What Makes A Home

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Summary

Duke Crocker is a ghost, haunting his old home. Nathan Wuornos is the realtor tasked with selling it. Many have tried, and Duke doesn't expect a challenge - but then he didn't expect a realtor this damn stubborn - or one who can see him.

Notes

The original idea came from this prompt and grew into this hugely long fic that has kept us amused for nearly three months :)

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Chapter 1

Being dead sucked, Duke thought as he glided through the wall between the lounge and the kitchen. Not only could he not touch anything, he couldn't communicate, no one could see him and, worst of all, he couldn't drink. So much for the idea of the perfect eternal afterlife, he snorted (or would have, if he'd had any breath to snort with). This was more like hell. Which, thinking about it, was probably more appropriate for someone like him. Why wouldn't his death be even more fucked up than his life had been?

He'd lost all sense of time since he died (kinda difficult to keep track without so much as a newspaper), but judging by the buildup of dust and cobwebs, not to mention the leaking roof and peeling wallpaper, he thought it must have been years. It was almost a shock when the first realtor arrived, but then, with no living relatives, it had probably taken a while to sort out his estate. He hated the idea of his house - his *home*, that he had spent so long lovingly restoring - being sold, but there was nothing he could do about it. Nothing, that was, except lurk in corners and glare menacingly at potential buyers. He thought it must have been working (or maybe it was just the general creepy vibe the house had now), because so far no one had bought the place and the last realtor had thrown their hands up in disgust and walked out, never to return.

So the house stayed empty for another few months, until the next damned realtor arrived.

The damned realtor who was kinda hot and always seemed to look in Duke's general direction as though he could sense that he was there. Yeah, *that* damned realtor. Duke had overheard him introduce himself to someone and knew his name was Nathan Wuornos; but he would always think of him as That Damned Realtor.

As though thinking about him had summoned his presence, the front door opened and Duke floated through the wall to glare at Nathan.

Nathan stepped through the front door and looked around at the now familiar house. Creepy as always (concentrated particularly in a spot in the front hall today, it seemed) but Nathan had always put that down to the state of disrepair. He'd tried selling the house as a cheap bargain for someone looking to flip it and make a handsome profit, but that hadn't panned out and his boss at the agency was breathing down his neck, so it was time to change tactics. Some repairs and redecorating would soon have it looking like new, and hopefully that would banish the creepy feeling.

Duke stuck with his usual tactic of glowering and trying to send out an unwelcoming vibe but it didn't seem to work on Nathan. In fact, he looked more... strangely fascinated than creeped out and that was creeping *Duke* out. He was just starting to ponder why that might be when he noticed that Nathan was carrying something. Papers. More specifically, paint charts. And that was very Not Okay.

"Okay, let's see what we're gonna need to do here," Nathan mused aloud. He'd gotten into the habit of talking to himself when he was alone. "Gonna need a lot of work but I think we can make this a whole new place."

"Okay, let's see what we're gonna need to do here," Nathan mused aloud. He'd gotten into the habit of talking to himself when he was alone. "Gonna need a lot of work but I think we can make this a whole new place."

A whole new place?! Duke bristled at Nathan's words. Sure, the place needed a good clean and a ton of repairs, but making it new again? No. Just no. It was an old house and deserved more respect than that. And what even was up with Nathan and the whole talking to himself thing? Signs of madness and all that. Duke wished he'd just give up on the place already and leave him in peace, but it didn't look like that was happening any time soon. He dimly contemplated the idea of learning how to ghost properly. With flickering lights and slamming doors and stuff. Maybe that
would get rid of him. He experimentally shoved at the door, knowing it was pointless to even try but needing to do something. As usual, his hand slipped straight through the wood and he swore in frustration.

Nathan looked up from his papers, glancing around the empty house. Nothing stirred but the motes of dust he'd disturbed, dancing in the shafts of golden morning sun coming through the windows. Funny, he could have sworn he'd heard something. He shook his head and got back to work. "Okay, so obviously the roof will need repairs, the carpet and wallpaper will have to go, might have to strip some floorboards and knock out drywall..."

Interesting, Duke thought. Nathan had definitely reacted as though he'd heard something. He didn't have long to think about what that possibility meant before Nathan started talking about remodelling and Duke lost his temper. Ok, so Nathan probably had a point - the roof was in definite need of repair, and some of the carpets had fallen victim to the damp - but the rest? No. Everything else just needed a good clean. When Nathan mentioned knocking out drywall, Duke swore again, more loudly than before, and perhaps it was his imagination but he thought the lights might have flickered as he shouted. Just once. Maybe.

Nathan looked up sharply, frowning. "Apparently we're gonna need to strip all the electrical wiring, god knows how old that is. Probably have to replace all the light fixtures too, can't have any fire hazards."

Duke enthusiastically agreed with that idea. If he was being completely honest, the electrics had needed attention before he'd died so they were probably in a dire state by now. "Yes!" He said, nodding his head, knowing it was pointless but needing to try to communicate anyway. This was the closest thing he'd had to a conversation for a very long time and he wasn't about to pass up the opportunity even if Nathan couldn't see or hear his responses.

"You know what, I bet if the electricity needs replacing, the plumbing does too," Nathan sighed. "This is gonna get damn expensive, I hope I can make any kind of commission on this at all."

He probably had a point about the plumbing, too, Duke thought. And the cost of it all. He might not want anyone else living in his house but he didn't much like the thought of it falling from it's current state of disrepair into dereliction either. At least Nathan was trying to stop that happening even if he did have ideas about turning it into a whole new place. At least he seemed to care. Duke let out a groan as he realised the only option he had was to go along with Nathan's plans and try to learn some ghostly tricks to put a stop to some of his more ambitious ideas.

Nathan was rubbing a hand over his face. "The siding, oh god, the roof was going to be bad enough...and the windows and screens should be looked at, the interior doors are scratched up, that bathroom cabinet is ugly as hell, I don't like the way the kitchen counter’s warping, those damn ancient appliances are a menace, and whoever the hell painted the bathroom and kitchen didn't know what the fuck they were doing," he said irritably.

Duke took in the look of despair on Nathan's face and almost felt sorry for him. Almost. Until Nathan mentioned the painting. "I fucking painted the bathroom and the kitchen," he tried to shout, realising as he did so that the lights flickered again, more distinctly this time. "And I chose the bathroom cabinet. There's nothing wrong with any of it and this is my home. If you don't like it, get out!"

Nathan actually took a step back, eyes wide and hair rising on the back of his neck and along his arms. The vague sense of unease he'd felt before had nothing on the sudden hostility he felt now - and it surely couldn't be a coincidence the lights flickered just at that exact moment, could it?
Was it possible that Nathan could actually sense him? Duke wondered. He'd definitely reacted when Duke shouted, but maybe that was just the effect of the lights flickering, something which Duke was now sure was down to him. He floated closer towards Nathan and tried again. “Out!” He growled, as menacingly as he could.

Nathan shivered and took another step back. "Hey, uh, look," Nathan mumbled, feeling stupid. "I'm sorry, okay? I shouldn't have insulted this place."  *Please don't let me get murdered by ghosts…*

Ok, so Nathan could definitely sense him. Duke backed off, feeling a tiny bit guilty for spooking him and a whole lot pleased that someone had finally acknowledged his existence. Of all the dozens of people who'd been through this house since he'd died, Nathan was the first to ever react to him and that was...kinda validating. He floated back to his favourite corner, staying away from Nathan while he worked out what to do with this new information.

Nathan breathed a sigh of relief as the sense of intense hostility faded away. "Look," he continued, wondering what he was doing talking to an empty house. "I guess this place must really be special to you. I just want to help it. I want to make it beautiful again. I want to make it a home again. Will you let me do that?"

Delighted that not only was Nathan trying to talk to him, but he was also acknowledging how much the house meant to him, and how much it deserved to be a true home again, Duke happily floated closer again, focussing all of his thoughts on 'yes' and 'thank you'. The lights flickered again, more quickly now, glowing rather than dimming as they had before.

Maybe it was just Nathan's imagination, but the place felt a little more welcoming. He eyed the lights, wondering if that meant a yes. "I'm sorry I said mean things before. It hasn't been easy and I'm starting to worry I'll never sell it - or that I'll pour a ton of money into it and still sell it at a loss, meaning no commission, meaning I'll have spent weeks or even months fixing it up and won't even get paid, plus I'll be taking a loss on the repair costs - which could be huge." He rubbed a hand over his face tiredly. Telling all his troubles to a ghost - maybe he was hallucinating from stress.

Mollified by Nathan's apology, Duke started to see his point. The house wasn't saleable in its current condition, which would only worsen if it wasn't straightened out now. Nathan was clearly stressed and yet still prepared to put in the time and work to make it a home again, even if that meant him losing money on it. He floated calmly beside Nathan and tried to speak again. “It’s ok, I know it hasn't been easy and I'm sorry, that's probably partly my fault…” he trailed off, there was no point talking to someone who couldn't hear him.

Indeed Nathan didn't, but he felt a little less alone. "Is it okay if I start with the stuff that's structural repairs instead of…um...aesthetics?"

Focusing all of his energy on the lights, Duke concentrated on the word 'yes', hoping that would be enough to get the message across. He was rewarded by the lights glowing momentarily and he grinned as it occurred to him that he was actually communicating with someone for the first time in what felt like forever.

"So, uh….lights glowing is good, lights dimming is bad?" Nathan ventured.

Duke nodded enthusiastically and concentrated again. It was getting easier now and the lights glowed stronger this time

Nathan grinned. "Kinda like the whole 'one blink for yes, two blinks for no' thing, huh."
Summoning up all of his concentration, Duke tried to make the lights blink to indicate 'yes'. He was rewarded by a brief, strong, glow, so he tried making them dim twice to say 'no'. It might not be much, but at least it was a way he could communicate which made sense and that was A Very Good Thing.

Nathan grinned. "Hey, that's cool!"

Duke matched his grin and made the lights glow again. He thought he might actually get to like this damned realtor.

"So was that you making this place feel all creepy before? Were you trying to keep people out?"

Duke made the lights glow, paused, and made them glow again, answering yes to both questions.

"I guess people who just wanted to flip the place for a profit probably aren't the kind of people you wanted in your home, huh."

Relieved that Nathan finally got it, Duke made the lights glow again. Because that was the crux of it. He didn't really want anyone living here, it was his home and he wasn't ready to share it with anyone, but he thought he might have been able to tolerate someone who wanted it as a family home. Someone who was just chasing profit, no, they didn't deserve this house. It was worth more than that.

Nathan nodded. "Okay, I won't try to sell it as a fixer-upper anymore. I'll do my best to find some decent people. Is that okay?"

Grinning happily, Duke made the lights glow once more, brighter than ever.

Nathan sighed in relief. "Can I ask you questions?"

Curious about what Nathan might ask, Duke made the lights glow again.

"Are you the most recent owner of the house? Or are you someone else who died here earlier?"

Nathan might have asked yes/no questions but Duke couldn't answer both of them at once. He rolled his eyes and made the lights flicker crazily, still feeling pleased with himself that he could do this now and that it was getting easier each time.

Nathan looked puzzled for a moment, then sheepish. "Sorry, I'll try again. Are you the most recent owner?"

Duke smiled and made the lights glow again, answering yes.

Nathan thought back to the paperwork from the estate. "So....Duke Crocker?"

It was the first time he'd heard his name come from someone else's mouth for a long time. Years. Smiling sadly, Duke answered yes.


"Nice to meet you too," Duke tried to answer, even though he knew it was pointless. He tried to make the lights flicker cheerfully again instead.

They gave only a weak flicker. Nathan gave a rueful smile, misinterpreting the reason. "I guess I wouldn't be pleased to meet me either - the guy trying to sell off my home. For what it's worth, I
am sorry. I'd leave it empty if that were possible."

Duke shook his head emphatically. “No, it's not that,” he tried to say, groaning with frustration
when he remembered that Nathan wouldn't hear him. He settled for making the lights dim twice to
indicate no, hoping that would be enough to get his message across. Because more than anything,
he didn't want Nathan to get the wrong idea and stop talking to him.

"Yeah, no, it was never gonna happen, sorry," Nathan said, misinterpreting again. "The bank
wants it sold ASAP. If I can't make a sale, they'll have it torn down and just sell the land for
redevelopment."

Duke's shoulders sagged. He supposed he'd always known that might be a possibility but hadn't
wanted to consider that no one would be able to sell the house. Surely with some sprucing up,
someone would want to buy it? He made the lights glow brighter again, leaving them on for longer
this time and desperately wishing Nathan could hear him so he could offer encouragement. If
anyone could sell this place, he could.

Nathan watched the lights, confused again. Not a blink for yes, but….good? "Not sure what that
means," he admitted. "But I'll do my best."

Smiling, Duke made the lights flash for yes. He understood that Nathan would try his best and that
was all that mattered.

Nathan looked thoughtful. "You must know this place better than anyone. Is there anything you
can think of that needs fixing? That I didn't already mention, I mean."

Duke ran through all the things Nathan had listed and decided he seemed to have it all in hand. He
dimmed the lights twice for no.

"Okay. If you think of anything, you could lead me to it with the lights," Nathan grinned.

Actually, Duke thought, that was a genius idea. He made the lights glow for yes, and as an
experiment, moved into the kitchen and made the lights glow in there too.

Nathan followed the lights. "Something in here?"

Duke made them dim twice and then flicker crazily, wondering if Nathan would understand what
he meant.

"No, and…..whatever the heck wild flickering means?" Nathan ventured.

Duke laughed and sent the lights flickering again.

"I wonder if we could do an alphabet," Nathan mused. "Something like Morse code?"

That... actually made sense. At least then he could *tell* Nathan what he meant. He made the lights
glow once more.

"I….don't suppose you know Morse code already by any chance?" Nathan asked without much
hope.

Duke helpfully made the lights code out S.O.S., which was the only Morse code he knew. He
grinned wryly to himself as he thought it was actually pretty fucking appropriate. Save our souls.
And here he was, trapped in an eternal afterlife with no hope of redemption.
Nathan blinked. "I'm not sure if that means you need help or if it means you know Morse code or if it means that's the only Morse code you know."

Duke rolled his eyes and made the lights glow briefly twice, then longer on the third try as he attempted to say that Nathan's third option was the right one.

"So...yes, you need help, yes you know Morse code, but yes that's the only Morse code you know?" Nathan tried.

Duke tried again, dimming the lights twice and then making them glow strongly.

"Okay, let me try this. Do you need help?"

Duke dimmed the lights twice. No. Well, maybe, if he was being honest, but no, not right now.

"Good, that's good," Nathan nodded. "Do you know Morse code? Besides the SOS, I mean."

Twice for no again.

"Okay, well, I don't either, so we'll learn together, I guess. I'll get a book. Maybe I can paint it on the living room wall for a reference, that wallpaper's rotted and will have to come down anyhow."

Duke smiled and glided closer to Nathan, reaching out uselessly to place a hand on his shoulder to say thanks. He was touched that Nathan would do that, would go to that much effort to learn Morse code just to communicate with him. He didn't have a way to let him know how much it meant to him so he settled for making the lights glow brightly, almost blindingly, to show his agreement and appreciation.

Nathan jumped a little when Duke touched his shoulder, shivering, looking wide-eyed at the spot where Duke was. He wasn't sure what that meant, but he was reassured by the warm glow of the lights.

Noticing Nathan's reaction, Duke backed off quickly. "You felt that," he said uselessly. He wasn't sure what it was like being touched by a ghost but he was pretty damned sure it wasn't anything pleasant. But still...if Nathan could feel him, maybe he could have an effect on other things too. Maybe he'd been too ambitious trying to slam doors and throw furniture. His eyes lit on the pile of papers Nathan had left on the counter.

He floated over to them and tried to pick them up, casually, just the same way he'd put his hand on Nathan's shoulder, as though there was nothing to it. They didn't move. Not even a tiny bit. He tried again. Still nothing. He made an inarticulate noise of frustration - he'd really thought he was onto something - and shoved at them in disappointment.

He was as surprised as Nathan when the papers fluttered gently to the floor as if caught by a sudden breeze.

Nathan spun around, watching his papers scatter. "Did I do something to make you mad?" he asked worriedly.

Frowning, Duke quickly made the lights dim twice.

"That's good," Nathan looked relieved as he knelt to pick up the papers. "I should probably get to work on making some of these repairs happen."

Duke smiled and made the lights glow happily again, trying to show his appreciation.
Nathan smiled. "All right then, I'll be back tomorrow."

Duke made the lights flicker crazily, feeling stupidly excited that Nathan was coming back the next day. It was as though he'd made a new friend and he'd had precious few of those in his lifetime. Deathtime. Whatever.

Nathan headed for the door, pausing to look back over his shoulder to softly bid Duke farewell. The house didn't seem creepy anymore, but it did seem big and empty and quiet...and very lonely.

Duke watched Nathan go, making the lights glow once more as he left, then floated back to his favourite thinking corner. Learning new ghost tricks had been cool, even if he didn't know exactly how it had happened. Maybe it was linked to emotions, but then he'd been just as pissed off when he'd tried it before and he hadn't had any luck back then. Maybe it was Nathan. That made more sense. After all, Nathan was the only person who'd ever acknowledged him, let alone taken the time to communicate with him. Maybe that was the difference, the reason he could do things now.

It was exciting, really, being able to interact with someone for the first time in so long. In life, he'd always had a certain charm about him and he missed the easy, flirtatious, banter that used to be his speciality.

He still wasn't happy, exactly, about Nathan doing repairs to his house, but if he stopped at just the repairs then Duke thought he might be able to live (ha!) with it. And maybe now he was able to communicate a little bit, he could put a stop to any major works as well as offer an opinion on things like paint colours. That would make it a little more tolerable, anyway. If he was going to be stuck here for the rest of eternity, he was damned well going to make sure the walls were a colour he liked.

Nathan had said he'd try to find decent people, but what did that even mean? Decent people who'd rip out all of the original features and try to modernise it? Decent people who'd try to get him exorcised or whatever? Were the right people out there? Someone who didn't mind sharing their house with a ghost, who would keep the original features and tolerate the house’s little quirks. The creaky floorboard on the landing, the noisy pipes in winter, the living room door which didn't quite close. Could Nathan find those people? Duke didn't know if that was possible but at least Nathan was going to try and that made all the difference.

And Duke was feeling pretty pleased with his discovery that he could make the lights flicker and throw papers around. He decided to spend some time practicing and see if he could work up to tapping on the walls or slamming doors. Something creepier than lights and paper. Something frightening to chase away any buyers he didn't approve of. After all, the only thing he had left was time, he might as well use it for something meaningful. And it might be amusing too, he grinned to himself.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Nathan comes up with a way for Duke to communicate and their friendship develops...

When Nathan returned the next day, he had a plastic bag in one hand and a lunchbox in the other. "Hi, Duke," he called as he let himself in.

Grinning, happy that Nathan had come back, and had greeted him, Duke zoomed to the front door to meet him, making the lights glow brightly again, even as he stupidly said 'hi’ in return.

Nathan smiled. "So I had an idea. Even if I painted a cheat sheet on the wall, Morse code is slow even if you're fluent in it, never mind learning. But I saw something on a TV show that might be more helpful."

Intriguing, Duke thought, making the lights glow briefly to indicate his agreement about Morse code being slow. He excitedly wondered what Nathan had come up with, whether it was a better way of communicating than the lights system they'd used yesterday. More than anything, he was touched that Nathan was even trying to communicate with him.

Nathan pulled out a can of spray paint and painted an alphabet on the wall, along with a bunch of emoji-like faces depicting various moods and several simple words like you, me, and, the, etc. Then he pulled out a string of large-bulb Christmas lights, tacking them up along the wall so each bulb hung over a letter, symbol, or word.

Duke looked on doubtfully until Nathan pulled out the lights and plugged them in. He grinned happily. This would be easier than sticking to yes/no answers. He waited patiently while Nathan checked they were working.

"Well?" Nathan stood back with a smile. "What do you think?"

Concentrating hard, Duke lit up the light above the happy face before spelling out a short message. Slowly, painstakingly, determined not to make a mistake, he picked out the word 'YOU' followed by the letter R, a pause, then G-E-N-I-U-S. He grinned happily in Nathan's direction.

Nathan laughed, pleased and blushing at the praise. "Just glad I could come up with something. Lots better than being stuck with yes and no, huh?"


"Oh, that's laughter!" Nathan said. "I wondered what all that crazy flickering was."

Duke lit up the lights over the 'yes’ and the smiley face, finding it easier to concentrate on the right light each time he did it. He spelled out another short message - ‘nice to meet you too'.

Nathan smiled at the message - but the smile then faded. "Wish it could've been under better circumstances."
Duke frowned, lighting up the sad face and adding 'me too'. He paused and added 'thank you for this, means a lot', followed by the happy face again.

"I'm just glad I can help. And I'm sorry for trying to sell your home to those house-flippers. I didn't know you were here. I didn't know this place meant so much to you that you'd stayed."

'Not your fault,' Duke spelled out, faster now he was getting the hang of it. 'Sorry I scared you yesterday, didn't mean to.'

"Thanks. And I know I said it yesterday, but I'm sorry I said mean things about your home."

'I know,' Duke told him. 'You were pissed off and being a dick,' he smirked to himself and sent the lights crazy again.

Nathan was glad of the laughter, otherwise he'd have thought Duke was upset. "Yeah. My boss is giving me hell. He about hit the roof when I told him I wanted to do some work on this place."

'That's shit,' Duke answered. 'Can you still do the work?' He still wasn't keen on the idea, but if it helped find the right people to buy the house then it was the best thing to do.

"Some of it. He wanted me to just hide any damage - paint over water stains and mildew from the roof leak, claim the appliances are refurbished vintage, pretend like there's nothing wrong with the wiring," Nathan scowled.

Duke lit up the 'no' and growled in annoyance, slapping his hand on the wall with a loud bang (or so it seemed to him, anyway).

Nathan glanced around for the faint noise. "I agree. That's shady as hell, could get someone killed, even. I pointed out that there's plenty of stuff wrong there's just no way of hiding, a number of our agents have already failed to sell it as a flip house, and that our reputation - and more importantly to him, our bottom line - will take a hit if we try to pull off a scam."

'Good,' Duke answered even as he wondered if Nathan had heard something when he banged on the wall. 'Thanks. House deserves better. So does anyone buying it.'

'I'll try to find someone who'll appreciate it, I promise."

'Thank you. Know you'll do your best,' Duke answered.

"Hope I can find someone who loves this place as much as you do. And doesn't mind some non-corporeal company." Nathan looked around, his expression oddly wistful. "It has good bones, this place. Been left alone too long, but invest a little hard work and money and it'd be beautiful."

Duke nodded and lit up the 'yes', going on to add 'it was beautiful, wish you could have seen it.'

"Did you have photos anywhere online?" Nathan didn't add that any physical photos had doubtlessly been thrown away long ago. Duke Crocker had been dead for over a decade - seven years missing before he could be declared legally dead, more years with the estate tied up in probate trying to find a will or heirs. In the end, none had been found, and his property had been sold off to pay debts against the estate - the house was the last remaining possession. Anything without monetary value, such as family photos, would have gone in the garbage.

'MySpace account,' Duke answered. 'If it's still active.' He wasn't sure how long online accounts stayed open for once you stopped logging in. 'There's a box too.'
Nathan pulled out his phone. "What's the username? And what do you mean there's a box?"

Painstakingly, Duke spelled out his user name - captainduke69 - and watched while Nathan tapped it into his phone before explaining about the box. 'Under loose floorboard on landing. Bastards missed it when they cleaned the place out. Pics and stuff. Gun not loaded.' He was slightly hesitant about directing Nathan to it, given the fact there was a weapon in there, but there were photos of the house from when he bought it, through the renovation process, until it was finished. They might be useful and that was more important.

Nathan's eyes widened. "Gun?"

Duke rolled his eyes. Pretty much the response he'd expected. He quickly lit up the 'yes' and snarkily added 'would you prefer I hadn't warned you?'

"No," Nathan admitted, heading toward the stairs to retrieve the box, which he did gingerly. "I'll have to call the cops to come pick it up."

Duke couldn't answer while Nathan's back was turned so he waited until he came back before spelling out: 'Fine. What are they gonna do, throw me in jail?' He sent the lights flickering crazily.

Nathan chuckled a little. He dialed the local police department and explained the situation, listening to their response, and said 'Ok, I'll be here.' He hung up and told Duke, "They're sending someone out."

'Thanks. Sorry you had to find it.'

"Better me than the three year old kid of whatever family buys this place," Nathan said grimly.

'Stupid mistake,' Duke told him and fell silent, knowing he was right. Why had he even left it there? The only saving grace was that he'd left it unloaded.

Nathan shook his head, remembering something in the files about 'lost at sea'. "You couldn't have known."

'Pics any use?' Duke asked, neatly changing the subject away from the more painful topic of his death.

Nathan gingerly put the gun well to the side and started flipping through them. "You documented every inch of this place," he said, surprised.

Duke lit up 'yes' followed by the smiley face. The house had been his pride and joy, he'd spent every free minute restoring it to it's former glory and had taken photographs of every step, wanting to remember how far it had progressed.

"You put so much work into it," Nathan said softly. "Shame it ended up so neglected."

The light above the sad face glowed. 'Took years,' Duke told him. 'It was worse than this when I bought it.'

'Don't worry, we'll get it fixed up again," Nathan told him. "Your home was beautiful. It can be again."

'Thank you,' Duke spelled out. 'Appreciate it.' He paused, wanting to give Nathan a hug even though he knew he couldn't. He settled for adding another message. 'You're a good man.'
"Just trying to do the right thing. Without getting fired, preferably," he added sheepishly.

'Not getting fired would be a good thing,' Duke added a smiley face.

"As a general rule. In fact - " Nathan was cut off by a knock on the door. "That must be the police officer.

Cops were not Duke's favourite people while he was alive and he didn't think his opinion would have changed much now he was dead. Still, he didn't want to arouse any suspicions so he tried not to be too openly hostile in case the cop was like Nathan and picked up on it.

Nathan showed the officer in - a tall, slender, man who introduced himself as Officer Stan Bannerman - and watched while he checked the gun. The officer thanked him for doing his part to keep Haven safe, and left his business card in case Nathan found any more.

Duke watched the exchange, relieved that the cop didn't ask questions (not that it really mattered any more, it was just instinctive to him), feeling enough relief that he sent the lights flickering unintentionally.

They both looked up at that. "Wiring in these old houses," Nathan commented. "Gonna have to get it all checked out."

"See that you do," Stan said sternly. "Can't sell a fire hazard to some unsuspecting family."

"Absolutely," Nathan agreed quickly.

Duke retreated to a corner, staying out of the way, waiting until the cop had left before he spelled out 'sorry' with the lights. 'Didn't mean to do that.'

"That's okay, it worked out," Nathan said, seeming relieved to have the gun out of the house. "Any other hidden caches of stuff I should know about?"

'No,' Duke answered. 'Everything else was chucked out.'

"I'm sorry," Nathan said softly. "I wish there was something I could do."

'Thanks,' Duke replied, floating back to Nathan's side so he could peer over his shoulder and look at the old photos.

"Well, we can at least do our best to get this place refurbished like you had it," Nathan mused, flipping through the photos.

Duke lit up the smiley face again, happy that Nathan understood and acknowledged just how much the house meant to him. 'What can I do to help?' He offered, probably pointlessly, needing to anyway.

Nathan thought about that for a moment, grabbing his notes and looking through them. "You said that there wasn't anything in need of repairs besides what I'd already spotted, right?"

'Right,' Duke answered. Actually he'd been pretty impressed that Nathan had spotted everything that needed doing.

"That's really all I can think of for the help. But thanks for offering," Nathan said.

'Ok,' Duke answered, adding the smiley face again. 'You should eat that lunch,' he reminded, having glanced at Nathan's watch and realised how late it had gotten.
Nathan glanced at his watch and startled. "That late? Shit, I need to get moving."

'Lunch first,' Duke pointed out. 'Can’t work on an empty stomach.'

Nathan smiled a little. "Sure I can. Especially when I have a showing in fifteen minutes."

Duke rolled his eyes. 'If you say so,’ he spelled out. 'Not good for you though.’

"Course not. See you tomorrow." Nathan waved as he headed out, entirely forgetting the disputed lunch.

Noticing the abandoned lunchbox, Duke slammed his hand on the wall, hoping he could make enough noise to get Nathan's attention. For good measure, he sent the lights flickering crazily again.

Nathan did hear the noise and caught the flicker out of the corner of his eyes, but thought Duke was just laughing. And then he was out the door.

Duke rolled his eyes. He was really going to have to work on affecting physical objects. Making noise. Moving things around. Thinking back, he recalled that Nathan had seemed to hear him when he cursed yesterday, so maybe that was something to practice as well. Although he could only do that when Nathan was actually here to tell him whether he could hear it or not.

Not only would being able to move things be an advantage in frightening off unsuitable and unwanted buyers, but maybe he could actually be useful. He'd definitely heard of ghosts moving furniture around, slamming doors, hiding small items. Were they just stories though? Was it possible he could learn to, well, he didn't know what exactly, but even if he could just move equipment or toolboxes or whatever, that would be helpful.

With nothing else to do until Nathan came back the next day, he spent some time practicing - swearing and shouting at each frustrating failure - and altogether too much time thinking about his death and the awfulness of his house being cleared out. Too many memories had been brought up today and he abandoned his attempts at moving things, deciding instead to float around near the ceiling while wishing he could drink himself into oblivion.

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By the time Nathan came back the next day, Duke was in a much better frame of mind and had spent some more time trying to move things around. He zoomed excitedly to the front door to greet Nathan as he came in.

Nathan called a greeting as he walked in, feeling what seemed like a chill breeze. Duke, he presumed. He immediately went into the living room so they could talk.

'Hi,’ Duke spelled, adding the smiley face. Concentrating hard, he shoved Nathan's abandoned lunchbox with all of his might. He was rewarded when it slid a couple of inches across the counter towards Nathan. Feeling pretty damn pleased with himself, he grinned and spelled out another message. 'You forgot this yesterday.’

Nathan looked sheepish. "Yeah, was hungry all afternoon. Cool that you can move it, though. How come you never did any of this stuff before?"

'You need to take better care of yourself,’ Duke reminded him. 'Couldn’t do any of this stuff before. Learning.’
"That's good," Nathan smiled. "Maybe one day I'll be able to see and hear you."

Taking the ghost equivalent of a deep breath, Duke tried to shout like he had before (except he tried to shout 'hi' rather than 'fuck', thinking that might be a more appropriate greeting if Nathan could hear him). 'Did you hear that?' He used the lights to ask.

"Maybe? Try it again?" Nathan frowned, concentrating hard.

Duke tried again, using every ounce of his concentration, every last bit of non-breath that he had to shout.

'I heard….something. Really faint and far off. Couldn't make out any words." It might not have even been Duke - it could just have easily been any old house noise or a far-off voice carrying faintly from outside.

'I'll keep practicing,' Duke told him. Something was better than nothing, after all.

"You'll get there," Nathan said encouragingly. "Look how much you've already learned."

'Yes,' Duke added the smiley face and made the lights twinkle.

"You know, Duke, in order to get this place fixed up, I'll have to bring in a lot of people. I can't do these repairs myself. Will you be okay with that?"

Duke thought for a moment. 'As long as they're acting under your instructions, and they're not rude about the place, yes.'

"We've got some reputable people we work with. They'll do the jobs we hire them to do."

'Ok,' Duke replied, pausing and adding 'I trust your judgement.'

