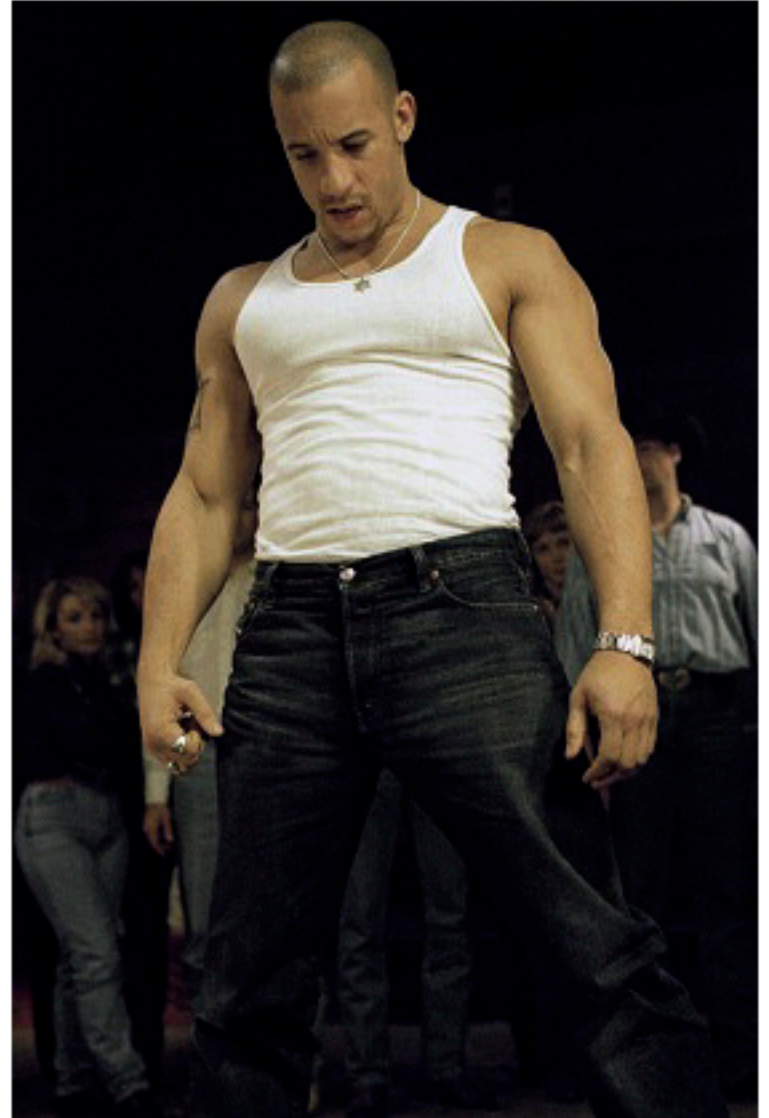


Man, Black or White

Blackbird



Lance
from Varsity Blues - Paul Walker



Taylor
from Knockaround Guys - Vin Diesel

Man, Black or White
Blackbird

Lance liked the bar because it was different and new, and even for him, studying was sometimes simply tedious, especially with his work load. He'd tried lots of places, including the library, the cafeteria, and coffee shops, but he never felt right in any of them. Looking around, he sighed in satisfaction. Not another student in sight. Just adults. Slightly tipsy adults, true, and from the back room there was some yelling in reaction to the game on the TV, but that sounded a whole lot better than the relentless silence of his house, or the imposed silence of the library. Life would be easier if he didn't keep wanting to get away from his peers, but it didn't take much before they irritated him. Everything they did reminded him of the guys back home, and he didn't have the extra energy to waste on stupidity. Not with a calculus test next week, his defensive plays due before this week's game, and all the practices on his schedule. He didn't know why he felt relaxed at the bar, but he wasn't going to question something that worked. Once he started studying, the rhythms of quiet conversations, the murmur of the sports on TV, and the smooth clatter of ice being scooped into glasses buffered him from any other thoughts.

He had found the bar when a study buddy arranged to meet him there then stood him up. Instead of heading home with all his books, he stopped in for a beer, tucking himself into the chair at the deserted end of the bar, amid discarded newspapers and fliers for bartending school and discount stores. This end of the bar butted up against the windows at the front side of the building, and clean air blew into the bar above his head, pushing most of the smoke away from him. Having a beer didn't mean he could avoid studying, so he opened his textbook as surreptitiously as he could. Toward the end of the evening, he'd gotten a friendly wink from the bartender, making him feel comfortable enough to bring books and a notebook deliberately the next night the silence of his house felt like a heat wave.

It wasn't hard to figure out after a couple visits that the front bar was populated by the neighborhood regulars. He'd read about bars in England – they were called locals, and it was where everyone socialized after work, even kids and dogs were allowed in. He had always wanted to have a local after he read about them, and the front room kind of felt like that. The back room had a big-screen TV, always on a sports channel, and the room was large enough to double as a dance bar on weekend nights. Most of the guys hung out there, so the front room was quiet enough to study in. Most people who came in worked in the industrial part of town, but the bar was on a major thoroughfare, mixing the crowd. He was glad the owner was smart enough to have a bouncer guarding the door every night.

The first time Lance came in, he didn't know there was a bouncer. He'd been at the bar for a while, had just started reading his book, when a big guy sauntered over to the chair next to the front door. Lance didn't let himself stare, but he was highly impressive. He was bald, he had more muscles than an offensive lineman, but he wasn't any football player; those muscles were developed for precision. And he was strangely quiet; he took everyone's measure thoroughly but quickly. And the strangest thing was that he never got tense – he was always calm and confident, but not cocky. The regulars seemed to like him, they greeted him, even asking how he was. He responded with a nod or a polite hello, but only occasionally used anyone's name. Except for this, he hardly said anything. And when he did, his voice was so low you could hardly hear him. His voice fit his image though - he had the thug look down perfectly – tight tank top covered by a long sleeve shirt, jeans, shit-kicking boots. At first, when Lance felt like he might get kicked out for studying, he was a little worried about the guy, but that didn't last long. He couldn't hide when he was sitting so close to the door, and the guy didn't even notice him. Lance noticed the bouncer's calm certainty, though, and for some reason it relaxed him so he was able to easily slide into studying.

It was hard to ignore the bouncer when he needed to take care of business. He'd take off his long sleeved shirt, and lay it on the chair. If the sight of all those muscles coming toward a guy didn't

calm him fast, the bouncer would growl something in the guy's ear, and the job would be done. So far Lance hadn't seen him do much more. Rough job.

Lance noticed the single tattoo one night when the bouncer took a drink of water before putting his shirt back on. It wasn't something Lance would have expected - it was a huge Jewish star, and he wore the same star on a chain around his neck, too. The tattoo flowed half way around the muscles of his right arm, and was the only thing keeping him from looking like a mob cliché.

His tall bar chair and the small, high table next to it were only a couple steps away from where Lance was perched at the bar. The few times Lance had been there, the bouncer mostly greeted patrons, read the paper, stepped outside for a smoke, patrolled through the bar a few times during the evening, sometimes stopping to watch the game for a few minutes, and perked up only when there was any sort of loud noise or scuffle sounds. He never talked to Lance, but he thought he'd felt the man watching him more than once, but he felt no hostility. After he studied at the bar a few times, he got so much accomplished that he made it his regular evening study place.

One night when he was dragging last week's play sheets out of his knapsack while balancing this weekend's sheets and his notes on the bar and trying not to spill his coke, the sheets started to slide over the edge of the bar. He groaned, thinking of the time it would take him to put them back in order, but if he tried to catch them, he'd tip over his chair. A large hand grabbed the stack of sheets before they slipped off the bar, while another hand wrapped around his upper arm, steadying him before he could launch off his stool. Completely surprised, he looked up into the bouncer's face, and thought a small smile might be trying to tug loose from his serious face.

He swallowed, then found his voice. "Thanks, man. Would have been sad if these got out of order."

The bouncer dipped his head. "No problem." Pausing for a moment, he added, "I'm Taylor."

Taylor's rumbling voice seemed to shake the bar. "Lance. Nice to meet you." He stuck out his hand.

Taylor took his hand into a firm grip, but didn't do the painful squeeze that Lance might have expected. "So, Lance, what are you working on tonight?"

"Ah, I'm working on the plays for this week's game."

Taylor tilted his head, questioning.

"Oh, sorry. Football." He continued at the sight of Taylor's raised eyebrows. "I'm kind of an assistant coach at the college."

"Kind of?"

"Well, I'm also a student."

"No kidding. Sounds like you got your work cut out for you. What year're you in?"

"Senior. Two more semesters."

"Then you're tossed into the world. You gonna coach, or do you play too?"

"I'm hoping to coach. I still love the game, and I'd like to be a good coach. Someone who's there for his team." The words poured out of him like he had no control, but he managed to stop the babbling.

Taylor looked interested, "For his players..."

Exactly. Lance nodded and Taylor continued. "You don't want to play?"

Lance's stomach dropped. Aw, hell. "I used to. First string quarterback and team captain until I destroyed my knee."

"Sorry."

"Nah – old issue."

"But? Sounds like there's more."

Lance hadn't told anyone outside of football about Kilmer. "Long, boring story."

"Wouldn't ask if I didn't want to know."

Huh. Lance believed him, and something in his stomach really wanted him to tell him about it. "Our old coach was a real bastard. After I fucked up my knee, I found out it was all scar tissue - I shouldn't have been playing for a long time before that, and he knew it. He didn't care who got hurt, as long as we got him his trophies." He shook his head. "I guess I knew it was wrong, what he did to us, but the only bad thing people said about him was that he was a tough bastard, and they said it like it was a good thing." Taylor's eyebrows raised. "Thing you gotta know is that everyone in my hometown is crazy about football, and I mean crazy as in nuts, and Kilmer won games, so he could do no wrong. I bought the line like everyone else: if your daddy played, you play. No one has a choice. My dad even kept back my brother a year so he'd be bigger for football."

Taylor's shook his head but looked at Lance steadily. "Pressure from everyone."

Lance nodded. "Kids go along with it when they're little cause they don't know any better, and it starts out fun. When they get to high school, they're too scared to say anything, and it hasn't been fun for a long time. Sure, it feels good to win, but the win tastes sour soon enough. Our folks didn't stop Kilmer cause he was their coach, and they were scared shitless by him. We didn't even know there was a choice."

Taylor nodded, thinking. "Something good came from it, though, right? You're going to be a better coach, take care of the kids, right?"

Lance smiled. "I'm gonna try." The warmth from Taylor's smiling eyes lasted until he was called away to visit someone getting overly involved in the game.

One thing you could count on –the fucking strange shit life threw at you when you weren't looking. And each time you had to decide how to play it: leave and go back to the way you always had been, see if the new rules sucked but could be worked, or try to change the whole fucking thing. Later, if it was all worth the sacrifice, you were one lucky bastard.

He hadn't felt balanced since they had arrived in Florida. The leaving went well enough, both he and Matty knew it was their one opportunity, and both were desperate to take it. Deciding where to land wasn't hard - they agreed they wanted someplace warm, not too small or too large, with a good chance of jobs, so a student town made sense, but it made him realize just how connected he'd been to Brooklyn. The umbilical cord was still attached, and he didn't know if he possessed a knife cold enough to cut it.

He got a job right away, and he liked how the weather made life more relaxed. People talked more here, even when they didn't know you. They'd say hello, or thanks, or how are you, even when they didn't need to. Anywhere he went in New York, even the places he'd grown up, he knew to stay quiet. New York didn't come with in-betweens. There was loud: loaded trucks bouncing over potholes; car horns and alarms at 3AM; a gaggle of Puerto Rican girls talking a mile a minute at the same time. Or there was the quiet of warning or obeying. Frequently it sucked, but you knew where you stood. Down here, where there were flowers everywhere in every color, all smelling great, and people wore bright clothes, you felt a freedom just walking in the warm air, but he couldn't believe it was real. For him, though, it still was like being a foreign country, and he didn't have a dictionary. So he'd stayed an outsider, this time not only by choice.

In Brooklyn, he was noticed, but people knew to leave him alone. Here, people stared. He didn't care what people thought about him, but the staring got old. It pretty much decided him against socializing, even if he were to find someone interesting. Yet he had more energy here, that before he'd used doing business and in simply staying alive.

He joined a gym to lift and hit the bag, and he jogged outside because the weather was so nice. He was tempted to find a boxing gym, but he hated all their rules and shit. In the past, training had consumed his off time as well as his work life, but maybe he'd had enough of fighting for one lifetime, at least when he wasn't working. He didn't think he could ever give it up completely. Maybe he needed something new to do in his spare time, besides work out.

At his safe distance from Brooklyn, he saw that his narrow focus on coping with what had been demanded of him had given him the strength to persevere. He'd never expected ~~that~~ his life would ~~to~~ change; he was sure he'd die before he needed a retirement plan. Now he had the chance for a new life, to let things inside loose that he'd had to smother to stay alive, and he was lost.

His solitude was the opposite of how Matty handled the change. Matty'd started dating like crazy as soon as they'd landed. Taylor had little interest in dating, especially when women looked at him either with fear or as an exotic toy. He stayed away from any place he might be tempted with anything else. When Matty didn't answer his phone, he told himself it was normal for him to get adjusted slowly, and that he'd never had any trouble being alone before.

He and Matty hung out here and there when Matty wasn't on a date and Taylor wasn't working. It was a relief that even out of Brooklyn they still felt easy with each other. Then Matty started getting serious about Polly. Taylor was happy for him, of course. But the peace he'd felt at being alone unraveled as his only friend got more involved with someone else. New thoughts clamored inside him, like did he want to work as a bouncer for the rest of his life? What would he do if he couldn't rely on his body anymore? Was watching TV and working out going to be enough for him forever, when it was already boring the shit out of him? Even if he wanted to change, would he be able to? He'd been a success in his old world, but here? The rules were all different.

Then one night he was working like usual, he turns around, and in front of him is a fucking angel. His stomach dropped to his knees, and he realized he'd got it all wrong - again. That night in his quiet bed, he went through the pros and cons from the perspective of his new life. If everything else in his life changed, maybe this could change, too. Maybe it was habit, but he couldn't help believe that thinking about that boy like that was stupid. It made everything unnecessarily complex and dangerous, even if he couldn't name the danger.

Then there was the part about the boy looking straight as an arrow, and even if he wasn't, why should he be interested in Taylor? It was much more likely he'd be as freaked out by him as everyone else down here was. It didn't even matter cause the kid probably got lost on the way to a class, and he'd never see him again. But no matter how many times on the way to work he told himself he was an idiot, the image of that beautiful boy would not be thrown out of his head. The

night Taylor walked in to the vision of him at the bar draped over his books, his blond head propped on his hand, Taylor's knees went watery. He had a long talk with himself that night in bed after taking care of business a second time, and he called bullshit on himself. He'd never lied to himself before, and he wasn't starting now. If he wanted to change, he had to look at things the way they really were. The first thing he needed to be honest about was that he wanted this boy, and the second was that this had been a long time coming.

At least his timing wasn't disastrous – this could have been a real problem if had happened in Brooklyn. He'd had moments of interest through the years, but nothing he couldn't shrug off. This boy affected him more than anyone else had – back there, this distraction could have got him killed. But he wasn't in Brooklyn, he was here in Normal, Florida, a real citizen and still alive, so what the fuck did he have to lose?

There was one thing, and it was something he didn't want to think about: Matty. With the move and his engagement, Matty was growing less connected to Taylor. Their bond was as strong as it gets between friends - Matty was the only person Taylor said important things to, but you never knew when something like this came up, how anyone would react. Even if he didn't reject Taylor, there was just so much beating any friendship could take.

The first time Taylor talked to the boy, he was sure the boy would ignore him – southern college boy this one, why would he spend time on a goon? But he'd been surprised that the boy not only talked to him, but gave him a real smile whenever he came by. And Taylor admitted he came by to talk to the boy – Lance – as often as he could. He'd never laid eyes on anyone as pretty, and he was smart, too, and was a good person. True, he was still young and idealistic, but that was part of his appeal.

In Brooklyn, Taylor had never touched anyone innocent – if *he* had to be dirty, he wouldn't contaminate anyone clean. Not that the girls he slept with were whores, but they'd been around and knew the score. Now that he was permanently out of that life, he felt some of the dirt slide off. To get completely clean, he'd probably have to become a priest, but at least he wasn't getting dirtier, allowing him to rethink his policies. He'd have to be careful, make sure he didn't stain the boy – he'd have to be the best person he could be around him. Because he didn't want to pretend he wasn't interested, and he didn't think he could stop himself from letting himself try for this golden ring.

One Tuesday Lance came in a little earlier than usual, surprised at the almost empty bar. A man came up front from the sports bar, and ordered a whisky. He and Dave, the bartender, started chatting. Normally this wasn't a distraction for Lance, but the man's accent was kind of funny - it was almost southern, but not. Soon Taylor strolled over to the bar and joined the conversation. When Dave asked about his accent, the man, Mike, said was from Maine. He explained that the Maine and the southern accents were offshoots of the same original accent. They teased Taylor about his accent and Lance gave up pretending to study. Mike told them a little about Maine, how beautiful the coastline is, but also how harsh.

When he paused, Taylor looked over at Lance, and said, "I don't know where he's from, but I don't think Lance is a local either."

His teasing tone was unexpected, and it made Lance smile. "Nah, I'm a good ol' boy from Texas."

"What's the biggest difference between Tallahassee and Texas?" Taylor asked him.

"Ah, probably the flowers and stuff here. It's all flat and bare, around West Canaan, anyway."

Mike nodded and said he moved for the weather, and they all looked at Lance's books and notebooks expectantly. "Florida State."

Then Dave asked Taylor what it was like to move from Brooklyn.

Before he spoke, Taylor smiled and dragged his hand over his head. "I'll tell ya, things are so different there, it's like a different country. When I got here, it was strange to drive all over to get something. In New York, people stick to their own neighborhoods, cause they walk and take the bus or subway. In Brooklyn it's not so bad, but in the City, to park your car - it costs almost as much as your rent."

He nodded at their surprised faces. "But you know what was the strangest thing – the supermarkets. The first one I went into down here was so fucking huge, I couldn't believe it. I never saw shopping carts so big. In Brooklyn, the stores are, like, maybe one quarter the size, and the shelves are packed all the way up to the ceiling, and you don't get all the variety you can get here. Sometimes you buy something, and you want to get it again, but the store don't carry it no more because they brought in a different brand, and they can't fit both of em. The aisles are so narrow, you can hardly get two carts to pass, and the carts are these tiny things, that hardly hold anything. 'Course that's okay, cause you can't buy more than you can carry on your walk home. Oh, and the food – the vegetables are all wilted and there's just a few of everything, like there'll be two crappy heads of that round lettuce, and maybe a cucumber, but that's all. It's nothin' like here, where the fruits and vegetables taste great, and everything looks like it was all picked that morning."

They all shook their heads, and Mike and Dave started talking about the how much driving they did since they moved there. Taylor swiveled in his seat and Lance found himself talking only to Taylor, thinking about the affection in Taylor's voice, that he didn't think he had when he thought about West Canaan.

"Do you miss Brooklyn?"

Taylor looked at him as though debating how much to say, but nodded. "It's the only place I ever lived. It's so different down here. When we came down, I guess I was thinking Tallahassee would be more like Miami, with ex-New Yorkers, different nationalities. Up here, I'm still out of place."

We? "Doesn't sound like you've been here very long, though. Maybe you'll like it more with time."

Taylor shrugged. "Could be. It's got its good points. The weather's a lot better. Food's better." Lance smiled. "And it's a hell of a lot cleaner and prettier."

Lance nodded, not sure if Taylor was still talking only about Tallahassee. He was used to being sneered at for being pretty by people who didn't know or care who he was on the football field. This felt different, but he wasn't sure how to react or read that steady gaze.

"It's a lot nicer here than in Texas. The flowers and stuff are real pretty. Texas is mostly dirt. And oil wells."

Taylor nodded and gave him another look he couldn't read, and went back to his chair by the door, after saying he didn't want to keep him from studying.

A couple nights later, Lance felt Taylor watching him most of the evening. After a couple hours, Taylor came over to him, tentatively looking at his play sheets. Lance needed a break, so he looked up and smiled in what he hoped would encourage Taylor to stop for a while.

"You mind if I ask you about this?"

"Shoot."

"So what are they then?"

He smiled, and Lance laughed. "They're play sheets. I watch tapes of games to research the plays the other teams' made in other games, write out their plays and then figure out what strategies, offensive and defensive, we should use depending on who is playing on both teams."

"That's a lot of research. And all for a game, huh?"

"Well, there's a lot of money in college football, not just betting, but players' careers, coaches' jobs, TV advertising, all that stuff."

Taylor nodded. "Yeah. But about what you told me before - when you got something so wrapped up in the result, you gotta make sacrifices. That something you want to do?" He must have caught an expression on Lance's face, because he quickly added, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't've asked that."

"No, it's an honest question. I don't like that aspect of the game, and I'd like to be there to make those sacrifices as minimal as possible. I love the game, but I don't get hyped up about it like a lot of guys. It's easier to keep my perspective when I see other people make fools of themselves. It's like when you're the one who's driving, you stay sober and watch out for the guys who are drinking. I think I'm always gonna be watching for other Kilmers."

"Well, then, that's good. Doing what's most important to you."

"You're right, though - it's hard because eventually it gets personal - students worried about their future, and coaches worried about their jobs. Some go overboard."

"There's more than one coach?"

"Yeah. There's one head coach at the school for each sport, and under the head football coach there are coordinators for the playing positions: quarterback, defense, offence." At Taylor's puzzled expression, he continued, "They're position coaches but they're also called coordinators. Anyway, each one of them has a whole coaching staff under them. There are even more coaches on the pro level."

"Huh. So where do you fit in?"

"Well, I'm the only student who's in training specifically to be a coach - it's an unusual thing to do. When my knee got wrecked, I almost lost my football scholarship, but because I was all-state, we persuaded the college to shift me over to coaching. I was lucky. So I'm kind of like an intern. I do a lot of hauling equipment and I help out at practices. Some coaches let me do one on one work with the players, and I attend meetings. I take courses in sports management and coaching, and do independent studies on the different positions."

Taylor frowned for a moment. "How do you guys get any school work done? Don't the teams travel all over the place?"

"The game season is September to November for most teams. And games are only on Saturdays, and they're divided up by geographical divisions, so the traveling doesn't usually take too long. I do have to travel with the team, but I can get out of it sometimes. And you can always study on the bus or the plane. But yeah, I'm pretty busy."

Taylor started to say something, but had to get back to the door, to check out the group of people coming in. Lance went back to studying, but looked up when he saw Taylor back at the door, frowning deeply and fiddling with a pen, lost in thought. Something felt wrong – Taylor had never looked like that since he'd been coming in. A shout came from the back room, and Taylor looked up, instantly alert, but still wearing that frown. He all but ran to the back room, and Lance found himself following before he was aware that he'd gotten up.

