before he shook off the aural hallucinations of the ecstasy and gasped that he was being rejected.

“Oh. Sure. *J’étais juste*—” Steven’s slack response and lapse into unintentional French was cut short by the return of the man’s friends. One smiled, a handsome bear of a man, his eyes sparkling. The tall, dark, severe one raked his eyes over Steven, judging him unworthy before he turned his attention to the blond man. Steven looked away, hoping his face didn’t reveal the sharp jolt of disappointment that coursed through him. He faded back discretely, headed for the bathroom.

Inside, he washed and dried his face. His eyeliner was mostly gone, but he was grateful he hadn’t appeared disheveled in front of the most provocatively handsome guy he’d ever seen. He tried to brush it off, attributing his feelings to the drugs. But something had happened when that man looked into his eyes. The inner flutter of butterflies was different from all other real and chemical emotions he’d experienced that night. Surely it was more than just a response to an exceptionally attractive face, graceful ease, and the low burr of the man’s voice.

Steven knew that love at first sight didn’t exist, but this immediate magnetic attraction had never happened to him before. With Adrian it took weeks for Steven’s longing to fill him with urgency, yet he felt this way after scant minutes near this

guy. Shaking off ridiculous notions, Steven relieved himself, washed again, and arranged his hair.

The face in the mirror scolded him for giving up when the man's friends arrived. Annoyed, Steven grinned maniacally at his reflection, until it forced him to laugh. His real smile returned, together with his determination. He was going back to the bar: he needed a name, something to hold on to until he could see this guy again and talk to him.

Steven stepped out of the bathroom. A hand closed over the back of his neck.

"Hey you," Adrian said, smelling of sweat and sex and someone else's cigarettes, his black-leather clad friend standing nearby. "We're going to The Dog House. Want to come? Or did you finally find someone to hook up with?"

"Maybe, I don't know. I didn't talk to him."

Adrian rolled his eyes. "Let's go. Grab him if you see him on the way out and bring him along."

Senses heightened as he walked through the bar, Steven turned at every movement in the corner of his eye, hoping that man was just around the next corner. But he was either hidden by the crowd of dancing men or he'd left while Steven was pulling it together in the bathroom. The lost chance crumpled the last good feelings from the ecstasy.

As they walked up the street in the early June night, air still chilly, Steven wished he had a jacket. It was the beginning of summer, but Seattle wasn't warm yet. And he felt so raw from the night's events that a jacket could offer the armor Steven wished for.

That man's face lodged in Steven's mind, that smile unfolding over and over again. *It's just the ecstasy. No one is that handsome in real life, in the light of day. You merely hallucinated him.*

3.

Computational Linguistics

STEVEN SHRUGGED HIS BACKPACK HIGHER up his shoulder as he walked into B&O Espresso. The room was packed with people in close groups at tables along each side of the narrow room. The vintage floral table coverings, colorful wall prints, and cluttered shelves of *objets d'Art* called up images of a Parisian cafe decorated with castoffs from an aristocratic grandmother's house.

Glad of the busy noise, Steven headed to the counter at the far end of the room, seeking coffee and cake to help him study. Halfway down the room, a quick movement caught his eye: his friend Lisa, the most beautiful woman he knew, waved at him. She was seated under a vibrant Art Nouveau mural that contrasted sharply with her mahogany skin and bright-white dress shirt. Her newly shorn hair highlighted the strong bones of her face and enhanced her smile.

Three paces away, arms out to greet her, Steven stopped, his heart hammering. Lisa's companion was that gorgeous blond man from the club a couple of weeks ago.

"Leese! Oh my God, your hair!" Steven forced the words out, his throat tight with giddy anticipation while he tried to keep his attention on Lisa.

"What?" Her silver watch and rings flashed as she patted the close-cropped curls. She cut her onyx eyes at Steven, her jaw set.

Although eager to know how they came to be sitting together in Steven's favorite coffee shop, he narrowed his focus, speaking only to Lisa. "I'm worried. You were beautiful before, but this cut is so stunning, I'll have to fight off your admirers to get your attention. You barely have time for me as it is." Feeling fluttery and flirtatious, he leaned down to kiss her forehead, then caught her hand and kissed that, too. "You look amazing."

“Thanks, sweetie. You don’t look so bad either.” Lisa squeezed his hand. Steven scowled at her—comically, he hoped. She grinned. “Steven, have you met my friend John?”

Faced with the bluest eyes ever known, eyes the color of Montana skies, piercing and strong, eyes like the ocean, like sparkling sapphires, Steven was writing a poem, lost in those eyes, when the man stuck out his hand.