"Thanks. I know that means a lot," Nathan smiled. He'd brought a folding chair this time, and opened it in the living room to take a seat.

Duke smiled. 'Quiet day today?' He asked, pleased that Nathan seemed to be staying for a bit, glad of the company after so long on his own.

"Mostly calls to make. Gotta get roofers, electricians, plumbers, general contractors…might get an appliance repairman to see if the appliances are worth saving."

'They're not,' Duke told him, knowing the appliances hadn't been in great condition before he’d died. They'd be past saving by now. 'Roof first.'

"Thanks," Nathan looked relieved. "I don't plan to skimp but I can't afford to waste, either. Every dime for the restoration is going to be like pulling teeth."

Duke nodded thoughtfully. 'Understand. Know you'll do what you can.' He also knew how frustrating it was going to be watching the work happening when all he wanted to do was fix things himself.

"I'll do my best. But you're right, roof first. No one's going to buy a house with a leaky roof, a new roof is way too expensive."

'Exactly. And nothing else will get damp damage once that's done.’

Nathan nodded, opening a notebook of professional contacts. "We'll have enough work to do with
what's already been damaged from that leak."

Duke nodded back before lighting up the ‘yes’. 'Storm damage two years ago. Nothing I could do,’ he explained.

Nathan nodded. "Not surprising. A lot of people can't afford that kind of repair work."

Duke laughed and made the lights flicker. 'I meant I couldn't do anything about it on account of being, you know, dead.’

"....Oh," Nathan looked sheepish. He'd known, intellectually, that Duke had been dead a long time, but it was hard to think of it that way when Nathan was talking to him, even through a medium of Christmas lights.

'So who are you, Nathan?' Duke asked, changing the subject. 'When you're not trying to sell houses and talking to empty rooms.' He thought he might as well get to know the damned realtor given the fact he was apparently going to be spending a lot of time in Duke's house for the foreseeable future.

"My job basically is my life. Get up, drive around all day to showings and houses, some time at the office for paperwork and stuff, grab a bite, go home, sleep, lather rinse repeat."


"No pets, not the way I'm gone all day every day. No family really - my father and I are estranged, haven't spoken in years, and Mom died when I was a kid. Friends and romance, I don't have time and I suck at both anyhow."

Duke placed what was supposed to be a comforting hand on his shoulder. 'Sorry. Must be rough.'

Nathan looked over his shoulder, only shivering a little. It wasn't so bad once you got used to it. "Well. It's my life," he shrugged.

'Can you feel that?' Duke checked, still unsure whether Nathan could feel him or just something.

"Yeah. It's cold. It's you touching me, right?"

Duke immediately took his hand away, lighting up the ‘yes’ and adding 'sorry, didn't mean to make you cold. Won't do it again."

"No, no, that's okay. I don't mind," Nathan reassured him immediately.

Duke smiled. 'Ok,' he replied. 'So, no life to speak of, married to your job, what do you do for fun?’

"....You'll laugh." Nathan mumbled.

'I won't laugh.'

After a moment's hesitation, Nathan admitted, "I....do decoupage. And golf."

'Nothing wrong with golf,’ Duke replied. 'Decoupage on the other hand.' He made the lights flicker again.

'Sorry,’ Duke answered. 'Need to find you some friends. Or better hobbies at least.’

Nathan shrugged. "What does it matter?” he mumbled.

Duke thumped the wall in annoyance. 'Because you're not dead yet.’

"Yeah, I'm boring even to a ghost,” Nathan sighed.

'You're not boring me,’ Duke told him. ‘Which bars are still open in town?’

Nathan blinked. "Bars? I….don't really know. I don't generally go to bars. Why?”

'You should go to bars. Have a beer for me.’

"Um….okay,” Nathan agreed. "I could bring a couple beers here, we could drink together in spirit.”

Duke sent the lights flickering. 'You do have a sense of humour then.’

"A sense of humor?’

'In spirit. It was funny.’

"Oh! Oh. I, uh, didn't intend the pun.”

'I guessed. It was funny anyway,’ Duke made the lights flicker again.

"Well, glad I could make you laugh,” Nathan gave him an uncertain smile. "Guess I should get to calling these people.”

'You did,’ Duke added the smiley face. 'Ok, I'll let you get on with it.’

Nathan smiled, unlocking his phone and getting to work.

Duke hovered nervously, trying not to listen in on Nathan's end of the conversations but unable to help himself. So far it sounded as though things were going well, he was making it clear what needed doing and finding contractors who could do the work soon - he clearly had the right contacts and Duke soon drifted away to leave Nathan to get on with it.

While Nathan finished his calls, Duke went round the house, making a mental note of exactly what needed doing in each room. He didn't come up with anything Nathan didn't already know about, but he thought having the specific details might be useful so as soon as Nathan had finished on the phone, he started to give him a list. It took forever to spell out each word and Nathan was looking distinctly impatient by the time he’d finished.

"We need a better way of doing this," Nathan mused as he jotted down notes.

Duke lit up 'yes’. It was getting frustrating only being able to communicate one letter at a time, although he was still almost overwhelmed by the fact that he could communicate at all after so long with nothing. He drifted close to Nathan and tried shouting into his ear.

Nathan turned his head. "Was that you?”

Grinning to himself, Duke turned on the light above the ‘yes’.

"I heard something. Still real faint, though."
'Better than nothing,' Duke told him. 'I'll keep working on it. Calls go ok? Got people lined up?'

"Yup. Got the roofers, the plumbers, the electrician, and Dwight," Nathan grinned.

'Dwight?' Duke asked, confused as to why Nathan had referred to everyone else by their trade but Dwight by name.

"Dwight's a general contractor and handyman. He does just about everything. Honestly he could probably fix this place up single-handed, but it'd take forever."

'I have forever,' Duke answered, only half joking. The sooner this place was fixed up, the sooner it would have to be sold and he still wasn't sure he was ready for that.

"Yeah, but I don't," Nathan grimaced.

'Point,' Duke admitted, albeit slightly grudgingly.

"Sorry. I know you're probably not in a hurry to see this place sold," Nathan said quietly. Duke replied 'no', pausing before adding 'gotta be done though'.

"Yeah. Sorry," Nathan said guiltily. "Is there anything that would help?"

'No, but thanks,' Duke answered. 'Dwight a good guy? He thought he probably knew the answer to that but it didn't hurt to check seeing as it sounded like he was going to be stuck with him for at least a few weeks.

"Yeah. Big guy, looks scary, not real talkative, but a good guy."

'Good. Thanks. For trying to make this easier for me. There's nothing you can do but I appreciate you trying."

'I just wish there were something I could do," Nathan told him.

'You're doing it, fixing the place up, trying to find buyers who'll love it as much as I do. It all helps."

"If I succeed," Nathan sighed.

'You will,' Duke told him, hesitantly resting his hand on Nathan's shoulder.

Nathan looked over his shoulder with a smile. "Thanks, Duke. Hey, do you get bored? Is there something I could bring over? I could set up a movie on my laptop or something."

'So bored,' Duke told him. 'Movie would be fantastic, if you don't mind leaving your laptop here for a few hours."

"No problem. I can just set it up and let it run somewhere while I'm making calls or with the work crews. Is there a movie you wanted to see but didn't get around to? Or a TV show? I could start something on Netflix and it'll let you binge entire seasons at a time without you having to do anything."

'Thank you,' Duke added the smiley face. 'Netflix? DVD rentals on your laptop?' He asked, curious.

"Oh, that's right. Here, let me show you. What's your favorite TV show?" Nathan asked, pulling
out the laptop.

'Was watching a remake of Battlestar Galactica,' Duke told him. 'Don’t suppose that's still around?' He added hopefully.

"It finished its run - completed, not prematurely cancelled," Nathan pulled it up. "Looks like Netflix has the whole thing. You wanna start from the beginning, or pick up where you left off?"

'Beginning,' Duke answered. 'If that's ok. Been a while.'

"Yeah, sure," Nathan hit play and set the laptop on the wide windowsill.

'Thanks,' Duke told him, adding the smiley face and then going on. 'Don't forget lunch today.'


'Good,' Duke lit up the smile. 'Thanks again for this.'

"Any time. I'll be in the kitchen making calls if you need me."

'Yeah, I'll shout,' Duke sent the lights flickering as he laughed.

Nathan smiled, and headed off to get to work.

Duke settled in to watch and was soon lost in enjoying catching up on Battlestar Galactica, remembering scenes and characters he’d forgotten. As he watched, he thought about Nathan (he no longer thought of Nathan as That Damned Realtor) and the kindness he was showing Duke. He didn't have to, he could knock the whole house down for all Duke could do about it, but he was trying his best to work with Duke, to find a way to sell the house which was least disruptive to him. Not to mention the conversation, the lights, the laptop. He sadly wished he'd had friends like Nathan when he was alive. Not that he'd ever admit that, of course.

He was halfway through the third episode when Nathan came back in from the kitchen.

Nathan stretched and yawned, looking tired and grumpy, but he smiled when he saw the laptop. "Enjoying yourself?"

Duke lit up 'yes' and the smile as he grinned at Nathan. His grin turned to a frown when he noticed the lines on Nathan's face, the dark circles under his eyes. 'Everything ok?' He asked.

"Yeah, just the usual troubles. Tough business, especially in this economy."

'I understand,' Duke told him. 'You should go home, relax a bit.'

"Can't," Nathan scrubbed a hand through his hair. "The deal on that big place in Wellfleet just fell through, so I'll have to find another buyer ASAP."

Duke glanced at the clock on the laptop. 'Not going to get much done this evening,' he pointed out.

"Shit, it's that late?" Nathan groaned.

'Home, eat, relax, have a beer, go to bed,' Duke told him. 'Start calling people in the morning.'

Nathan shook his head, his expression wistfully resigned. "I should get a jump on my paperwork so I can spend more time tomorrow on calls and showings."
Duke rolled his eyes and gave it up as a lost cause. 'Ok,’ he spelled out. 'Have a good evening.’

Nathan turned to go, then paused. "Have you ever tried to interact with a touchscreen? I wonder if your energy might be able to make it respond."

‘Not since the original Palm Pilot,’ Duke replied, laughing slightly. ‘Guess things have moved on a bit since then.’

Nathan nodded. "I'll pick up a cheap tablet for you to play with, if you accidentally fry it or something, won't matter much. Would be pretty cool if you could use a computer."

Duke felt as though there was a lump in his throat. 'Thank you,’ he replied, drifting over to rest his hand on Nathan's shoulder again.

"Least I can do," Nathan said quietly. "Figure I'd want someone to do as much for me, in your shoes."

Duke nodded uselessly before answering with a smiley face. He didn't know what else to say so he made every light in the house glow brightly for a moment and hoped that would get his point across.

Nathan's eyes widened as he looked into the hall and up the stairs, seeing light pouring from every corner. "Wow," he said softly. "You're getting really good at this."

Feeling pleased with himself, Duke let the lights fade and lit up the smiley face. 'Getting there,’ he added. 'See you tomorrow?’

Nathan nodded. "Might be a little late if I'm running around doing showings all day, but I'll be here."

'Go kick some ass, sell some houses,’ Duke grinned at him. 'Goodnight.’

"G'night, Duke."

Duke watched him go, his expression (had anyone been able to see him) thoughtful, somewhere between concerned and sentimental. Even when he'd been alive, no one had shown the same consideration for his well-being as Nathan was now. It was like they were friends, admittedly slightly weird friends given the fact that Nathan couldn't see or hear him, but they were communicating and Nathan actually seemed to care. He was touched by everything Nathan was doing and wished he could find a way to give something back to him.

All of the things he was doing to make Duke's not-life easier was on top of the stress he had about work. With that and his obviously low self esteem and apparent inability to relax or take care of himself (for fucks sake, the man wasn't even eating properly), Duke was worried. He made a mental note that he'd have a proper talk with Nathan about it. Just as soon as he'd found a way to make Nathan hear him.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Nathan brings over Duke's tablet, which Duke learns to use, and the contractors arrive to start doing work on the house...

It was the following evening before Duke heard Nathan's truck pull up outside, and his key in the lock. Just as Nathan unlocked the door, Duke zoomed into the hallway, determined to show off the new trick he'd been working on all day. In his enthusiasm to helpfully open the door, Duke somehow managed to slam it closed again instead.

Nathan took a step back as the door slammed in his face, his expression shocked and hurt. "Duke? I….I got your tablet. What's wrong? What'd I do?"

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck, Duke thought as he waited for Nathan to open the door again. He made every light in the house glow for a moment, trying to say hello and sorry as best he could, then started flashing the Christmas lights to try to get Nathan's attention so he could explain.

Nathan caught the flash of the Christmas lights through the window, and went across the lawn to look, not yet daring to try to come in again when Duke seemed so clearly to want him out.

Duke saw him looking through the window and made the lights flash the word 'sorry' repeatedly.

"Sorry?" Nathan was just confused now. "Duke, what happened? Are you okay?"

Duke flashed 'yes' and spelled out 'didn't mean to slam the door, come back in.'

Nathan nodded and went back around to the door. "Trying out some new stuff?" he asked as he came in.

'Yes,' Duke replied sheepishly. 'Tried to open the door, slammed it by mistake. Sorry.'

"No worries, I'm just glad everything's ok," Nathan said, visibly relieved. "I thought you were mad at me."

'No,' Duke flashed repeatedly. 'Are you ok? Not gonna try that again.' He'd been practicing with the doors all day and had gotten pretty good at it but he wasn't about to risk another mistake that could have hurt Nathan, or upset him to the point where he didn't come back.

"I'm fine," Nathan smiled tiredly. "It's cool that you learned how to slam doors, though."

'You're tired,' Duke told him. 'Would've been cooler if I'd actually managed to open it.' He shrugged to himself.

"Maybe next time. And yeah, but running around all day will do that."

'Maybe,' Duke replied, doubting there would be a next time, at least not until he was much more practiced at opening doors. 'You should go home, get some rest.'
"Later. I brought your tablet, want to play around with it?"

'You are amazing, thank you,' Duke told him, making each light glow brightly before lighting up the 'yes' because hell yeah, he wanted to try something new.

Nathan grinned, forgetting his long hard day as he pulled out the tablet and started it up. He set it on the windowsill and stepped aside to let Duke experiment.

Tablets were a new thing to Duke, they hadn't been around when he'd been alive, but it seemed as though every realtor had them; he'd curiously peered over their shoulders and had a fair idea of what to do. Concentrating in the same way he did with the lights, he tried to open an app that looked like it might be a word processor, thinking that it might be useful for leaving notes for Nathan when he wasn't here - ideas for repairs and renovations, that sort of thing. After a couple of failed tries and several curses of frustration, the app opened and he started trying to pick out letters.

If opening the app had been frustrating, it had nothing on focussing on the right letters and his first few attempts were garbage. Eventually he managed to type out a short message.

This is cool

Nathan was, if anything, even more excited than Duke. When the app opened he grinned hugely. "You're doing it! Duke, you're doing it!" He laughed with delight at the message. "It is cool!"

Duke grinned at Nathan's happiness and slowly, deliberately, typed another message.

Can help u now. Make lists n stuff :)

"This is amazing! We can talk," Nathan said happily. "And when I'm not here, you can have the internet so you won't get bored."

Internet connected?

"Yeah, boss had it connected so we don't miss emails while we're here," Nathan grinned.

Great :D Thank u for this. Means so much 2 me. Easier than the lights (which were an awesome idea 2). U rock.

"I'm really glad you like it. I can't believe it's really working," Nathan smiled.


The concentration was taking it out of Duke, it didn't come quite as easily as the lights had but he thought that might be down to practice. The more he tried, the easier it felt. And his tiredness could just as easily be down to having spent the better part of the last twenty four hours practicing door slamming. Either way, he was tired and tried to yawn.

"You should get some rest, don't overdo it," Nathan said worriedly. What happened when a ghost fell asleep? Would Duke just...disappear?

Could say the same 2 U. I will if U will?

"Okay," Nathan agreed ruefully. "Have fun with the tablet, but not before you get some rest, okay?"

Yeah. Have a good evening. Sorry bout the door thing.
"No problem. Good night, Duke."

Goodnight, Nathan :)  

After Nathan had left, Duke tried to rest, without much success. Being tired as a ghost was different. It wasn't like being tired as a person, with that desperate need to sleep, or to sit down, or to stop thinking. It was more like...a depletion of energy. He knew if he just stopped trying to do stuff that it would help, but the temptation of playing with the tablet was too great.  

So he tried opening different apps, things he'd never seen before, had never thought would be possible on such a tiny device. Things had moved on a lot in the past few years, he thought, smiling wryly to himself. He browsed the internet for a while, catching up on all of the news he'd missed. He didn't even know who the president was, for fucks sake, and finding out the answer to that had been somewhat...surprising. And maybe a little terrifying.  

Things that he had to think and concentrate to do were easier - the lights, the tablet - they ran on energy, he could affect them just by focussing very clearly on what he wanted. More physical tasks like moving objects and opening doors were difficult and he still didn't have the hang of them. And as for projecting his voice so someone could hear him, well he had no idea how that was even supposed to work. Let alone trying to make himself visible.  

Those were things to worry about another day, he thought tiredly. For now, he'd make notes on what needed doing around the house, ready for Nathan to start crossing things off as they were completed. He knew Nathan had his own lists, but it made him feel less useless if he could at least do something.  

Nathan was... interesting. Having abandoned the nickname That Damned Realtor, Duke thought he might actually like Nathan. He wasn't sure if they'd have been friends, exactly, if he'd been alive, they were too different. Like apples and oranges. But he was proving to be a good person. Kind. Generous. Funny, even when he wasn't trying to be. Tolerable company, even though he was trying to sell the house. And kinda nice to look at, Duke thought, smirking to himself.  

Giving up on attempts to rest, given the fact it didn't seem to be remotely possible to rest as a ghost (what was he even supposed to do? Lie down on the floor and sink through it?), Duke started typing out another message to Nathan. Now that he was getting used to it, he found that concentrating on each word worked better than focusing on each letter. Faster, too.  

Nathan -  

This house is my home and it means everything to me. See, I didn't have the easiest past and this was the first place I ever put down roots. It was a wreck, the same as I was after a failed marriage and a few too many whisky fuelled bad decisions. I sold everything I owned and bought a bar and this dilapidated old house. I fixed the house, used it as a way to fix me, and I made it beautiful again. It was a home. My home. The only place I've ever truly been able to call that.  

It's so much a part of me that I couldn't leave even if I tried.  

That's why I couldn't bear the thought of all those fixer uppers buying it. They'd destroy it's spirit and me along with it.  

I couldn't let that happen.
You're the only person who ever noticed I was here, let alone tried to communicate with me and I will forever be grateful for that. Thank you. For acknowledging my existence and for helping me find a way to 'talk' to you.

You're a good man and a good friend (if being friends with a ghost isn't too weird for you, I'm not sure I'd be taking it so well in your shoes). I trust you to do right by the house. By me. And I’ll try to stop scaring off buyers. Unless I really don't like the look of them, then all bets are off. Sorry.

I'll save the lecture about looking after yourself, resting, eating properly. You know as well as I do that you're working too hard. But consider yourself warned. If I think you're overdoing it, I'm chasing you outta here so you go home :)

Duke

PS - how the fuck do I get onto Netflix?! ;)

With the message typed out, Duke was exhausted and decided rest was his only option. He drifted around near the ceiling, meditating calmly as he always used to, switching off his mind and trying to focus on nothing.

****

Nathan was back bright and early the next morning, looking a little better but not - to Duke's worried eye - enough. "Hey, Duke," he called as he walked in. "Work starts today, are you ready?"

Duke waited until Nathan could see the lights before he answered. 'As I'll ever be. Been practicing on tablet. Left you lists and stuff.'

"Nice. Hope you managed to get some rest, though," he said, walking over to the tablet.

'Some,' Duke answered. The meditation had helped restore some of his energy. Psychic energy, he supposed it was called. Whatever, he didn't feel tired any more.

"Good, good," Nathan nodded. He picked up the tablet and read through what Duke had left. His expression softened, a little sad at the beginning, then he blushed at Duke's praise - and looked sheepish at the scolding. "Here, I'll put Netflix on the home screen. Come here and I'll show you how to get to all the apps."

Duke floated over to him and touched his shoulder to let him know he was there. For good measure, he added a note on the tablet.

I'm behind you

If Nathan hadn't already felt the touch on his shoulder, the message would have made him jump out of his skin. As it was, he looked over his shoulder. "Are you trying to do some horror movie shit here?"

Duke grinned as he realised how that might have come across.

Not deliberately, sorry, wasn't sure you'd feel me. Kinda funny tho lol

"Ha very ha. And yes, I felt you. So this icon here pulls up a list of all the apps, you can scroll
through until you find what you want," Nathan explained. "I don't mind if you add more apps, but I'd appreciate if you don't go too nuts with the ones that aren't free."

Duke smiled at Nathan's response, watching carefully as Nathan showed him how to get to all the different apps. Not that he had a clue what any of them were for, but he'd worked out how to type a document and he had the internet and Netflix so he was a damn sight better off than he had been yesterday.

**Thanks. Won't buy any. Got all I need :) What time is work starting?**

Nathan glanced at the tablet's clock as he set it on the windowsill. "Should be any minute, just wanted to get in early enough to say hi and make sure you were all set up."

**I'm good, thanks. Will make myself scarce. As long as they don't do anything WRONG :)**

"Okay. I don't think anyone will be in here particularly, but - " Nathan cut himself off as the doorbell rang. "That'll be them."

Duke kept a watchful eye as Nathan let the contractors in - roof first, which shouldn't take too long, provided they didn't dawdle and spend all day drinking coffee. They seemed competent, had all the right supplies and were making the right noises, and after a short greeting, they got to work. Relieved that they hadn't even thought about going into the living room (he wasn't entirely sure how Nathan was going to explain the letters and lights on the wall), Duke settled in to wait, trying not to disturb Nathan from his work.

The plumbers and electricians arrived shortly after, and Nathan led them upstairs to start their work.

Duke followed them upstairs, keeping his distance but supervising closely. Fortunately, they seemed to know what they were doing so he went back downstairs, finding himself at a loose end with nothing to complain about. He quickly made the lights flicker so Nathan would know he was there before he started trying to load up Netflix.

Nathan caught the flicker in the lights and headed back downstairs. "Something you need?"

**Just letting you know where I was so you don't freak out when Netflix starts playing on its own :)**

"More like so the workers don't freak out. Me, I'll just know it's you," Nathan grinned.

**Yeah, yeah. You keep telling yourself that haha**

"Ha ha," Nathan said dryly. The doorbell rang again and Nathan checked his watch. "That'll be Dwight then."

Duke watched while Nathan let Dwight in, apprehensive because he knew Dwight would be here the longest of all the contractors. Nathan hadn't been kidding when he said Dwight was a big guy, Duke thought. Tall (a good couple of inches taller than Nathan who Duke reckoned was about the same height as he was), muscular, hairy. The nickname Sasquatch sprang to his mind and he laughed so hard that he accidentally made the lights flicker.

"I can see why you need an overhaul on this place," Dwight commented, glancing at the lights.

"Yeah, the damage is extensive. I've got people here for the wiring and plumbing and roof, but there's plenty else to do. The roof had a leak, so we're gonna need to replace ceiling plaster and..."
carpeting at least. But I need to know how extensive the damage really is."

Dwight nodded. "Can start with an assessment. Drywall, floorboards, insulation, chimney, windows and doors, heating and cooling systems, kitchen counters and bathroom tiles, porch and balconies." He looked around, down the hall and up the stairs. "Place has good bones. Rock-solid foundation, strong support structures. Lot of these older houses do. Take a lot of work, but she could be a real beauty."

Duke nodded along as Dwight listed all the things he was planning to look at, glad that he hadn't missed anything and the house was going to be fully checked over. He practically glowed with pride when Dwight said the house could be beautiful again and he immediately warmed to the man, knowing straight away that Dwight would do everything thoroughly and the house would be in safe hands. Still, he planned to keep a close eye, make sure that Dwight definitely didn't miss anything, that he didn't get any funny ideas about ripping all the wood out and replacing it with (Duke shuddered to himself) plastic. Not that he thought he would, Dwight didn't seem the type to do that, but still. It was worth keeping watch.

Nathan nodded, knowing how happy Duke would be. "We'll get her there."

"Good. Know your boss was on you for a quick sale, but I never like those vultures looking to score a cheap property. They always tear out the solid old stuff that just needs a bit of work, and replace it with whatever cheap crap will make the place look nice long enough to turn a profit. Never restore a place the way it deserves. No one appreciates quality workmanship these days."

Nathan hid a grin at the grumbling - it was a complaint he'd heard many times. "That's why I come to you and no one else."

Duke didn't have to hide his grin and he beamed happily, knowing that Dwight got it. He was far more at ease now that he'd (not quite) met Dwight and heard what he had to say. It didn't exactly stop him worrying but it did put his mind at rest that the house would be restored in the way it deserved to be and maybe, in turn, that would lead to the right buyers walking through the door. Which was the best he could hope for.

"Well, c'mon, let's go see what the old girl needs," Dwight said, patting the doorway.

"Right behind you," Nathan got out a notebook and pen, and followed Dwight out.

With Dwight and Nathan starting outside, where Duke couldn't follow, he drifted upstairs to check on the electricians and plumbers. Somewhat frustratingly, they were getting on with doing a good job and he couldn't find anything to complain about so he went further up into the attic where he could at least listen to what the roofers were doing even if he couldn't watch. That all seemed to be going well too and, slightly dejected, he sank back down to the living room to wait.

Nathan completed the assessment with Dwight, checked in with each of the work crews, and came back down to the living room. "Hey, Duke. You doing okay?"

Duke shrugged to himself and started think-typing.

Yeah. They all know what they're doing. Gonna have to find something to complain about just so I feel useful again. How'd it go with Dwight?

"Well, he's not wrong, there's plenty of work to be done, but I knew that. I have a folding table in the car, I figured I'd bring it in and keep you company while I get through some of my paperwork. If that's okay, of course."
Duke immediately perked up, appreciative of the company. It was good that the house was being sorted and he was genuinely delighted that it was being repaired properly by people who knew what they were doing. But the loss of control was harder to take. He wanted to be doing the work himself. Or at least supervising. He couldn't do either and he hated that. Having Nathan keep him company, even for an hour or so, would take his mind off it. Help him feel less alone.

Yeah, fine with me. Company is good :)

Nathan smiled. "Thanks. Much nicer to not be stuck alone in an office while I work."

Will Netflix disturb you? Or I could find some music?

"Go nuts. I'm not making calls, just doing boring paperwork, so some background stuff would be nice."

Duke smiled as he started concentrating on opening the radio app he'd noticed the night before. It took him a few minutes to open it, then another few to try to get it to a station he liked, but before long the sound of 00's rock filled the room, stuff that was current when he'd died, and some songs he didn't know from after that date. He had a lot of catching up to do.

Nathan looked over at the tablet and smiled "Good choice."

Duke grinned, adding in some air guitar when one of his favourite songs came on. In his happy enthusiasm, he managed to blow Nathan's paperwork across the table and onto the floor.

Nathan chuckled, leaning over to pick up his paper. "I know, you think I work too much."

Sorry. Mistake. Got carried away. But yeah, you do work too much :)

To prove his point, Duke deliberately scattered the papers again, making the lights flicker wildly as he did so.

"You're a funny guy, Duke," Nathan said dryly, but he was smiling.

Always have been :) I'll stop now, let you get on with it

With that, he floated off to check on the contractors, even though he knew it was pointless. Sure enough, they were all getting on with exactly what they were supposed to be and doing it well. Dwight was still carrying out his assessment, which seemed to be taking forever. Duke thought that was a good thing. Attention to detail. If Dwight applied the same fastidiousness when he started the work, Duke couldn't see there being any problems.

He drifted back into the living room and gave Nathan a clap on the back as he glided past.

Nathan looked up. "Yeah, Duke?"

You found good people. Thank you.

"You're welcome. I'm glad you approve," Nathan smiled.

I definitely approve. And I appreciate you finding them. This can't be easy for you, more stress on top of everything.

Duke frowned as he finished the message, feeling guilty that he'd added to Nathan's problems.
Nathan shook his head. "The repairs needed doing anyhow, and these are the guys I would have picked. Wasn't any extra trouble."

Relieved, Duke replied.

**Ok, good, don't want to pile more on you. Btw, eat your lunch :)**

Nathan hesitated, but then caved. "All right. Guess it's no worse time than any," he admitted as he pulled out his sandwich.

Duke smiled and returned to listening to the radio. When 'Fix You' came on, it reminded him to mention the lights to Nathan.

**You should take the lights down, cover the writing on the wall. People will think you're nuts.**

Nathan looked over at the tablet, then frowned. "But don't you need them still? What if the tablet's battery runs down or something?"

**Can use house lights to get your attention if I need to. If you plug the charger into the tablet before you leave each time then it'll be fine. Seriously, man, you basically have an Ouija board set up on the wall of the house you're selling. It's gonna have to come down at some point.**

"Yeah, I know, I was gonna have to take down the wallpaper in here before I did any showings," Nathan sighed. "If you're sure."

**I am. Probably better the contractors don't think you've lost your mind. Or that they realise I'm here and freak out and refuse to come back.**

"Probably," Nathan agreed, taking down the lights and putting them in his briefcase. Then he grinned. "At least I can say the writing was there when I got here. Blame the previous owner."

Duke made the overhead lights flicker wildly.

**That's it, blame the dead man for everything, not like I can answer back ;)**

"Something like that," Nathan said. It was ridiculous, but hearing Duke refer to himself as a dead man bothered Nathan. Duke was, unquestionably - he was a *ghost*, invisible, inaudible, and intangible. But Nathan still didn't like the reminder that Duke had suffered and died.

Catching the expression of sadness on Nathan's face, Duke placed a hand on his shoulder.

**Nathan? What's up? I was joking, I know you won't blame me.**

"Nothing, it's fine," Nathan put on a smile for Duke.

**Bullshit. You've gone from joking to looking like someone ran over your unicorn. What is it?**

"Just...think my sandwich might have gone off. Not feeling so great," Nathan lied. If he didn't like thinking about Duke's death, how much worse would it be for Duke?

**If you say so**

Duke didn't believe a word of it but realised that Nathan wouldn't be drawn on whatever was bothering him.

**Figured you'll talk when you want to. None of my business til then :) Still think you need to go to a bar and relax tho ;)**

"Bars are anything but relaxing," Nathan smiled.

**Maybe, but there's alcohol and that's definitely relaxing :)**

Nathan shrugged. "Just makes me act stupid."

**And this is a problem, why, exactly?**

"Because stupid equals attempts at dancing."

**Now that I'd like to see ;)**

"I'm sure you would, so you could laugh your ass off," Nathan snorted.

Duke smiled and responded.

**Obviously. Everyone's got embarrassing drunk stories, you should let your hair down once in a while**

"Not really looking to ruin my reputation. One video of drunk dancing on Facebook and it'd cost me my job."

**Yeah, fair point. Facebook was just starting up in my day, wasn't really a big deal (great, now I sound old)**

Nathan shrugged. "No older than I am."

**Spose not**

Duke thought on that. The last ten years of being a ghost notwithstanding, they probably were about the same age.

"I should get back to work," Nathan sighed.

**Yeah. Maybe you can get finished early :)**

"Would be nice, but there's always more to do," Nathan sighed.

**There always is. I'll leave you to it :)**

Duke nodded as he typed, remembering how busy he used to be.

As Nathan worked, Duke wandered the house aimlessly. He checked on the contractors once again, everything seemed to be going well no matter how much he looked for things to nitpick at. It was reassuring, if he was honest, that everything was being done properly. He just wished he didn't feel so useless.

