

JUST A LITTLE BI

MEN OF FORT DALE



ROMEO ALEXANDER

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Published by Books Unite People LLC, 2019.

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Editing by: Jo Bird

JOHN



“You ever wonder if he’s going to snap and kill somebody one of these days?” John asked as he watched the surly bear of a man stomp around the perimeter fence.

Tossing a straying lock of hair from her face, Trisha snorted. “Only you.”

John huffed, sliding his phone along the surface of his desk as he watched Sloane stomping around outside. He didn’t settle back in his seat until Sloane was out of sight. The guy had never done anything to make John think he was actually going to cause any harm, though there had been a few growling threats. Personally, John didn’t think Sloane would ever do anything to him, but it was hard not to be intimidated by a guy who towered over you at six feet six inches and built from the stone of a mountain.

Then again, he’d spent most of his life surrounded by bigger, more intimidating people. Despite not being short, John was still dwarfed by his older siblings and his dad. His mom was the only one in his family shorter than him, and she made up for it with one hell of a personality. Then again, that might have to do with having to raise five boys.

John eyed Trisha. "Why's he get along with you so well?"

Trisha flicked over a page of her book without looking up. "Probably because I don't drive him crazy."

"Not fair. Everyone seems to drive him crazy."

"Except me, apparently. And Dean."

"Doc's his friend, that doesn't count. Wait..." John hesitated, eyeing Trisha speculatively.

Trisha looked up, narrowing her eyes. "We haven't slept together, and we never will. Don't even go there."

John held up his hands, laughing nervously. "I wasn't."

"You're a dirty liar."

Alright, maybe the thought had crossed his mind. It's not like he cared, though it would have been one more notch for Sloane's headboard while his own felt pretty barren. Trisha was a good-looking woman, and when she bothered to socialize, she was good company. Sloane might be the grumpiest person John had ever met, but a mix of his size and rugged good looks had women flocking to him in droves.

John picked up his phone, flipping the front-facing camera on and cocking his head. "You think it's my hair?"

"I don't think your hair has anything to do with why you drive Sloane nuts," Trisha said.

John rolled his eyes. "No, I mean, do you think that's why I don't have any luck with women?"

Trisha sighed. "You know, when you first got assigned to this post, you weren't *this* obsessed with getting laid all the time."

"I'd barely been here long enough to worry about it. I mean, a coastal base, a tourist town not far away. I thought I had all the chances in the world. Now, it seems like I'm doing nothing but crashing and burning every chance I get. Meanwhile, Mr. Snarly gets all the attention."

Trisha snorted. "You know, your complaining might be what drives him crazy, I'm just saying."

John glanced at her. "So, not the hair?"

Trisha rolled her eyes. "Jesus."

Turning his attention back to his camera, John squinted at the image, looking back at him. Sure, he wasn't the embodiment of good looks that Sloane was, but he had a strong jaw, and being at Fort Dale had given him enough time in the sun to darken his skin from ghostly pale to a reasonable flush of color. With bright blond hair kept regulation short and his equally bright blue eyes, he felt he should have had better luck. Looking down at his arms and legs, he thought that despite what he considered a good amount of musculature, maybe he should start putting in more work for some gains.

By the time he'd evaluated himself and begun plotting a new workout schedule, Sloane returned. The big man snatched the checklist off the wall next to the door and began marking things off. John thought it was a bit of a crime since Sloane usually required John to take the list with him when he did the security check.

Sloane stopped, flipping the page over and looking at the next sheet. "The hell...why are you getting off early, Simmons?"

John shrugged. "I got a check-up today, got orders to go see the doc."

"Why?"

"I never got one, well, not since getting assigned here, so off I go. Doc's orders, are you going to argue with Doc?"

Sloane grunted, slapping the clipboard back and taking his customary spot at the other desk. Trisha chuckled softly, earning her a dirty look from Sloane before he collapsed in his seat. If there was anyone Sloane could be said to like, it

was the corpsman running the fort's clinic, Dean. The Doc was the only person Sloane actually became a reasonably nice person around.

As if sensing his thoughts, Sloane looked up and eyed him. "Don't be an ass."

John blinked. "What?"

"To Dean."

John looked around, bewildered. "I...why would I?"

"After you ran your mouth, I'm not taking any chances. You say anything to him or be an ass, I'm coming for a piece of yours," Sloane growled.

John blanched as he realized, perhaps for the first time, that Sloane meant his threat. Worse, Sloane's reference to the time John had questioned Sloane and Dean's friendship solely because Dean was gay only added to his discomfort.

John squirmed. "Look, I didn't mean anything by it."

Sloane raised a brow. "You heard me."

"I know, but, c'mon, I was only trying to give you a hard time, but it came out...wrong. I don't care if Doc's gay, man."

"Work on your jokes, Simmons," Sloane grunted before turning away.

As far as interactions with Sloane went, that was one of the better ones. Sure, John knew he was prone to more venting than necessary, but it wasn't just John's complaints that annoyed Sloane. Sometimes, John swore all he had to do was breathe around the guy, and he was ready to start barking.

A car pulled up, and before John could say anything, Sloane was on his feet and heading out to meet the driver. Being the junior member of the guardhouse, John was usually sent to deal with people when they came to the gates.

"He's antsy," John noted.

Trisha looked up. "No, that's the General's family."

"I thought General Winter wasn't married?"

"You can have a family without being married. It's his sister, Caroline."

"Only one sibling? Must be nice," John snorted.

"Why, how many do you have?"

"Four brothers, all older than me."

"Aw, you're the baby."

John shot her a glare. "Don't."

Trisha searched his face. "Touchy subject?"

John shrugged. "I had four brothers who were all good at something. By the time I got a chance to do anything, it felt like it'd all been done, and I would be following in someone else's footsteps. Not exactly fun to compete, even if that's all my family does."

At nineteen, John was still staring down the barrel of that particular gun. One brother had gone on to be a doctor, while another was an engineer. The next oldest was on the cusp of getting his master's degree and was already trying to line up a prime teaching job. All three were in relationships, with the oldest two happily married with a few kids running around.

And here was John, a grunt on some unknown base.

Trisha hummed. "Got to be rough."

John shrugged. "I have a couple more years before my parents start pestering me about finding a nice girl and settling down."

"Meanwhile, you're interested in getting laid by any hot piece of ass that walks by or bothers to come within eyesight," Trisha noted dryly.

"I'm going to have to settle down at some point, might as well have my fun before I have to start being serious, right?" John asked her with a grin.

"Might want to work on your game then."

There wasn't much he could say to that. His work relationship with Sloane was the epitome of the reactions John was used to receiving from other people. It didn't matter if he was being nice or trying to be funny; everything he said fell flat or blew up in his face. He wasn't entirely sure what he was doing wrong, but very few women hung around him for long.

Sloane reappeared, glancing up at the clock. "Isn't it time for you to get going?"

John looked up, sighing. "Yeah, guess it is. Time to go get poked and prodded. I'll tell Doc you said hi."

"We have phones for that."

John sighed, heaving himself out of his chair before his mouth decided to throw something else out there and land him in trouble again.

* * *

DEAN PEERED UP AT HIM. "Sleeping well?"

John shrugged. "I do alright."

"So, that's probably a no."

John snorted. "Better than some people."

Dean held John's wrist with his fingers. "Do I want to ask how bad your diet is?"

"More junk than my mom would like, but I do pretty good. I'm not allergic to the leafy greens."

Dean snorted. "That would make you a rarity around here. You're eating consistently?"

"Every day, two or three times a day."

Dean nodded, reaching up to press his fingers against John's throat. "So long as you remember to eat."

Dean was probably the youngest doctor John had ever had to deal with. He was sure medics didn't run clinics on bases either, but he'd never bothered to check. Dean was

pretty casual about it, though there was an air of professionalism about him as he poked and prodded while asking his questions.

It helped to ease the strangeness of the moment. Sitting in your underwear in front of some old guy as he went through his routine was one thing, but the Doc wasn't much older than him. Being almost naked around the other soldiers was no big deal. That was casual, but doing it around Dean left John feeling a little squirmy.

Dean looked him over, nodding. "You've obviously been keeping up on your workout routine, so I won't ask about that. The file from your last checkup says you were about twenty pounds lighter, but you're not gaining any fat. Just make sure to keep up your cardio too. No good getting all those muscles if you can't run far with them."

It was an innocent enough comment considering Dean's position, but John couldn't help feeling self-conscious. Maybe his comment to Sloane about not caring who Dean slept with wasn't totally accurate. Would he have been uncomfortable if another corpsman or doctor had said something like that to him? He didn't want to accuse himself of being on edge around gay guys since that wouldn't look good. Still, it was a little uncomfortable to be scanned by someone who might, in another situation, potentially see him as someone to get together with.

Dean turned around, reaching into a drawer next to the exam table. "Sex?"

John straightened. "What?"

Dean looked up, raising a brow. "Are you sexually active?"

John kept himself from letting out a sigh of relief, knowing that would be more than a little obvious. Mentally, he chided himself for his childish reaction, reminding himself that Dean had been nothing but professional. It didn't stop his thoughts from whirring in the back of his

mind, but at least that would minimize the risk of him saying anything stupid.

"Ah, not really," John admitted.

Dean nodded. "So, no girlfriend, boyfriend, whatever?"

"No, I don't have a girlfriend," John said.

Dean nodded, pulling out a tube and holding it up. "Well, if you find yourself about to get laid, do us both a favor and wrap it. Last thing we need to be dealing with is another STI."

John eyed the suspicious tube. "What's that?"

"Lube."

John's eyes widened. "What do you need that for?"

Dean glanced at him, the corners of his mouth twitching. "Do I make you uncomfortable, Private Simmons?"

John shook his head. "No, why would you?"

Dean chuckled, tossing the tube back into the drawer before drawing out an electronic thermometer and a clean cover. "I think we both know the answer to that."

John winced. "I swear it's not...because...well, maybe. Oh shit, please don't tell Sloane."

Dean laughed, sliding the cover over the thermometer. "I'm not going to go running to Sloane because someone is afraid they'll catch my gay."

"You don't have to say it like that," John mumbled as he looked down at his hands.

Dean smiled. "Never been around someone gay before?"

John peeked at him. "Not really."

"Small-town boy?"

John smiled. "Cornfields for days."

"Well, I'll give you this much, you might be uncomfortable with the fact that I'm into guys, but you haven't acted like an ass, and you haven't tried to get someone else to look you over. So sure, maybe you're not comfortable, but you're not an absolute dick, which is more than

can be said for a few of the assholes who've come through here."

"Dunno how I should feel about *not being a dick* being something to be happy about. Kinda sounds like the minimum standard to me."

"A standard many people don't seem to reach. Goodness and effort, even if it doesn't seem like much to someone else, are still worth praising. Now be a good boy and stick this in your mouth," Dean said, holding out the thermometer.

"I bet you say that to all the guys you have sitting in their underwear," John said unthinkingly as he took the thermometer, wincing as he wondered if his joke went too far.

Dean snorted. "Or hear it from them."

Unsure what to say, John placed the thermometer under his tongue while Dean busied himself.

"And don't let Sloane get to you too much. He's a grumpy bastard sometimes, but he means well. I don't need him to take care of me, but hell, it makes him happy to do it sometimes, so screw it."

"Makes him happy, maybe," John mumbled.

Dean pointed at him. "Keep that in your mouth."

The curtain around the area rustled, and a red-haired man popped his head in. "Hey, Dean, food's on the way."

Dean nodded. "It's alright. I'm almost done here, thanks, Troy."

Troy looked up, looking John over. "Oh, never mind. I see you already have a snack."

Dean moved with startling speed, picking up a notepad from the table and whacking Troy on the forehead with it. "Get your ass out of my exam room until you learn how to act like a professional."

Troy disappeared with a cackle, leaving John to cringe with discomfort and Dean to glare at the curtain. John supposed he'd been lucky it was Dean who'd been the one to

give him his exam. He couldn't imagine what the other guy would have been like, though he was sure it would have been a lot more uncomfortable.

Dean eyed him, sighing. "He's a professional, I swear."

John could only give him a weak smile in return.

Right.

LANCE



“And what was wrong with this one?”

His sister’s question brought a sigh to Lance’s lips, and he had to resist the urge to thump his forehead against the steering wheel. There was only one direction this conversation was headed, and he wasn’t looking forward to the inevitable conclusion. Of course, he could always end the call, but he knew his sister too well. She would find him and pounce later, twice as hard than if he just got it over with now.