Taylor's back was toward the group of guys who had recently come in, who were sitting at one table, looking upset but pissed, while he faced down three angry guys from a nearby table. The angry guys were red-faced and big and ugly looking, and were yelling at the guys behind Taylor, calling them a bunch of faggots and demanding they leave the bar. Taylor looked more irritated than Lance had seen him, but he stayed calm while explaining that being gay didn't mean you weren't allowed in the bar.

Something changed in the atmosphere, and Taylor quickly stripped off his overshirt, and sort of shrugged all over, suddenly becoming *ready*. Two of the guys stepped back, but one just got more vocal, and suddenly rushed Taylor. Taylor stepped to the side, grabbed the guy's arm, and twisted it up against his back, paralyzing him. Taylor told them that this gentleman was leaving, and they could all leave with him, or behave. He walked them out, and with their buddy still locked up, they left peacefully. Lance watched them go, and leaned against the wall, taking in what he'd seen. Taylor came back in, bending over to speak quietly to the group of guys he'd protected, but Lance could hear what he said. He told them to be careful when they left – to call a cab before they leave, because these were the type of guys to not let something like that go. Then he nodded to them, and walked outside, lighting up a cigarette. Lance slowly followed him back, and climbed onto his chair, still slightly stunned. He'd never have expected a guy with Taylor's background to have defended a bunch of gays, but he had seen it with his own eyes.

Taylor came by his seat as Lance took a break a few nights later. He launched right into his question, like he'd been thinking about it for a while.

"So what are the players saying when they huddle?"

Lance laughed. "They're making sure everyone knows what play to do, and they can tell everyone about any changes if they need to."

"But the coach calls the play, right?"

"Yeah, but sometimes he'll give one player more details, and then that guy tells everyone else in the huddle. Sometimes quarterbacks are allowed to change the play from what the coach gave him. They read the other team's defense and can change the play after the huddle. It depends on the team, and the coach, though."

Taylor asked a few more questions, and Lance gave him some basics. After Taylor left, an idea popped into his head. He spent the next hour thinking about it when he should have been studying.

When Taylor came back to his seat by the door, Lance turned to face him. "I'd completely understand if you weren't interested in this, but I'm assisting in Saturday's home game. That's what all this is for." He waved a hand at his play sheets. "If you'd like to go, I can get you a ticket. I wouldn't be able to explain anything to you, because I'd be on the sidelines, but you'd have a great seat." Maybe they could catch a drink after the game. He'd like to know what Taylor was like outside of the bar.

He couldn't read Taylor's face, but he wondered about the slight frown. "What time?"

"One."

Taylor nodded thoughtfully. "I'd like that, thanks."

Lance brought the ticket in the next evening.

Lance forced himself to relax his jaw. He'd desperately wanted to get to the bar that night to see if Taylor had gone to the game, and if he'd liked it. He'd kept his eye open for Taylor, and had hoped to get out early enough to run into him in the stadium, but one of the water boys was sick, so Lance had to help bring the equipment off the field as well as help put it away. By the time Lance had left the stadium, it was empty. And to add to his frustration, here he was the day after the game, giving his irritating classmate a ride home instead of going to the bar to see Taylor. Gary had completely flaked out on their engineering project, giving everyone more work, then he shows up late to their study session, whining about not having a new car like Lance. Ordinarily he'd check in at the bar after driving Gary home, but he'd been given the opportunity to run drills with the offense that afternoon, so he unusually exhausted. There was no way he was getting to the bar that night. And the way this project was going, he might not get there for the next few nights. He again told his jaw to relax.

He should know better than to let himself be talked into anything, especially a blind date. But Matty said this girl, Cherry, was a friend of Polly's, and when Polly asked Matty for something, he couldn't deny her. It wasn't all Matty's fault; since Matty started seeing Polly, Taylor saw him only occasionally. Taylor didn't socialize with people from the bar, leaving him with little companionship.

Cherry was a small, pretty girl – nice body and not too mouthy. A little shy, which could be a problem since he didn't talk much. But he liked her and she was good company. When Matty and Polly left dinner early to get to a football game, he managed to talk all right with her. She didn't look at him funny, either, which was a huge plus.

On their way to a movie, he started thinking that sleeping with her might not be such a bad idea. She seemed to like him, and was interested in him physically, but he didn't want anything to get messy between him and Polly and Matty. On the other hand, he hadn't had anything but himself in bed for a long, long time. Not like he wasn't used to taking care of himself, but it would be real nice to be with someone, even for one night. The bar was on the way to the movie, so he stopped long enough to run in to grab his paycheck. He hoped he'd get in and out fast enough to avoid seeing anyone, but shit, there was Lance, in tight jeans and tight tee shirt, frowning over his play sheets, looking more beautiful than anyone had a right to. On Taylor's way out of the bar, Lance looked up, catching his eye. All Taylor could do was tell him thanks for the ticket and run back out of the bar. The lump in his throat wouldn't let him say much until after the movie. Afterwards, he drove Cherry home, and kissed her on the cheek.

The best thing about his usual seat at the end of the bar was that it was too far out of the way to ever be a good seat, so it was available even on Saturday nights. He didn't see Taylor when he got there, so he assumed he was off. Didn't lighten up his mood any, after it was already dented by the day's losing game. He was still sure they could have won if they'd used his strategy in the second quarter, but the defensive coach refused to even look at his ideas, even after asking for them. He didn't know why he came to the bar on Saturday, anyway, since Taylor didn't have much time to talk with him. The bar felt like a community during the week, when the camaraderie

from the game flowed forward from the TV room to the bar. Sometimes it reminded him of being in the locker room after a good game.

But on Saturdays the couples, the dancing, and the music underscored that he was alone. The stillness in his house would be better than being alone in a crowd, except then he wouldn't get to see Taylor.

He ordered a shot of tequila and a chaser, figuring that just this once he'd indulge himself while studying. He didn't even wonder about the noise from the back room. At least in the bar he could be distracted from thinking about why he'd avoided making friends or getting a girlfriend since he'd been at school, and if this pattern was going to plague him forever. His career of choice would make the situation worse – he avoided socializing with football guys when he could, but he didn't go out of his way to meet any non-football people, either. If he coached, his life would revolve around football, so basically he figured he was screwed no matter what happened.

He sighed and dragged his shot glass around in the puddle on the bar. He'd committed himself when he changed his engineering major to a minor last year. He'd doubted himself since then, but it all came back to his love of football. After he found out all he was to Darcy was a ticket out of town - and he didn't think he'd ever forget the humiliation of *that* talk with Mox – he lost interest in spending any time with the girls he knew at home, and the girls here reminded him too much of the girls he'd left behind. All the guys on the high school team had been best friends forever. It wasn't the same being with buddies not on the team – they didn't get the same things. At college he pretended to make friends outside the football team, but he knew he never tried hard enough.

He divided his life up in two parts: before and after his knee injury. Before the injury he was famous state-wide, local businesses sponsored him, he had friends and a loving girlfriend, he could do pretty much what he wanted, and everyone liked him. After the final game, when his coaching helped get them the win, he was celebrated as much as Mox. But it felt different, like everyone wanted to ignore the guy whose time of glory was over, even though he'd done more to win that season than Mox. He knew this was the way things happened in sports, but it was the first time he'd had it happen to him, and he'd felt as flat as the billboard of himself that taunted from his parents' front lawn.

His second surgery ruining spring break, and his third destroying his summer brought home how much he'd taken his stardom for granted, and what it really meant - his ability in football got him friends and the most popular girl at school. When football was gone, so was his recognition, his friends, and his girlfriend. Three years in college and he still was plagued by the disappointment.

A pocket of silence interrupted his thoughts, and he jumped when a broad, warm hand rested lightly on his back.

A familiar gravelly voice mumbled into his ear, "How are ya doin' tonight, Lance?"

He turned to look at Taylor, and hoped his pleasure in seeing him looked like surprise. In the weeks he'd been coming here, Taylor had never touched him. He didn't usually like people touching him, but he didn't mind Taylor's nearness at all. There was a liveliness to Taylor tonight that was unusual. Catching Taylor's glance at his drinks, the heaviness descended again. "I'm okay. What about you?"

"You miss that last guy? I've been better."

Lance's heart thumped. "What happened? Are you okay?"

Taylor smiled. "Yeah, I'm fine. He only got off one shot and he missed, but it'll be a good bruise by morning." He twisted sideways to show Lance the back of his right arm, and Lance figured something out.

"You like to fight." Oh shit. Did he say that out loud?

Taylor watched him before answering. "Not as much anymore. A challenge now and again is fun, keeps me sharp." Lance could see more words forming behind those, but Taylor stopped them. He might have been playing down how wired he was but Lance saw it spark along his skin.

Lance looked down at Taylor's arm. He could see the bruise already forming over the muscles – the guy must have thrown a hell of a punch. Lance's fingers lightly glided over the bruise, up the triceps, and then across the deltoid, and down the bicep where the star was painted. His fingers wanted to continue to slide over that golden skin, but he realized what he was doing, and lowered his hand, confused and oddly tilted.

Taylor's dark eyes were intense as he looked into Lance's, and Lance saw his breathing speed up for a moment. Lance had no idea what Taylor was thinking, but he didn't stop Lance's touch. "My mother's Jewish, my father's Italian." Taylor ran his own hand over the star. "That makes me Jewish, but I grew up in my father's way." He looked at Lance to see if he understood. "Something like being half Jewish puts you forever on the outside with the Italians. You're never really one of them." He was silent for a long time.

Lance didn't know if Taylor would appreciate his contribution, but he wanted show Taylor he was trying to understand. "I... I don't know if this is even close... but I never used to understand about not fitting in. I was always part of the team. Then my knee got fucked up and suddenly no one knew me. Now I'm part of a football team, but I'm not a player, so it's different from what I expected, and I'm still on the outside. But I guess it's all by choice, so it's pretty different." Lance wished he'd said it better, but couldn't have, considering he'd never talked to anyone about stuff like this.

Taylor's long fingers picked up Lance's empty shot glass, turning it around and around. "It's something like that. For me maybe it was good, being on the outside, made it easier to leave. I thought I was who I wanted to be, but now that I'm away, I think that maybe I wasn't."

Taylor's good mood had given way to something sadder, and Lance had to ask, "What's going on?"

"Ah – my friend – we came down here together – Matty - he got engaged. I'm happy for him, she's a great girl and she's good for him. But he's my only friend, and I start wondering what's here for me. Sometimes I wonder if I can't really leave after all."

Lance felt a chill at no longer knowing Taylor. "What about new friends?"

Taylor frowned. "Don't come real easy. People look at me, they get scared." He shrugged and tried to smile, but it was heavy. He tilted the empty shot glass toward Lance. "What's the occasion?"

Lance sighed. "Saturday night."

Taylor cocked his head.

"Everyone here has friends or a girlfriend. I don't hang around with any of the college crowds, they remind me of my buddies back home. Sounds stupid now, but back then I didn't get that friends came with being the star quarterback. When that went away, so did everyone else."

Taylor frowned. "Friends should be there for you when you need them."

"I'll drink to that."

The front door opened, bringing in a large group of rowdy sports fans, so Taylor turned away, but not before giving Lance a serious look. Lance nodded, then turned back to his book, and eventually ordered another round.

A little later, he felt Taylor hesitate before coming over to him. Taylor leaned against the bar next to him and brought his face closer to Lance's. Lance felt him swallow his nerves. "I like talking to you."

Lance had to take a breath before he could answer. Taylor's personal power and gentle honesty was an intoxicating combination. "Thanks Taylor. I like talking to you, too." Taylor looked shy, if that was possible, and happy, though only the edges of his face changed.

"Maybe you and me can be friends?"

Lance smiled. "I'd like that." Taylor smiled at him before heading into the back of the bar. Lance's stomach decided to move into a condo inside his chest. He felt like a dork, but he had to respect Taylor's guts by being honest to himself. He really liked seeing happiness on Taylor, and even more liked being the cause.

Despite the amount he had to drink, Lance had trouble sleeping. He woke at 2 AM thinking about Taylor's nearly black eyes, and picking at something he couldn't quite remember.

He stared at the light from the street patterning the ceiling, almost dozing, when it popped into his head. It was in high school. The team had traveled to Dallas for a game, far enough from home that they had to stay in a motel, a rare and exciting event. Kilmer didn't spend the evening with the team; he was having dinner at an old friend's. All the guys felt like they'd been let off the leash. After winning the game, a bunch of them went out to a bar. There was a guy there, he didn't look much older than they were, who kept staring at Lance. Lance eventually noticed, and although he was a bit puzzled, it didn't bother him. When Tweeder noticed and threatened to beat the shit out of the guy for hitting on his friend, Lance wasn't sure how he should feel. Later in the motel room he was sharing with Mox, he asked Mox what he thought. Mox surprised him by saying it was kind of like when a girl likes you but you aren't interested. You say no thanks, but you're still kind of flattered. Lance fell asleep with Tweeder's anger and Mox's calmness swirling around each other.

He never did come to terms with how he felt about it. One guy during his freshman year at State seemed like he was going to make a pass at him, but Lance stopped hanging around with the guy's crowd, taking care of it the easiest way he knew how. He hadn't been interested, but he sure didn't want to kill the guy, like Tweeder would have.

He flopped over onto his stomach, trying to get comfortable, but he was still wide awake. He had early classes, he had to stop messing around. He dragged his laptop into bed, and went to his favorite web site. He looked through a couple of folders of photos, then shut down the computer, beat off, and finally fell asleep.

A thick, slurred voice in to his ear broke into his thoughts. "Hey schoolboy, you want some company?"

Lance looked up, startled. "No, I don't."

The man ignored him. "Come on, I like to play and playing with me is fun!" The man laughed at his own brilliance.

"Not interested."

But the man had opened his play notebook and was pawing through the pages. "Oh, football! Pretty boy, I'd like to tackle you!"

Before the man had taken another breath, long fingers had removed his hand from the playbook, and twisted it back and down into a wrist lock. The next breath from the man was a gasp.

"Are you bothering my friend here?" The gravelly voice snaked up Lance's spine.

"I'm not bothering anyone, am I, cutie?"

Lance didn't see a change in Taylor's grip, but the drunk's eyes watered, and he looked like he was having trouble breathing. The growl got lower, "I'll break it." A calm statement of fact.

"All right, all right! I'm sorry!"

"Good. Now maybe you have somewhere else you should go tonight?"

The man nodded rapidly, eyes wide, as Taylor walked him calmly to and out the door of the bar. Taylor strolled back to Lance, who was still stunned by Taylor's speed and efficiency. "You okay?"

Lance nodded, still dumb. Taylor laughed at his astonishment, and ran a quick hand over Lance's hair. He smiled, then sauntered away in response to another shout from the back of the bar.

Lance's spine had turned to water. And his knees. All of Taylor's power and intensity had been focused on Lance, and behind the danger Taylor posed to the drunk idiot, was deep affection and sincere need to protect him. That raw affection jolted Lance as much as the intensity of Taylor's power. He used to have, and still had, so much affection for Billy Bob, who put his heart and soul into protecting him, but this was something different and bigger. The team protected him because he was one of them, and their star: it was personal but not the same as he saw in Taylor just now. He might have thought a few shots of tequila was intoxicating, but they didn't come close to this. He knew he'd have to think this all out when he came down from the high, but for now he just wanted to float around the bar.

When he got back home, he finished up the chapter he had to get through for the next day, and turned on the TV. He let it blather without him seeing or hearing it. Something Taylor said came back to him. He'd told Taylor about how Darcy had seduced him with her famous whipped cream bikini, mentioning how it had almost worked on Mox, too. Taylor looked at him, his eyes sad, and said, "Life ain't black or white, Lance. Desperation makes people do things they didn't think they could. Most things are grey. 's why it's hard."

He understood desperation – Darcy's need to get out of West Canaan, his when his scholarship had been in jeopardy. After his blinders came off following Kilmer's disappearance, and he saw how Kilmer's bullying spanned generations, weakening his father's group so badly they allowed Kilmer to damage their sons, he realized he had nothing left in Texas. He started understanding Taylor's desperation to get out of Brooklyn when Taylor started telling him stories, even though he left a lot out. He described some wild characters, but Lance could see that Taylor had been through a lot, in his stories and the scars in his voice as he told them.

Lance wasn't desperate now, but he did recognize Taylor's grey. It had been his background color since he stopped playing football. He couldn't make friends, avoided getting a girlfriend, wasn't sure about his school and career path. Taylor seemed to be in a similar situation – not only had he confessed to Lance that he hadn't made any friends here, but he'd never seen Taylor express any interest in anyone at the bar, even though he regularly had women, and some men, try to give Taylor their numbers. From what Lance had seen, he was the only person Taylor paid regular attention to, and he was apparently able to get Taylor out of a bad mood, too. One night a very drunk lady would not stop making passes at Taylor, and ended up scratching him before he got her out the door and into a cab. When he sat down next to Lance to disinfect his scratches, Taylor had been fuming. After a couple minutes chatting with Lance, he seemed to forget the incident. Tonight, the warmth of Taylor's concern still flowing over him, was the first night he thought there might be color behind the grey.

This was the kind of thing he looked forward to when he thought about being a coach. He just didn't expect to be thrown into it without preparation. But maybe that was a good thing – there wasn't a lot he did that kept him on his toes, now that he wasn't playing, and he'd enjoyed that part of being a quarterback. He'd been wondering about Samuels for a while, watching his distraction and nervousness, but he assumed Copley was working with Samuels and it was just taking Samuels a while to adjust. Then he got an email from Copley tossing Samuels to Lance, with no information except to take care of what's bothering him. Typical fucking Copley.

He met Samuels in the one of the gym rooms. He was pacing, and all 270 lbs of him looked grim and sullen.

When Lance entered, Samuels looked up, surprised. "Hey Lance, what's up? Where's Copley?"

"No Copley today, just me."

Samuels's look held suspicion and relief.

"What's going on?"

"I'm not sure. Copley just told me to meet with you." Lance shook his head and hoped honesty wouldn't backfire on him. "Look, we both know Copley. I think there's something funny going on here. Has he been meeting with you?"

"Naw. He's been ignoring me off the field as well as in practice."

"Yeah, that's what I was afraid of. He doesn't have any love for me, that's for sure. I think he's trying to kill two birds here."

Samuels shook his head. "What do you mean?"

"I think he doesn't care what's going on with you, and he doesn't think I can handle helping you. So he tells me to take care of you, without giving me any information – it's like he's setting up both of us to fail. Here's what I think we need to do – prove him wrong. We need to work together and show him that we can get through this and come out stronger for it, all right?"

Samuels nodded, but he wasn't completely convinced.

"I have a plan. You and me, we'll meet every week, and you can call me if you need to, too, any time. We'll spend the time going over any plays we need to, but mostly I want us to talk about anything else that's bugging you – football related or not, okay?"

Samuels looked at him for a while, then smiled. "I want to be on the team you coach, Lance."

Amazingly, that was all it took to get Samuels on his side. They talked about the problems he was having with the way he felt his friends were using him for his sudden money, and they even went over a couple plays that they expected this week's opponent to use against them, that Samuels had been having trouble with. When they left, Samuels looked a thousand times better. Lance felt stronger from it as well. This was the stuff he wanted to make right that the Kilmers and Copleys of the world got wrong. Not caring about your players as people was destructive for everyone. And if this worked, it was going to drive Copley nuts. Lance smiled as he left the gym and headed out across campus.

The weather had been perfect for the last couple days, and people were still taking advantage of 75 degree, low humidity, and a cloudiness sky. He walked across a common, aware of the everyone around him. Students were bunched in small groups, but many were couples, some lying on each other or even necking. He preferred to keep his activities private, indulging in less than private places only when it seemed that was all he was going to get. That night with Darcy on the dryer, he'd been pretty nervous, and that nervousness had been justified when Billy Bob broke into the laundry room to puke into the washing machine. Not that it did his reputation any harm being caught pants down, inside Darcy, but he didn't think it was his finest moment.

His gaze wandered over the couples until he nearly tripped over his own feet. Two boys were putting away their books, then, as Lance watched, they lay down, one on the other, and started kissing. Lance couldn't stop watching them, though the burn on his neck told him he'd turned red, and he was starting to get hard. He turned down a different path, putting his back to the them, and controlled his breathing. Shit. He wasn't gay. He didn't want to be gay. He. Wasn't. Gay. He left the common, and sat on a bench in the shade between two buildings.

He didn't want his life twisted around any more than it was already. He couldn't count the number of ways his life would be more fucked up if he was queer.

He might never feel safe again going home, if he were gay. He never took Tweeder seriously when he'd talk about hunting queers until he really looked into his eyes one time, and he looked away quick.

The first time he heard his parents talking about gays, they'd heard about a movie that had a gay relationship in it. They hadn't even seen the movie - his father had heard about it from some of his work buddies and he was describing it to Lance's mom, who shuddered in disgust and told him she never wanted such filth uttered in her house again. According to everyone, there weren't any queers in football, despite the retired players who wrote books about being closeted in the NFL. He'd read a couple of those books when he got to college and now that he was thinking about it on a personal level, he didn't know how anyone could stand it. If anyone found out, that would be it. It would be worse if you were on the field - that would be physically dangerous, but he could still lose his job and be blackballed.

Lance wasn't hostile to gays, but he sure didn't want to be one. If he were, he'd be someone that everyone, including his friends and family, would hate. How could he live like that?

He thought of Taylor, the way he looked at him. It was how other guys who'd flirted with him looked, but this time he liked it. Could a guy like Taylor really be gay? If pro-football players could be gay, he guessed tough guys who didn't give a shit about what people thought of them could be too. He liked that so much about Taylor, that he didn't care what anyone thought of him. What right did someone like Tweeder have to decide what was right or wrong for someone else? Damn it, why did those guys have to go necking on the lawn for everyone to see?

He got up and walked to his car. He needed to get back on solid ground again, but he didn't know where to find any. He didn't like grey, he wanted black and white back again. He sounded like a petulant child, but at that moment, he didn't care.

The bag swung horizontally away from him before he stopped its return swing with a solid fist. He'd been at it for a half hour, and figured on needing at least another before he let off enough steam to be able to enter the bar without knocking out everyone who got in his way. He threw a fast left into the bag, twisted, and nailed it with his right, then popped another left into it as it swung away.

Last night, he'd acted completely on instinct, despite what he told himself, he'd allowed his attraction to show. Instinct had saved his life many times, but this time it screwed him over. He didn't think he could stand to see revulsion on Lance's face when he saw Taylor, yet that was exactly what he expected. Would Lance even come in? If he didn't show, was it because of last night, or because he was busy doing something else? He turned a yell of frustration into a grunt as he hit the back with a right hook, a left double hook, then a right straight punch.

As hot as that moment with Lance had been, he'd been so worried about Lance freaking out that he couldn't even jerk off last night. Just when he needed to.

He hoped no one would want the bag soon, cause they weren't gonna get it.