When he was alive, he'd always been busy. Like he'd just typed to Nathan, there was always something. Whether it was finding food and a safe haven for the night, or running some sort of con,
to his more legitimate business activities like running the Grey Gull, he always had things to do. This floating around doing nothing was - for lack of a better phrase - killing him.

He thought about the past, steering his memories away from the more painful aspects of his life, remembering the good things. The handful of friends he'd made, the bar, before things went bad, his boat, before he'd sold it. Most of all, his home.

Night was drawing in and the contractors packed up and said goodnight to Nathan, arranging to meet him at the house bright and early again. Dwight was the last to leave, making his apologies when he had to go and pick up his daughter from the babysitter. It was pushing seven o’clock when Nathan yawned.

Duke frowned at him. He'd been here for nearly twelve hours. It was too much, even allowing for the time he'd spent talking to Duke which (Duke hoped) might count as relaxation.

**You should go home, get some dinner**

Nathan looked at the message, looked at the clock. "Well...." He hadn't been able to do any showings, but he *had* gotten through an awful lot of paperwork, and had made a number of calls. "All right. Will you be okay here?"

Duke rolled his eyes.

**I think I'll cope ;)**

"Okay," Nathan connected the tablet to the charger. "Should be all set for all the movies and music and internet you want. You know, this thing has skype, if you need anything you could make it call me. I mean, I wouldn't hear or see much but I'd know you needed me and I could come over."

Duke smiled to himself. Nathan worrying about him was kinda sweet.

**I'll be fine. You worry too much (but thanks...for giving enough of a shit to worry in the first place)**

"Least I can do." Nathan yawned and stretched. "Good night, then."

**Have a good evening ;) G’night**

Duke gave the lights a soft flicker as he watched Nathan leave.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Work carries on at the house but an electrical problem leaves Nathan in danger

Duke spent most of the night catching up on shows on Netflix and trying to work out the Skype app Nathan had mentioned. It was all very well Nathan saying to call him but it was signed in under Nathan's user ID so that wasn't going to work. Not that Duke would ever call him anyway. Nathan's lack of a social life was a concern and he wasn't about to add to it. (Also, he thought, what did Nathan think he might need? Rescuing from the depths of existential despair? Yeah, no, he wouldn't burden Nathan with that shit, even on the worst of nights.)

The next morning came around and Dwight arrived early, letting himself in with the key Nathan had given him. Duke watched, glowering slightly, as he let in all the other contractors and they all got to work. Without Nathan there, Duke was at a loose end - he'd decided that playing on the tablet while other people were here wasn't a good idea. It was one thing when Nathan could say he had music on for background noise or whatever, quite another to explain why the tablet was playing movies to an empty house.

So with nothing to do, he drifted from room to room, supervising closely. Everything was going well. Until the house fell into sudden darkness. Every light bulb had blown and only the damp, grey, light filtered in from outside.

Immediately, there was a shout from the electrician, warning everyone not to touch any of the light switches or power points. Work stopped and Duke looked on, worried, as the electrician hurried to the breaker box to turn the power off.

It was, as bad luck would have it, just that moment when the front door opened again - Nathan, arriving to check on things. He frowned at the dark hallway, and reached for the light switch.

Hearing the door open, Duke flew down the stairs to meet him. The first thing he saw was Nathan reaching to turn the lights on. Filled with a fear so deep it bordered on terror, Duke shouted as loudly as possible, a single thought filling his head.

“Nathan! No!”

Nathan jerked his hand away from the switch as if he'd been burned, eyes huge in the dark hallway. He knew the voices of all his work crews, and that hadn't been any of them. "....Duke?” he whispered.

Duke practically sagged with relief. Nathan had heard him. Somehow. He tried to answer. 'Yeah, it's me,’ he shouted, trying to replicate the volume and intensity he'd just managed. He frowned. It felt different. Less powerful. He touched Nathan's shoulder for good measure, in case he hadn't heard him.

Nathan felt the touch, but didn't hear the words. And in the dark, with no lights and no tablet, he had no way of communicating with Duke. "Hey Louis," he called to the head electrician. "What's going on?”
"Don't touch anything!" Louis yelled back. "Not until I give the all clear!"

Relieved that Louis had filled Nathan in and there was no immediate danger, Duke relaxed.

Nathan waited patiently, standing still right where he was, until Louis hollered again to say it was safe. "What went wrong?"

"Some wiring got fused, must've been a lightning strike. Routed live current all sorts of places it shouldn't have been. I got the breakers shut off but until I did, all the lights and power sockets were potentially lethal."

So that's what had happened, Duke thought, grateful for the explanation. Dread filled him as he thought about what might have happened if he hadn't been able to make Nathan hear him. If it was possible for a ghost to feel sick, that's how he felt. It had been close. Too close.

Nathan's face went ashen-pale in the dim light filtering through the windows. He began shaking, and sat down abruptly on the stairs.

Duke stayed close to him, concerned. He placed his hand on Nathan's shoulder, keeping it there as he uselessly tried to offer calming words.

"Duke," Nathan reached up, laying his hand over the cold spot on his shoulder. "Jesus, Duke, you saved my life." His breathing was coming shallow and fast.

Still in shock himself, Duke tried to speak again, getting frustrated when it didn't work. “Yeah, maybe, but you're fine, that's the important thing. Everything's fine, just breathe.”

Nathan buried his face in his hands, shaking from head to toe, fully hyperventilating now.

Worrying more than ever, Duke tried shouting again. “Nathan, breathe,” he tried, failing miserably. Inspiration struck him and, concentrating hard, he tried to make the phone in Nathan's pocket ring.

It was far more difficult than using the tablet - for one thing Duke couldn't see what he was doing, and for another, there was nothing he could do on the touchscreen to make it ring. The phone stayed silent and inert.

Sinking down onto the stairs, Duke pressed himself against Nathan, offering what little comfort he could (he dimly wondered if something cold pressed against you was even remotely comforting, but it was all he had right now). Surely Nathan would get his phone out at some point and then Duke could try to use it and leave at least a short note.

In spite of the physical discomfort, Nathan felt reassured by the cold, realizing Duke was trying to hug him. Slowly, his trembling subsided and his breath steadied.

Good, that's good, Duke thought, moving away once Nathan seemed to be calmer. His face was still pale, tinged with grey from the shock, but he was breathing normally again and that was what mattered. He stayed close, not wanting to leave Nathan on his own.

Nathan managed to get up unsteadily and go into the living room, looking for the tablet to talk to Duke.

Duke followed him, eagerly going to the tablet to type a message. He frowned when he realised the screen was off and groaned in frustration and disappointment when he realised what must have happened.
Nathan tried turning it on, and shook his head. "Power surge must have killed it. I'll get you a new one tomorrow," he muttered, pulling out his phone instead and opening the notepad app.

Thankful to have a way to communicate, Duke typed as fast as he could, relieved that the phone responded in the same way the tablet did.

**Are you ok?**

"As okay as a guy can be after coming within literal inches of death," Nathan mumbled. "Which is to say, not very."

**You should sit down, take a few minutes**

"Yeah," Nathan sighed, sitting shakily on the folding chair. "I can't thank you enough. You seriously saved my life."

Duke watched him, concerned with how shaky he was still looking.

**Maybe. Sorry it was so close. Didn't know you were coming in 'til I heard the door close. Was almost too late by then.**

"It's fine, you did it, you saved me. And….I heard you."

If Duke could have started shaking, he would have. The thought of what might have happened if Nathan hadn't heard him… Well, Duke didn't want to think about that. He just wished he knew how he'd managed to shout when every other attempt he made fell flat.

**Thank fuck. Don't know how but I'm glad it worked.**

Nathan gave him a wobbly grin. "Look on the bright side, if it hadn't worked, you'd have had some company."

**Don't even fucking joke about that**


Duke drifted back slightly, feeling guilty. He hadn't meant that message to be quite so harsh.

**Sorry. Just meant that I don't want anything to happen to you.**

Nathan nodded. "I know. It's just...if i don't laugh, the alternative is falling apart."

Duke looked at him and did the ghost equivalent of a sigh. He absolutely didn't want Nathan to fall apart. Laughing was better.

**Fine. But you'd be a crap ghost. I mean, do you even know how to walk through a wall?**

"No, but I guess I'd learn."

**Actually it's easy, you just walk, nothing to it. Don't try walking through people though. Trust me on this.**

"What does touching people feel like for you?" Nathan asked curiously, distracted from his near-death, "For me it's just cold."
Duke thought for a moment, wondering if he should lie to keep the conversation upbeat. No, he decided sadly. Honesty was probably best.

Nothing. Same as when I touch anything else. There's just nothing there.

"I'm sorry," Nathan said softly.

Thanks. Least I can do some cool stuff :) thanks to you.

"Including talking. What was different this time than all the other times you tried?"

Sheer panic? I couldn't stand the thought that something might happen to you. That I might have to stand by and watch it happen. I didn't even think about it, I just shouted and you heard me.

"Maybe the panic is what did it. I mean, the intensity of emotion or something," Nathan mused.

Maybe, but I've been completely fucking furious before and it still hasn't worked. I'll keep trying though :)

"Maybe try again with some really intense emotion?" Nathan asked.

Summoning up all of the fear and worry that he had when he shouted before, Duke tried to speak. He focused all of his attention on how it had felt, thinking Nathan might die in front of his eyes, and concentrated on one single phrase. "Are you ok?"

Nathan heard the worried 'okay?', faint and indistinct, more a thought than a word. "Duke?"

Duke concentrated again, trying to feel and think the word instead of saying it. "Yeah."

Nathan grinned. "I think I'm hearing you."

Duke matched his grin as something clicked in his mind. He'd been trying to speak, to shout, to try to make himself heard. With no breath, no vocal cords, that wasn't working. It was the thought that mattered, and the power of that thought. That's why, when faced with the possibility of Nathan dying, he was able to make himself heard. It wasn't the panic which had made the difference, it was that there was just that one, single, thought and nothing else. Instead of trying to speak, he tried to project his thoughts - the same way he did when he wanted to type a message, focusing on the word rather than the physical act.

"Took me long enough," he said/thought, wryly.

Nathan grinned. "But you can now. Weird. It's less like spoken words and more like….you're projecting thoughts, concepts, right into my brain."

"That's kinda cool. Guess I'm gonna have to watch what I think now," Duke laughed.

Nathan considered that. "Are you trying to think at me? Because if so, I might not get random stray thoughts that cross your mind, if you're not making an effort to broadcast, so to speak."

"Yeah, at the moment, but I was trying to think at the lights as well and they kept going off on their own," Duke replied. "Maybe just ignore any random thoughts, yeah?"

"Will do," Nathan promised, still grinning. "This is really cool. I can't believe I get to talk to you. You're getting clearer every time."
“Good,” Duke grinned. “I can't believe it either. Been a long time since I had a conversation.”

"I can only imagine. This is much better than typing. Typing's limited."

“Yeah, you don’t get the tone of voice. My humour doesn't come over well without that,” Duke laughed. “Seriously, though, are you ok? Because I must have given you a hell of a fright screaming at you like that.”

Nathan snorted. "The fright wasn't from you yelling, it was from finding out I came within inches of dying horribly."


"Still kinda shaky," Nathan admitted. "But I'll be okay."

“Yeah... You could do with a stiff drink. I'd offer, but... y’know... Bastards even took that when they cleared the place.”

"I could go out and get one myself if I wanted one. I just need to calm down," he closed his eyes.

“Sit, relax, meditate or whatever. It'll help.”

"Yeah. It's good to talk to you. It helps," Nathan admitted.

“That's what friends are for,” Duke smiled and placed his hand on Nathan's shoulder.

Nathan smiled at the touch. "You're a good friend, Duke. I'm glad I met you."

“You are too, Nathan,” Duke told him. “And I'm glad you walked into my house and realized I was here.”

"I'm glad it was me too, and not some of the other guys at the agency," Nathan shook his head. "You and this house both deserve better."

“Thank you,” Duke said softly. “Everything you're doing...it all means so much to me. The alternative...well, I don't even want to think about it. Losing this place...it would kill me. Again.”

Nathan had seen the words, in blinking Christmas lights and in letters on a screen, but this was the first time he felt the emotional impact of them. "Wish I could do more. Would keep this place your own, bring back your things, give you back your home for real if I could. You lost so much and there's so little I can give you."

“You've given me hope,” Duke stated simply. “You're putting my house back together. You've given me friendship. And this is a really fucking depressing conversation. Can we talk about how nuts the contractors are gonna think you are when they find you talking to yourself?”

Nathan chuckled. "I'll try to avoid it when they're in the room. And keep my phone in my hand a lot, I guess."

“Get one of those Bluetooth earphone things maybe?” Duke suggested, helpfully. “Are those still a thing?”

"Yeah," Nathan made a face. "That makes you look like an asshole, but there are worse fates, I guess."

“You look like an asshole anyway,” Duke said, teasing gently.
"Yeah, yeah, me and my mysteriously terrible hair, right?" Nathan grinned.

"It is terrible hair," Duke took offence at the neatness of it and tried to ruffle his hand through it to mess it up a bit.

Nathan shivered at the cold touch on his scalp, reaching up to straighten his hair even though Duke hadn't actually be able to ruffle a single hair.

Duke laughed. "Don't worry, Nate, it's still perfectly neat and tidy."

Nathan paused, and smiled slowly. "No one's ever called me Nate."

"Sorry, I should've asked first. Do you mind?"

"No, it's...I like it," Nathan said.

"Nate it is then. It's an improvement on That Damned Realtor, which is how I thought of you before."

Nathan chuckled, the last of the tension fading away.

"I'm gonna go check on things, you ok for a few minutes?" Duke checked, relieved that Nathan was finally starting to look more like himself.

"Yeah, yeah, of course. Honestly I should go check on Louis too, see how that whole thing is going."

"You check on Louis, I'll check on Sasquatch and the others," Duke told him.

"Sasquatch?" Nathan's eyebrows rose.

"Dwight," Duke grinned. "Don't tell me you can't see it?!"

Nathan laughed. "Okay yeah, but I'm sure as hell not gonna tell him that."

"Maybe I should," Duke laughed as he drifted out of the room to check on how things were going after the near disaster.

Leaving Nathan to check on Louis and the electricians, he sought out Dwight first (and, despite the amusement value, didn't try to call him Sasquatch - he doubted Dwight would hear him anyway, but the last thing he wanted to do was upset him, given the fact he was doing a bang up job). With everything's going well in Dwight's corner, he moved on to the plumbers who had finally managed to stop the dripping tap in the bathroom that had been driving Duke mad pretty much since the day he died. How hadn't he noticed it when he was alive? At least it was fixed now…

The roofers were having a day off on account of the weather, but the temporary repairs they'd made to stop the roof from leaking were holding, even through the downpour that had just passed over. Duke nodded, satisfied, and went to report back to Nathan.

"All fine," he said. "Everything's going well. Annoyingly well, actually, I can't find anything to complain about."

"Wish I could say the same," Nathan sighed as he headed back down. "Louis wants to keep the power off until he can do a full examination and make sure we're not gonna have a repeat. We'll have to bring in a generator, floodlights, tons of extension cords and powerstrips..."
“It's the only sensible thing to do. Better that than take any risks. There used to be a guy, had a workshop out by the docks. I dunno if he's still around but he'd have a generator and won't charge a fortune.”

"Thanks, Duke, I'll look into it. Guess we're done for the day," Nathan rubbed a hand over his face.

“Looks like it,” Duke agreed. “You should take the rest of the day off,” he frowned, concerned about Nathan. Not that that was a new thing, but at least now he could tell him that.

"No time, if I don't have to stay here then there are showings I should be doing, I'm way behind on those."

“Nathan,” Duke said sharply. “You wanna think about this for a minute? You almost fucking died, like...two hours ago. You’re allowed time off after that.”

"But I didn't. I wasn't even hurt. Just shaken up. And I need to close some sales. No closings, no commission, no money - and no job."

“And when you drop dead of a heart attack due to stress? No life,” Duke pointed out stubbornly.

"Duke, it's not as bad as all that. I'm just a little tired."

“No? When did you last eat a proper meal? More to the point, when did you last eat? What about the last time you had a day off work? Or slept a solid eight hours?”

"I went out for a burger last night," Nathan protested. ‘Went out for’ was maybe stretching it a little for hitting a fast-food drive through, but still. Maybe it would make Duke forget about the other two questions.

“Really? A burger? That doesn't count as a proper meal. And it's now close to lunchtime and you haven't had anything to eat yet. What about a day off, and sleeping? Because (and I am gonna be brutally honest here) you look like shit.”

"Wow, thanks," Nathan said dryly. "I'll catch lunch on my way to my first showing."

“Nate,” Duke said softly. “Ok, that was harsh and I'm sorry, but I care and I can see what you're doing to yourself. If you really can't take the rest of the day, at least finish early and get yourself a good meal and an early night.”

Nathan face softened. "Duke, I'm touched, I really am," he said softly. "I'll do my best, but I can't make any promises. My numbers haven't been good - it's why I got assigned to this property, none of the other agents wanted it. If things don't look up, I'll lose my job."

“So this is, what? Some sort of fucked up punishment assignment?” Duke said bitterly.

"Yeah. Sorry. For what it's worth, it's the best assignment I've ever had."

“What the fuck?” Duke slammed his fist into the wall with a satisfyingly loud bang. “No fucking wonder no one's been able to sell it if that's the attitude. What is it? You're not doing a good enough job selling houses so here's one you definitely won't be able to sell to motivate you to sell the others and get taken off this assignment?”

Nathan jumped, startling at the loud bang. Dwight, packing up upstairs, called down to ask if everything was okay.
“Fucking brilliant,” Duke spat out. Not only had his home been left to go to rack and ruin, but it didn't seem as though anyone had even tried to sell it. Every realtor had just been going through the motions until their other sales had picked up enough for them to get taken off and someone else to take over. As if that wasn't enough, Nathan had just been pretending to be his friend to try to sell the place. The betrayal stung.

His temper flared, no matter how much he tried to control it. This new information was too much to process and he was furious. He let out an inarticulate shout of anger and every door in the house slammed at once.

A number of alarmed shouts came from the crews of workmen, who stampeded down the stairs and out the front door. Dwight fought his way through to Nathan. "You okay, Wuornos?"

"Yeah, fine, I'm fine. Weird draft, huh?" Nathan managed.

Duke glowered in the corner, still fuming but grateful for the release of slamming doors, even though it hadn't been intentional. He didn't like losing control like that and he hoped to fuck that no one had been hurt, but he couldn't deny that it had felt good. And he was kinda pleased that he'd manage to scare a house full of burly workmen, that should make scaring off potential buyers that bit easier. Because, armed with this new information, he had every intention of frightening off every buyer who walked through the door.

"Seen weirder," Dwight shrugged. "Should head out, though. Best not to stay if it's a safety issue."

Without a way to refuse, Nathan could only worry about Duke. He couldn't hear him, but he could feel the ghost's anger, reminding him of the first time he'd realized Duke was more than just the eeriness of an old empty run-down house.

Duke drifted closer to them. With a low, deep, growl, so unlike his natural voice, he told them to get out. He didn't want anyone in his house. Not now, not ever.

Dwight scowled and looked around. "Someone's playing pranks, sounds like."

"Yeah...pranks," Nathan mumbled, looking hurt and sad - and more stressed and worn-down than ever.


Nathan's shoulders slumped and he headed for the door.

"Don't worry," Dwight thumped him on the shoulder, making Nathan stagger. "We'll figure out who's playing tricks and take care of 'em."


Dwight didn't seem to get the more complicated phrase, entirely unintimidated as he strolled out. Nathan gave an apologetic look over his shoulder as he slunk out as well.

Just to make his point, Duke waited until they'd both cleared the doorway and slammed it closed behind them. Still angry, he drifted off to his thinking corner.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The work on the house is finished and it's ready to be sold...

Nathan kept the house empty for a couple of days, ostensibly while they found a generator but really just to be safe. If Duke was still angry enough to be slamming doors, he didn't want anyone to be caught in the crossfire. After all, Duke had once kept a weapon stashed, which suggested that he wasn’t exactly unused to violence and that, combined with some uncontrollable anger, could lead to someone being hurt.

Duke was grateful to have his quiet, empty, house back and he seethed to himself. He wasn't a stranger to being used, but it hurt that Nathan had just befriended him as a way to get rid of the punishment assignment. Duke had trusted him. And wasn't that a stupid mistake? He should've known better. Life had shown him over and over again that he couldn’t trust anyone and yet here he was, sucked in once more.

He thought about nothing else, drifting quietly around the house as his anger subsided, replaced by something more like guilt. He supposed it wasn't really Nathan's fault, it was his boss's doing. This place should never have been turned into some sort of punishment for not selling the easier houses. It deserved better.

The more he thought about it, the more Nathan’s words haunted him. ‘It was the best assignment I’ve ever had.’ That said it all and Duke was hit with a wave of sympathy for Nathan. He deserved better too. He had a shitty boss, no friends to speak of, and threw everything of himself into work (which apparently went unnoticed). He groaned softly as he realised he'd directed his anger at entirely the wrong person.

The contractors returned, with a generator, and work started once more. Duke kept looking hopefully for Nathan, wanting to talk to him and clear things up. Mostly to apologize for being a dick. But he didn't come back.

Slowly, the dawning realisation of what he'd done hit Duke. He'd chased away his only ally in this whole horrible situation. His only friend. In short, he'd fucked up. Big time. He sighed to himself as he thought about how appropriate it was. He'd spent his whole life fucking up, why would he think his death would be any different.

Days passed with Duke keeping a watchful eye on the repair work, simultaneously looking for any sign that Nathan might be arriving soon. He listened to all the conversation, thinking that someone might mention him, at least then he'd know he was ok. Nothing was said.

Before long, the repairs were done. The house still needed redecorating - paint, wallpaper, carpeting, cabinets, light fixtures, appliances, sinks and tile for the bathroom and kitchen, and so on - but anything that had actually been broken was now either fixed or stripped out.

It had turned out to be a more extensive renovation that anyone had realized. The house boasted new wiring, plumbing, siding, and roof. All traces of mold and mildew had been scoured away. Rotted ceiling plaster and drywall had been torn out and redone, the ruined carpeting had been
pulled out. All the wood that was swollen and warped by moisture - floorboards, support beams, kitchen counters and cabinets, doors and window frames - had been either replaced or removed for remodeling. There was new glass and new screens in the windows. The heating and cooling systems had been updated. The chimney had been thoroughly cleaned and patched. The bathrooms had been stripped of tile to clean out the decay beneath. It was like a brand new house, ready for the new owners to come in and remodel to their liking.

The contractors packed away all their tools and Duke watched them leave, almost sadly. They'd done a good job and while he hated the fact that his home was being sold while he was still here, he was pleased that no corners had been cut. Their company hadn't been the same as Nathan's, hadn't really been company at all, but having people around had made him feel less alone. Now it was just him and the house once more and it was quiet. Too quiet.

There was no more stalling, whichever realtor picked up the punishment assignment now (and Duke had no doubts that it wouldn't be Nathan, not after what he'd done to scare him off), they'd be arriving with potential buyers soon enough. He wondered if there was any point trying to chase people away. Maybe he should just deal with it. He'd learn to live with whoever bought it and if it was someone he hated, well that was no less than he deserved.

After the contractors left, Duke spent a long night worrying about what was coming next and dimly hoping that now the house was fully repaired and ready to redecorate it would attract the right sort of people.

The following morning was bright and sunny and Duke heard a car pull up onto the driveway. Steeling himself, he peered out of the window to see which realtor was arriving this time. Recognising Nathan's car, relief flooded through him and he zoomed excitedly down the stairs, intending to meet him at the door, to shower him with apologies and find out what he could do to make this right again. As he got there, he thought that being so full on might not be a good idea, he didn't want to spook Nathan any more than he already was, so he backed away into the corner and waited.

Nathan stopped on the step, however, and knocked politely. "Duke?" he called softly. "Are you there? I'm sorry. Will….will you let me come in? If you don't want me anymore, I'll understand. If I quit, your house will be assigned to someone else. I guess it was coming anyhow. Better to quit than be fired, right?"

He sounded so defeated that Duke's heart broke for him. “Nathan, just...come in so we can talk. Please.” He said softly, hoping Nathan could still hear him.

Whether it was the thick door between them, or the fact that Nathan was outside the house and therefore outside of Duke's home, Nathan couldn't hear him. With every second that ticked by, he looked more and more hurt. "Duke, please," he tried again. "I don't even know what I did wrong. If you just let me in so we can talk, I'll make it up to you, I swear."

Duke moved closer to the door and tried again. “Nathan, I want to talk to you too, can you just come in, please.”

But Nathan still couldn't hear him, and what little hope he had was quickly fading from his expression. "Okay, Duke. I understand. I'm sorry. For what it's worth, I'll miss you. You were a good friend."

Panicked by the thought of Nathan leaving, Duke summoned up all of his energy, all of his concentration, and wished he'd practiced opening doors more than he had slamming them closed. Slowly, he worked the lock, rewarded by a soft click as it released. Desperately hoping for more
success than last time he'd tried this, Duke turned the handle and pulled the door open. It didn't fly open as well as he'd hoped but he did manage to move it so it was ajar and he resorted to praying that it was enough for Nathan to realise he was welcome.

Nathan had started to turn away, but he paused when he heard the lock click. He watch the door swing open, just a little. "Duke?" He asked, cautiously poking his head inside.

"Nathan, can you hear me now? I can't move the door any further."

Nathan frowned. Half inside the house and half out as Nathan was, Duke's voice was faint and garbled. But Nathan didn't sense any hostility, so he ventured fully inside. "Duke? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Are you? I'm so sorry Nathan, please don't leave again, can we talk?" Duke tried to speak to him again, even as he made the lights glow. Nathan looked so worried, so scared, that Duke wanted to make sure he knew he was welcome.

"Duke, thank god, I thought…" Nathan all but collapsed on the stairs.

"Nathan," Duke said quietly, pushing the door closed as gently as he could. He sank down next to Nathan. "I'm so sorry and I'm so pleased you came back so I can apologize. I was pissed off and being a dick. I shouldn't have flown off the handle like that. Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?"

"I'm just glad you don't hate me," Nathan said softly.

"I don't hate you, never did. I got angry and lost control and I know nothing I can say will make up for that but if you can bring yourself to forgive me, I'll do everything I can to help you sell this place. If you're not giving up on us, that is."

"No, of course not, but why are you talking like that? What do you mean you can't make up for it? Why wouldn't I forgive you?"

"Because I scared you, and everyone else who was here, except maybe Sasquatch. Because I threw you out when all you've done is show me kindness. Because I was a dick. And I wouldn't blame you if you walked away and handed this place off to someone else, but I really really hope you don't," Duke replied miserably.

"You were angry. It happens. And don't worry, I'm the low man on the totem pole, I couldn't hand this off even if I wanted to. Not unless I quit my job entirely."

"Guess not," Duke said quietly. "I'm glad you came back. I thought I'd pushed you away for good."

"To be honest, if I'd had a choice I would have stayed away - I thought that was what you wanted. I mean, you made it pretty damn clear you wanted me gone."

His words pierced Duke like a knife. "I'm sorry, Nathan, I'm so sorry. That was the last thing I wanted. I shouldn't have pushed you away like that. I kept looking for you. Every day. But you didn't come back and I was so scared that you never would and I've never had a friend like you before, and I fucked it up just like I do everything else and now you've come back and I don't know what I can do to fix this."

"Nothing to fix, Duke," Nathan smiled softly. "I'm here, you're here, neither of us is mad at each other. I'm not leaving you and you don't want me gone. You haven't fucked anything up. You're
my best friend too."

“You really mean that?” Duke asked, hesitantly.

"I really do," Nathan smiled. "I'm so glad you're not mad at me."

“I’m just glad you came back,” Duke told him.

“Had to come back,” Nathan smiled softly. “Replaced your tablet.”

“Thanks, Nate,” Duke said quietly, humbled that Nathan would do that after he’d given him so much grief. “So. We've got a house to sell, right?”

"Sure do. What do you think of the work? Think she's ready?"

“Yeah, she's ready,” Duke smiled sadly. “The work is brilliant, thank you for finding the right people to do it. They've all done a great job.”

Nathan smiled. "If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing right. Hopefully I can find some people who understand that."

“Hope so,” Duke said quietly. “I'm...uh. I'm not gonna make it difficult for you. I owe you that much.”

"Well, if there's someone you really don't like, someone you honestly think you'd hate to live with, I won't mind. It's your home, after all. I don't get much control over who I'll be bringing - if someone calls and asks to see the house, I pretty much have to show it to them."

“Thanks. I'll try not to hate everyone but yeah, if it's someone I really couldn't live with then I might have to raise a bit of hell,” Duke smiled.

Nathan considered that. "Might be worth thinking about the kind of people you'll get if this place gets a rep as a haunted house."

“Ghost hunters?” Duke laughed. “Please, no, I'd never get a minutes peace.""

"Either that or kookydooks New Agers who'll be constantly doing crazy things in an effort to communicate with you."

“No. No. Nate, if that happens you have to promise to save me.”

Nathan laughed. "Just saying. Maybe plan your theatrics to not be obviously ghost-induced." 

“If you have any ideas on how to do that, I'm all ears,” Duke said dryly.

"Fair," Nathan admitted.

“I'll work on it,” Duke told him, racking his brain for ways he could ghost without seeming like a ghost. “So how've you been?” He asked, eyeing Nathan critically.

"You can imagine," Nathan sighed. "My boss chewed me out for, and I quote, 'letting some dumb kids come in and stage a prank'."

“Fuck,” Duke said. “I'm so sorry, Nate. I didn't mean that to happen.”

"It's okay, I know you didn't mean to. The boss is kind of an ass anyhow. If it wasn't this, it would
have been something else."

“Kind of an ass?! That's the understatement of the century,” Duke snorted. “Your boss is a total asshole. I'm betting the punishment assignment was his idea, yes? And he treats you like shit. You deserve better.”

“Maybe, but I need this job,” Nathan shrugged.


"Thanks," Nathan smiled, admitting softly, "It helps to hear it."

“Then I'll keep reminding you,” Duke smiled and placed his hand on Nathan's shoulder.

Nathan smiled and placed his hand on his shoulder where Duke's rested.

“You’re a good friend, Nate,” Duke told him. “But right now I'm probably keeping you from work.” He reluctantly moved away.

"I just came to inspect the place and make sure it's ready for showing. I have time. We can talk for a while yet."

Duke smiled. “Well, as you might expect, I've...kept a close eye on things. It's all good, nothing got missed, it's fixed up and ready for redecorating, tiling, all that stuff. It's ready for showings whenever you are.”

"I almost hate to," Nathan looked around the hall.

“Yeah,” Duke said, filled with sadness. “Gotta be done though.”

"I know. But hopefully we'll get a nice family. Think what this place will look like once it's redecorated. It'll be beautiful again."

“It will,” Duke agreed. “Some nice creams and cosy reds for the living room. Dramatic grey in the dining room. Peaceful blues and greens in the bedrooms,” he went on wistfully. “None of this paint everything magnolia shit."

Nathan wrinkled his nose. "Resale value. As if a home is just something to buy and sell, and not the place you live."

“Exactly! I mean, there's nothing wrong with a good, rich, cream colour on the walls, it can work well with a certain style, but at least choose it, don't just do it by default because that's what's expected. Y’know?”

Nathan nodded. "So many people never make their house their own, because they're always looking ahead to selling it."

