

# The Billionaire's Secret Thug: A Gay BMWM Romance

Pages: 1543

Format: pdf, epub

Language: English

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A BWWM Billionaire Romance

By: Patricia Vanzant

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## The Billionaire's Secret Thug

Jeremy seemed to have the perfect life. He was sitting atop his penthouse executive office, staring out into the city thinking about what he had accomplished so far in his life. To him, it didn't feel like he was perfect. He was the head of Finite Industries, one of the best consulting agencies in the country. He knew that from the moment he said goodbye to Darrius, his childhood best friend back in the day that it would be like this, but he didn't know what to think of it all. As he looked out at the skyline below, he realized what he had done. He had become a billionaire. He was part of the one-percent, which to most can seem incredible, but to him felt miserable.

"Shit, why do I feel this way?" he asked himself. He got like this every now and then. He had a great life, but there was always that one little thing that made him go from feeling like he had it all to wondering just exactly what he was missing in his life.

He stared at the statistics for his company. Since the startup five years ago, it had grown to one hundred times the size it had been before. It was shocking to feel this wave of excitement as he looked at the graph. Even though it had been five years of success, it had also been nine years of emptiness. Jeremy had left his best friend Darrius when he decided to go to college, and from there, his life had changed.

Of course, Jeremy never felt like he belonged in that world anyway. Jeremy grew up in the bad part of town. The part of town that people tried to spend as little time as possible in. But Jeremy had more of an idealistic thought about that area. Sure it was dangerous, and there were times when he feared for his own life, but Darrius, his best friend throughout most of his life, was always there to protect him. Darrius was the man who saved his ass more times than he could count, and he would probably be dead on the streets if it weren't for him.

Jeremy and Darrius were best friends. Darrius was black, a man who was from a family that was respected in the hood. When people saw the two guys together, they would always criticize Darrius for his choice of friends. Jeremy was constantly harassed for being white, but Darrius was always there to save the day. He knew that Darrius was probably the reason why he was able to have the success he had, but before they were able to realize how important they were to each other, Jeremy's parents forced him to leave the area he was living in. They refused to allow Jeremy to continue to live in this desolate place. Sure they had some money, but not enough to leave the area. Plus, it was strange, but his mom was happy to live here despite the fact that it was dangerous according to many people. Jeremy ended up getting a scholarship to one of the best schools in the country, and when that happened, it was time for the two men to part.

Jeremy still wondered to this day if he would ever see Darrius again. Darrius was his rock when he was younger, a man that he could trust. Some probably thought they were gay for each other or something, but it was never like that. Rather, it was like they were brothers, two men who cared about one another more than life itself. It was strange, but Jeremy had a strong heart for the other man, and to this day, he still regretted ditching him all those years ago.

"I still can't believe I did that," he muttered to himself. He still couldn't bring himself to realize exactly what he had done, and the regret still haunted him. He left the office that night, shooting a text to his wife Francine that he would be back late, and that he was going to work at the local café. He needed a break from the life he created, and he wanted to collect his thoughts.

When he got to the café however, something felt different. He didn't know what it was, but it was almost as if he was feeling a familiar presence. Could it be? Could it really be him? It couldn't be, especially considering his situation. He shunned Darrius after his parents sent him off to college, and when he thought about all of that he regretted it.

Darrius was adamant about staying in communication with Jeremy, and initially Jeremy was all for that. He thought that it was right to talk with his best friend all the time, and to let him know about what was going on with the college life. But shortly thereafter, Jeremy left the other man, and he stopped answering Darrius' calls and text messages. It bothered Darrius, until one day Jeremy just up and blocked him. Call it what you want, but Jeremy did it because he felt ashamed to be associating himself with the other man. He never told Darrius that, but he was trying to forget the hood past that he had left behind.

When he stepped into that café and got a look at the black man over at the corner of the room, the regret immediately flushed over him. He looked there, jarring his gaze away when the barista called out to him. He rushed over, ordering a decaf tea and a small sandwich. He continued to look at the other man, realizing the truth. It really was him, and it was the start of the flood of regret and hate for himself that he had.

"Shit. I can't believe this," he muttered to himself. But he could, and at that present moment, he couldn't turn his gaze away. Jeremy saw Darrius for the first time in nine years, and the feelings from the past immediately washed over him. His mind starting flooding with thoughts, what would happen between both of them? Would they be able to talk out the past? Or would it be just another encounter in the book of life?

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For a moment, Jeremy thought about leaving. He thought of just getting up, getting away from the man, and pretending like they never saw one another. But then, he saw the small smile on Darrius' face, and Jeremy wondered if it would be okay. Would they be able to talk all of this out? Or would it end up being awkward once again? He moved tentatively over to the other man, blushing madly.

"Hey there," he told Darrius.

"Hello Jeremy, It's been a long time," the other man said with a small smile.

Jeremy wondered if it was even safe to sit with this man. He remembered that he basically left the hood to pursue his dream, and he did technically leave his best friend high and dry. He wondered if Darrius would judge him. He hoped not, but right now, he couldn't tell if the other man was just being friendly or was truly going to get into a deep conversation of their past occurrences.

"What are you doing here?" he asked Darrius.

"Well, I figured I would get myself a cup of coffee. It's been hard working out on the streets," the man said.

Great, so Darrius has been working out on the street. That didn't make his resolve any better than

it already was once before. It scared him, because that meant he might be doing something illicit.

"It's not like that Jeremy. I'm playing music on the streets. Being a street performer and rapping in the streets actually does well to pay the bills. I also do a couple of odd jobs delivering things. I wouldn't get caught up in the drug cartels or anything," Darrius said, pulling Jeremy out of his thoughts.

"Oh thank god. I was scared for a minute you got into that. I was worried about what you might think of me too, not living that sort of life anymore," he told the other man.

Darrius drank a bit of his coffee, not saying anything. For a bit, Jeremy wondered if the other man would tell him off, to say that he was a bastard for leaving him all those years ago.

"It had been nine years since you left Jeremy, I already took out my anger. Besides, there is something else that I've wanted to tell you, but I don't think this is the fitting place. Let's just catch up though, because that's not awkward to do, and we can discuss the elephant in the room later," Darrius insisted.

Would they really discuss it? It seemed like Darrius didn't want anything to do with that past, but was only focused on the here and now.

"What have you been up to? Besides the odd jobs and crap?" Jeremy asked the other man.

"Been mostly working, keeping my nose clean and out of trouble. The old area is pretty much the same as it always was. Been thinking about getting out, but I've wanted to wait," he told Jeremy.

"Why is that?" he asked.

Darrius looked at Jeremy straight in the eye, and then the next words immediately had another meaning.

"I've needed a reason to leave. Someone to push me forward," Darrius said.

So there was a person who could do that? Who would it be? Jeremy didn't know, because he thought that him leaving would be the kick starter to all of this, but apparently not.

"Well, I'm glad that you want to get out," Jeremy said nervously.

"Indeed. What about you though? I heard you have a wife now, and you're working on some company," Darrius said, looking at Jeremy with shifty eyes.

"Yeah, I've been married for a few years, but to be honest, it's not all that it's cracked up to be. To be honest, I'm kind of miserable in the place I'm in right now," he told the other man.

"Whys' that?" Darrius asked. Jeremy stared at him for a bit, realizing that Darrius had very penetrating eyes.

"Because...I don't love her," he told Darrius.

That's when Darrius looked at Jeremy with emotion. "Seriously? You're with a woman that you don't love? Why? I mean, you could have any woman that you want to. You have one of the most

successful startup companies out there. You fulfilled your dream, and yet you're settling for being unhappy?" Darrius asked.

"I know, I know. I just...I don't feel like I should try to pursue anything else. The weird feelings that I have, they're just hanging around there waiting to escape, but I'm not sure what to say," he told Darrius.

"Well, you should work on being happy. You're not put on this damn planet just to sit around and mope like crazy. You need someone who cares about you, who will be there for you, who is okay with you and who you are. You're not supposed to just end up dying like the rest of the world. I get it that you have money, man. I totally do. But instead of just focusing on the greed of your company, try and look to see how you can have the best relationship possible. You should do something with your life. I'm trying to, but I'm looking for the right one," Darrius said.

Jeremy listened to this. Darrius did have a point, he always did. The only person he's ever felt emotions for was Darrius though, especially in the realm of caring. He only did care about the other man and not much else. Sure, he did wish that his wife wouldn't spend all his money and be annoying, but they hadn't had sex in a while, and she rarely did more than her domestic duties. It had been forever since they went out on a date as well.

"You're right. I hate to fucking say it, but you're right," he told the other man.

"I know. I've always been right. I've always been that good conscience that hangs around and tells you to stop fucking your life up," the other man insisted.

He was right. But then, Jeremy started to feel something within him start to grow. He felt a sort of longing for this man, even though he never had any sort of thoughts about the man before. He never felt gay for Darrius, but at that moment, he knew that the only person who truly understood him was Darrius.

"Listen, let's head back to my place, I want you to see it. I'll take you there," Darrius said.

Jeremy nodded, and soon they got up. The people in the coffee shop looked at them, briefly wondering where the two men were going. However, when they got to Jeremy's car, Darrius told him where to go. They drove for about ten minutes until they got to a familiar place, and when Jeremy saw it, he gasped.

It was the skyline. This was a place right near the hood where they grew up, and when Jeremy and Darrius got out, Jeremy looked at the place with wide eyes. He couldn't believe they were back here, but when he got there, Darrius spoke.

"I took you here because I think there's something that's been on your mind recently. I know for a fact that I have my own feelings as well, and I don't think it's time to just sit around and let these go. I knew you came back into my life for a reason, and I think this was it," Darrius said.

"What do you mean?" was all Jeremy could say. He was then turned around, and soon, he felt something soft against his own lips. For a moment, Jeremy didn't know what to say, but he kissed the other man, waiting for the answers to come.

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Darrius pulled away, blushing as he looked at Jeremy with a soft face.

"I've wanted to do that for a while now," he told Jeremy.

Jeremy touched his lips. He didn't want to pull away from the other man, but instead he wanted more. He's never kissed a man before, and he knew what type of trouble he was getting into with this man. He knew that kissing and being with Darrius would mean cheating on his wife, so he had to think twice before doing all of this.

"But...why? Why me?" he asked Darrius.

"To be honest, I don't fucking know, but it's something I've wanted to express to you for a long time. I know that you're a good man Jeremy, and I can tell that you're miserable. I've loved you for a long time, probably since we were young and stupid," Darrius said.

Jeremy couldn't believe this. Darrius was in love with him? It seemed almost too good to be true, but in a sense, Jeremy couldn't believe that he felt the same way.

"Are you...sure?" he managed to ask the other man.

"I'm fucking sure Jeremy. I've been in love with you for a long time, and the reason why I've stayed in this goddamn area was because I had hopes that you would come back. However, I realized that it was indeed something fragile that was stupid of me to hold on to. I love you Jeremy, and from this, I've realized that you're the only man I give a flying fuck about. I want to be with you, and I love you. The reason why I haven't left this area was because I was hoping that I could see you again, and tell you how I feel. I love you Jeremy, and I want you," Darrius said.

Jeremy was about to ask him more about this confession, but deep down, he knew it was a waste of air. He loved Darrius too, but he'd never acknowledged the feelings until now. He ran off to his wife, a woman who he didn't care about at the bottom of it. He really did only marry her because the people in his company insisted that he get married off soon, because if he did end up dying, he needed an heir. But they struggled, and now that Darrius had told him the truth, he realized as well that the truth, although it did hurt for a bit, was the truth that had been hiding within them.

"You're right Darrius. I love you as well. I was a fucking idiot for running off," he told the other man.

"You're not. You were living your dream, and although I was a bit selfish at the onset when I thought of that, I realized that was how I felt. I love you Jeremy, and I knew that if I waited for you, everything would be okay. Even if I had to wait until I was 50, I would do it, because you were my best friend. The man who changed my life, and the one that I fell for," Darrius said.

Before Jeremy could say anything else he decided to express his feelings with actions instead of words. To say that actions speak louder than words at this moment was an understatement. He started to press his lips to the other man, and the each of them were soon lost in the touch of the other man. Their kisses were intoxicating, and Jeremy felt more passion with this one man than he had with his wife throughout their entire marriage. They stayed like that, kissing each other with passion along the lakefront of the city. After a moment or so, Darrius pulled away, blushing.

"Sorry...I didn't mean to be so...forward," he said.

"That's fine. How about we head back to my second home and have some fun. I'm not letting you go tonight. I would be a fucking fool if I did that sort of thing," he told the other man.

Darrius couldn't believe his ears, but he immediately nodded. Jeremy grasped his hand, and soon they walked to his car, wondering what was going to happen next. It was time that they finally expressed those feelings that they couldn't nine years ago, the feelings that had been holding them back and the feelings that would take them into the future.

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When they got to his second home, Jeremy glanced around before he got out of the car. Darrius followed. Darrius was trying hard not to be seen, as the last thing Jeremy wanted was to let a neighbor notice his situation. When they got to the door, Jeremy opened it with a card key, letting the other man in first. He then scurried in second, and Darrius looked at the place with awe.