Lance couldn't decide to whether or not to go to the bar. It was Saturday, so Taylor would most likely be there. He drove home as soon as he got off the bus that brought them back from the game, and spent the early part of the evening deciding not to go, deciding to go, changing his shirt, changing his pants, feeling like an idiot, putting back on his original pants, and changing his shirt one more time. He had a cup of coffee, which got cold as it sat on the coffee table while he flipped channels. He considered that he might be going crazy, not sure from what – the things that came to mind when he thought about Taylor or that he was acting like a girl. Jeezus. He grabbed his pack, his sheets, and threw himself out the door. Now he turning into a drama queen. Great.

When he walked into the bar, he understood what it mean to have your stomach in knots. He thought he might puke. He was sweating, He was going to puke. No Taylor at the door. He slid over to his seat and put his things down on the bar. He was going to be okay. The front door opened, but it was just more sports fans. He sat down and ordered a beer, took out his notes from last week's game, and started working.

He felt the air around him shift, and he looked up. It was Taylor, wearing a black tank top and black jeans, and he was staring at Lance, indecipherable look #25 in his eyes, then licked his lips and swallowed. Lance could not believe Taylor was nervous. But he didn't move while he watched Lance follow the ribbons of muscles flowing down his body. Jesus Christ, the man was gorgeous. Suddenly, Taylor relaxed and sauntered to the bar, leaning on it next to Lance.

"How are ya doin' tonight, Lance?"

Lance swallowed. "I'm good, Taylor. You?"

A private smile lifted the edges of his lips. His voice was nearly too low to hear. "Mmm. Better." He stood back up and walked toward his chair, bringing his forearms behind his head like he was stretching his arms. It doubled the size of his shoulders, and it emphasized his back muscles. When he turned to again face Lance, his chest and stomach muscles were taut as well.

Lance had a notebook on his lap, thank heaven. Taylor's eyes raked down and back up his body, and when he met Lance's eyes, he was smiling knowingly. Lance was sure he was blushing again, but didn't care. He kept staring after Taylor, even as Taylor switched direction and headed back into the sports bar. Lance turned back to the bar, hoping no one noticed. He didn't think he needed anything in the notebook for a little while.

Well, it looked like both of them were clear on what each wanted. But getting an erection from a look didn't mean he was going to act on it.

As expected, Taylor was busy most of the night. He came over once to ask a few questions about the plays Lance was working on, but he'd turned the heat off, so things fell back to normal. At one point, a bunch of girls came in, all dressed up, and as they passed Taylor coming in, one of them yelled his name.

Taylor looked startled for one second, then he was back in control. He took the girl aside to speak quietly to her, his back toward Lance. Lance thought that the back of Taylor's neck was may have been flushed. Taylor towered over the girl, and as he stepped back from her, he bent to kiss her on her cheek. She didn't look too happy, but smiled at Taylor anyway, and went to find her friends. Lance turned back to his work but still caught Taylor's glance at him.

Huh. Taylor actually knew someone, and it sure looked like they'd dated. But it didn't look like anything was continuing. It brought up some new ideas, though. If he was wrong, it could be a perfect out of whatever was going on between him and Taylor, if he wanted an out. On the other hand, what if Taylor's definition of socializing didn't include one nighters? Did he sleep around? Lance had only been with Darcy, and although he'd felt worldly in high school, he never got past feeling small-town in college. It was one reason he wasn't in a hurry to date. Taylor must have tons more experience than he did.

He got back to work, but during a lull in the bar's activity, he felt the heat of Taylor's eyes on him. He turned his head to get the full blast of the stare. He shuddered, and took a deep breath, and let his eyes drift over Taylor's body again. Nothing had changed on that front – Taylor was still hot and he was still attracted. Then Taylor was up and into the next room, and Lance ordered a shot and a chaser. He was so screwed. Oh god, he really might be. He did the shot and took a long drink of the beer.

He kept his attention on his work, hoping the alcohol wasn't making a mess of things. Then there was a shadow next to him, and he looked up into Taylor's serious face. His eyes held a softness that Lance hadn't seen before. He slowly brought a hand up, stroked it through Lance's curls, and Lance closed his eyes, and leaned into the caress. Then a new heat flowed along his side, as Taylor's chest and stomach pressed into him, Taylor's hand cupped the back of his neck, and Taylor spoke softly into Lance's ear. "Am I coming home with you tonight?" Soft lips tickled his ear, then Taylor was gone. Lance propped his elbows on the bar. Yes, yes, please yes. His neck was warm with remembered heat of those powerful fingers. He hoped closing time came soon.

By the time Taylor was done for the night, Lance had passed through nervousness, insecurity, and horniness, and was back to suspecting he was nuts. He ordered more shots when he considered that taking Taylor home with him would make him a different person than who he was supposed to grow up to be, more different than he'd ever expected. Tonight was a line in the sand. If he went through with this, he'd be labeled a faggot by everyone he knew. If his parents knew, they'd never speak to him again. He tried to compare this with the excitement of having sex with Darcy, but it wasn't the same. He thought he'd loved Darcy, and he had loved having sex with her, but it never felt like his bones were going to shake out of his body – and this from a few looks and words.

Why should he deny himself this? He was in school, away from home -- this was what going off to college should be about -- having new experiences, making new friends, getting laid by attractive... people, wasn't it? Even if that person could beat the shit out of him with one finger. Oh god, what if all that strength went against him? What if he changed his mind -- would he take no for an answer? He had another beer, that cooled his panic a few degrees. He couldn't imagine Taylor angry at him, it just didn't fit with what he'd seen all these weeks. The two guys thing was something else, though -- what if he couldn't get it up? What would it feel like to touch another guy's cock? He shifted in his seat, hot and uncomfortable. If he was able to perform, would Taylor mind that Lance didn't know what he was doing? It wasn't rocket science, yeah, but what if he was awkward and did something stupid? What if Taylor wanted something Lance couldn't do?

When Taylor came over to leave, he was less than steady on his feet, so he gave Taylor the keys to his car, leaving Taylor's in the lot, and directed him toward his house.

Taylor almost stumbled when he saw Lance at the bar. He'd been wired all night waiting to see if he showed. Then he was there, in front of him, wearing a shirt he'd never seen, a white and blue jersey with the number 7 on it, and it fit perfectly and the blue was the perfect shade of blue to show off Lance's amazing eyes, and Taylor came to a boil right then. He almost lost it, almost kissed him right there at the bar, when he saw Lance staring at him like he was dinner to a starving man.

Cherry coming in almost threw him off, but she accepted that he couldn't spend time with her because he was working, and that he was seeing someone else. Still, he spent an hour afterward wondering what Lance was thinking.

Then, when he thought he'd be able to get through the night like it was any other night, he asked Lance to take him home. He could only thank his dick for almost blowing it again. But Lance didn't say no, even though the number of shots he was kicking back was a little worrying. Still, Taylor figured he'd never been with a guy before, so that was understandable. *He* considered a shot or two, and he wasn't the straight 21 year old.

As the night passed, and he had to admit his brain was going to be stuck on Lance all night, he thought about how he'd changed since meeting Lance. His brain on Lance made unusual behaviors happen. He wanted to tell Lance stuff, small stuff like about the people who came into the bar, and big stuff, like *unedited* stories about Brooklyn. But the strangest was a pressure on his chest that was relieved only when he saw Lance. The only thing he had to compare it to was how protective he got with women, with them being so small and easily broken. But it wasn't the same. He couldn't bear the thought of being away from Lance, was tense when he was away, and when he was with him, he wanted to touch him to make sure he was really there. Touching him tonight didn't make the feeling go away, either. His hand had crept into Lance's curls by itself, and once it got there, it didn't want to leave. He'd had to stop himself from tilting Lance's head back and taking his mouth.

Taylor had to steady Lance as they walked up the steps to Lance's house, not easy when Lance was clutching two big notebooks and two thick text books. Taylor wasn't sure exactly how much Lance had had to drink, but the bartender had given him the sign to watch out for him. Lance got the front door open, and threw his jacket and the books onto the couch. He ran a hand unsteadily through his hair. "Oh man, I drank too much. Be right back." Waving a hand, which looked like have a seat, Lance tottered through a door off the short hallway and closed it behind him.

Taylor walked into the kitchen, got a glass of water, and looked around. A couple mugs and bowls sat soaking in the sink, a couple boxes of sugary cereal, one open, shared the counter with a

pizza box. Piles of books and papers were stacked on the plain kitchen table. The living room consisted of a side chair, couch, decent stereo, small TV, and large coffee table piled up with another bunch of books, a laptop computer, a plate with crumbs on it, an empty soda can, and mug full of coffee. Nothing he might expect a football star to have around, like trophies.

Lance came into the kitchen, and grabbed another glass of water. He wasn't meeting Taylor's eyes. He was a little damp, but looked less out of it than he had. He leaned on the counter well within Taylor's personal space, and drank.

"Uh, Taylor, I'm really beat – I'm sorry I drank so much – uh, would you mind if we just slept?" He was blushing, but he sounded sincere, and maybe regretful.

"Yeah, it's no problem." Taylor hid his disappointment, hoping he could fit on the couch. If he was invited into Lance's bed, he wasn't sure he could stay calm enough to fall asleep with Lance next to him, but he'd take whatever he got.

Lance smiled at him. "Great. C'mon." He lead Taylor to his bedroom. Lance stripped off his shirt without waiting for Taylor, stopping before pulling off his pants to point to the hall. "Bathroom's to the right, and there's a toothbrush for you if you want it." When Taylor returned, Lance was under the covers, almost asleep. He wasn't sure how far to strip down, but saw a pair of briefs on the pile of clothes Lance had left on the floor. If Lance was going to be that bold, he would be, too. God knows he wanted it enough. He stripped off, laying his clothes on the chair next to the bed, made a quick stop in the bathroom, and finally slid into bed.

As soon as he got under the covers, Lance slid toward him, the heat of his back burning where it touched Taylor's side. He stifled a groan. Torment or not, he had no choice - he turned on his side, spooning into Lance's heat. Lance sighed, then reached behind him, to pull Taylor's arm across his stomach, and laid his own hand over Taylor's. He wriggled a little to get comfortable, not seeming to mind the hardness against his buttocks. He yawned, and managed to softly say, "Thanks, Taylor, 'm glad you're here," before he fell asleep.

Taylor fell asleep smiling despite the ache in both his dick and in his chest.

Taylor woke to pre-sunlight grey and Lance's soft breathing, far from the hard edges of his usual mornings. Lance lay on his stomach with Taylor leaning back on him. For much of his life, time had moved too fast. Now he wanted time to pay him back, to let him stay in the sea of Lance's bed, where he bobbed gently against Lance's hot skin in time to his breathing. He could imagine what Lance's neck would smell like, and how soft his curls would be with Taylor's nose buried in them. His bladder, however, was giving him other instructions, so he carefully rolled out of bed, and brushed his teeth while he was in the bathroom. Slipping back into the heaven of a warm bed, he fitted himself against Lance's hot length, and fell back into sleep.

The next time he woke, Lance was sliding out of bed. When he dug back under the covers he lay on his back, eyes closed, but Taylor could tell he was waiting. Taylor slowly turned over and leaned up on one arm, looking down at Lance, who looked more unsure than nervous.

Taylor had always taken a casual attitude toward sex. The women he'd been with had had plenty of experience, so although he was always careful with them, it wasn't brain surgery to figure out what they liked and to provide it, but it wasn't something that he couldn't live without. This, though... he'd denied himself this his entire life, but it was what he'd wanted since he figured out the fun parts to owning a dick. Now, with this breathtakingly beautiful, sweet boy lying next to him, he wanted to honor that he was laying the ghost of his past to rest.

He waited to touch until Lance looked up at him. When Taylor saw the trust, he rested his hand in the middle of Lance's chest, and slowly lowered his mouth onto Lance's lips. Lance opened to him as soon as they touched, and Taylor licked gently inside, before capturing Lance's bottom lip with his own, running his tongue over the silkiness, capturing his flavor.

Dipping into Lance's mouth, Taylor felt the universe shift. He'd never had any idea this level of desire could exist. This came from the same place as the weight in his chest. Now that he was touching and kissing Lance, the weight turned into an energy that rode wild through him, bucking him between searing lust and flying happiness.

He could die here and be happy, tangled in Lance's mouth. Time had become elastic. He was vaguely aware of Lance's hands stroking his back, his head and neck, while one of his own hands was sunk in the curls, and the other roamed down the light hollows and curves of Lance's side, up his long, slender leg and his lean stomach, and over his chest and neck, and into his hair, where it, too, rested, utterly content.

Lance's hardness pushing into his groin reminded him there was more of Lance to taste. His neck was saltier than his earlobe. The hardness of his shoulder was a smooth hill under his lips, and his chest a series of gently sloping planes, which goose bumped when stroked by his tongue. His nipple crinkled after a couple licks, letting him to compare its texture while soft and while bumpy.

While he was investigating the nipple, Lance slid a hand down Taylor's back and onto his butt cheek, pulling him down hard, pushing their dicks together. They both groaned, and Lance's breaths were uneven. They were both close. Taylor moved back up, taking Lance's mouth again. Lance grabbed his butt with both hands, and thrust up. Taylor matched the thrust with one of his own. He felt like Lance was trying to blend them together, like he was reading Taylor's mind. He moaned into Lance's mouth, while Lance's tongue explored his mouth. They pushed against each other again and once more, and then Lance was groaning and pushing, and a wet heat pulse onto his dick, onto his stomach. It was a switch that flipped his thoughts back on, like he had walked out of a fog. He was in bed with Lance, Lance had just come all over him, and with that thought, desire spiked through his body. He pushed blindly against Lance and came, all over that golden skin.

As he fell to earth, heart still pounding, the first thing he noticed were Lance's arms still around him, holding him in position, while they rubbed up and down his back. Taylor was flat out laying on him, but Lance didn't seem to mind. His nose was buried against Lance's neck, memorizing the scent of his skin. He'd been given a small peek into the universe beneath him, and he couldn't wait to discover more.

Taylor lifted himself up to look at Lance, and was enchanted all over again. Lance was even more beautiful like this, blinking lazily up at him, a contented smile on his lips. He'd do anything to see this every morning of his life. Taylor was in deep, deep trouble.

Lance had no idea what to expect after having sex with a guy, but it wasn't this. He was surrounded by Taylor's heat and hardness, his large hands, huge arms, and the passion he'd had a peek of the last few days. The second Taylor kissed him, he got it: everything he'd done before had been practice drills: this was the final game. It was easy to give himself over to Taylor, because Taylor wasn't taking advantage of him; he'd been just as hot for him as he'd been for Taylor. That was something new, too – he'd always felt something wasn't quite right when he was with Darcy, and now he thought it was because she was never into it as much as he was. Like she was thinking through the whole thing. He was sure neither he nor Taylor had done any thinking.

He didn't know Taylor well enough to know what made his impassive expression crack. Lance had seen Taylor look at him with affection and heat, and he'd seen him hyper, a little sad, and annoyed, but they were all low key, nothing like what he was seeing now. Taylor was looking at him with nothing less than wonder. While Lance lay watching him, Taylor studied his face. He frowned, put his nose into the hair above his ear and took a deep breath. When he pulled back, he looked so helpless and happy that Lance could only smile at him. The odd frown came over him again, and he leaned in, tilting his face, and those sweet lips were on his again, they were drowning in each other again, the need pouring off Taylor in waves. Taylor pulled away, then he rubbed his nose and mouth over his neck and chest, even lifting his arm to sniff at his arm pit, causing Lance to laugh in surprise. Taylor looked up startled and a little pink, but when he looked in Lance's face, he lost the look of unsureness and smiled.

A stretch came over him and spread to Taylor, who had slid off him. Taylor leaned over to the chair with his clothes on it, and took his cigarettes from his pants pocket.

"Um, do you mind smoking outside?" Lance didn't want to insult the man right after having sex with him, but he had trouble with smoke in the morning.

Taylor looked surprised, then thoughtful. "It bothers you?"

Lance nodded.

Taylor frowned as he thought, then threw the pack in the wastebasket. He kissed Lance again, and asked, "Shower?" He jumped out of bed, playfully pulling Lance after him.

As Taylor steered him to bathroom, Lance tried to hide his surprise: did Taylor just give up smoking for him? Taylor was a happy man this morning; the only time his lips weren't twitching or he wasn't enveloped in a full blown smile was when he had been examining Lance. He'd have to see, but if so, holy shit.

In the shower, Taylor wouldn't let him move. He grabbed the soap and washed him within an inch of his life. Taylor examined his fingers with soapy hands, then he washed his arms, chest, stomach, and the large hands swirled around his legs and feet. His genitals were soaped gently and precisely, and he was turned and his back and ass were soaped... and then Taylor's fingers slid into his ass crack, where he slowly and deliberately soaped and teased his hole. Lance would have been nervous if it hadn't happened so suddenly and felt so incredibly good. Lance had gotten hard just from having his fingers washed, so by the time his ass was being washed, his knees were weak. Taylor reached around him and stroked his dick with his other soapy hand. He watched Taylor's frowning concentration as he manipulated him, and was mesmerized by Taylor's pink tongue as it crept out to lick his lips as Lance got closer to the edge. Watching Taylor watch him, concentrate on him, was incredibly hot. He couldn't get enough of the hand on his cock or the hand between his cheeks, and when Taylor sucked on his neck and gripped him tighter, Lance groaned and came all over Taylor's hand.

While he recovered, Taylor kissed his back and rubbed himself along Lance's soapy body, before turning him under the spray to rinse him off. As soon as Lance got his wits together, he took the soap from Taylor's hand, and began his own exploration. He started with the pecs, which were breathtaking. He tweaked the nipples, producing a shudder that ran through Taylor's body. He ran his soapy hands over his shoulders and down his arms, then over his neck and gently over his face, and up over his head. He'd wondered what a bald scalp would feel like. Not weird at all, just kind of smooth. He gently rubbed Taylor's ears, and Taylor pushed his head into his hands like a cat, before rinsing off his face. He explored the muscles of Taylor's stomach and back, then he was stopped by his amazing ass. Only able to do this after Taylor did it first, he tentatively ran his hand between the cheeks, and heard Taylor groan. He washed Taylor's powerful legs, did his

feet, then coasted back up to his genitals. He rolled Taylor's balls in his soapy palm, and lathered his cock, which he found was uncut. He must have stopped because Taylor took himself in hand, pulling down the foreskin.

Taylor smiled at his surprise, and said softly, "That decision almost ended in divorce. It was a pretty wild story to hear about when you're thirteen." His eyebrows must have hit his hairline, but he couldn't stand the thought of Taylor thinking he was turned off, so he lightly soaped the head of his cock, and watched Taylor's cock thicken again to full erection. He continued rubbing his balls and his cock, watching himself wind Taylor tighter and tighter. Just when he expected Taylor to come, Taylor took him by the hips, turned him so he was mostly facing the wall, ran his hands frantically all over him, pushed his nose into Lance's neck, and breathed deeply. His cock pushed against one of his butt cheeks, and Taylor hugged him tightly with both arms, and thrust against him until warm heat jetted over his butt and his leg. Lance was half hard. That was one more surprise – even though he had a couple inches of height on Taylor, being the lust object of a man stronger than he was was incredibly hot.

They towed off and slipped on sweats Lance pulled out of a drawer. They were a little tight on Taylor, and as his body disappeared under the sweats, Lance wished he could stay inside, even in bed, with Taylor all day. He wanted more of Taylor's stunning intimacy, but also he was unsure of how to face with the real world, again trying to find balance on newly broken ground. What he did know was that he wanted more of this man, no matter who that made him.

After breakfast, Taylor wasn't in a rush to get anywhere. Lance wasn't sure what to do, when Taylor spoke up.

"What do you normally do on the weekends?"

"Study. Go for a run. Study some more. Maybe see a movie, before I go see you at the bar." He couldn't really believe he'd just said that, and he could feel a blush growing, but Taylor just grinned at him.

"You want to run together? I could go home, get my stuff, and meet you later. Give you time to study without bein' a distraction. I need to be at work at 8:00."

"That'd be great. Take my car, come back around 4:00. We can eat after we run."

Lance grabbed his keys from the table, removed the car key, and handed it to Taylor. Taylor took it, and leaned down to kiss Lance. When he finished exploring Lance's mouth, Taylor said, "I'll get through the day thinking about the shower we're going to have after we run." He smiled at Lance's dazed look, then left.

Taylor's departure left behind a vacuum. The silence he'd grown into since moving here wasn't enough after last night; it no longer fit. Growing up, he'd spent more time with people than away from them. Although he'd liked his time alone, it had been limited – everything was based on practices and the inevitable parties that followed. Although he wasn't the life of the party, it was expected that he be there. Now that he had the freedom to do what he wanted, he found he liked being alone. The folks back home would say he'd withdrawn, but he knew now that it was not in his nature to be as social as he'd been when he hung around the more social guys on the team, like Tweeder and Billy Bob.

None of the team were loners – loners weren't team players. He'd never been teased about reading or studying too much, like Mox. But he'd learned how to be alone in a group so that no

one on the team questioned Lance being on the outside of the action. But he rarely got to be completely alone when he wasn't studying, and when he had been, he hadn't known what to do with it. Since he'd lived alone, he'd learned to enjoy the texture of silence. But after only one night with Taylor, his silence felt thin and weak.

He missed Taylor already, but he needed time to process the last 24 hours. And he had to study or he couldn't spend time at the bar tonight. He quickly washed the dishes, poured more coffee, and opened his books.

The knock on the front door startled him. He checked his watch – 4pm. He'd totally lost track of time, a good thing, though by the look of Taylor standing in the doorway. He'd never have got any work done if he'd seen this before studying. The tight tee shirt barely held in Taylor's muscles, and half his tattoo dripped down from one sleeve. His pecs and abs were clearly defined, and his worn sweats hugged his hips and thighs possessively. He was carrying a small gym bag.

"Uh, Lance? Can I come in?"

Lance blushed again; he'd been blocking the door, absorbed by Taylor's physical presence. He stepped aside and watched the sweats kiss Taylor's firm butt as he walked in. Taylor turned, catching him, and he laughed. "Are we going to get out of the house?"

Lance grinned, enjoying Taylor's pleasure at catching Lance ogling him. "Not if we don't go now. Let me get changed. You stay here, or we *won't* get out."

Lance quickly changed into tee shirt, shorts, and sneakers. They jogged slowly to warm up, and then headed out over Lance's regular route. They didn't talk much, but Lance didn't feel like they needed to.

They slowed down for the last few blocks, and Lance allowed himself to be as conscious of Taylor as he wanted. They stretched a warm-down on the front steps, the scent of their sweat clouding around them. By the time they were inside, stripping down, Lance was already imagining Taylor's skin against his tongue. Lance was hard when he pulled down his shorts, and Taylor wasn't far behind. Lance had not previously noticed an oral fixation, but he needed to taste Taylor's muscles, and, heaven help him, his balls and his cock. He wanted to feel Taylor's power surge against him.