Duke nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah, and that's stupid. You wouldn't do that with anything else. Houses deserve to be homes. They all have personalities and little quirks. Like old cars “

"Exactly," Nathan smiled. "In fact, there's more of a reason to customize your home than any other possession in your life."

“Yes! It's not just a roof and four walls, it's your sanctuary, your haven. Make it your own, love it, enjoy it.”
"Exactly. The other day I saw a really attractive tile, white with veins of aqua running through it, imagine putting that in the bathroom and then painting the rest of the walls that same shade of aqua for a counterpoint."

“Perfect! See, you get it. So many people don’t.”

"Yeah. I don't know if we can find people are are decent and have a good sense of aesthetics. Seems like a bit much to ask."

Duke let out the ghost equivalent of a sigh. “Yeah, it is a bit. Still, long as they're not gonna rip walls down and pull out all the original features, I can deal. Gotta get you off this shitty assignment somehow.”

"I meant it when I said it's the best assignment I've ever had. I'd stay on it forever if I could," Nathan said earnestly.

Duke smiled. “I'm glad you love the place as much as I do. Buyers’ll see that too.”

"I just hope I can find one that loves it as much as we do."

“You will,” Duke told him, confident in Nathan's ability to find the right buyer. “C'mon, we'll do a walk round, you haven't seen the place yet. Dwight did an amazing job with the panelling in the living room.”

"He always does," Nathan smiled, leading to the living room.

“See? He matched the missing panels perfectly. Wouldn't even know they're not the originals.”

"Impressive. He always does this, no matter how old or obscure the decor he's trying to match. Where does he find this stuff?" Nathan wondered.

"You don't know?" Duke laughed. "He makes it. Watched him do it. He matches the wood as closely as possible, cuts it to size, adds the detail, all that routing and coving, then matches the colour to some antique furniture wax. He spent hours just applying coats of wax until it was just the right shade. Seriously, the guy's talented. He should be in the restoration business, not general contracting."

"Seriously? I mean, I guess I'm not surprised, given how he talks about old houses and the importance of quality workmanship, but that's nuts. What's he doing as a contractor? And why isn't he changing me the arm and leg that kind of work deserves? I figured he knew someone with some kind of salvage business where he could find old fixtures and furnishings."

“I think he enjoys it, he was here late some evenings when he didn't have to be. The metal stuff he bought in from somewhere, door handles and the like, but the wooden bits he made himself. You should see how closely he matched the bannisters on the stairs! Oh, and the skirting boards in the bedroom where they got damaged by the leak.” Forgetting Nathan couldn't see him, Duke flew excitedly out of the room, wanting to show off Dwight's handiwork.

Nathan methodically went to each place Duke had mentioned, inspecting and admiring the work. Duke hadn't been wrong, the matching was so impressive that even though he'd seen the house before the work, Nathan couldn't actually tell which parts were new and which had simply been cleaned up.

“It's good, right?” Duke checked. “I can't tell the difference and I've lived here for twenty years. Well, ten, strictly speaking. Anyway. What do you think?”
"I think the place looks great. I wish I could see it once it's redecorated."

"Yeah," Duke said sadly. "Guess the new owners won't be too pleased if you just decided to drop in."

"Once a place is sold, that's it," Nathan said slowly, just now realizing what that meant. He swallowed around a lump in his throat, his stomach cold.

"Yeah," Duke lapsed into silence, lost in thought. After a moment, he shook his head and smiled again. "Better make sure they're good people, then." He announced cheerfully.

"The best," Nathan managed to force the words past his constricted throat. "People who will be just as good friends to you as I ever was. Like family even, maybe."

"Thanks, Nathan," Duke said quietly. "Don't know what I'd do without you."

"Make friends with the new owners. Move on. Forget me," Nathan tried to sound normal, and failed.

"I won't forget you, Nate," Duke promised. "How could I? After everything you've done for me. I wish I could do something to repay you."

"You already have, Duke. You're my friend," Nathan smiled sadly.

"Yeah," Duke smiled back at him, wishing (not for the first time) that Nathan could see him. "Doesn't feel like enough, though."

"It is, believe me," Nathan said softly. "You have no idea what this means to me."

"Likewise," Duke answered quietly.

"So, yeah. I have to get to work selling this place soon enough. For now I just want to….take a moment," Nathan told him.

"Take as many moments as you need," Duke told him. "I'm not going anywhere," he tried to laugh.

Nathan smiled. "You're a good friend, Duke."

"You are too. And this conversation would be much more cheerful with a few beers or a bottle of whisky."

"Sorry, can't help you there," Nathan smiled ruefully.

"That's probably a good thing," Duke smiled. "I always did drink too much."

"At least you don't have to worry about that now," Nathan offered tentatively.

"Well it's not like I ever worried about it before," Duke laughed.

"You know what I mean," Nathan grinned.

"I do," Duke grinned back.

"Asshole," Nathan chuckled.

"Seriously? Asshole? That's the best insult you could come up with?"
Nathan flipped off the empty air, smirking.

Duke laughed. “Yeah yeah, resort to hand gestures because you know I can't retaliate. Asshole.”

"Poor baby," Nathan grinned.

“Nathan, I'm hurt,” Duke replied, mock offended. “Such cutting words coming from one so sweet and innocent.”

Nathan snorted. "Sweet and innocent, me, right."

“Well, sweet anyway. I have no idea about the innocent.”

Nathan actually blushed. "Shut up."

“Which bit am I shutting up about?” Duke asked, half laughing. “Telling you that you're actually quite sweet or questioning how innocent you are?”

"Both," Nathan said firmly.

“Ok,” Duke agreed amiably. “For now, anyway.”

"You can ask other questions about my life, if you want,” Nathan offered generously.

“Ok…” Duke said. “Are you from Haven originally? Grow up here?”

"Yeah. Born and bred, never been further than Portland."

“Really? There's a whole world out there to explore, some great places to see. What kept you here?”

"I guess….I always knew my life would be here."

“That's...so there was nothing specific? You just...stayed? No family obligations or whatever?”

"Well, my old man wanted me to become a cop. Family business, so to speak, police for generations. I wanted to be a doctor, so I went to college for pre-med. Couldn't hack med school, though. Dropped out before I got kicked out, took whatever jobs would pay the bills."

“Well...I'm uh...glad you didn't become a cop,” Duke said, remembering Nathan's surname and putting two and two together, kicking himself for not making the connection sooner. “You said you don't talk to your old man, right?”

Nathan nodded. "Yeah, he, uh, he never really forgave me for not going into the academy."

“That's probably a good thing. He... might have a few words to say about me. Assuming we're talking about the same person.”

"You knew him? Garland Wuornos? Chief of Haven PD?"

“That’s him, yeah, you could say that he and I crossed paths.”

Nathan remembered the hidden gun. "So, uh, not in a good way?"

“No. And do me a favour, please?”

"Of course."
“If you decide you want to know - and I would strongly suggest that you don't - ask me and not him. I don't mind you knowing, but I'd rather you got the full story from me and not a biased version from someone who doesn't know all of it and never bothered to listen.”

"No need to worry, haven't talked to him in nearly ten years, not gonna start by asking about a ghost. Doesn't matter to me anyhow. That's all behind you now."

“Thanks,” Duke said quietly. “So, med school, huh? Must have been tough.”

"Yeah. Too tough for me," Nathan sighed.


Nathan shrugged. "Should've set my sights lower, I guess. Might as well've been a cop. Not like this is great job."

“Don’t say that, Nate, it's not a case of setting your sights lower, you just didn't have the right support to get through something that soul destroying,” Duke told him. “And you’d’ve hated being a cop. You care too much.”

"Maybe. Funny thing is, I don't actually hate being a realtor. When you find the perfect match and the buyer walks in and they're just… they're home. That's a pretty amazing moment."

“I bet,” Duke smiled. “And that's what I mean about caring. It matters to you that someone finds their next home. You don't just want to sell the house and get your commission, you want them to be happy.”

"Well yeah. Of course. What's the point otherwise?"

“That's precisely my point, other realtors are in it for the money. They don't give a shit about the home or the people. You're different. You care.”

"Point of living is to make the world a better place," Nathan shrugged. "Couldn't manage to save lives but I can at least help people find a home they'll love and be happy in."

“That's a good world view to have,” Duke smiled sadly. “Wish there were more people that thought like that.”

"I think there's more'n most people realize. We can't all be Mother Teresa but we can all make the world better in our own little ways."

“Maybe,” Duke said. “I've never met anyone like you before. Someone who wants to make a difference.”

"I'm not special," Nathan shook his head. "I don't make much of a difference. This is just the best I can do. Second rate."

“You are and it isn't second rate,” Duke insisted. “Do you have any idea how much people's homes mean to them? It's a huge part of their lives. You make the difference between a house they like and a home they love. Don't underestimate that.”

"Thanks, Duke," Nathan smiled. "You're a good man, and a good friend."

“Nah, there's always been far more bad than good in me.”

"Not what I've seen."
“No? I seem to remember you being pretty shocked that I had a gun here. One that I didn't clear out before...well, before. And losing my temper, throwing you out, scaring the shit out of everybody. No, I'm not a good person. I wasn't when I was alive and I'm sure as hell not now I'm dead.”

"Everyone loses their temper sometimes. What’s more important, you've been my friend. You keep me company, you worry when I'm pushing myself too hard, you're a good friend."

“Thanks,” Duke said quietly, not believing him but not prepared to argue the point either.

"I mean it, Duke. You're the best friend I've ever had."

“That's... Nate, that's not really a good thing. Your best friend is a dead man. We need to find you some living friends. People you can spend time with, socialise with.”

"I don't have time. And maybe it's not ideal that you're a ghost, but you're still a better friend than any of the living ones I've ever had."

“You'll have time when you're not stuck selling this place. There are far better people than me to be friends with.”

"I don't want 'better' friends. I don't even think there is such a thing."

“See? And you said you're not sweet,” Duke teased lightly. Nathan blushed. "Yeah, well, you said you're not a good person."

“Maybe I'm a better ghost than I was a person,” Duke relented.

"Could be. I imagine that would change your perspective. But you're a good person now, which is what matters."

“Thanks Nate. You're a good friend too, you know that?” Duke put his hand on Nathan's shoulder. Nathan smiled. "I try."


"So do you," Nathan smiled.

Duke rolled his eyes. “Fine. If I say I agree, will you shut up?”

"That works," Nathan chuckled.

“Good,” Duke smiled. “And not that I'm trying to get rid of you or anything, but don't you have work to do? I don't want to make you run late.”

"Yeah," Nathan sighed. "Much rather stay and talk to you, though."

“Well you know where to find me if you ever actually take a minute off work,” Duke said. “Otherwise I guess I'll see you when you get some showings booked in.”

"Yeah, I'll try to come by as much as I can, but the showings will start soon."

“Good, that's good,” Duke said, not entirely convincingly. “I'll see you when I see you. Just let yourself in, I'm still not great at opening doors.”
"Will do. And Duke….thanks for being such a good friend," Nathan said softly.

“Back at you, Nate. Go kick some ass today.”

"Sir, yes sir," Nathan grinned, snapping a salute.

Duke rolled his eyes and laughed. “See ya, Nate.”

"Later," Nathan said, reluctantly heading out.

Duke watched him go, a sad half smile on his face. Somewhere along the line, he'd grown to like this Damned Realtor, had made a friend, someone who made life (death?) bearable again. And soon that was going to be a thing of the past, with new owners who might not even notice he was here.

Nathan's thoughts followed a similar dark path as he headed back to the office, thinking about the impending loss of his only friend. At least he could try to find a good family to move in, people Duke would like - and ideally, who would be able to perceive him. Just because Nathan would be alone didn't mean Duke had to be, too.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Showings start on the house - they don't go well and Nathan's job is at risk...

Nathan led his first potential buyers up the steps of the rebuilt house, extolling its virtues and thinking how much Duke would hate these people. They perpetually found ways to stress how rich they were, and made it extremely obvious they felt like everyone should leap to do their bidding because of it.

Duke lurked in the corner of the hallway, watching as they came in and trying to reserve judgement until he'd at least heard what they were saying. He took in their designer clothes and general air of snobbishness and immediately decided 'nope'.

That decision was further compounded when he heard the woman remark how run down the house was and how it might be better to knock it down and start again. Annoyed, Duke slammed the living room door.

Everyone jumped, but the pair quickly regained their composure, the man remarking disdainfully how there clearly was a draft, what an old wreck this must be.

Glowering, Duke tried to give off a menacing air of 'get out', the way he'd done before he met Nathan. For good measure, he turned on the kitchen taps. They hadn't been used regularly and made a satisfying groaning noise as the water started to flow.

"What the hell is going on here?" the man demanded.

Nathan rushed to turn off the taps, smiling blandly and making empty reassurances.

Duke smirked to himself and made the lights flicker wildly. There was no way he wanted these people, despite his assurances to Nathan that he wouldn't make things difficult for him. There were limits.

"You claimed the electrical wiring was new!" the woman turned on Nathan. "What kind of fraud are you?"

"Ma'am, I assure you -" Nathan started.

It was one thing them insulting the house, quite another for them to insult Nathan and Duke flew into a rage. The doors swung wildly, every tap turned on at the same time and the lights went out completely as he shouted. "Out!"

The pair screamed and fled, flying out the door, leaping down the steps, and running wildly up the driveway. Nathan laughed. "Didn't much like 'em, huh?" "Nope," Duke replied, still offended on Nathan's behalf. "They don't get to say that to you."

Nathan smiled. "Sweet of you, Duke. Some people are just like that, though."
“Doesn't mean I have to like it. Or put up with it.”

"And you doubted that you're a good friend," Nathan smiled fondly.

Duke rolled his eyes. “Don't start that again,” he laughed.

"All right, all right. Got two more showings today, think you can play nice?” he smirked.

“I'll try but if they're anything like those two then probably not,” Duke answered honestly. “Sorry, I know I said I wasn't going to be difficult but…”

“It's okay, I can't say as I blame you, those two were a horror. If I'd had a say I wouldn't have let them near this place.”

“Yeah, I know you don't get a say in it. Did you like the taps thing?” Duke laughed.

"Impressive," Nathan grinned. "When'd you pick that one up?"

“When the plumbers were here,” Duke admitted. “It was kinda funny watching them try to work out why it was happening.”

Nathan chuckled. "You're a bad man," he said fondly.

“Yeah, I keep telling you that,” Duke laughed.

"Well, this is the worst I've seen, so there you are," Nathan told him.

“Well, it'll give them something to talk about at dinner parties with their equally awful friends,” Duke grinned.

"Ugh, can you even imagine that?"

“I'd rather not. Can you think of anything worse? All expensive suits and fancy dresses and using the right cutlery. Yeah, no, not my style.”

"And talking about hedge funds and IPOs and, ugh."

“Yeah, ugh is right. Let's hope the next showings are nicer people,” Duke tried to be upbeat.

"They could hardly be worse."

“True. I will try to be nice, I know you need to sell this place,” Duke promised.

"A fair chance is all I'm asking," Nathan nodded.

“I can do that,” Duke replied, trying to convince himself that maybe it wouldn't be so bad having people around all the time.

"Maybe they'll be nice. It's not unthinkable. You like me, right? So you might like the new residents."

“Might,” Duke said grudgingly. He'd always been good with people, charming, flirtatious, even, but sharing his space with nowhere to retreat to was a whole other matter.

"Not feeling too optimistic, huh?" Nathan asked.

“Sorry. You're right, it'll be fine.”
"I'll do my best for you."

"I know you will," Duke smiled. "Thanks Nate, this whole thing is much easier thanks to you."

"I'm glad if it helps," Nathan said.

"It really does," Duke replied emphatically. "When's the next showing?"

Nathan checked his watch. "Ten, so about an hour out."

Duke nodded to himself. "In that case, go and get yourself some breakfast and a coffee. I'll try not to wreck the place while you're gone."

"Thanks. Wish I could bring you something too."

"Thanks, I appreciate the thought," Duke smiled. "See you later."

The next showing didn’t go well but at least that one hadn’t been down to Duke - it was an older man, looking for a house to renovate as a wedding present for his daughter and her soon-to-be-wife, who decided it was just a little bit more work than he wanted to take on.

The one after that had been nothing short of a clusterfuck. Duke hadn’t even done anything. It was a young family and Duke thought they might be ok. He lurked in the corner, trying not to be menacing, just keeping his distance and watching, assessing whether he could spend the next...however many years with them. No sooner had they walked into the living room when the little girl started screaming, staring into the corner where Duke was.

Honestly, Duke wasn’t sure who was more shocked. Feeling guilty for scaring her with his mere presence, he moved out of the room and made himself scarce until they’d scurried out, offering Nathan hasty apologies for their daughters behaviour.

Over the next two weeks, Nathan brought in potential buyer after potential buyer. Some were like the first couple and Duke used every trick in his repertoire to frighten them off. Others seemed more likeable but Duke found reasons to chase off every single one, his most notable excuse being that one couple had wanted to paint the kitchen yellow. Nathan had rolled his eyes in exasperation at that one, but hadn’t actually complained which Duke was relieved about. It wasn’t that he wanted to make Nathan’s life any more difficult, exactly, it was just....

It was really fucking hard watching his house being sold. Knowing that he’d be stuck with whoever bought it, either until they sold it to someone else or until they died. Knowing that he’d have to tolerate everything they did, their stuff in his home, all the changes they’d make. It wouldn’t be his home any more and that wasn’t so easy to let go of.

At least he had Nathan’s company to help him through it. Nathan wasn’t able to spend much time in the house now that he was drumming up potential buyers, but he always popped by to let Duke know when to expect the next showing and stayed after each one to hear his thoughts.

After the next failed showing (this man wanted to knock the house down and build two smaller houses in it’s place, which Nathan had known really wasn’t going to go down well with Duke but he had no way to refuse to show the man the house), Nathan’s boss stormed in.

Well, someone stormed in through the front door, slammed it behind him, and started shouting. Duke could only presume it was Nathan’s boss.

He was an older man, well into his fifties, heavyset, carrying a gold trimmed briefcase, and
wearing a fake-looking hairpiece balanced precariously atop his head. “Wuornos! Get your ass out here and explain to me what the effing hell you’re doing. Do you have some sort of new sales prevention technique I don’t know about?”

Duke bristled, wanting to leap in and defend Nathan. Knowing that he could potentially make things worse rather than better, he wisely decided to wait and see what happened.

"Sir, with all due respect, it was never likely that we'd sell the property at the first viewing," Nathan said patiently. "It was an understatement - selling any property at the first viewing was akin to a hole in one. On a par five. "To keep costs down we did repairs but no redecorating, so it would need a lot of work still. Not every potential buyer wants that."

Indignant at being questioned, Roland Holloway drew himself up to his full height. Poking his finger into Nathan's chest with every word, he carried on shouting. “It is your job to make them want that, Wuornos.”

Duke watched through narrow eyes, willing Nathan to punch the guy. A brief flutter of guilt crossed his mind before it was replaced by anger. Nathan didn't deserve this. Well, no one deserved to be treated like this, actually, but especially not Nathan who was trying his hardest to get the sales he needed to keep his asshole boss happy.

"I am doing my best, sir," Nathan bit back a sigh. "You know that this economy isn't making things easy on anyone."

“You think I don't know that?! I employ you to get the job done, not just to do your best,” Holloway sneered.

"I am aware of that, sir. I will find the right people."

Duke looked on. Nathan's expression was flat and calm, carefully concealing the emotions that Duke knew he'd be feeling. No one, no one, did that to Nathan. Not on Duke's watch, that was for sure.

“Oh, you're aware of it? You'll find the right people? Wuornos, you don't know your ass from your elbow and you are incapable of finding the right people,” Holloway taunted him.

Anger rising in him, Duke was aware of the lights starting to flicker and he forced himself to calm down. Ghost stuff at this point would only make things worse for Nathan.

Nathan's face gave nothing away but his body tensed at the flickering light, knowing it would get him into trouble.

“For chrissakes man! You couldn't even get the electrics sorted. I've thrown good money after bad at this little project of yours and if you don't have it sold by the end of the month, you're out on your ear.”

Nathan refused to flinch, his expression stiff. "I understand, sir."

“Oh, you understand,” Holloway went on. “That's really good to know. Perhaps if you understood a little bit more about selling houses, you'd have got rid of this run down hovel months ago.”

That was the final straw for Duke. He'd been fighting to control his temper ever since the man had walked in and started harassing Nathan, finding it more and more difficult with each comment he heard. But the mocking tone of Holloway's voice, the way he insulted Nathan's knowledge and ability, and now calling the house a hovel? No, that was too much for Duke to bear listening to any
He flew at Holloway with an inarticulate cry of rage, the lights flickering crazily as doors slammed throughout the house.

Holloway glared at Nathan. “You've let those kids in to play pranks again, haven't you?” He accused.

"I have the only key we know of, and I double check that the doors are locked every time I leave. The only way anyone could be getting in is if someone out there we don't know about was given a key by the previous owner."

“The previous owner was a no-good low life who everyone hated. He didn't have anyone to give a key to,” Holloway snorted at Nathan's explanation.

Nathan frowned. "Even if that were true, one shouldn't speak ill of the dead."

Holloway scoffed. “Why? It's not like he can hear me. Crocker deserved everything he got.”

Nathan's scowl deepened. "It's tasteless and crude."

Duke listened, glowering menacingly as this man badmouthed him. This man who he didn't even know, who must know him by reputation only. He glanced at Nathan, read the angry scowl on his face and tried to work out how upset he'd be at a few ghostly tricks. He settled for swooping at Holloway again. Even if he couldn't hear or feel anything, at least it made Duke feel better about doing nothing.

Somehow, and he didn't really know how it happened given the fact he wasn't trying, Nathan's stack of papers were blown off the counter, scattering across the floor.

“You were supposed to get the drafts fixed!” Holloway shouted. “Are you that effing useless that you can't manage a few small repairs?”

Nathan didn't even attempt to respond. What could he say? The only explanation would make him look insane. The way things were going, he'd be lucky if he wasn't fired on the spot.

Small repairs?! Duke's anger grew. Did this asshole have no idea how much had needed doing just to get this place habitable again? And calling Nathan useless after all his hard work? No. Just no. Not wanting to cause further trouble for Nathan, Duke decided to show Holloway a few things which couldn't be explained by drafts or pranks.

Grinning to himself, he started with the hairpiece, flipping it off Holloway's head and into the kitchen sink where he turned the taps on.

Holloway looked on in horror, clapping his hand to his head to try to cover the bald patch he was so vain about. He tried to shout at Nathan, to accuse him of something, but no words came out of his mouth.

Nathan's jaw gaped in astonishment. That was a new trick!

Duke laughed and went for the briefcase next, knocking it clean out of Holloway's hand and hurling it against the wall where it fell open, the contents littering the floor.

Holloway's face was a picture of terror and for his final party piece, Duke steeled himself and swooped through him, the force pushing Holloway back a step.
Staggering slightly, Holloway stuttered something unintelligible and turned to flee, leaving his briefcase forgotten on the floor as he ran out of the house.

Nathan barely held back his laughter until his boss was good and gone. He laughed so hard his stomach hurt and he gasped for breath.

Duke laughed with him. He hadn't had that much fun in years. “Sorry, Nate, I probably shouldn't have done that but you have to admit it was funny as fuck.”

"It really was," Nathan wheezed. "His face! " he fell apart in fresh gales of laughter.

“He couldn't even speak,” Duke hooted. “I don't think he'll be back in a hurry."

"Hell no," Nathan chuckled.

Duke grinned before he turned serious. “I'm sorry, I really did try not to cause you any trouble, but he was so fucking obnoxious and I...uh...couldn't stop myself,” he said ruefully.

"I'm not sure it was a bad thing. At least I don't look incompetent anymore. Don't know if it'll keep me from getting fired at the end of the month, but it's something."

“Yes. I mean, I know you said he was a bit of an ass but I think you were understating things.”

"Some bosses are like that."

“Well they shouldn't be,” Duke told him. “And...I'm sorry about the mess,” he looked around at the briefcase and it's contents, and the now soggy wig which was on the verge of causing the sink to overflow.

Nathan hastened to the sink to drag the wig out before he had a flood on his hands. "Hey, not like I care that his rug got all sippy."

"S'pose not,” Duke agreed. “I'd better learn to clean up after myself if I'm gonna keep up this sorta thing,” he smirked.

"Guess you'll have a long time to do it. I don't think I can find anyone by the end of the month, and if I can't find anyone you like, I doubt anyone else at the agency will. If this keeps up it might just go to auction, just to get rid of it."

“I'm sorry, Nathan,” Duke said quietly. “I know I'm making more problems for you. It isn't an easy sell anyway, the amount of work still left to do, and I'm just making it more difficult.”

"Duke, it's your home,” Nathan said earnestly. "Of course you don't want awful people living in it. No one likes asshole roommates."

“No, but your job is under threat and that's got a helluva lot to do with me and that isn't fair. I just wish I didn't hate everyone who walked through the door.”

"I've seen the people who've walked through that door, I can't blame you for hating them. It's not your fault. It's just...bad luck, is all."

“Some of ’em yeah, but others have been ok. I'm not taking responsibility for the screaming kid though, I didn't do anything then,” Duke tried to joke.

"She must have seen you. I wonder why she could and no one else."
“No idea,” Duke replied. “Weird, right? Like you can hear me but no one else can.”

"Pretty sure some of the people have heard you yelling when you get really pissed off. Might be no one else can hear you because there's no one else you've tried to talk to."

“No one else I wanted to talk to,” Duke told him.

"Well. Now you know that if you try talking to someone else, it might work."

“Yeah,” Duke said quietly and a little sadly.

"I'll keep trying to find someone good, even if I only have a few weeks left."

“I know you will, thanks Nate. I'm sure you'll find the right buyer,” Duke encouraged him. “And despite what that asshole said, your best is good enough.”

"Sure hope so. Hate to think of you getting stuck with some assholes."

“Me too, but I'll be fine if it happens. I can always hide in the attic or make their lives such a misery that they move out pretty quickly.”

"I just hope you don't get someone who wants to tear it down."

“Yeah, no, that would be the worst. I don't even know what would happen to me. I mean, I'm linked to the house, if the house goes…?”

Nathan paled. "No, no, you'd surely find a reason to stick around."

“I didn't exactly choose to get stuck here, Nate, it just sort of happened. I died and I found myself here and I can't leave and I don't know how or why. So if the house is knocked down, maybe I won't have a choice then either.”

"That can't happen," Nathan shook his head. "I'll….I'll talk to the historical society, see if I can get it declared a historic building and protected."

“Don't, Nathan, there's nothing historic about it, it's just old. Honestly, if I disappear or whatever, it wouldn't be the worst thing that ever happened to me. Probably better than being stuck here with people I hate.”

"But you don't know it'll always be like that. You could find good people, even if it's not the next set of people who own it."

“And if they're here for the rest of their lives? What? Fifty years or more? Yeah, no thanks.”

"You could scare 'em off.”

“Maybe. I couldn't even make happily ever after work when I got married, doubt there's much chance with roommates I haven't chosen,” Duke laughed.

Nathan blinked but only said, "Plenty of people have bad marriages, doesn't mean there's no hope."

“Yeah. Because I'm so easy to please that out of however many people who've walked through this door, I haven't found a single one I could live with,” Duke said bitterly. “I'm a dick, Nathan, I told you that. Just…find someone who wants to buy the place, I won't be difficult.”

"Duke. You shouldn't have to be miserable. You deserve better.”
“No, I really don't. Find someone. Anyone. Keep your job. That's more important.”

"There'll be other jobs, and yes, you absolutely do."

“Thanks, Nate,” Duke whispered, overcome with emotion that Nathan would risk losing his job over Duke's happiness.

"We'll figure something out," Nathan tried for a smile.

“Yeah,” Duke plastered a grin onto his face, even though Nathan couldn't see it. “Something'll work out. It always does.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

There's still no buyer for the house and Nathan loses his job....

“Duke! What the hell?” Nathan asked, exasperated after Duke had chased out yet another potential buyer.

It was two weeks after the incident with his boss and time was running out. He'd thought these buyers had been perfect. An older couple who wanted to settle into a new home before their retirement. They'd restored old houses before and wanted plenty of space for visiting family.

“What do you mean?” Duke tried (and failed) to sound innocent.

"You know damn well what I mean. Look, I get that it's your house and you have to live with the buyers, but what was wrong with these people? They were some of the nicest folks I've met, they clearly cared about making this a loving home and were willing to invest in finishing the restoration properly, quiet older couple with lots of cute grandkids coming to visit, I figured they were as perfect as we were gonna get!"

“They were nice,” Duke cautiously agreed. “But I'd be bored with an older couple. It'd probably be all talk radio and television documentaries.”

"Duke. I know you don't need me to remind you that we're running out of time.”

“I fucking know that!” Duke replied hotly. “I just…”

"You just what, Duke?” Nathan asked in exasperation, running a hand through his hair. "I don't mind finding you the right people but if I lose my job because you're being picky for no real reason…”

“There’s a reason…,” Duke answered evasively.

"Better be a damn good one. What's your reason?"

Duke groaned. The realization had come to him a couple of days ago. That the reason he was chasing buyers away had less to do with the house and far more to do with Nathan. He really hadn't wanted to say anything, would much rather keep that knowledge to himself, but Nathan's job was on the line and he deserved an explanation. “Because if someone buys it then you won't come round any more and I don't want that to happen.”

Nathan's jaw dropped, and he stared at the empty space where Duke was.

“And I'm sorry about your job, really, I am, but if the house gets sold then I lose my home and my only friend and I have nothing left,” Duke went on, trying to ignore the look of horror on Nathan's face.

"But Duke," Nathan said gently, "if the house doesn't get sold, you still lose me, and the house will go to auction, maybe get torn down? Isn't it better to find a good buyer?"
“No,” Duke answered him decisively. “Because at least I’d know I did everything I could to stop it happening instead of just watching.”

"Duke, I want to stay with you too, I do. Every time I've brought someone out here I've dreaded that I might make the sale even though it would save my job. But there's nothing you or I can do that will let you keep the house to yourself, or let me keep coming here. I'm sorry, I hate it, but I can't change it."

Duke smiled sadly. “I've dreaded it too. What if there was someone I couldn't scare off? And I know you can't keep coming here but I wanted you to keep visiting for as long as possible because forever is a really really long fucking time and even just an extra couple of days with someone to talk to, someone I like, would make all the difference.”

Nathan sat on the stairs, his expression defeated and tired. "I wanted more time too," he said softly. "You're my only friend, Duke. I'm gonna lose you, I'm gonna lose my job, probably lose my place when I can't keep up the payments….I'll have nothing left. What's even the point?"

“Nate,” Duke said gently, wincing at Nathan's words, the thoughts all too familiar to him. He placed his hand on Nathan's shoulder, desperately wanting to offer some comfort, hollow though it was. “Don't talk like that.”

"It's true, though." For a wild moment, Nathan thought 'that's one way we could stay together' - but he swallowed the thought, choked it down.

“It isn't. You see things differently from this perspective,” Duke tried. “Tiny things, the small parts of living that you don't notice when you're alive. The things that make life worth living. That's the point. That's what you have left.”

"Like?" Nathan asked dejectedly.

“Like the smell of rain on a freshly cut lawn. The first bite of food when you're really hungry. The beauty of the ocean at sunset, the light glinting off the waves. The sound as those waves crash against the shore. The feel of sunlight on your skin. Those tiny things that mean so much.”

"I wish I could give you those back," Nathan said quietly.

“Yeah,” Duke said gratefully. “Just don't underestimate them, they might not seem like a lot with all of the shit you've got on your plate, but…. Those tiny things make life beautiful.”