“Steven,” he said, his voice gruff in the way Steven remembered. “John Pieters. We’ve met, haven’t we?” His accent had been too faint to pick up in the club noise, but now Steven was guessing: not German; maybe a Scandinavian country? No, it was more familiar than that.

Mind whirling with this proof that good things happened if you wished hard enough for them, Steven shook John’s hand. “Steven Frazier,” he said, limiting his words to avoid spilling the dirty thoughts he had about John’s mouth and hands.

The work-roughness of John’s palms matched his gruff voice. Steven clasped his left hand around John’s as if giving him a great honor. John smiled at the gesture. In fact, after their first too-brief meeting, Steven was reluctant to release John’s hand, lest the man disappear again. Heart pounding, afraid John might read his thoughts, Steven released John’s grip and answered the question.

“Well, not exactly. I think we spoke once.”

“Yes, at Neighbours, two weeks ago,” John said. “I don’t forget a face.”

John remembered him. The rush of blood from his pounding heart went straight to Steven’s head, leaving him dizzy. Something *had* happened when their eyes first met. That same notion flared again, a flashback hovering in the back of his brain.

“Oh?” Lisa said, her head cocked, her smile softening the question. “What were you doing at Neighbours, John?”

John’s smile was faintly crooked around his straight, white teeth, as if repeated use had pulled it askew. Even though that smile was for Lisa, Steven’s heart clenched at the sight of it. The man was even more appealing than Steven remembered.

“Oh, you know Bash and Shane,” John said. “Friends believe they know best when you need to get back out and meet people. So of course they dragged me there.” John’s fond tone

led Steven to reassess his judgment of the interlopers from that night, yet he focused on the significant words. *Back out:* he's single!

"It's nice to truly meet you, John." Steven's eyes cruised John in a quick once over, a subtle hint at his interest.

Catching Steven's attention, Lisa said, "Do you want to join us, sweetie? It's so crowded here, you won't find a table. I bet we can get a chair to squeeze you in." Lisa nodded to a four-top table with only three people seated at it.

Homework forgotten, there was nothing Steven wanted more. However, politeness overruled. "Oh no, I don't want to interrupt you guys. Just came to say how pretty you are."

Lisa laughed at Steven's flattery, patting her hair again.

"Please join us," John said, his voice like walking barefoot through warm sand, scratchy and smooth all at once. "We finished talking business. I have to go in a minute, but join us, please."

John stood to ask the nearby table for their extra chair, carrying it back and setting it next to his own. "Have a seat," he said, hand out in a gesture of offering. Steven sank onto it, knees weak.

Settled back in his own chair, alert eyes fixed on Steven, John asked, "What are you doing tonight, Steven? Coffee before clubbing?" John raised his espresso cup in a toast.

"No, not tonight." Steven considered John's lavender shirt, shot through with grey stripes, tucked neatly into fitted, well-faded jeans. A darker grey blazer hung on the back of his chair. When John moved, the light hair on his chest flashed between the open top two buttons on his shirt. Mouth dry, Steven licked his lips, trying to remember what he was saying, why he was here. "I have to study for finals. You might think it's weird, but I find it easier to study here than in my apartment."

John nodded, chin settling on his fist, eyebrows lifted in curiosity at the mention of homework.

"Yes, Steven is back in school. I'm crazy proud of him." Lisa laid her hand fondly on Steven's shoulder for a second. "We met at Seattle Central years ago, but he didn't come back to finish until now."

Steven smiled awkwardly at the praise, hating the dig at how long he'd been out of school. He'd take responsibility for it,

but there had been extenuating circumstances. He'd moved in when Adrian's former roommate moved out, just as school started six years ago. Through the endless party that was Adrian's life, Steven had managed to attend classes at Seattle Central Community College while working at the Fred Meyer store on Broadway.

Despite the time he spent partying with Adrian, Steven passed his classes, doing well in all of them those first two years. His beautiful Pakistani anthropology professor said that Steven had an exceptional grasp of the nuances of linguistic anthropology. So Steven took more language classes, branching out from his mother's French and his own high school Spanish into Japanese and German. He'd brought home extra books to study and visited the University of Washington's Anthropology department, ready to apply when he finished his two-year degree. But academic passion wasn't enough to combat the allure of Adrian's sparkling life. Under the guise of saving money for tuition, Steven took a year off, which became three years, before finally entering the University of Washington.

"What are you majoring in?" John asked. Usually that question seemed patronizing, as if Steven were a child expected to give a prepared answer. But John's attention left Steven wanting to please him so badly that his heart raced.

"I went back for anthropological linguistics. But after taking a few computer classes, I'm switching my major at the end of this quarter."