Lance drew himself up, preparing for what was to come. “He was a banker.”

“What the hell does that have to do with anything?”

“Lacie, do you have any idea how boring bankers are?”

“No more than any other person, I imagine.”

“Yeah, well, not this one. This one was exactly what you would expect a banker to be like.”

Lance had hesitated when he’d learned the guy’s profession but he’d been willing to try and break through the stereotype. The guy, Dan, had proven to be the very incarnation of the stereotype, and Lance thought it was a miracle

he'd made it through the date without falling asleep in his dinner. Why someone with a mind-numbing job that boiled down to essentially crunching numbers, would want to talk about their work non-stop to a stranger they were trying to impress, Lance would never know.

"You went on one date with the guy and decided he was too boring for you? Wow, it's almost like you have a pattern."

Lance frowned. "Look, this one was different."

"You always say that."

"I learned more than I wanted to know about principles and loans. He spent at least twenty minutes discussing his portfolio because, did you know, he also deals with stocks and bonds?"

Lacie hesitated before grunting. "Alright, that does sound like one of the circles of hell."

"At least the third one."

Lacie sighed. "It doesn't change my point, though. There's always something with the guys you find."

"They're totally valid reasons?"

"Really? The guy whose socks you didn't like counts as valid?"

"One was a long, black dress sock, and the other was a white anklet! No one who decides to wear mismatched socks without them being colorful and intentional is someone I want to be with!"

"And the guy with the blood pressure problem?"

"No, that's what I thought, too, when he ordered his food without salt. He's in perfect health. He just...doesn't like salt or garlic. Garlic Lacie! How the hell could I even think of being with someone who doesn't appreciate both a seasoning necessary for every meal under the sun and an herb that's vital to so many others? Who hates garlic? Monsters, that's who."

"Socks and garlic. Those are your standards."

Lance sniffed indignantly. "They're perfectly reasonable standards."

Lacie groaned. "You're impossible. You know that?"

"I know you don't mean that as a compliment, but I'm taking it as one."

"Seriously, Lance, when did you last go beyond the first date?"

"Are we talking, like, going on a second date, or—"

"You know damn well I'm not asking how many times you've slept with someone. I love you, Lance, but there are things I don't want to know."

Lance laughed. "I just thought I should clarify."

"No, you didn't."

Maybe not, but it was still fun to torment his older sister occasionally. He was grateful to her for the life he was able to live, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to take the chance to tease her when the opportunity presented itself.

"Look, I know this has to get old for you, but I'm just trying to help."

For a moment, he considered saying that nagging him wasn't helpful but kept it to himself. She wasn't exactly nagging him, just exasperated. If anyone was used to dealing with him and had ground to stand on when it came to being irritated with him, it would be her. He had to accept that, even if he didn't like it. Lacie was only doing what she thought was best.

Even if it did mean nagging him.

"A guy has to have standards. I'm adorable!"

Well, he thought he did alright in the looks department. Definitely on the short side, he didn't even meet the average, but he took good care of himself and made sure he was in shape. And while he had alternated between loving and hating it over the years, his flaming red hair was still a big feature, one he took care of, even when he'd kept it exces-

sively short. Even on the job, he kept the few inches of red hair styled, with a single lock falling over his forehead, stopping just short of his dark green eyes.

"You can't blame me for wanting to have someone I'm going to click with, Lacie. Someone who gives me that spark, who holds my interest, and won't create a ridiculous amount of change in my life."

Lacie snorted. "You get a pass on the last guy. I can't imagine you would have gotten on too well with him in the long run."

"Garlic and salt guy was out too. I like to cook and won't abstain from using either of those things just because he doesn't like them. Health problems? Sure thing, bud, but simply dislike? Lord knows what else was waiting in the wings."

"And the socks guy?"

Lance sighed. "Alright, maybe you have a point with him."

"And a few others."

"Yeah, maybe."

"You're not going to find anyone if you keep dismissing them out of hand, Lance. You liked that guy in your senior year. What the hell has changed in the past three years?"

"I liked him because he was the first guy I ever dated, and I'd never known anything like it. And I mean...I was a little lost, hurting, and somewhere new. It was nice to have someone there to make me feel better, shitty as that sounds."

"It's...not. You didn't use him and throw him away, Lance, and it's not unreasonable to want a little comfort, all things considered," Lacie said, trailing off.

Conversations between them always grew awkward whenever Lance's Junior and Senior years of high school were brought into the conversation. His sister was completely comfortable with the fact that Lance was gay, but his parents had been less than accepting. It didn't help when

they discovered the truth by coming across him kissing another guy, but in the end, it didn't matter.

Lance still wasn't sure what hurt more, that they'd refused to consider accepting their only son the way he was or the fact that they'd been all too eager to wash their hands of him. Lacie was over six years his senior, so Lance was the only child left in the house. Yet they wanted him gone from their lives, especially when he'd shown no sign of 'changing his ways.'

Which was how Lacie had ended up as his legal guardian for the last two years of high school.

Lacie cleared her throat. "You working?"

Lance glanced out his driver's side window at the bright restaurant sign blinking nearby. "Yeah, I'm waiting for this place to call me so I can get the food. Maybe this time they'll tell me before the food gets lukewarm, and I'll get a decent tip."

Seriously, it wasn't his fault the food hadn't been up to standard. He simply got the order from the customer, put it in, picked it up, and delivered it. Lance wasn't even allowed to open the bags, which were typically stapled or taped shut. All he could do was try to confirm it was the right order before delivering it somewhere. Yet, it didn't stop people from lodging complaints with his supervisor or cutting his tip because the restaurant had screwed up the order without his knowledge.

"Where are you delivering to this time?" Lacie asked.

"Military base."

"Clinic again?"

"Yeah, you'd think for a place that's all about health, they'd order from better places. Don't know what those medic guys are on, but they really like spicy food. Last time, it was Thai. Now it's Mexican."

Lacie laughed. "With the number of times you've talked

about loving going out to the base, why are you even pretending to complain?"

Lance frowned. "You make it sound like I start drooling every time I get an order for the place."

"Well, I'm not there in person whenever you bring it up, but it sounds like you do."

"I do not drool."

"Maybe not, but you're a sucker for a strong man in uniform."

Lance wouldn't dignify that with a response, mostly because anything he said would be taken as protesting too much or affirmation of what she already believed. Then again, it was impossible to argue with the truth. When Lance had first moved in with his sister, he'd been delighted and too young to have a chance to enjoy the base nearby. In the five years since, he hadn't ventured there too much other than for work.

His phone dinged in his ear, and he checked. "Ah, that's them. I better get in there and pick up the food."

"Good luck. Remember to behave yourself."

"Me? I always behave myself."

He wasn't sure he appreciated her laughter as she ended the call.

* * *

LANCE WASN'T sure if the welcome at the front gate was supposed to be as intimidating as it was or if it was simply the guy's innate charm. It might have been a terrifying experience as he was questioned at the gatehouse, but the guy who'd reviewed his information was gruff and hot. Lance had driven onto the base with the most confused boner he could ever remember having. Even as he approached the clinic, Lance still wasn't sure if he wanted his next trip to the

base to be met by the same guy or if he'd prefer the far more benign woman he was used to.

Shaking his head, Lance slid out of his car, grabbing the food bag. Unlike the nearby town, which smelled of gas and whatever scent drifted out of a local shop or restaurant, the base always smelled like the sea. Built at the end of a peninsula, it was surrounded by salty sea air and the crash of the waves. Unfortunately, he couldn't hear the waves since the sound was drowned out by the noise of trucks, machinery, and what sounded like a huge exercise nearby.

Lance pushed open the double doors leading into the clinic and glanced around. At first, he could only see the long line of cubicle curtains. As he stood in the quiet entrance, he could just make out the sound of murmuring from down the hallway, where a stream of light cut across the floor.

"Hello?" Lance called, unsure if he should walk down there or try to get someone's attention.

Normally, either the medic, Dean, or his partner, Troy, would be lurking somewhere when he arrived. He'd only dealt with them a few times, as most deliveries were in the city. The few times he'd delivered their food, they were pleasant enough and tipped well.

He stepped forward, and Troy popped his head out of one of the examination rooms. Lance froze as the man looked him over, relief crossing his face when he realized who was there.

"Uh, hi," Lance said.

Troy held a finger up to his lips. "Don't talk so loud."

Lance raised a brow. "What's uh, going on?"

"I'm hiding. Obviously."

"Right, but from who?"

"Dean."

Lance wasn't sure why someone would hide from Dean. He didn't know Dean outside of a casual, business sense, but

he hadn't detected anything that told Lance to be careful around him.

"Should I come back?" Lance asked cautiously.

Troy snickered. "No, he's pissed at me because I made a joke that embarrassed him, and he's hangry."

Lance held up the bag of food with a smile. "Then that's where I come in."

Troy pointed down the hallway, where the light was shining brightly. "He's finishing up with someone, so go take him the food, and maybe he'll calm down after a few bites."

"You're an interesting person to work with, aren't you?" Lance asked.

Troy grinned. "I'm the best; just don't ask Dean about it when he's hungry."

Shaking his head, Lance did as he was told. He heard the conversation as he drew closer to the doorway and saw shadows moving as he approached. Lance hesitated at the door, unsure if he should walk in while Dean was dealing with someone or wait outside.

"Don't wait so long for your next checkup, alright? Or I will have Sloane after you," Dean said.

An unfamiliar voice replied. "Right, well, I'll do everything possible to avoid that."

Dean chuckled. "Good, then you're all set."

Lance took that as a cue that he was safe to intrude. He stepped through the door, walked right into a solid, warm body, and realized he should have timed his entrance better. Thankfully, neither he nor the other man had been walking fast, so Lance only had to take a step back with a surprised grunt.

"Shit, sorry," Lance said, feeling his face burn.

The other man chuckled, rubbing his chest where Lance had bumped into him. "You're alright. It'll take more than little ol' you to do any damage."

“Little, huh?” Lance asked.

Not that the guy was wrong. Lance had no delusions about being tall or even average. Topping out at a whopping five feet five and one hundred and twenty pounds the last time he checked, Lance wasn’t exactly what he’d call impressive, and nobody else did either. Still, being called little by a cute guy wasn’t something he would argue with.

The guy hesitated before stepping aside to let Lance through. “Oh, right, sorry.”

Lance looked up into a pair of the bluest eyes he’d ever seen. “No worries.”

Stepping around the guy, Lance let him pass, but not without sneaking a glance at his ass as he stepped into the hallway. Blond hair, bright blue eyes, tall and built, and a rocking ass to boot? Lance could fall in love.

Dean was watching him as he turned around. “When you’re done checking out the recruits, I’d like my food, please.”

Lance chuckled, holding the bag out. “Troy wasn’t kidding. You are grumpy when you’re hungry.”

“I’m grumpy when a certain someone doesn’t know how to behave themselves, that person being Troy,” Dean said, taking the food.

Lance held out his phone for Dean to scribble a digital signature. “He’s got to be fun to work with, though, right?”

“Is that what we’re calling it?” Dean asked as he signed.

Lance shook his head, thinking maybe he should find a reason to stop by the base more often. Not that he didn’t think Dean and Troy were good enough to appreciate looking at, but they weren’t quite his type. The guy who had just left was long-limbed, strong-looking without being huge, and with some pretty eyes. He was right up Lance’s alley.

JOHN



He normally considered himself pretty good at choosing a bar. Not that he could drink, considering he was still two years shy of being legal, but normally, he found places with good people or at least something interesting happening. Now and again, though, he found a place that looked promising, only to find out within an hour that it was a dud.

The bar's name was Swanky's, and in John's honest opinion, it was anything but swanky. Sure, the place didn't look like it was one call away from being condemned, but it had certainly seen better days. The music was good, and it looked clean, but the stools and the bar were worn and could have used a fresh coat of stain. Some of the bottles on the top shelf were dusty, and there wasn't a booth that didn't have torn or repaired upholstery.

The bartender, an older woman with graying hair, stopped at his place at the bar. "You sure you don't want to move on somewhere else, where there's more people your age?"

And there was a statement he wished he didn't have to respond to. On the one hand, he had been thinking about

trying to find somewhere else before the night drew on. On the other hand, he didn't want to tell this woman, who he was pretty sure was the owner, that her place wasn't good enough.