"I still can't believe I'm here," he told the other man.

"I know, it's a lot to take in. but to be honest, a billionaire's life is meaningless without something to spur it along. And I think that something is you," he told Darrius.

"I think so too. I mean, we can talk about this later, but for now I want you," Darrius said with a husky voice. Before Jeremy could say anything else, the other man pinned him to the wall, kissing him hungrily and with a passion that knew no bounds. Jeremy couldn't believe that this was happening, that he was kissing his best friend that he once betrayed but was now together with once again. It was perfect, simply perfect, and soon the other man started to continue the actions.

He slipped his tongue into Jeremy's mouth, and for a moment, Jeremy was a bit confused. It didn't feel like how he expected, but soon, he opened up his lips, parting them slightly to let the other man roam in there. It was a bit shocking, that's for sure, and soon the two of them let their tongues start to mingle with one another in a passion that was unlike anything else they had ever felt before. They started to let their tongues slip into each other, and soon, they were both moaning with unexplainable pleasure, loving the way that it felt. It was by far a great feeling, and it was certainly one of the best moments ever.

After a moment or so, he then felt Darrius start to tug at his suit jacket, which Jeremy immediately slipped off. Darrius then worked in a hungry fashion to get the man's undershirt off, leaving him half-naked in front of the man that he grew to love. Soon, Darrius started to move his lips against Jeremy's neck, lightly touching and teasing the flesh with little kisses. Darrius started to bite down in the flesh there, eliciting a moan and a groan from Jeremy as he continued to do so. Soon, Jeremy was trying to hold back moans as Darrius continued the onslaught against his body. Jeremy soon felt the small feeling of his leg against his crotch.

"Fuck," Jeremy breathed.

Darrius smiled, happy to finally reenact his dreams. He had wanted this for a long time, to have Jeremy in his arms and be happy like this. Soon, Darrius was dotting the other man's collarbone with little kisses, and he moved to Jeremy's peaked nipple, taking it between his teeth and lightly sucking on the flesh, letting his pink tongue get to work. Jeremy groaned, bucking his hips with need and pleasure as the other man continued to tease his nipples. Sure, his wife did that at one point, but it was different with her. She seemed to only do it for a bit, and it wasn't arousing when she did it. With Darrius against them using his tongue to swirl and feel around, Jeremy felt the hot passion envelope over his body, and soon, he felt like he was about to go completely and utterly insane.

Darrius could see the need, and he could feel the hard member between his legs. Soon, Darrius

moved downward, taking off Jeremy's pants without any second thoughts. Jeremy knew that he would have to iron these later and take them to the dry cleaner, because they would be wrinkled all to hell. At the current moment, the only thing he could think about was the passion that Darrius was about to give him. He then started to notice Darrius using his teeth to grab the waistband of his boxers. Jeremy blushed, hot and turned on at the sight of the other man, and soon, he noticed Darrius slip them off with one fell swoop, letting the garment pool at his feet. Jeremy stepped out of them, and soon Darrius pulled them roughly to the side.

Jeremy realized how hard he was at this point. He couldn't believe how turned on he was by the other man, and soon he could feel his cock pulsating in front of him. At that moment, he realized that he had never been this hard before. He was super turned on, and he also noticed that his wife could never get him up like this. Maybe this was a trick that only Darrius had, but whatever it was, he wanted more.

Darrius then wasted no time, taking his cock in between his lips and kissing the head, swirling it around softly before taking more of it in. Jeremy wondered how he got so good at this, because this skill was not what he was expecting. Darrius was really fucking good, and soon the other man started to take his cock and tease the tip of it before he moved down the shaft. Darrius licked it like a lollipop, and Jeremy was trying to hold back the moans and thrusts that were trying to come out of his body. He wanted to fuck this man's mouth, but Darrius then took extra precaution, lightly holding onto Jeremy's hips as he bobbed his head up and down. Jeremy bit his knuckle, trying to hold back the aching pleasure. He also didn't want to come yet either, even though he could feel his orgasm looming over the horizon. He loved this, and Darrius knew that the other man was enjoying this almost as much as he was.

Darrius then swirled his tongue around, moving it up and down, and against the edge of the base of his shaft. Darrius took him in deeper, and soon Jeremy was in shock at the sheer nature of all of this. Darrius was really good at what he did, and soon, he deep-throated the other man with his lips. Jeremy moaned, feeling his body tense up and his orgasm about to come. But, before it could, Darrius grabbed his dick hard, staving it.

"You're not coming yet. Let me give you more pleasure," the man said.

Those words reverberated through the air, and soon Jeremy realized what this meant. The other man was going to make him go insane, and he was more than ready for that. Soon, he felt Darrius grasp his hand, looking at him with a serious glance.

"Where is the bedroom?" the man asked.

Jeremy weakly pointed to the back room, and soon, he followed the other man in there. He was pushed down on the bed, with Darrius hovering over him. Darrius then slipped off his body for a moment, grabbing something from his wallet.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

However, Darrius didn't respond. It didn't take long for Jeremy to realize what the other man was getting out of his pocket. The man pulled out what seemed to be a fresh bottle of lube and a condom. Putting the condom to the side, Darrius coated his fingers with the lubricant. He looked at Jeremy with a serious face, glancing at him with lust and desire.

"I'll try to be as gentle as possible. I've never done this to anyone but myself before," he told Jeremy.

Jeremy nodded, obviously a bit confused himself. Soon, he felt Darrius spread his legs, and there was something cold ghosting against his entrance. Jeremy hissed, but not because it hurt, because it was different from what he expected. Soon, Darrius pushed the digit into him, and Jeremy started moaning with pleasure. It felt tight, very tight, but at the same time, it was a feeling that he'd desired to feel for the longest time only having just now had the chance to.

Darrius had thick fingers, and it was obvious from each of the movements that they were big. He started to feel the tight, burning stretch of the area down there, and for a moment, Jeremy didn't know if this was going to work. He was trying to bite his lip to prevent a hiss of pain from coming out. However, before he could tell the other man that he was worried about that, something ghosted over an area that Jeremy had never experienced before, and the pain that he had completely dissipated, turning into a complete envelope of pleasure.

"Holy shit," he said, practically bucking and fucking the finger inside of him.

"There it is," Darrius said with a knowing smile. Soon, the man started to press right up against it, and Jeremy was moaning like crazy, bucking his hips and loving the way that it felt. He couldn't believe how much this was making him go insane, and soon, Darrius added in yet another finger into the fray, spreading him out.

Jeremy didn't care about the pain anymore, not since he found the spot. Jeremy was in bliss, and already he could feel his cock going rock-hard once again. The other man continued the onslaught against his sensitive area with more fingers until Jeremy had three inside of him. He was moaning, groaning, and bucking his hips in sweet pleasure. After a moment or so, Darrius knew that it was time.

Darrius pulled away, smiling at the other man before grasping the bottle of lube and the condom. He put the condom on his shaft, and then coated the area with lube to help with the penetration. Soon, Jeremy felt the tightness of his hole being pushed apart, and for a moment, it felt a bit burning. But then, Darrius was inside the very tight hole, and he started to move in and out of Jeremy with a wanting, needy moan.

He started to feel the pace pick up, with Darrius thrusting hard inside of Jeremy, and Jeremy wilting at the pleasure. He couldn't believe how far he had come with this man, and how far gone he was now. He was enraptured in the pleasure, and Jeremy couldn't believe what he was feeling. This was bliss, complete and utter bliss, and that's when the feelings that he had within started to come up.

There was one word that flashed within his mind as he felt the man penetrate him. Love. Was Jeremy in love with Darrius and this was the result? In a way, it made perfect fucking sense. It was why he gave himself to Darrius so easily, why he agreed to this whole thing in the first place. He was fine with it once he realized what was going on, and soon, he felt his body tense up, and when that happened his orgasm was the last thing he remembered.

He came hard, his cock spewing out his seed and coating their bodies. Darrius let out a small grunt before he tensed up, his large cock swelling within Jeremy. He also came hard, his body tensing up as the pleurae of his own orgasm took over his body and Jeremy could feel the warmth of his seed as it entered within him.

The two of them separated, and for a moment, neither of them spoke. They looked at one another, both of them enraptured in the pleasure, but knowing that there was another thing that needed to be discussed. That was the future, what this meant for them, and what they would do next.

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Both of them were in a sort of heaven for what seemed to be forever, but then Jeremy started to come to. Darrius went to flush the condom down the toilet to hide the evidence of their mischief here, but when Jeremy looked at him, he smiled.

"That was amazing," Jeremy said. It really was. It was better than any encounter he had with his bitch of a wife, and he could see the smile on Darrius' face.

"I'm glad. I could see that we both needed to get the feelings out there. I think it's time that we talked about that though, now that our hormones are a little bit calmed down," Darrius said.

The two of them got dressed and sat on the couch, looking at one another with smiles and with worry present in their eyes. Jeremy knew what he just did, he cheated on his wife, and he knew that he would have to deal with that first.

"So what do you think of us, Jeremy? Am I just some fuck buddy, or am I something else?" Darrius started off.

Jeremy thought about this, and as he mused on the choices, he knew that Darrius was one thing and one thing only. Darrius was his lover, the man that he wanted to see happy, and after a moment or so, he shook his head, realizing what he was thinking.

"I'm a goddamn fool, that's what I am. I can't believe I never realized it sooner," he told Darrius.

"It's fine, really. I mean, it took me a while to see the true feelings that I have for you as well," Darrius admitted.

"You're right though, it is something that we must talk about. I love you Darrius, and I realized that after I ditched you all those years ago, I ruined things. I learned from you just now that I can be happy, but it will have to be with you. My wife is okay, but the truth is, I know that she's not happy. She never really does much anymore, and we have a strained relationship at best. I think it's a mutual unhappiness, but with you, I feel complete and utter bliss. I want you Darrius, and I want to be with you. Maybe it's the truth, that I really do love you," he told the other man.

Darrius came closer, planting a kiss on the other man's mouth. "Then you should do the right thing. I want to be with you, and I know that you want to be with me. Otherwise, you would've pushed me away when I kissed you at that point. I know it's going to be hard, especially since I'm black and you're white, but we can work this out. I was thinking of maybe trying to get a better job or something," he offered.

"Nonsense. You can come work for me Darrius," Jeremy simply said.

Darrius looked at him with wide eyes. "But I don't have the skills to work in a place like that!" he cried out.

"You might not think so, but I know it. I can train you, we can work together, and everything will be okay. I think at the end of the day, the only thing that we need to remember is the fact that we're able to be with one another, and we do love one another. If that means that I have to help you get back on your feet, then let's do it," he told the other man.

Darrius looked at his best friend with a beaming smile. "Thank you Jeremy. I owe you one," he

told the other man.

“You don’t owe me anything. You’re my best friend, my lover, the man who waited, and you’re an old friend who I realized I was madly in love with,” he told the other man.

The two of them looked at one another, each with smiles on their faces and ready for the future. Jeremy knew that he was taking a big gamble with this, to get the hell away from his soon to be ex-wife, but he knew that the real meaning of life was to be happy, and he knew that Darrius gave him a happiness that he never felt before. Even just being around him for that little bit of time changed him, and as the two of them kissed one another with a wrought-iron passion, Jeremy knew that no matter what, everything would be okay once they figured everything out together.

Once Jeremy got home, he went to work drafting the divorce papers. About a week later, he presented them to his wife, who was relieved when she saw that. She knew that everything was going bad for the last couple years, and she was ready to move on too. They went to the lawyer’s office, and even Jeremy felt like a big weight was being lifted off his shoulders. He knew that he wanted to be with the man, the best friend that he always had.

Jeremy gave her one of the homes, but she didn’t accept it, saying she would rather take some money and go travel. Jeremy did just that, and once that happened, he never saw her again. Jeremy helped Darrius get a job with his company, and the two of them worked together. Darrius was able to get out of the hood he lived in before, and he was able to escape the past that they had. Soon, the two of them grew more in love with one another than they had ever before, and Jeremy knew when the time was right, he would marry this man. He knew that when he did marry Darrius, it would be the right choice and not a stupid move. He knew that he loved the man, and things would be okay, as long as they had each other till the day they die.

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THR END

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## BONUS: Dragon's Last Breath

"Another incident," detective Robert Simpson said as he looked at the debris that was scorched black. He gazed upon the sight. It was another arson, this time at yet another bar that seemed to be a hole-in-the-wall type of place. It made no sense, and Robert pursed his lips as he looked over the area, trying to figure out why someone would do this.

It was always these run-down places that got hit, almost like someone had some sort of a grudge against the place. Robert looked as his assistant, Natalie, who raced over to him with the paperwork describing the incident.

"Here are the details from the analysis sir. It looks like no one was hurt, but the place is gone to pieces. This is the third case in the last two weeks," she said.

He took the paperwork from her and read it over. Sure enough, it was just like the other two. All run-down places that seemed to only have locals flock to them.

"Well, let me see what I can do with this. Thank you," he told her.