"Turns out this boy is great with computers," Lisa said.

"Interesting." John's head tipped as he smiled, considering that idea. Steven resisted shifting under the weight of John's regard. Heat bloomed in his belly: John's smile was for him only. "How do you get from, what did you say—anthropological linguistics—to computers?"

"It's not that crazy. I loved Anthropology when I was at SCCC with Lisa, but I was young then—"

"As opposed to now." The lilt in John's tone revealed less than his eyes, which crinkled at the corners in amusement.

Lit up by that intimacy, though the joke was at his expense, Steven laughed. "Yes, as opposed to now, when I'm clearly aged and full of wisdom and experience."

Both Lisa and John laughed with him. Steven went on, boosted by John's interest and Lisa's fondness.

"Everyone loves Sociology or Anthropology when they start college, but only a few people are cut out for academic careers. Which you figure out is your only option if you study that stuff. I've always been good with math and languages, so when there was a computer language class, I signed up just to see."

Steven, excited to find willing listeners, couldn't stop talking about his obsessions once he started. "So far, I love it. It's like linguistics and math had a beautiful baby. The rules are hard and fast. It's satisfying to study a puzzle until it's solved, and yet it's like magic, how a computer language generates into code that runs programs." Steven fidgeted with the seam on his jeans. He wished he'd gotten coffee. His rambling could maybe be stopped if he had a cup to sip to slow him down. "Sorry, I get carried away. I should sign up for a class on how to stop giving impassioned speeches to the uninitiated." He swallowed and sat up straighter in his chair. Discomfited, Steven glanced back to the counter. "I should get coffee."

"I'll come with you. I could use refill myself," John said.

Walking to the counter, Steven was too aware of John's body close behind him. John wasn't much taller than Steven, but he stayed close enough that Steven was able to gauge his height, at least two inches more than Steven's five-eleven. Their shoulders touched lightly as they stopped at the counter. Feeling John's body heat so near was such a distraction that the barista's greeting startled him. Unintentionally, he stepped just a bit away from John.

"Hey," the barista said, smiling when she recognized Steven. "How goes it?"

"Great! I'll be better if I have coffee though." Steven wondered if she thought he and John were together. He warmed at the idea of introducing John to people in a way that indicated John was definitely with him.

She made a serious face. "Luckily I can help you with that. Usual?"

"Yeah. Please."

"And you?" She smiled at John.

"Double espresso." John tapped his fingers on the counter, drawing Steven's attention to how graceful they were: long and

neatly manicured, in opposition to the calluses Steven felt when they shook hands earlier. Steven shivered, imagining that roughness across his bare skin.

“Anything else?”

Jarred back to the present, Steven looked into the pastry case. The barista said, “Oh, we have that one you really liked again. The strawberry gâteau.”

Steven happily abandoned his perusal of the case. “*Le fraisier?* I’ll have that, for sure,” he said, catching John’s expression from the corner of his eye but unable to interpret the question in John’s eyes or the slight smile curling his lips.

Steven felt he was being unusually performative. He was just ordering coffee and a sweet, yet he wanted John to pay attention to the kinds of things Steven liked, in the same way that Steven would be deeply interested in everything his crush chose.

“*Le fraisier.*” John mused as they watched the girl pull it from the case and plate it for Steven.

“Have you ever had it? It’s amazing. Of course, they do it great here. Though I like almost anything strawberry.”

John said something too softly for Steven to hear, but he imagined it was, “Of course you do, *mon petit fraisier.*” Steven wondered if he was flashing back again, like the night he first saw John, when his languages got confused in aural hallucinations of what he hoped to hear.

Before Steven could ask what John had said, the girl slid the plate across the counter. The second barista set down Steven’s coffee and John’s espresso.

“What’s that?” John asked, looking into Steven’s cup.

“Café au lait,” Steven said, once again offering information and hoping John was cataloging it.

“Very European.” John’s eyes twinkled with amusement and that curiously knowing smile again. He reached across Steven to hand cash to the girl, close enough that Steven again smelled the cedar and cut-grass of John’s cologne. Distracted by the heady memory of that scent from their first meeting, Steven didn’t reply quickly enough to the barista.

“All together?” she asked John.

“Yes, please.”

“Oh no,” Steven protested, “I can’t let you do that.”

“Of course you can. Here I am, keeping you from your studies. The least I can do is make sure you’re awake enough to finish them this evening.”

John folded his change and tucked it into the pocket of his jeans before picking up the tiny espresso cup and saucer and Steven’s cake, and heading back to join Lisa.