John shrugged. "Might, I don't know. Haven't quite made up my mind if I want somewhere noisier."

She snorted. "Yeah, it's been pretty quiet in here lately. Thanks for that."

John watched her go, wanting to explain that he hadn't meant the quiet was bad. Yet before he could think of how to clarify, she had walked off, shaking her head. What was it about him that managed to rub people the wrong way? He was sure someone else could have made the same comment, and she would have made a joke or taken it in her stride.

Sighing, he contented himself with his virgin daiquiri, sipping slowly and wondering if maybe he should learn how to make them at home. That or he should consider getting stationed somewhere he could drink in public.

He had only been stationed at Fort Dale for a few months, and John had yet to make anything resembling a friend. Sure, he was on okay terms with Trisha, but she didn't seem interested in doing much of anything with him. He was also sure Sloane would have shoved hot pokers in his ears rather than hang out with John. Any friends he'd made were either back where he'd gone through Basic Training or were stationed elsewhere.

Sure, he could call someone, but it wasn't the same as having someone around in person. Despite the significant age gap between him and some of his brothers, John grew up with a lot of noise and people around him. It was why he liked bars; it helped ease the loneliness.

Someone flopped over the bar, not too far from where John was sitting. John jerked when it seemed like the man

had seemingly come from nowhere, hanging over the other side of the bar and looking toward the bartender.

"Theresea, can I get one of those amazing mojitos you make so well?" the stranger called down the bar.

The bartender, who John had to assume was Theresea, turned and eyed the man. "You haven't come in here in days, and you want to buddy up and pretend like I'm going to make a pain in the ass drink because you decided to bat those eyelashes at me?"

"What, you busy?"

John expected the woman's face to show anger, but instead, she smirked. "Sit down, you little shit. I'll bring you your drink."

The guy plopped down on his stool with a satisfied smile. He glanced toward John, and it was only then John realized he knew who it was.

"Oh, hey, you're the guy I bumped into earlier," John said.

The guy looked up, peering at John's features before grinning. "Literally, long time no see."

It was John's first real human contact since he'd walked into the bar. The man looked pleasant enough to talk to, and the playfulness drew John to him. The guy looked like he'd stepped straight out of an Irish stereotype, with his flaming red hair and pale, freckled skin, and while the bar lights made it difficult to tell, John would swear he did, in fact, see green eyes.

John held his hand out. "John."

His grip was returned. "Lance."

John looked him up and down. "Mojito, huh? And she's just going to serve you that without question?"

Lance chuckled. "Let me guess. Because I don't look a day over fourteen?"

It was what he thought, but John hadn't wanted to say it. Not more than five minutes had passed since his attempt to

be diplomatic with the bartender, and he was wary of being loose with his lips. Thankfully, it looked like Lance wasn't taking it as an insult.

"How much trouble would I be in if I said yes?" John asked.

"About as much as you were when you told me I was little," Lance said.

John cringed at the reminder. The statement had come out of his mouth before he'd thought about it. Admittedly, Lance was pretty short, and John didn't consider himself to be all that tall. Lance wasn't built all that thickly either, and John was also sure he could probably wrap his hands around the man's waist, and his fingertips would almost touch.

John blinked, wondering where *that* thought had come from.

"Should I be apologizing like my life depends on it?" John asked.

Lance laughed. "No, I am little. I mean, I spent my school years having that fact stated over and over again. I think at twenty-one, I'm pretty much over the fact that I am short and not getting any taller."

"If it helps, I'm the shortest out of me and my four brothers," John said.

Lance looked him up and down, leaving John with an odd sense of nakedness. "You're like, what, six feet?"

John shrugged. "Something like that, between that and six foot one, depending on the day."

"Actually, you're taller in the morning than at night. The cartilage in your spine stretches while you sleep and gets smooshed from being upright all day. So you're swinging between the two probably because of what time of day you're getting measured."

John blinked. "I...didn't know that...med student?"

Lance laughed. "No. I just learn random facts from who

the hell knows where, and they stick in my head for some ungodly reason.”

Theresea returned, sliding a glass in front of Lance. “Here, anything else for his majesty?”

Lance gave her a wink, sliding a bill across the bar. “Here, keep the change.”

Theresea waved him off. “First one’s on the house, you know that.”

“Right, so subtract the cost of the bill from this and keep the change,” Lance told her, inching it closer.

Theresea eyed the bill. “Don’t push your money on me, or I’ll call your sister.”

“And Lacie will tell you to take the damn money. So why don’t you save yourself the trouble and take it before I find a way to slip it in your tip jar without you noticing.”

Theresea took the bill, shooting John a dirty look as if it were his fault. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to have done about it, but he figured he was a convenient scapegoat. However, Lance didn’t seem to notice, continuing to look pleased with himself as he pulled his drink closer.

“So, you know her,” John said.

Lance nodded, sipping from his glass. “Her son is dating my sister, has been for a few years now. My sister doesn’t know it, though we do, but he’s going to pop the question soon. So Theresea is stuck with me, whether she likes it or not.”

John leaned forward, watching her shake her head as she dropped the bill in the tip jar. “Seems like she likes you just fine.”

“Think so? She’s always growling at me.”

It reminded John a bit of how Sloane was with him, except he didn’t think Sloane liked him even secretly. Then again, he was no Lance, who was silly and charming. John could see himself enjoying the man’s company a great deal,

and maybe he could learn something. Hell, the guy even managed to look endearing, sitting at a rundown bar, sipping his drink.

It was weird.

"She probably growls because she doesn't want to admit she likes you," John finally told him.

Lance beamed. "That's what I tell her, but then she growls more."

"The trick is not to tell them. Otherwise, they get mad because you're onto them," John told him.

Lance laughed, winking. "Well, maybe I like them knowing. Maybe I like seeing them get all flustered and annoyed with me."

John was reminded of the description he'd once heard of an imp. Supposedly, they were a type of demon, more of a mischief-maker than an evil corrupter. John opened his mouth to tell him but then thought better of it.

Lance caught the movement, though, cocking his head. "What?"

John laughed nervously, turning his attention back to his drink. "Nothing."

"Looked like something."

"Was going to say something."

"So why not say it?"

"Because I have this thing where I open my mouth, and everyone around me seems to hate me. After years, I've decided to start thinking before I speak."

Lance snorted. "Well, that explains why you acted weird when you called me little and thought I looked like a kid. But hey, I didn't get offended."

"You did not."

Lance turned to face him, raising a brow. "So, try me."

It was a completely innocent remark, but John couldn't help feeling there was something else behind the statement.

Not that Lance had done anything to make John think it, but a small twist in his gut had him wondering.

John sighed. "Just the way you talked about liking to tease people, but not like, in a mean way. Reminded me of something I heard once about imps."

Lance paused on his next sip, his glass barely touching his lips. "I reminded you of an imp?"

"It was the first thought to pop into my head," John admitted.

"Little winged creatures that like to mess with people."

John thought about it and hung his head. "And I managed to call you little again."

"You did, but you also called me a trouble-making demon. I can hear my sister laughing from here," Lance said with another laugh.

John's chest fluttered at the sound, and he felt a sense of hope. Maybe he had managed to get words out in conversation that didn't put someone on the wrong foot. If Lance's wide grin was any indication, John might be in the clear.

"It's not the first time someone's said something like that, and it probably won't be the last. Hell, at this point, I'll take it as a compliment."

John nodded. "I meant it as one. You seem like fun."

Lance cocked his head. "Fun enough to spend more time with?"

Again, John wondered if there might be more beneath the seemingly benign question. Considering his awkward moment with Dean earlier in the day, John couldn't help but wonder if there was a chance Lance was flirting with him. It didn't feel like flirting, though. It felt like normal conversation. A normal conversation that John was enjoying, and it made him feel more at ease than he'd felt in days.

And after all, he had managed to make the guy laugh twice. John would take it.

Lance waited before adding. "Of course, if you were getting ready to go off and do something else, don't let me keep you. I can find plenty of trouble around here if I want."

John looked at Theresea. "Bugging her?"

Lance shrugged. "This is a place for regulars, so I've gotten to know a few of them."

It was odd being asked to hang around with someone else, but it was a feeling John could get used to. If Lance wanted him to hang around, then John wouldn't turn him down.

John smiled. "I'd love to hang out if you want."

LANCE



Lance tucked the sleeves under before folding the shirt into a square. “We had a few drinks, talked, and agreed to hang out again.”

Lacie eyed him as she fished a sweater from the basket. “You managed to talk to a guy, flirt with him, and didn’t try to sleep with him or get him to take you out on a date?”

Lance stuck his tongue out at her. “I know, right? It’s almost like I can behave when I’m supposed to.”

“I’m both shocked and amazed.”

Lance balled up one of his shirts and tossed it at her. Lacie barely reacted, snatching it from the air and folding it. They were seated on opposite sides of his bed as they went through the pile of laundry. When he’d rented the place, he hadn’t thought about whether to check if there were hookups for his washer and dryer. It turned out he would have to hoof it to the nearby laundromat if he wanted to get his clothes done, and it always took him ages to work up the motivation.

“So, you two are just supposed to hang out then?” Lacie asked.

Lance began fishing out socks, making a pile to sort through. "We swapped numbers, and we've been texting. He wanted to make a real night of it, so he told me we should do something when he's got a day off."

Lacie smirked. "A real night of it, huh?"

Lance snorted. "My interpretation of his words, not his actual words. I don't mind. It's not like I have anything pressing to worry about."

"You know, other than your job."

"A job with flexible hours and despite all my bitching pays pretty well after I get my tips," Lance admitted.

Which was precisely why he could afford a one-bedroom apartment in a tourist town. His sister thought he'd been crazy to live in the city, choosing herself to live on the outskirts where real estate and rent were far cheaper. Once Lance figured out he could afford the apartment and manage comfortably with his other bills, he hadn't thought twice about it. He loved being at the center of things, and while one day he might crave peace and quiet, he reveled in the energy and life waiting for him just outside the front door of the apartment building.

"Did he actually say what he wanted to do? Or are you guys going to wing it?" Lacie asked.

Lance shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, this is kind of new for me. Normally, when I meet a cute guy I might be interested in, I go for the kill. Guy seemed awkward but in a cute way."

"Bad social skills, or were you messing with him?"

Lance hesitated, unsure how to answer. "Well, I might have messed with him a little, but not too bad. I want to think he got the Lance Lite treatment."

"Which is probably more than the poor bastard is used to."

"Aw, thanks, sis. I love you too."

Lacie shifted one pile of laundry on top of another, making room. "So, neither of you has any expectations or plans. You're simply going with it?"

Lance chuckled. "We'll probably end up hanging out here. He lives on base, which can be a pain in the ass to get onto, at least if you're me, for some reason. But maybe I can get him to come over here, and we can veg out, have some drinks, talk some more."

"And the countdown to how long it takes you to misbehave begins."

Lance rolled his eyes. "I don't sleep with every guy I meet, c'mon."

"No, but it's obvious you're into this guy."

"What? I mean, of course, I think he's interesting, and he's cute, but so what? He wouldn't be the first?"

Lacie looked up. "Really? The first thing you told me today was that you met a guy and really liked him."

"Yeah, and? Why is that weird?"

"Because half the time, you don't even tell me you have a date."

"Okay, maybe I was a little excited," Lance begrudgingly admitted.

Lacie smiled. "Well, maybe between you deciding to try something different with him and being so eager about it, that's a good sign."

"Is this where you tell me not to get too crazy and immediately write him off with my 'high standards?' Because really, you don't have to," Lance told her quickly.

Lacie chuckled, shaking her head. "No, I'll spare you, if only because things seem different this time. I just want you to be happy, and I'm always hoping the next guy might be the one for you."

The way she said it, Lance felt like he had been going through a rotation of guys with her watching the parade.

Sure, he'd been a little adventurous once he hit eighteen and had a job that let him explore more, but he hadn't gone crazy. He always reminded himself that Lacie and her soon-to-be fiancé, Leon, had been dating since her junior year of high school. The only reason she hadn't had kids yet was that they'd decided to wait until their careers were settled.

Lacie shook her head. "Only you could find some random guy in what is pretty much a place for straight people."

Lance let out a light laugh, scooping up the empty laundry basket. "Yeah, it's a gift."

He hurried out of the room before his sister could read his facial expression and start questioning him. The truth was, he wasn't even sure John was into guys. They had talked, and John had made him feel good, but that wasn't the same as being gay or bi.