"You're welcome sir," she replied.

He watched as Natalie walked away and sighed.

"This is bad. Do we have any leads on this place?" he asked himself.

He didn't know what to do about it all. He could already see that this was something that was only growing weirder by the moment. This was a bizarre case, and one of the weirdest he's faced while being a detective.

Robert finished the rest of his analysis and then decided to head on home. While driving, Robert felt his stomach start to growl at him, and suddenly he realized that he had not eaten since about five hours before being called to the scene. Since this was close to seven hours prior, he decided to search for a local diner that was still open at midnight. He located the only diner in the area that was open, which was relatively close to the scene of the crime, and parked his car in the parking lot. He noticed that there was only one other person at the diner, and the man was sitting at the bar.

He looked formidable, intimidating, and he was staring right at Robert with a glance. Robert normally wouldn't have cared in this scenario, but there was something about him that seemed off. What got Robert's attention more than anything wasn't the look of disdain present on the man's face, but the image that was clearly visible to everyone on his arms.

He wore a sleeveless vest and a tank top underneath, but on both of his arms were brilliant orange tattoos of a dragon. From Robert's viewpoint, it looked as if the dragon was wrapped completely around the man's body, with the head entering the back of the man's skull. Robert

stepped back, holding the doorway as he looked at the mesmerizing tattoo present on the man's body. The man looked at him with a glance, and then snorted.

"Take a picture, it lasts longer," he said with a crass attitude.

Robert shook his head, blushing a little bit from the sudden embarrassment of being called out. "Sorry about that sir. I was just shocked by your tattoo," he told him.

"Don't sweat it, you're not the first person to ogle over me because of this thing. There is a very long and convoluted story as to why this tattoo exists on my body, but I have no intention on telling a stranger about it," the man said.

Robert nodded, trying to avoid the man's penetrating gaze. He scanned across the diner, realizing that the only logical place to sit at was the bar. It was where the waitress was, and having to work an overnight shift was probably horrible enough for her. Making it worse by sitting on the opposite side of the building did not seem like a nice thing to do, and Robert saw himself as a nice guy. He sat one stool away from where this mysterious man resided, and the other man looked at him once again.

"I'm surprised. I thought my initial greeting would scare you off," he said.

"You'll have to do better than that," Robert replied.

The man laughed, lightly slapping Robert on the back. "You're funny. I like you," he said.

"I'm glad you find me so amazing," Robert replied with a blanch tone.

"Well, I just find you more interesting than most. Most people try to avoid me when they get the chance and you decided to come right next to me...So what's your name?" the man asked.

Robert looked at him. This guy was strange, very strange, but he didn't know what to make of him. He seemed friendly enough, although very intimidating at the same time.

"Robert...You?" he asked.

"Barnaby. Just Barnaby. I know it's not the most fitting name for a guy like me, but that's what the folks decided to call me. I don't try to question my parents, but they do whatever the fuck makes them happy," the man replied.

He nodded, listening to the man speak. "That's quite a name. So what do you do around here?" he asked.

"Stuff. Things. I just do whatever the wind tells me to. I have my own personal business, but I would rather not go into it in public," he said.

Robert brushed his short brown hair behind his ears, looking at the man. He was a lot more intimidating than anyone he had met before, but there was something about him that seemed sort of friendly in a sense. He was a direct contrast from Robert who was still present in the suit he wore earlier.

"It's nice to see you're doing something with your life. I'm just a detective. Been out on a few jobs, but I'm still relatively new to the whole scope of the job" he told the other man.

"Seems legit. I can tell you look tired. Guess it does take a lot out of a person to do what you do," he said.

Robert nodded. "Yeah. I actually just came back from quite a long case," he told him. "It's still unsolved, with almost no traces of evidence. Its cases like these that just take all of my energy."

"Yeah well, that's the life I wanted to live before fate dealt me a shitty hand. Enough about that though, I'm fucking starving," the man said.

Robert couldn't agree more with that. Barnaby ordered a ¼ pound cheeseburger, with all the fixings, as well as fries and a soda. At this point, Robert could literally eat anything, but wanted to spend the least amount of effort to do so.

"I'll have the same exact thing," Robert said with a smile to the petite girl behind the bar.

"You would get the same thing as me," said Barnaby, a grin stretching across his masculine face.

After a few minutes of chatter about different foods that the two loved, the food finally came out. Before Robert was even handed his, Barnaby had already started munching down, almost animalistic in a sense, but for whatever reason Robert seemed to grow attraction to the man for it.

Robert was gay, but most of the time his romantic affairs were with men who were nothing like this Barnaby. He was strong, domineering, and almost overwhelming in a sense. It didn't help that Robert was usually the bottom despite it all. This man seemed to be a total alpha, and there was something strangely alluring about this man that he couldn't put his finger on.

The two of them stayed at the diner, talking with one another for what seemed to be forever. Finally, Barnaby stood up, putting money on the counter.

"It's on me," the man said.

Robert looked at the other man, shock plastered on his face.

"But...why?" he asked.

"Why? Because I like you. Do I need another fucking reason?" the man said with a snapping tone.

Barnaby looked at Robert, expecting the answer. Robert shook his head. Even though it was unconventional at best, the man did have a point. He knew that Barnaby seemed to have some sort of interest in him. Whether or not it was anything more than mere companion, was up for them to decide.

"Thank you," Robert said.

"Keep the receipt and change too. I left another present for you," Barnaby stated. He sauntered out of the diner as soon as he said that, leaving Robert confused and alone.

"What the hell was that?" he mused. However, he grasped the piece of paper, looking at it.

It was his contact information. So he did convey interest to this other man. Maybe Robert was

better at meeting people than he thought.

However, there was something very odd about this whole thing. The man seemed almost too nice to him, like there was something else that the man was afraid of expressing to others. Whatever it was, it bothered Robert to no end. He didn't understand the situation, but he still pocketed the small piece of crumbled paper. Barnaby. The man definitely had a nice ring to his name, but there was something else that made Robert wonder for a while as he finished up his food. What did this mean? Did the man like him? There was no talk of women and past sexual experiences during their lengthy conversation, but there was also no talk of the subjects that gave Robert a slight idea of a man's sexual orientation. The only thing he could do right now was to wait and see. He finished his food and started to walk back to his car. He took the piece of paper once more out of his pocket and gave it a thorough look. Barnaby...Barnaby...Barnaby. He could be the alpha he had been searching for. He placed the sheet back into his pocket and got in his car.

"What a day," he said as he drove off in the darkness.

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It had been about a week since the incident at the diner, and Robert hadn't seen Barnaby since. He decided to visit the diner frequently, even at the time that they had met a week prior, but no luck. Every time he reached for the piece of paper bearing Barnaby's contact information, he hesitated before calling him.

"What if he forgot who I was, or better yet what if he just laughed at me and hung up when I asked to see him again?" Robert kept pondering every night.

The fire from the night of his interaction with Barnaby was still unsolved, and was without any suspects as well, even after all the questioning that Robert did with the staff and owners. No one had a grudge against the bar, but it definitely seemed as though someone or a group of people had burned it down. There was no sign of gasoline canisters at the scene, but the way the building looked after the arson made it seem as though someone used some sort of flamethrower.

However, even though it had been a week since that event, Robert could not focus his attention on the case because all he could think of was Barnaby, and the Alpha like nature he exuded. He decided to go for a drive down to the diner where he first met Barnaby, but as he was near arrival he notice something out of the corner of his eye. Any arson detective could notice when smoke coming off a building was either a minor, or major event to its life, but this visual was far worse than Robert had ever seen in his career as a detective.

It looked as though the fire had just occurred, and Robert decided to race over to the building. By the time he arrived, he realized that no one was around to call the fire department. He pulled out his phone and dialed 911, but before he could tell the operator the address to the location, something had caught his eye within the building. There was a large figure, about half the size of the warehouse within the flames.

"Sir, what is your emergency!" said the woman at the end of the line.

"Uh.....umm...oh! I'm sorry...the address is 147 Wheeler road! There is a fire....please come quick!" Robert said right before he immediately ended the call.

"What the hell is that?" he said to himself.

Before he could think about what he was looking at, the figure spiraled upwards into the sky until

it was out of sight.

"There's no way...those don't exist," Robert tried to explained to himself.

All that was left in front of Robert was half the structure of an old abandoned warehouse accompanied by flames that reached higher than where the building originally stood. Robert stood at the location with his mouth fully agape, realizing that all those bedtime stories that his mother had told him when he was younger were true. They weren't fiction, they weren't mythological, they were the real deal. He had just found his true suspect, a dragon that was as majestic as it was demonic. Getting its fix by scorching abandoned or empty buildings.

A red dragon.

What the hell? This had to be some sort of sick joke, like a joke some prankster kid would engage in. However, Robert knew that what he saw was real. There really was a dragon that was flying up into the air, disappearing into the clouds. It was what caused the fire here, and immediately, Robert heard the wail of sirens.

What did this mean though? There was no way he could go up to his boss and tell them that the perpetrator of a crime was the dragon. They would laugh at him, and they would call him crazy. This was growing pretty strange, and Robert wondered how he could tell others about this without being put into a mental hospital.

His assistant soon arrived to the location, and the investigation was conducted. He did not mention what he had seen to Natalie, as fear of judgement was foreseen. Robert looked back at the burned down building, and felt a strange presence lingering around him. For whatever reason, the dragon felt familiar, like it knew him or maybe had some sort of past relationship with him. Maybe his grandmother, or maybe even his great grandmother had resurrected in the form of a majestic being.

"That's insane. Why would the dragon know me?" Robert asked himself.

"And why am I the one that has to deal with this?" he continued.

"Robert...You okay?" Natalie asked.

He whipped his head around. Sure enough, Natalie was there, looking at him with an innocent face.

"It's nothing. I'm just trying to piece a few things together," he explained.

"Okay. Here is the details of this incident," she said as she handed him some paperwork.

He looked at the papers, but it was everything that he knew. Of course, they were missing the information that spoke of the dragon, but the only person who saw it was Robert. Robert finished up, and after he left he pulled out his cell phone, dialing Barnaby's number. Without any hesitation, he clicked the call button.

After two short rings, the familiar curt voice was heard. "Yeah?" he asked.

"Hello Barnaby, it's Robert...From the diner the other night," he said.

"Oh hey. What's up?" Barnaby asked him.

"Well, I was wondering if you wanted to get a quick bite to eat. I mean, it's definitely last minute, but I need to speak with you again," he said.

There was pause, and then a loud cough on the other line. "Sorry, had something stuck in my throat...that's fine by me. I don't have any other shit to do," he said.

"Great. Do you want to meet up at the diner?" Robert asked.

"Yeah. But don't think we'll be staying there. I'm taking you somewhere else tonight right after we eat," the other man replied.

Robert blushed. This man was so damn straightforward with everything he wanted to do, and in a sense, he heavily enjoyed it. It didn't feel like he had to run around and pretend with this other man. Everything seemed to just be out there. He smiled at the thought of getting in bed alone with an Alpha male like that, but that smile soon turned into a confused look as he soon remember the severity of his current case. He looked back up at the building that looked as though it had just spit out itself into a fine black ash.

"I can't think about this right now, I need to go and see Barnaby." He told himself, as he walked over to his car.

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He stood in front of the diner fifteen minutes later, ready to see the other man once again. He heard a motorcycle pull up in the alleyway on the side of the building, and sure enough, a minute later he saw the familiar face walk towards the front entryway.

"Hey, follow me," Barnaby said in his usual tone.

Robert did as he was told, like a good omega, going along the corner of the street to the alleyway. There was a black motorcycle there, the engine still running.

"You ride a motorcycle? That very....thrilling," Robert said, trying to show how interested he was in the other man.

"Of course. I have an extra helmet for you. Since you're a detective and shit, I would rather not be on the wrong side of the law," the man said as he gave Robert a smirk.

Robert nodded, putting the helmet on. He clung to the back of the other man, and without hesitation the motorcycle zoomed off. Robert clung to the back of the Barnaby as hard as he could as he drove to what seemed to be the outskirts of town. Robert had no idea where Barnaby was taking him, but he all his faith in the other man. He drove surprisingly well for being an intimidating bad boy who was rude, crass, and curt.

"You're a really good driver!" Robert said into Barnaby's ear.

There was something charming about the way that he acted though, and it certainly was going to be interesting seeing the other man in his own element.

They got to what seemed to be a small clearing, and when Robert got off, he looked around.

"It's a forest," he said.

"Yeah, I come here a lot when I'm frustrated, and when I need some space. It's been pretty crazy on my end as of late, and it's been hard to do much else besides come here and think about things," Barnaby said.

Robert listened, realizing that Barnaby was hiding something, but in a sense he was opening himself up.

"You're quite the person. You're someone I don't even understand," Robert said.

"Yeah, I get that a lot. I've just been going through a whole lot, and it's been frustrating me," the other man said.

Robert listened to this, and soon, the other man sat down on a log. Robert followed suit, looking at him with concern.

"What's wrong?" he asked the other man.