"Maybe. Just….doesn't feel like much, stacked up against what I'm losing, you know?"

“Trust me, I know,” Duke told him, trying to sound offhand even though he understood all too well. “And I'm sorry. You're about to lose everything and it's my fault and I don't know how I can ever apologise enough for that. For what it's worth, though, I do understand.”

"I don't blame you. Hell, I probably would have gotten fired anyhow," Nathan mumbled.

“You don't know that, and even if that was the case, I've definitely helped things along and I'm sorry. Will you be ok? Have you got savings or anything?"

"Some. Was saving to buy a house of my own someday. This'll sink those plans," Nathan sighed.

“Fuck, Nate, I'm so sorry. This is all my fault. Look, keep getting people through the door, there's still another week or so. I promise I won't object to any of them and I know it's ‘too little, too late’ but even if they want to knock the place down, I'll stay quietly in the attic and even you won't
know I'm here,” Duke said miserably.

"Duke, no, if they try to demolish this place, you do your damndest to stop it, okay?"

“Yeah, course,” Duke agreed. “But after they've bought it and your job is safe.”

"Or if I fail and get fired and anyone tries to demolish it, okay?"

“Anyone trying to demolish the place won't know what's hit 'em,” Duke promised. “What I did to your asshole boss will seem like child's play by comparison.”

"Good,” Nathan said, relieved. If nothing else, Duke would have his home. He'd be safe.

“You won't fail, Nate, not once I stop being a selfish bastard and let you get on with it.”

"I'll do my best. If it's someone really bad, you can still object, even if it means I lose my job.”

“No! I'm not gonna let that happen. Bad enough I've let it go on this long.”

"Duke, it's okay. I'd rather lose my job then see you miserable.”

“But if you lose your job then the house’ll be sold to whoever and I'll be miserable, so there's no difference, is there?”

"No, if I lose my job, another agent will take over and there's still a chance they'll find someone decent. Maybe not a great chance, but better than guaranteed misery.”

“That's a chance I'll take,” Duke replied stubbornly. “So go, get more showings booked in and I'll stay out of the way. If no one buys it, no one buys it, but I'm not going to keep making things worse for you.”

Nathan didn't look happy, but he knew there was no budging Duke, so he simply nodded.

“It'll be ok, Nate. For both of us. It'll work out one way or another.”

"I hope so,” Nathan sighed.

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With only ten days left until the deadline Holloway had given him, Nathan was spending most of his time on the phone, drumming up potential buyers and booking in showings. He hadn’t had much time to spend with Duke who was filling his time with roaming the house and trying not to think about the past.

He was worried about Nathan, the way he was talking. He lived for his job and Duke knew that losing it would come as a huge blow to him. But with Nathan occupied with phone calls and buyers, there was nothing Duke could do. So he drifted from room to room and he brooded.

True to his word, he was hiding out in the attic when buyers came round, only coming out once they’d left and he knew Nathan was alone. There was barely time for them to say hello to each other but Duke could see how tired Nathan was - the worry lines on his face were deepening, dark circles below his eyes, and he looked as though he was losing weight. Duke had tried to talk to him about it, but Nathan was always dashing off to make another phone call or show another house and had brushed off his concerns.

Finally, the day of reckoning came around and there was still no sale. Despite Duke being quiet,
and not even lurking menacingly, no one had made an offer on the house. Duke fretted all day, watching out of the window, hoping Nathan would arrive with some good news - either that there was a last minute buyer, or that his asshole boss had relented and not fired him. Or at least that he would come and say goodbye.

It was getting dark when Nathan’s car pulled up. Impatient, Duke flew to the front door to meet him, turning the lights on while Nathan fumbled with the lock and came in.

“Nate?” He said, hesitantly, not sure if he really wanted to hear what Nathan had to say. One look at Nathan’s face told him all he needed to know and he fell back, deflated.

"I'm sorry," Nathan said tiredly. "I couldn't find anyone for you."

"Crap," Duke said. “Guess that's it then.”

"Yeah. I'm sorry, Duke." Nathan rubbed a hand over his face. He sounded like he was about to cry. "This is all my fault."

“No, it's not! If anything, it's my fault, all the people I scared off. I'm sorry, Nate,” Duke's voice was full of guilt.

"Not your fault. If I wasn't shit at my job, I'd have found you better people, now you're gonna be unhappy and it's 'cause of me."

“Fuck that,” Duke said forcefully. “You found the right people but I was being a dick and chased them off. Yes, I'm gonna be unhappy but it's entirely my own fault. Not gonna stand here and let you blame yourself for it.”

"Coulnda done more. Should have. Now you'll get stuck with some asshole and I'm out of a job."

“I'm sorry, Nathan, I don't know what to say. There's nothing I can say. You've lost everything because of me.”

"Not because of you. Would've gotten fired anyhow."

“No, you wouldn't. I've fucked up your life, just like I fucked up my own, and there's nothing I can do. If I could, I'd do it in a heartbeat.”

"I know you would. And I mean it, boss had it in for me long before I ever set eyes on this place. So don't feel bad, okay?"

“Thanks for saying that, Nate. I don't believe it, but thank you for trying to make me feel better.”

"C'mon, Duke, you know it's true. Remember this whole assignment was meant to punish me. It was basically a way to find a reason to fire me."

“Maybe. No point going round in circles about it, anyway.”

"Yeah. So don't feel bad, okay?" Nathan said earnestly. "Please, Duke. At least give me that, knowing I didn't make you feel even worse about all this."

“Ok,” Duke replied quietly - glad, for once, that Nathan couldn't see his face and read the lie.

Nathan nodded, and was silent for a long moment before admitting, "They're going to make me turn over the keys when I get back."
“Yeah. Always knew that’d be the case,” Duke replied sadly.

"I'm gonna leave this tablet here. Maybe I can put it somewhere that won't be too obvious. I, uh...I made you some profiles. On Skype and stuff."

"Thank you," Duke said, barely above a whisper. "We could maybe message a bit, least til the battery runs down or someone finds it."

"I'd like that," Nathan smiled bitterly. "I'd say we could skype, but I don't think the microphone will pick you up, much less the camera. I'll leave it plugged in, so as long as no one finds it, we'll be okay."

“Yeah, long as it's not obvious, no one'll find it til someone buys the place. And you could pop over. Occasionally,” Duke pointed out. “If you wanted to, of course,” he added hurriedly.

"Never underestimate a nosy buy- wait, come over? I won't have the keys anymore. Are you able to leave the house? I had no idea.” Nathan perked up.

“Idiot,” Duke rolled his eyes. “No, I can't leave the house but I can unlock the door, you've seen me do it."

Nathan's eyes widened. "You did! I'd forgotten!” he looked immensely cheered. "And with the long driveway and scarce neighbors, it's pretty unlikely anyone will notice if I stop by at night every now and then. I mean, I'll still have to be careful, I'd get arrested if I'm caught, but still!"

Duke grinned. “See, I do have my uses.”

"This is amazing. I can't believe I can still come and see you!” Nathan beamed.

“You can come any time you like, Nate, I mean that. You're good company and you're welcome here any time,” Duke said, still smiling.

"I should probably give it a few days, but after that I promise I'll be back regularly,” Nathan said happily.

“Good,” Duke paused. “But don't feel you have to. Not often anyway. You have to find another job, make some friends, do some decoupage, go and have a few beers for me. Go and live your life.”

Nathan shook his head immediately. "I want to. You're my best friend."

“Nate, no. There's more to life than hanging out with a dead man.”

"Hanging out with a friend," Nathan corrected firmly.

“Ok, there's more to life than hanging out with a dead friend, then,” Duke countered. “Seriously, go and find some friends who can offer you more than I can, doesn't mean you can't pop by and see me too, just make sure you interact with real people sometimes.”

"What can they offer me that you can't?” Nathan shrugged.

“You can do fun stuff with them, crafting, sharing meals, whatever's fun for you,” Duke pointed out. “And they can touch you without making you cold,” he tried to joke.

"Not exactly a touchy-feely kinda guy,” Nathan smiled.
Duke rolled his eyes. “Fine, but you can at least see them instead of staring into the space where you think I am. And, by the way, half the time you're wrong.”

Nathan looked sheepish. “Sorry, Duke.”

“You don't need to apologise, Nate, I was just making the point that having friends you can see is much better than having friends who you can't. Like you'd be able to see them smile and know that they're happy. Or see them smirk and know they're joking. Or wink and know they're flirting. That's the stuff I can't offer you.”

Nathan looked thoughtful. "Are you sure? I couldn't hear you at first either."

“But I have no idea how to make myself visible. Same way I had no idea how to make myself heard until…” Duke trailed off. “Until I had no choice.”

Nathan smiled. "Maybe you could."

“Oh, if you have any suggestions, believe me, I am all ears,” Duke snarked. “Preferably ones which don't involve you nearly dying.”

"After the emergency, how did you make yourself heard?"

"By projecting my thoughts rather than trying to shout. Same way I did to write messages with the tablet. But projecting thoughts is one thing, I don't know how that'd work if I tried to project me. What do I even concentrate on? It's not like I can just will you to see me.” Even as he spoke, ideas were forming in Duke's mind, nothing concrete yet, but he thought Nathan might be right, maybe it would be possible.

"If being heard is projecting your thoughts, maybe being seen is projecting your emotions? Like a smile?” Nathan ventured.

"Maybe," Duke agreed. “Not like there's a guidebook on how to ghost.”

"You're doing amazing, though. Look how much you've learned since we first met," Nathan smiled.

“Yeah,” Duke grinned. “Couldn't've done any of this without you.”

"Me?" Nathan asked, confused.

“Yeah, you,” Duke told him. “You acknowledged my existence, you realised I was here and no one had done that before. No matter how much I tried, I couldn't make anything happen. It was only after you arrived that I could. You made the difference.”

Nathan actually flushed. "If it hadn't been me, it would've been someone."

“Maybe, maybe not. Either way, it was you and that changed my... not-life.”

"I'm glad if I helped you. You seem so much happier."

“I am,” Duke smiled. “Been a long time since someone cared.”

"I'm happy you're not still alone,” Nathan said quietly.

“Me too. But I feel selfish for even thinking that,” Duke admitted.
"You're not. Duke, I'm so much happier too."

“That's...good to hear,” Duke smiled warmly.

"You're my best friend, Duke. Hell, my only friend. I know you think that's not healthy, but it's true."

“Nate...yeah, no, it's not healthy and I'll always encourage you to go out and live your life, interact with real people, but... you're my best friend too,” Duke stopped abruptly as emotions threatened to overwhelm him and he made a noise as though he was clearing his throat.

Nathan wished he could reach out to his friend, but there was only empty air. "I'm glad we met," he said softly instead.

“I'm glad you walked into my house and found me,” Duke smiled.

*******

The next several weeks went by in surprising peace. Duke terrorized everyone who stepped foot in the house, learning new tricks all the time. Nathan stopped by a few nights a week, coming at different times and approaching from different directions to seem less obtrusive.

“Hey Nate,” Duke greeted as Nathan came in. “Good day?”

Nathan shrugged. "Another day of job hunting. Got some interviews lined up."

“Interviews are good,” Duke encouraged him. “What are they for?”

"All sortsa stuff. Another real estate agency, though I don't have much hope there. Call center, retail - whoever'll have me."

“I...had a thought and I googled and don't hate me but I did have a suggestion…” Duke said, slightly nervously.

"Suggest away, why would I hate you?” Nathan asked, baffled.

“Because I'm interfering,” Duke pointed out. “But anyway, you said you wanted to be a doc but med school is shit and expensive...but what if you retrained as a paramedic? You'd still be helping people, saving lives, but it's only 2 years as an evening class. Look…” Duke pulled up the research he'd been doing on the tablet.

"Really?” Nathan brightened, and he came over and looked at it, scrolling through the pages. "This...yeah, maybe. I could try. If I can find a decent job, I could afford the course."

“Exactly! And if you know you're working towards something else then I thought it might make having to take a job you hate a bit more palatable,” Duke went on, enthusiastically.

"That it would," Nathan agreed.

“So I'm not totally useless, then?” Duke teased.

"You're amazing," Nathan said happily.

“Yeah, yeah. Anyway, it's a thought, right? You could...Oh fuck!” Duke cut himself off as he saw a set of headlights coming up the drive, accompanied by the blue flashing lights of a police car.
Nathan turned white. "Oh, shit." The panicked impulse to run flashed wildly across his mind, but he realized his car was now blocked in. Even if he got away, they'd know it was him.

"Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck," Duke muttered. "Let 'em in, Nate, it'll be easier and maybe I can do some shit, get rid of them."

"What am I supposed to say?" Nathan hissed - but by then it was too late, police officer and realtor had swept up the stairs and burst through the unlocked front door.

Holloway stopped abruptly just outside the door, remembering what had happened last time. “See, Garland, I told you that useless son of yours was breaking in here.”

Duke glared at him, but with him staying just outside the boundaries of the house, there was nothing he could do. Instead, he turned his attention to Chief of Police, Garland Wuornos, who hadn't changed a bit in the ten or so years since they last saw each other. “You ok, Nate?” Duke checked, hoping there was enough love left between father and son that this wouldn't turn into a total clusterfuck.

Nathan, however, stayed silent.

“Nathan,” Garland said sharply, casting his eyes around the empty house. “Want to tell me what's going on here.” It wasn't a question.

"Am I under arrest?" Nathan asked, trying to stay calm.

“Not yet,” Garland snapped. “Think how it'd look if I arrested my own son. But I won't hesitate if you don't answer me. What's going on here?”

"If you're here as chief of police and not as my father, then you taught me well and good not to say anything."

“Holloway asked me to come as your father, he doesn't want you to end up with a record over some simple trespassing, and I'm trying to get this resolved without having to resort to being chief,” Garland pointed out. “But you're not making it easy. He just wants an explanation and an apology and you'll be free to leave with a promise to never come back. You lost your job, Nathan, you can't just walk into houses you were trying to sell.”

"I appreciate the consideration. I apologize and…." Nathan swallowed hard. "I promise not to come back." The tablet would just have to be enough.

“No!” Duke shouted, trying to project his thoughts at everyone, not just Nathan. Judging by the step backwards that Garland took, he thought it might have worked.

“See,” Holloway's voice came shakily from the doorway. “I said your son was rigging up pranks.”

Garland nodded doubtfully. “Is that what you've been doing, Nathan?”

"No," Nathan said honestly.

“They’re not pranks,” Duke growled as he moved protectively in front of Nathan.

Garland took another step back. “What is this?” He demanded. “Nathan, what's going on?”

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Duke laughed. “I know you can hear me.”
Garland turned pale. “Who is that?” He looked around wildly for some sort of speaker.

“Don't you recognise my voice?”

“Crocker,” Garland snarled even as he backed up another step. Crocker alive was one thing but he didn't fancy having to deal with the angry, vengeful, ghost of Duke Crocker. “You stay the hell away from my son.”

"Duke's done nothing to me,” Nathan scowled.

“Yet,” Garland shot back at him. “Wouldn't put anything past him. He'd hurt you just to get at me.”

"Could've hurt me a dozen times over if he'd wanted to. Hell, he saved my life. Wiring was damaged, I damn near electrocuted myself, he warned me away."

“Probably thought he'd get something out of it,” Garland snorted. “Come on, Nathan, ghosts or not, you shouldn't be here.”

"I already said I'd leave," Nathan said flatly.

“You don't have to go, Nate,” Duke told him. Projecting his thoughts as loudly as possible, he shouted. “This is still my home and I decide who comes and who goes.”

Holloway whimpered from the doorway. “Garland, please, just get him out so I can sell this shitheap in peace.”

Fury raged within Duke as he stood his ground. “Nathan stays, as long as he wants to. Everyone else leaves.”

Garland backed off, staring at the spot where a glimmering apparition of Duke Crocker had momentarily appeared.

"Duke!” Nathan exclaimed delightedly.


"You were visible there for a sec,” Nathan grinned.

“Cool,” Duke said happily.

“Nathan, we should go,” Garland swallowed hard. He hadn't believed in ghosts before tonight and if it hadn't been for the apparition appearing in front of his eyes, he would have thought his son had gone mad, talking to himself and addressing an empty room. “You don't know what sort of a man Duke Crocker was, his ghost won't be any better. It's not safe for you to be here.”

Scowling, Duke swooped towards Garland. “I can assure you,” he said loudly, “that Nathan is perfectly safe here. Anyone else, however, can take their chances.”

Feeling ridiculous for talking to a ghost, Garland stood his ground. “Are you threatening me?!”

“Yes,” Duke smiled, glad that he'd understood. “What are you going to do, arrest me?”

“No, I'll arrest Nathan,” Garland countered.

Duke glared at him, his anger causing him to glimmer faintly as the lights flickered. “You might want to rethink that, Chief, or I can't make any promises for your safety.” Proving his point, Duke
removed the handcuffs from Garland's belt and dropped them on the floor.

Garland jumped slightly. "Very well, Crocker, no one's being arrested tonight," he reluctantly agreed. "Nathan, don't stay too long and don't come back here. If you do, I'll send someone else out to arrest you. Holloway has every right to press charges against you - trespass, breaking and entering - I'm disappointed in you."

"Understood," Nathan said shortly.

"Good," Garland snapped, turning on his heel and exchanging a brief word with Holloway before they both left.

"Thank you, Duke," Nathan said softly.

"Nice to see I still have my uses," Duke tried to joke. "You ok?"

"I'm...fine," Nathan lied. "Really impressed you were visible, that's awesome."

Duke eyed him critically and decided to let the lie slip past. "Yeah, wish I knew how I managed it."

"I don't know. I wish I could help you keep trying but...I guess I gotta go," Nathan said unhappily. "I'll leave the tablet."

"Yeah," Duke agreed sadly. "I...guess I won't see you again but I'll message you as much as I can," he tried to sound cheerful.

Nathan nodded glumly. "Maybe we can try skype. Never know what the camera and mic might pick up."

"Yeah, maybe," Duke didn't sound hopeful.

"Wish I could do more," Nathan said softly.

"I know. You've already done so much and no matter what, you've made a huge difference in my not-life. Don't ever forget that."

"I won't. You've made a huge difference to me too, Duke. Don't know what I'll do without you."

Nathan said sadly.

"You'll get a crappy job and use it to pay the bills while you train and then you're gonna get out there as a kick ass paramedic, saving lives and making friends and settling down with someone special."

Nathan tried to smile and failed. He didn't want other friends or even 'someone special' - he wanted Duke.

"Nate," Duke said softly, putting his hand on Nathan's shoulder. "It's gonna be ok. You'll get your life back."

"Don't want my life back, I want you."

Nathan reached out to touch Duke, but his hand passed through empty air.

Duke summoned up all of his emotions and tried to make himself visible again. "Maybe I'm just selfish but I want you, too," he said quietly.
Nathan extended his hand toward the shimmer in the air, but felt nothing more than the usual cold. "There's gotta be some way," he said hopelessly.

"Can't think of anything," Duke replied sadly as Nathan's hand passed through him. "I wish things were different."

"I just….there has to be some way I could buy this place," Nathan ran a hand through his hair in frustration.

"I wish there was," Duke said quietly. "What'll happen if they can't sell it soon?"

"Either they'll decide to tear it down, or they'll auction it off - probably to someone who will tear it down," Nathan said unhappily.


"I'll try to convince them not to - maybe tell them that if the house is destroyed you'll be free to leave it - and you'll be pissed. If you wanted, I could maybe call the local news, see if they wanted to do a piece."

"Anything you think might help," Duke told him. "I'll do what I can from here, try to scare off all the other realtors, maybe get you your job back."

"Thanks. Just….anything to keep the place standing, you know?"

"Yeah," Duke agreed. "But right now you need to go, don't get yourself in any more shit because of me."

"I know," Nathan sighed. "I just….I don't want to go, Duke."

"I don't want you to, but think about it, Nate," Duke tried not to let his emotions come across. "If you get a criminal record, finding a job’d be next to impossible. Your life would be destroyed and I've done enough damage already. I won't let you make it any worse than it already is."

"You're right, I know you're right," Nathan said unhappily. "But I'll miss you. And what about you, will you be okay?"

"Yeah," Duke said quietly. "I'll miss you, but I'll be fine. Don't worry about me."

"We'll talk through the tablet. I'll be online every night, I promise. If something goes wrong, let me know, okay? Hell, if something goes wrong and you can't let me know, if you go silent I'll come check, and damn the consequences."

"I'll let you know," Duke promised, knowing that he wouldn't. Not unless he really had to. Nathan was deep enough into this shit storm and Duke had no intention of dragging him any further into it. "Thank you, Nate, for everything."

Nathan swallowed hard. "Don't," he managed to choke out. "Sounds too much like goodbye."

"Nah, it's not goodbye, I'll have sent you a message before you even get home," Duke tried to sound cheerful.

"I'll reply as soon as I get in," Nathan said softly. "Even if I can't see or hear you, if you still want to skype, we can."

"Yeah, we'll work it out," Duke replied sadly. "See ya, Nate."

“Yeah...go on, you need to get outta here before they come back and check.”

"Yeah…” Nathan dragged his feet to the door, his expression heartbroken. He paused and turned back. "Duke, can I….can I see you?” the words one last time hung heavy on the air, unspoken.

Duke summoned up all of his emotions, all of his concentration and tried to project all of himself.

"Duke," Nathan choked out as the shimmering form appeared, reaching out to him.

“Nate,” Duke said, moving forwards and putting his hand on Nathan's shoulder.

Nathan tried to do the same for Duke, a tiny raw sound escaping his throat when his hand slid through.

Duke moved away again. “Go, Nate,” he said quietly. “Walk outta here and don't look back.”

"Better be that message waiting for me," Nathan choked out.

“It'll be there,” Duke promised.

"Talk to you soon, then," Nathan turned to go, looked for all the world as if he had to forceably tear himself away.

“Yeah. See ya, Nate,” Duke said sadly, watching him leave.

Nathan went out to his car and just sat for a moment, looking back at the warm golden glow through the window, wishing with everything inside him he could turn right around and march back inside. Tears made their way slowly down his face as he made himself pull out of the driveway and head home.

Duke watched him go, looked on as he drove away and was hit with an overwhelming sense of despair. His best friend, his only friend, his only connection with the living world, had left, with no chance of returning. No matter what they said, it had been goodbye and they both knew it. With the last of his energy, he sent the message he'd promised to Nathan.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Someone finally buys the house....

The following day, a security company came round to install video surveillance cameras and Duke knew it was to keep an eye out for Nathan coming back (or possibly, the non-existent prank playing kids that everyone thought was to blame). The company ran cables, wiring the cameras into the house electrics and Duke smiled to himself as he realised how easy it would be to break them. No sooner had the security company left than Duke fried them all with a power surge. They came back to fit new ones, which Duke broke again. After the fourth visit, they gave up and left it which Duke found immensely satisfying.

The first realtor had run off screaming as soon as the door slammed in her face. The next one was more persistent but gave up after Duke shouted at him to get out, causing all the lights to flicker and the doors to swing at the same time. He’d dropped a pen on his way out, which Duke gleefully eyed up. After days of practice, he was eventually able to pick it up and use it to scrawl messages on the walls - Get Out was one, followed by This Is My House, and finally Only Nathan Is Welcome Here.

Nathan and Duke messaged each other most nights and Duke let out a whoop of delight when Nathan told him that he’d found a new job - as a realtor for a rival agency, with a much nicer boss. Duke harboured vague hopes that the instruction to sell his house might pass to them if Holloway’s company didn’t have any luck soon.

Those hopes faded after the last realtor had given up. There was no one left in Holloway’s agency who was prepared to set foot in the house and after Duke had frightened this one off, he’d overheard the guy talking to Holloway on the phone (well, shouting might have been more accurate). He caught the words ‘not sellable’, ‘auction’, and ‘there’s one next month’. His heart sank as he realised that was it. His home would be going under the hammer and would probably be bought by a developer who would knock it down.

Duke debated whether or not to tell Nathan - he knew he’d only worry and probably try to rush over, and Duke didn’t want that - he knew Nathan needed to move on, settle into his new job and stop worrying about Duke and his house. In the end, he decided that he should, Nathan would only hear it on the grapevine anyway and then he’d be upset that Duke hadn’t told him.


Shit, Nathan typed back. I'll see what I can do. I can still talk to the historical society, might find some other options. Meantime, usually houses going to auction will have open houses so people can see them. Given what you've been up to, I doubt Holloway will want to, but it'll look damn suspicious if he doesn't, so he might. Imagine you could have no end of fun with those.

Thanks, Nate, not sure they'll be interested but it's worth a shot, Duke replied. And yeah, I might have a few ideas if he tries to do an open house ;)

I'll call the news crews too, if that's okay with you. And find a way to tell Holloway you'll come
after him if he tears your home down. We'll figure something out, Duke. Won't let your home get destroyed.

Yeah, news crews are fine, if you think it'll help. I always knew this was a possibility but now it's come down to it... I can't watch it being torn down...

Won't happen, Duke, I promise. I'll call the news stations right now, if they come out you can put on a good show. No one'll want to tear down Haven's very own haunted house.

Yeah, I will. Been practicing some new stuff, Duke told him. Thank you, Nate, let me know how you get on?

Course. You okay?

Yeah, fine, Duke lied. He was about a million miles from ok but he wasn't about to tell Nathan that. You?

Yeah. We'll make this work, Duke. I promise.

Thanks...for helping with this and, well, everything.

Been my pleasure. Miss you, Duke.

Miss you too, Nate.

**********

A few weeks later, the attempted open houses had ended in near disaster, the news crews were indignantly reporting on 'the threat to Haven's very own haunted house' and the historical society was clamoring at Holloway's agency. It was time, Nathan decided, to visit his old boss.

"Wuornos," Holloway growled as Nathan strode into his office. "Come crawling back for your old job?" He sneered.

"No thanks, I have a much better job now," Nathan smiled. "Come with a proposition."

Holloway laughed. "And what makes you think I'm interested in anything you have to say?"

"The fact that you have a dead weight of a property hanging around your neck dragging you down. None of your people could sell it. The open houses to drum up buyers for auction was a disaster. You can't even get it torn down for redevelopment with the news crews and historical society all over your ass."

"Are you still going on about that damn wreck? Why do you care so much? It's just a derelict house," Holloway shrugged.

"Sure it is. But you're in the hole over it, and no way to make up those losses."

"Because of you and your stupid insistence that there's a ghost there," Holloway snapped.

Nathan smiled. "Have you got a better explanation for what you've seen happen there? If you think it's a hoax, you're welcome to search the place from basement to attic to figure out how it's being done."

Holloway went pale. There was no way he was setting foot in that house again and none of his employees would either. "Fine," he muttered. "What's this proposition?"
"I buy it. How does two hundred grand sound?"

Holloway scoffed. "It'll go for nearer three even at auction."

Nathan's eyebrows rose. "After it's a well documented phenomenon that no one can set foot inside the place? The only potential buyers left are developers looking for cheap land. And maybe you're prepared to risk the auction tanking, but what do you think that ghost is gonna do to the people who tore down his home once he's no longer trapped inside it? He hasn't forgotten you."

Holloway paled and glared at him. Nathan had him over a barrel and he knew it. "Two fifty and it's yours," he tried.

"Two twenty-five," Nathan said magnanimously. It was still a scandalously low price, even allowing for the renovations that still needed to be made.

Holloway narrowed his eyes and considered that. After a moment, he stuck out his hand. "Two two five it is."

Nathan shook it. "Got all the paperwork we need, I say we do it here and now."

"Works for me," Holloway agreed, relieved to finally get rid of the house.

As he pulled out the paperwork, Nathan was relieved too, not that he showed it. He didn't want to give Holloway any chance to back out or reconsider.

Half an hour later, he walked out of the agency with a deed and a set of keys, and headed straight for Duke's house - their house, now.

Duke heard the car pull up outside and looked out of the window. Fuck, he thought when he saw Nathan. That either meant there was something seriously wrong or Nathan was risking everything just to come and see him, neither of which was a good thing.

Nathan was smiling as he got out of the car, not looking worried in the slightest as he strolled up to the front door.

That confused Duke even more and he waited in the hallway, fully prepared to throw Nathan out if there was any chance he might get caught here. It would be for his own good.

A moment later, a key sounded in the lock and the door swung open. "Hey, Duke!" Nathan called.

"Nate, what are you doing here? How'd you get the keys? What have you done?" Duke asked, concerned.

"Nothing bad," Nathan assured, pulling out the deed and holding it up for Duke to read.

"Nate," Duke whispered as he read it and saw Nathan's name listed as the owner. "Wh... How...?"

"It's all because of you, Duke. Between you running off every realtor and buyer, and making such a hash of the open houses, and putting on such a show for the news crews, no one wanted to touch this place with a ten foot pole. I was able to talk Holloway into selling it to me for an affordable price rather than risk it going to auction."

"You bought my house," Duke said quietly, still stunned by the news.

Nathan looked suddenly anxious. "Is that okay?"
"Yes," Duke replied fiercely. "Nathan, yes, of course it's ok, it's better than ok, it's…" He abandoned his attempts at speaking and instead tried to make himself visible so that maybe (just maybe) Nathan could see the emotions on his face.

Nathan watched the shimmer coalesce in front of him, and his breath caught. Duke was smiling, and it lit up the room.

Duke grinned widely. "I have no idea how you managed to talk that asshole round, but thank you. I don't know what else to say."

"At least I could do. Just hope you're okay with me actually living here. I can't afford to maintain two separate homes, so I can't just leave this place for you, I'll have to move in."

If it was possible, Duke grinned even more widely. "You're moving in here? Really? So we can watch movies together and talk shit and whatever?"

"Yeah," Nathan said, relieved by how happy Duke seemed at the idea. "Not made of money - at least, not the kind that lets a guy have two houses."

"You haven't overstretched things, have you?" Duke checked, concerned. "Because it isn't worth that."

"No, I can make it work. As long as I can get a decent price on my current place, which should be doable. And it'll be a lot easier to sell once I've emptied it out."

"Ok," Duke said, relieved. "Nate, thank you."

"Thank you, Duke. Wouldn't have been possible without you."

"We make a good team," Duke smiled.

"Sure hope so, since we'll be living together," Nathan grinned. "Gonna have to get the decorating sorted first, though. But I can start boxing up less urgent stuff, bring a carload over every day, stick it in the attic or basement until the rooms they'll go in are finished."

"Yeah, gonna take a while," Duke agreed. "I still can't believe it," he grinned

Nathan nodded, grinning happily. "So, did you want everything recreated as exactly as possible? Or do you have stuff you want to change?"

"It's your house now, Nate, and I trust you to do what's right. I'll complain if you paint anything yellow, and if you want an opinion on anything, tell me. Otherwise, I'm happy with however you want it."

"I want your opinion on everything. It's not my house, it's our house."

Duke rolled his eyes but he was touched, overwhelmed almost, at what Nathan had done. "Our house. That had a good ring to it. Roommates sounded even better. "Ok, I'll give you my opinion on everything, but you have the final say," he said firmly.

"All right," Nathan grinned. "Can't wait to get started, this is gonna be amazing. Hey, I should take some shots of my place so if I have some hideous furniture you can't stand, we can look at better options."

"You're amazing," Duke said happily. "I still can't believe you've done this. As far as furniture
goes, if you like it then I can live with it.”

Nathan beamed. "I can't believe it's real either. Can't wait to move in."

“It's gonna be so cool,” Duke agreed. “We should celebrate.”

"We should," Nathan grinned.

“Pick up some beers, put on some tunes. I'll even make the lights flash like a cheesy 1980's disco,” Duke laughed.