"When's his next day off?" she called down the hallway.

"Tomorrow!" Lance called back.

Which would probably be a good time to figure things out about John.

* * *

JOHN LOOKED around as he entered the apartment. "Nice place."

Lance snorted, closing the door behind him. "It's nothing fancy, and I'm not exactly the world's best decorator."

"You're talking to a guy who's still waiting to be approved to get an on-base apartment, so I'm in the barracks," John said.

"Ah, so this place could be a rathole, and you'd be perfectly okay with it," Lance said.

John blinked, cringing. "Not...what I meant."

Lance winked. "I'm teasing."

His place wasn't a rathole by any standard, but he hadn't

lied when he said he wasn't the world's best decorator. Only the kitchen was separate, with the living and dining rooms flowing easily into one another and a short hallway leading to the one bedroom and bathroom. The dining area had a small table with a couple of chairs and a few nice paintings in wild colors. In his assessment, it was a decent-looking room, but he didn't use it often.

The living room and his bedroom were the real exposers of his not-so-adept hand at decorating. The couch was comfortable enough, and Lance had taken many a nap on it. However, its black leather didn't mesh with the big lazy boy he'd found at a resale shop and looked far sleeker than the movie and game posters he'd hung on the walls.

"I got a couple of drinks made if you want one," Lance offered.

John looked at him, letting out a sigh. "Alcohol?"

"Yeah, that a problem?"

John wrinkled his nose. "They moved my day off to a couple of days from now, so I can't stay too late."

Lance deflated. "Oh."

"Sorry, I didn't want to cancel after we agreed, but it was a last-minute change."

Lance shrugged, bringing out a couple of bottles of juice instead. "Well, we've always got the virgin drinks, so you don't have to drink and drive, no big deal."

It was comforting to see John looked as disappointed as he felt. John took the bottle from him with a smile before looking around the living room.

"Make yourself comfortable. My sister already made sure it was presentable for guests," Lance said.

John chose the couch, plopping down on one end and leaning against the arm. "She come around often?"

Lance chose the other end of the couch, slipping the bottle to rest between his legs. "She likes to come by and see

me, make sure everything's okay. She knows I can take care of myself, but I think it makes her feel better to do things for me. I usually leave a few things messy, so she has something to do."

John smiled. "So she feels important."

"And wanted, and needed, because she is. But it's easier to let her do things and feel it than try to find a way to make her believe me."

"I think that counts, though, doesn't it? You're purposefully leaving stuff for her because it makes her feel good."

"Yeah, but don't tell her, she'd give me hell."

John laughed, setting his bottle on the coffee table. "I'll do my best to keep my mouth shut."

As Lance watched, John reached behind his back and stretched his long arms out. Lance certainly did not miss that the man's shirt rode up a few inches, exposing a flat stomach, a slight rippling of muscles beneath his skin, and a trail of fine, blond hair leading down beneath his waistband. The low groan of pleasure from John was a bonus, and Lance curled one leg up so his groin was hidden from view.

"I know you mentioned you had four brothers. Are you guys close?" Lance asked.

John snorted. "Not really. I'm the youngest by five years. My parents had me by accident. Pretty sure my mom was hoping for a girl, but here I am, not a girl."

Lance eyed John's arms, and his gaze flitted up to his face. "You are not, no."

There was a pause, and Lance wondered if his glance might have been too obvious. On closer inspection, he realized John was looking at him more closely. It was the same thing the man had done a few times in the bar, and Lance was never completely sure what he was doing. It was as though something was bouncing around in John's head, confusing him.

To try and swerve away from whatever was bugging John, Lance decided to launch into a few stories he thought were safe and could get a good laugh. The time when he was a kid and his sister had tried to talk him out of climbing a tree, and he'd insisted he was, in fact, capable of climbing up high and getting down.

Lance shook his head. "I was not capable of getting down, and they had to get a big ladder to rescue me."

There had also been when his sister had discovered that Lance had gotten into her liquor supplies. It wasn't hard to figure out, as he had left the cabinet wide open, and he'd passed out in the hallway like a moron.

"Her favorite part of that story is when she tried to get me to bed, I insisted on trying to pee in a potted plant. Apparently, in my drunk and half-asleep state, I thought it was the toilet and was mad as hell that she kept trying to pull me away from it."

John snorted, shaking his head. "She had to have been pissed."

"She probably was at that moment, but by the time I woke up the next day, she wasn't."

"That was cool of her then."

"It was my first year there, and I think she was willing to let it go. Wasn't like I had a bunch of people over and got drunk with them. I got sad and decided it was a good idea to drink my problems away. Turns out, not such a great idea."

A frown creased John's forehead. "Sad? Why?"

Lance looked down at his now empty bottle of juice, snorting softly. "Well, that's kind of what happens when your parents don't want you, so your older sister has to take legal custody of you until you're eighteen. I think that's why she helicopters so much. She's just worried."

John drew himself up, eyes widening. "Why the hell wouldn't your parents want you?"

Lance looked up, smiling softly. "You...can't guess?"

John shook his head. "Unless you underwent radical personality change in the past few years, no. You're funny, charming, pretty smart, and have a good head on your shoulders as far as I can see."

Lance set his bottle aside, raising a brow. "John, I'm gay, didn't you realize?"

John's raised brow fell slowly until his expression was completely neutral. "I...did not."

Lance smiled, giving a little shrug. "Well, surprise, I am. And they found out, in probably the worst way possible. They tried to 'persuade' me to 'choose' something else, but when that didn't work, they didn't want anything to do with me. Lacie was there, so now I'm here."

John's brow furrowed again. "That's...awful."

It was heartbreaking, soul-shattering, and it had taken Lance years to crawl out of his despair. But the last thing he wanted was to get into the sad story of his life with someone who barely knew him. Some stories were too depressing to tell or just plain hard to talk about.

Lance brightened. "Don't worry about it. It's their loss, right? Let's just watch some TV before you leave, alright? Far less depressing."

"Uh, sure," John said, looking like he wanted to argue but not knowing how.

Lance snatched up the remote and flipped the TV on before John could say anything else. Harder to deal with than bringing up his parents was the surprise and lack of response from John when Lance told him about being gay. Lance didn't need to ask. He could tell from the reaction that not only did John not know, but the man was straight. Lance sighed, telling himself it was better to figure it out early than make a fool of himself later.

It didn't make the disappointment sting any less, though.

JOHN



He wasn't sure how long he'd been standing outside Lance's apartment door, trying to summon the courage to knock. John had been swinging between telling himself he was being utterly ridiculous, reaching his hand out, only to snatch it back as something inside him recoiled at the thought of facing the man again.

They'd made plans to hang out after all, and it ate at John to think he might bail out. It wasn't as if they hadn't been texting after John had left Lance's apartment the other day. Lance had mentioned their plans for Friday, and now that Friday had rolled around, John was questioning whether to follow through, and he wasn't sure why.

Sure, he hadn't been expecting Lance to drop the news that he was gay, but was that any reason to stop hanging out with him? It wasn't as if Lance had done or said anything that made John uncomfortable. If anything, being around Lance had been comfortable, and talking to him was easy. John enjoyed their conversations and was eager to spend more free time with him. Lance hadn't hit on him, touched him, or tried anything, so there was no reason to avoid him.

All he had to do was avoid the strange twist in his gut every time he thought about Lance trying to touch him, that's all.

Steeling himself, John reached out and rapped on the door before he could change his mind again. The sound of his third knock sent a ripple of panic through him. He realized he was committed, and the deed was done. There was no backing out now he'd knocked, and he'd have to face whatever the hell was eating at him.

And then Lance opened the door with a wide smile that soothed the tension in John's chest.

"Hey, wasn't expecting you this early," Lance said as he stepped back.

Which was saying something since John had been standing outside the man's door for nearly twenty minutes. It had only been by some fluke or perhaps good luck that no one had come out of the apartment building and seen him standing outside like an idiot. That thought hadn't exactly helped his anxiety, but he wasn't going to tell Lance about it.

John shrugged. "Wasn't a long day, and I have tomorrow off for real this time, so I got showered and dressed. No big deal."

That was leaving out the hour he'd spent debating with himself before he'd left work, but he wasn't going to mention that either. If anything, he was going to enjoy his time with Lance and try to get over himself. Plus, from the light in Lance's eyes, the man was thrilled to bits that John had shown up, and he wasn't going to be the one to ruin that happiness.

Lance tapped his chin. "How do you feel about spicy food?"

John wrinkled his nose. "I have the spice tolerance of...well, a wimp, actually."

"Good, because I can't deal with it either. How's pizza

with a few veggies so we can pretend it's good for us?" Lance asked, already pulling out his phone.

"Just so long as mushrooms don't count as a veggie in your book, then we're good," John told him.

"Mushrooms? Really? Those are, like, a legal requirement," Lance said as he tapped away.

"Texture thing. I like the taste just fine, but the feel of biting into one turns my stomach."

"Fine, fine, but no pineapple. If there is anything in the world that doesn't belong on pizza, it's pineapple."

John wrinkled his nose. "What? That's blasphemy."

"The man who gags on mushrooms doesn't get to talk about what's right and wrong with pineapple on pizza," Lance told him.

"I think you're going to have to accept that you're weird."

Lance grinned, tucking his phone back into his pocket. "You're damn right I am, and I embrace it. Now, since you don't have to work tomorrow, how about I drag out the big boy drinks and turn on some junk TV for us to zone out on?"

John laughed. "My, you do know how to drag out the best of the best to entertain someone."

Lance winked. "Only the finest for the greatest of my guests, I assure you."

He watched Lance wander off toward the kitchen, momentarily unsure how he felt about drinking when his head didn't feel it was on straight while sober. Then again, that would require him to tell Lance no, which would probably take the happy expression off his face. Lance seemed as pleased to have company as John was to be the company, and in all honesty, he was happy to shove aside his vague discomfort to continue enjoying himself.

Lance glanced back, grinning still. "If it makes you feel better, they won't be cheap drinks."

John snorted but continued to watch Lance make the drinks, fascinated by the man's fluid movements. Even as a kid, John had been awkward and clumsy when he hit his teenage growth spurts. However, Lance seemed to possess an internal rhythm perfectly in sync with his limbs, and he moved around his kitchen with a grace and confidence John would have attributed to an experienced bartender on a busy night.

"Just don't kill me with it," John warned as Lance snatched a bottle of liquor up.

"Don't worry, got a few lessons from a date I went on with a bartender. Turns out, I kind of like mixing drinks, so I learned more. You won't even notice."

Well, maybe he could use a few drinks to lighten up. Who knew? Maybe it would help.

* * *

HIS HEAD BUZZED, and his body was pleasantly warm as John lounged against the back of the couch. Some trashy reality show was on TV, but neither he nor Lance had been paying much attention to it. It only entered John's mind when something funny or ridiculous popped up, or Lance commented on it.

The pizza had long since been eaten, with only crumbs left in the box, which had been thrown on the coffee table. Both he and Lance were nursing their fourth drinks, though John was starting to suspect the previous three were more than they appeared in terms of alcohol content.

"You know, when you said I wouldn't notice the alcohol in the drinks, I didn't think you meant you'd load me up," John said, lolling his head to look at Lance.

Lance glanced at him from his corner of the couch. "What? I said you wouldn't notice."

John motioned to his head and body. "This feels a lot like noticing."

"Aw, you're a lightweight," John stated. "You telling me you're drunk after a few drinks?"

"Three drinks that I'm pretty sure counted as six," John accused.

Lance screwed up his eyes in thought. "I might have been a little heavy-handed after the first one. My sister always said I get pretty liberal with the alcohol after I've had a bit already."

Which made a great deal of sense. John had a similar problem whenever he was drinking beer. The first couple went down pretty slow, and the third wasn't much faster. By the time the previous beers had time to settle into his system, though, every beer from the fourth on up went down with increasing speed. John didn't realize how many drinks he'd had until there was a collection of empty bottles, and he had to contemplate how much he was going to regret his choices the following morning.

John chuckled. "So, that's why they say bartenders shouldn't drink on the job. They'd end up pouring all the bar's money away."

Lance nodded. "Sounds about right."

John nudged Lance with his foot. "Especially if they're you."

Lance swatted at him. "Are you complaining?"

"Not in the slightest."

How could he? It felt like ages since he'd been able to just chill with someone and enjoy a few drinks. Despite his earlier hesitance, John found he was more relaxed than he'd been in weeks. Whether because of the drinks or Lance's personality, John found himself content to vegetate for as long as possible on the couch.