At the table, John set the cake at Steven’s place and pulled out Steven’s chair. Before Steven could truly appreciate that thoughtful action, Lisa’s eyebrows shot up and her lips pursed in a scarcely suppressed smile. Steven could see that she was getting ready to comment, so he kicked her lightly under the table.

“Ow!”

“Sorry, did I get you as I sat down?” Steven gave Lisa a falsely sympathetic look and then a quick warning glare.

“Sweetie,” she grinned, “I think maybe you’re looking to get something. Oh, but I see you got cake. Maybe that’s enough for now.”

John, inquisitive, glanced between them.

Steven felt the back of his neck heating. As a diversion, he said, “You know, I’m usually good with accents—it’s part of the languages thing. But I can’t place yours. It’s so faint.”

“Ah, you have a good ear. I hope hardly anyone notices anymore.” John settled back against his chair, which again drew attention to the open shirt buttons, where Steven imagined pressing his tongue into the hollow of John’s throat and feeling the pulse that visibly throbbed there. Stomach fluttering, Steven sipped his coffee and tried to focus on John’s words. “I grew up in Belgium and Switzerland, speaking French and Flemish at home. And, of course, English.”

“Why wouldn’t you want anyone to notice?” Steven asked, processing the delightful knowledge that John spoke French as a native language: one impossible thing Steven would never dare hope for.

“I like to think that I can master anything,” John said, his eyes on Steven. “So I despair that after twenty-five years in America I haven’t mastered English well enough to pass unnoticed.”

Steven was fairly certain that John could master anything just by looking at it with those piercing eyes. He shifted in his

seat, thinking again of John's calloused fingers rasping across his bare skin.

"I assume that, after twenty-five years, you figured out that most people think it's attractive," Lisa said. Steven nodded.

"Yes, I've heard that." John smiled.

"*Oh, ça alors! C'est toujours un plaisir pour moi de trouver quelqu'un avec qui parler français.*" Steven pushed aside his lascivious thoughts and expressed happiness at their shared second language.

"*Oui, pour moi aussi.*"

Warmth flared in Steven's core. John's *Français de Belgique* accent differed enough from the Québécois, Algerian, and Parisian accents Steven typically encountered that he didn't catch it until he heard John speak *en Français*.

Steven sat forward, not caring how eager he seemed. "*C'est super le fun, ça! En connais-tu d'autres ici avec qui tu parles français?*"

Steven asked who else John spoke French with. Outside his family, Steven spoke mostly with older people from his parents' social group and the African émigrés he encountered and made friends with at the grocery store.

"*Some friends, my brother. I've been lucky to meet people through work I can talk to.*"

Steven felt a pang of jealousy at not yet being counted among that special group.

John sat forward, his elbow brushing Steven's, obviously impressed in a way that sent Steven soaring, because he'd done something right. "Your French is exceptionally good. Part of your study in linguistics?" John asked in English.

"Steven's mother is French-Canadian," Lisa said.

Steven nodded. "When she married an American, her father begged that her kids be raised bilingual. They sent me to a French-immersion elementary school near Lake Sammamish. Lucky for me. I might not have gotten started with languages like I did if my *Papi* hadn't insisted."

"Do you know many other speakers outside your family?"

"Not enough, though there's a surprising number of Algerians I run across, mostly at stores. But not many of my friends, no." Steven caught the sparkle of Lisa's bracelet out of the corner of his eye. Too excited by the delight of finding this

connection, he had to suppress the urge to keep talking to John in French. It was too rude, leaving Lisa out of the conversation. “Hopefully I can convince Lisa to learn, then we won’t have to whisper secrets anymore. We’ll could talk about people out loud at parties.”

Lisa’s bubbly laughter reminded Steven just how much he loved her. “If you’d said that’s why I should learn, I’d have started when we were still in college together.” She patted Steven’s knee, forgiving him for kicking her earlier.

“So, Steven, are you at U-Dub now?” John asked. “Or elsewhere?”

“Yep. U-Dub.”

“I also went there, but I wasn’t nearly as enthusiastic about my studies as you seem to be. If you’re always this eager to please, your professors must find you a joy to have in class.”

Steven flushed in confusion, unsure whether John was complimenting him or teasing him for being so excited about school.

“I can’t imagine you as a party boy in college,” Lisa said to John, which saved Steven from humiliatingly blurting that he’d be glad to please John. It wasn’t just the man’s attractive face and graceful movements. Usually when Steven talked about school, people listened only to be polite, but John watched with an intensity that made Steven feel respected, truly heard. In the half hour they’d been acquainted, Steven longed to prove he was worth this man’s time. Which was likely why John saw him as eager to please.