Barnaby scoffed. "Like I would tell you. You've just met me, and I don't think you would understand," he said.

Robert turned to him, staring into his eyes.

"I think I will. I know it's not easy to express your true feelings, but I know for a fact that if you can do that, everything will be okay. I want to be your friend Barnaby," he said.

Barnaby looked at Robert with a serious glance. "Are you sure? Because I have a lot of fucked up baggage," the man said.

"Of course. I mean, we're all human, and we all have our dark sides. I won't judge you," Robert replied.

The man sat silently, looking at Robert for a moment.

"You have your heart so open right now. I wish I could do that. I wish that I could just tell someone my feelings about life, and the past that I've had. Maybe then the pain will go away," he said.

The pain? What did he mean by that?

"What's wrong?" Robert asked.

Barnaby was looking at Robert with a perplexed glance. This was the first time someone had actually asked him what was wrong and cared about the answer.

"Fine. You win. Well, I guess it's time to start from the beginning," he told Robert.

Robert looked at the other man and nodded, listening intently.

"You have my attention," he said.

"I'm sure. Well, my name is Barnaby, and I'm from a run-down part of town. I had something happen when I was younger, something bad, and that's when she came around. My stepmother," he said.

"Your stepmother? What happened there?" Robert asked.

"She's crazy, that's what happened. My stepmother was an abusive cunt to put it lightly, and I was forced to live with her after the incident happened. My dad married that fool, and I was forced to give up the happy life that I had because my dad decided to marry the first whore that showed him attention after my mother had passed. We were well off before and in the beginning of their relationship, but the money started to deplete. After about 2 months of constant spending by her, we ended up being in debt. This was the worst because since she couldn't go out and spend money she decided to just abuse me all day. I know for sure that it's not the best thing in the world to say, but I wish she was dead," he told Robert.

Robert nodded. "I understand. I feel your pain," he said. "I had an abusive uncle who used to touch me when I was very young, and would threaten to hit me every time I told him I was going to tell his brother, who was my father."

"Wow, that's very secretive, you probably have not told many people that," Barnaby said with a horrified look on his face.

"I haven't, but for some reason I feel very comfortable telling you Barnaby," Robert said with a smile.

"There's more of my story that I need to tell you Robert. What I said earlier was putting it lightly. I was torn apart by that bitch, made to suffer, so I ran away, and I tried to live in the slums all my life. But...she would follow me...and would force me to live under her guard. I had to until the time was right, when I could escape. I did so for the first time recently, and it's been the best moments of my life," he told Robert.

Robert nodded. "I get that. I mean, you can change yourself. I see that you're a great man, someone with potential, and an enjoyable person under the cold, hard façade," he told Barnaby.

"Thanks. You're great too. You're like that best friend I had always been looking for. Of course, I was also all alone. I had a shitty home life, and a shitty personal life. I didn't have friends, mainly because everyone was scared of me. Plus, I was never interested in women, so the ones who threw themselves at me were usually tossed away, and then they ran around saying that I didn't give a fuck about them. I didn't, but that's because I'm not interested in women," he said.

Robert paused, looking at the man. "You're not?"

"Nope. Despite my hard façade, I don't like women. I like men. I'm gay, and that was frowned upon as well. It's been hardship after hardship, and to be honest this is the first time I've ever come to terms with it," he told Robert.

Robert understood. He had a great life in comparison to this man, but it seemed that Barnaby was trying.

"Well, you're doing great," he said.

"Thank you. I have become the leader of a small group, and I've become more of an alpha, but it still hurts, and it's why I keep doing what I'm doing. I don't know what to do about myself," he said.

Robert nodded. "It's fine. You have me, and if you ever want to talk, I'm all ears," he said.

The other man nodded. "Thank you Robert. To be honest, I was a bit nervous around you when I first met you...but then...I started to see that you were a caring individual. A man who did seem to understand me, and I appreciate that," he said.

Robert smiled. "Good. I'm here for you...Barnaby," he said.

"I'm here for you too," the other said.

The two men embraced each other, and for a moment, Robert thought of spilling his own secret, that he was gay as well. There was something holding him back from just telling Barnaby that he can unzip his tight jeans and Robert could do the rest. Licking the tip and kissing it softly before taking the whole thing fully down his throat. Robert had always been the receiver. He would always elect to be the first one to be lubed up, and the first once to reach into his lovers tight boxer briefs and put a strangle hold on the large cock that filled in the gaps. After the few seconds when extremely vivid situations filled in the void of spectral infinity, Robert realized now was not the time to tell him. He hugged the other man, happy and satisfied with the way everything was for now.

Barnaby and Robert drove back into town and said their goodbyes, and for the first time ever, Robert saw the other man smile. Robert was grateful to meet someone as amazing as Barnaby, but there was something about his aura that was telling Robert he was more than meets the eye. When Robert fell asleep that night, he felt satisfied that he got to know Barnaby better, and that the potential to be more than friends was present. But there was something still unsettling about him, something that made him want to learn more about his past and group that he was the leader of.

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The two men hung out frequently after that, talking about each other's past experiences. The only problem with some of their conversations was the depth of the personal issues. Barnaby would always teeter with caution over certain subjects, causing Robert to question himself. Would Robert see him differently if Barnaby told him his personal past? He didn't know. What was also surprising was that the arson attacks did not occur as much. Robert would often spend time in his office just daydreaming about the dragon that he was beginning to think was only a figment of his imagination.

Every time he would spend time with Barnaby, Rob would act as though he was a straight man. He eventually was forced to tell a story about his most interesting sexual experience and he described a time with his first boyfriend.

"So I was in doggie position with Crystal, and I was just going to town. She loved to take it very deep and at a speed that was as close as possible to the speed of light. I was at the point where I was about to just bust inside of her, and I just decided to shift into a gear I had never shifted into before. Right before my two little guys down there were about to spill their sacred juice, I accidentally went full speed directly into her asshole!" Robert said while bursting into laughter, talking of the man who later ended up ironically becoming straight, as if this moment in time caused him to confuse himself some more.

"No way, hahahaha" Barnaby exclaimed as her fell to the left of the tree he was sitting against.

"...The best part is....I ended up finishing inside of him after he begged me to get out!" Barnaby shrieked amidst gasps of air.

After about 5 seconds of nonstop laughter, Barnaby's joyous face transformed into a confused look,

"....Did you say...him?.." Barnaby questioned.

"Oh whoops haha, I meant her," Robert pleaded after reconstructing to a straight face pose.

"Oh, that just caught me off guard...Still a hilarious moment though," Barnaby said before he decided to tell of his own experience.

"I once knew this guy who would literally pound me so hard every single time I went over to his place. I felt as if he was such a superior to me, even though I can definitely hold my own. Anyway, he ended up almost killing me when I asked him to choke me...but I mean I was asking for it considering he outweighed me by about 50 pounds of muscle hahaha," continued Barnaby as Robert went from 6 o'clock to midnight thinking of this man being dominated in the bedroom by another man.

"Wow that's...surprising. You seem like such an alpha, I can't see you picture you being an omega." Robert slurred, as he realized that every single conversation led to him wanted Barnaby for himself even more.

"I like to be on both ends of the stick, it's much more fun feeling it from every angle." Barnaby said, leading to a conversation about a few emotional problems that Barnaby had with his former lovers.

Most of their conversations had gone like this. Where Robert would come close to spilling his secret to Barnaby but would always just change the subject right before he was to say it.

After a few weeks of spending time with his so called "best friend", Robert had still gone nowhere with Barnaby. The two cases of arson had still been unsolved, and without more to inspect, Robert found himself spending much more time with himself. For the entirety of his relationship, starting from the night of his first embrace with Barnaby, Robert touched himself frequently to the thought of being in bed with Barnaby naked. He wanted to fully grasp his member, with his hands as well as with his mouth and it never took him long to finish.

Before deciding to set a location and time to tell Barnaby the truth, Robert received a phone call. There had been a fire in a residential home not too far from the first two, and he told the lady on the other end that he was on his way.

He arrived at a run-down home, and was greeted by a woman upon arrival.

"Are you the detective?" she asked.

"Yes, I am. What's your name?"

"Teresa. This is my husband Marcus. Our son left years ago, or at least that's what I thought. I believe he is the one responsible for this destruction" she said while pointing at the burning and melting remains of a small home.

He nodded. "What's your son's name, if you don't mind me asking?" he asked her.

"His name is Barnaby, and he is roughly 30 years old, 6 feet tall, and weighs about 220 pounds" she explained.

That's when it hit him. The same Barnaby? That was definitely the same Barnaby he had grown a relationship to, but why burn down his mother's house? This had to be a joke, this just had to be. However, Robert kept his cool, writing down the information.

"Thank you," he told her.

"Thanks. I'll be trying to scrounge up a motel for us," she replied.

"That works. I have to investigate while the fires are being put out," he told her.

He raced down to the house, and soon, he saw it again. It was smaller this time, but it was that red dragon. It seemed as though it had been admiring its work for the few minutes previous on a nearby mountain, as the flight path was a straightaway shot away from the location. Robert knew what he had to do, but the sinking feeling that he might discover the truth started to loom over him.

"This had to be a joke. This just had to be," he said to himself. He was starting to get a bad feeling from this. However, he continued on his way, heading over to what seemed to be the other side of town. The dragon moved fast, but Robert knew of the shortcuts, so he was able to get to the location in time.

Then he saw it.

The dragon was resting in the gazebo, its majestic wings completely covering its body. It looked as if it had been injured, grimacing in pain as it kept licking the inside of its wing. After starrng in disbelief for around 5 minutes, Robert decided he needed to go over and comfort the bright red dragon. Right as he was starting to head in the direction of the mammoth, Robert noticed something strange. The dragon had markings on its back that looked oddly familiar. Before he could even fathom how these marking were familiar the beast morphed into its true form.

Out into fruition came his friend, Barnaby, looking completely fine as if he did not feel the transformation from a large dragon into a regular man. Robert could not believe his eyes. Barnaby had been the arsonist he had been searching for these past few weeks. He was the man who almost killed his own mother, and the man had been burning down buildings for apparently no reason.

Barnaby had still been facing the opposite direction, making it difficult for Robert to approach him. He inched closer, looking at the figure in front of him. Barnaby then turned to Robert, his form now fully human.

"Well...I guess the cat's out of the bag," Barnaby said as he flashed a smile.

Robert stepped into the light, looking at the other man.

"You don't have to do this," he said.

"I do. I have to. I'm sick of living this life of pain...Everything is going wrong...I burned down all of the places that have hurt me, and that was the last location. But I didn't stop her, and I know that I never will," he said.

Barnaby slunk into the corner and Robert came over to him, holding him in his arms.

"Come with me. I'm not taking you to the station, just to a place to talk where nobody can bother

us," he told him.

"Fine. I'm actually very glad that you found out about this side of me," Barnaby said.

Robert took him to his car, driving him over to his own home. When he got there, he pulled Barnaby out, bringing him inside. He would check in with the station later, but first he had to resolve this. He closed the door, putting Barnaby on the couch. Robert looked at him, his eyes fraught with concern.

"So why? Why did you do it? How did this happen?" he asked without a chance for any question to be answered.

Barnaby started to cry, tears falling down his face. Robert pulled him into his arms, comforting his sad friend.

"It's my fault. It all started when I was a kid, and the dreaded incident happened. I never told you, but I got attacked by a dragon. My mother tried to protect me from it but lost her life, and my dad didn't do anything to help. I was supposed to die, but since the dragon's blood entered my system before it was able to massacre me, I was physically able to transform into a dragon. My stepmother knew that I suffered, but she didn't even care. She was too busy being a floozy with my father, and I had to fend for myself. From there, she was going out with him, leaving me alone to suffer. All those years of the same treatment by her caused the anger to grow within me. I don't have anyone who cares about me, or anyone who loves me. I wanted to get rid of all of that so the pain would go away. They all deserve their lives to be destroyed and their possessions burned into ash," he told Robert.

Robert listened with attention, nodding as the other man finished speaking.

"I get it. I understand how you feel. Is that why you attacked?" he asked.

"Yes, because I want to get rid of it all, burn my past and burn the bridges," he told Robert.

"I understand. You know that this is a crime though? All of these fires are putting me in a tough position," he mentioned to him. It wasn't going to be easy to let the man off the hook, especially now that he mysteriously ran from the scene and was talking to an individual alone.

"I know. I don't care if I have to go to prison. I still won't feel love," he said.

"You don't feel love?" Robert asked.

Barnaby gazed at him, pausing for a moment before speaking.

"It's why I attacked. I don't feel like it matters. You can throw me in the slammer, kill me, or whatever you want. My life isn't worth it. I know I'm taking all of my anger out in physical form, but I definitely am doing this to erase the pain by causing all of this harm," he said.

Robert listened to him, but instead of being mad, he gave Barnaby a hug. Barnaby gasped as Robert did something that he never thought he would do.

He kissed Barnaby.

He didn't know he had it within him. Usually, others would make the first move with him, but this was the first time that he had the gall to do this sort of thing. Barnaby was surprised at first, but

he didn't pull away. They kissed passionately for a bit, and then Barnaby pushed back, breathing hard.