Nathan laughed. "Let me make a quick run out to the liquor store."

“Yeah, you do that, I'll find some music,” Duke smiled.

"I'll stop off at home and get a few things for hanging out, too. Be back soon," Nathan grinned.

“Ok, pick up food, too, don't want you drinking on an empty stomach,” Duke told him.

"Yes, mom," Nathan laughed. "I'll grab a pizza."


"Yeah. Be home soon,” Nathan said, happy to know he could come back any time, that this was home now.

Duke grinned. “Yeah. Home,” he said, watching Nathan go to the door. “Oh, and Nate?”

"Yeah, Duke?"

Concentrating on being visible, Duke moved closer to him again. “Thanks. That doesn’t seem like enough, but thank you.”

"I'm just glad I was able to make it work," Nathan said softly. "I didn't want to lose my best friend."

Duke nodded, a half smile on his face, hoping Nathan could see him. “I'm glad you were able to, too,” he said. “I mean...I didn’t want to lose my home, but losing you was worse.”

Nathan's smile was soft and sweet. "Thanks, Duke. That means the world to me."

He looked younger, somehow, when he smiled, as though all the worry lines had faded from his face. More handsome too, Duke mused, quickly shutting down that thought in case he inadvertently projected it to Nathan. That would be seven hells of awkwardness that he really didn’t want to deal with.

“Shut up,” Duke teased. “Go and get your pizza, beer, whatever else you’re bringing.”

"Yeah, yeah," Nathan grinned. "Be back in a bit."

A couple of hours ticked by with Duke waiting impatiently for Nathan to get back. He grinned happily to himself, still trying to process what had just happened. His home was safe. After months of worrying about it, he could finally relax. Not only that, but Nathan was going to be living here. The best friend he’d ever had, the best friend anyone could ask for, was going to be his roommate, and maybe, in time, Duke would be able to repay the kindness Nathan had shown him.
When Nathan came back, the old blue Bronco was stuffed full, a tarp-covered mattress tied on top. But for the time being Nathan brought in the six pack and the pizza, and left everything else but a duffle bag, easily slung over his shoulder to leave his hands free.


"Hey," Nathan said happily. "Brought over a bunch of stuff, enough to live on while the place gets restored."

“Really?” Duke grinned. “I thought you were sorting out the decorating first?”

"Well, I have to do that before I move in fully. Most of my stuff will stay at my place until we're done here. But I brought my mattress, clothes, toiletries - enough to live on."

“Nate, I could hug you right now,” Duke said happily.

"Figured you'd appreciate the company. Must get boring as hell all day by yourself. I'll call Dwight in the morning and get the ball rolling."

“I do and it does,” Duke agreed. “Be good to get Sasquatch back, he'll do a good job.”

"I'm glad you like Dwight. We've been friends for years," Nathan smiled.

“See, you do have friends,” Duke said lightly. “Yeah, he's a good guy. Have you told him I'm here?”

Nathan shook his head. "Not mine to tell. Got no objection if you want to come out and say hi next time he's over, but it's your call. No pressure."

“Thanks. I'll say hi as long as you don't think he'll freak out over it.”

"Not sure Dwight even knows the meaning of 'freak out'.”

“You make a very good point,” Duke laughed. “What sort of music do you like? I'll find something that suits both of us.”

"Eh, I'll listen to just about anything," Nathan went to take a slice of pizza, then paused. "You okay if I eat?"

“Uh...yeah, why wouldn't I be?” Duke asked, confused.

"Seems rude. Since you can't have any, I mean."

Duke laughed. “So if I say no, what would your plan be? To never eat in your own home?” He said. “It's fine, honestly, it's not like I get hungry.”

Nathan looked sheepish. "Guess I didn't think it through. Do you ever miss eating? Can you smell this?"

“No, and no,” Duke replied before turning his attention to putting some music on.

Nathan bit his lip, feeling he'd hit a sore spot. He crammed a slice in his mouth, chewing and swallowing as quickly as he could before setting the rest aside.

Duke watched him and frowned. “Eat your pizza, Nate,” he said quietly. “It's really not a problem and I'd really prefer that you don't go hungry.”
"I don't want to rub it in your face," Nathan mumbled. "Maybe that's dumb, but...I don't want to hurt you."

"Nate," Duke said, moving closer to Nathan. "It's not dumb, it's sweet of you, but honestly, you eating in front of me isn't a problem. You not eating because you're worried about it, that's a problem."

"I understand. But are you sure you're okay?" Nathan worried. "You didn't sound okay. I was being nosy, must've upset you."

"I'm fine," Duke insisted. "We're supposed to be celebrating, can you stop worrying about me for one evening, please?"

"Okay, okay," Nathan gave him a little smile, lifting his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"Good," Duke grinned. "Music ok?" He checked as he turned up the volume.

"Sounds great," Nathan smiled.

"So am I gonna get to see some of the infamous Wuornos drunk dancing?" Duke teased him.

"Helllllllllllllll no," Nathan laughed.

Duke laughed along with him. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"Because my drunk dancing is an embarrassment to all mankind?"

"You should let me be the judge of that," Duke chuckled.

"No way," Nathan grinned.

Duke laughed. "If you say so. Beer probably wouldn't be enough to get you so drunk you start dancing anyway."

Nathan eyed the six-pack. "Dunno 'bout that."

"Really?" Duke asked, surprised. He couldn't remember the last time he'd got drunk on just beer.

Nathan looked embarrassed, and a little defensive. "I don't drink a lot."


"Pancakes and two beers - doesn't get much cheaper," Nathan smiled wryly.

"Pancakes? Really? What's wrong with waffles?"

"Pancakes are the best breakfast food," Nathan said, as matter of factly as if he were explaining that the sky is blue.

"No, sorry Nate but you're wrong there. Waffles are the best breakfast food," Duke argued good-naturedly.

"Waffles are for people who are trying to fool themselves that a single pancake is enough food," Nathan shot back, grinning.

"Pancakes are for people who have no taste and insist on drowning everything in maple syrup,"
Duke snarked.

"You've clearly never had good pancakes," Nathan returned.

"Nathan, please," Duke said, half laughing. "I used to make good pancakes."

"That's right, you said you knew how to cook, huh?" Nathan looked interested.

"Kind of a basic survival skill, but yeah, I used to do most of the cooking at the Gull, in the early days at least. Picked up work in the odd kitchen when I was travelling. Learned how to make a few things, developed from there," Duke told him.

"You're miles ahead of me. I never really learned."

"Take out and frozen microwave meals, huh?"

Nathan nodded ruefully.

"I could teach you, talk you through a few things," Duke said. "If you wanted to learn," he added.

"That might be fun, but I could burn water. You sure you want to risk me setting your beloved house on fire?"

"If you burn the house down while I'm supervising, I'll have got something very wrong," Duke pointed out.

"You underestimate me. Or maybe overestimate. Not sure which."

"Nah, I'm a good teacher," Duke grinned.

"Well, we'll see. But better to start small."

"Yeah, start you off with pancakes seeing as you love them so much," Duke laughed.

"I dunno, the ability to make my own pancakes could be dangerous," Nathan grinned.

"Right, you'd never eat anything else. Should I be worried about this pancake obsession?"

Nathan chuckled. "You never had a favorite food?"

"Not really, long as there was enough of it."

"Not a picky eater, huh? Your mom must have loved that."

Duke stayed silent for a moment. "No, not a picky eater," he replied quietly.

"Sorry," Nathan said softly, realizing he'd put his foot in his mouth.

"Don't be," Duke told him. "You gonna bring your stuff in?"

"After I'm done eating. No hurry," Nathan grinned. "After all, there's a great security system set up out there, I'll know if anyone messes with my truck."

Duke laughed. "You mean the security cameras? Yeah, I fried those. Several times. I think they gave up in the end, just left the camera shells up as a deterrent."

Nathan laughed. "You're amazing."
“Well they wired them into the house electrics, it wasn't exactly difficult. It was funny watching
them trying to work out how it'd happened.” Duke grinned.

"Honestly it's amazing more people didn't realize you were for real."

“People see what they want to see.”

"Guess so."

“Makes it surprisingly easy to pull off...to pull the wool over people's eyes.”

"True,” Nathan mused.

“Guess you've seen a fair bit of that from the other realtors.”

"Too much,” Nathan grimaced.

“Better at the new place? How's it going there?”

"Yeah, the new boss believes in ethical business practices."

“That must be a relief after the asshole,” Duke grinned.

"So much better," Nathan said, heartfelt.

“I'm glad. You seem happier,” Duke told him honestly.

"I am," Nathan grinned, "How could I not be, now this is my home here with you?"

“I'm happy, too,” Duke said quietly. “What you've done, all of it, I mean. I didn't think there were
people like you in the world.”

"I'm not that special," Nathan went faintly pink.

“No? You need to start rethinking that.”

"Duke, c'mon," Nathan all but whined.


"Thanks," Nathan looked relieved.

Duke placed his hand on Nathan's shoulder. “You need to get started on that beer if this is
supposed to be a party,” he grinned.

"Yeah, okay," Nathan said, amused, taking one of the beers and another slice of pizza. "Hey, I
wonder if you could possess people."

Duke laughed. “Nate, I can barely manage to be visible, I think some sort of exorcist style
possession might be a bit of a stretch.”

"Well, obviously you'd have to get strong or more practiced or whatever. But how much of what
you can do now is stuff you wouldn't have thought possible before you met me?"

“That...is a very good point,” Duke admitted. “But still, no.”

"Well, if you ever want to try, let me know," Nathan said agreeably.
“Uh...what, now? You mean possess you?”

"Well sure. Don't imagine anyone else would be willing."

“Nate, no, not happening.”

"Okay. It was just a thought," Nathan looked puzzled.

Duke drifted closer to Nathan, facing him as he tried once again to be visible, wanting Nathan to see his face, his expression. “It was a good thought,” he said quietly. “And it means so much to me that you'd offer to do that for me.”

"Was probably a dumb idea. It's just.." Nathan looked embarrassed. "Figured if you could hitch a joyride with me, you could, you know. Eat pizza. Feel sunshine. Go to the beach at sunset. That sorta thing."

Duke shook his head and reached out to put his hand on Nathan's shoulder. “Not a dumb idea at all,” he smiled. “It's a lovely idea and it's so tempting to just say 'fuck it' and do it.” He paused. “But I don't know how it would work, where would you go? Would you have access to all my thoughts, memories? Because, trust me on this, you don't want that. What if I did something you weren't happy with? How would we communicate that? Until I get a better grip on those things, I don't even want to try it.”

"That's fair," Nathan nodded, looking relieved. "Maybe someday when we've got a better handle on things, just know if you ever want to try, the offer's on the table."

“Thank you, Nate, I really mean that,” Duke said. “I mean, half the time you can't even see me when I try. What if...what if I got something wrong?”

Nathan nodded. "Can see why you'd worry. We won't even think about trying until you're in full command of your abilities," he agreed.

Duke laughed. “Yeah, if I ever actually manage that. Oh, uh, on the subject of abilities...I'm sorry about the writing on the wall...kinda wouldn’t’ve done that if I'd known you'd buy the place, gonna be a lot of work to cover it over…” he said sheepishly.

Nathan shrugged. "Place was gonna need paint or wallpaper anyhow, no big deal."

“True, true. You have any thoughts about paper or paint colours?"

"Not white," Nathan said immediately. "Sick to death of boring white rooms. Don't care if it's wallpaper or wood paneling or paint colors, just not white." He caught himself and added, "If that's okay with you."

“Agreed, anything except white,” Duke smiled. “You probably have a better eye for what'd look good than I do.”

Nathan looked around, pensive. "Cool colors for the bedrooms. Maybe pastels with dark accents, sky blue in the master bedroom with royal blue trim, that sort of thing. Warmer colors for the living room, wood and dark red and gold. Aqua and white for the bathrooms. For the kitchen, hmm...cream accented with just a touch of yellow here and there?"

“Perfect,” Duke smiled. “I knew you'd have good ideas. Maybe grey in the kitchen? Rather than yellow?”
"That'll work," Nathan said agreeably. "Bare floors or carpeting?"

"Bare floors with rugs," Duke replied. "If that's good with you."

"That works. You want hardwood flooring or tile? Tile holds up better but hardwood cleans easier."

"Tiles in the hall, kitchen, and bathrooms, hardwood everywhere else?" Duke suggested.

"Agreed. Presume you want proper tile and not linoleum?" Nathan grinned.

"You presume correctly,"

"Noted," Nathan grinned. "If you want, I can pull up some home decor sites, we can look at tile patterns, cabinet doors, light fixtures, that sort of thing. I assume you don't care much about appliances?"

"That'd be great," Duke agreed enthusiastically. "Yeah, no, not interested in appliances, but I'm happy to offer advice on choosing kitchen stuff, if you decide you want to learn to cook."

"Well, I don't plan to get cheap crap for the kitchen, even if I never end up using it myself," Nathan admitted, pulling up his preferred site for home fixtures.

"Yeah, cheap crap is never a good idea," Duke agreed.

Nathan nodded. "I mean, if you can't afford to invest in better stuff, that's one thing. But if you can, better to spend twice as much on an appliance that'll last three or four times as long."

Duke grinned. "Exactly. So what are we looking at first? In fact...maybe you should unload your truck first, before you drink too many of those beers and pass out in a corner," he laughed.

Nathan laughed. "Okay, okay. You look through the website, it lets you bookmark items, so mark anything you find interesting and once I've got my little camp set up, I'll come and see what you've got."

Duke immediately started going through all the different pages of the website, picking out a few tiles he liked the look of and bookmarking some kitchen cabinet ideas before he got thoroughly engrossed in the lighting section. Now that he'd spent so much time here, seen the natural lighting at different times of day as well as throughout the years, he thought he had a much better idea of how electric lighting could add to atmosphere of each room. He was so engrossed that he almost didn't hear Nathan crashing about and bringing his stuff in.

Nathan dragged his mattress and clothes to an upstairs bedroom that didn't need any work except painting, set out his toiletries in the bathroom, and headed back to the living room where he'd left the folding table and chair.

Duke glanced at him, looking up from his research for a minute. "Sorted?" He asked brightly.

"Yup, all set for some camping."

"Good, good," Duke said, thoroughly distracted by lighting again.

"Found some good stuff, huh?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, sorry," Duke replied sheepishly. "Here, have a look, I've bookmarked a load of stuff."
"Great," Nathan swiveled the laptop toward him and took a look. "You have good taste," he smiled.

"Yeah, don't sound so surprised," Duke laughed. "Look, click on the tile section... remember you were saying a while back about a tile with a vein of aqua running through it? I found one."

"Oh, that's really nice! We can use that for the shower stall and maybe the lower half of the wall, then paint the wall above it with a matching shade of aqua."

"Perfect," Duke grinned. "Oh and I found some taps with an enamelled top, those match too, hang on…" Duke trailed off as he pulled up the right page. "These."

"Oh, nice, that'll look great. And you know what I've always wanted? A tub with enough room. I haven't been able to take a bath since I was a kid, the water covers my legs and that's it."

"Nice thought," Duke smirked, forgetting that Nathan couldn't see him.

"You're no shorter than I am, you must've had the same problem," Nathan pointed out, entirely missing the innuendo.

"That's not what I...," Duke started to say before he thought better of it. "Yeah, you're right. I never did get round to getting a better bathtub for this place. I used to have a great one on my boat, water jets, underwater lights, big enough for...well, let's just say big enough for more than one person."

"You had a boat?" Nathan asked - again focusing on the wrong thing.

"I had a boat. Small cargo ship, to be more accurate," Duke told him. "The Cape Rouge. She was home for a lot of years."

"Do you miss it? We could maybe keep track of it, buy it back someday."

"Nate," Duke said softly. "You...you're the kindest person I've ever known. But no, I don't miss her. This is home now, the Rouge is just memories and not all of them good."

Nathan nodded, blushing. "Just...want to make you happy. Wasn't right, everything of yours getting taken away, not when you're still here."

"Your company makes me happy," Duke told him. "You don't need to do any more. And yeah, maybe it wasn't right but it was my own fault so don't go feeling bad about it."

Nathan looked worried. "What do you mean, your own fault?"

"Nothing. What do you think of these doors for the kitchen cabinets?" Duke pulled up a different web page.

Nathan was surprisingly bad at social cues for a realtor, but even he could tell Duke wasn't interested in talking about it. "I like them, but look at that carved detail - it'll gather dust like a bitch, and be a royal pain to clean out."

Relieved that Nathan hadn't pushed for an answer, Duke nodded to himself. "You make a good point," he smiled. "How about these?" He switched to another page.

"I really like those," Nathan smiled. "Hey, Duke, you ever have any pets?"

"Nope, no pets. There was a half tame otter that used to come up to the deck of the Gull sometimes when it was quiet. I think it was old and not hunting well, so I fed it scraps. Not sure I'd call it a
"That's really sweet," Nathan smiled. "You're a good man, Duke."

"Maybe," Duke allowed. "Just can't stand to see anyone or any animal going hungry."

"Which is why you're a good person," Nathan smiled.

Duke rolled his eyes. "Fine, I did some good things."

"Of course. What are your thoughts on lamps versus overhead lighting?"

"Wall lights with lamps would be my preference. Recessed ceiling lights in the bathrooms. Directional spotlights in the kitchen. Oh, and under cupboard lights for the kitchen. Although you might not need them if you're not planning to cook much."

"Still not a bad thing to have, though. Might leave it for a later round of improvements, though, depending how much the work costs."

"Yeah, you don't need to go crazy, just do what needs to be done to get it how you want it."

"Yeah, but some things are easier done in an empty house. Anything having to do with the floors or walls, we'll want to get done before the rooms are full of stuff. And some of it needs to be done to make the place livable - getting lighting in every room, the bathroom tile, the kitchen cabinets and a lot of the appliances. And honestly, that's just about everything anyhow."

"You're right, it'll be easier to do as much as possible before you move everything in," Duke agreed. "Gonna be nice seeing the place all finished and back to being a home again."

"I'm looking forward to it too," Nathan smiled. "This is a beautiful home, it must have been amazing when you lived here."

"It was and it'll be just as amazing when you finish it," Duke told him.

"Sure hope so. Plan is, this is gonna be my home for the rest of my life," Nathan smiled.

"You really mean that?" Duke asked, his voice small and soft.

"Sure I do," Nathan smiled. "It's gorgeous, why would I ever want to leave? Could spend my whole life looking and not find a place half this nice. This is home now. Always will be, fingers crossed."

"So..." Duke tried to order his thoughts. He'd known Nathan wasn't just going to try to flip the place, but to hear that Nathan was planning it as a forever home, the same way Duke had done all those years ago...to know that Nathan was staying, that the house was safe and he'd have his best friend around for a long time...it was a lot to take in. Abandoning his attempt at speaking, Duke tried to project how he was feeling instead.

Nathan smiled as Duke shimmered into being. "Hey, Duke. I take it by your smile you approve of this plan."

Duke nodded, his smile growing even wider before he turned serious. "Yeah. It's a good plan," he said quietly. "It's...the house is safe. I'm safe."

"For as long as I can keep it so. Till my dying day, if I can, and I'll do what I can to arrange things after. Not going anywhere, Duke."
“Nathan,” Duke whispered, ghostly tears slowly streaming down his face. “I don't have any way to thank you, any way to try to tell you what this means to me. I'm dead and this is the first time I've ever felt safe.” The irony of that wasn't lost on Duke.

"I'm glad I could give you that," Nathan said quietly. "Wish I could've helped when you were still alive. You've been a good friend to me, Duke. Best I've ever had."

“I wish I'd known you then, too. Maybe things would've been different,” Duke smiled sadly. “And I wish I could do something in return for you.”

Nathan looked baffled. "You've done so much for me! You're sharing your home, your big beautiful home - which I wouldn't have even been able to secure without you. You've kept me company, you gave me the idea to train as an EMT….you're an amazing friend, Duke."

“Maybe,” Duke smiled. “When you put it like that…”

"There, see?" Nathan grinned, "Never think you haven't done anything for me, Duke. I mean that."

Duke and Nathan had spent another couple of hours going through home decor sites, looking for ideas and arguing good naturedly about which wood to use; Nathan wanted oak which Duke said was ridiculously expensive and ash would be a perfectly suitable alternative, but Nathan refused to budge. Putting their disagreement to one side, they watched a film - or at least they did until Nathan dozed off, the stress of the past few months catching up with him now it was over.

The following morning, Nathan had called Dwight to explain that he’d bought the house and ask if he could come and finish the work that needed doing. Dwight had offered his congratulations and agreed to pop over at lunchtime the following day.

Dead on the agreed time, there was a heavy knock at the door and Duke waited impatiently while Nathan let Dwight in. He’d spent most of the day wondering whether it was a good idea to let Dwight know he was here before he decided it was a good idea - if Dwight was going to be working here for another few weeks then it would be much easier if he knew Duke existed.


"Okay as ever. Glad to see this place in good hands. Just between us, did you set up that whole haunting thing to drop the price so you could afford it?"

Duke laughed and made the door slam. “Nope, that was me,” he said.

Dwight didn't startle, but he did raise an eyebrow, and looked at Nathan.

"I seem to have come across a genuine haunted house. Meet my incorporeal roommate, Duke."

“Good to meet you, Sasquatch,” Duke grinned.

"Well, I'll be damned," Dwight said mildly - not dignifying the nickname with a response.

Duke was slightly miffed that he didn't manage to get a rise out of Dwight. “You did some great work on the place, so, uh, thanks for that."

"Thanks. Can't imagine you'd have stood for less, after all this hoopla over the sale."

“You would be right, house deserved better than being flipped for profit.”

Dwight's lip curled a little. "House-flippers are vultures."

Duke smiled. “That they are,” he agreed.

"So why Nathan?" Dwight asked curiously. "Figured you'd hate the realtor trying to sell the place."

“He was the only one who realized I was here. And I figured cooperating with him was my best
chance at finding a buyer who wasn't gonna flip it,” Duke told him. “Once he'd been here a few times, I decided I might sorta like him. He's a bit like a lost puppy, kinda endearing.”

Dwight snorted, amused. "You got that right."

"Hey," Nathan objected halfheartedly.

Duke laughed. “Sorry, Nate, but you are like a lost puppy.”

"He knows, that's why he isn't objecting more strongly," Dwight pointed out.

"I don't think I like how well you two are getting along," Nathan complained.

“Aww, poor Nate, now he looks like a lost puppy that's been kicked,” Duke laughed again.

"Nah, that puppy would be sad, Nathan's grumpy. Like a puppy whose chew toy has been taken away," Dwight smirked.

"I definitely don't like this," Nathan muttered.

“Actually you're right, that's exactly what he's like,” Duke chuckled. “Stop complaining, Nate, you introduced us, you've only got yourself to blame.”

"Yeah, yeah, assholes. Dwight, come check out what we're thinking for fixtures and decor. Want your opinions before I put in the order."

"Yeah, okay," Dwight took the laptop Nathan handed him.

“We really need your opinion on which wood to use for the flooring, too,” Duke added as Dwight browsed through all the fittings they'd picked out the night before.

"By which Duke means that he doesn't like my choice," Nathan grinned.

“It's not that I don't like your choice, it's that oak's expensive and ash would look just as good for less money,” Duke pointed out.

"Oak will be more durable, though," Nathan protested.

"All right, all right, you guys aren't an old married couple so don't bicker," Dwight told them. “You both raise good points. Why not see what kind of budget we're looking at overall and then decide whether the extra cost is worth it. Bear in mind that for one thing, you can always replace it later, and for another thing, you can stain it any color."

“Yeah, you're right. Could you price up both options and we'll decide from there?” Duke suggested.

"Course. Let me know which rooms you need done and I'll work out the square footage.”

“Thanks,” Duke smiled. “It's for the living room, dining room, landing and all the bedrooms.”

"Yeah, all right. Doing tile in the rest?"

Nathan nodded. "The real stuff, not linoleum."

“Yeah, no, linoleum is definitely not coming in this house,” Duke added.
"Good, I'd have to walk right out that door if you asked me to put that shit in," Dwight snorted. "Be an insult to a place like this."

Duke laughed. "See, Nate, I knew there was a reason I liked him."

"Good taste matters," Nathan grinned.

"The shit some people do to their poor defenseless houses," Dwight agreed.

"Between the two of you, you must have seen it all. Terrible paint jobs and ugly bathroom cabinets..." Duke paused. "Just like here, huh, Nate?" He teased lightly.

"Okay, some of your design choices were maybe not the best," Nathan said.

Dwight snorted.

"Uh, Sasquatch, what exactly is" - Duke imitated Dwight's snort - "supposed to mean?"

"Means you bicker like an old married couple," Dwight told him.

Duke made an offended noise. "I...do not bicker."

"Seen enough old married couples in my line of business," Dwight said. "Just like 'em."

Nathan blushed.

Duke grinned, Nathan looked pretty damned adorable when he blushed like that. "Maybe you're right. But less of the 'old', please," he chuckled.

"A ghost who's vain about his age. Now I've seen everything."

"Well, you would be too," Duke pointed out. "I mean, how old am I? Do I stay the same age as when I died? Or do I keep aging even though I look the same? Trust me, man, it's confusing."

"They say you're only as old as you feel," Nathan said dryly.

Duke stared at him. "Nate, did you actually just make a joke?"

"It's a well known proverb, Duke." Nathan's face was suspiciously blank.

"Yeah, I got it, I just wasn't expecting it from the man who got worried that I might be offended about having to watch you eat last night."

Dwight gave Nathan an odd look. "You're living in the same house. He is literally always going to be here, and you didn't want to eat in front of him?"

"That's what I said! He was being all weird about it, said it seemed rude. I mean...what the fuck?" Duke laughed.

"I was trying to be nice! I could eat out. Not like I don't already all the time," Nathan grumbled.

"Yeah, because eating out for three meals a day is really practical," Duke snarked.

Nathan sulked.

"Fine," Duke made a noise like a sigh. "It was a nice thought and it was very considerate of you."
"Yeah, whatever. I'm gonna go grab some lunch. If that's not too ridiculous for you."

“Nate, I'm sorry,” Duke took in the look on his face - the set of his jaw, the deep frown lines - that said he was far more bothered than he was letting on. “I was teasing and I shouldn't have. It was, is, considerate of you and I appreciate it.”

"S'fine. I deserve it. I was a stupid sap."

Duke felt as though the wind had been knocked out of him. He put his hand on Nathan's arm and wished for all the world that he could drag him into a hug. “No, you don't,” he said quietly. “There's nothing stupid or sappy about being considerate of a friend's feelings. That's what makes you a good person.”

"Makes me soft. Foolish. Should know, heard it enough."

“Yeah,” Duke said softly, remembering what Garland Wuornos was like and putting two and two together. “I guess you did. He was wrong, though, Nate, being kind doesn't make you soft or foolish.”

"Always seems to," Nathan mumbled.

“It doesn't. Someone soft wouldn’t’ve been able to stand up to Holloway the way you did. Someone foolish wouldn't’ve come up with the idea of buying the house cheap before it went to auction. Trust me, you're neither of those things and I'll keep telling you every fucking day until you believe me,” Duke kept his tone soft.

Nathan gave him an unsteady smile. "You're such a good friend, Duke. God, I don't know how you could ever think you're not a good person. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

“Back at you, Nate,” Duke smiled.

Nathan smiled too. "I really should get some lunch, though. Dwight and I can have a sandwich or two and a beer, then we can get to work."

“Sounds like a plan,” Duke said. “Ok with you, Sasquatch?”

"Fine by me," Dwight reappeared from the other room where he'd discreetly stepped out. "Italian sub for me."

"Good choice. Get 'em to add an extra pinch of basil, adds a touch more flavour," Duke advised.

"Huh. Sounds good," Dwight mused, digging in his wallet and giving Nathan some cash.

"You can have it. I'm gonna do ham and cheese, I think," Nathan said.


"Any other suggestions, maestro?" Nathan smiled.

“Grilled cheese - sharp cheddar if they have it - with thinly sliced smoked ham, smear of mustard,” Duke suggested. “And make sure they toast the bread first, or it'll go soggy.”

"Damn, that does sound good," Nathan said. "Don't think Subway'll go that far, whatever they say about their employees being 'sandwich artists'."
“You mean there isn't a place doing sandwiches in Haven any more? Apart from Subway, I mean,” Duke asked, disappointed. He'd always opened the Gull with a full lunch menu - including sandwiches to go. Subway just didn't compare.

"Well, I guess there probably is? I've just always gone to Subway since they're fast and cheap and fairly decent."

“Nate, no, just no. Dwight, tell him. There must be better sandwich places in town, right? A bar or restaurant that does takeout? Something?”

Dwight shrugged. "Food's just fuel, far's I'm concerned. If it fills me up, good enough."

“Sacrilege,” Duke complained. “Fine, get your Subway, I'm gonna Google and see if there's somewhere better so you know for next time.”

Nathan grinned. "Still like this guy?"

“He just needs educating,” Duke laughed.

"Him and me both?” Nathan chuckled.

“Yeah, you're as bad as each other. No taste. When it comes to food anyway.”

Nathan grinned wickedly. "Sometimes I even eat…..boxed mac and cheese!"

“Uh...what, now? Boxed mac and cheese is not coming in this house, Nate, over my dead body.”

Nathan's grin grew. "I'll sneak it in when you're not looking. I hear they sell a ready-to-eat version now, you don't even have to add the milk and butter or cook the pasta.

“Nope, not happening. I'll wreck the microwave before I let you eat that shit.”

"Eh, it's not bad cold," Nathan smiled.

“Please tell me that you haven't actually tried eating it cold?”

"Hey, sometimes needs must."

“Oh my god,” Duke groaned. “How are you even still alive? Seriously, I'm beginning to see why you eat out or get takeaway so much.”

"I did tell you I can't cook," Nathan chuckled.

“Yeah, but there's not being able to cook and then there's eating total crap. At least find somewhere good to eat. Or let me teach you."

"All right, all right," Nathan smiled fondly. "But sometimes junk is tasty."

“The key word being sometimes,” Duke grumbled.

"Are you a food snob?" Nathan smiled.


“Probably,” Duke muttered. “But I'll teach you to like the good stuff even if it kills me.”
"I look forward to it," Nathan smiled.

“Good,” Duke grinned. “Because you've got a lot to learn. Both of you.”

"He can learn if he wants, I'm fine," Dwight snorted.

Duke rolled his eyes. “Whatever you say, Sasquatch.”

"Har har," Dwight rolled his eyes.

Duke grinned. “Go and get your crap sandwiches, I promise I won't complain...much.”

"Sure you won't," Nathan grinned.


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Dwight had another job to finish before he started on Nathan's house, but work was soon underway. Duke initially tried to supervise and made helpful suggestions, to which Dwight pointed out that he was being less than useful and it really would be better if Duke could just let him get on with it. Having decided he was right, Duke turned his attention to coming up with simple recipe ideas for Nathan to try (and researching local food places that did good takeout). Whenever Dwight took a break, he always popped into the living room for a quick chat and he and Duke became, well not friends exactly, but buddies.

Nathan was settling into his new job and coming home at a sensible time every night (usually with takeout from one of Duke's suggested places). He was enthusiastic and full of stories about his day, and was still looking into doing his EMT certification once the house was finished.

His friendship with Duke was growing as they settled into a comfortable routine of chatting while Nathan ate dinner and then watching a movie or a TV show. He'd even started seeing Duke more often - just a fleeting glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye, or the outline of a figure when the lights were dim, no facial expressions or details, not unless Duke was trying to be visible - which he was getting much better at now.