“Ah, I wouldn’t say I was a party boy. I wasn’t in a fraternity. I had more than enough of that kind of thing in boarding school.” John sipped his espresso and looked thoughtfully at the Art Nouveau mural above Lisa’s head for a second. The idea of a young John in an all-boys boarding school was too much for Steven at the moment. He filed the information away to consider later. Like maybe in the shower.

“Of course,” John continued, “it was the late sixties, early seventies. There was partying, just not like today’s keg parties.”

Steven calculated quickly: late sixties meant his deduction about John being in his late thirties or early forties was accurate.

“I guess things were much more political then, too?” Steven asked, determined to push for the most information about John he could gain in the little time they might have.

“It’s Seattle. Isn’t everything always political?” Lisa asked.

John laughed. “Yes, I suppose it was. It was hard to avoid in the circles where I hung out. Still, I’d have been better off paying more attention to school work, given the opportunity I had.”

“Doesn’t seem to have affected your success,” Lisa said. Steven nodded, although he was only guessing that John was successful. Unsuccessful people didn’t have John’s confidence and grace.

“I floated through school,” John said, “studying things that wouldn’t get me a job because I knew I’d have one with my father’s company. I just imagined that I’d have a natural aptitude for business.”

“And you didn’t?” Steven asked. He leaned in to hear the answer, then aware he was hanging in John’s space. He sat back, hoping to appear casual. Not letting Lisa catch his eye.

“I did, as it turns out. But my parents died a few years after I graduated. I wish I’d spent more time with my father to learn the business. I wish I’d learned something in school that he thought was useful.” The pain of his loss flickered in John’s eyes. He smiled sadly, as if apologizing to Steven for that answer.

Steven’s stomach dropped. “I’m really sorry.” He wanted to touch John to offer comfort, however inadequate.

“That’s terrible, John. I am so sorry,” Lisa said, her hand twitching on the tabletop, as if she too wanted to reach out.

John shook his head, as if releasing the sadness, sending it away. “It’s been a long time. Though I do wish I’d listened to him more while he was alive. Not only to learn business, but just to learn about him. I suppose I still have daddy issues. But who doesn’t?”

“Isn’t that the truth,” Lisa agreed.

“I don’t think I do,” Steven said at the same time.

John’s inquisitive blue gaze caught Steven. “No?”

Lisa said, “Actually, that’s true. He has weirdly normal parents.”

Steven felt a bit awkward that, even after six years in the city, he still carried a suburban taint. Yet he answered, to allow John to see who he really was. “My dad is kind and loves me. He’s interested in my life, but not so much that he’s invasive.”

“I didn’t know there were families like that.” John sat back, his brow wrinkling in contemplation.

“Ah well, not all American suburbs are pits of secret horrors. I do have issues with my mom. She loves me and means well, but my coming out was hard for her. She’s not over it nine years later.” Steven shrugged. “But overall, my family is pretty normal.”

A smile lit John’s face, his eyes glittering and crinkling at the corners. “Surely something must be wrong with you. You can’t be well adjusted, smart, ambitious, and self-assured. That wouldn’t be fair to everyone else.”

“I’m red-haired, left-handed, and gay. If that doesn’t make me the devil’s own child, then I’ve been living my life all wrong,” Steven replied, a cocky smile on his lips.

The pure mirth in John’s laughter cracked open Steven’s heart. Then John’s focused smile shone on him again. “I’m sure you do very well at leading others into temptation when you put your mind to it, without having to claim devilish descent. Perhaps you need an angel on your shoulder to keep you in check.”

Steven’s body responded with a small shudder. John’s voice had dropped slightly, and that growl went straight to Steven’s groin.

“I’m pretty humble, usually.” Steven fumbled, not sure whether he was being chastised or teased.

Lisa watched with rapt attention, as if this show was purely for her entertainment. Steven would never live down his attempts to flirt with John while she watched.

John’s voice smoothed out, his tone turned amicable. “I’m convinced you have no reason to be humble. You certainly aren’t what I expected, Steven.” John lifted his hand as if he might reach to touch Steven’s arm. Steven held his breath, unsure whether he could keep his composure if John touched him. But then John twisted his arm back to look at his watch. “I wish I could spend the evening talking with the two of you, but I do need to go. Can’t keep people waiting.” He put his hand

out to Steven and spoke in French, “Steven, *it was a pleasure to meet you. Let the better angels of your nature prevail.*”

“*Merci, John. I’ll try to be good.*” Steven blushed, feeling caught out. “It was nice talking with you.” He switched to English, conscious of leaving Lisa out. The scratch of John’s hand against his, together with their renewed language connection, left Steven lightheaded. He sipped at his coffee while butterflies tried to beat their way out of his stomach.