They didn't touch until they were in the shower, when they melted together from mouth to cock. Between deep, wet kisses, Taylor murmured, "I can't not think of you when I'm not with you. After this, I don't know what I'm going to do at work." But he didn't suggest Lance not come into the bar, and Lance didn't think Taylor wanted Lance to stay away.

Lance was reduced to moans, rocking against the top of Taylor's thigh. One of Taylor's hands flowed down Lance's side and cupped his butt, while the other wrapped around his skull. The hand on his butt crept slowly between his cheeks, and rubbed softly against his opening, and a jolt of lust struck him from his butt to his balls. He circled Taylor's neck with his arms, holding tight. Thrusting hard against him, the orgasm slammed into him, taking away his breath. The reverberations of his shout blended into the hum of satisfaction rumbling through Taylor's chest.

Taylor kept stroking his back and butt, and he became aware of Taylor's cock pushing against his hip. The water was beginning to chill, so Lance grabbed the soap, gave Taylor a look and a nod toward the bedroom, inspiring them both to quickly clean themselves. At the side of the bed, Lance pushed Taylor down with a smile. He knelt between Taylor's legs, and hoped he could do this without making a fool of himself. Taylor was breathing hard just watching him.

"Lance." Lance looked up. "I'm clean." It took a moment for him to understand what Taylor meant.

"Oh, okay. Uh, yeah, I must be, too." He glanced up, and was caught by the understanding in Taylor's eyes. He blushed even though Taylor wasn't laughing at him.

Lance looked down at the magnificent landscape of Taylor, and his awkwardness disappeared. He hadn't even thought about that stuff, and that made him feel like a kid. But with Taylor sprawled out in front of him, big everywhere, smiling at him with affection, it didn't take him long to get back to where he'd been, mouth watering for a taste. He lowered his head, and licked up the front of Taylor's cock. Swirling his tongue around the head, he licked off the precome. He didn't want to try anything too advanced, so he wrapped his hand around the shaft and covered the head with his mouth, sucking gently and swirling his tongue first around the head, then down the shaft over the vein. It felt strange to have cock in his mouth, but also good, and the groans Taylor was making made it hotter.

He felt the thin press of Taylor's hand on his head, fingers running through his hair, the other hand laying along his cheek, feeling his cock inside Lance's mouth. Taylor gasped through his panting breaths, then managed to whisper his name and his cock swelled in Lance's mouth. Lance wanted to feel Taylor come inside him, so he continued sucking. Taylor stiffened and let out a choked "ahhh," and warmth pulsed into Lance's mouth. Lance kept swallowing until Taylor was done; when he looked up Taylor was watching him with slitted eyes, seemingly unable to move. Lance crawled up the bed, and lay next to him, one arm over Taylor's chest, the other propping up his head. Taylor was magnificent like this, beyond bliss, cock wet and thick in its flaccid state laying on his thigh, eyes never leaving Lance's face.

Taking a deep breath, Taylor stretched, and pulled Lance on top of himself, using one hand to angle his face before leaning up to capture his mouth.

When they parted, Taylor whispered against Lance's lips, "Thank you." Lance smiled before licking Taylor's lips again.

Taylor spent his night at work in a kind of satiated daze. An odd irritation nagged at him a little while after he got to work that he couldn't place until he automatically went for his cigarettes and they weren't in his pocket. He stopped in shock. He had forgotten that he gave up smoking for Lance. He'd never been known for being especially giving, but here he was, going cold turkey because it bothered his angel. Lance didn't even ask him, he volunteered. Who the fuck was he turning into? At least he had years of discipline to rely on. He suspected that he'd manage to get through the rough parts of withdrawal with a few packs of gum, and hours of kissing and blow jobs would make it worthwhile.

His new awareness of Lance made his skin prickle all night, especially when Lance was near. It wasn't a distraction; he'd been keeping track of Lance for weeks now, but tonight he was finely tuned. One look at Lance studying at the bar heated him enough to make him duck outside to cool off. He didn't need proof that he could still concentrate despite his increased awareness of Lance, but he got it anyway. He had to disarm a drugged up customer who'd caused trouble before. Taylor didn't like being threatened by knives, and as usual he increased the punishment just enough to make this point. He only used body shots, but they were hard and it didn't take many to take the asshole down. He threw a couple extra in for the entertainment value and because he was pissed off, and when he was done folding the guy into a cab, Taylor turned around to see Lance watching him from the window, eyes wide.

Taylor's stomach turned to ice. Would seeing the violent side of Taylor's life make Lance come to his senses? Could he want to be touched by someone who was so casual about violence? Or would Lance be afraid of him? Would it be bad enough for him to leave? Taylor wondered if he'd ever have to tell Lance about his life in Brooklyn, and if he did, if that would send him away. Taylor might have left his former life behind in Brooklyn, but to someone from White Bread, USA,

it would look like he was still a part of that life. He hoped Lance would listen to him, let him explain, but deep inside, he couldn't imagine why Lance would bother. He saw the heaven he'd just discovered sliding away from him. He stood up straight and went inside.

Lance was back at his seat, pretending to read. He didn't look up, and Taylor's stomach went queasy but he gave Lance his space. He stayed near, but didn't impose himself all evening, and Taylor allowed himself some hope at Lance's continued presence. And he was still there at the end of the night, waiting for Taylor.

They took their separate cars to Lance's. When they arrived, Lance was obviously tired. He took Taylor's hand, leading him to the bedroom, and they got naked and into bed. Lance curled up to Taylor, and spoke softly into Taylor's ear.

"We need to talk." Then he leaned over Taylor, and kissed him gently but intensely, bunched up his pillow, and fell asleep.

It took around an hour for Taylor to fall asleep; Lance's presence eventually pushing his fear away long enough to succumb. Being back in Lance's bed was a huge relief, but things were so new for them, they could quickly fall apart.

Taylor woke to Lance's hard cock nestled against his butt crack. Damn, but it felt good there, unexpected but not unwanted. He was tempted, but neither of them were ready for that, especially after last night. He hadn't expected to get so hot from rubbing another guy's asshole, but he'd almost come from it. The few seconds Lance spent washing his crack was great, but he didn't know why it made Lance shoot so quickly. Fingers would be a good way to introduce the idea of fucking.

Lance stirred, and Taylor got up to piss before he got harder. They traded places and Taylor was relieved when Lance joined him in bed again. Lance pushed Taylor onto his stomach, and licked the back of his neck, up over his skull – which had never been a hot zone before, and then down his spine. As he licked southward, he squeezed Taylor's butt, and when he got down to the bottom of his spine, Lance focused on his butt, licking and biting it gently. Taylor vaguely heard his own moans travel around the room, and then, when a slick finger roamed between his cheeks, a jolt of lust shot from his butt to his dick. The finger was gentle against him, and without him having to think about it, his ass lifted to invite it in. Then he was open, and Lance was inside him. So now he had his answer - the finger sent pounding waves of sensation through him. Lance pulled out, the bed shifted around him, then he was invaded again, deeper and with more fingers and enthusiasm. With no warning Lance's finger hit on something so intense he levitated off the bed. He heard the echo of a roar, but didn't have any time to think beyond that. The finger rubbed in the same place, and orgasm slammed into him on a giant wave of joy. When he woke, Lance was plastered against him, and his dick rubbing lazily against his butt. Taylor turned over to face Lance, who was groggy but smug, which was a good look on him.

Taylor surged upward, taking that beautiful mouth with his. Between kisses he murmured, "How did you know I wanted that?" Then he stopped, startled. Lance was looking at him with understanding, "Because I knew how much I want it." And he brought his mouth down again against Taylor's. Lance was poking into him with purpose, and Taylor's first thought was to wrap his hand around him, but there was something else he wanted more. He pushed at Lance's shoulder, lowering him onto his back, settled next to him, and leaned over his cock. He licked at the head first, just to get a feeling of what it felt like, then engulfed as much of him as he could. Lance doubled up with a loud gasp, pushing himself further inside Taylor's mouth. Taylor was thrilled at the reaction, and that Lance's dick felt like it belonged down his throat. Lance realized what he'd done, and flopped back down onto the bed. His hands flowed over Taylor's head while Taylor continued sucking and licking. He rolled Lance's balls in one hand, getting sighs and groans. If Lance could swallow, so could he. Lance couldn't make a full sentence when he tried warn Taylor, "Uh, uh, Taylor, I'm, oh god..." And Lance's dick was thick in his mouth and then

there was the warmth pulsing into him. He swallowed awkwardly, making sure he wasn't letting his teeth scrape. As Lance softened inside him, he swallowed again, getting another groan. He let Lance slip out of his mouth, and moved up on the bed.

Lance was still recovering but quirked his lips into a small smile. He took a deep breath, and said, "I think we're really good at this."

Lance knew he was procrastinating when he let Taylor go without talking about last night's exhibit of Taylor's rough talent. He didn't know what to say or ask, anyway. At least it had given him more information about Taylor, beyond his stories and the scars defining various curves of his body. Taylor knew exactly what to do in a fight. The customer might have thought he had the upper hand when he pulled the knife, but it was a delusion. Taylor had been in control every moment. When Lance played it back in his mind, he remembered his own fear when he saw the knife, and then his fascination at the new expression on Taylor's face. When Taylor was dealing with someone in the bar, as long as they weren't bothering Lance, he was casual, even when they tried to hit him. But when the man pulled a knife, something clicked in Taylor. A full-body alertness came over him, his body almost vibrated with awareness, and strangely, interest. He watched Taylor analyze the new way the man moved in the space of a breath, and in his next breath, disarmed him. It was like the instant you had to read the field after the snap, before throwing the ball. There was an added depth to Taylor's analysis - he had also watched Taylor enjoy considering how and where to hit the customer to get the intended effect without damaging him.

Lance could see now that part of Taylor's usual calmness was boredom. He'd enjoyed the challenge that the knife gave him. Lance didn't know what it said about himself, but it was hot to see Taylor in action like that. Unfortunately, he was unable to ignore that Taylor had to have done some sort of nasty stuff to get that good, to be that analytical and ruthless. Lance wondered how much about that part of Taylor's life he wanted to know, and how much Taylor wanted him to know. And what that meant for the long term, if there was to be one.

But what stole Lance's breath was the fear in Taylor's face when he saw Lance watching him. He could face a knife-wielding opponent and be totally confident, but one look of shock from Lance and he'd looked terrified.

Lance had spent the rest of the evening trying to put together all the discordant pieces he knew about Taylor. Taylor was happy to leave his past behind, but his past had claws sunk so deeply he might not be able to remove them. If Taylor's violence didn't turn against Lance, he saw one advantage: Taylor was a supreme protector, if Lance ever needed one. But Taylor wasn't invincible – even though Taylor was good, he could be hurt, and that made Lance's palms sweat.

The incident taught Lance one more fact about Taylor. Lance had the power to hurt him, more than a knife-wielding attacker. And that was both new and terrifying, and didn't help him think of what to say.

Taylor watched Lance messing with his play sheets, deep in thought, unaware that he was squirming in his chair. Lance had been away two weekends in a row for games at other schools, and as he explained to Taylor, that meant time away from studying, less time to see Taylor, and no time to work out. He, himself, was antsy, having been asked to work at the bar during day for the last several days, unloading and prepping, which didn't let him get to the gym for almost a week. When Lance looked like he was taking a break, he stepped over to him.

"You've been studying up storm."

"Yeah, I've got an exam tomorrow. 9 a.m."

"You done after that?"

"Kind of. Why?"

"You look like you haven't been getting out much. You want to go work out tomorrow after your test? Maybe a short run outside, then go over to my gym. They've got a good set of weights, heavy bag...."

"Sounds great. But would you mind going to the school's gym? It's got a running track, machines, weights, everything. I'll be over there already... We can meet by the front door of the gym, so I can sign you in."

The university gym was bright and clean, nothing like Taylor's gym. Probably not a good idea to take Lance there yet. At first Taylor felt out of place with all the students, but Lance was so attentive and relaxed with him that he stopped feeling weird pretty fast. They started on the inside track, not something Taylor liked, but fun with Lance. They chatted while they jogged, nothing important, but there were a couple comments Lance made about his coaching that sounded like he'd had some issues in the last couple weeks.

Taylor was able to only get a few things out of Lance when they were alone in the weight room, with Lance spotting him. He'd had a public disagreement with one of the coaches, because Lance felt the coach had been wrong. Lance had given the players a water break during a practice, specifically against the coach's orders, and although he didn't say it out loud, he wasn't comfortable with how the coach had finished it. He didn't mention retaliation, but it hung over him.

Getting a kick out of Lance being impressed at the amount of weight he lifted was stupid, but it made him feel like a million bucks. It was only topped by Lance watching him do a few rounds barehanded on the heavy bag tucked into a corner of the gym, while Lance stretched and exercised his leg. He wasn't sure if this was a good idea while Lance was still thinking about how Taylor worked over the asshole who pulled a knife, but he wanted to show Lance the art that lived inside fighting along with the violence. When he glanced over, he definitely had Lance's attention, and he might have imagined it, but Lance looked a little dazed, kind of the way he looked right after Taylor kissed him. He'd count that as a good sign.

While they were working out, Lance nodded to or said hi to a few guys, but there was one guy he was more friendly with, who gave him a huge smile. At Taylor's questioning glance, Lance explained.

In the locker room, Lance explained. "I'm working with Samuels one on one. It's something coaches do, but I didn't think I'd have to do it as a student. The coach who gave it to me expected me to fail, but Samuels and me, we're turning it around. He'd doing great, and it's the kind of thing I've always wanted to do."

Taylor was called to the back of the bar right before closing. He looked at the bartender and tipped his head toward Lance, receiving a small nod in return. Then he headed to the back room.

Taylor had not always been able to work for who he liked. He'd been lucky to be able to work for his best friend's father, who took care of him and let him work his own businesses when he was

on his own time. As much as he could, Matty buffered him from his father and that fucking shit Teddy.

Now that he and Matty were away from that life, the old way tasted like ashes. Sometimes in the middle of the night he woke from the oddness of it. He could have stayed and sunk deeper and deeper in the shit until he drowned. But Teddy's – and Benny Chains's – betrayal gave Matty, and consequently Taylor, the means to get out. Taylor was finally able to admit that even though he was in the 1% who could handle the violence, he never *wanted* to.

He'd learned early that people use you for whatever they can get. He'd wanted to survive and he was a natural fighter. He'd had the strength and determination to do what was necessary to become the best. He was always valued by Matty, but by the time he'd become a fighter, he was valuable to Teddy and Benny too, and at that point he was owned. Benny Chains and Teddy forced his loyalty but he gave it to Matty freely. He never expected Benny and Teddy would let him go, and he'd never voluntarily leave Matty. Now that he was a citizen, he never again wanted to be owned like that. And he never wanted Lance to see the scars.

Taylor's current boss was typical low-level local mob. Taylor had watched the man examine him when he'd been hired, when Taylor had been careful to avoid any suggestion about anything beyond bouncing. Since then, Tony had left him alone, but Taylor had felt himself watched many times through the office's one-way window. But Tony had had no complaints, and Taylor's restraint probably pleased Tony – no one in his situation wanted problems with the cops. Even though there were always payoffs, things could always get ugly if something bad happened. So Taylor set things straight in the bar with as little violence as possible, and his boss left him alone. He'd never been called back to the office before.

Tony had him sit and came right to the point.

"Taylor, you do a good job here, there's no problem there."

Taylor nodded.

"As I recall, you're from New York – Brooklyn, right? I got a job needs being done, it's a little more than I could ask of most of my employees – and I thought you might be interested in making a little extra money."

Taylor made sure he's face didn't change, but he didn't like this, even if he should have expected it. He shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry Mr. DeNunzio. I've given up all my other work."

Tony smiled and nodded, but he was disappointed. "You know anyone who might be interested?"

"No sir. I haven't made many friends since I moved here."

"Well, I see you've made one." He smiled.

A chill swept over Taylor's skin. He shrugged. "Gotta start somewhere."

Tony's smile looked sincere, but Taylor didn't know him well enough to know if this was a threat. Most of the men he'd known like DeNunzio were obvious even when they thought they were being subtle, but Taylor never underestimated anyone. He suspected it was just his protective instinct kicking in, but he'd have to be careful until he was sure.

Tony thanked him for his time. Taylor nodded and left. As he walked through the bar, his mind was racing. He had to make sure Lance was protected, and the way to do that was to tell him what to be watchful of, and that meant coming clean about his past. He hated to do it during such an early stage, and after the exhibition he gave Lance a couple weeks ago, he didn't know how

Lance would take it. Then again, Lance wasn't stupid, had probably put most of it together already. And he was still in Lance's bed. If this thing with Lance wasn't going to work, it would be better to have Lance end it now, before they got even more involved. But his stomach was sour with the possibility.

Lance was waiting for him, and looked up as he approached, concerned. Taylor found a smile for him, and almost dragged him out of the bar. He nodded at Lance's car, got into his own, and they drove together to Lance's house.

Taylor felt like he was walking through quicksand as he got out of the car. The steps into the house took forever; wanting the freedom of honesty was one thing, paying the price was another. He'd never been ashamed about what he'd done, even if he wasn't happy with it, but he never cared what anyone thought about him. Everyone he knew in Brooklyn understood about what he did, or knew not to ask. He'd made sure his girlfriends hadn't stuck around long enough to figure anything out and he never slept with anyone close to the business. Now shame was dragging at him, and he was going to inflict his past on the man he loved, probably forcing him to leave. He had no armor against this. By the time he got to the door, his knees were trembling. One day he's the guy who takes on the toughest, with no one to worry about besides Matty, the next day he's wanting to remake himself for a farm boy from Texas.

He pushed open the front door which had been left ajar, to find Lance on the couch, two beers on the coffee table, and Lance on the couch, not looking at him. Taylor sighed and sat next to Lance, grabbed a beer and drank. He put the beer down on the table, not wanting even a bottle between them.

"Lance. I gotta tell you some stuff about me..."

Lance appreciated Taylor telling him why he'd acted oddly that evening, but he couldn't take in everything Taylor told him. Even though he'd guessed a lot of it, a chill ran up his spine when he found out how right he'd been. What had been a vague shift of clouds on the horizon was now a thundercloud right above. Taylor's real fear for him was a cold rain on his skin.

Despite his shock, Lance couldn't stand the misery that came over Taylor as he described his life in Brooklyn. Taylor's voice shook as he spoke and he avoided Lance's eyes. Lance was hearing about someone he'd never met.

As Taylor's words whirled around him, Lance saw how much he'd wanted to get out of the violence. Whenever he could, Taylor had set up legitimate businesses, and when the opportunity came to become a citizen, as Taylor called it, he did it without hesitation. At one point he'd even tried to get Matty to leave while Taylor stayed behind to clean things up.

Of course the sticking point was that even though it was only hinted at, Taylor had killed at least one person, and Lance wondered how much of this insanity Taylor wasn't telling him. Even if the last situation was a setup - holy shit. And Taylor grew up doing shit like this. Could he really leave it behind?

Obviously every word cost Taylor plenty. He was sweating shame, while Lance was also seeing that to cope with the impossible, Taylor had found rock inside himself, strong enough to let him leave the only existence he'd known, and to find who he really was.

"I'm only tellin' you this because he mentioned you, you know, being friends at the bar, and I just want you to be careful. I don't think he meant anything by it, I don't think it was a threat, but I don't

know him well enough to be sure. If there's one rule, it's to never underestimate your opponent. Maybe I can join you when you run for the next week or so, not to bother you, just back you up when you're vulnerable." He stopped and turned to face Lance.

"I'm sorry, Lance. I thought it was gone, but it's back, and I have to tell someone important to me that I was someone they'd never want to know."

Lance didn't know what to think. Should he be worried about being hurt, about Taylor being hurt? Might someone follow Taylor to Florida to get revenge, or did that happen only in movies? If he stayed with Taylor, would Taylor's past explode one day in his face? Was Taylor's nature truly violent; might it rule him, even without him knowing? Or had the violence been less natural to Taylor than anyone had thought, and he could leave it behind with relief? He rubbed his hands over his face, not knowing how to respond, or what questions to ask.

Taylor cleared his throat. "Lance, I understand if you want to stop seeing me, but I'd like to stay here for at least tonight. I really don't think you're in danger, but I have to make sure. I couldn't..." He stopped and cleared his throat. "And if you stop coming into the bar, DeNunzio will see you're not important to me, and I'll know you're safe."

Lance looked at Taylor and took a breath. "You've been honest with me and I appreciate it. I'll be honest, too. I have no idea what to think about this. I think I need some time."

Taylor nodded. "'s what I figured. Can I stay here? I'll sleep on the couch. That okay?"

"Yeah." Lance scuffled through the house as though his body had grown too heavy, grabbing an extra blanket and pillow. He gave one last look at Taylor who was settling into the couch, and went into the bedroom to get ready for bed.

Even when he didn't know Taylor, when he was just watching him at the bar, Taylor wasn't thuggish. Taylor was always polite and respectful when doing his job, possessing an unexpected dignity. Even when a patron got nasty, he remained calm and polite. Lance hadn't been able to put a word on it until now: Taylor made bouncing into an art.

Taylor might have lost important pieces of himself, but he'd also gained something Lance didn't think he knew he had: the ability to change gracefully. Taylor had made huge life changes twice within the span of a few months, leaving his home for good and letting himself get involved with a man. Compared to the changes Lance had recently gone through, Taylor's were extraordinary.

Lance stripped and lay in bed, thoughts still zig zagging. Lance had never wanted to be involved with the violence inherent in football, either in the game and especially when adrenaline spiked the guys into craziness after the games. With Tweeder, the violence in the game gave him the authority to let loose whenever he wanted. But Tweeter was a high school kid from Texas – what would it do to someone who lived that violence daily, and who'd killed? Did it make a difference if you did it because you could and you had to, when you didn't actually want to?

Tumbling in on top of that, he wondered how it might affect his and Taylor's future. Lance couldn't imagine Taylor hitting him; it was inconceivable. But he didn't know how Taylor would act after a relationship got older. Would he be stable in a long term relationship? Had Taylor ever had one? He also didn't know how Taylor reacted to threats outside of work, where he had permission to fight. What could make Taylor's self-control break, if anything? And if it did break, what would that mean?

He rolled onto his side, trying to relax, but instead thinking about how terrified Taylor must have been in some of the situations he'd alluded to, especially the last one, the situation that allowed him to get out. Getting shot was bad enough, but going into a setup, expecting to die to protect a friend and to let him go straight – that was heroic. And it was fucking insane.

He flopped onto his other side, and stuck his face in the pillow Taylor used last. Now he knew where some of his scars came from – the round, scary ones on the back and front of his shoulder. Jeez. He hadn't wanted to believe they could be from a bullet, but now he wondered what else about Taylor he had just not looked at. He flopped onto his stomach, face still in Taylor's pillow.