"What was that for?" he asked.

"To prove to you that someone does love you Barnaby. That someone is me. You're the first man I've really fallen for, a good soul. I know you're suffering, but I can help you with that. Please stop attacking the city. You know as well as I do that it's not going to resolve anything. In fact, it will only make everything worse," he told Barnaby.

Barnaby thought about it, and then he nodded. "You're right. But how could you love me, you love women?"

"I do. I love you Barnaby. I've fallen for you, ever since you opened up to me that first night. I want to protect you, to love you, to care for you, and I want you to be inside of me," he said.

Barnaby smiled, and for the first time ever, his eyes radiated as Robert spoke.

"Then I will stop. As long as you love me, I will stop acting like this. You win, and I understand now," he said.

Robert nodded, pushing his lips to the other man once again. Sure, this might take a while, but Robert was going to prove to him that this would all work out.

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The two of them kissed passionately, both realizing that they had been holding themselves back. Robert immediately opened his mouth, and soon Barnaby had Robert pinned to the couch, his lips enveloping Robert's as both could not stop touching each other. Robert moaned, and Barnaby felt his primal urges kick in. He knew what he was feeling was a combination of the animalistic desires that he developed when obtaining his Dragon genes and strong feelings that he had for Robert. Soon, his tongue entered Robert's mouth, pushing deep against his own. He started to massage the inside of his mouth with his tongue, which was a new experience for Robert.

He gave into this, loving the way that it felt. He knew that Barnaby would dominate him, and soon, he felt the brush of Barnaby's groin against his own, a clear indication that his dreams would finally come true. Robert clung to his arms, moaning in pleasure. Barnaby smiled as his tongue continued to mingle and massage against Robert's, loving the reaction that he got out of him.

Robert knew this was what he wanted. He knew that he would take this dragon, and they could work things out later. If he needed to speak to him once again in the future, especially about the past, he would do so. But for now, his mind was enveloped in pleasure. Barnaby wasted no time taking off Robert's jacket and shirt, leaving his bare chest out in the open for him.

Robert felt Barnaby press his lips against his neck, nibbling on the flesh that was present. He moaned, his cock aching for touch, and soon Robert felt Barnaby move his lips downwards, lightly teasing and biting down on the neck before he got to his chest. From there, Barnaby peppered kisses against Robert's chest, and soon, Robert let out a soft, subtle growl as he felt Barnaby press his lips to Robert's erect nipple. He flicked his tongue over the area, and Robert felt his cock jolt within his pants. He cried out in pleasure, his body already losing its control as he submitted to the other man.

For Barnaby, this was the first time he ever felt something other than the primal urges. Maybe

this was love. He didn't mind it, and in a sense he felt happy to make Robert utter those sounds. He then started to push his lips harder down on the nipple, biting and sucking on the flesh while his other hand moved to the other nipple, teasing and touching it. Robert let out a series of gasps that were music to his ears. Barnaby suddenly palmed Robert's cock through his pants, causing Robert to let out a hiss of pleasure.

Robert was painfully hard, and it was obvious Barnaby could see that. Barnaby then moved his hand away, replacing it with his lips as he kissed the front of the bulge through his pants, making use of his hands while doing this by quickly and efficiently taking his pants off. Soon, Barnaby had Robert's cock in his hands, lightly massaging it between his cold fingers. Robert jolted, moaning in need as the other man started to play with the shaft of it, his tongue slithering against the top of it and licking the bead of precum that had formed from all of this foreplay.

"Fuck," he said out loud.

Barnaby smiled, excited to see the other man like this. Barnaby then placed Robert's cock into his mouth, taking it all the way in and bobbing his head up and down against the tip of the shaft. He could only get about halfway down the shaft, because of how large Robert's cock had been. Robert moaned, bucking his hips and pushing his cock deeper into the warm, wet cavern. Barnaby was in complete control though, slowing Robert's thrusting with all his strength, and deciding to pick up the speed to meet with Robert's demands. He released his mouth from the python that had filled it to capacity, and wiped all of the developed saliva onto his fingers. He gently rubbed Robert's anus, preparing for the next step in their love making. He started to slide one finger at a time into Robert's asshole, surprised at how it wasn't as tight as he thought it would be. He then slid a second finger in and proceeded to continue to suck on the head of his massive penis. Robert could not help himself from thrashing about, moaning in need and pleasure.

Robert loved this. He could feel his body being spread with the heat as he felt the fingers ghost over his prostate. It was exactly what he wanted, and after a couple of seconds, he felt a third finger enter him.

"How large is your cock...master?" Robert coughed out loud after Barnaby decided to stick a fourth finger inside.

Barnaby, after hearing the word master almost pre-ejaculated. He took Robert's penis out of his mouth.

"Oh my...Don't worry about it baby, you're about to feel the whole thing" Barnaby said, while gently licking the head of his baby maker.

Barnaby, using his free hand, decided it was time to take off his pants and start the process. Before the act was committed, Robert decided to find out for himself how large he was. He reached into Barnaby's boxers, causing his eyes to dilate.

"Oh my lord...I don't know if I can handle something that large Barnaby," Robert shrieked after feeling his erect shaft.

Without responding, Barnaby continued to lick the underside of the head while slowly raising up to prepare himself. Robert hissed in pleasure, enjoying the way this felt.

"Fuck," Robert said while breathing out, his hips bucking and his cock throbbing in the Barnaby's mouth. He was so close to finishing, but he knew he could not until he was entered from behind, so he just tried to think of something that would take his mind away from the pleasure. Barnaby

took out his fingers and moved his mouth off of Robert's cock. Barnaby then put some newly acquired spit on his own penis after finally taking off his underwear. His cock was much bigger and wider than Robert's was, and it was hungry with need. He then flipped Robert over like a pancake, as if he was as light as a sheet of cardboard. He spread his asshole apart, placing his cock in its entirety on Robert's buttcrack and lower back. He stared down at his penis, realizing that it reached all the way to his ribs, and forcefully grabbed him by the throat. He turned his head towards his, and the two locked eyes for only a brief moment, which felt like an eternity for the both of them.

"I love you Robert. You have given me feelings I have never felt before." Said Barnaby slowly as he gently kissed Robert on the lips.

Right as Robert was about to respond back, Barnaby pushed the tip of his monster into Robert's somewhat looser butthole.

"Uh!" Robert screamed as the words that were formed in his brain turned into pure animal noises.

He moaned some more as he was feeling the stretch of his tight hole as Barnaby continued to push into him. It was too much, and not enough all at the same time. After a couple of thrusts, Barnaby started to pick up the pace. Robert shrieked, feeling his body tense with need and lust, and soon he started to push his hips backwards as well, feeling the impact of the cock within him even more so. He was dangerously close, and when Barnaby noticed that, so he moved his hand right up against Robert's cock, pumping it in time with his thrusts.

That was enough for Barnaby to completely and utterly lose it, pushing his hips up and screaming out in pleasure as he came hard. At the same time, Barnaby let out his own groan, filling Robert up with his seed. Barnaby fell on top of Robert after a moment or so, completely drained of all his energy and life.

"Wow...Did you...like that?" Barnaby said in between deep inhales and exhales.

"I did...Thank you so much. I'm glad we finally got that out of the way. I've been wanting to confess to you for a long time," he told Robert.

"I have as well. I guess everything happens for a reason, and us doing this now after finding out about my true identity was meant to happen" he responded.

Everything did go right after that. They cuddled up to one another, both of them falling asleep due to the lack of energy they each had in each other's arms. However, there was something still amiss, and Robert didn't know what to do.

They frequently made love after that moment. Actually, it was at least 2 times a day of pure heaven for the both of them, with Barnaby taking full control every time. Barnaby fully disclosed his past to Robert, telling him of all the places he had flown to, the way he felt when he transformed, and the accidental acts of arson he had committed when learning about his acquired skills.

After a couple weeks later, Robert felt strange. He started to get sick, rushing to the bathroom frequently in order to throw up. He thought it was just bad food, but it happened for days on end, first thing in the morning. He never mentioned it to Barnaby, who had completely turned his life around. He was working to be a good boy, and since their night together, the arsons had stopped. Robert was doing much less at work, but he kept looking into this new problem of him being sick all the time. It just didn't make sense, there was no solutions online for his symptoms,

other than the occasional “cancer” argument in every part of his body.

He noticed that he was starting to get sick of eating everything he liked, and instead, wanted strange foods such as pickles with cream cheese. This made no sense to him.

“Geez, am I pregnant or something?” he asked himself. “There’s no way that ass cancer can cause me to have these temptations...” Even though it sounded ridiculous, the thought lingered, and one day after his shift, he decided to get a pregnancy test. He thought this was some sort of joke, and that he was just overthinking things. But then the unimaginable happened.

He was pregnant. But with who? The only one that he had let inside of him was Barnaby. Was this Barnaby’s child? This made no sense. He decided to drive over to where Barnaby lived and talk to him about it.

“Hey,” Barnaby said with a large grin as he opened up the door.

“Hey. Can we talk? It’s important,” he told the other man.

Barnaby nodded, moving aside as Robert walked in. He sat on the couch, looking at Barnaby with a glance.

“So, you might not believe this, but I’m pregnant,” he said.

He then brought the test out of his pocket, showing Barnaby.

“Oh my god. So it’s true,” he said.

He looked at Barnaby with a glance. “What do you mean?”

“Well, when a dragon copulates with a human, they have the possibility of forming a child, regardless of the gender. Given that I’ve dominated and finished inside of you almost every single day, it looks like we’re having a child,” Barnaby said.

Robert looked at him with a glance. “Why are you so calm?” he asked with an confused tone.

“Because it’s what I’ve wanted. I mean, I wanted to be with you. I know that we’ve gone through a lot, but there was something else I wanted to talk about. The burning of the structures,” Barnaby said.

Of course. The arson attacks.

“What about them? And what does this mean for us?” he asked.

“Well, if you agree to be with me and have a child, we can prevent the attacks from occurring. I don’t want to attack anymore, but instead, I want to be with you Robert. I know this is weird, and I know it’s controversial and confidential, but I love you, and I’m trying to better myself,” he said.

Robert listened to this, and when he looked at his lover, he saw only true honesty in his eyes.

“Are you sure you won’t attack?” he asked.

“Positive. I love you too much to hurt you, both physically and mentally” Barnaby replied.

Robert nodded. "Then it's settled. We'll have the child. We'll improve our lives. And we'll make this work...Just one question though.." he said.

"What is it?"

"How do I have a child if I'm a man?" Robert responded almost immediately.

"Haha I knew you would ask. Well, were going to have to perform a caesarean section on you. A "C" section as they call it." Barnaby said confidently.

"Umm...okay. I trust you Barnaby. I think this could be a great thing for us. As long as I have you by my side as my protector and lover, everything will be alright," Replied Robert.

"Good. And I'll make sure that I don't attack the town, and nobody else attacks us or especially you too. You keep me level headed, and I love you so much for that," Barnaby replied.

Robert smiled, and soon he felt Barnaby pull him into his arms. They kissed, both of them knowing that no matter what, this would work. They will make it work, and they will be happy.

8 and a ½ months later, a beautiful baby girl named Sarah was born, bearing the same color of eyes that Robert had, light blue like the sky on a beautiful clear day. The two of them lived together shortly after they became public with the announcement. It was strange and the delivery of Sarah was awful for Robert, but they lived a happy life. Robert and Barnaby did get married after she was born, and the two of them had a great ceremony where they were able to consummate their love. They knew that this was the start of the future, a future that they had no intention of occurring. Things happen for a reason, and that night when Robert decided to sit right next to Barnaby proved to be a life changing night.

Since their agreement, no fires had happened in the area, and there weren't any attacks. Robert continued to be a detective, and Barnaby became a tattoo artist and stay-at-home dad. From there, they learned to love one another, care for one another, and make each other happy. Barnaby was finally able to let the past go, instead replacing it with the future that he knew he cared about more than anything else. Impregnated by a dragon. Can you image how much that could change your life?

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THE END

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## BONUS: Cowboy's Southern Confession

Jacob is out in the stables again. For the past two years, it seems he's spent most of his life out there with those horses. He wasn't like that before...well...before.

When he was younger, he didn't like farm work. His mother and I would have to bribe and cajole him even to pick up his room or feed the hens by the front gate.

Oh, he liked riding horses well enough. But when it came to watering, feeding, brushing, and all the other things that truly needed to be done, he was happy to let his Mom take care of it. I suppose he was like most boys that way.

Now that his mother's passed on, now that Emily's been gone for almost two years, he's...different.

Two years into this and he still doesn't do the things he used to do. He doesn't play sports after school. He doesn't invite his friends over to play their video games. He rarely even reads the comic books he used to love.

Instead, he spends all his time with the horses in the stables.

I suppose I shouldn't complain. He seems happier when he's spent some time in the barn, and it does take a load off my shoulders.

I help Jacob lug the large bags of feed and move the big things but, other than that, he looks after the horses all on his own. Every day, he comes home from school and barely says a word before rushing out the stables.