The work on the house was ongoing, taking weeks even with Dwight coming every day. The argument about which wood to use for the floorings was solved when Dwight arrived with sections of oak timbering and explained that he was doing the floors at cost as a housewarming gift. Nathan had grinned and thanked him profusely, clapped him on the back and immediately dashed out to pick up some beers to say thank you. Duke had added his thanks, and made appreciative noises over the quality of the wood (and had quietly admitted that maybe Nathan had been right all along).

Each evening, Nathan would stop off at home after work and pick up a truckload of stuff which he brought to the house and unpacked into each room as it was finished. Duke watched him, amused at how one man could accumulate so many boxes of what seemed to be junk.

Eventually, the work was finished - everything that Nathan and Duke had planned carried out to perfection by Dwight - and Nathan arrived with the last few boxes which he quickly unpacked before he turned to where Duke was glimmering softly and grinned.

"All done?" Duke smiled.

"All done. I'm officially moved in and the work is complete," Nathan smiled. "Home sweet home."
“Got a good ring to it, doesn’t it?”

"Sure does," Nathan smiled, looking around the place with pride.

“It looks great, Nathan,” Duke said quietly. “Sasquatch did an amazing job of pulling our plans together and making it all work.”

"He really did," Nathan smiled. "And you had so many amazing ideas."

“So did you. And you were right about the oak,” Duke admitted grudgingly.

"Ash would have been nice too," Nathan offered.

“Maybe, but oak works better with the lighting and colour scheme. It’s warmer, more cozy. You have a real eye for this stuff,” Duke smiled.

Nathan blushed. "You pick up a few things, seeing so many places."

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Duke nodded to himself. “So, time to kick back, relax and enjoy your new home,” he grinned.

"Yeah," Nathan grinned. "Nice not to feel my life is split."

“Good,” Duke smiled. “You should invite some friends round, have a housewarming party.”

"Dwight’s already seen the place, though," Nathan said.

“That’s...not really the point of a housewarming, ask him anyway, get some people from work, other friends, pick up some beers, make a night of it.”

Nathan looked down at his feet. "I….don't really know anyone that well."

“Sorry, Nate, forget I said anything, should’ve known you're not a party sorta guy,” Duke said apologetically.

"I'm not a people sort of guy," Nathan mumbled. I can't talk to someone without shoving my foot in my mouth so hard I choke. Everyone thinks I'm this emotionally constipated animated stone statue."

“Yeah, well I do pretty well at the whole foot in mouth thing too,” Duke reminded him. “And you're not emotionally constipated or stony. Anyone who thinks that just doesn't know you.”

"Maybe, but it's pretty hard to get to know me when that's what I'm like."

“You're not difficult to get to know,” Duke said, puzzled. “Why would you think that?”

"I usually am. You were an exception. Mostly, I meet people and clam up."

Duke smiled softly. “Kinda nice to hear that,” he admitted. “Guess it's easier when you're not face to face with me.”

"That, and meeting you was not exactly the normal course of social interaction," Nathan grinned.

“That...is very true,” Duke laughed. “Whatever it was, I'm glad you were able to open up to me.” He reached out to place his hand on Nathan's back.
"I am too," Nathan smiled softly. "Couldn't have asked for a better friend."

“You're a pretty amazing friend too, Nate, don't ever forget that.”

"I try. You deserve a good friend. More'n one, really."

“Yeah, well, not everyone wants to be friends with a ghost... you're...kinda weird in that respect,” Duke laughed.

"Why wouldn't they be? You're a great guy."

“Uh... because I'm a ghost,” Duke laughed. “Doesn't matter anyway, no one liked me when I was alive and I doubt that'd be improved now I'm dead.”

"Anyone who didn't like you was an idiot,” Nathan snorted.

“Yeah, well, you heard what Holloway had to say about me, he was just saying what the whole town thought of me.”

Nathan scoffed. "Duke, how many times did you tell me that Holloway's a complete raging asshole? You wanna use him as your example?"

“Nope, he just repeated what I spent my whole life hearing. You saw your dad's reaction to me, too.”

"Dad's an asshole too. You had too many assholes in your life."

“Whole town full of 'em?” Duke laughed. “Yeah, kinda hard to believe anything different of myself than what I heard from them day in, day out.”

"People are judgmental assholes. You just finished telling me I'm more than what everyone else thinks of me. Why is it any different for you?"

Duke didn't have an answer to that. “S’pose you're right,” he admitted, grudgingly.

"See? You're a good guy,” Nathan proudly concluded.

As much as he wanted to argue that actually, no, he was a guy who’d done as much bad as good in his life, Duke didn't have the heart to take the wind out of Nathan's sails. “Yeah, yeah, whatever,” he replied instead. “Can we get on with enjoying the house being finished? What d'you want to do this evening?”

"Enjoy it,” Nathan said promptly. "Relax on the couch with a movie. Make ice cream sundaes in the kitchen. Take a bath in the tub and sleep in my bed."

Duke smiled. “Sounds pretty damn perfect to me.”

"Not too boring?” Nathan smiled.

“Definitely not. I mean, it depends on the movie and the sundae toppings, obviously, but no, it doesn't sound boring at all.”

"What gourmet shit do you insist on using in a sundae?” Nathan teased. "Do you make your own maraschino cherries or something?"

“It has been known to happen. And yes, before you ask, I used to make my own ice cream. And
sauces. As far as toppings go, you should try home made fudge with caramel sauce and chocolate brownie pieces."

"Okay, that does sound good. But also totally out of the range of my abilities."

"Well, maybe. Most of it's easy but caramel can be tricky. Get store-bought ingredients and just assemble it here. Salted caramel if you can get it."

"I thought making caramel was ridiculously hard."

"It's not that difficult, there's just a knack to it. Anyway, store-bought is nearly as good, especially if you can find some at a farmer's market or food fair."

"Definitely sticking to store-bought," Nathan grinned sheepishly.

"Probably a good idea," Duke grinned back. "So what movie are we watching?"

"You like the Die Hard movies?"

"Is that seriously a question?" Duke laughed. "The first two were good, the third one less so but it was still watchable."

"Then you don't want to know about four and five. I'll queue up the original."

"They made another two? I really don't want to know, do I?"

"You truly do not."

Duke nodded. "I'll take your word for it. The original was the best anyway."

"Almost always is," Nathan agreed.

"Yeah," Duke agreed. "Oh, hey, look," he said as he made a book zoom off the shelf and land on the couch next to Nathan.

"Nice, you're learning to move stuff around with a lot more control and finesse," Nathan said, impressed.

Duke grinned. "Yeah, it's getting easier now."

"Pretty soon you'll be able to flip over the pages to read the books, not just move them around."

"... I hadn't even thought of that, I was just thinking I might be able to be *useful* and help you with stuff."

"Useful?" Nathan looked confused. "Why would you need to be useful?"

"Because I want to be. So I don't feel like a waste of space. So I can help you take care of the place."

"You're not a waste of space! You're my best friend, Duke. I have been so much happier these past weeks staying with you than I ever was on my own."

"And that makes me happy, Nate, *so* happy. I just want to do things, like... I dunno, stupid stuff like fetching you a beer from the fridge or rescuing a pan if you decide to try cooking."
Nathan grinned. "Okay, that one is something that will probably need doing at some point. But I just want you to know you don't have to. You don't need to be useful, you're not obligated to do things for me, you don't owe me anything. You're my friend, and that's all I could ever want."

“I know I don't have to,” Duke said quietly. “Doesn't stop me from wanting to.”

"Okay. I just wouldn't want you feeling like you had to."

“I don’t,” Duke replied firmly. “Anyway, I'm getting better at it. At least now if I throw a book at your head you know I meant to,” he laughed.

"I'll probably deserve it," Nathan chuckled.

“Definitely,” Duke laughed. “Go and make your sundae, I'll get the film ready.”

"Sounds good, thanks."

Duke stayed out of the kitchen while Nathan got his ice cream ready, not trusting himself to keep quiet and not make any helpful suggestions. When Nathan came back in, he laughed. Nathan was carrying the biggest sundae Duke had ever seen, scoops of ice cream smothered in chocolate and caramel sauces, fudge pieces, chocolate chips, a wafer and what looked suspiciously like crushed meringue.

“What the fuck is that?” Duke asked, still laughing.

"I call it, 'the Housewarming Party'," Nathan smirked.

“Well that's one name for it,” Duke laughed.

"Another being 'compete gluttonous disgrace'?” Nathan grinned.

“Complete sugar overload?” Duke suggested.

"That works," Nathan said cheerfully.

Duke rolled his eyes. “There's no hope for you, is there? You're worse than a child,” he laughed.

"Childhood is short, immaturity is forever," Nathan smirked.

Duke snorted. “Yeah, yeah, age is just a number, I get it,” he chuckled.

"You'd know," Nathan said in his usual deadpan.

Duke let out an indignant squeak. “What are you trying to say, Nate?”

"Nothing," Nathan looked entirely innocent - suspiciously so.

“You do know that you only think you're funny, right? You're actually not,” Duke snarked.

"Been told so often enough,” Nathan said blandly.

Duke squinted at him and decided to change the subject. “Ready to watch this film, then?”

"Sounds great," Nathan smiled.

Duke started it and they settled in to watch in companionable silence, only pausing for Nathan to top up his sugar rush with a mug of cocoa.
In spite of all that sugar, Nathan soon began to yawn. It had been a long day. Before the movie was even over, he'd slumped down asleep on the couch.

Duke smiled at him and considered waking him so he could go to bed. He thought better of it, the couch might not be the most comfortable but Nathan looked so peaceful and relaxed that he didn't have the heart to disturb him. Instead, he carefully moved the blanket from where it was folded up on the armchair and gently draped it over Nathan so he wouldn't get cold. He silenced the movie and drifted away so Nathan could sleep in peace.

Nathan snuggled up beneath the blanket with a contented smile, falling into a deeper sleep.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Nathan has a dream which makes him see Duke in a different light. Duke discovers he can leave the house. And the rating has jumped up to E ;)

The dream was so realistic that Nathan didn't even realize it was a dream. He woke up yawning, and rolled over to find Duke in his bed, sleepy and stretching as he woke as well.

"Good morning," Duke murmured, smiling softly.

It was the most natural thing in the world for Nathan to lean over and kiss him.

Duke returned the kiss readily, wrapping an arm around him and drawing him close. Their bare chests pressed together as the kiss deepened, making Nathan moan softly. He ran his hands over Duke's skin, warm and smooth and soft, eager to feel every inch of his lover.

Duke returned the favor, hands slipping down to touch Nathan intimately. Nathan whimpered and arched into his touch, it was good, so good. Good, but not enough, Nathan wanted more, he wanted...he was on his back with Duke on top of him, his weight pressing him into the mattress, bodies twined together and Duke's length buried deep inside Nathan, hard and hot and deep, taking him so perfectly, everything Nathan had never known he'd wanted.

Duke was meditating in the living room when he heard his name being called. Worried that Nathan needed something, that he might be ill, or hurt, or upset, he rushed straight into Nathan's bedroom and stopped suddenly.

Nathan's sleeping body was sprawled on the empty bed, legs spread, hips arching, arousal obvious as he moaned Duke's name.

Realising that his name was being used in a very different context to what he’d initially thought, Duke reluctantly dragged his eyes away from the beautiful sight of Nathan at the height of his arousal, and drifted slowly out of the room, his thoughts scattered. Whatever Nathan was dreaming about, it clearly wasn’t unpleasant and it wasn’t for Duke to see him like this. Not while he was asleep, anyway.

Nathan's climax woke him, and he blinked as he grasped at the fragments of the dream, catching them before they could slip away so he could review and examine them. It was not the first time he'd had a sexual dream about someone he knew, but it was the first time he'd woken clinging to the idea instead of cringing at the random images his sleeping brain had thrown at him. It was the first time the idea had appealed to him, as strange at it was to a man who'd always thought himself entirely straight. Had Duke been a woman - and not a ghost, of course - they'd probably already be dating. But while Nathan could be open to exploring his sexuality, what would be the point? Duke had come a long way with his abilities, but he was still entirely incorporeal. What Nathan had dreamed could never be. There was no point dwelling on it. Nathan swallowed his disappointment, and got up to get ready for the day.

“Good morning,” Duke said chirpily when Nathan came downstairs.
"Hey, Duke," Nathan gave him a smile that felt a little off.

"Sleep ok?" Duke asked innocently.

"Yeah, fine," Nathan could feel the blush rising to his cheeks.

Duke smirked, thinking how adorable Nathan looked when he blushed. "No...uh... nightmares or anything?"

Nathan's eyes widened in panic. Had Duke seen something? Heard something? "Why...why do you ask?" he squeaked.

Shit, Duke thought, reading the fear on Nathan's face. Whatever he might have been dreaming of, it clearly wasn't something he wanted to be dreaming about. "Nothing, no reason, just checking you're sleeping ok here," he said quickly.

"Yeah, fine, no nightmares, definitely," Nathan mumbled.

"Good," Duke said quietly, frowning as his mind worked overtime. If it hadn't been a nightmare, then...maybe... "Busy day today?" He asked, changing the subject.

"Yeah, plenty of showings," Nathan said quickly, relieved to change the subject.

"Good," Duke smiled. "Glad things are going well. No more haunted places, I guess."

"Nope. Almost too bad, we actually get a lot of calls from people wanting to know if 'that haunted house' is up for sale."

"Really?" Duke laughed. "No one wanted the place before, now they're jumping at the chance to live with me. You could sell the place again, turn a profit."

Nathan snorted. "As if. Maybe you should start coming with me to showings, could make a name for myself selling haunted houses."

Duke laughed. "You think, if I could leave the house, I'd want to come to work with you when I could be cruising bars and watching gorgeous people all day?"

For a split second Nathan just stared, stunned and hurt. Then he managed to fake a little laugh. "Yeah. Good point."

Fuck. "Sorry, Nate, that came out wrong," Duke told him. "I just meant...the work part would be boring, not the spending time with you part."

"Hey, no, it's okay. You already spend your evenings with me every single day. Can't blame you for not wanting to do the same for the days. Must be getting pretty sick of me by now. M'not even very good company, n' definitely not gorgeous. Course you'd want pretty, fun company instead."

"Nate, no," Duke said softly. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't've said that. I love spending time with you and if I could leave the house then I'd definitely come with you. Even to work. I'm not sick of you, you're great company and you are gorgeous." He stopped abruptly, realising that Nathan might very well not want to hear that from him.

"S'ok, you don't have to coddle me," Nathan told him. "I know it's true. Don't have to lie to make me feel better about it."

"I'm not lying," Duke insisted. "I meant every single word," he said honestly, putting his hand on
"You're a nice guy," Nathan smiled weakly.

"Nathan, I'm not being fucking nice," Duke said hotly. "I don't do nice, I do 'being a dick' pretty well, but not nice. Just believe what I said. Please."

"You're not a dick!" Nathan objected. "You've always been nice to me."

Duke rolled his eyes. "Whatever. I meant what I said and I need you to believe it."


Duke narrowed his eyes, as if deciding whether or not to let the lie slip past unmentioned. "No, you don't," he said bluntly.

"Sorry," Nathan mumbled. "S'not that easy."

"Yeah…" Duke said quietly. "Can you believe that I meant it though?"

Nathan smiled - a real smile this time. "That I can do."

**********

As summer gave way to fall, Nathan announced he was going to catch up on some yard work before the bad weather set in. His first job was to tidy up the windfall apples from the tree and Duke told him he thought there might be an old rake in the shed which would be much easier than picking them all up by hand.

Nathan had nodded and pulled on his boots and a pair of work gloves before heading out to investigate what tools might be hiding in the dilapidated, tumbledown shed.

Duke watched him through the window, looking at the yard which could really use some sprucing up. Nathan had kept on top of the regular tasks - lawn mowing and such like - but with the whole house needing work, and his new job, there hadn't been much time for landscaping and planting. Next year, Nathan had promised. Duke was starting to think about what they might plant and was working out where a pizza oven might fit when there was a loud shriek from the shed.

Filled with panic, he flew out of the door and across the backyard, terrified that Nathan might be hurt.

"Nate! What happened?" He shouted.

Nathan had been staring in horror at a corner of the old shed, but he looked up sharply at Duke's voice, his expression changing to surprise. "Duke? Is that you?"

"Yeah, what's wrong? Why'd you scream?"

"Duke, you're outside!" Nathan exclaimed, half excited and half worried. "Are you okay?"

"Obviously. I'm talking to you, aren't I?" Duke snarked, his concern over hearing Nathan scream slowly dissipating. He grinned as the realisation sank in that Nathan was right. He was outside the house. "I'm fine, I don't understand how I'm here but I'm fine."

Nathan grinned. "Nice to get out and get a change of scenery, huh?"
“Really good,” Duke said quietly, still smiling. “I can almost smell the crisp air.”

"Let's go out in the yard so you can see the sky and sun," Nathan proposed. He glanced at the corner of the shed and added, "also so I can get away from that." 'That' proved to be an orb weaver spider of truly impressive proportions.

“That is why you screamed and frightened me half to death?” Duke grumbled even as he drifted out of the shed. “A spider? Really?!"

Nathan looked embarrassed as he followed Duke out. "I was rummaging through the stuff on the floor and I straightened up only to find that damn thing a bare inch away from my face," he defended himself.

Duke laughed, too happy to be outside to do anything else. “Yeah, ok, I might've screamed too,” he admitted.

Nathan looked relieved, and watched Duke shimmer into being, joy on the ghost's face. "Anyone would've. Even Dwight."

“Nah, not Sasquatch, he would've picked it up and rehomed it in the hedge or something,” Duke grinned as he slowly turned a circle, gazing upwards and watching the wispy clouds drifting across the sea of blue sky.

"Fair," Nathan allowed. "It'd probably come right back, though. From the size of that monster, that corner must be the spider jackpot."

“Don't think anyone's been in there for years,” Duke said, distracted by the soft rustle of wind in the trees. “It must've been undisturbed for a long time.”

"Yeah. I'll try not to bother it," Nathan said quietly. The soft delight in Duke's face made his heart ache.

Duke nodded, smiling as he turned his face up towards the sun's rays. Sensation was nothing but a distant memory, but here, now, it seemed so close that he could almost feel the warmth on his skin.

Nathan folded himself into a sitting position on the soft ground, the dry leaves crunching beneath him.

Duke glanced at him. “You know there might be spiders in those leaves, right?” He teased lightly. “Don't want you freaking out and screaming again.”

"Shut up," Nathan said, scrambling upright with more haste than dignity.

Duke laughed, waiting until Nathan was upright before putting his hand on Nathan's shoulder. “It's good to be out here,” he said quietly.

"I'm glad you made it out," Nathan smiled.

“Me too,” Duke grinned. “Thanks for terrifying the life out of me so I could do it.”

"Even over just a spider?" Nathan chuckled.

“Even over just a spider,” Duke laughed, still deliriously happy to be outside, his mind running nineteen to the dozen as he tried to work out how this worked, how far he could go, whether he could visit some of his favourite places.
Nathan's mind seemed to be running on a similar track. "We could test this, see what your limits are. Maybe I can take you out places."

Duke smiled softly at Nathan's use of the 'we'. “Thanks, Nate... that'd be really good.”

"If I can, I will. But don't push yourself too hard, okay? I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to you," Nathan said anxiously.

“I won't,” Duke promised, touched by Nathan's concern and wanting to put his mind at rest. “Nothing's going to happen to me. Look, how's this? I'll go back in and then come straight back out. That way we know I'm not stuck out here and that this isn't a one off.”

"Yeah, good, that's good. Smart." Nathan hadn't even imagined that Duke might not be able to come back inside, and the thought of it turned his stomach to lead.

“Ok, stay here, I'll be back,” Duke said, frowning at the sudden look of dread on Nathan's face.

Nathan nodded, biting his lip.

As quickly as possible, Duke raced inside, paused for a moment, and went straight back out to Nathan, grinning with relief that it hadn't been a one off. “See?” He said. “I'm fine.”

"You got in okay? And back out? No problem?" Nathan smiled, relieved.

“No problems,” Duke confirmed, excited to go exploring. Remembering Nathan's concern (and he might have a valid point about not pushing too hard), Duke suggested Nathan show him the work Dwight had done on the front of the house. It might not be far, but he hadn't seen the front of his house since the day he'd left for the final time.

"Yeah, come on, you'll love how it looks now," Nathan smiled, walking with him around to the front of the house.

“It looks great,” Duke said quietly, his lips curved into a sad smile as he remembered the last time he'd been here, when he'd gazed wistfully back at the red front door before he'd driven away.

"I'm glad you like it," Nathan told him.

“You should get a chair for the back porch,” Duke said, trying to shake the memories. “Maybe a table, too, have breakfast out here on the weekends.”

"Yeah, okay," Nathan agreed. "Porch swing too - nice padded one with a footrest and cup holder. Or a hammock."

“A hammock is a genius idea!” Duke replied enthusiastically. “Lounge around out here, have a few beers…”

"Enjoy the sunshine and the view," Nathan smiled, and decided to get one big enough for two.

“Wrapped up in blankets with a mug of cocoa when it's cold,” Duke added.

"I never even thought about using a hammock when it's cold, but yeah," Nathan nodded.

“It'll be good, sit out, look at the stars…”

"Yeah, that sounds great," Nathan smiled.
"It will be," Duke grinned. "C'mon, we should go exploring, see how far I can go."

"Yeah, okay. Let's start with the property boundaries. If you're gonna have a problem, it's most likely to be there I'd think."

Duke nodded. "Yeah, you're right," he said, already making his way down the long driveway.

"Be careful," Nathan said again. "If you feel even the slightest bit wrong, pull back. And stick your toes or something out first."

"I will," Duke promised. "Not taking any risks, just want to test this out."

"Good, good," Nathan said. "How are you feeling? Does putting distance between yourself and the house make you feel bad?"

"Nope," Duke grinned as they reached the end of the driveway. Steeling himself for disappointment, he slowly drifted a couple of feet further, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk. "Still fine," he said happily.

"That's great, Duke," Nathan beamed. "Let's go for a walk up the road and see how you do."

"Keep up, then," Duke was already zooming off excitedly.

Nathan chuckled and strolled after Duke, happy to see him so excited.

Duke got as far as the stop sign at the end of the street before it felt like he'd hit an invisible barrier. He turned back towards Nathan, disappointed. "This is it," he said dejectedly.

Nathan hurried over. "Are you okay? Did it hurt? Do you feel….faded, or anything? Should we get you back home?"

"No, I feel fine, I just...stopped. Look," Duke tried to show Nathan what had happened. This time, though, there was no barrier and he crossed to the other side of the street. "...Ok….that’s weird," he said.

"What's weird? What are you getting?" Nathan fretted.

"Everything's fine," Duke reassured. "But a minute ago I couldn't get past the stop sign and now I'm the other side of the street."

"That is weird," Nathan wondered.

"Stay there for a minute?" Duke asked him, a sudden thought occurring to him.

"Yeah, okay," Nathan agreed, waiting patiently.

Frowning slightly, Duke started to make his way back to the house and ran into the invisible barrier again. He turned around. A hundred feet, he reckoned. He went back to Nathan but turned right just before he got to him and ran into the same invisible barrier in that direction too. He nodded to himself and slowly drifted back to where Nathan was starting to look worried.

"It's you, Nate," Duke told him quietly.

"What's me?" Nathan asked, confused.

"You're the reason I can leave the house. I think, anyway. I can't go more than a hundred feet away
from you, in any direction. It's not the distance from the house that stops me, it's how far I am from you.”

Nathan looked even more baffled. "That's strange. Why would I be your lifeline to the outside world?"

“You say that like you think I have any idea how this shit works,” Duke snarked at him.

"Yeah, yeah. Do you want to go back home, or do you want to try driving somewhere?"

“Driving somewhere,” Duke said decisively. “If you don't mind, that is, I know you had stuff you wanted to do and taking a ghost out for a roadtrip probably wasn't on the list.”

"Taking a road trip with my best friend sounds amazing, and I know just the place,” Nathan said happily. "Figure we should start around the block nice and slow, take some back roads before trying the highway. Or maybe skip the highway entirely - if something goes wrong, I'd be going too fast to stop soon enough."

“Ok,” Duke grinned. “As long as you're sure. Where should we go?”

"Surprise," Nathan grinned as he headed back to the house.

Duke rolled his eyes and smiled as he followed Nathan home. “If we're going to be out for a while, you should get something to eat and drink,” he pointed out.

"Guess I gotta go inside to grab my keys and lock up anyhow. Might's well grab a water bottle out of the fridge, and something to snack on."

“Good,” Duke grinned. “You're getting better at looking after yourself, even if you still won't let me teach you how to cook,” he teased gently.

"Not that good, if I needed you to reminded me," Nathan grinned sheepishly.

“I said better, not good,” Duke laughed. “A few months ago, you would've argued with me that you didn't need to eat, drink, or sleep.”

Nathan scratched his head, looking embarrassed. "If I didn't have to go up to the house anyway, I'd probably be arguing for us to hop straight into the car, that I could grab something on the way - which I'd probably then forget to do."

“Yeah, ok, maybe you have a point, you're really not good at looking after yourself,” Duke smiled. “Gonna have to work on that.”

"Yeah," Nathan smiled. "What would I do without you?"

“Uh...well, you wouldn't be planning to drive round town with a ghost in your car,” Duke laughed. “You do know that you're probably certifiably insane?”

"Probably," Nathan sobered, looking over at him. "It's crossed my mind sometimes to wonder if this is all in my head. Wouldn't change it if it were, though - better'n my old life. How sad is that?"

Duke studied him. “Nate…” he said softly. “It's better than my old life too. This...me...it isn't in your head, I promise you that.”

"I know," Nathan smiled softly. "Whenever I start worrying about that, I go look at the news articles and videos, and remember how things went with Holloway."
“And laugh, I hope, because that really was funny,” Duke grinned.

Nathan chuckled. "Yeah, sometimes."

“Good,” Duke smiled. “Are we going then?”

"Yup," Nathan grabbed a water bottle, packet of crackers, and his house keys before locking up and heading down to the car.

Duke followed him, gliding easily through the car door while Nathan juggled everything he was carrying. Trying to sit in the car was more awkward - furniture generally had proved to be a challenge because he couldn't sit on it like a normal person, he had to sort of fold himself up into an approximation of a sitting position and hope it didn't look too weird. Mostly, he didn't bother, preferring to drift around instead, but while travelling in a car...that felt too much like a dog hanging it's head out of the car window and he really wasn't keen on that idea. So he carefully arranged himself into the passenger seat and turned to Nathan. “If you dare mention anything about seatbelts…”

"Yeah, okay, fair," Nathan smiled a little. "Talk to me as we go, okay? Let me know how you're doing, if you need me to slow down or stop or anything, anything at all."

“Will do,” Duke said, suddenly uncertain of how this was even going to work. Would he have to drift along and try to match his speed to Nathan's driving? Or would he just be sort of carried along?

Nathan put the car in gear and crept down the driveway at a snail's pace. "Okay?"

As it turned out, Duke was worrying about nothing. However this ghosting shit was supposed to work, apparently travelling in cars was easy. “Yeah, I'm good,” he grinned. “Don't even have to do anything."

"Okay, good. Gonna put on just a little speed." Speed was a relative term - a turtle's pace instead of a snail’s.

Duke rolled his eyes. “If you keep this up, you're going to be arrested for impeding traffic,” he complained. “I promise you, I'm not even having to do anything to stay with you, you're not going to go too fast and leave me behind or anything."

"I know, I just…..what if something goes wrong?" Nathan said softly. "What if I take you away from where you can be, and you're just….gone?"

Duke looked at him and frowned. Nathan's face was pinched with nerves, a subtle tic of tension in his jaw. "Nate," he said quietly. "You won't. Where I can be is close to you, so as long as I'm near you, nothing's going to go wrong."

"I hope so," Nathan swallowed hard. "If anything happened to you, I'd never forgive myself."

“Likewise,” Duke replied softly. “Nothing's going to happen to me, though, trust me.”

"Says the guy who just admitted he doesn't know how any of this works," Nathan joked weakly.

“Fair point,” Duke laughed. “But what I do know is that I can't leave the house on my own and I can't go more than a hundred feet away from you when we're out. Stands to reason that the only thing that'll happen is that I get too far from you and can't go any further, or I get somehow zapped back to the house. Neither of which is a terrible thing.”
"Stands to reason, sure, but when does a ghost follow reason,” Nathan worried.

“It’ll be fine, Nathan, trust me.”

"Yeah, okay," Nathan mumbled, accelerating to the residential speed limit.

“See, all good,” Duke tried to reassure him (and maybe himself as well).

"So far, so good," Nathan nodded.

“You gonna tell me where we're going yet?” Duke grinned.

"Nope," Nathan grinned and he merged onto a state highway, accelerating carefully. It wasn't until they saw exits for 'beaches' and took one that it was clear where they were going.


"You said you missed it. Late afternoon now, figure we can stay an hour or so until sunset at least."

“You remembered,” Duke said quietly, touched that Nathan would recall such a tiny detail from their conversation.

"Of course," Nathan sounded a little confused. "Can't give you all the things on that list, or maybe even most of 'em. Be a shame not to give you what I can."

“Thank you, Nate, it means a lot to me.”

"Glad to," Nathan smiled.

“Sure you won't be bored sitting on the beach for an hour?” Duke checked.

"I'll be fine, don't worry about me," Nathan reassured him.

“Ok,” Duke grinned as they pulled up in the parking lot and he got his first glimpse of the ocean in ten years.

Nathan locked the car and hurried out into the sand, not wanting to hold Duke back.

Duke stuck close to Nathan, staying quiet as he took in the sights and sounds that he thought he'd never get to experience again.

Nathan settled on the warm sand, far enough down the beach that Duke could go in the water or explore the rocks for tidepools.

The ocean, Duke thought. Almost his second home, whether he’d been out on the boat or sitting on the deck of the Gull and listening to waves crashing against the rocks. And ultimately, his resting place. The emotions of being here hit him hard and tears flowed down his cheeks as he thought about what it meant to be back.

Nathan saw Duke shimmer into being, faint tear tracks on his face. "Duke? Are you okay?"

Duke nodded. “Yeah, just... the ocean meant the world to me. It was escape, it was home for a while. It was peace…”

"I'm glad I could bring you back here," Nathan said softly. "If you want, we can take a boat out
sometime. Might have to show me how to drive it, but it's something we could do if you wanted.”


"It's my pleasure, honestly," Nathan smiled.

“No, I mean it. Thank you. For remembering, for taking the time to do this. For everything.”

“You're welcome, Duke. I mean it when I say it's my pleasure,” Nathan murmured.

Duke glanced at him, distracted momentarily from watching the waves. “Y’know, now I can come out with you... I could come to work with you. Well all sorts of places really, but...if you wanted…” He said, hesitantly.

"You're welcome to come with me wherever you want," Nathan offered without even a moment's hesitation, "but I know you're not really into seeing my job, I won't be offended if you opt to stay home while I work."

Duke stared at him, silently taking it for the rebuff it was. He should've known how much he'd hurt Nathan by saying that, should've known there was no way back from it. “I'm sorry I ever said that,” he said quietly, needing to try anyway.

"Don't be sorry," Nathan said earnestly. "I'm glad you feel like you can be honest with me. I'd rather have the truth even if it's not pretty, than have my best friend lie to me to make me happy.”

“I wasn't being honest, though, Nate,” Duke said, gazing out at the ocean. “And it wasn't the truth.”

"Duke, I told you, it's okay, you don't have to spare my feelings.”

"I'm not trying to spare your feelings,” Duke insisted.

"Duke, c'mon. I'm a real estate agent. That'd put most people to sleep. Of course you're not interested."