Beside him, Lance wriggled, trying to push himself

upright. John watched, snorting as Lance discovered he had dipped between the cushion and the couch, making it difficult to get up.

John gave him a sympathetic look. "Are you stuck, little boy?"

Lance glared, swiping out one foot to smack John on the hip. "Help me up, you ass."

John laughed, reaching to take hold of Lance's wrist. Lance held onto John's, and with a yank, he was free. Lance slid forward, turning to glare at the offending gap between the cushion and the couch.

"I didn't think it through when I bought this couch. Should have known it was too good to be true. Thing probably ate its last owner's dog or something," Lance said.

John was only partially paying mind to what Lance was saying, his attention diverted by the fact that they hadn't let go of one another. Lance's fingers were warm on his wrist, and he had a surprisingly firm grip for his size. A flutter passed through his stomach, rising into his chest and clenching his throat.

Lance only looked at John when he tried to pull his hand away. He was halted by John's continued grip. Face flaming, John released Lance's wrist with a sputtered apology. Lance eyed him with a small, bemused smile as he stood up to shove the cushion back into place.

If John wasn't mistaken, he thought he could make out a faint flush on Lance's pale cheeks as he wrestled with the cushion. That bit of color only made Lance's freckles stand out even more than before, speckled from the middle of one cheek, across the bridge of his nose, and onto the other cheek. Amidst the confusing tumult in his head, John couldn't help but be reminded of the summer before he'd shipped out for Basic.

Lance finally gave up on the cushion, grabbing one end

and giving it a yank to move it back into place. "Now I'm beginning to understand why Lacie's couch has Velcro between the couch and cushions."

And now he had a really good view of Lance's ass as the man hunched over the couch and tried to wrestle and curse at the inanimate object. John's face burned a little hotter as he realized he was not only noticing but staring. Worse, he was judging it, and God save him, he found it enticing.

Lance gave one more yank, succeeding. "Ha! Cushion zero, me one."

"Just going to ignore the part where it trapped you earlier, huh?" John asked.

Lance flopped down, looking smug. "You're damn right I am, that was a cheap shot. In a real fight, I won."

He had to blame the alcohol for the weird thoughts drifting through his head. There was no way he could find Lance attractive. He found women attractive. Hell, he'd had sex with women and had thoroughly enjoyed himself. There was no reason to believe otherwise. Not even with the memory pushing at the edges of his mind, held up by the remembrance of fleeting feelings from his awkward teenage years.

"You okay?" Lance asked.

John's eyes widened. "Yeah, of course, why?"

"Looking a little red in the face there."

John shrugged. "I don't exactly have a dark complexion, and sometimes alcohol makes me get a little red."

Lance glanced at his glass. "So, you're saying I shouldn't make more."

John thrust his glass toward him, shaking his head. "Don't say stupid things."

Lance laughed, taking the glass and hopping up to go to the kitchen. "Somehow, I thought that might be the case."

Drinking more was probably a bad idea, but John needed

something to take the edge off his panicked thoughts. Despite blaming the alcohol, it was the only thing he could think of that might potentially save him.

"I've kissed a guy," John blurted as Lance returned.

Lance stuttered to a stop a few feet away, refilled glasses in hand. "Oh?"

If John hadn't been blushing already, he would have been after blurting out the not-so-distant memory lingering in his head. He cringed, reaching to take the drink from Lance, knowing he was too far in to back away from the story now but needing a little more courage. Lance handed it to John, who promptly took a huge gulp before continuing.

"Ended up hanging out with some guy I knew in high school after we graduated. I was preparing to go into Basic, and he was at some California school. I'd never really hung out with him, but he invited me to chill. We sat around his fire out back and had a few drinks. Pretty normal until he kissed me."

Lance sat down, sipping his drink slowly as he listened. "Just like that?"

John nodded, taking another drink. "Just like that. I didn't know what to do."

"This might be a weird question, but did you like it?"

John opened his mouth to reply with an instantaneous no, but he thought twice and closed it. Maybe the alcohol was making him more honest, or perhaps it was slowing him down enough so he could think without needing to react instantly.

"I don't know, it happened so fast, I never had a chance to react," John said honestly.

Lance nodded, looking thoughtful. "Sounds like he had a bit of a crush on you."

"You think?"

"I mean, he invited you to hang out even though you guys

weren't close, and right before you were both supposed to leave? Pretty sure he had a crush."

"I never thought of that."

Lance watched him for a moment, took a deep breath, and set his drink aside. "Not that I'm complaining about you opening up, but...why tell me that?"

"Would you believe me if I said it just came out of my mouth without me thinking it through?" John asked.

Lance chuckled. "Yeah, I would."

"Right, well, that's what happened."

"Out of the blue."

John hesitated, his eyes darting between the freckles on Lance's nose and the sight of him licking his lips. "I think?"

Lance cocked his head. "But you don't know."

John drained the rest of his drink, not even caring that he'd downed another one of Lance's potent concoctions in five minutes flat. He wasn't used to introspection, and it was weird to question things he'd considered just another part of his life. Truth was, the questions were oddly tempting, as though Lance were drawing him into something other than mere conversation.

Was he tempted to repeat history? And would there be a different outcome?

"Okay, maybe not out of the blue. I was thinking."

Lance nodded, leaning forward. "About?"

They weren't close, but Lance had leaned in far enough that John was afraid he would hear his heart pounding. Lance managed to look wise and endearing as he watched John's face with open curiosity. John had the sneaking suspicion Lance already knew what was going on in John's head but was waiting for him to be the one to say it.

Just as he had with knocking on Lance's door, John knew he had to commit or not. There was no gearing himself up and inching forward. There were no baby steps, and taking it

slow with John. When it came to risk and reward, he leaped forward and took whatever came his way. Otherwise, he would run away and never look back.

Which was why he found himself leaning forward, cupping Lance's jaw with his free hand, and pressing their lips together.

LANCE



Overall, Lance considered himself a good judge of character. Despite his assertion that he was far too picky, he generally thought his beliefs about people's behaviors and habits were accurate. It had served him well in the past, and he relied on his instincts where other people were concerned with great effect.

So, while he suspected there had to be some reason for John choosing to share his story of the kiss, he was genuinely surprised when John then kissed him. Lance had suspected the man might have been telling him because his initial reaction to Lance's announcement of being gay had been both a surprise and had left John looking a little awkward. From what he knew about John, it would have made sense in the man's mind to try and alleviate that awkwardness by telling a story he felt Lance would relate to.

But a kiss?

Not that he was complaining. He had, after all, been interested in John from the moment he saw him. But his surprise kept him from reacting to the kiss other than to sit there in dumbfounded shock. His brain fought to work its

way around the idea of the man he'd thought was straight kissing him.

John seemed to sense his surprise and began to pull away. Alarm bells went off in Lance's head as he felt the pressure of John's lips against his lessen. Not willing to let John's second kiss with a guy be as brief and confusing as the first, Lance snapped himself out of his stupor.

Before John could finish pulling away, Lance reached out, grabbing the back of his head and pulling him in for a real kiss. Thankfully, it didn't result in their teeth clacking together, an unfortunate event Lance had been a participant in more than he would have liked. Instead, their lips pressed together firmly, with a touch of softness as Lance eased his hold once he was sure John didn't feel as though he was being forced to retreat.

And indeed, John stayed. His hand, resting on Lance's jaw, slid down to wrap around his neck and squeeze lightly. Their lips parted, and Lance couldn't help the soft noise of pleasure as he felt John's tongue slide over his, tasting him. So close he could smell the man's cologne, rich and fragrant, reminding him of a cool autumn evening.

John finally ended the kiss, pulling away slowly. Lance thought it was a good sign that while John was still red in the face, he didn't look like he was getting ready to bolt or freak out. Upon closer inspection, he looked confused and maybe a little worried, but at least he wasn't looking for the door.

Lance chose to speak first. "So, I gotta ask again, did you like it?"

John sat back against the couch, his eyes roaming Lance's face thoughtfully. John drew a hand up, resting his fingers against his lips and frowning.

"Is it because I'm drunk?" John wondered.

Lance did his best not to take offense, telling himself John was confused and out of his element.

"It might be why you were willing to do it, but if it was more than just 'okay, I did that, I can move on now,' then probably not only the alcohol," Lance told him.

"Alcohol can make you do some weird things," John continued.

"It makes you more willing to do things you might not normally be ready to do when you're sober, but it can't suddenly make you like kissing guys."

John looked up. "And I did."

It was more the look of surprise on his face that brought Lance a light laugh than anything else. His realization of his attraction to men had been much easier and without too much confusion. The hardest part had been hiding it from everyone because the small town he grew up in had a very similar mindset to his parents.

"I've been with women and liked that," John said.

Lance reached out, resting his hand gently on John's arm. "There's this thing called being bi. You're allowed to like both."

"But I never...I've never been with a guy."

"Never been attracted to one?"

"Maybe? Well, sorta."

"What's that mean?"

John took a deep breath. "When I thought about it after that guy from school kissed me, I thought it felt good when I looked back. But I never...I mean, yeah."

Lance cocked his head. "What about me?"

"Am I attracted to you?"

"Well, you did kiss me, so that's kind of a fair question, don't you think?"

Lance laughed. "Alright, yeah, guess you're right. Kinda feels like I am attracted to you, like kissing you felt...good."

John glanced down at his crotch, and Lance's eyes followed his. Sure enough, the front of John's loose pants

were pushed forward by a rather noticeable bulge. Lance felt a thrill run through him at the sight, and not only because it looked like something was worth seeing in John's pants.

Lance looked up, grinning. "So, yes."

"And I mean, I like spending time with you. I think you're funny and fun to be around. You make me feel relaxed, and I don't have to constantly worry about the stupid shit that comes out of my mouth when I talk to you, which is really nice," John babbled.

Lance blinked, taken aback by the switch from a fun kiss to what essentially sounded like a confession of romantic attraction. He hadn't been expecting that either.

"It sounds weird to say that after I just... after we just...well, kissed. But it's true, I like being around you, and who you are as a person. I don't know what that means now I've shown you my hard-on after kissing you."

Lance chuckled, scooching forward so he was nearly in John's lap. John stared, eyes going comically wide as Lance approached. However, he didn't pull away or try to stop Lance and even moved his hands so Lance could sit in his lap properly.

"That's sweet, John," Lance told him, resting his hands on the man's shoulders.

John looked up at him, unsure. "Doesn't feel very sweet."

"I'm going to assume you mean that what you said doesn't feel sweet and not my sitting in your lap," Lance teased.

John flushed again, reaching down hesitantly to take hold of Lance's hips. "No, this...feels kinda good."

"While still feeling weird," Lance added.

"A little. Sorry."

"Would you be okay with me kissing you again?"

John's breath caught, and he slowly nodded. "I...yeah."

Lance didn't need to be told twice, bending forward to take John's lips. His body relaxed as their mouths met, and he

felt John's cock press against his ass. The pressure brought a low sound from John, and the man pushed his hips up, rutting his tented pants against Lance's ass.

Lance smiled into the kiss as he felt John's grip around his waist tighten. Pushing down against John's bulge, he was rewarded with another desperate sound.

"Something more?" Lance asked.

John peered up, half-dazed and confused. "More?"

"Are you up for something a little more than kissing?" Lance asked, not wanting to push John past his limits.

John's gaze was cautious. "I'm not sure that I could, not like—"

Lance smiled, kissing the corner of John's mouth gently. "Don't worry. I'm not asking you to fuck me."

The relief on John's face almost made Lance laugh, but he held it back. As far as he could tell, John had never dealt with the idea that he was anything other than straight. Lance was all for letting John experience the other side of the coin, but he wasn't going to push and risk scaring him off.

The truth was, he was pretty fond of having John around.

Lance pushed back from John, sliding down between his legs so he was again on the couch. Reaching down, he took hold of John's thighs, squeezing them and appreciating the firmness of his muscles. Slowly making his way up John's legs, he leaned forward and kissed him again as he gripped the top of the man's thighs. John's breathing was sharp and eager, his legs quivering slightly at Lance's touch.

"If I go too far for you, tell me," Lance whispered.

With that, he undid the button of John's pants with the faint clink of the metal sounding too loud. Lance peered down, making sure John was wearing underwear before he took hold of his zipper and pulled it down. John grunted the moment the jeans relaxed their tight grip around him and then hissed quietly when Lance's fingers reached inside.