He hadn't seen Taylor smoke since the morning after they'd first slept together, and Lance's stomach flipped. He thought about the expression Taylor wore each time he'd done something that affected Lance, like when he threw away his cigarettes. Taylor took things seriously, having lived with death one mistake away. Then he thought about how Kilmer tried to be the bad boy of West Canaan. Lance didn't think anyone had bought Kilmer's statement that death was preferable to losing: the fact that he'd had the balls to say something like that put him and West Canaan into another category of absurdity, even if you loved football. Why did everyone just accept Kilmer's hold over them? Maybe it was a chicken and egg situation. No one in West Canaan had a future outside of the town. They were unmotivated to do better because they were taught the only important thing was football, and they depended on the high school's football success to make their lives seem important. The town took itself seriously, but anything that happened there was insignificant next to what Taylor grew up with.

What were the possibilities for a kid growing up like Taylor? Taylor said that Matty was different; he was kept out of "family business," and that innocence was one reason Taylor was so loyal to him. What would have happened to Lance if he'd grown up there? His stomach roiled.

He thought he caught Taylor's scent on the pillow. He was about to flop onto his other side, when it hit him that if he was so turned off by Taylor's past, why was he spending his night obsessing about him? Even now, with Taylor's past and a storm of unanswered questions between them, he ached for Taylor's body, his warm arms holding him even in sleep. He flopped onto his back and sighed. He got out of bed.

He watched Taylor from the doorway for a few moments, the cold light from outside cracking the darkness. He lay on his back, one knee bent and leaning against the back of the couch, one massive arm over his eyes. He couldn't be sleeping in that position. Lance cleared his throat, and felt Taylor twitch.

"Taylor..." Taylor turned his head toward the back of the couch. "Come to bed."

"Nah, it's okay, I'm good out here."

"Well, I'm not. Come back to bed. You belong there."

"Do I?"

"Yeah, you do. I still find it all hard to take in, but I want you there." He waited.

Taylor lowered his arm and looked at him for what felt like an hour. Lance had watched bar patrons squirm under that heavy gaze, but it was honey to Lance. Taylor slowly rose from the couch, and stood in front of him, his hands on Lance's waist. "Be sure, Lance. If you're not, let me go now."

Saturated with misery, Taylor's words answered any questions Lance had about Taylor's commitment. He wrapped his arms around Taylor's neck, pulling him into a hug. Taylor paused, then returned the embrace, holding on to him tightly, his chest hitching as he took deep breaths. Eventually Lance pulled back, hoping Taylor didn't notice that his eyes were a little wet, and lead Taylor to bed.

Taylor woke early in the morning, amazed to have Lance wrapped around him. Lance turned onto his back, his blue eyes just visible in the pale yellow light. Although he knew more would come from his confession, he was unexpectedly relieved that his past was out into the open. He'd hidden himself his whole life, even from Matty; he had no idea letting someone see who he really was would ease so much of the pressure. Lance was watching him, and he lifted a hand to Taylor's neck, guiding him down into a kiss of devastating tenderness. Taylor thought his chest might explode from the brightness.

Lance sighed as the kiss ended. He looked away, then met Taylor's eyes. "I wonder who I'd be if I grew up in your situation. I was always athletic, but I was never the tough guy, I was the one who could throw and run, the one the tough guys protected. What would I have done in your situation?" He shook his head. "And who would you be if you'd grown up in West Canaan? The pressure we were under was crazy in its own way, for our world. Billy Bob was our best offense, had to take down the biggest guys, but they let him get big by eating anything he wanted – he just got so fat, no one could stand up against him. Then Kilmer made fun of him. I love the guy, and I can't believe he's gonna live past 40. Who would you have been?"

Taylor watched him closely. "You know there's no point to this, right?" He smiled when Lance nodded, and ran his fingers over Lance's eyebrow, and down his cheek. "I'd be the guy who'd protect you, and who'd follow around after you, hoping you'd notice me."

During breakfast, Lance ran his fingers over Taylor's tattoo. "When did you know you liked guys?"

"Always."

"So you didn't mind letting everyone know you're half Jewish, but you couldn't tell them you were gay?"

"Ah, yeah. Yeah, in New York you got the typical racial tensions that get worse or better depending what neighborhood you're in, but there's a kind of respect there, too. But if you're a faggot," he shook his head, "there ain't no respect for faggots."

"Was that another reason you wanted to get out?"

Taylor nodded thoughtfully. "I didn't figure it at the time, but yeah. I never expected I'd do anything about it, though. I'd only done two guys before, and that was giving each other a hand after drinking too much. The most important thing was surviving. I never thought that being with a guy was possible."

He tilted his head. "What about you?"

Lance blushed. "Nah, I never even thought about it. I always liked girls. Besides, there aren't any gays in West Canaan, that I knew about, anyway. Everyone was like everyone else, or they pretended to be."

Taylor wondered if he should bring this up, but he couldn't resist. "What do you think they'd do if you told them?"

Lance shook his head. "I think Mox would be okay with it – he was a good friend, and he always thought for himself. And my sister – she was Mox's girlfriend, and always thought a little differently, too – she never liked football. I think Tweeder might want to kill me, but he was always a crazy fuck. Billy Bob – I think if he weren't with anyone else he wouldn't care, but he tends to

bend with pressure. Except he made it his mission to protect me – he was so devoted... I just don't know." He looked down at his cereal. "I don't know what my folks would do. My dad was so proud of me because I won all the time. They'd probably think I lost my mind or maybe got in a cult."

Lance tried to smile, but Taylor caught the unhappiness underneath. He was about to try to get more from him when Lance turned the tables, asking, "You think you're going to tell Matty?"

Taylor couldn't answer. Before last night, he thought this thing between him and Lance was too new for him to need to say anything to Matty. But now he wasn't sure. Even though Lance needed more time, Taylor could see that he understood everything Taylor *didn't* say last night, and miraculously Lance hadn't turned him away. Not many people would want to or be able to accept what he'd spilled. And if things with Lance were that important to both of them, he needed to think about telling Matty. It was risky. He thought Matty would accept it – he was as devoted to Taylor as Taylor was to him - but if he didn't, and Lance were to leave him, he'd have no one. And even though he'd never expected to be with anyone, he'd expected to have Matty as a friend for a long time, if they stayed alive. On the other hand, if he lied to Matty, how much of a friendship was that? He shook his head.

Lance nodded shortly.

When Taylor looked at him, Lance said, "I know, it's complicated."

Taylor held his eyes. "Yeah, it is."

"It's okay, really."

He really did get it. Taylor nodded, and Lance got up to clear the table. He leaned against the counter and said, "I'll be expected to go home for Christmas."

Taylor waited. Lance continued, his head high, but arms crossed in front of him, "I may tell them then."

Taylor got up and stood in front of Lance, leaning in to him, and rubbing his hands up and down Lance's arms. Lance uncrossed his arms, wrapping them around Taylor's waist. "Be careful, Lance. You don't need to tell them, at least not right away. This is a big enough change for you, you don't need to make it harder on yourself if they can't handle it. Not everyone can. And what about graduation? You'll want to have them there to celebrate with you, right? They'll be so proud of you. Why don't you wait, make sure all of you have that, in case."

"In case they disown me." Lance's thumb rubbed the skin under his waistband. "When I left, I wanted to make sure I lead a different life from my father's. All he and the other dad's do is relive their high school football moments, and ridicule others for not being as good as they were. They didn't want to face that Kilmer bullied them and they didn't have the balls to stand up to him. They never tried to protect their sons from him, not even caring if we fucked ourselves up for the rest of our lives. All their lying to themselves and to us – I left it behind. I want to be who I am, and part of that is standing up for things I believe are right, and being honest. I'm ashamed that even after what I went through, when I was standing there in a cast and crutches in that locker room, Kilmer about to put a needle into Wendell's knee, it wasn't me who stood up to Kilmer. It was Mox. That son of a bitch was about to do to Wendell what he did to me, and I wasn't the first person to tell him to stop. That was wrong, and I'm not going to be that person any more."

He leaned up to kiss Lance's forehead, needing a moment to collect himself. "Being a good person doesn't mean you have to put yourself into situations that can hurt you when there's nothing big at stake. You've heard about working inside the organization?"

"Yeah."

"Seems to me there's two ways to work this. You can tell everyone you're gay before they know you and trust you, or you can just be you, not hiding, but not saying anything either, and after they know you, you let them know and treat it like it's something normal, no big deal."

Lance turned his piercing blue eyes on him. "All right. But I still think it's wrong to hide from my family, no matter what the reaction." Lance sighed and slumped, a new level of anxiety in his eyes. "But Taylor, the thought of actually doing it – I don't know if I could."

"I know. It's new, Lance..."

"... I have to give it time." Lance gave him a hesitant smile. "But sometimes time just makes things hurt more."

All Taylor wanted to do was wrap Lance up and not let anything ever hurt him. All he could do was promise both of them find the easiest way, the one that would do the least amount of damage.

Matty called him on his cell as he was at the drugstore, in front of the lube section, inviting him out for a drink. He almost looked over his shoulder the timing was so strange. He kept his answers short, not knowing if his pounding heart would show through his voice. He accepted the invitation, and closed his cell, taking a deep breath. How could this shit get him so worked up?

Buying condoms wasn't anything new, but when he thought of what he wanted to do with them he got shaky, in a bad and good way. He didn't know what lube to get, so he picked something that seemed to hint more than the others that it was for gays.

Lance had been extra busy the past couple weeks studying for his exams, and was again out of town for the weekend's game. They hadn't talked further about Christmas, but Taylor assumed that he was spending the week between the holidays in Texas. Matty had always found time to spend with Taylor over the holidays, inviting him to Christmas dinner since he was a kid. But now with Polly in the picture, Taylor doubted he'd have the luxury of Christmas dinner; he was expecting to be alone the whole week.

Alone had a new meaning since he met Lance. Aside from Matty and a few acquaintances he'd have a beer with when he felt social, he'd preferred his own company. He got tired of being looked at with fear when he was going about his business. The guys who looked at him with that other look – he made sure to ignore them and distract anyone around from noticing. He'd have been expected to defend his honor from a queer, and he never wanted to get into *that* situation.

He rarely liked the women he dated enough to spend a lot of time with them, and he'd never been serious about anyone. Not only did he not want the hassle of a steady girl, but the women who were attracted to him liked him in a kind of creepy way, like they might want him to fight for them or something. When he was alone for long periods, he'd go to the gym, work, and sometimes he'd sneak off to the library when it wasn't busy, and grab a couple books. Now time alone was time without Lance, and he wasn't used to how isolated it made him feel.

As he sat in the bar waiting for Matty, he watched the people around him. As usual, people stared at him, then looked away when they saw him watching. He was used to being looked at as a thug, which he didn't care about, but not as a queer – he had no idea how that would feel. Ignoring his interest in guys never made him different from who he really was. It was something

he carried inside himself, something he couldn't indulge, so ignoring had become just another weight he'd molded into muscle.

But his muscles were shifting under his skin. Some were no longer needed while others grew stronger with what he felt for Lance.

He'd never cared about social status, but he did need to prepare for anything that might happen in his new role as outcast. He supposed that if he thought he needed more practice fighting, that would be one way to get it. He had to smile at that. Unless it would freak Lance out. That was the only thing he cared about. And keeping him safe.

He heard the chuckle a moment before he felt the hand on his shoulder. Matty sat next to him, and looked him over quickly before ordering a beer. "Sitting alone at a bar, laughing to yourself. That doesn't look too good, my friend."

Taylor grinned at Matty. "I ain't never looked good."

Matty grinned back. "Taylor, I keep tellin' you, man, you're a good looking guy – you just gotta put the time into finding someone special."

Time to change the subject. "So what's going on with that bastard you work for?"

That was all it took for Matty to tell Taylor about what he was up to. Taylor listened enough to keep up, but mostly he tasted a new flavor of silence between Matty and him. Almost all his life he'd had Matty's voice holding him together when he felt he was flying apart. He didn't like this new flavor. Now that his secret had grown legs, it was wrong to continue to hide it. Matty didn't even know Taylor had a secret. How would he feel to find out that Taylor kept something this big from him all their lives? Hiding his sexuality was much bigger than he'd let himself believe. Wouldn't it sound like a betrayal to Matty, even if Taylor hadn't realized how important it was? Back then, telling Matty his secret would have put Matty and himself, and their friendship, at extreme risk. Even with Lance firmly in his life, Taylor didn't want to lose Matty: he was family.

Matty paused to light a cigarette, offering one to Taylor, who hardly noticed Matty's surprise when he declined. He told Taylor another story about his boss, then again offered Taylor the pack. When Taylor shook his head, Matty blew out some smoke and looked at him thoughtfully.

"You quit, Taylor?"

"Uh, yeah, kinda." To distract him from going in this direction, Taylor asked about Polly. "Ah, she's great. Did I tell you I told her all about everything?" Taylor shook his head. "She took it real good. She knows I don't want nothing to do with that stuff again. I'm thinking about some kinds of businesses that we can start together, when she finally gets her masters'." He shook his head, bemused. "I still can't see what she sees in me." He smiled as goofily as he did every time he said it.

Taylor watched Matty's happiness, and he saw miles of deserted road between them. Looked like he had the same amount of choice with this as he did hiding himself before.

"Matty. I gotta tell you something, but I don't know how you're gonna take it."

Matty looked at him, concerned. Taylor was tempted to grab a cigarette from Matty's pack on the bar.

"You're not in trouble, are you?"

"Nah, nothing like that. It's good, it's just not what you might be expecting."

Matty was obviously waiting for him, but his words dried up. "Taylor..."

He took a swig of his beer. "Yeah, all right, all right. I've been seeing someone, for a little while now. I think it's getting serious."

"Oh, Taylor, that's great, man! I was hoping you would find a nice girl—"

Taylor interrupted. "Thanks, Matty, but there's more. It's a man. I'm with another man."

Taylor watched the shock wave hit in Matty's eyes. Then disbelief crowded out the shock, then denial, and Taylor saw what was coming next. "No joke, Matty."

Matty looked away, and took a long drink of his beer. He finally turned to Taylor. "You're serious? What does that mean?"

Taylor laughed without humor. "What do you think it means? We might stay together. I might move in with him. That kind of thing."

Matty lowered his voice, and leaned in to speak confidentially. "Taylor, this isn't you. What happened? I don't get it."

"You know how good it was to tell Polly about everything? Well, that's what I'm telling you now. I've always been this way. I knew I could never do anything about it, so I never did, and it was never a big deal. But I'm a citizen now, just like you, and I don't see why I can't finally be who I am." He took a drink of his beer. "I wasn't looking for it. I figured I'd just always be alone." He shrugged his shoulders. "But then I met Lance, and – jeez, Matty, it's so good. It made me see that I was wrong about it not being a big deal. I found this great guy, and I ain't giving him up for a rep that I don't want or need anymore. I'm sorry I never told you. I never knew it would be important, and it was too dangerous for both of us to tell you even if I'd wanted to. Now that I'm a citizen, it's all different. Matty, I ain't never been happy like this."

"I want you to be happy, you know that. But this? You sure you can't find a nice girl instead? the girls down here are a helluva lot nicer than back home."

"Didn't you hear what I just said?" Taylor was getting irritated.

"Yeah, I heard you. But it's a shitload to take in." He paused and took a long swig off his beer. "How long have you been seeing him?" Taylor watched Matty put two and two together. "Jeez. Is that why you quit smoking?"

"I've been seeing him a few months. He's at the university. I came to work one night, he was studying at the bar. We started talking. He's a good person." He paused for another drink, then looked steadily at Matty, even though Matty was still talking to the mirror behind the bar. "Yeah, I quit for him. And Matty, I told him. About everything."

Matty's jaw dropped, but then he thought for a little while, watching Taylor, and finally nodded. "Huh. Okay... That serious, huh?"

Taylor nodded. Matty asked, "What happened?"

"He saw me work over a son of a bitch at the bar who pulled a fuckin' knife. I gave the bastard a little extra, you know? I ain't done that in a while, it was fun, stupid bastard, pulling a knife on me." Matty finally met his eyes, and for a minute no shadows divided them. "But I didn't paste him or anything. And then I look up and there's Lance watching me." He shook his head. "It scared the shit out of me. I thought for sure that was it. But he thought about it, and he was okay. Then, a

couple weeks later, my boss asks me if I wanted to do something extra for him." He looked at Matty, who nodded. "I said no, but he noticed me being friendly with Lance, and I got worried. I didn't think he'd be a problem, I just wanted to make sure. So I figured I had to tell him to keep him safe. To make sure he got it."

"Did it work out okay, with your boss?"

"Yeah. It was all okay. He was disappointed, but he accepted my answer."

"How did, ah, Lance take it?"

"He freaked out for a little while, but I think he'd figured out a lot of it before I told him. He'd, like, touch my scar, and I could almost hear him wondering. Still, it's a hard thing to hear. But, Matty, he's a great guy. I'd like you to meet him."

He watched Matty blush, and when he raised his eyebrows, questioning, Matty hesitated. "Uh Taylor, is he, uh, ya know...", he held up a limp wrist.

Taylor sighed. "C'mon Matty. This is me. Lance was a quarterback in high school. He's no fairy." He continued more quietly. "He said he never thought about another guy till he met me. Isn't that a fucking trip?" He took another swallow of beer, trying to stop the grin that wanted to escape. "He grew up in Texas, in some weird town -- all they care about is high school football, they live for it."

"Sounds like the twilight zone."

"Yeah. He busted his knee cause they forced him to play with it all screwed up. I mean, it's a game. Jeez, to fuck someone up for the rest of his life for a fucking game." He shook his head.

Matty was quiet for a while, obviously thinking. Taylor was relieved to not be talking any more. Too bad it didn't last.

"So you felt like this before? I seen you do girls."

"Yeah, I did girls, but you'll have noticed I never spent much time with them. I'd rather be with a guy. Listen, I was never attracted to anyone we knew, okay? Does that help? I can't help it, Matty. I wouldn't pick it, but I'm not going to hide it anymore. I'm not ashamed." That wasn't all true, but he figured Matty didn't need to know about how pretty he thought Scarpa had been.

"No, Taylor, I'm not saying you should be ashamed. I'm just... I don't know -- I'd never have guessed this and it's just, you know, weird."

"Yeah, I figured. Listen, I gotta get to work. Lance comes to the bar to study every night I work unless he's working on a team project. If you want to come by sometime, you could do that." Matty didn't reply, he just looked uncomfortable. "Or, look, just give me a call. But use the cell, I'm mostly at Lance's. And give my best to Polly, all right?" He got up, and drained his beer, and threw down some bills. "Look, I know this is rough. If I wasn't me, I wouldn't believe it either. Just - maybe try to see it from everything I said, okay?" Matty nodded. "Take care, Matty."

A week later he hadn't heard from Matty, leaving Taylor antsy. Making it worse was seeing Lance exactly twice in that time. Both times all Lance had time for was going for a run, and he broke down for that only when he was going stir crazy from too much studying. Taylor took what he could get, but it left him horny and frustrated. According to Lance, a project had to be redone from the beginning because someone dropped out of class or something. Taylor had spent the week

working any extra hours he could pick up, working out, and trying to keep busy at his own apartment. He'd cleaned his apartment, did laundry, even got a library card at the Leon County library. But he was off work tonight even though it was Friday, and he was beyond bored with flipping channels. He was almost embarrassed at how much he missed Lance. He decided the hell with it – he was pretty sure tonight was the night Lance was supposed to be done with the project, and he was going to take a chance.

He drove slowly over to Lance's house. He'd never dropped in to Lance's unannounced, and Lance rarely came to his place; to do so meant dragging around a laptop and a ton of books. He wasn't sure if it was okay to drop in or if he should call first, but he didn't feel like calling, he just wanted to go. He might as well try it and see what happens.

He'd surprised himself by telling Matty he was serious about Lance, considering how little time they managed to spend together. But what he'd said was true, at least for him.

Lance had mentioned telling his folks about Taylor, maybe at Christmas. Lance was a smart guy, but he was young. Taylor didn't think there was a chance in hell that anyone in that fucked up town would accept him as queer, and it would make it worse, not better, that he'd been a town hero. When Lance told him that his dad had put up a billboard to Lance in his front yard, Taylor lost it and laughed out loud. Not at Lance, who'd looked sheepish but laughed along, but at what a pathetic bastard his father was, living through his son like that, and letting him get fucked up in the process. Apparently no one thought this was weird – this Mox guy's father, the quarterback who won the game Lance coached, put up his own billboard when Mox won the final game of the season. Definitely Twilight Zone. He wondered if he'd ever get the chance to see the place himself; if Lance would ever really be strong enough to take him there, and if it would be safe.

Lance was going to graduate in a little over half a year, and his future was more important than his fucked up parents. Pro sports weren't known for being kind to queers. Taylor knew that most of the time you had to play games to survive. He might not want Lance or himself to have to, but he also knew that if he had Lance in his life, he could get through anything. He suspected that Lance might have problems staying hidden, though.

When he pulled up in front of Lance's house, light shone from between the blinds. Maybe the project wasn't done, and he'd have to head home again. Maybe he needed a hobby for when Lance wasn't available.

His knock on the front door wasn't answered – he could hear music from outside. He dug out of his pocket the key Lance had given him the last time they went jogging. Lance had blushed when he'd handed it over, but he'd smiled when Taylor tucked it away. He unlocked the door, and let himself in. A small shout of surprise greeted him, and a young woman stood staring at him in front of the couch, a bottle of beer in her hand, her eyebrows up to her hairline. He was about to reassure her when Lance sped into the living room and saw Taylor standing there. A huge smile lit his face, and he launched himself across the room and into Taylor's arms. Taylor caught him, ecstatic at the greeting, and then stunned as Lance latched his mouth over Taylor's, kissing him until he saw stars, right in front of the girl, who produced an odd, wheezy noise he heard over the music. Lance pulled away and whispered in his ear how much he missed him, while Taylor watched the girl sink onto the couch, mouth still open. Taylor's hands were roaming over Lance of their own volition and it was all he could do to keep his hands above Lance's waist. Finally, taking a big breath, he pried Lance away from him, nodding to the woman on the couch, her eyes still wide as she sipped her beer.

Lance took Taylor's hand and lead him into the living room, turning down the stereo on the way. "We just finished, and were celebrating with a beer."

"Becky, this is Taylor. Taylor, Becky." Taylor shook her hand.

"Nice to meet you." All Becky was capable of was bobbing her head up and down. Taylor wasn't sure what really stunned her, the kiss, the impression he made, or the fact that Lance wasn't just unavailable, but gay.

He sat on the couch, and Lance handed him his beer, ducking into the kitchen for another. When he returned, he had become more serious and was blushing a little. "Becky, I'd really appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone about Taylor and me. This sort of thing can spread all over campus, and the professional sports market isn't too open minded."

"I thought you were majoring in engineering." She squeaked out, and waved a hand toward the papers and books strewn over the coffee table.