I thought that might change after what happened last summer. When he came to me in tears, sobbing that Gypsy had gotten out of her pen and he couldn't find her.

Gypsy had been his mother's favorite horse. She was a beautiful brown mare.

I helped him look for her, but we had no luck.

"I guess she decided to leave too," Jacob told me finally after we'd spent the day driving the truck around the ranch looking and asking neighbors about the horse.

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

"I mean...since Mom's gone...maybe Gypsy didn't want to be here either," he said with a shrug. His head hung down towards the ground and he didn't look at me.

"Maybe it's for the best," I remember telling him. "Maybe we could use a clean break."

I still remember Jacob's face when he finally looked up at me after I spoke those words. He neither smiled nor frowned. Just gave me a hard look before muttering, "I guess," without any real conviction.

Almost a year later, I still stand by what I said. Gypsy reminded Jacob, both of us really, of Emily. Of seeing her ride around the land on the back of that horse, Jacob trotting along beside her, laughing. But it also reminded us of how sick she'd gotten. Of visits to doctors, staying up all night worrying as she coughed herself to sleep. Of standing in that sterile hospital room, having to say goodbye...

With Gypsy gone, I thought we could learn to move on. Not forget, entirely, but...to find some little bit of normalcy again.

In spite of my wish, Jacob still stays out there. In the barn with his other horses.

It's sunny today, at least. The weather's fairly warm, and the flowers have started to come out.

When I look out the kitchen window, I can see bluebonnets begin to dot the little slopes around our property. Wind blows against a tree just outside the front door. It causes Jacob's tire swing to shake as though some phantom child is riding inside it.

It would look a little sad, maybe even creepy if the bright sun spots bursting through the oak trees didn't give everything on the ground a bright, happy color.

With one last glance out the window to the stables where I know Jacob will be ensconced until supper, I move to the refrigerator and grab a bottle of water. I rub it against my head to stem the sweat beads that have started to form.

For what feels like the thousandth time, I wish we had air conditioning in the old ranch house. I know I'll wish it a hundred times more when summer comes. Right now, it's barely warm. But, as I've been working outside most of the day, it feels much hotter than it actually is.

I slump down into a seat at the table. It's getting on five o'clock. I've just let the ranch hands go for the day. I know I'll have to get up in a minute and put dinner in the oven. Then, I'll have to tear Jacob away from the stables before nightfall. He doesn't quite understand that the horses need to eat and rest as much as he does.

Rubbing my eyes, I have to fight off the urge to go into my back bedroom and fall asleep myself. As much as I hate to admit it, I haven't been sleeping so well lately.

It's not that I'm not tired. Between the ranch and Jacob, I'm always exhausted. But every time I lay down to try and sleep at night, little things wake me up.

Sometimes it'll be the hoot of an owl, or the sound of the wind knocking a branch against the window. Sometimes it'll just be the fact that the space next to me in the bed is empty.

Either way, I can't dwell on it.

I take a sip of water before pushing myself away from the table. I've barely made it to the freezer where two TV dinners are waiting, when the front door suddenly bursts open.

I turn to see Jacob. He's small for his age and very skinny. His freckle filled cheeks are red and his breath is short from running.

I almost jump again when I see an excited smile on his face. I haven't seen that expression in a long time.

"Dad! You've got to come out to the barn!" he says excitedly.

"Why? What's happened?" I ask closing the freezer.

"Just come and see," he says. And, before I can protest, he grabs hold of my hand and drags me out the door.

"Jacob, just tell me what it is," I call as Jacob leads me down the hill to the stables.

"You have to see," he says excitedly. In spite of myself, I smile as he continues to drag me to the pasture behind the horse barn.

I haven't seen him excited about much of anything in the past few years. And this...whatever it is...has clearly lifted his spirits.

We finally reach the fenced in pasture behind the barn. We stop just at the gate.

"Was this what I just had to see?" I ask Jacob. I'm still smiling though now a little confused when I see nothing out of the ordinary. Two of the horses, Lightning and Bella are grazing peacefully by the gate. Through the open door, I can see the last one, old Jack tucked away in his stall munching on oats.

"She must have gone up the hill," Jacob says. Before I can ask who the mysterious 'she' is, Jacob takes my hand again and drags me over the next little dip in the land that Jacob's always called a 'hill'. It's not. More of a dune really. But, to a boy who grew up thinking that the foot hills in the Texas hill country are mountains, I suppose it seems quite large.

We move up the hill and, when we reach the crest, I stop in my tracks. A large, lovely brown mare with a distinct white marking on her forehead lifts her head from the grass to look at me.

"Gypsy!" Jacob says happily. "She's back! And look over there, Dad!"

I turn my shocked gaze from Gypsy to the open plain where Jacob is pointing. Not far from his mother, I see a little colt walking on shaky legs, occasionally trying to run and stopping when he stumbles.

"Jacob, go into the stable and get the lead," I say, keeping my eyes on the colt.

"We're going to keep both of them, right dad?" Jacob asks before moving. I turn my gaze fully to

Jacob, his smile has gone and he's looking at me determined. Like I'm in for a fight if I say we can't keep the baby.

"Well," I answer slowly. "We can't separate the colt from its mother. The little one looks to be barely a few weeks old."

"So, we'll take both of them in?" Jacob asks. I see a hint of a smile reach his eyes. Though, his lips don't curve upward just yet.

"Get the lead," I tell him gently. "We'll take both of them back to the stables. Then we'll decide what to do from there."

A small, hopeful smile returns to the boy's face as he rushes back towards the barn.

I turn back to the colt, who is now making his way over to Gypsy. As he reaches her, she lifts her head and licks his mane lovingly. The little brown colt leans into his mother's touch.

No matter what reservations I have about this arrangement, I'm too tired to argue with Jacob. And, after everything we've been through the last two years, I don't have any desire to see his heart broken again.

Still, I know we're not going to be able to do this alone.

Emily was the one who loved horses, after all. Not me.

I know the basics, of course, and Jacob's done a decent job of looking after the adults. But I know a colt will need special care. It will be beyond brushing, washing, watering and a once monthly visit from the vet. He'll need to be trained to ride, trained to learn commands and a hundred other things. Things that I have no idea how to even begin doing.

Jacob comes back with the lead. Gypsy comes willingly. The way she looks at us, it's as though she's merely been on a long trip and has come back home as expected. The colt follows fairly obediently behind his mother, though we do occasionally have to prod him along when he stops to inspect different flowers and patches of grass.

They both go into Gypsy's old stall, which has stood empty since her disappearance a year ago.

As Jacob and I walk back to the house for supper, he's more than eager to continue our conversation.

"We are going to keep the colt, aren't we, Dad?" he asks. "It wouldn't be too much. We've got plenty of room."

"I suppose," I answer. I look down to see him smile it fades a little when I mention my stipulation. "But if we'll be keeping the colt, we're going to have to hire someone to help..."

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I drive through the gate at the large farm with butterflies swirling in my stomach. They've been swarming ever since I set out this morning. If I'm completely honest with myself, they've been there longer than that; ever since I was offered and accepted this job.

I've been praying for a job ever since I got my horse training certification. And I've been praying

for a way to move out of my parent's house almost since I moved in with them.

It only took me a few days to realize that I couldn't stand the glances of pity my mom gives me. Not to mention my dad's constant swinging between smug 'I told you so' looks and unasked for lectures.

My dad's a pastor. That means he thinks it's his job to tell everyone exactly where they've gone wrong in life and exactly how to fix it.

He doesn't believe me when I tell him that I know where I went wrong. Instead of dating girls, like a good Christian young man is supposed to do, I fell for a guy.

That was my first transgression. My parents took it as well as they could, considering how conservative they are. But even though they couldn't understand why I was gay, they at least respected that it's who I am, and that God loves all of his children, no matter their sexual orientation.

No, the problem wasn't with the fact that I wanted to date men, but with the specific man I chose to date.

In my second year of college, I let my boyfriend talk me into dropping out so that I could "support" his music career. And then I watched helplessly as he dumped me for one of his groupies.

My parents told me not to date him. They told me he was no good for me. I thought that it was homophobia talking, but deep down, I knew even early on that they were right. Still, I was in my rebellious phase, and my tattooed, pierced rock musician was a far cry from the clean cut church boys my parents would have conceded to letting me date.

So a year ago, I came back home begging my parents for mercy. I went back to Church and asked God for the same. I must say, He seems to be much more forgiving about my years away from him than my parents are.

I'm convinced that He was the one who lead me to this job posting on a Horse Trainer's website. I'd been praying about it for weeks and I'm still convinced that this position could not have come to me by accident.

I applied on a whim two weeks ago. Last week, Grant Mason called and asked if I would agree to a phone interview. I did. We discussed the position which seemed absolutely ideal for me.

There were four grown horses and a colt to care for on a large farm. I would be working alone, mostly as Grant stayed out with the Cattle most of the day. His son, Jacob, would come out to help me when he got home from school. The colt would also need to be trained when he grew a little bigger.

All of these ticked the boxes I was looking for. I have always preferred working alone. Having a boss hover over me constantly makes me nervous and, ironically, less productive. Working with young horses, while challenging to some trainers is positively thrilling to me. The idea of training a colt was more than a little exciting.

But, the best part, what really convinced me that this was exactly the job I needed was that Grant's ranch was over fifty miles from where I lived with my parents. That meant that I would have to move out and find my own place closer to my work.

So, when Grant called one day after our phone interview to offer me the position, I happily accepted.

But ever since, I've been nervous. I know I shouldn't be. I know that, if God truly lead me here, it will all work out.

Still, a tiny doubt filled voice keeps whispering in my ear. Reminding me that I've never had a job working with horses on my own. I've only done an internship where I worked under a more experienced trainer. The doubt filled voice tells me that I'm going to fail.

I push it back as best I can and try to find the words to pray. I need to ask God's help or I don't know if I'll ever get out of this car.

I search for something profound, something eloquent to ask him. Something desperate to say.

"Please help me," is all that comes out. I have to admit that's the extent of my prayer over half the time.

As small as it is, it seems to work. I feel a tiny surge of confidence now that allows me to step out of the truck.

I look around me as I move towards the small Brick house. The ranch is much larger than I expected it to be. It must be about ten acres at the very least. On the far side of a newly mown field, I see a herd of cattle munching away on the grass.

They look up at me with a lazy expression, their mouths half chewing and half gawking. Beyond those cows are several trees lining the bottom of a foothill common in this part of Texas. The rest of the land is all flat plains and brush.

I open the gate to the front door and step onto the small porch. When I walk towards the door, I am stopped by the sound of raised voices on the other side.

"I still don't get why we have to have someone come in at all," A high pitched voice says. I assume this is Grant's ten year old son, Jacob. "I've been taking care of the horses for two years. I can take care of Ranger too."

I can't help but smile at the name Ranger. Grant told me his son named the little black colt after the Lone Ranger. He'd become obsessed with the Johnny Depp version of the story when it first came out. No one really understood why.

"Jacob we've been through this," Grant's voice says. He sounds weary, exhausted. As though everything in him is tired of fighting.

"The other horses are already trained," he continues. "They know how to accept a saddle. They know how to respond to the reigns, they know how to take commands. Ranger will need to learn all that too."

"I can teach him!" Jacob says.

"Have you ever taught a wild colt to take a saddle before?" Grant asks. There's a touch of laughter in his voice now.

"No," Jacob says quietly after a moment. "But, I could try. It can't be that hard."

"Jacob, it's already settled," Grant says. "I've hired the trainer. He should be here any minute. And when he comes I want you on your best behavior. Is that clear?"

It's quiet for a moment before I heard Jacob say:

"Yes, sir."

No one is speaking now. I realize that I've been eavesdropping on them far too long. Time to make my presence known.

Taking a deep breath, I knock on the door.

Not a moment passes before the door swings open. On the other side is a man much taller and much younger than I pictured.

Grant's deep, tired voice suggested on the phone that he was in his late forties. Possibly even his early fifties. But, this man looks as though he's about thirty eight at the very most.

He's also more fit than I expected. Somehow, I pictured a country man who had let himself go. I imagined a beard and a beer belly hanging out over a pair of jeans.

There's no beard on Grant and certainly no beer belly. His entire body looks muscular and very fit. His broad shoulders suggest a strength you don't see in men anymore. Like he's spent his entire life working on this land.

When his hazel eyes meet mine, he gives me a small, weary smile and I can't help but blush. I realize he's waiting for me to speak.

"Hi," I say in a tone of voice that's much higher than I intended for it to be. "I'm Adam."

"Nice to meet you, face to face at least," he says. "This is my son, Jacob."

He brings my attention to the small, skinny boy with blonde hair and freckles standing at his side.

"Hi Jacob," I say. "I understand you're the one who'll be helping me with the horses."

The little boy does not smile. Instead, his eyes harden and he gives me a cautious look.

"Jacob's been looking after the horses on his own for the past couple of years," Grant explains. "But, he appreciates the help. Don't you, Jacob?"