Lance stroked him over the top of his underwear, reaching down until he hit the tip. It wasn't incredibly thick, though he certainly appreciated its healthy length. Lance made a note to himself that if they ever did get to full-on fucking, it wouldn't be an uncomfortable fit, but it would feel good.

Slipping his fingers beneath the band of John's underwear, Lance stroked the soft, heated skin of the man's cock. It hadn't been that long since he'd last had fun, but he couldn't remember the last time his heart raced so hard from touching someone. He knew what he wanted to accomplish, but he told himself to go slow, taking hold of John's shaft and gently pulling it into the open air.

Lance stroked it softly with his fingers, playing over the glistening head with a thumb. "You good?"

John nodded, hands gripping the couch fiercely. "This is different."

"Bad different?"

"God, no."

Lance took that as a cue for him to go a little further and inched back along the couch so he could lie down. He took his time, glancing up at John to ensure he wasn't losing it or uncomfortable. As far as he could see, from the widening of the man's pupils to the unconscious licking of his lips, John was all for what Lance had in mind.

After a bit of maneuvering on his part and some wiggling on John's, they managed to get his pants and underwear down far enough to give Lance complete access to John's cock. It was amusing to see how much John leaked as Lance's fingers gripped his shaft, stroking it as he positioned himself.

Licking his lips eagerly, Lance ran his tongue from the base of John's cock, slowly bringing it up and over the leaking tip. John shivered at the sensation, but Lance moaned as he tasted the man on his tongue. Unable to contain

himself any longer, he closed his mouth around the head, letting it slide over his tongue slowly.

Above him, John gave a low moan, one of his hands moving to curl in Lance's hair. Taking that as an obvious sign of encouragement, Lance worked more of John's cock into his mouth, opening his throat as he inched his way down. If there was one thing Lance prided himself on, it was his ability to use his mouth and use it well.

His tongue slid along the underside of John's cock as he felt the man pulse with excitement. Lance's throat muscles worked and squeezed the entire length before pulling free to suck and nurse gently on the head. He was taking his time, sensing that John was worked up to the point of losing it and wanting to make sure it was a memorable experience.

John was no silent partner, and while most of his noises were unintelligible, they were still eager and full of pleasure. Strong fingers curled tighter in Lance's hair every time he dipped lower, letting his throat squeeze John's sensitive head. John's hips jerked every time Lance pulled back, letting his tongue bathe the underside before wrapping around the sensitive head and moaning when he tasted more of him.

"Lance," John panted, not pulling Lance off, but his entire body freezing.

He didn't need to be told what was coming, and if he could have grinned, Lance would have. Instead, he dove down with renewed vigor, taking John to the hilt before rearing back and pushing down again. John's grip on his body became fierce, and he gave a desperate cry of pleasure as Lance drove him toward the edge.

John cried out again, his hips pushing up and driving his cock into Lance's throat once more. Lance felt the shaft pulse, and John poured down his throat. Not one to rest easy, Lance pulled back, letting the spurting head lay on his tongue and coat it with each pulse. Lance sucked gently,

rubbing John's thighs as the man tipped over the edge and fell into pure ecstasy.

He was careful when he pulled John free from his lips, however, not wanting to stimulate the sensitive cock too much. As soon as his mouth was free, Lance shot John a grin and pulled away.

"That was..." John began, slowly tucking himself away as soon as he had the strength.

"Something," Lance finished.

"Definitely something."

Lance wanted to ask what that something was, but one look at John's face told him that might not be a good idea. If he was going to make John feel comfortable, he needed to remember to take it slow and not push him too hard. The best thing he could do would be to let John absorb what had happened and hope they found something to share on the other side of that introspection.

"Want another drink?" Lance asked, pushing up from the couch.

"Uh, yeah, thank you," John mumbled, looking down at his lap thoughtfully.

Lance walked away, noting he should probably not make this one as strong, or he should go for a virgin version. The last thing he needed was for John to get truly wasted. Obviously, John had found his courage at the bottom of a bottle, and Lance hoped there was enough left in his system when morning came.

JOHN



He wasn't sure what he'd done wrong, but John was completely and utterly sure he'd done *something*. Despite trying his best not to push any buttons, Sloane still looked ready to strangle him, given the opportunity. That could have been described as just one more day at the base's main guardhouse, but John felt Sloane was even more on edge than usual.

Thankfully, he had his phone, and more importantly, he had Lance to talk to. Despite not knowing what he was supposed to feel about what happened, the two of them continued talking. Albeit, their conversation had turned a little flirty.

"You ever look at life and wonder, when the hell did that change?" John asked, glancing between Sloane and Trisha.

"No," Sloane said, not elaborating.

John thought about asking more but turned his attention back to his phone. What had started as a conversation between him and Lance about the greatest comedy movie or show had slowly morphed into something else. And as John

looked down at the latest text, he realized it had definitely changed.

They say you're supposed to make someone you're with laugh as hard as you make them come. You think I manage? Lance had asked.

Weird as it was to say it to a guy, John had to be honest.

You definitely managed both.

I figured since you were in my mouth and all, but had to ask.

John's pants were getting tighter at the thought, and he hurried to reply.

You were the best I ever had. Though I'll be honest, I haven't had much.

If you're good, you'll get more than that.

John's eyes widened as he typed his reply. *Like what?*

Sloane growled from beside him. "Do you have to have your phone sounds on? I don't need to listen to you tapping away like a chicken to your next attempt at getting laid."

John's cheeks burned, and he turned down the sounds on his phone. "Yeah, sorry."

Sloane rolled his eyes. "Just fucking do it before you come on shift."

"You okay?" John asked, wondering if he needed to move his seat.

"I'm fine," Sloane growled.

"You don't seem fine."

"But I am."

John winced. "Well, if you want to talk about it, you can."

"I don't want to talk about shit because there's nothing to talk about."

John held his phone up as if to gesture and then shrugged. "Fine, then don't talk about it, just sit there and be angrier than usual."

Sloane moved quickly, yanking the phone from his hand. "Go do a perimeter check."

John stared at his phone nervously. "What'd I do?"

Sloane slapped his phone on the desk. "Driving me crazy."

John snorted, growing annoyed. "How's that different from any other day?"

Sloane pointed at the door with a growl. "Go."

Huffing, he pushed himself out of his seat. "Jesus, fine. Maybe you can stop being a fucking asshole by the time I come back."

He was sick and tired of dealing with Sloane's surly attitude anyway and could use the breath of fresh air. It would've been nice to have his phone while he patrolled outside, but he wouldn't risk pushing Sloane too far. Most of the time, Sloane was grumpy and rude, but there was an edge today that wasn't normally there. Something was obviously eating at Sloane but damned if John was going to be the one to find out.

Thankfully, he'd remembered to grab the clipboard off the wall beside the door before heading outside. John had been working in the guardhouse for the few months he'd been stationed at Fort Dale, and nothing on the checklist had ever been out of place. Yet, as with everything in the military, General Winter insisted on daily checks of the fence and the area outside the fence to make sure everything was safe and secure.

It gave him a little time to think as he considered what to do next. On the one hand, he had definitely enjoyed himself, and as shocking as it was, he wanted to see where it would lead with him and Lance. On the other hand, it felt so out of character to have gone that far with another guy, especially when, before, he'd always felt a little odd around gay or bi guys.

There wasn't anyone he could talk to about it. Everyone else in his family was completely straight and wouldn't have understood. He was pretty sure one or more of his brothers

would have given him hell for it too. Not that he thought they were necessarily against being gay or bi, but damned if they wouldn't give him shit all the same.

He'd told Lance the truth; he liked the guy and wanted to be around him more. He'd also enjoyed what they'd done together, and it would have been a lie to say he didn't want to find out what more there was. On the other hand, it was hard to picture himself with a guy despite having gone halfway there with Lance.

True, Lance hadn't pushed for anything else save for his flirtatious comments and reminders of the blowjob. It helped to make John feel a little better, as if he wasn't being shoved in a direction before he even knew what the directions were. It had been a few days since he'd seen Lance, and he still wasn't sure what he was going to do the next time he saw him.

With the checks done, John returned to the guardhouse to pretend he wasn't confused as hell, and go back to his conversation with Lance. Stepping through the open door, he set the clipboard on the wall where it belonged, turned to the front, and froze.

Sloane sat wide-eyed, staring at John's phone with a startled expression. From a handful of feet away, John couldn't make out what was on the screen, but he could see it was a picture from Lance. Considering what they'd been talking about before his phone was taken from him, John strongly suspected what was on that screen.

"This...is not my phone," he heard Sloane say.

A cry rose from John's throat, and he dove forward, desperate to get the phone away from Sloane. It was a testament to how startled Sloane was that he didn't resist. John snatched his phone back, holding it to his chest desperately, and stared at Sloane in disbelief.

"Why are you looking at my messages?" he demanded.

Sloane's eyes widened. "I...wasn't thinking, thought it was mine."

John unlocked the screen to see what Sloane had seen. His gut twisted as he caught sight of the picture, his heart skipping a beat. Lance was on all fours, a phone over his shoulder pointed toward what must have been a mirror. His ass was in direct line with the camera, and John could see everything, from Lance's half-hard cock dangling between his kneeling legs and the oh-so-appealing curve of his naked ass.

"Why wasn't it locked?" Sloane asked.

John's head snapped up. "You don't lock yours."

Sloane looked him over, finally speaking slowly. "So, that was uh—"

John's eyes widened. "An accident!"

"An accident."

"Yes."

"Some guy accidentally sent you a nude."

"My name is...similar to someone else's on his phone," John insisted, tightening his hand around his phone.

God, of all the people to find that, why did it have to be Sloane?

"And you know that without telling him what happened?" Sloane asked.

"It was an accident," John repeated, having no idea what he was supposed to say other than to keep insisting on his version of events.

Sloane smiled. "John?"

"Don't."

He sighed. "Look, you should know that I, of all people, won't judge you for that. I mean, look at my best friend."

John looked at his phone. "I'm not—"

Sweat broke out on his forehead as he tried to think of some way to make Sloane stop talking about this. John had

decided to leave him alone, hadn't he? Even if he'd been annoyed at how cranky Sloane had been about it, John had been willing to drop it.

God, he didn't even know what there was to talk about. Lance hadn't said anything about a relationship, and other than flirty comments and now a dirty picture that would be forever lodged in the erotic portion of John's brain, there wasn't anything to talk about, especially with Sloane.

Sloane took a deep breath. "John, I'm not going to say you are or aren't something, okay? I'm simply going to tell you that...if you are feeling a certain way, there's got to be a reason for it. Maybe you've been feeling it for a while, or maybe it's new, but don't run from it, man. You'll only end up tired and miserable."

John stared at Sloane's hand, not knowing what he was supposed to feel about its comforting presence. "It's not that easy."

"Of course it's not. It can be hard to make peace with something unfamiliar, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't."

John looked up in wonder. "What would you know about it?"

Sloane frowned but gave him a squeeze. "Look, I won't tell you to talk to me. I'm just saying you don't have to run from it, and you should get comfortable with yourself, whoever the hell you are, okay? And fuck, if you need to talk about it, you can."

"With you?" John asked incredulously.

Why would Sloane care? Was it because his best friend was gay, and Sloane couldn't help but show some sympathy? There was an odd light in Sloane's eyes, though, and John couldn't help but want to trust what Sloane was saying, even if he could still feel himself drawing away from the truth.

Sloane patted him, chuckling. "Yeah, man. You're an annoying shithead sometimes, but you're...not a bad guy."

John shook his head, unable to help his soft laugh. "Just annoying."

"Yeah."

"That's the closest to a compliment you've ever given me."

"Yeah, don't tell Trisha, though."

"She'd never believe me."

John pulled his phone away from his chest and stared at the message. It seemed almost silly, trying to run away from it when the facts were laid out before him, as bare as Lance's ass on his screen. The two of them had already been enjoying one another's company, and they only needed to take that one extra step to become something more.

Was it worth running away just because it didn't fit his original view of himself?

John fell into his chair, staring down at his phone. "I...thank you."

Sloane glanced sidelong at him, smirking. "Don't worry about it."

"And I...if I want to, I'll talk to you."

Sloane's eyes shifted to his phone, eyes going soft as he spoke. "Good."