"I tried to double major in engineering and Sports Management, but couldn't do it. I had to change the engineering degree to a minor. I really love engineering, but I'd rather being a football coach." Becky's eyebrows climbed her forehead again. Lance watched her and grinned. "Yeah, I know. I was a quarterback in high school. I still really love the game, even if I can't play anymore."

Taylor hadn't known about the major and the minor, which explained the astonishing amount of work Lance had to do. Taylor didn't like that he didn't know this. Lance never showed discomfort answering Taylor's questions, but Taylor still had trouble asking them, feeling like he was prying. He needed to change it.

"You must have one hell of a workload." She then looked at her watch. "Look, Lance, I have an early class tomorrow. I'm going to take off. Now, you're going to..." They started discussing the plans they had for the project, and Taylor reduced his concentration to half.

Eventually she left, with a sincere "nice to have met you," but there was a scary speculation in her eyes. He wondered if the entire campus would know about Lance by the end of the weekend, or if she could keep it to herself.

When he returned from walking Becky to the door, Lance straddled Taylor's legs, and leaned in for a kiss. This one was gentle and Taylor let his hands go wherever they wanted, which were over the sweet globes of his ass. Lance pulled back, leaning his forehead against Taylor's and whispered, "I missed you." He planted little kisses over his cheeks, up his temple and over his head. "I'm so glad this project is over, it was nasty. But Becky was a great help. I don't think I could have done it without her." The kisses kept coming, between the words, neither letting up. "You're not working tonight? I'm so glad you came over." And then they were at each other again.

When he woke the next morning, he was surrounded by the silky warmth of Lance's body and the musk of last night's marathon sex. The wet spot had been huge on Lance's side, so he had draped himself over Taylor before falling asleep. Taylor woke in the now-dry wet spot, with Lance everywhere. It was perfect. He sighed in contentment and fell back to sleep.

Taylor woke again to Lance heading to the bathroom. He leaned off the bed, and grabbed his pants. He dumped all but one condom into the nightstand drawer, and put one condom and lube on Lance's pillow. He waited. Lance hesitated when he saw the supplies, but he scooped them up, got back into bed, and leaned over to kiss Taylor. Taylor lost himself in the kissing for a while, but when Lance pulled back, he flipped over onto his stomach, and pushed the covers down to his legs. Even though Lance appeared as surprised as he was, that earned him a gaspy moan. He loved blowing Lance and being blown by him, but he wanted Lance inside him, to fill this silence, too. Lance stroked him from head to butt.

"Taylor, are you sure?"

"You know you don't need to ask."

Lance kissed his neck and head. "I know. I just..."

Taylor turned over, and pulled Lance down in to a kiss. "Yeah, I know. It's okay."

He turned back over, heart pounding much faster than he'd ever let on. He was so relaxed around Lance that this was a natural step. Even if he never expected to have the opportunity to do anything about it, he couldn't remember when he hadn't thought about other men sexually, and he'd never been turned off by the idea of being fucked. It certainly looked good in the porn he'd watched, and it was a standard fantasy.

Lance took a deep breath, steadying himself through the burst of lust that shook him as Taylor spread himself out on the bed. All that sexy beauty, just for him. His stomach bottomed out and he straddled Taylor's hips and started massaging his back, enticed as always by the muscles under the smooth skin, and loving the brush of his balls against Taylor's ass. He worked his way down Taylor's back, before zeroing in on his butt. Jeez, the man had a fine ass, as well developed as the rest of him. He wanted to rub his entire body against that butt, but settled for tasting it. He rubbed his face over his cheeks, then kissed and licked it as he went, occasionally taking light bites. Taylor was panting when Lance pulled off. Lance ran his hands over the muscles that flowed down the sides of his spine as they arched into this pelvis. The man was a work of art.

Lance took hold of the lube and condom with shaking fingers. Slicking his fingers, he slowly entered Taylor's tight heat with a couple fingers, earning him a gasp. Taylor tilted up his pelvis, inviting more. He stretched Taylor until he felt him relax around his fingers, trying not think about what that heat would feel like on his dick. He pulled his fingers out and rolled on the condom. He lubed himself quickly, and Taylor opened his legs further for him. He guided himself to the entrance, and glided in slowly as Taylor opened for him. Hot and smooth, tighter than he could imagine, he was soon fully encased, and then he was lost in Taylor. He thrust gently, at first holding himself above Taylor to watch himself going in and out of that beautiful ass, but it was too much, and he wanted this to last. He lay down over Taylor, who hissed out a "yes."

Taylor tipped his butt up again, and growled, "C'mon, Lance." Lance's little head didn't wait for his big one to keep up, but started sliding in and out of the heat. Taylor rocked back against him, sliding into a rhythm. Lance changed the angle, getting a sharp exclamation from Taylor and a powerful thrust back. Lance did it again, and got a noise from Taylor that was a cross between a growl and a whine, so he kept pushing into that spot, Taylor thrusting back erratically and harder, his hands planted against the wall at the head of the bed for more traction, then Taylor groaned, thrusting back in short jerks, squeezing down around Lance's cock, and Lance felt him pulse from the inside. So close, he needed just a little more, he wrapped his arms around Taylor, holding him hard and tight, pumping hard and fast and then he was there, pushing into the scalding tight, so good, oh god, joy surrounding him like Taylor surrounded his cock, and his arms surrounded that hard body, he was lost, sunk deep and coming, lost in Taylor.

He never wanted to move. This was perfect, laying over Taylor's landscape, both of them panting and hot and sweaty, his dick still sunk in heaven. Taylor wasn't showing any distress at having Lance collapsed over him. But soon he was starting to slip out, so he pulled out carefully, a low groan meeting him. He threw the condom into the wastebasket and flopped down next to Taylor, who turned on his side and pushed over toward Lance.

"Wet spot."

Lance grinned. Taylor moved over enough to get out of the wet, wrapped an arm and leg around Lance and sighed deeply.

"You okay?"

"Mmm. Perfect."

Lance kissed the part of Taylor's head within reach, and they both fell into the ocean of sleep.

He woke to Taylor making a soft groaning sound as he got out of bed. He dozed until Taylor came back to bed. He rolled over to Taylor, who wrapped his arms around him while Lance stroked whatever part of Taylor he could reach.

"I saw Matty last week."

Lance waited.

"I told him about us."

Lance looked up at him. "How did he take it?"

"I'm not sure. Real surprised. He told Polly about everything I told you about, and when he told me that, I just had to tell him about you. It's not right that he can tell me something that important but I can't tell him."

Lance nodded.

"He's thinking about it, I know that. And I think maybe he doesn't want to lose me as much as I don't want to lose him." He was quiet for a while. "I wonder if he's going to be pissed when he figures out I spent my life lying to him."

"You don't think he'll understand why you kept it from him?"

"Yeah, he'll understand, but to keep something so personal from him – even if it was dangerous to know, it's like I didn't trust him." He sighed. "I told him to call me, or come by the bar to meet you."

Lance smiled. "Think that'll help, huh?"

"Yeah, I think that'll help." Lips touched his forehead.

"Lance, last night, you could have screwed things up for yourself, you know?"

"With Becky? Yeah, I know." Lance sighed and looked away. "I don't think she'll tell anyone, and besides --"

"Yeah, I know, you don't want to hide."

"Yeah. But you can't want to hide, either, after all those years denying yourself."

Taylor squeezed him hard, wrapping a leg around him as well. His big hand gently tilted his head toward Taylor's. There was a strange light in Taylor's eye as he kissed Lance firmly. "Are you kidding? I want everyone to know that I got the best looking, smartest man in the world." His grin faded. "But more important is for you to start out with a fighting chance."

"I know, Taylor."

Taylor sighed and kissed his hair. Lance wondered if Taylor had some sort of hair fetish. "You do realize her world was rearranged."

"She wasn't after me." Taylor tilted his head to look at his face and gave him a look. "No, she has a boyfriend. He's in our class, but he's in another study group."

"Uh huh." But he smiled.

"Stop it. You're biased."

"I'm completely biased." Lance knew he was blushing, but damn, it felt good having this man's attention.

At breakfast, Lance admitted to himself he was tired of his own indecision. Even though it was early for him and Taylor, he wanted this desperately. If his folks called, or any students, he'd tell them he had a roommate. For the people he really cared about, like Mox and his sister, he'd use the roommate lie until he could see them in person to tell them. If he wanted to be out with Taylor, at least eventually, he had to start somewhere.

He hated that he couldn't bring Taylor with him to Texas over Christmas this year, or maybe ever. It was wrong, and he wondered if it would ever stop bothering him. But he was also afraid of what the good people of West Canaan would do to them. He hoped to tell his parents one day about Taylor, but he wasn't sure when that would be. Maybe after he got a job, especially if he got a coaching job, his dad would treat him like an adult, and he could tell him without him having a fit. He'd also have to watch for pigs with wings.

He refilled their coffee cups, and sat back down at the table. "Taylor, I don't want that to happen again." He looked up to a glimmer of pain and confusion in Taylor's eyes. "No! Not that." He grabbed Taylor's hand and hung on. "Never that. I mean not seeing you for so long. It's going to be this crazy until the end of the semester, and as bad next semester, too."

"Yeah, and what was that about you studying engineering as well as coaching?"

Lance felt his cheeks warm. "I figured there are a lot fewer coaching jobs than engineering jobs. If I couldn't get a job coaching, I'd go into engineering. But being the only coaching student means I'm used as a peon as well as for a coach, and last year I got so busy I had to go with one or the other, so I chose football."

"But now, you seeing me, it's going to be harder for you in football. And you gave up your fall back position."

"It may be harder. Look, as much as I want to coach, and I'm willing to put a whole lot of time into it, I'm not letting a bunch of homophobic assholes run my life. It's not the end of my life if I can't coach. If I need to finish my engineering degree, I'll figure out a way. I have all my basic classes, I just need a few advanced ones."

He drank some coffee. "So, ah, anyway. I was going to ask you, and it's completely okay if you don't want to – if maybe you'd like to move in here with me."

He made himself look into Taylor's serious face, unable to breathe. Taylor's dark brown eyes were deep with pleasure. "Yes."

Only then did Lance let himself go, grinning like a loon.

Taylor gave notice at his apartment right away, and they arranged for him to move in the next Friday, Taylor's night off for that week. Unfortunately, the week before he moved in, Lance had an exam and a paper due, and had to begin a new coaching project. He did manage to clean the place up, at least he did laundry and put his clothes away. And he moved some stuff around to give Taylor his own drawers. The only things in his closet were one crappy suit that never felt right, and a pair of slacks, so space wasn't a problem. He hadn't brought any of his football trophies with him to school. He did have a few photos of the team celebrating their last victory that the school newspaper reporter, gave to him as a sympathy gift, but they were the only things he'd brought that meant anything.

He was looking forward to Taylor moving in, but wasn't sure how they were going to do things. He studied in both the kitchen and the living room, and he didn't know what Taylor did with himself during the day. Taylor said he could be flexible, and Lance knew he respected Lance's schoolwork, so Lance figured they'd work it out, somehow. He supposed they could get a TV set for the bedroom, or a desk or something. If he could study at the bar, he could probably study in the living room when the TV was on. It was one more new situation for both of them. He'd never had to share a bedroom, and he'd been lucky to find this small house for rent when he got to Tallahassee. It wasn't very expensive, so he didn't have to use too much of the football money to live alone off campus.

He wondered if Taylor was neater than he was, and if Lance's tendency to disregard his surroundings would irritate him. At least he'd have Taylor in bed every night. A vast improvement in his sex life made up for a lot of compromise. The sex wasn't all he was looking forward to. He hadn't had meals with anyone except in the school cafeteria for ages, and he'd always liked everyone being together for dinner, even though he'd never admitted it to his family. Taylor had been living alone for a long time, maybe he knew how to cook. Lance's mom might have a heart attack if he asked for some of her recipes, but she'd also be thrilled. And maybe suspicious. He could always get a cookbook.

One thing he didn't know how to handle was when people came over to study. He'd gotten something of a rep of having a great place to work on projects because so few students had their own place, never mind one that was big enough to fit more than a couple people. He didn't mind someone nice like Becky knowing about Taylor, and he didn't think she'd told anyone. But what about the guys? Someone was bound to notice the one bedroom. He could tell them that the sofa pulled out into a bed, but a lie about money being tight wouldn't work with anyone from football, and probably not with anyone else either, especially if they noticed his car. He'd been given it new freshman year, even though he'd tried to get a used car, one that he might be able to pay for himself, the football sponsors wouldn't hear of it. He was going to have to face interviews and possibly coaching jobs in a few months – he should start learning how to be true to himself now, even though he didn't know how.

He had grown up as the golden boy; he never gave anyone cause to have issues with him, everyone protected him, and he had everything he wanted. When he and Darcy had broken up once, he had girls following him all over school, even onto the football field. It was flattering but it still drove him nuts. He'd never figured that one out – he was just being himself, but they were crazy. He'd even overheard some of the nicknames they had for him, Loveable Lance was the least painful one. Darcy and he had had occasional problems, but she kept the other girls away, and things were easy and safe with her, and she got him off pretty regularly, which a lot of girls wouldn't do. His background didn't give him any ammunition as to what he should say if one of the guys asked him if he was queer. If he said yes, he didn't know how they might react. He didn't want to fight about it, he wasn't in good enough shape to take on anyone bigger than he was, and he didn't want to fuck up his knee any worse than it was, and he wasn't sure how Taylor would take it if someone gave Lance shit and he was around – well, maybe he could guess about that. Of course one look at Taylor, and no one would give him shit. He had to smile at that.

It didn't take Taylor long to move in, and they were too hungry to do anything but go out for dinner as soon as his personal items and clothes were put away. They'd never been out to a restaurant together before. Lance felt more adult, and that they were an actual couple, going out to an intimate Italian restaurant where the tables were so small you almost had to eat out of the same plate. Taylor looked great, he always dressed with his own casual style that made him look mysterious and sexy. Lance had never noticed clothes much, unless Darcy wore something especially sexy, and he'd never noticed what guys wore, until Taylor. He wanted to acknowledge how good Taylor looked, to put his arm around his shoulder, to kiss his cheek, or touch his hand. If he'd been with Darcy, he'd walk with his arm around her. If he went out with the guys, they'd horse around – grab or shove each other. But he felt like he was wearing a jacket that was too small, pinching his movements and keeping him from lifting his arms and reaching out.

Everything was going great until that fucker Copley came into the restaurant. Copley's eyes went right over to him and Taylor and he could see the wheels turning in his primate brain. He and Taylor had just been laughing about something and were looking sappily at each other. Copley caught the look, he was sure. That wasn't good. This was something he could use against him. He looked away and tried to ignore Copley by calculating the check. He wasn't sure Taylor bought it, though. He wanted to point out Copley to Taylor, but he didn't want to make it worse. He'd tell him later. Taylor would remember Copley. Funny, though, Copley was with a woman who looked like she was a student. Maybe that would be helpful if Copley ever moved against him. Fortunately, Copley was seated across the restaurant so Lance didn't have to say hello to him.

As soon as they got out of the restaurant and Lance started up the car, Taylor asked, "What was that about?"

Lance sighed and put the car in gear. "That was the coach I told you about, Copley."

Taylor grunted. "And he saw us together. You worried that he's going to use this against you?"

Lance didn't expect him to put it together quite that fast. "Kind of. I gotta figure out how to handle this whole thing, and he's just a part of it." He didn't expect to lay all this on Taylor, but he felt better now that it was coming out. "I'm real happy you've moved in, but what if some of the guys come over to study or run through some plays, and figure out you're not sleeping on the couch, or even ask me if we're together? I just don't know what to say."

"Look, what do you want them to know? Let's say someone asks you a question, not like he's hostile, he's just asking, if you and me are together. What do you want him to know?"

"I don't know why it's such a big deal. I'd want him to mind his own business."

"There you go."

Could it really be so easy? "I never thought about it like that."

"People usually back down when they're confronted."

"Yeah, that should shut up almost anyone."

Taylor nodded. "It puts 'em on the defensive."

"I like the way you think." He grinned.

"You want to stop at the store? Get some food for that big thing in the kitchen, you know – the thing that's cold when you open the door?"

Lance stuck his tongue out at him, and took a right turn.

A couple days later when Lance got back from his morning class and handing in a paper, Taylor persuaded Lance to take him to the college gym. Lance was too antsy to deal with the girls in spandex, who he called bunnies, populating the weight room, so he went for a run on the inside track. Taylor didn't understand what he meant until the group of young women took over the weight benches, talking non-stop and loudly to each other, or bouncing to whatever beat was streaming into their ears from their iPods, ignoring everyone who might want to actually use the equipment they were dominating. Taylor left soon, too, but worked on the heavy bag for a bit. He drew some shocked looks from the bunnies but ignored them for the satisfaction of embedding his fists into the bag. When he was done, he looked for Lance. He wasn't on the track, so he walked around, checking out the other areas of the building. He finally heard Lance's voice, sounding stressed, coming from a racquetball court. He hurried to the court, and stepped inside, just as a big footballer was leaving. Lance was inside, pacing.

"What was that about."

"It's okay, it was just a heated discussion."

"What was it about?"

Taylor leaned against the inside wall, waiting for an answer. Lance looked sharply at him, then stepped around him to close the door to the court. "He's a defensive linebacker. Copley is causing more trouble, and they want me to do something about it. I told him that what I can do is limited, but the players can band together and talk to the head coach. Tommy said that Copley warned them not to do just that."

"Something else is going on."

"Yeah. I think it's a set up. He knows I advocate for the players, and he wants to catch me doing something he's forbidden. It's my career at stake, but I can't let him hurt the players."

"All right. Look. Let's get dressed, get home, and think about this calmly. We'll come up with something."

"Yeah, but apparently every practice is the same for them. No breaks. No water. And they're scared shitless to tell anyone."

"But wasn't that more dangerous when it was a lot hotter? Now that it's cooler, it's not as bad, right?"

"Yeah. That time I gave them water it was real hot. They can manage for however long the cooler weather lasts."

"Good. It buys you time. And they can stand up for themselves if they feel they're in danger. I mean, they're all bigger than Copley, and younger, right? They walk off the field, what's he gonna do? And besides, how is that going to look for Copley, if all his players leave the field." Lance nodded, but his hands were still clenched in fists.

Saturday night was going good, not too crazy, just enough action to keep him from thinking too much about what he was going to do to Lance later. He was still high from going out to the

restaurant with Lance last weekend. They'd been out together only to work out. Taylor could get addicted to going out with Lance, watching how he drew looks from everyone, men and women, and how Lance only had eyes for him. How could someone so beautiful miss all that attention? Maybe he was just used to it. The night had been perfect until that coach walked in and freaked out Lance. But he'd been able to help, by giving Lance a way to handle things, and he got to go home with him, which wasn't ever going to get old. Now Lance was at his usual place at the bar, engrossed in his play sheets, preparing for the upcoming week's game.

Taylor was reading the paper when the door opened, and there was Matty, flicking glances around the bar before stepping in. He stopped in front of Taylor, unsure of what to do with himself. Taylor made the decision for him. He scooped him into a hug. Matty stiffened up, but then relaxed and pounded Taylor's back in return.

"Hey, Matty, how are you doin'?"

Matty nodded. "Good, Taylor, I'm good. You?"

"I'm great. Hey, come on in, and get a drink. What are you drinking these days?"

"Beer is fine." He lead Matty to the bar, where introduced him to the barman, ordered his beer, and pointed to himself.

"Taylor, you don't have to..."

"Don't argue." He growled as he brought the beer toward Matty.

Matty took a good swig of his beer, and Taylor thought he'd get it over quickly, like pulling off a band aid, "I'm glad you came. Let me introduce you to Lance."

Matty's eyebrows rose, but he let himself be guided to where Lance sat. Lance looked up, and smiled nervously in turn, having heard the exchange. "Matty, this is Lance. Lance, Matty."

Neither hesitated to shake hands, and Taylor settled Matty into the seat next to Lance.

Knowing he'd have to take care of business sooner or later, he gave them a start. "Lance is working on the play sheets for this Saturday's game."

"Football, huh? Taylor told me you played in high school. What was it? Quarterback?" Matty sounded sincerely enthusiastic.

"Yeah. You follow?"

"Oh yeah. I was a modest Jets fan in New York, but now that I'm down here – I've, ah, gotten a little more enthusiastic. I mean, everyone's a football nut down here. So, I follow college as well as pro. Still a Jets fan, though." Matty and Lance grinned at each other. "So Taylor said you're coaching now, at FSU?" They continued chatting as the bartender motioned Taylor to the back room. Maybe if Lance got used to being out with Taylor's friend, it would be easier for him when people he knew found out.

The Christmas holiday snuck up on both of them. Lance waited until the last minute to pack, as though it would keep him from going. Taylor took Lance to the airport, missing him before he left. An unexpected bright spot was Lance's travel itinerary, which Lance gave him right before they left for the airport. Taylor had expected Lance to spend at least a week away, but he was coming back in 5 days. Lance laughed when he saw Taylor's face. Then Taylor was driving home alone.

Taylor had lived with his own silence as company since he left home, and if he had thought he would have any problems living with someone after so long alone, he'd have been wrong. He loved every moment of living with Lance, from grocery shopping and doing their mixed laundry, to sharing showers, making coffee and breakfast in the morning, and cooking dinner before he went to work. When Lance was home, he'd read or watch TV quietly while Lance studied, spending as much time watching Lance as the TV or books. If there was something he wanted to see seriously, he'd go into the bedroom, where they put his TV, but that was rare. Their natural rhythms matched. Taylor had never been happier.

Matty and Polly invited him to Christmas dinner. The food was good, the decorations Christmassy, but Christmas needed cold weather and snow to seem real. Sixty-five degrees at Christmas made it feel like play acting. He was pretty sure Matty had told Polly about him and Lance; they didn't have a lot to talk about, and Polly kept looking at him funny. His rhythm didn't match Matty's anymore. He hadn't wanted this change to happen, didn't want them each to have chosen new families.

He was relieved when Matty turned on football. Taylor let the noise wash over him, pulling him out of his thoughts and back to the present. He took advantage of Matty and Polly's knowledge by asking questions. He wanted to be able to know what Lance was talking about, and it got everyone to relax. While they were watching, Taylor could imagine what Lance looked like out there on the field. He was a tall guy, but so slender – these beefy guys looked like they could break him like a twig. It was selfish, but he was glad Lance wasn't playing anymore. It would drive him crazy to see him tackled and getting hurt. He forced himself to focus on what Matty was telling him.

Even though Lance was away less than a week, it gave Taylor too much time to think about things other than Lance. With Lance's future getting closer by the day, he looked at his own and saw a blur. He needed to admit he had a life now, he'd have a future, and he had to figure out what he wanted this new future to look like. The night after Christmas he was back at work, indulging himself by sitting in the chair Lance usually occupied. He flipped through the stack of flyers and catalogs at the end of the bar, and pulled out a catalog for a local community college. He flipped through it, and was surprised when several of the class descriptions sounded interesting. He'd never thought of taking classes before, it wasn't done when you were the muscle. Maybe it was time to see what he could do with his head instead of his body. He had plenty of money saved, not having much to spend it on since he landed in Florida.