“Lisa,” John said, putting his hand out to her. “I won’t make you wait for an answer. If you’re still interested, I’d love to have you. Call you in the morning to discuss the details?”

“Oh wonderful. Thank you, John,” Lisa’s incandescent smile, whatever it was about, made Steven even happier as he watched her shake John’s hand.

Steven slumped in his chair, resenting that the steamy windows prevented seeing more of John after he walked out the door.

4. Lint on Velcro

“WHAT WAS THAT LAST BIT about? And how do you know the most handsome man who ever lived?” Steven offered his most winning smile.

Lisa’s gaze was soft and knowing. “That was an informal second job interview. I’m going to work for him. That last bit was him being kind and not making me wait to hear about the job.”

“Oh rad! You’ve been needing a better job forever. I’m so excited for you!” The charge Steven got from his conversation with John sparked into gleeful happiness. Everyone got something good today. And Lisa working for John meant Steven would see him again. Soon.

“Thanks, sweetie. I hope it works out.”

“So—” Steven steepled his fingers under his chin, trying to look grave and serious. “Do you believe in love at first sight?”

Caught off guard, Lisa laughed. “Why? Did you fall in love with John when you first saw him? Or did you wait until you heard him speak French?”

“What? No. Ridiculous,” Steven said, disdaining the idea. “I’m wondering if he fell in love with me. At first sight.” Laughter bubbled in his chest while he tried to look as innocent as possible.

“Sweetie,” Lisa said, laughing, “everyone who knows you loves you at least a little. So if he doesn’t now, I’m sure he will.”

“Okay, but seriously, do you think he was flirting with me? Like, just a little? I couldn’t tell for sure, but some of the things he said—well, I could read more into them if I wanted too.” Steven leaned on the table, chin in hand, maintaining his solemn expression. Though he seriously wanted to see John again.

“I don’t know, but you were certainly doing your level best to flirt with him. Not sure how effective it was,” Lisa said. Steven made a face, wrinkling his nose at her. Thoughtful, she went on. “I don’t think he dates younger guys anymore.”

“Anymore?”

“Yes.”

“So he has dated younger guys before?”

“I don’t know him well enough to say what he does in his personal life. It’s secondhand information. Sorry.”

“You’re not helpful. Anyway, he bought me cake.” Steven looked at the nearly untouched piece of *fraisier* in front of him. He picked up his fork, glad to have this sweet bit of John left. “That has to mean something, right?”

“He can certainly afford the cake,” she said, taking Steven’s other hand. “Given the sparkle in your eye, I probably shouldn’t tell you that he’s fabulously rich, huh? If you were with him, you’d never have to work.” Lisa arched an eyebrow suggestively, in the spirit of fantasizing about imaginary crushes.

“Handsome and a sweet sugar daddy?” Steven dropped his fork to the table and fluttered his hand to his chest. “Be still my heart! Ha. Really though, I just want to know how he kisses. God, did you see his mouth? And how strong his hands are? I’d like him use those hands to—”

“Please stop right there before we both regret where you’re going with this.” Laughing, Lisa waved a hand to cut him off.

“So what kind of lover do you think he is? He seems so nice. Like he’s kind to animals and small children, right? But maybe a little kinky in bed?”

Her face pinched with distaste. “You really are the devil’s child. I do not want to know how he is in bed. Do not want to think about it, especially if he’s going to be my boss.”

“Okay, we don’t have to talk about his bedroom possibilities. But he’s really great, isn’t he? I could stand to have a really nice boyfriend.” Steven took a bite of his cake, savoring its sweetness.

“I do hope you find someone nice, sweetie.” Lisa squeezed Steven’s hand, then picked up her coffee cup. “You deserve good things in your life.”

Steven set his fork back on his plate. “What’s not good in my life? I’m back in school, so you can’t harass me about that anymore. What’s left that’s so terrible?”

“Adrian.”

“What’s wrong with Adrian?” He knew that Lisa hadn’t liked Adrian since the beginning, but she usually just grimaced faintly at his name and let it go.

“I’m sure that his mother asks herself that every day.”

“Don’t be mean, Lisa. Adrian is my closest friend.”

“And I’m sorry for that, Steven. You’re so nice, and he’s a bitchy drama-queen who hates everyone.”

“No, he doesn’t.”

Steven’s post-John euphoria crumbled as he chafed at the insult to Adrian, feeling both scolded and protective. Lisa couldn’t see that her assessment of Adrian was wrong.