Grant looks down at his son and gives him a warning look. When Jacob looks back at his father, I can tell he's trying to decide whether or not it will be worth it to disobey Grant's implied order. Finally, I see him decide that it's not worth it and the boy gives a resigned nod 'yes'.

Apparently satisfied with his son's reluctant acceptance, Grant looks back up at me. The sad, half smile is back on his face. I can't help but wonder if I'll ever see either of these men truly smile at me.

"Well," Grant says. "Would you like to come in and sit for a minute, or would you rather go straight down to see the horses?"

"I'll go see the horses, if you don't mind," I tell him. "I feel like I've been sitting in my truck for the past two days straight."

His smile hitches a bit, almost as though it's going to widen and become real. It doesn't. He simply nods to me as he and Jacob move out of the doorway. Grant closes the door behind him.

"Jacob," Grant says turning to his son. "You can lead the way."

Jacob looks at his father and then throws another hesitant, weary look my way before marching off purposefully down the small slope to a small barn in the distance.

"After you," Grant says gallantly beckoning me down the steps. I give him a nervous smile before stepping down and hurrying to follow Jacob's lead.

As I watch the young boy march almost fiercely towards the barn containing his horses, I realize that this dream job will come with even more challenges than I had imagined.

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"We call this one Old Jack," I tell Adam as I head to the first and least resistant of the horses. From inside his stall, Old Jack looks up slowly and blinks lazily at us.

He continues to chew his oats as he eyed the newcomer with only slightly curious indifference.

"How long have you had him?" asks Adam.

"About fifteen years," I tell him. "He was ten when he came to us. Jack was the first horse I bought."

"Mom bought him," Jacob finally speaks up behind us. He's been silent since we entered the barn. Now, when I turn to him, he's looking at Adam with a defiant sort of glare. "He's the horse she taught me how to ride on. Remember, Dad?"

He turns the glare to me and I feel my heart begin to pound in my chest. He knows how much it upsets me to talk about Emily. I've asked him not to if he can help it.

I know why he's doing it now. He wants to upset me. That's his whole game. It's my punishment for bringing Adam into Jacob's territory.

"That was a long time ago," I say. I hope the warning look I give him is enough to keep him civil throughout the rest of our tour.

"Do you get to ride him much anymore?" Adam asks kindly, turning to Jacob. Jacob gives her another glare.

"He's twenty-five," he says flatly. "That means he's too old to ride now. I thought you would know that."

I feel heat rush up my cheeks at Jacob's tone. Apparently all the warning looks in the world are not going to stop him from speaking his mind.

"Jacob," I say harshly. "Apologize right now."

"Don't worry," Adam says, turning to me. To my surprise, he's still smiling. "He's right. I should have guessed that. When I'm nervous I have a tendency to say whatever's on my mind. Sometimes things fly out of my mouth without thinking."

I know he doesn't really mean it. The way he's addressing both of us, it's as though he's trying to keep the peace between father and son. And, by talking about his own nerves, I think he also may be hoping to make Jacob just a bit ashamed.

It seems to have worked, if only slightly. I see a tiny hint of guilty color come into Jacob's face and he turns his eyes down towards the floor.

"There's no reason to be nervous," I tell Adam. I give him a smile that I hope conveys warmth and friendliness before turning to my son. "Is there, Jacob?" I ask in the same warning tone.

"No," he says quietly. I'm glad, at least, that his glare is gone. And I'm glad when Adam turns from Jacob to me, giving me another genuine smile. It reaches all the way up to his dark eyes, causing them to dance. Suddenly, I feel something I have not felt in years. It's a slight swooping sensation in my stomach. Like I've missed a step walking down a flight of stairs.

I clear my throat, hoping that I can either force the sensation away or ignore it.

"Over here is where we keep Gypsy and her colt," I tell him, leading Adam to the far stall.

"His name's Ranger," Jacob says. I'm glad to hear, this time, that there is less animosity in his voice.

"He looks like a ranger," says Adam, looking at the handsome black colt. Ranger shakes his mane in the stall as though in response.

"Jacob named him that," I tell Adam. "After his favorite movie hero."

Adam smiles up at me, and that strange feeling in my stomach comes back. It still plays in my stomach when he moves closer to the stall to get a better look at the colt.

"He looks like he's about...a month and a half. Maybe two months old," he says. "I take it he's been eating well?"

I start to answer, but Jacob cuts me off before I can.

"Gypsy only lets me feed Ranger," he says. I bristle a bit when I hear a challenge come back into his voice.

"She doesn't like anyone else getting too close to him," I turn to give Jacob yet another warning look. Even though it is true, Gypsy gets protective of her charge when anyone but Jacob comes too near, I know Jacob didn't bring it up for Adam's benefit. The combative note in his voice as well as his defiant glare at Adam tells me that he's put his guard up again.

I look to Adam, praying to God that he hasn't been put off by my son's combative attitude.

To my surprise, he smiles down at Jacob.

"You must have a gentle touch, then," he says. "It takes something special to be able to handle horses."

Jacob looks up at him, and I can tell he's nearly as surprised as I am. I see his lips curve upward as though he wants to smile. The moment passes and he forces his face into an unamused frown.

"Jacob, why don't you head back up to the house," I tell him. "I'm sure you've got homework to do before supper."

He turns his gaze to me and stands defiantly for a second, shoulders back and fists clench. I stare him down, giving him a look that I know he won't disobey.

Hesitantly, he lowers his gaze, turns and makes his way out of the stables.

I watch him go before turning to Adam. He's still looking in the direction where Jacob has now disappeared. His smile is gone and a thoughtful frown lines his face.

"I'm sorry about Jacob," I feel the urge to tell him. "He's been a little on edge since I told him we would have to hire someone for the horses."

"It's ok," he says, turning to me. The smile returns to his face and reaches all the way up to his dark eyes. I feel yet another tingling sensation run up my spine. It's getting harder and harder to force them away.

"He's formed a bond with the animals," he says. "He doesn't want anyone interfering with that. It's totally understandable."

"I suppose it is," I say simply. I decide its best not to tell him that Jacob's bond with Gypsy and Ranger might not be the only one he's afraid of losing. I don't tell him that my wife used to tend the horses before she died. I don't tell him that Emily started teaching Jacob how to care for them before she got sick. I realize that might be a little too much to take on the first day on a new job.

"Well, I know you've probably got more to do today than walk around an old ranch," I say to Adam.

"I do have to move some things into my new place," he says.

"I'll walk you back to your truck then," I say.

"Thanks."

He smiles again, and I'm becoming more and more familiar with that swooping sensation. I start to wonder if it'll be there every single time I look at him. I'm not sure if I could get used to that.

We walk from the barn down the small hill in silence. All the while, I can't seem to keep my eyes from drifting towards him.

He's young; much younger than I expected. I hadn't seen him before today. We had only spoken on the phone. His voice made him sound very mature.

Somehow, I was picturing a crusty old farmhand with thinning grey and sloppy clothing.

I certainly wasn't expecting a young man with thick, raven black hair and brown eyes that sparkled every time he smiled.

It's...unsettling, I suppose, to have been so wrong. Maybe that's why I keep sneaking glances at

him as we near the gate that leads to the driveway. But something in the back of my mind tells me it's more than that.

"Is your new place far from here?" I ask finally, desperate to make some kind of conversation.

"Not really," he says. "It's a little house about ten miles up the road."

"That's good," I say. "Working here will be tiring enough. It's nice if you don't have a long drive on top of it."

"I think it will be," he says.

When we reach the gate, I bend down to open it for him. Apparently, he doesn't realize I've done so, because the next moment, I feel his warm hand land on top of mine.

I look at him and see a blush cover his face. I feel heat rush through my own cheeks as I quickly take my hand off his and look away.

"Sorry, go ahead," I tell him.

I look at him out of the corner of my eye. He looks back at me with a slightly embarrassed and slightly confused expression before swinging the gate open.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning, then," he says.

"Yeah," I say quickly. "I'll expect you at nine."

He nods and moves to his truck. I watch him drive down the road and out of sight. Truth be told, I stand there much longer than is entirely necessary.

I pick my hand up and rub the spot that still feels warm from his brief touch. I try to shake it out before going inside.

When I get in, I see Jacob at the kitchen table, his math book, notebooks, and pencils spread out in front of him.

"So, what do you think of him?" I ask.

He gives me a shrug without looking up.

"I guess he'll be ok," he says.

I give a weary smile. I know that's the best I can hope for.

As I move into the kitchen and set the pot on the stove, I can't seem to keep my thoughts away from Adam. Not just his smile and her touch, but the way he so deftly handled Jacob's antagonism.

I realize, of course, that this presents a problem. After Emily died, I knew I could never get married again. I knew I would probably never be in a relationship again either. With Jacob, it's just too complicated. Man or woman, it wouldn't make a difference – Emily and I made a point of raising Jacob to understand that families come in all types, and that two fathers or two mothers is just the same as a mother and a father. But the idea of anyone trying to take Emily's place now that she's

gone would be upsetting to Jacob, and if the way he spoke to Adam this morning is any indication, Jacob is highly protective our family staying the way it is.

Now, with Adam around...I'll have to be very, very careful.

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"He isn't bucking anymore," Jacob says. He's holding onto the little bit we've put in Ranger's mouth as I buckle the saddle in place on the horse's back.

"He's getting used to having a saddle on him," I say.

"I didn't think he would ever like it," he tells me.

"It takes a while for colts to get used to it," I tell him. "If you're patient enough, though. They start accepting it."

"I'm glad he did," he says.

He looks up with a smile and I can hear a note of amusement, even approval in Jacob's voice. I can't help but feel a little swell of satisfaction at that.

"So am I," I say, smiling at him in turn.

Over the past two months, Jacob and I have formed a sort of working relationship. There have been times, like now, when I think we might even be friends.

Of course, that relationship or friendship warms and cools depending on how close I get to Jacob's father. Which is a problem on many levels.

See, Jacob doesn't want me getting close to his dad, for obvious reasons. And, I've tried to respect that. But, more often than not, I can't seem to help myself.

It's not like I can just say no when Grant offers to walk me to my truck at the end of the day. Though, to tell the truth, I don't really try. Nor do I try to fight the little butterflies that have lately taken to flitting around my stomach when he smiles at me or laughs at one of my jokes.

But, every time Jacob catches us talking or walking or just smiling at each other, he's much colder to me the next day.

I know Grant notices it too. And, the more I think about it, that's probably why Grant has carefully avoided being alone with me for the past two weeks.

He hasn't offered to walk me to my truck since that last night a couple of weeks ago.

Jacob and I had a surprisingly good day. And, as per usual, Grant had come down to the barn to summon Jacob back to the house for dinner.

Once Jacob was gone, he helped me gather my things. This was also typical.

"Thanks," I said as he handed me my purse.

"Jake seems happy today," he said. "I take it you two got along ok?"

"We did," I told him. "Better than we did in the beginning anyway."

"That's a good thing," he said. "It's getting dark. I'll walk you to the truck."

As we moved down the hill, I remember glancing at Grant out of the corner of my eye. There was something I'd been wanting to ask him about all day. Something Jacob had mentioned.

The thing was, I wasn't sure if it was my place. I was just an employee after all.

Still, the silence in my own head was growing awkward, I knew I would have to speak up eventually. So, I took a deep breath and made a firm decision.

"Jacob told me his mom used to look after the horses," I said. I remember his eyes darting towards me, his jaw clenching just a bit before he answered.

"That's right," he said, finally. "The horses were her thing more than mine."

"I just wondered why you never mentioned it before," I said. It came out in a rush and I could feel heat racing up my cheeks. There was no way to tell whether or not Grant would take offense at my asking. I didn't think he would. I hoped he wouldn't.

"Jacob and I," he said slowly, "we don't like to talk about Emily much."

We'd arrived at the gate and I'd turned to look at him with my eyebrow raised.

"Jacob seems to talk about her a lot," I told him. "At least around me."

He looked away from me and heaved a sigh.

"Fine," he said finally. "I don't like to talk about her. After she died I just figured...she'd been sick for so long...I thought if we didn't say much about the past it would be easier to move on."

I felt like asking why that was. I was dying to know. Especially since Jacob seemed so eager to talk about his mom in conjunction with the horses (what she fed each horse, how she'd bought each horse). But, I knew that would be pressing my luck.

Grant still wasn't looking at me and I had no inclination to move through the gate and to the truck. I knew if I did that, things would be left in this awkward, half finished state. I wasn't sure I would be able to take that.

There was only one thing left to do. Since Grant had told, at least, some of the truth, about his past, I might as well talk about my own.

"I get it," I tell him. "I guess I don't mention Michael for some of the same reasons."

"Michael?" he asked. He finally looked up at me again and I thought I heard a trace of jealousy as he asked about the other man. But I might have been imagining that.

"My boyfriend...ex-boyfriend now," I say. "He's the reason I left college."

I knew my voice would shake as I told the story. It always did. Still, I would try to keep it as steady as possible.