He had no idea where to start, it felt weird even thinking about taking a class. He'd dated a girl who was really into weaving and art and stuff. She showed him a book of artsy things that he had trouble believing were made out of yarn. This college had all sorts of art classes. There were also classes on reading books, and other stuff that made more sense for a guy like him, like cars, and other mechanical stuff. His instinct said to go for the classes that didn't sound silly for a guy to take, but that made him pissed off at himself – if he was going to really be himself, he had to stop thinking like that. Who was he trying to impress? He'd always thought he did things because he wanted to, not because it was expected. But now that was smelling like bullshit. He'd kept away from guys and lived a life of violence because people like Benny and Teddy told him to. What did he ever do that really was what he wanted? Nothing, until he left Brooklyn, and the only he'd done so far was get involved with Lance. Okay, not a small thing, but still just one thing. He was living by the rules set down in Brooklyn, while he thought he was clear. What would be the worst thing if he took a class like weaving? He'd look like a queer. But he was a queer. So what the fuck? He shook his head at himself. But he took the catalog home with him that night.

The next night Matty and Polly came into the bar, which worked better than him going to their place where there weren't enough distractions to ease the discomfort. Polly noticed the college catalog next to Taylor's seat and asked him about it. His instinct was to deny his interest, but he

caught himself, and told them what he was thinking about. Polly was sincerely interested and got him to tell her what looked interesting. By the time he left the bar that night, he had a better idea of how to start taking classes and felt a lot better about Polly.

The night before Lance got back to Tallahassee, Taylor hardly slept. He wanted to smell Lance's skin, feel his balls move against his tongue, feel his hardness rub against his own. He beat off twice, and that put him out, but he didn't sleep deeply.

He got through airport parking and the baggage area without braining anyone, but it was close. He waited against the wall of the terminal, out of the way, his stomach flipping as Lance strode into the area and looked for him. He indulged himself, just looking for a few moments, unable to move, his heart beating hard and his knees weak. He finally pushed himself off the wall as Lance saw him, catching him staring. His smile was blinding. Taylor had to shove his hands in his pockets so he couldn't grab him into a hug and kiss him until they couldn't breathe. He stopped in front of Lance and took a deep breath, trying to catch Lance's scent. Lance looked at him like he was dinner.

Taylor cleared his throat. "No bag?" Lance answered with a quick, "Nope," and Taylor took his arm and guided the toward the garage. As soon as they were in the car and the doors were closed, Taylor twisted over to kiss Lance, who gave as good as he got. Taylor had never thought he could come by kissing but he got close. Taylor pulled back, uncomfortable with not being able to move as much as he wanted. He drove home carefully, Lance's hand warm on his leg the entire time. They were naked and in bed before the click of the front door lock stopped echoing through the house.

Taylor was desperate for Lance to fuck him, but neither of them could wait. They wrapped themselves into a tangle, and humped each other, lips locked, until they shot. Taylor fell asleep afterwards, he came so hard, and Lance must have, too, because he looked groggy when he woke Taylor, heading to the bathroom for a towel.

By the time Lance was back in bed, Taylor had a condom and the lube on the mattress, and he was on his stomach, legs open. He smiled at Lance's groan. Then Lance was all over him, kissing and licking him, then opening him and fucking him with his fingers until he thought he'd die. Finally, Lance slid into him, and his world slipped back onto its axis. Lance was careful to hit his button on almost every thrust, but it still took Taylor a while to come, this being round two. He had no complaints with a luxuriously slow fuck that kept him high forever. And when they both came, Lance's arms squeezing him tight, panting in his name in his ear, it was shattering.

They spent the day reading and watching TV, talking about anything that came to mind. Lance was unable to stop touching Taylor, and Taylor seemed to have the same difficulty. Lance was reading for next semester, and he noticed a stack of library books on the living room table that hadn't been there when he left. A little pink stained Taylor's cheeks when Taylor reached over Lance to pick one of them up. He leaned back on the sofa, and hooked an arm around Lance, and pulled him back to lean against him. Lance sighed in contentment. Truly this was his home now. He'd felt completely at odds while he was in West Canaan. On the second day he realized it was because he was thinking endlessly about Taylor, and although he enjoyed it, it wasn't getting him anywhere. He decided to pay attention to what his friends and family were doing, to try to get involved but still watch them from his new perspective.

Each time he returned home, even though he'd kept all his visits short since sophomore year, he expected something to have changed. He wasn't sure what, but each vacation he looked for it, and it never happened. They were still talking about Kilmer's disappearance, the new coach and

how he held up, what had happened that last game, and how this year's team did. The only people who changed were those who left.

And each time he visited he saw something new that disturbed him. In high school the guys had talked about hunting queers, but there weren't any queers to be hunted, so it had sounded like a joke. This year the town's intolerance was a disharmony that he heard everywhere he went. He wondered how he could have missed such strong discordance all his life. He could only think of two people that he could tell about Taylor – Mox and Julie. Julie was home at the same time he was, but he had no energy to tell her. He counted the minutes to when he could get back to Taylor.

While he and Taylor read, leaning against each other, Taylor occasionally turned toward him, kissing him softly on his temple or hair. Relaxed in Taylor's warmth, he slipped back into harmony with what he'd chosen for his life. There was nothing better to heal the pain of his new wisdom. To celebrate Lance's return, they called out for pizza. Lance discovered something he should have learned earlier like other college kids: pizza was good before and after hand jobs on the couch.

As he chewed through a huge bite of pepperoni pizza, Lance remembered something he'd been wanting to ask. "You never told me how you liked the game you attended."

Taylor nodded. "I didn't get a lot of what was going on. Mostly I tried to watch you, but I couldn't see you much. I think I'd like it more now..."

"Do you think you'd like to go to the Gator Bowl? I'm pretty sure I can get another ticket if you'd like to."

"Aren't those impossible to get?"

"The school buys a block of tickets for the team and that includes a bunch of extra seats. But we'd be sitting with everyone from the team."

"I don't mind. I can behave. How is it going to look for you, though? I don't think this is going to help support the roommate angle."

"You said it – it's none of their business."

"Yeah, but it's your future."

"I'll manage. I have to get used to it eventually."

"What about that guy. The one you don't like who came into the restaurant that time?"

There was a down side to having an extra-perceptive guy as your lover. "Yeah. He'll be there."

"What's the real story with him?" When Lance's hesitation became silence, he continued, "It's personal between you, I can tell. Look. I think I can help you with this."

"I don't know - I think I should work this out on my own."

"Why?"

Lance didn't want to explain this – he knew Taylor liked him for who he was, but he never liked feeling like a kid with him. "You have a lot more experience about this kind of stuff. I should be able to figure this kind of thing out by myself, so I can stand on my own."

"So someone, your dad I'm guessing, told you that you're not a man unless you figure everything out by yourself? So you're going to put yourself in the hardest situation you can, one that you don't have any experience in, and not ask for help from someone who wants to help you, because that's what a man does."

"Well, yeah."

"I don't see it like that. Why do you have to do it alone? You've never been in a disadvantaged situation, you were the golden boy your whole life. That gave you a step up in that world, but it left you behind in other worlds. Now you're thrown into a situation you have no experience in. I want to help you, and probably can. Why is it wrong?"

"It's weird to take advice from you, it's like suddenly you're being my father or something."

Taylor laughed. "I ain't never gonna be your father, Lance. But what about being your mentor? Would that work? I don't want to solve your problems for you, I just want you to be on even ground with anyone who might try to hurt you. You're good at game strategy, but this type of strategy is something I know more about. You're a good man. I don't want you to lose to some fuckhead because you think it's weak to listen to someone who has more knowledge in an area you don't."

He hadn't thought of it that way, it made sense. He shouldn't have to pay beyond a busted knee – and the guys being abused by Copley shouldn't have to pay for Copley's hunger for power.

"Well, first there was the thing about the water that I told you about." Taylor nodded. "Well, I didn't add that he ripped into me in front of everyone. The team was behind me, at least when Copley wasn't there. I didn't care about the yellin', cause I know I was right." Lance stopped for a breath. "Then I read something about a new device that keeps the player's body temperature cool, even when they're overheated. Some teams use it to take players out of the danger zone, but you can extend a guy's practice and playing, while keeping them safe. I told Copley and a couple other coordinators about it, but everyone ignored me. So I emailed it to the head coach, who ordered one. Copley was furious when it came out that it was from me. I think he's looking for anything against me."

"Good for you for going through with telling the head coach. But, yeah, after this and the restaurant means he's going to be watching both of us closely."

Lance nodded, his expression glum.

Taylor looked at him, his deep brown eyes warm. "Okay. Here's another idea - not hiding can be an option. If we don't look like we're worried, we don't give him anything to work with. If it irritates him, he may do something stupid, which could put him at a disadvantage. And you have the team behind you, if you need them."

"Huh. That might work. Not many people like Copley, but he's been there forever, so everybody thinks he's got political pull. And yeah, the guys were grateful, and pretty amazed when I took shit from him without bowing down to him. But they have their careers to think about. One word from him, and they're screwed."

"So we go as friends who know each other really well, so you can teach me all about football, and see what he tries to make of that."

"I'm teaching you?"

"Well, I found out over Christmas that Matty and Polly are both really into football. We watched a game on Christmas, and they were telling me stuff about it. Parts were a little confusing." He smiled and licked his lips. "I bet you could clear everything up for me."

"I bet I could."

"You know one reason I want to go? I kept thinking about what you looked like out there, king of the world, in those tight pants."

Lance smiled craftily. "I still have my old uniform at home. I could get it sometime."

Taylor groaned, and leaned over to have better access to Lance's lips. Lance snickered. Who'd have ever expected football would be sexy?

While Taylor put together pasta for dinner, Lance asked him, "Do you think Matty and Polly would like to come to the game with us?"

Taylor looked up at him, eyebrows raised. "Yeah, I think they'd love it. You sure that's a good idea?"

"Why not? If Copley is there, it might confuse him. Besides, I hate letting him control what I do. And it would be a good way for us to get to know each other."

"Yeah, it's a great idea."

Lance called to confirm the tickets, and then Taylor invited Matty and Polly, who were thrilled. He found Lance in front of his closet, looking grim. "What's going on?"

"The head coach told me when I attended the last game in the stands that I needed to look more professional. I don't have anything to wear."

Taylor laughed at the panic in his voice. "What's this?" He pulled out the one suit in the closet. "Oh."

"Yeah. My mom bought it. Years ago."

"Right. Well, that's not hard to fix. We've got a couple days and stores are open."

When they got to the department store the next day, Lance headed toward the athletic wear section, but Taylor grabbed his arm and swung him over to men's apparel. "I've seen what coaches look like on TV and at the game. They wear nice slacks and jackets, right?"

"Unfortunately. I don't need to have to get any shirts, I can wear team shirts."

Taylor continued, ignoring him, "You need at least two lightweight jackets and two ties. At least three pairs of slacks and, yes, you still need a few nice shirts. You can mix the jackets and pants."

"I wouldn't have to wear this stuff if I was still playing," Lance grumbled.

Taylor smiled, and mussed his hair.

They went through the racks, Taylor pulling down and stacking in Lance's arms what he thought was appropriate and what he knew Lance would look best in. He didn't think Lance would buy it, but he also grabbed a light blue jersey pullover that would make his eyes shine brighter than usual.

Taylor hung everything up in the dressing room, closed the curtain, and poked his head back in. This was one of the perks of having a boyfriend – sharing dressing and locker rooms. He got to see Lance's front and back as he changed thanks to the mirror, and it was a joy. Lance looked great even in ratty tee shirt and torn sweats, but he wore clothes really well, and it was a pleasure to see him dressed up. And undressing, and dressing again. Taylor sighed. Just because the thrills were cheap didn't mean they weren't fun.

As they walked to the cash register, Lance grumbled about having to spend money on something he didn't want to buy.

Taylor pulled him aside. "Lance, if you can't afford these, I'll buy them for you." Lance looked unhappy. "Or, you know, you can pay me back. Neither is a problem for me."

Lance shook his head. "No, it's okay. I have enough money." Taylor tilted his head, and kept his arm on Lance's. "They give us money, on the football team. We get gifts and all sorts of stuff, like my car. It's like being sponsored, but privately and quietly, if you know what I mean." Taylor nodded and waited for more. "I don't like taking their money. Feels like being bought. I use what I need – it's how I can afford to live outside the dorms, but I don't like to take more than I need."

"All right. But you need these, and remember, they're for football. Doesn't look to me like you're taking advantage of the situation. You gotta look professional, and to do that you gotta have clothes. You should also consider getting at least one nice suit, too. You got interviews coming up, at least eventually, and since you can afford it, you should get one, a good one. It'll last forever and jeez, Lance, you'd look great in a nice suit."

Lance gave him a sideways look. "I'll think about it."

When they left, Lance had four pairs of slacks, two jackets and ties, several button down shirts, most of them blue, and two pairs of shoes, as well as the blue pullover. Taylor didn't think he could let Lance wear it without ravishing him. Maybe they needed some practice wearings.

Two days later, Lance dressed in his new clothes, they picked up Matty and Polly and drove to the stadium. Their excitement didn't allow any awkwardness. Their seats were just a few rows behind the benches, and their guests were ecstatic. Lance was right, this was a great way to get everyone comfortable with each other. During play, Lance explained things to Taylor or watched and yelled with Matty and Polly.

Taylor watched as all three of them lean forward anxiously during one play. When their team came through, Lance and Matty jumped out of his seat and high fived, both grinning madly. Lance turned to Taylor, his grin changing to knowing when he realized Taylor had been watching him and not the game. He kept his eye on the other coaches, but they were all too into the game to watch him and Lance. Still, he kept his Lance-watching low key.

They went out to dinner after the game, and the talk was relaxed and full of the game, and everyone got along well. Even when Lance mentioned how Taylor had watched him more than the game, everyone laughed at his helpless shrug. Taylor felt like this could work, the four of them.

Later, before they got into bed, Lance dragged him into the shower. He wouldn't allow any serious touching, so Taylor figured he had a plan. Before he joined Taylor in bed, Lance pulled out the lube and a condom from the bed stand drawer, and tossed them on the bed. He put one knee on the bed, leaned over to kiss Taylor quickly, then lay down on his stomach. Taylor's stomach flipped upside down. Oh god.

"Uh, Lance."

"I'm sure, Taylor." He was sure. And ready. Nervous, yeah, but he still wanted it. Taylor's fingers inside him shot him into space, but he knew it would be better with Taylor's cock. Taylor went crazy with it, and he wanted to know why. And he wanted Taylor to feel how great it was to be on the other side.

"You don't..."

"I know. I want to. Please."

The bed shifted and the hard warmth of Taylor's legs straddled his hips. His cock and balls lay in the pocket where his legs and ass met. God, that was hot, feeling Taylor cock grow hard as he rocked between his butt cheeks. Taylor leaned forward, his cock pushing harder against him, and then Taylor's large hands were kneading his shoulder and neck muscles, and he melted into the bed. Eventually Taylor's hands reached his butt. Taylor took him from relaxed to horny so smoothly that he was still relaxed when Taylor opened his legs, and slid his slick fingers inside. He worked his fingers in and out, slowly, while kissing and biting Lance's butt. By the time he felt Taylor's cock rubbing at his entrance, he was hard again, and ready.

But before Taylor could enter, Lance twisted around, turning onto his back, surprising Taylor. He pulled his knees up, and Taylor hesitated, then grabbed a couple pillows and shoved them under his hips. He opened wider to accommodate Taylor as he leaned down to kiss him. Taylor bent down to lick his cock, and then took each of his balls into his mouth for a few moments.

It was totally hot to watch Taylor above him, muscles bulging, all his concentration on controlling himself while he penetrated Lance. Taylor slid inside slowly and stopping waiting for Lance to open more before continuing. Taylor's cock throbbed inside him, like they were sharing a heart beat. With Taylor lying on top of him, Lance's legs wrapped around his waist, Lance ran his hands over the muscles in Taylor's back and arms as he held himself over Lance, waiting and watching. Lance reached down, hands around Taylor's butt and pulled, finally getting Taylor fully inside.

Lance pushed up in response, and Taylor grunted and started moving, slowly at first. Then Lance shoved up sharply, and Taylor looked into his eyes, saw what he wanted, and started fucking him. Lance met him on each thrust, loving the fullness and the nerves that jittered through him each time Taylor thrust. Taylor pushed up and thrust, and without warning, a lightning bolt screamed up his spine. He heard the echo of a noise, and all thought left him as lightning zipped through his body every time Taylor thrust. Then Taylor's mouth was on his and he was blasted into orbit, and coming and coming, and Taylor was thrusting hard, erratically, holding onto Lance tightly, god so tightly, and then he pumped again, no rhythm, and he stilled, holding tighter than ever, and Taylor's cock pulsed deep inside him. He couldn't believe how good this was, he wanted to do this again, in like 5 minutes, and again, and again and never let Taylor leave him. Taylor was perfectly heavy on top of him, chest heaving, and Lance let his hands roam all over his back. Eventually he lifted himself up enough to bring one hand up into Lance's hair. His lips moved over Lance's ear as he whispered, "Love you."

Lance wasn't able to form words, to break his silence, but the world shifted beneath him.

The semester began, and they both worked at being respectful of each other's space. Taylor kept out of Lance's study zones as best he could, not wanting to distract Lance or mess up his notes. Lance invited him to join him whenever he was taking a break or just reading. Not surprisingly, he studied best when he was nestled up against Taylor on the couch.

The first engineering study session Lance hosted was on a night Taylor wasn't working. He'd offered to leave for a few hours, but Lance wouldn't let him. Taylor watched TV and read in the bedroom. He wanted to use the time to figure out how to tell Lance he was going to take a class at the community college. Lance was a smart guy, working on two areas of study and doing real well in both of them. Taylor didn't think he, himself, was stupid, though people had assumed that for most of his life. He didn't want to fail at school, at something Lance was good at. He didn't mind Lance being smarter than him, but he wanted to prove he was as good for Lance as he could be.

An hour into the study session he went to the kitchen for a beer. Everyone looked up and did a double take. He'd heard Lance mention a roommate when some of the students got to the house, but their reaction was what he was used to. He was polite and said hello, enjoying Lance's smile and wink as he got his beer and went back to the bedroom. There was silence in the living room for a few seconds before the talking began again. There was going to be rumors, he knew it.

That night, Taylor woke up in the middle of the night, chilled. He waited for Lance to come back to bed, but when he noticed the living room light on, he threw on a pair of shorts, and went to see what Lance was doing.

Lance looked up as Taylor came into the room. "I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

"No, I just didn't know where you were."

"Sorry. I have to make a decision, and I don't know..." He motioned Taylor to sit on the couch. When Taylor sat and wrapped an arm around him, Lance continued. "I may apply to grad school next year. I have a shot at a scholarship, depending on how things go this semester. I want to do it, but this whole thing with Copley..."

"Can you go to another school?"

"No. The head coach, Stevens, is setting this up, just for me."

"Lance, that's great. Tell me about it."

"It would be for one more year. But I'd be much more involved in coaching, which means traveling for every out of town game. I'd have to write a thesis during the summer, which would be due at the beginning of the next fall semester. Stevens thinks it'll help get me a good position when I get out. It would almost be an internship with Stevens. It's an incredible offer."

"You're worth it. And Stevens obviously is a smart guy."

He had to kiss the blush that bloomed on Lance's cheeks. "The problem is that if Copley does something that turns Stevens's mind, he can pull the scholarship. I don't know if he suspects about us, but if he does, that might be his trump card."

"You need to go for it, you know you do." When Lance nodded, he continued, "Lance, I can move out. Even if it's for a year, we can manage."

Lance almost shouted at him, "No! No, I'm not doing that. I hate even keeping it quiet, I will not sacrifice the most important thing in my life for that bastard." But he was pale, and when he looked in Taylor's eyes, Taylor saw he still was scared.

"All right. But the offer stands, Lance, if it becomes too much."

"I hate it Taylor. I hate having another bastard run my life."

"You're just not letting him run your life. I'm here, I'm not going anywhere, even if I need to move out." Lance nodded, but didn't have anything more to say.

Taylor was at Lance's computer when Lance came home, looking like he was about to explode. He didn't even need to be prompted to spill it.

"That fuck-head Copley. He got Anderson to give me his defensive line for my final coaching project based on our toughest opponents. And it's due right after spring break, so I'll have to work over most of the break. I was going to use that time to finish off my independent study. Goddamn."

Taylor managed to close down the browser while Lance paced. He waited for Lance to run down, which he did when he noticed that Taylor was using the computer.

"Hey, whatcha doin'?" All curiosity.

"Well, I was thinking about signing up for a class at the community college. I was checking them out on the internet."

Lance smiled at him. "That's great, Taylor. What are you thinking about taking?"

Taylor hoped his relief didn't show. "I'm having trouble deciding. Basic business, business math, and even basic computing look good. And there are a few others that look good, too. There's a weaving class that sounded interesting." He busied himself with launching college's site.

Lance's hand ran across the back of his head and down to his neck. He looked up to see Lance's surprised grin. Lance had told him his computer was for both of their use, but Taylor had never used it in front of Lance, and he knew Lance didn't think he'd ever had. As the site loaded, he got up and went into the bedroom to grab a book he'd found at the library. He came back to the living room and handed it to Lance as he sat in front of the computer. *The Internet For Dummies*. Lance laughed, and then kissed him.

"All those classes sound great. But hasn't the semester started already?"

"Yeah. I figured I'd wait until summer, with this semester being so crazy for you. They have a couple one and two day classes that I could take this quarter – it might be better to start there. It's been a long time since I've been in school."

They discussed the course offerings while they made lunch. Taylor would have to wait until Lance's next class to get back on to what he'd really been doing when Lance came home. He figured he'd better work on a reservation as soon as possible.

Lance needed a vacation, especially if he was going back to school for another year: even if his schedule wouldn't be worse than the current one, it would be as tough. Lance had explained that the difficulty in grad level classes made up for not having to also study engineering. And Taylor was the person to make sure he got the rest he needed and deserved. He was giving it to Lance

as a graduation gift, and he hoped it wouldn't cause any problems with Lance's family, assuming they came to graduation. It would all be worth it, to get Lance to relax, and to be alone with him, someplace they didn't have to worry about being accepted, someplace they could be together, and out, and live with how that felt, even if for just a little while.

Lance spent most of spring break studying. Still, without classes and games, he found more time for Taylor, and they got into the habit of a bed break in the afternoon, usually after a run. Taylor thought they both needed the vacation part of it, and he hoped it would get them through the rest of the semester, which sounded like it was going to be even rougher, despite there being no more football games. Hopefully Lance getting some work done over the break would relieve some of the pressure.