“Oh sure, he likes *you*—but only because you follow him around like his shadow. Adrian will never be there for you. I wish you could find someone who appreciates you. But Adrian will always come between you and anyone who’s interested in you. He needs you to fluff his ego, so he can’t let you get away. But the worst is that he barely ever drops you a scrap of affection.”

“Wow, don’t hold back.” Steven sipped his coffee casually. He looked away, not wanting Lisa to see how much her judgment hurt.

“I’m sorry, sweetie. I don’t like to see you treated badly. But it’s as if you don’t even see what Adrian does.” She reached for Steven’s hand again, and he let her pull it into her lap.

“You don’t even know him, Leese.”

“No, but I know you. And I want more for you.” She leaned forward to brush her other hand along his jaw. “Your face *is* so pretty that people will judge you for it. You’re so much more than some scene queen, swanning around with Adrian like Snow White and Rose Red.” She shook her head when Steven smiled at the description. “It isn’t good. You look like beautiful, flashy club kids. All surface and no substance. It leaves a negative impression for a lot of people who don’t run in the circles you do. I want people to think more of you.”

Steven delayed speaking. Lisa would never understand, because she’d never seen Adrian the way Steven had, curled up

on Steven like a cat, crying that no one loved him, that no one ever wanted anything real from him, that he couldn't trust anyone but Steven. Sure, they were coming down off a weekend of opium and cocaine, and Steven *didn't* actually understand Adrian, but he did care. Steven didn't know how to make Lisa understand that if he wasn't there, then Adrian really would have no one.

Still, Lisa's comment about people seeing him as shallow was unbearable, especially if that was what John meant when he said Steven was different than he'd expected. He spoke up, bravely.

"I don't think John saw me that way."

"Sweetie, guys like John already have everything. They want something more than another pretty object in their collection. Even I can see how gorgeous John is. You think men aren't always throwing themselves at him? He could collect twenty twinkles just walking from here to his house. They stick to him like lint on Velcro, but he always brushes them off. What makes you different? What makes you better? That's what you have to prove if you want him."

"Thanks," he said, coldly. "I'll take that into consideration the next time I'm swanning around."

The dig had hurt. Steven liked having a pretty face, liked that it drew other pretty boys to him, but Lisa knew he wanted to be more. He'd complained to her after every breakup that the last boyfriend didn't appreciate Steven's depth, didn't love the deeper side of him, didn't understand his intellect or his aspirations. She was digging into that wound while refusing to acknowledge that his friendship with Adrian had rewards—that someone besides Lisa saw all the pieces that made Steven who he was, the parts he shared only with the people he trusted most. It was an old fight that Steven was tired of. He was glad to let it go when Lisa reached out to him.

"Sorry. I don't want to upset you. I want good things for you. I just don't know how to help you get them, given the way your life is now." Lisa kissed Steven's hand in apology, and then released it.

"It's fine. No big deal," Steven said, his light tone masking how he felt. "But I came here to do homework, so I should get to it. Are you staying?"

“As fun as it sounds to watch you do homework, I have a date.”

“Oooh, who’s the lucky girl?” Steven asked, glad of the subject change.

“Actually, I don’t know. Shane and Bash, the friends who introduced me to John, invited me for dinner to decompress after the interview. Shane is always trying to set me up with someone. At least I’ve figured it out now, so I show up looking nice.”

Steven said, “You couldn’t look any nicer than you do right now. If she doesn’t fall in love with you immediately, then something is wrong with her. I can’t wait to hear about it. And about your new job. John is so lucky to have hired you. He’d better treat you well.”

Lisa rose to leave. She kissed the top of Steven’s head and whispered, “Be good.”

Steven pulled out his notebook and *Mathematical Foundations of Computer Science* textbook. He’d been looking forward to today’s chapter, but now he couldn’t focus. Bad feelings lingered from the conversation with Lisa. He shoved them aside, thinking instead of John’s voice as it dropped into a near growl, of John’s hands and how they might feel on him, of the warmth that had spread through Steven’s belly every time John smiled at him.

Completely lost in thoughts of John, Steven ate the rest of the delicious cake John had bought him. Surely that was flirtation and not just taking pity on a poor college student?

5.

Exactly Like It Is

“THERE YOU ARE,” ADRIAN SAID. He slipped into a nearby chair, startling Steven from his daydreams.

“Hey.”

“Got tired of waiting, so I came to find you. Let’s go out.”

“I can’t, Ade. I need to study.” Steven waved his hands over his books. “I have both finals and work tomorrow.” He felt defensive at Adrian’s arrival after Lisa’s harsh words, ashamed that he hadn’t done more to defend his friend.

“Whatever. You’re such a grandma since you went back to school.” Adrian scrunched his nose up at the face Steven made. “Well, you are. And you’re always gone. I miss you. Can’t you at least do homework at home so I can see you?”