A companionable silence spread between them as they sat. For the first time since working at the base, John felt like something good and friendly had passed between him and Sloane. Maybe the guy was a grumpy asshole, but there was a heart there and a pretty good one at that.

As John looked down at his messages again, he realized he was going to have to sort out his own heart, and soon.

LANCE



His phone sat on the coffee table, its blank screen and unblinking light feeling like an accusation. It had been hours since he'd heard from John, and the passage of time was beginning to eat at Lance's nerves.

After John had left Lance's house a few days before, their conversation had been perfectly normal. Lance had slipped in a few casual flirts, ramping it up now and then to gauge John's reaction, but the other man had reacted with interest, albeit a little hesitantly. Yet, since Lance had taken it a step further and chosen to add a picture into the mix, John had been uncharacteristically quiet. Not completely silent, but there were enough stretches between texts that Lance could see the writing on the wall.

In his attempts to be playful, and try to get John to be more comfortable with everything, he had stepped too far. Subtlety had never been his strong suit, and he'd pushed John beyond his comfort level. The longer the gap between texts, the more Lance chided himself for being too pushy.

"Should have waited," Lance muttered, staring at the phone.

Just like he should have waited before kissing another boy in his parent's house before he was an adult, instead, he'd let his own emotions and hormones get the better of him, and he was eventually unceremoniously dumped in his sister's lap. And maybe his sister was right; maybe he should have waited before deciding some of the other guys he'd dated weren't a good fit for him, jumping ship before learning whether he was right. And now, he'd impulsively gone too far with John, driving the man away before they could figure out if there was anything worth exploring between them.

His gut clenched when his phone lit up, and he snatched the device from the table. It was a message from Lacie, telling him she was parking and had a few things for him. His heart sank as he nodded, typing back that the door was unlocked. Normally, he'd be pleased to see his sister, but he didn't want her to see him wallowing in his misery and guilt.

A few minutes later, he heard a conversation outside his apartment door. He frowned, cocking his head as he heard Lacie's familiar voice talking with an unintelligible though distinctly male voice. Then, his door swung open, and Lacie stepped in with a bemused frown on her face.

"This belong to you?" Lacie asked, stepping in further and nodding toward the door.

Lance's heart skipped a beat as John stepped into view, looking sheepish. The two of them looked at one another, neither speaking.

"Uh, yeah. Hi, John," Lance said, realizing the silence was becoming awkward.

"Hi," John said, glancing at Lacie nervously.

Lacie raised a brow, setting a box down on one of Lance's chairs. "He was standing outside the door when I came up the stairs. Seemed a little lost."

John stared down at his feet, cheeks turning pink. "I wasn't lost."

"Oh, well, then he was standing there staring at your door the whole time I saw him because he thinks it's a really impressive door," Lacie said.

Lance frowned at her. "Lacie."

"This the guy you were talking about?" she asked.

"Lacie," Lance repeated, sensing an oncoming lecture or tirade.

She rolled her eyes. "Fine, fine. I'll be good. There's your stuff. Try not to leave so much at my house the next time you're over."

"Love you," Lance told her as she made for the door.

"Love you too," she said, closing the door behind her.

John waited before finally clearing his throat. "Sorry, didn't mean to interrupt."

"It's fine. I see her often enough. She was on this side of town and decided to drop stuff off, so no loss on her end," Lance told him.

"That your sister?"

"Yeah, that's Lacie. Pain in the ass, huh?" Lance asked with a laugh.

"She seemed okay, and she didn't give me too hard a time out there."

Lance cocked his head. "How long were you standing out there?"

"Long enough that I don't want to admit it."

Lance watched him for a little while longer, unsure what to say. Normally, he would have invited John to sit down and make himself comfortable. He wasn't exactly sure why John was at his apartment, though he had a sneaking feeling he wouldn't like the conversation. After John had essentially pulled away from Lance, there could only be one conclusion.

John looked around, and his eyes settled on the couch. "Can I sit?"

Lance scooted over, making plenty of room. "Sure."

John did so, moving carefully as though the couch were made of paper and thin glass. Once seated, John clasped his hands in his lap and stared at them. To Lance, it looked as though he was gearing up for what he'd come to say but was trying to summon the courage.

Lance smiled as best he could. "It's okay, John."

John looked up, confused. "What?"

Lance resisted the urge to lay a comforting hand on the man's arm. "I know why you're here. It's okay."

"Uh, you do?"

Lance sighed. "Look, I know things have been awkward for you, and you've been unsure. All of this came at you quickly, and I wasn't helping. I did notice how quiet you went after the picture thing, and I realize I went too far, and I'm sorry about that. But it's okay. I understand that you feel as though you have to back off."

John's eyes widened. "Wait, no, that's not...you thought I was here to say I wasn't going to talk to you anymore?"

"Is that not why you're here?"

"No!"

Lance sat back, completely lost. "Okay, so why are you here if not because I freaked you out?"

John shook his head. "Haven't even got started on what I want to say, and I've already managed to screw it up. How's that for talent?"

Lance frowned, finally giving in and taking hold of John's wrist. "Hey, don't do that to yourself. I assumed and ended up making an ass out of at least me, so tell me why you're here."

"I wasn't here to, like, abandon you or whatever you were thinking. I'm sorry I went really quiet after the picture. A guy I work with at the guardhouse saw it before I did, and it freaked me out a bit," John explained.

Lance's eyes widened. "Wait. What?"

John chuckled. "Yeah, you remember the grumpy guy I told you about? The one who doesn't like me very much?"

Lance nodded, remembering him coming up in their drunken conversation. "I remember."

"Well, he's the one who accidentally found it. I wasn't ready for anyone to know what was going on in my life. Not about that anyway. Wait, is that a shitty thing to say?" John asked, looking up worriedly.

Lance laughed. "No, I don't think it is. Like I said before, you've had a lot thrown at you, and it makes sense that you've been confused. Not everyone is like me and rolls with their feelings, and I should have remembered that."

John turned his arm around to take hold of Lance's hand and squeeze it. "Let's get that straightened out real quick. You didn't make me feel like I was being pushed too far or that you crossed a line. The only thing being pushed was the front of my pants when I saw that picture."

Lance let out a laugh. "You have such a way with words."

"I mean, you were trying to turn me on with it, right?"

"Definitely."

"Mission accomplished."

That gave Lance a bubbly, happy feeling in his gut, but not nearly as much as the realization that John wasn't there to end it all and flee for the nearest hills. It gave him hope that maybe he hadn't screwed it all up, and there might be a chance for him and John.

"Okay, so you got that...straightened out," Lance said with a grin.

John snorted. "That's a cute pun, but I'm serious here."

"I'll be serious."

John nodded, taking a deep breath. "I never considered myself to be into guys. I mean, there were moments when I felt drawn to guys more than I guess would have been normal for a straight guy. But, other than getting a surprise

kiss before leaving for Basic, I'd never done anything with a guy that felt...good."

"Makes sense. Sounds like you're into women too, and if you didn't have too many opportunities with guys before, I imagine the women side of things took over," Lance said.

"That's...yeah, sounds about right, hell, it feels right. I never had any guy I was into like that, never had a chance."

Lance hesitated before finally summoning the courage to ask. "And now?"

John looked up, smiling shyly. "A really cute guy hit on me, and it threw me for a loop."

"Threw, but not throws?" Lance asked as his heart began to race.

John chuckled. "It's...still going to take some getting used to. I won't pretend it's all perfect and ready to go. But funnily enough, that guy from work I was telling you about, Sloane? He was really cool about the picture and even gave me something to think about."

"Good things?" Lance asked.

"Well, combined with seeing that picture and how...strongly it affected me, I kind of had no choice but to think, you know?"

"So, the picture *was* part of the reason you went quiet."

"Yes, but not in a bad way."

"Still, probably should have held off on the whole, hey, here's my naked body thing, though."

John reached out, cupping Lance's face. "I'm telling you the picture, along with Sloane talking to me, knocked me out of whatever weird thought process I was stuck in."

Lance wanted to joke about his body being so good it could create revelations, but he kept his lips clamped shut. John was obviously going through something he needed to talk through, and the last thing he needed was for Lance to keep cracking jokes.

"Alright, talk to me then," Lance said.

John squeezed Lance's fingers gently. "I realized I was so worried about whether or not it made sense compared to the rest of my life that I wasn't paying attention to what I was feeling right now. Weird as it might sound, that picture you sent me made it ridiculously obvious what I've been feeling, and Sloane's talk made me realize I was putting stuff off for no good reason."

"Being unsure is a pretty good reason not to act. I'm not very good at that, but I can understand other people hesitating," Lance said gently.

"Maybe, but at the end of the day, it made me avoid something sitting right in front of me, and I wanted it. I wanted you."

Lance leaned into John's touch, smiling. "Yeah?"

John chuckled. "I mean, don't get me wrong, that, uh, blowjob was the best I've ever had. And that picture got my attention in the best way possible. But if it was just that, I might have been able to ignore it. Once I was knocked out of my head for a second, I realized I was also avoiding that I like being around you, I like your company, and I want to keep being around you. And stuff like this? Touching you, talking to you, and seeing that happy smile on your face? That's what I want."

"Are you sure? I mean, like you said, it's a lot to take in," Lance asked, unable to help his nerves as they jumped and jerked.

John smiled, leaning in and pulling Lance closer. Lance came willingly, unable to keep the smile from his face as John's lips pressed against his. Warmth bubbled in his gut as John's hand slid around his neck. Grunting in surprise, he found himself pulled forward into John's lap, where he rested as their kiss deepened.

Lance's body brimmed with arousal as he settled on

John's legs, making himself comfortable. Strong arms wrapped around Lance's back and waist as John held him in place, his touches bolder and more sure of himself.

John broke the kiss, pressing their foreheads together gently. "I'm sure."

Lance chuckled shakily. "Alright, you win the best kisser award, happy?"

John's hand slid from his waist and over Lance's ass, squeezing it. "Would this be a bad time to ask if I can see that picture again, but you know, in person?"

Lance smirked. "Are you asking if you can see me naked?"

"I'm asking if you'll take me to bed."

That Lance could do.

JOHN



As Lance led him down the hallway, John could only remember his heart pounding so hard when he'd been put through his paces in Basic. Then again, those moments had ended with him puking or wanting to pass out, while watching Lance walk in front of him as they neared the bedroom left him only nervous and eager.

Entering the bedroom, Lance spun around, taking hold of the bottom of John's shirt and tugging it up. To John's amusement, he had to finish the job, taking hold of his shirt and tugging it over his head when Lance was too short to do it. Not to be outdone, John did the same with Lance, revealing his smaller, toned body in the light seeping through the windows.

John reached out, running his hands over Lance's shoulders and moving further down. It was a little strange, feeling nothing but flat skin with muscle beneath it as he stroked Lance's bare chest. Yet when Lance looked up at him, eyes eager, his bottom lip between his teeth, the strangeness washed away.

"You okay?" Lance asked.

John grinned, wrapping his hands around Lance's waist and hefting him up. Lance gave a startled yelp, which turned into a full-on shocked cry as John moved him over to the bed and tossed him onto the covers. Looking down at Lance's prone body and startled expression, he realized he could quickly get used to the sight.

Kneeling at the end of the bed, John leaned forward and gently kissed the top of Lance's exposed stomach just below his nipples. Running a line of kisses over the flat, hard surface, John felt his body react. His pulse increased as he raised a hand to take hold of Lance's zipper, his stomach twisting as he pulled Lance's pants open, revealing a brightly colored pouch.

John stopped, looking up at Lance. "Are you wearing a jockstrap?"

Lance blinked down at him innocently. "What? They're comfy."

"And the fact that they probably show your ass off really well?" John asked.

"Merely a coincidental benefit."

"Uh-huh."

"And how would you know they show off an ass well?"

"Because I'm bi apparently, surprise."

Lance laughed, and John took the opportunity to pull his jeans off. Sure enough, all Lance was left wearing was the straining pouch where his cock sat, with the bands around his waist and backs of his thighs.

John ran his hand over Lance's exposed flesh, fingers caressing the pouch that jutted forward. As his fingertips brushed Lance's straining, hard cock, the smaller man sucked in a breath, hips jutting forward. Lance's leg hair was fine, and John took a moment, feeling the muscles in his legs, appreciating their warmth.

Not wanting simply to touch, he leaned forward, pressing

his face between the pouch and Lance's thigh. Pressing his lips to the sensitive skin, he kissed, running his tongue upward.

"Oh shit," Lance moaned.