He had narrowed down his vacation plans to a gay cruise, spending two weeks in a gay bed and breakfast in San Francisco, or spending two weeks in a gay bed and breakfast in Hawaii. Apparently it wasn't very warm in San Francisco in the summer, which was a surprise, and he was glad he checked. He wasn't sure about the cruise; he wasn't sure either of them wanted to be locked on a boat. Not to mention being on a boat with a hundred other gay men who would think Lance was the tastiest dessert they'd ever seen. The downside to Hawaii was the longer plane ride, but the weather and the beauty of the place would be the most relaxing, so that was his top choice. He desperately wanted to be affectionate with Lance wherever they went, not just inside the bed and breakfast; that was a major factor, and he wasn't sure how that would be accepted in Hawaii. He'd have to check the internet – see if he could get more information on this kind of stuff. He didn't need to make a decision yet, but he still wasn't sure which to choose. He wished Lance would say something about graduation and if his family were coming. He'd ask, but he didn't want Lance to think he was pushing. They didn't talk about his family much. Taylor wanted to know more, but Lance avoided the subject when Taylor tried to bring it up.

On the Saturday before the semester started, Lance was resting his head on Taylor's thigh as he casually licked come off his dick, when the phone rang. Lance groaned and reached over Taylor to get it, laying over his stomach while he spoke. Taylor let his hands roam freely.

Taylor smiled at how Lance's accent thickened when he spoke to his family. "Yeah, mom. I'm fine."

"No, I told you, I studied over the break."

"Well, you've got a more'n a month to decide. No, it's not a big deal. I know it's tiring." Taylor heard the disappointment in his voice, and wondered if his mother could. Or cared.

"Well, is Jules coming?"

"All right."

"No that's it. Okay. Bye."

Lance flopped down next to Taylor, laying his head back on Taylor's thigh, deep in thought. He wasn't usually this cloudy after talking to his folks.

"What's going on?"

"I don't know. I don't know what's going on with them. My dad hasn't talked to me in a while. Mom sounds like she's been drinking. I don't think they're coming. At least I know that Julie isn't coming. "

"Did she say why not?"

"No. I didn't ask. I didn't want to hear a stupid excuse."

Taylor stroked Lance's hair.

"Do you want to know?"

"Not sure. It doesn't really matter."

"But you'd like them to come to graduation."

"You know, I don't know if I do. I mean, I'd like a lot of things that I'm not going to get. So yeah, I'd like them to come, but I know I wouldn't look forward to dealing with them while they're here. And hiding all this." He paused. "By the way, there's something else I need to talk to you about. There's a party for all the football student-athletes at the end of April, right before the college starts its exams. Everyone goes. Even I can't miss it. Boring, but good food and booze, and usually everyone's in a good mood. Will you come with me? I'll wear the blue sweater you made me buy." Lance shot him a teasing grin.

Taylor sighed. Of course he'd go anywhere with Lance.

They arrived at the party a little late. The second half of the semester had started with a bang, and even though Lance had prepared in advance, he was still swamped. He'd had a little unexpected time the afternoon of the party, which was the result of finishing a paper early, and Taylor made sure they spent the bonus time in bed, not that he had to be overly persuasive. It was a two bird situation – it was sex and it would relax Lance a little. Lance tried not to show how nervous he was about going to the party, but he didn't fool Taylor.

They both got a beer, some food, then circulated. Taylor drifted away from Lance, trying to stay in the background, and let Lance socialize more freely without him. He watched and listened to the people around him. It was clear that most people had taken advantage of the open bar. A skimpily dressed woman made a pass at him, which he gently escaped from. He got more food, and noticed a crowd of big guys beyond the porch outside the back of the reception hall. He followed his instinct and headed that direction.

His instincts were right; Lance and Copley were in a face-off. He unobtrusively slid up to the side of the group. Only a handful of players surrounded them, but they were all big enough to keep anyone inside the hall from seeing them. Although they were keeping their voices down, their words were distinct to the group around them. Taylor couldn't believe Copley had the balls to confront Lance at a party in front of teammates but the almost-empty tumbler in his hand and his unsteadiness explained it.

Lance stood in front of Copley, head down, while Copley called him a useless pretty boy, who got everyone to back him when he didn't do anything to deserve it, a trouble maker for not following Copley's orders, and a suck-up. Taylor was as stunned as everyone else in the group. Taylor didn't know if these were the guys Lance had helped, except he did recognize the guy from the gym, who Lance told him he was helping, but they all looked uncomfortable but unable to abandon either Lance or Copley, he didn't know which. Taylor's palms itched with wanting to take Copley's head off with his fists, but he didn't move. Violence wasn't called for and it was Lance's fight. He would be working the heavy bag tomorrow at the gym, though.

Copley finished his insults and stood triumphant that Lance wasn't reacting, then he grew irritated and frustrated, and tried to get Lance to react. As Lance had feared, he played his trump card.

"And you might think no one knows about you – but we all know you're a faggot. You think a queer can coach? No fucking way. You think you're a hard ass like your thug boyfriend, but you're just a little worm, who doesn't have any balls."

Lance's head snapped up as soon as he heard "thug boyfriend," a bolt of pain flashing across his face. But something under the pain pushed it effortlessly aside. Lance looked into Copley's eyes, speaking calmly and strongly. He tilted his head slightly to the side, as though examining Copley. "On this one point, Mr. Copley, you're right. I am gay. It's been difficult putting that into the context of coaching, and I'm ashamed only that I considered hiding that part of myself. My partner is a good man, and I'm not ashamed of him or our relationship."

"I've passed all the tests you set for me, I did everything you requested of me as your associate, even though you never used any of the plays or ideas I submitted to you. I've taken it all, and the only time I fought back is when you risked the players' safety. That is one line you are not allowed to cross, and this is another. My relationships outside of school are none of your business. This school has a non-discrimination policy. You might consider reading it. I won't bow to blackmail again - been there, done that. Never again."

Taylor expected him to turn and leave, but he stayed where he was, refusing to give the territory to Copley. Taylor was proud of him, but also deeply touched at his pride and his defense of himself and of Taylor.

Copley looked around at the players. "You're going to let him get away with that? Talking to me that way? Are you all a bunch of faggots? How dare you!" His hands were balled into fists and he looked seconds away from attacking Lance. Taylor was getting ready to launch himself forward, when a deep voice came from behind the players.

"Mr. Copley. Why don't you come with me, we'll have a little talk." Everyone turned to look at the man, and Copley puffed himself up while ill-ease gusted across his face.

"Coach Stevens! I'm glad you're here..."

The players let Stevens in, and he put an arm around Copley's shoulders and guided him back into the hall.

Everyone took a breath of relief at the same time. Each of the players walked up to Lance and spoke with him quietly, or patted him on the back. When they were gone, Lance walked up to Taylor. He was shaking.

"Taylor. I never imagined..." His voice cracked

"You did good, babe. Real good."

"Yeah, I think maybe so." He put one hand on Taylor's shoulder, as though to absorb some of his strength. "Do you know how much Stevens heard?"

Taylor shook his head. "I think he heard a lot, though."

"Shit."

"No, Lance. I hope he saw it all, saw you defend yourself and keep your cool, no yelling back, just standing up for what's right."

Lance nodded, but his eyes remained cloudy.

The email from Coach Stevens came after Lance's last exam. Even though Lance didn't have problems with his exams, the extra pressure didn't help. Both of them had been waiting for over two weeks for the other shoe to drop from the confrontation with Copley.

They'd gotten out of bed after a nice long morning fuck that left both of them relaxed. Taylor made breakfast while Lance checked email. When Lance didn't respond to the offer of coffee, Taylor poked his head into the living room to see Lance staring at the computer screen.

"When's the appointment?"

Lance jerked his head up in surprise. "Uh, 3:00 today."

"Why don't I go with you. I can take a walk while you see him." He walked over to Lance, and massaged his shoulders. Bending down to kiss his neck, he said, "It'll be fine."

Lance nodded, but Taylor didn't buy it. "Another degree would be great, but you don't need it."

Lance finally stood, and brought Taylor into a hug. "I know. It's just..."

Taylor whispered in his ear, "I know. I know."

Taylor wandered around campus for an hour waiting for Lance to get out. He didn't go far, not knowing how long the meeting would take. He tried to prepare himself for either reaction. He'd just settled on a nearby bench to do some people watching when Lance came out of the sports building. He didn't look happy.

Taylor walked up to him, wishing he could put his arm around him. Lance was almost hunched into himself. He was quiet on the drive home. Taylor was glad he came, because Lance was too distracted to drive safely. Lance brought out a couple beers to the living room, and sat next to Taylor. The frown hadn't left his face since they left school.

Lance tipped his beer back, trying to get some moisture in his throat. This felt like betrayal, even though Taylor would understand and accept it.

"Coach Stevens will give me the scholarship under one condition." He took a deep breath. "He wants me to be completely quiet about you."

"What does that mean? Do I need to move out?"

"No. Absolutely not. It just means no talk of you as my partner, and no public affection or anything like that." Taylor nodded, looking serious and not happy, but resigned and unsurprised.

"Taylor, I don't want to do this. But I did some research, and coaches with advanced degrees do better entering the job market."

Taylor wasn't to be distracted. "Did he say why?"

"Yeah. The alumni who give the school money and provide the players with all the perks, they're conservative. If they knew about us, they'd make noise about kicking me out, or pressure him to kill the scholarship. They might also make it harder for other students to come in as coaches, which Stevens likes. Stevens would have to do what they say – if they players don't get perks,

they don't attend your school, you lose games, and then the coaches lose their jobs. And I'll be higher profile as a grad student – more responsibility, I'll be between an intern and an actual coach. I'll have to attend every game, and I'll be included in meetings for the coaching staff, stuff like that. I'll be more high profile."

Taylor spoke quietly, a deep seriousness overlying his sadness. "You need to do this, Lance. We don't need to be any more public than we are now. We don't have to go out as a couple. And it's only one year. I bet it'll be a good way for you to see what it's really like to do the work before getting the job." He wrapped an arm around Lance's shoulder, and Lance gratefully sank into Taylor's strength.

"It also probably means less time studying at the bar." Taylor shrugged with a small smile. That meant much less to both of them since Taylor moved in with him. "I have good news, too. Copley's contract is up for renewal and it's not going to be renewed. Stevens didn't say it right out, but it was partly because of how he treated me. Stevens looked at the plays I gave to Copley, and Stevens thinks at least one of them could have given us a major advantage in one of the games we lost. His players also reported him not allowing them water; apparently last year one of the players passed out on the field, and Copley was warned against doing that again. I never heard about it, so it must have been hushed up. So at least we won't have to deal with him next year. I'm not looking forward to rubbing elbows with the alumni, though, if they're a bunch of idiots."

"Remember what I said about working inside the system? This is a way to give it a shot. They get to know you, find out you're a great guy, and later if they find out you're gay, it might make them wonder. And remember, most people get jobs from knowing people. If they get to know you and like you, all the better. But there's something to be said for taking advantage of assholes, too." He shrugged.

"I don't have to like it."

"But you might have to live like that for a while. What if you get a job with a conservative school? They're gonna wonder why a beautiful guy like you is single. And maybe even why you have someone like me as a roommate, when you don't need one."

"So I practice this now, see how it fits."

"Yeah. I think you need to get this second degree no matter what – even if you leave football, the fact that you have a masters is a good thing for your resume. If you hate it, or you don't feel comfortable working someplace, you change into engineering. You don't have to worry about me. I can get work anywhere. And I can take classes anywhere. I just need to be with you."

Lance turned inside Taylor's arm to face him. "I don't know what I did to find you. But I'm not letting you go. I love you."

Taylor was stunned, a look Lance had never seen on him. Lance watched as Taylor flushed and his eyes get bright before he pulled Lance into a huge hug.

Graduation was more mellow than Taylor had expected. He had less to worry about when Lance's parents confirmed they weren't coming to town for it. Taylor was relieved that Lance got as many cheers as the other members of the football team. And he'd spent a little money on a disposable camera, not minding Lance smirking at him.

When they got home and had changed clothes, Taylor pulled a large lasagna out of the freezer. Lance's eyebrows shot up, but he looked pleased.

Taylor explained. "You been spending so much time at work, I figured I better learn how to cook better. I really like it. I may take a class in it." Lance gave him a blinding smile.

Lance cleared away the dishes, and brought out a couple beers. "That was amazing Taylor. Thank you."

Taylor smiled. "I have a little graduation gift for you. I hope you like it." He placed an envelope on the table. Lance sat there, stunned. "Well, c'mon, Lance. Ain't no fun if you don't open it."

"You shouldn't have, Taylor."

"Yes, I should have. You work so hard, Lance, and that's great, but someone needs to make sure you have what you need to keep going. That's me, if you hadn't guessed." He pushed the envelope toward Lance.

Lance slowly opened the envelope, still stunned. He pulled out tickets and started reading them, then looked up at Taylor, puzzled.

"It's a Caribbean cruise, Lance, a gay cruise."

"Oh my god, Taylor." Lance's eyes looked a little wet.

"I just figured you needed the time off before the shit hits the fan, and we can completely indulge ourselves, and see how it feels to be completely out. If this is the sort of thing we need to do in the future, then it's good to know now."

"It's perfect Taylor." He let out a whoop. "I can't wait!"

The week of the cruise passed too quickly. As Taylor had expected, Lance turned heads wherever he went on the boat. But then the turned heads would see Taylor, and they'd look away, much to Taylor's amusement. He also caught more than one look that said, "What is that gorgeous boy doing with that hulk?" But when the eyes drifted down Taylor's body, their eyes went wide, then slid away. Taylor made sure to wear as little as possible. He was enjoying every bit of this.

When Lance caught someone drooling at Taylor he'd laugh, and when Taylor pretended to preen, he laughed louder. Taylor wondered if Lance actually noticed the attention that came his way. Every guy who walked past Lance was stunned by him. He never saw Lance react. He hated to admit that it was satisfying, that among all these hard bodies and pretty faces, all Lance's attention was on Taylor. He even let Lance persuade him to dance, if that's what they called being pressed up against your lover and moving your weight from foot to foot.

He kissed Lance at breakfast the second day on ship, that freedom headier than touching. It felt so great that they'd spend odd moments against each other at various parts of the day stopping just for a kissing session.

They ran together on the ship's running track, sunbathed in lounges on deck, swam several times a day amid hundreds of other horny gay men in tiny swim suits, and spotted each other when they found the weight room. On the third day they went into the ship's store, which apparently catered to the clientele to a surprising extent, to settle a bet on how much more expensive lube would be on ship, and how many brands they'd carry, when they found the swimsuits. Lance argued they couldn't be called swim suits because they were too small to hold anything in, especially on Taylor, he added into Taylor's ear. Taylor ended up daring Lance to wear the teal-

blue thong into the pool, and Lance countered by agreeing, only if Taylor wore the red one that was equally tiny. By then they were both getting hard, so they threw down the ridiculous amount of money required to buy them, and hurried back to their room.

"Hey, how are we gonna wear those things and not get a stiffie?"

Lance sniggered. "I don't know if you noticed, but at least in the pool, almost everyone has a stiffie. No one cares. But I know I'm not gonna be able to look at you and not get hard. That bother you?" He'd turned serious.

He surprised himself at his answer. "I'm not thrilled, and I can't believe I'm saying this, but if I get to see you in that scrap of material in public, I can deal. I'm a little worried about the people around us, though. I think you're gonna have people creaming in their speedos or fainting when they see not just the rest of you, but your butt and your dick, as well."

Lance just groaned and kissed him.

They figured that going out nearly naked the first time would be best right after they'd had sex. They wore the terry cloth robes the ship left in their rooms to the pool, and lay on two available lounges to gather courage. When it became too hot, they opened their robes, revealing the tiny suits. They lay next to each other for a while, watching everyone around them, commenting sometimes on the more outrageous behavior, when Lance noticed Taylor's cock start to lengthen.

"Uh, I think we better get into the pool." He looked down.

Taylor gusted a huge sigh. "How do I let you get me into situations like this, where in moments, a hundred gay guys are going to be checking out my lover's ass?"

Lance laughed. "If you go any further than that," he nodded to Taylor's cock, "guys are going to be dropping to their knees in front of you."

Taylor felt himself blushing, but it still felt great. This would probably be best done fast, like peeling off a bandage. "Let's go!"

He grabbed Lance's hand, and they ran across the pool side to jump together into the pool. They dunked themselves and paddled around, then Lance walked over to Taylor, grabbed his ass, and kissed him. Taylor was laughing as he kissed him back.

The week was over way too quickly, but Taylor felt it cemented them together better than anything else had. Taylor thought this might be the ticket to keep them from going nuts as the intensity of Lance's schedule got worse.

Lance spent the rest of the summer mostly preparing for next year's football season. One afternoon he was watching TV when he heard stumbling at the front door. He opened the door to find Lance, holding a large box, trying to get his key in the door. A burly guy in a football jersey was unloading more boxes from a van parked at the curb.

"Whatcha got there?"

"Hey Taylor. Wait'll you see this stuff. I didn't want to take it at first, but Stevens said I had to, and honestly, it'll make it so much easier. I got a new laptop, desktop, a DVD player, a VCR, and a TV, for me to watch plays on. Oh, and a really nice pair of headphones. And Taylor, I got a flat panel LCD TV!"

The guy walked up he walk with two boxes, and came into put them on the living room floor, as indicated by Lance.

The football player headed out, saying, "Hey can I get some help with the TV?"

Taylor followed him out, and they carried the large box inside.

The football player nodded to Taylor, and bumped knuckles with Lance. "Hey man, see you at practice," and left.

Taylor helped Lance put everything together. Lance looked like it was Christmas, and Taylor had to admit he was pretty excited about the hardware, too.

Fall brought stresses Taylor had hoped weren't going to be problems. First there were dinners and parties with alumni and other football VIPs, which Taylor not only couldn't attend, but that Lance had to lie through, saying he was way too busy to date much. Then Stevens gave Lance a sections of the team to work on, including one on one coaching, which wasn't just on the field and in the gym. Lance got phone calls late at night, and it didn't take long to realize that Taylor wouldn't be able to answer the phone at home. He didn't like it, but figured it was a small price to pay for being with Lance.

What he didn't like was how it grated on Lance. He came home from a dinner more aggravated than he'd seen Lance in a long while. He had to persuade Lance to tell him what was bothering him, which worried him more than anything.

"I just hate telling you stuff like this, Taylor. Mrs. Bosworth has taken a shine to me – you remember I told you about her – and now she's trying to set me up with women, telling me the whole time that she can't understand why a such a handsome boy like me isn't seeing anyone."

Taylor sighed. "Lance, I know you're not going to see anyone else. You don't have to worry about that. What if you say thank you, you'll consider it, and then not do anything about it? Do you think she'll drop it?"

"She might, but I'm afraid I'm going to explode sometimes. I don't want to be such a fake."

"You're putting on your public face. That's all it is. When you're with me, you are yourself. A lot of people have to do this. You can if you want it enough."

Lance nodded, but didn't look any less sad about it.

Taylor couldn't even attend games as Lance's guest, and this Taylor found surprisingly frustrating. He spent the summer reading about football, and now wanted to see some of Lance's work in person. He had to settle for watching it on TV, until he came up with the solution. He'd asked Matty and Polly to a game, and they went together, again having a great time, and this time they met Lance at a restaurant away from campus afterward. Before Lance arrived, Taylor had a brainstorm.

"I had an idea I want to run by you two."

"Yeah, sure, Taylor."

"I told you about the terms of Lance's scholarship, right?" Both Matty and Polly nodded. "Well, I'm thinking that the only way I can get to attend his games is in a group. Would you mind being my beards? You know what that is? It's a gay guy's fake girlfriend. We'd both win – I'd get to go to the games, and so would you guys. What do you think?"

Polly had a big grin on her face, but Matty was less sure. "You think it's gonna fool them, and that Lance is gonna want to get that many tickets all the time?"

"I think he'd love to have you guys come, and we'll have to ask about the tickets. Now that he's more involved, it's probably less of a problem. Can't hurt to ask, though."

Taylor asked him about the scheme when they got home, and Lance loved it. Taylor hoped he could come up with other solutions so easily, but wasn't so sure.

Lance had been successful with his coaching, and finished up the year working on his classes and thesis, which he hoped to finish by the end of June. He also spent time applying for jobs, around the country, except for Texas. Taylor was puzzled when he found out.

"But isn't all of Texas crazy about football? Wouldn't it make sense to just see if there are any positions open?"

"All coaches are supposed to live football. I don't mind that. We're also supposed to be the pillar of the community. That's what I want to avoid. That means everyone knowing everything about you. I don't mind being called out day or night, and working all the time, but I want my privacy. The pressure is going to be worse in Texas, believe me."

"You're also afraid you're going to get stuck there."

"Yeah, I am. I'm also afraid of what might happen if they find out about you and me. You'll notice I'm avoiding the south as much as I can, and keeping to the bigger cities when I can't."

Lance finished his thesis at the beginning of August, and let Taylor take him away on another gay cruise. Although it wasn't quite as special as the first one, they had a great time, and he was able to regain some of the energy he'd used in keeping the closet door shut. A week after their return, Coach Stevens emailed him with an appointment. Taylor offered to drive him, and Lance was grateful. This was unexpected, and that wasn't a good thing.

Lance watched Taylor watching people in the common before he walked over to him. Taylor had put up with so much this past year. He knew Taylor was being truthful when he said nothing mattered to him but being with Lance, but it still wasn't right, hiding like this. Still, he suspected that this new bit of news was going to make Taylor happy.

Taylor tried to read him, but Lance just wanted to go home. He managed to stay silent all the way home. As soon as they got in the living room, though, he felt like he was going to burst, and didn't know where to begin.

"Taylor, you're not going to believe this – I'm sure not believing it yet. When Copley left, he got a position at another school and took a couple people with him. That's actually a good thing for the team, because they were in Copley's mold." Taylor was looking impatient. "Anyway, Stevens offered me one of the positions." He couldn't contain his grin any longer. Taylor looked stunned, then grabbed him in a bear hug.

"That's fantastic, congratulations! You'll do great."

"The only problem is that the same rule applies. And I'll have to do more traveling to scout high school kids, starting real soon. But Stevens knows, and he offered me the job. He said I did a great job with the players, as well as plays. He wants me to work individually with the players even more. Unfortunately, we're going to have to move into a larger place, so you can have your own bedroom. Cause there'll be a lot more people coming and going. But I think it's all worth it, don't you?"

"Lance, I couldn't be happier. It's perfect."

Lance believed Taylor. It wasn't a perfect world for them, but it was better than most people got, even for a little while, better than his world in West Canaan, and certainly better than Taylor's in Brooklyn. He didn't see either of their feelings for each other getting any less intense, and really, this way they both had their dreams. Taylor got out and found Lance. Lance got to continue in football and found Taylor. It was truly all each of them needed.

END

Feedback to:
riesling@pobox.com

Title is from Good Things by the Bodeans:

Give I can give love and attention
Give I can give all time away
Only to one heart I can give today
Be I can be man full of color
Be I can be man black or white
But only to one heart I can be tonight