Adrian’s need for Steven’s attention was limitless, though uneven. They could go for days barely speaking more than a greeting, each comfortable in their separate worlds. But when Adrian’s razor-sharp needs turned, they spent entire days together, never apart for more than an hour. Sometimes Steven was Adrian’s audience, other times they just sat close, touching lightly as they both read. When Adrian wanted full contact, it was useless to argue that he distracted Steven from his work. But no one ever needed anything from Steven in the way Adrian needed his attention, so Steven gave it. Gladly.

“So then,” Adrian continued narrating his day as they headed down Bellevue Avenue back to their apartment, “she pulled down another one. Pink satin. Satin! And I was like, ‘Well, girl, you can’t wear pink with your coloring and no one, no one, who is cool is wearing satin to prom,’ and I thought for a second she’d cry. I wasn’t even being mean or anything, I was trying to help—”

Steven cut in, since the story would go on long after they got home. “Wait, sorry, but do we have dinner at home? Before we head down the hill?”

“Oh! I checked and if we get meat, you can make spaghetti, okay?”

That Steven would cook was given. Adrian’s cooking, whether accidental or on purpose, never once proved to be edible. Steven nodded his assent, so they turned toward the Broadway QFC grocery store before home.

As if the interruption never happened, Adrian continued. “So I’m trying to help and she finally gets it. It was so great. I finally sent her off with a short-sleeved deep turquoise velvet skater dress. You know: little flared skirt and all. And I convinced her to wear it to prom with thigh-highs and her 20-hole Docs. Like what is prom even for if you aren’t going to look like yourself? And I’m sure her pictures will be totally dated in like five years, but who cares? She’ll remember 1991 exactly like it is, exactly like she was.”

“Sounds like a good day.”

“It was. You know, I thought this job would suck. There’s only like four things in that shop I’d wear. I’m fabulous, but I’m no drag queen, so prom dresses are pretty much right out, but I feel like maybe I’ll actually do some good. It could be my calling, you know, hand holding the poor, frumpy masses and sending them back out into the world dressed a little better than I found them.”

Steven laughed and squeezed Adrian’s hand affectionately. A staggering amount of thought and detail went into Adrian’s outfits, and he often spent as much time fussing over Steven, so Steven knew exactly what the teen girls in the shop had been through that day. Yet when Adrian was on and flattering you, you definitely felt like royalty. So maybe that *was* Adrian’s calling.

“I bet she felt great when she left,” Steven replied as they toured the meat aisle at QFC. “What do you want?”

“Something better than hamburger. Something that tastes good.”

Steven chose some hot Italian sausage. Different from what he usually cooked. Adrian would eat anything, but he’d be happier about it if he thought it was fancier. That was the

secret to pleasing Adrian in any situation: tell him what he got was better than what most people had.

It was a pleasant, normal evening for their household. Their other roommate, Ryan Ikeda, wasn't home. They cooked, ate, and watched TV while Steven studied, until Adrian decided it was time to get dressed and go out. He didn't argue when Steven declined. An ordinary end to a day that had been fractured into pieces, normalcy crunched against the argument with Lisa and the elation of meeting John.

While chatting through Adrian's endless pre-club outfit changes, checking for cues as to whether he was supposed to reject or approve each one, Steven didn't say anything important. They discussed teal glitter versus silver, but Steven never mentioned the rasp of John's calluses against Steven's palm when they shook. He didn't say how John's voice echoed that same grit and strength.

After Adrian left, Steven went to bed. Sleepless, he pulled the pillow around his head to block out the world. Remembering John's voice and touch, Steven tried to shut out other thoughts. He'd kept John a secret from Adrian, knowing that neither would appeal to the other, Adrian surely too flighty for John. But more than that, Steven couldn't be sure of Adrian's reaction. He wanted his best friend to be happy for him, but he feared the possible truth in what Lisa said earlier. That Adrian might try to keep Steven from John was too awful to contemplate.



This book is available at Amazon.com, Smashwords.com, iTunes.com, barnesandnoble.com, and other retailers. Please visit the author's website for full list of retailers: <http://flickerjax.com>

About the Author

A Seattle native now living in the southern American hinterlands, Ajax Bell likes pretty boys, beautiful women, and good jokes. She believes the best things in life are loud music and bourbon. No matter what the task, she always has the right pair of shoes. She's never been a sea captain, but a background in library sciences and a lifetime of pencil pushing together have left her with a rich fantasy life and a compulsive need to write it down. She hopes one day to own a genetically altered hippopotamus the size of a small dog.

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