Opening his mouth once more, John clamped his lips over the spot where Lance's leg met his hips, sucking gently. The reaction was immediate, Lance's hips pushing upward, his fingers curling into a fierce grip against the bed cover. John had an ex whose sensitive spot had been right there, and he was pleased to find it also worked on Lance.

Running on instinct rather than his swirling thoughts, he nudged the fabric covering Lance's cock aside. Male nudity wasn't new to John, who was pretty used to it after a short run with his high school baseball team and his time in the military. But the sight of Lance's naked body, cock jutting into the air eagerly, had Lance's mouth going dry and his heart pumping harder.

Taking hold of Lance's cock in one hand, he gave it a few experimental pumps. It was smooth but warm, pulsing with every beat of Lance's heart. Rather than feeling strange, John's body tingled with excitement as he moved over the top of it.

Lance watched him with wide eyes as John gave the tip a lick, sliding his tongue from the underside of the head and over the top. The taste wasn't bad, and part of him shivered at the thought that he was tasting Lance. Closing his mouth over the tip, he nursed gently, attempting to reenact what others had done for him.

With a slight arch of his spine, Lance pushed up into John's mouth, sliding the head of his cock past his lips and over his tongue. The cock pulsed once more, this time in John's mouth as he ran his tongue along the underside. The taste of Lance spread over his tongue as his cock inched

deeper, hitting the back and immediately making his throat seize.

John pulled back with a cough. "Shit, sorry."

Lance smiled, running his hands up John's arms. "Gag reflexes are a bitch."

"You didn't have any trouble," John noted.

Lance chuckled. "Practice. You're always free to practice on me, though."

"Give me pointers, huh?"

Lance grinned. "You bet."

"Alright, what sort of pointers would you have for me when it comes to...getting ready?" John asked with a glance down.

Lance opened his mouth, then closed it as he followed John's eyes down to his lower body. Realization flashed in his eyes, which then widened in surprise. John wasn't sure if Lance was ready to go all the way, but John told himself that if he was going to do this, he was going full tilt, or he might as well not bother.

Lance rolled to one side, opening a drawer in the bedside table and bringing out a bottle and a packet containing a condom. John took them, setting the condom beside him and looking at Lance.

Holding up his hand, Lance wiggled his fingers. "Lube and fingers."

John appreciated that Lance didn't need to explain anything more than that, trusting that he had at least enough cursory knowledge to know how to use his hands. The principle had to be about the same, John figured, and he opened the bottle of lube and coated his hand, letting the fluid warm up.

Lance grinned, raising one leg to roll onto his stomach. John's movements stopped as he looked at Lance's body laid out before him perfectly. The bare expanse of Lance's back

and the curve of his ass were so much better in person, with just the little touch of Lance's jockstrap to frame the picture in John's mind.

Reaching down, John brushed the ring of muscle of Lance's ass. Pressing forward, he sucked in a breath as the single digit eased in, engulfed by sudden warmth. He supposed one finger wasn't that big a deal to Lance, though he watched Lance's body carefully for any signs of unease as he pushed his finger in completely.

Lance wriggled, letting out a soft hum. "Gonna need more than one."

John chuckled, having figured that out on his own but still appreciating the gesture on Lance's part. Pulling his finger back, John added a second. This time, the resistance was more pronounced, as Lance's muscles were forced to stretch further from the intrusion.

Moving carefully, John let Lance adjust, ensuring he didn't go too fast or hard as he slid the two fingers in. When he was sure the man was ready, he added another, biting his bottom lip as he felt the intense heat and pressure build around his fingers.

Lance pressed his head against the mattress, pushing his ass toward John. "Okay, that's enough."

John froze. "Am I doing it wrong?"

"No, but if you're going to fuck me, do it," Lance panted.

John took a moment to let that statement sink in before he snapped into action. Pulling his fingers free, he grabbed the condom and lube and got to work. Rolling the condom over his aching cock, John positioned himself over Lance, pressing the head of his cock where his fingers had been.

Wiggling his hips, Lance pushed back, almost making John breach him. Taking the hint, John moved forward, feeling only momentary resistance before he pushed past the ring of muscle. A low moan fell from his lips as the intense

heat and pressure squeezed his cock, feeling as though it were drawing him inward.

John sank forward, draping himself over Lance's body as he inched his way in. Below him, Lance gave a desperate whine, which morphed into a low groan of what John was sure was pleasure. It felt as though it took no time at all, and yet forever, but eventually, he watched as the last inch of him sank into Lance, sheathing him completely.

Lance moaned again, straining to kiss John's arm as it bent around him. "Oh God, you feel really good."

It was a sentiment John wanted to share with Lance, but he focused on keeping calm. He hadn't realized how good it would feel to be inside Lance or how much the noises Lance made would send a pang of need through him. He wanted to move, to drive himself into Lance again, just to hear the man cry out and moan.

"You okay?" John asked, voice quivering.

"I will be when you move," Lance chuckled.

It was all he needed to pull his hips back and sink into Lance again. Propping himself up, he worked his hips back and forth, watching as his cock disappeared into the tight heat. He couldn't say what was more erotic, watching as he fucked Lance, watching Lance's body writhe with each downward thrust, or the sounds dripping from Lance's lips.

He had nearly let this amazing experience slip past him.

Shoving the thought aside and focusing on the moment at hand, John bent forward, placing gentle kisses on Lance's shoulders as he thrust down into him. Lance arched up, turning his head around to catch John's lips as he moaned his name. Claiming Lance's mouth with his own, pleasure rang through him as Lance's moans echoed in his ears with each thrust.

Knowing he was getting close but wanting Lance to get there first, John pulled free. Before Lance could do more

than moan in protest, John flipped him and picked him up. Sitting down on the bed, John brought Lance over his lap. Sensing what he was trying to do, Lance steadied himself with his legs, positioning his hole over John's straining cock before easing down.

As Lance sheathed John's cock inside him, John wrapped his fingers around Lance's straining length. Lance let out a low cry, allowing his body to fall the last few inches, impaling himself. With John's hand wrapped around his cock, Lance lifted and fell with a constant, if erratic rhythm.

And then, with a final fall, Lance took all of John inside him, his cock pulsing in John's hand. Warmth splattered over their bodies as Lance cried out, forced to cling to John as his body was wracked with pleasure. John let forth a strangled gasp as Lance's body bore down around him, squeezing him and tipping him over the final hurdle and into his orgasm.

Pleasure cascaded through him, filling his body and mind as he held Lance close, refusing to let him go. The seconds ticked by, and eventually, he found he could move again, even as Lance went limp in his arms.

Moving carefully, he eased Lance up so his cock was slowly pulled free. With that done, he helped lay the man on his side, letting Lance pant and sigh as he got up from the bed. Legs wobbling, John made his way to the bathroom so he could remove the condom and wipe himself with a cloth.

Once done, he washed the rag, ran it under warm water, and wrung it out before returning to the bedroom. He stopped in the doorway, unable to help but laugh a little as he looked at Lance.

Dead asleep.

"Go me, I guess," John said, chuckling as he made his way to the bed to finish his self-appointed task of cleaning Lance off.

They could talk later.

* * *

IT TOOK Lance over an hour to finally stir from his slumber. While he'd slept, John had positioned himself next to the man, letting a sleeping Lance wrap his arms around John's waist and lay his head on his chest. Content to lie there for as long as Lance needed, John had retrieved his phone and read quietly, stroking Lance's hair gently.

Lance peered up at him, eyes foggy and dazed. "Oh, hey, you're here."

John frowned down at him. "Didn't think I would be?"

"I meant it to sound happy," Lance said, nuzzling into John's chest.

"Sounded more confused," John said with a laugh.

Lance kissed his side, smiling. "I didn't mean to. Sorry, I fell asleep."

"I took it as a compliment."

"Good because it was. Getting rid of your gag reflex might take some practice, but the rest of it sure doesn't. God."

John chuckled, wrapping an arm around Lance's shoulders and pulling him closer. It was funny how the gesture might have once felt weird, cuddling up to a guy like that. Yet, the more things he did with Lance, the more he realized there was nothing but pleasure there.

Lance looked up, squinting. "You're thinking."

"I was, for a second, sorry."

"What were you thinking?"

"Mmm, that you were right. I can like both, and it's okay."

"Well, duh."

John laughed. "And I want to take you out for dinner."

Lance's face brightened. "Are you asking me out on a date?"

"Well, we've already had sex, twice, technically. Seems only right to wine and dine you afterward."

"I think it's supposed to be the other way around."

"True, but I blame you for that."

Lance opened his mouth, then snorted. "Alright, fair."

"I know a really good Italian place on the other side of town," John offered.

Lance's eyes widened. "Reggio's?"

He'd forgotten that Lance probably knew every food place in the entire town, or at least the ones worth going to.

"That'd be the one."

"Hell, even if you weren't devilishly handsome, funny, sweet, and damned good in bed, I'd say yes to that. Having all that *plus* Reggio's is a freaking bonus."

"So, it's a date?" John asked.

Lance grinned wide. "A date."

John pulled Lance up, kissing him, telling himself it was a good start.

EPILOGUE



Six Months Later

John twirled his keys as he closed his car door behind him, humming mindlessly as he walked along the sidewalk. The sun was bright overhead, with barely a cloud in sight. He would give Lance credit; the man knew how to pick a day to go to the beach.

Halfway up the stairs, he heard the door to the apartment building open below and saw Lacie heading his way.

She stopped at the bottom of the stairs, smirking. "Coming to lurk?"

"Are you planning on ever letting that go?" John asked.

"Lance once forced me to take his computer to a repair shop after he got a nasty virus on it. And I had to look like a pervert because of all that gay porn, and he still hasn't lived that down. You don't have a chance," Lacie said as she jogged up to meet him on the landing.

"Well, it was worth a shot," John sighed.

"Lance told me you were out of town," Lacie said as she fished for her keys to Lance's apartment.

"I was visiting my family."

"Oh? How was it?"

John chuckled. "A little awkward. They're still getting used to the idea that I'm dating a guy."

The door swung wide open, revealing a grinning Lance. "An adorable guy."

John bent down, kissing Lance hello. "An exceptionally adorable guy."

Lacie raised a brow. "For two people who haven't seen one another for over a week, that was a pretty mild reunion, completely unlike the Lance I know."

"Maybe I've calmed down now I have a boyfriend?" Lance offered.

John chuckled. "I stayed over last night when I got into town."

Lance huffed. "You could have at least made her doubt herself for a minute."

"Fat chance," Lacie said as she stepped into the apartment.

Lance looked John over. "Sunscreen?"

John held the bottle up, wiggling it. "Fresh from the shelves. We are now safe from the tyranny of the sun."

Lance hummed. "Your mom called."

John stopped, turning to look at him. "Excuse me?"

"You really have to put a password on your phone, babe. That's the only way she could have got my number."

He was not worried about his mother calling Lance. She'd been the first to take the news about him and Lance in her stride. His brothers had mixed reactions, though he knew they'd be alright. Meanwhile, his dad was still trying to understand how John could be dating a guy but not be gay. John figured it was better to give his dad time to process it on his own before he threw anything more at him.

"And?" John asked.

"She wanted to talk, to get to know the person her son was dating. She said six months was pretty serious in her book, and then she told me not to break your heart or take any of your shit," Lance said.

"That...yeah, that sounds right," John laughed.

Lacie appeared with a basket full of supplies and an arm full of towels. "I think I like your mom."

"Something tells me Lance is going to be meeting her soon," John said, taking the basket from her.

And maybe one day, he could take Lance with him to visit his family back home, to see where John grew up. The past six months had been the best of John's life, and he looked forward to what the future brought them. And who knew, with enough time, they might even settle down together, wedding rings on one another's hands.

Lance appeared with a small cooler, taking John's with his other. "I think we're all set."

"Yeah, we're ready," John said, squeezing Lance's hand as they walked out the door.

AUTHOR NOTES

Dear reader,

Thank you for reading this story. I hope you enjoyed it. This is just the start of the journey for the hot men of Fort Dale. All books can be read as a standalone.

If you enjoyed reading about John and his new-found love, Lance, then check out the next book: Dean's & Sloane's story "I'm Straight, Right" after one slightly drunken night, will Dean and Sloane ever be able to get back to what they'd been, or has everything between them changed forever? Can a best friend become a lover without throwing away years of friendship? Click here to find out!

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I can't wait to see you there...

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Romeo