"A few years ago, he...he got me into some heavy stuff. Drinking, even some drugs. He convinced me to drop out so that I could support his music," I said. "So, I did. Just a few months later, he ran off with one of his groupies. Told me about it in a text."

"Seriously?" Grant asked. I look up at him for any trace of amusement. That's what I usually get when I tell people about my unfaithful musical boyfriend. I guess it's a lot funnier to hear about than experience.

But, to my surprise, Grant didn't look amused at all. He looked...concerned. Almost as though he was still worried about me.

"Yeah," I said. I gave him a small smile that, hopefully, told him I'd moved on from it.

"Anyway," I continued. "It worked out. I went back to church. Got myself straightened out."

"That couldn't have been easy," Grant said.

"Well, church helped," I told him.

"I wish I could say the same," Grant said. I stopped and turned to him. We hadn't really talked about God or church or any of the big things. It almost felt strange to bring them up now.

"To tell the truth," Grant continued. "I can't even seem to pray anymore. Not since Emily..."

"I can't either sometimes," I told him before he was forced to finish a sentence that I knew would cause him pain. "In the beginning, I refused to pray at all. Until one day when I was depressed and crying and thinking of giving up. I just looked up and said 'God help me'."

"Doesn't seem like much," Grant said.

"I know," I told him. "But it made a difference. In fact, I think it led me here."

"How do you figure that?" he asked.

"I'm not sure exactly," I told him. "But, I do think God had a plan for me. I think he meant for me to be here. It just took me a while to realize it."

"You really think it works like that?" he asked.

I couldn't help but shrug. The truth was, I couldn't explain, even then, how or why I'd ended up with Grant and Jacob. I only knew I was meant to.

"I'm here," I tell him. "That's enough for me."

"I'm glad you are," Grant said. With a small, sad smile, he moved his hand and lightly rubbed against my shoulder in a comforting gesture.

Even though I know it was meant to be purely platonic, friendly even, my heart began to pound at the warmth of his hand on mine. I could feel it through the fabric of my shirt and I couldn't seem to stop staring into those eyes. And, to my surprise, Grant was staring into my eyes the same way.

"Dad! Are you coming in?"

Jacob's voice cut across us and broke the spell. Grant moved his hand away from my shoulder and backed away from me. He looked at his son on the porch, ashamed, as though he were a teenager who had been caught kissing a boy in his parents' driveway.

I still remember the dark glare Jacob sent me as I left that day.

That's why I'm more than happy that I seem to have gotten back on his good side now. Even though it's taken me two weeks, it's worth it to see his smile rather than his defiant frown.

"When do you think I might be able to ride Ranger?" Jacob asks now. He's carrying the saddle we've used for training as we move into the barn.

"It'll be a while yet," I say. "His back needs to get a little stronger."

"But, when he is ready I won't have any problem getting the saddle on, will I?" he asks.

"You shouldn't," I tell him.

He smiles at me as he hands me the saddle and I put it up in its place against the wall.

I must admit, that smile makes him look ten times brighter than he normally does. When he smiles like that, he almost looks like a typical ten-year-old boy. Full of joy and wonder at the world around him.

"Jacob," I hear Grant's voice move towards the barn and try to keep a blush from coming into my cheeks. No matter how routine it's become to see Grant, my body seems to betray me every time.

"Time for dinner," Grant says. Jacob and I turn to look at Grant at the barn's opening at the same time.

"It looks like rain," Grant continues. "So you'd better hurry."

"Ok," Jacob says. I feel another swell of satisfaction when he sounds a tad reluctant to leave.

Jacob starts to move towards his father but stops about halfway. Slowly, as though forcing himself to do it, he turns to me.

"Thanks, Adam," he says. "I learned a lot today."

"Don't mention it," I tell him with a smile.

He gives me a tiny half smile before rushing past his dad and up to the barn.

"Was that actual gratitude I heard?" Grant asks with a slight chuckle as I reach down for my bag.

"Do you know what?" I say. "I think it might have been. But, don't worry. I'm sure it'll be gone by tomorrow."

"Good thing too," he says. "Otherwise, I'd have thought you'd kidnapped my son and replaced him with an alien look alike."

I let out a chuckle that Grant shares. When we're done, I find myself staring into his eyes once more. I realize that this is the first time he and I have been completely on our own together in two weeks.

I feel my heart begin to pound at the thought and my pulse beats quickly in my ears.

I know I should take my eyes off his but I don't seem able to. He doesn't either.

Suddenly, a loud clap of thunder makes us both jump. As soon as I do, I hear rain begin to pound on the roof of the barn.

"I should get back to the truck before it starts coming down too hard," I tell him.

"Do you need an umbrella?" he asks. "I'm sure there's one in here. If you just wait a minute I could probably find it."

"That's ok," I tell him gathering my bag. The lights flicker in the barn and we both jump again.

"That's my cue to hurry," I say with a lame chuckle. I start to move past him but, as soon as I do, the lights flicker and go out completely.

In the dark, I feel my foot catch on what feels like a large piece of wood. I gasp as I feel myself falling forward. Before I can hit the ground, I feel a pair of large, warm hands grabbing my waist and holding me up.

A moment later, the lights flicker back on and I find myself wrapped in Grant's arms, his face much closer to mine than I'd expected. I look into his eyes and can feel his breath on my cheeks. His mouth is inches from mine. My heart is pounding so loudly in my ears that I almost don't hear the next words he speaks.

"Are you ok?" he asks quietly, almost breathlessly, as though he's having as much trouble speaking as I am having trouble breathing.

I nod, but don't trust myself to answer.

"Good," he says quietly. He makes no move to let me go, nor does he look away. Instead, he moves his lips closer to mine.

I realize what's about to happen barely a moment before I close my eyes.

He's kissing me. Grant Mason, the man I've been silently dreaming about for the past two months is kissing me. And it's soft and gentle and wonderful and everything I dreamed it would be.

As I open my mouth to welcome his kiss, I can't seem to think of anything else but how I want to stay in this moment forever.

"Dad?"

The small voice makes my eyes fly open.

Grant and I jump apart and turn to see Jacob, soaking wet standing at the barn's entrance.

My heart, so light and happy one moment ago, sinks at the sight of Jacob's face. He doesn't look

angry or defiant. He isn't hiding behind the contempt he's shown me intermittently over the past two months.

Now, he looks betrayed, vulnerable. Even through the rain drops, I can see that his eyes have begun to brim with tears.

My face burns with shame as he rushes from the barn, up the hill and out of sight.

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I don't know what to do.

I know how stupid that sounds, believe me. I'm the adult in this situation. I should always know what to do and say, and I should always be right.

But, now, I'm standing here, staring stupidly at my son's closed bedroom door hands shaking like I'm about to be punished. Like I'm a kid in school again waiting for a reprimand from the principal.

I press my eyes closed and say a quick prayer. It's nothing much, just 'God help me'. But, I remember what Adam said that night two weeks ago. He said sometimes that's the only prayer you've got. And it's the only one He needs.

Feeling at least a little comforted, I open my eyes and face the door. I twist it open.

As I expected, I see Jacob sitting on the edge of his bed, his head down. He doesn't look at me as I enter. Instead, his eyes focus on something clutched in his hand.

My stomach clenches when I come close enough to see what it is.

It's a framed picture of Jacob when he was about six years old. He was sitting in Gypsy's saddle, smiling at the camera while his mother, Emily, stood next to him holding him by the waist.

The sunlight in the picture hit against the blonde curls framing Emily's smiling face. It gives her a halo-like glow. I find myself staring at the picture in Jacob's hands for far too long.

Eventually, I realize that I should say something. That I should speak, but, I can't seem to find any words. Despite my simple prayer, God still hasn't told me what to say to my son.

I open my mouth to say whatever comes to mind first. Before any words from, Jacob speaks.

"Why don't you talk about her?" he asks.

Before Adam, before Gypsy came back, I would probably have pretended not to know who Jacob was talking about. If he had asked this same question a year ago, I would push it aside and try to change the subject.

Now, as Jacob finally looks up at me, I see tears staining his cheeks. He wipes his nose absently with his sleeve and I know I can't lie to him anymore. I can't try to save him the pain that I feel.

I sit down next to him on the bed and he scoots over towards his pillow. I look at the picture while I speak. I can't seem to take my eyes off of it.

"I guess," I begin slowly. "It's because it...hurts too much. I thought that maybe if we didn't talk about it, we could move on."

"Is that why you kissed Adam?" he asks bitterly. "Is that why you didn't try to look for Gypsy when she ran away? Is that why I have to keep all of Mom's pictures in my room?"

The words hit me like a slap in the face. My instinct is to snap at Jacob. To tell him to watch his tone. But, I can't seem to do that while I'm still looking at Emily in the picture. While her blue eyes are still dancing up at me.

"I don't know," I say instead. "Maybe that was part of it."

"It's like you want to forget her," Jacob continues. "Like you want to pretend she never existed."

"That's not true, Jacob," I answer automatically.

"Isn't it?" Jacob asks. "Isn't that why you brought Adam here in the first place?"

I finally tear my eyes from my dead wife's smiling face and turn towards my son. Jacob's looking at me again too. His blue eyes, so much like Emily's, are hardened and staring at me with a sort of challenge.

I know now that I'll have to tell him. I'll have to tell him what Emily said before she died. I haven't for the past two years. I didn't think I needed to. I thought, with Jacob taking care of the horses, we could get along all right by ourselves. But now, with Adam and our kiss and Jacob holding his mom's picture, I know that's not true.

"Do you want to know why I wanted to hire Adam?" I ask him.

"You said it was because of Ranger," Jacob says reluctantly. Though his eyes, still hardened, clearly suspect that wasn't the whole truth.

"Ranger was just part of it," I tell him. "The other reason was because of something your mom said to me, a few days before she died."

Jacob's eyes soften and widen at the same time. There's a tense kind of excitement in his face as he scoots closer to me on his bed.

"What did she say?" he asks hungrily. I can see now, just how desperate he's been for me to give him any little memory. To share with him any word from the mother he loved so much.

A lump suddenly forms in my throat when I realize the real reason I didn't want to give it to him. It wasn't because I was afraid it would cause Jacob too much pain. It was because I was selfish. I didn't want my son to see how painful it was to me. I didn't want him to see me cry as I knew I would. But, now, I know I have no choice.

"She made me promise," I begin slowly, "that, no matter what happened to her, there would always be someone to look after the horses. She said as long as you and I had someone with us to take care of the horses, she knew we would be all right."

"But, I looked after the horses," Jacob said slowly, his eyes now squinting in confusion.

"I know you did," I tell him. "But, I don't think it was the horse's your mom was worried about. I

think she wanted to make sure we had someone to help look after us.”

“You and me?” Jacob asks, a skeptical frown still lining his face. “But...you look after me, Dad. I didn’t think you needed anyone to look after you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Jacob,” I say. “Everyone needs looking after. Even me.”

Jacob looks back at the picture and runs his thumb gently over his mother’s face.

“Mom used to say that God would look after us,” he says.

“I know she did,” I tell him. “But, sometimes, God sends people to help.”

“Like Adam?” Jacob asks looking up at me. For the first time at the mention of Adam’s name, I hear no animosity in Jacob’s voice. No harsh scorn. Just a calm kind of acceptance.

“I think so,” I tell him.

We look at each other for a long time. My heart clenches and I feel as though I’m waiting for a jury to return with a verdict.

After several moments, Jacob stands up and slides off the bed. I watch carefully as he puts the framed picture of his mother back on the dresser.

“Ok then,” he says. “I guess he can stay.”

I can’t help but smile at this.

“I appreciate that,” I tell him with only a hint of amusement.

Jacob leads the way out of his bedroom and around the corner towards the kitchen. Jacob seems as surprised as I am to see Adam standing by the front door. He’s wringing his hands awkwardly and she moves forward a little too quickly when she spots us.

“I just wanted to make sure everything was...ok before I head out,” he says quickly. As though he’s expecting to be yelled at or tossed out of the house or both.

To my surprise, Jacob leaves my side and walks up to him.

“It’s ok,” he says with a smile. “In fact, Dad and I wanted to know if you would stay for dinner.”

Adam’s eyes widen in surprise. He looks up at me, his brown eyes meeting mine. I feel a smile creep across my face as I nod subtly to him.

“I’d love to,” he says.

As his face breaks out into a smile, and I see Jacob rush to the kitchen, I know that what Adam said was true. God has a plan for all of us. Even if it sometimes takes us a while to see it.

\*\*\*\*\*

THE END

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### **Jeremy seemed to have it all...**

But he was still haunted by the mistakes of his past. He grew up in the hood and used to be best friends with a man named Darrius, a black man who was there when he needed him the most.

When he was 18, Jeremy was forced to leave Darrius behind in order to attend college, leaving both of them to disconnect. After college, Jeremy became very successful with a startup that grew to a multi-billion dollar company within 5 years.

### **One day, Jeremy spots Darrius at a local Cafe...**

This sparks up a much needed conversation about the past,

Which leads to a sort of sexual tension both of them were not expecting...

Will the two of them realize their feelings for one another? Or will they continue to wallow in the agony of the past and present?

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