“In the work? Yeah, no, you've got me there,” Duke agreed. “Still want to come with you.”

"Well, you're welcome to come along, but what if you get bored?" "Uh, do I have to remind you I've just spend ten years drifting around an empty house on my own? Boredom is not a problem. Besides, I'd be with you,” Duke made a noise like he was clearing his throat.

"Fair enough, I guess. But it is really boring work, even with me." "I'll risk it,” Duke grinned even as he thought nothing is boring with you, Nathan. “Sun should be going down soon.”

"Yeah. Sure hope it's a good sunset," Nathan smiled.

“Looks like it will be,” Duke nodded, lapsing into silence so he could hear the waves softly breaking over the sand.

Duke was far from wrong - the sun set in spectacular bands of bright gold and blazing red, fading to soft pinks and purples in puffs of cloud against the blue vault of sky.

“Beautiful, isn't it?” Duke said softly. “The colours glinting off the waves. It looks like the sea’s
on fire.”

"It does," Nathan said, his voice hushed.

Seized by impulse, Duke leaned over and placed his lips against Nathan's cheek in what he thought might be a fair attempt at a kiss.

Nathan reached up to touch the cold spot on his cheek, hoping the sunset's brilliant colors would hide his blush. "Duke?"


"Was that….I mean, are you….uh…," Nathan stammered over his words.

“It was meant to be a kiss, if that's what you're asking,” Duke said quietly, staring back out at the ocean and watching the colours slowly fade.

"I, uh….yeah," Nathan managed. "Um…..I'm sorry? I just, I mean, I….can't really kiss back I don't think?"

“No, I'm sorry,” Duke told him. “I wasn't thinking. Caught up in the moment, I guess, and I just wanted to show you what it meant to me. I should've known it'd make you uncomfortable.”

"Didn't make me uncomfortable," Nathan shook his head. "Wasn't a bad thing."

“Really?” Duke checked, shyly ducking his face away in case Nathan could see him more clearly now the light was fading.

"Yeah, I just…..wish I could do more, you know?" Nathan said softly.

Duke risked a glance back at Nathan. “Yeah, no, I get it. We’re friends, it doesn't have to be anything else. I can understand why you wouldn't want that.”

“Isn't that I don't want it," Nathan shook his head, frustrated. "It's that we can't have it.

“'You don't have to say that to make me feel better, Nate."

"No, I mean it. I, uh," Nathan blushed noticeably. "Look, just trust me, I mean it."

“Ok, I trust you,” Duke said quietly. “But I don't understand 'can't have it.'”

"We can't touch each other. If I tried to kiss you, you wouldn't feel anything at all." "No," Duke agreed. “But there's more to life than that. Besides, I get to watch you blush prettily and that more than makes up for it,” he teased gently.

"Ha, ha," Nathan rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, sorry, but I meant what I said. If - and it's a big if - you wanted to be more than friends, not being able to touch each other isn't an insurmountable issue.”

"How do you mean?" Nathan asked, half confused and half hopeful.

“Oh god,” Duke groaned. “Please tell me we're on the same page and we're both talking about sex because otherwise this is gonna be embarrassing.”
Nathan turned beet red. "Of course we are, just havin' a hard time seeing how that works with no touching."

Duke wasn't entirely sure his face hadn't turned the same colour as Nathan's. This stuff was much easier when he was alive. "Because most pleasure starts in the mind. I can talk to you, tell you what I want to do to you, tell you what I want you to do to yourself. I can make it good for you without you feeling a thing."

Nathan shivered a little, his flush deepening. "I, uh, hadn't thought of it that way."

"Most people don't," Duke smiled. "But it's never going to be a normal relationship, or whatever, and I'm never going to be able to hold your hand or wrap my arms around you, no matter how much I want to, and I understand if it's too weird for you, I probably shouldn't've said anything, it's not like you can walk away from me, so just say no and I'll drop it," he said, the words coming out in a rush.

"No, it's okay, I want to try. Can't promise I'll be anything worthwhile."

"You underestimate yourself," Duke told him, purring into his ear.

Nathan made a stifled little noise, shivering.

"And as much as I'd love to fuck you, hard and dirty, right here in the sand, we should probably go home," Duke grinned.

"Duke," Nathan whined, remembering his dream.

"You like that idea, don't you?" Duke whispered.

Nathan managed to nod.

"I'll tell you more about it when we get home," Duke promised. "Unless you have a surprising exhibitionist streak that I should know about."

"Really not," Nathan told him.

"Ok," Duke laughed. "C'mon then."

Nathan nodded, and they headed home.

Duke stayed quiet as Nathan drove, not wanting to distract him from the task at hand. Not yet, anyway, he smirked to himself. "I feel like I should be inviting you in for a euphemistic coffee," he laughed as they pulled up outside the house.

"Never understood that," Nathan admitted. "I once turned a woman down because I didn't like coffee. Didn't realize what she really meant until later."

"You…? Seriously? Nate, that's... really sweet."

"Really stupid, you mean," Nathan snorted. "Never been good at polite double-talk - those extra layers just go right over my head. Wish people'd say what they mean. I try to, but feels like I'm the only one sometimes."

"It's not stupid," Duke told him. "And yeah, people should say what they mean but it isn't always that easy."
"I don't know, why not 'Do you want to come in and take things further?' - that seems a perfectly sensible way of asking."

“You’re probably right,” Duke smiled. “But, you know, then you miss the flirtation, the wondering if it's just coffee, the excitement of not knowing.”

Nathan shook his head. "Not for me. Too easy to misread things and do something your partner doesn't want. Would hate to push things thinking it's what she wanted and turn out to be wrong."

Duke gave him a sideways glance. “Yeah, communication is kind of essential,” he said. “On the subject of which, are we actually going inside or are we sitting in your car and talking all night? I mean, I'm good with either but you're gonna get cold soon.”

"Yeah, sorry," Nathan mumbled, getting out.

Duke followed him inside, smiling at being able to go through the front door of his house for the first time in what felt like forever.


"Yeah,” Duke grinned. “Thanks again for taking me, and remembering the beach thing. It was... beautiful and emotional.”

"I'm really glad you got to do that," Nathan smiled softly. "We can go out every weekend if you like, see all the places you miss."

“As long as you show me the places you love as well,” Duke said, smiling.

Nathan blinked, as if he hadn't even thought of that. "I'll try to come up with some that're worthwhile."

“If you like them, they're worthwhile,” Duke told him.

"They're not like yours, though. Today was amazing, gorgeous, brilliant. I just like old houses and little country roads and tiny local businesses."

“All of which are amazing, gorgeous, brilliant,” Duke parroted back at him. “And I'll enjoy them more because it means spending time with you."

"Well...I can show you, but promise you'll let me know if you get bored?"

“I promise," Duke murmured. “But why would I get bored when I'm with you?"

"I'm....kind of a boring guy, Duke. You're really sweet about it but I know what I am."

“You're not boring. Not to me, anyway. You intrigue me.”

"Intrigue?" Nathan's eyebrows rose.

“Yeah. Like...you live by your own set of rules, you don't follow what the rest of the crowd's doing. You walk your own path and everyone else can be damned. You're...you, and you're pretty fucking amazing,” Duke told him.

Nathan blushed brightly. "I'm not some rebel or anything. I tried to be normal. Wanted to. I'm just not. I don't get people. I like what they make fun of and couldn't care less about the things they like. I hate bars and clubbing and getting drunk and fashionable clothes, I like decoupage and
architecture and stores run by people with a passion for their trade. I never managed to date a girl more than a few months, I bombed at college, I have no real career, I'm disconnected from my family and haven't started one of my own. I flunked out of normal - literally.

“Nate,” Duke said softly. “Normal is overrated, whatever the fuck normal is anyway. You could say I flunked outta normal too, you've just gotta adjust your mindset on what makes you a success and stop holding yourself to some unrealistic ideal of what you think your life should be like.”

"I'm trying. I keep telling myself there's nothing wrong with the jobs I've taken or the hobbies I have. Hard to shake, though," Nathan looked over at him and smiled a little. "You help, though."

“There isn't anything wrong with your job, or your hobbies, there's nothing wrong with you at all, and anyone who thinks otherwise can come fight me.”

Nathan actually laughed. "Sorry, sorry, I know you mean it and I appreciate it, it's just….I'm getting this image of you fighting my last girlfriend and it's pretty damn funny."

“Well I'm glad I could make you laugh,” Duke smiled.

"Yeah, you might find your ass kicked, honestly. She was no joke."

Duke stared at him. “Nah, trust me, I'll kick the ass of anyone who's ever hurt you.”


Duke smiled back. “I mean it. You deserve better, and if I could right the wrongs from the people in your past, then I would.”

"You're so good to me, Duke," Nathan said quietly.

“Back at you, Nate,” Duke smiled.

"What do you want to do for your next outing?” Nathan grinned.

“I... would like you to show me somewhere you like. Wherever. You mentioned architecture? You have a favourite building or two we could go look at?”

"Could maybe check out some stuff like that, if you're sure."

“I'm sure,” Duke smiled.

"You're the best," Nathan beamed.

Duke rolled his eyes and laughed. “I could argue that you are. You're the one who's taking me places, sharing your life with me.”

"Sharing my life with you is the best thing I've ever done, Duke. I'm so much happier now, I don't even have words for it."

“I am too, Nate. And I don't mean happier than when I was here, ghosting on my own, before you came along, I mean happier than when I was alive. You've made a huge difference to me.”

"In that case I wish I'd been there when you were alive," Nathan said quietly. "I hate to think of you unhappy."

“I wish you had been too,” Duke answered, barely above a whisper.
“Wish I could hug you, too,” Nathan said softly.

“Yeah,” Duke agreed, drifting closer and putting his hand on Nathan's shoulder.

Nathan put his hand over Duke's, then leaned over to kiss his cheek.

Duke smiled at the affectionate gesture even as he wished desperately that he could feel it.

"Wish I could do more for you, Duke," Nathan told him softly.

“You do plenty,” Duke replied. “You don't have to do any more, this...us, it doesn't have to be any more than it already is “

"I want it to be everything we can have, everything you want it to be,” Nathan said earnestly.

Duke shook his head. “It's not about what I want, it's about what we both want. You can't keep taking yourself out of the equation.”


“Don't be sorry,” Duke said softly. “I just need to be sure that you're sure.”

"I'm sure. I don't know if we can make it work but I want to try."

“We can,” Duke grinned. “Trust me on this.”

"I do trust you, Duke," Nathan said sincerely.

“Thank you,” Duke said quietly, moving so he could kiss Nathan on the cheek.

Nathan turned his head trying in vain to press his lips to Duke's.

“Wish I could kiss you for real,” Duke murmured. “Feel how soft your lips are, find out how you taste.”

"Wish I could too,” Nathan told him, biting down an impulse to say he was nothing special.

“Feel the way your lips yield beneath mine, slip my tongue past them, make you breathless before I even touch you,” Duke whispered.

Nathan flushed at the provocative words, wondering if he should head up to his room.

“Hold you close, run my fingers through your hair…” Duke went on.

"I want that too, Duke, I want to touch you and feel you," Nathan bit his lip.

Duke smiled. “I'd love to feel your arms around me, your hands wandering as we kiss, exploring every part of me.”

Nathan's breath caught. "I wish we could, Duke..."

“So do I, more than anything,” Duke said softly. “I want to make you feel so good that you forget about everything bad that's ever happened to you.”

"Just being with you does, most often," Nathan admitted quietly.

“That's really nice to hear,” Duke smiled and touched Nathan's hand.
"You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, Duke, I mean that."

“And I mean it when I say that you're the best thing that's happened to me too,” Duke said honestly.

Nathan raised a hand to stroke along Duke's cheek, feeling nothing but cold with his fingertips.

Duke smiled at the almost-touch. “Maybe we should go to bed,” he murmured.

Nathan blushed brightly, but nodded and headed up the stairs.

Duke followed him, hanging back enough so that Nathan didn't feel rushed. “Hey, Nate,” he said softly when they got to the bedroom. “I know this must be weird for you, just wanna remind you that it's about what you're comfortable with and if you're not happy then you tell me, ok?”

"I will, I promise," Nathan told him. "I mean, you're right, it is weird. I don't know how this is gonna work, even if it's gonna work. But I want to try. And...thank you. For wanting to make sure I'm okay, that i'm happy. You always do that - with the decor, with the outings, now this. Wanted you to know, doesn't go unnoticed."

“Nathan...This is just what friends...or whatever...do. It's not particularly unusual to make sure people you care about are happy,” Duke pointed out, his eyes narrowed as he tried to work out what sort of friends and girlfriends Nathan must have had in the past to think that this was anything special. Shaking his head slightly, he carried on. “Whatever, anyway...take off whatever clothes you're comfortable taking off and lie down on the bed.”

"Well of course I want to make sure you're happy," Nathan said matter-of-factly as he unbuttoned his shirt, wanting to distract himself from thinking about how strange the situation was. "But you always insist on taking me into consideration too, and that's pretty amazing."

“Not amazing, just what's right,” Duke said quietly, watching Nathan fumble with the buttons.

"Well, I think you're amazing, anyhow," Nathan stripped off his shirt, showing his blush spreading down his neck and across his collarbones. His hands went to the fly of his pants, hesitating just a fraction.

“...wow...,” Duke said admiringly as he briefly ran his fingers across Nathan's chest. "Who knew you were hiding that under your shirt."

Nathan's blush deepened. "Compared to some of the guys, I'm not much. Dwight makes me look like a twig."

“You're gorgeous,” Duke said firmly.

"You're sweet," Nathan smiled sheepishly, clearly unable to believe him.

“Guy could get hard just looking at you,” Duke grinned.

"Duke..." Nathan blushed harder as he climbed onto the bed and lay on his back.

“What?” Duke asked innocently. “I want to get my hands on you, trace my fingers across every muscle, feel how eagerly you respond to my touch...”

Nathan was already responding, squirming a little, his breath coming just a bit rough.

“... I want to feel your chest against mine, skin to skin as I hold you close and kiss your neck, your
breath hot against my face.”

Nathan closed his eyes, shivering. "I want that too, Duke."

“You are so fucking hot,” Duke murmured. “I’d go so slowly, touching and kissing every part of you, listen to every sound you make, work out what you like most and do it over and over again.”

Nathan bit his lip. "God, that sounds amazing, Duke."

“Cover your body with mine, feel you writhe beneath me, shivering as I kiss my way down your chest, run my hands down your ribs, teasingly dipping under the waistband of your jeans.”

Nathan whined a little, visibly aroused within his jeans.

“Take them off,” Duke whispered.

His earlier hesitation gone, Nathan stripped off the now uncomfortably tight jeans, tossing them on the floor with uncharacteristic carelessness.

“God,” Duke said, his voice hoarse as he drank in the sight of Nathan clad only in a pair of white briefs which were thoroughly failing to conceal an impressive looking bulge. “I was wrong before. You're not gorgeous, you're beautiful.”

"Duke," Nathan whined, his blush spreading further down his chest, the shyness an odd but appealing contrast with his arousal.

“I want to touch you so badly,” Duke said, his voice full of need.

"I wish you could, I want that too Duke," Nathan groaned.

“Let me see you, Nate, all of you.”

Nathan bit back the comment that sprang to his lips, about how Duke wouldn't find him much to look at, and slowly peeled down his underwear.

“Fuck,” Duke said softly, the word long and drawn out as Nathan lay back, now fully naked and very, very, hard.

Nathan bit his lips, struggling with the impulse to cover himself shyly.


"I'm okay, I just...not a lot of people have seen me naked," Nathan admitted.

“Then I'm honoured to be one of them,” Duke smiled.

Nathan opened his mouth, hesitated, then closed it again.

“Nate? What is it?”

Nathan gave him a lopsided smile. "Just being insecure. Don't mind me."

“You have nothing to be insecure about, trust me,” Duke tried to reassure him. “But you need to be comfortable. Would you prefer the lights off? Or you could go under the covers? Or just say the word and I'll leave the room…”
"No, don't leave!" Nathan said quickly. "I want you here, I want to be able to see you. I, uh….I like the way you look at me," he admitted. "Just sometimes have a hard time believing you really think I'm all that, you know?"

Duke smiled. "Then I'll have to work extra hard to make you believe it because you're stunning and wonderful and I hate that you don't know that."

Nathan's fresh wave of blushing had nothing to do with arousal this time. "Think if anyone could make me believe it, it'd be you."

"I'll try," Duke promised. "I'll remind you every single day if that's what you need."

"You are amazing, Duke. You're everything I could ever want."

"You're pretty amazing yourself," Duke smiled sweetly.

Nathan reached out to Duke. "Come lie down with me?"

Duke went eagerly, delighted that Nathan had asked.

Nathan raised his hand to run his fingers along Duke's cheek. "Wish I could hold you."

"I do, too," Duke said quietly. "Arms wrapped around each other, breathing together, moving together."

Nathan nodded, "Hold you close, feel your warmth...wish we could."

"Yeah," Duke whispered. "Close your eyes, I'm right here with you, touch or no touch."

Nathan obediently let his eyes fall shut. "So glad you're here with me, Duke."

"I wouldn't want to be anywhere else," Duke said softly. "Except…," he went on mischievously, "maybe instead of being beside you, I'd be kneeling between your legs and taking you into my mouth."

Nathan made a choked sound, squirming on the bed.

"Kissing and licking and teasing until you arch off the bed, raw and desperate, words tumbling from your lips as you ask me for more."


Nathan looked embarrassed, but his hand crept down to stroke his length for Duke.

"That's a beautiful sight, Nate," Duke whispered. "Imagine how my lips would feel, closing around you, warm and wet, sliding down and then back up, taking you deeper each time."

Nathan bit his lip, then reached his free hand over to the nightstand, pulling out a bottle and squeezing the slick substance over his length.

Duke groaned lightly. "You have no fucking idea how hot that is to watch."

"Want you to enjoy it," Nathan said breathlessly. "Almost feels like it could be your mouth."
“Fuck, Nate,” Duke groaned again. “I can almost feel you throbbing under my tongue, twitching in my mouth as I suck you, swallow you down.”

"God, Duke," Nathan whimpered, his hand speeding up.

“The way you wouldn't be able to keep still, your hips moving, showing me your rhythm as I suck you harder, faster…”

Nathan moaned, his hand and hips moving to match Duke's words, an edge of desperation in his voice.

“You're so beautiful like that,” Duke murmured. “I want to see you come, Nate, can you let me see that?”

"Yeah, Duke, I'm so close, want you so much," Nathan groaned, his long, lean body tensing.

“That’s it,” Duke encouraged. “Think about how good it'd feel to come in my mouth, my lips wrapped around you as I swallow every last drop.”

Nathan made a choked sound as his pleasure peaked, spilling over his stomach.

“So beautiful,” Duke whispered, drinking in the naked, defenceless, expression on Nathan's face.

Nathan opened his eyes to give him a dazed, blissful look, his hand still moving slowly over his softening length to draw out the last few drops.

Duke grinned at him and carefully moved the box of tissues from the nightstand so Nathan could reach them easily. “Ok?” He asked, quietly.

"Better than okay," Nathan murmured, lazily reaching for the tissues. "Best I've been in ages."

“Good,” Duke smiled, waiting until Nathan had finished with the tissues before he pulled the sheets up so Nathan could easily cover himself if he wanted to.

Nathan yawned, burrowing under the sheets contentedly. His eyes were just slipping closed when he blinked, looking at Duke with concern. "What about you?"

“Ssh, Nate, relax, sleep. Don't worry about me. I'll be right here when you wake up.”

"But you didn't get to… I mean… can you even?"

Duke shook his head. “No, and believe me, I've tried,” he said gently.

"You didn't get anything out of this at all?” Nathan asked unhappily.

“You're not an idiot, Nate, I'm not gonna lie to you and say it's as good as a mindblowing orgasm. But seeing you like that, pleasure written all over your face, knowing that my words, my presence, put you there, that's fucking incredible. So no, it isn't the same and of course I wish I could feel you and we could make love and you could feel me, but don't think I get nothing out of it. I get to be a part of your pleasure, I get that emotional closeness and that's worth more.”

"You really mean that?” Nathan asked hesitantly.

“I really mean that,” Duke promised. “Besides, what's the alternative? I don't get to share it with you? No, that's not an option. Not for as long as you want me to share it with you, anyway.”
"If you're sure. I feel kinda selfish."

“Don’t, Nate, please. You aren’t selfish. You’ve just shared a huge part of yourself with me, there’s nothing selfish in that.”

"Well. Guess if you enjoyed the show, that's something," Nathan sighed. "Wish I could hold you."


Nathan reached out to 'hold' Duke's hand. "You say the nicest things."

Duke smiled, glancing down at where their hands met. “Just honest things.”

Nathan yawned, blinking at him sleepily, his expression soft and unashamedly adoring.

If Duke had been capable of breathing, his breath would have caught in his throat at being on the receiving end of that intense almost-worshipful look. Instead, he just smiled again. “Sleep, Nate, I promise I’m not going anywhere. I’ll stay here all night.”

Nathan's eyes slid closed, his hand contracting as if to give Duke's a squeeze. "So glad you're here with me."

“I’m glad too,” Duke said quietly. “Can I come to work with you tomorrow?”

"Course. Can come with me anywhere," Nathan told him.

“Thank you,” Duke said, his voice low and soft.


Duke smiled back at him. True to his word, he stayed there all night, watching Nathan sleep, seeing the lines on his face soften, listening to him snore softly.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Duke finally tells Nathan how and why he died - please check tags as this chapter is potentially triggering <3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Going to work with Nathan was much less boring than Duke had anticipated and he found that he actually quite enjoyed it. Spending time together, talking about the houses, the sellers, the buyers, seeing different places.

One of the houses was big and old and rambling, Victorian era, not dissimilar to their own home. It wasn’t in quite such a state of disrepair as theirs had been but Dwight had been called in to carry out some work (Nathan wouldn’t use anyone else, especially not for a house like this).

When the prospective buyers walked in, Duke got an immediate sense of house flippers and he smirked to himself. Time to have some fun.

As they went into the living room, accompanied by Nathan who was giving them the sales patter, Duke made the lights flicker quickly.

Nathan quickly hid an 'are you kidding me?' expression as the potential buyers talked about the need to rewire the place.

Duke grinned and made the door sway gently, as though being moved by a draft.

"Definitely need to find out where that draft is….coming….from?" The man had held up a hand to feel for the presumed draft, but felt no air moving.

Duke laughed and waited until they'd moved on to the kitchen before he made the living room door close - not slamming it, just shutting it loudly enough that they could hear.

The man and woman jumped, clutching nervously at each other. "We should tell Brenda about this place," the woman laughed nervously. "It'd be right up her alley."

"See, Nathan, I can be useful. Give them your card to pass onto whoever Brenda is,” Duke grinned, making the lights flicker again.

Nathan kept a straight face with a supreme effort of will. "Well, if you know someone who'd be interested in the property, here's my card."

As the couple were leaving, Duke helpfully opened the front door for them and laughed when they scurried out, looking nervously back at the house until they were safely in their car.

"You're a bad man," Nathan muttered, trying not to smile.

“I keep telling you that,” Duke laughed. “C’mon, did you expect anything else? They wanted to
"flip this place, it deserves better."

"Might have a point there," Nathan smiled. "Hopefully this Brenda will be better."

Duke nodded. "Hope so. You never know, I might even be able to help you sell the place."

"You sure might. Like I said, agency gets plenty of calls from people who want a haunted house."

"So tell them you've got one and I'll do some haunt-y stuff, get you the sale. I'll have fun, you make commission, house gets sold... everyone wins."

"And when they realize the haunting stops the minute the sale is made?" Nathan said amused.

"Some people will just keep seeing haunting stuff because they want to believe. Enough that it wouldn't affect your reputation, anyway," Duke shrugged.

"S'pose that's true," Nathan allowed. "Making up their own hauntings."

"Yeah, and you could always make friends with them, pop in for a coffee every now and again so I can do some more ghostly shit."

"Well. We'll see," Nathan said.

Duke nodded. "We will," he grinned. "But seriously, if you think it'd help you sell more houses, I'm happy to play up to the ghost fanatics. It's kinda fun."

"It is," Nathan grinned. "Gonna make a name for myself, huh?"

"Yeah, I can see it now. Your face on billboards. Nathan Wuornos, haunted real estate specialist,“ Duke smirked. "Just needs a cheesy tag line and you're good to go."

"Who you gonna call," Nathan said, deadpan.

Duke laughed, looked at Nathan's expression and laughed even harder. "See,” he said when he'd stopped cackling. “This is what I love about you. One minute you're all serious and the next you've come up with a genius one liner and I'm cracking up with laughter."

Nathan broke his deadpan to grin. "Glad you enjoy my humor."

"I very much do,” Duke grinned, kissing Nathan on the cheek.

"Most people don't get it," Nathan admitted.

"Most people are idiots then."

"Nah, it's just subtle."

Duke rolled his eyes. "Maybe. But you always make me laugh."

"I'm glad," Nathan smiled.

“And it's fun, coming to work with you,” Duke told him. “What's next? More showings here? Or was it that big place on Ocean View?”

"Ocean View this time," Nathan told him.

Duke grinned happily. “Awesome,” he said. “I love that place. The rooms, the view…”
"It's a nice place."


"Not as good as our home, though."

“Definitely not,” Duke agreed quickly. “I just like spending time there because I can see the ocean.”

"We can go to the beach this weekend."

“Nate, it’s October, it's freezing, there's a storm forecast, you don't want to sit on the beach at this time of year.”

"I can park close and sit in the car. Cold and storm won't bother you."

“You're amazing,” Duke said softly.

"Just the decent thing to do,” Nathan shook his head. "If I couldn't go anywhere but where someone else chose to go, i'd take it as a kindness if they went to the places I liked sometimes.”

“You’re still amazing,” Duke said stubbornly. “You always let me pick what music to listen to, what shows or movies to watch, you take me everywhere with you, and I know you take the coast road even when you don't have to, just so I can look at the ocean.”

"Of course, I want you to be happy."

“I am. And that's down to you, so stop underestimating how amazing that makes you,” Duke said. “Please?”

"Working on it," Nathan said with a self-deprecating smile.

“That's all I can ask for,” Duke smiled.

"You're amazing too though."


"Always,” Nathan smiled fondly.

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Nathan had watched Duke all day, worried about the ghost's dejected attitude and morose silence. As soon as they got home from work, he asked, "Duke? What's wrong?"

“Hmm?” Duke said, too lost in his thoughts to register what Nathan had said.

“You've been down in the dumps all day. What's bothering you?"

“Nothing, sorry,” Duke muttered, embarrassed that Nathan had noticed there was something wrong when he thought he'd done a fair job at hiding it. “All good. What d’you want to do this evening?” He tried to smile.

"I want to talk about what's upset you,” Nathan said gently. "You don't have to if you don't want to, but you don't need to pretend you're ok for my sake."
“It’s nothing, Nate, really, it’s just what date it is. I'll be fine tomorrow. You don't need to worry about me,” Duke tried to reassure him.

"What date is it, Duke?” Nathan asked patiently.

“November eighteenth,” Duke replied smartly, knowing full well that wasn't what Nathan was asking even as he tried to evade the question. He wished he hadn't mentioned anything in the first place.

"Which is?” Nathan asked.

“You're not gonna drop this, are you?” Duke said quietly.

"If it's your way of telling me that you honestly don't want to talk about it, then I'll drop it. If you're hurting and want to talk but are having trouble spitting it out, then I'll take however many baby steps you need to get to it."

“I think that's the most words I've ever heard you say in one go,” Duke snarked, realising even as he did so that he was taking his shitty mood out on Nathan. “Sorry, sorry” he said, his hands raised in an apologetic gesture. Taking the mental equivalent of a deep breath, he bit the bullet and started to explain. “It's the anniversary of my death. Eleven years ago today.”

"Duke, I'm so sorry,” Nathan said, reaching out as if to take Duke's hand. Duke nodded - an acknowledgement, or maybe a thanks. “It never really bothered me before, not when I had no way of knowing what the date was. I wasn't expecting it to hit me this hard.”

"Anything I can do? Listen, distract, whatever helps?"

Duke shook his head, a sad smile on his face. He appreciated the offer but... “No, but thank you. It was a bad time, back then, and I don't think there's enough distraction in the world to take my mind off the memories.”

Nathan nodded. "Want to talk about it, or just want quiet company?"

“I...don't know. I've never talked about stuff like this before. Never had anyone to talk to until you. Don't really know where to start,” Duke shrugged.

Nathan patted Duke's intangible shoulder. "Just say what you're feeling? If you want to, 'course."

Duke glanced at him, a half smile briefly on his lips before his face fell again. "You're the best, you know that? I wish I could've known you back then. Maybe if I had, I wouldn't've..." He trailed off and stared at the floor.

Nathan waited patiently, shifting his hand to cover Duke's. The ghost might not be able to feel the gesture of support, but at least he could see it.

“Maybe there would've been a reason to keep fighting. Maybe I wouldn’t’ve ended it all,” Duke said miserably, unable to look Nathan in the face.

"You….Duke...oh god,” Nathan choked. When Duke finally dared to look over, there were tears in Nathan's eyes.

Duke’s heart broke for Nathan, the look of utter despair on his face was almost too much to take. He nodded and tried to explain. “I ran out of options, ran out of fight. I was facing losing
everything. There was nothing left to cling on to."

"God, Duke," Nathan tried uselessly to touch Duke's face. "I wish I'd been there, I wish…"

“I know, I wish you'd been there too. There was no one. A town full of people who did nothing to help a starving, scrawny kid. A town full of people who were convinced I'd live up to the Crocker reputation. And they were right, for a while I did,” Duke said bitterly. Now that he'd started talking he found he couldn't stop, the words just kept flowing, tumbling from him as though floodgates had been opened. “But I turned it around, I had my bar, kept the people of Haven well fed - all the people, not just those with money to spare - bought this place, restored it. I thought my old life was behind me.”

Nathan tried to stroke Duke's cheek, knowing it wouldn't help.

Duke leaned into the almost-touch, desperately seeking contact, comfort, as the words continued to rush out of him. “And then the money ran out, the bar was running at a loss with all the free meals I was giving out. My savings, what little there were, only lasted a few months. The next step was bankruptcy and what then? I’d lose my business, my home. There was no one I could turn to. I didn't know where I'd end up sleeping - and believe me, sleeping rough as an eighteen year old is very different from sleeping rough as a nearly forty year old. How would I eat? All those years making sure everyone else had something to eat and my only option was to go back to what I did when I was a kid - throw morals out of the window and do whatever I had to do to get enough money to survive. Live up to my reputation once again. I couldn't do it, Nate. I couldn't let people think any less of me than they already did. I wanted to go out on my own terms.” Finally, Duke stopped, feeling spent, used up, all of his emotions clamouring for space in his mind and no outlet for them except to talk.

"Duke, I'm so sorry. I would have helped, would have done anything for you, I wish I could have."

“I know, Nate, I know you would have, and I wish to god I'd known you then because maybe things would have been different. Maybe I'd have felt just a little bit less like I was on my own.”

"I never would have let you feel alone, I'm sorry I wasn't there, Duke."

“Thank you,” Duke whispered. “I just need you to know... I don't regret it. Please don't think that. I regret not knowing you then, but I don't regret what I did.”

"But if I'd been there, you'd still be alive," Nathan said softly.

“Don't!” Duke said sharply. “Nate, you can't think like that. We didn't know each other, there are no 'what ifs'.”

"Sorry," Nathan said softly.

Duke shook his head. “I just don't want you blaming yourself, I know what you're like, guilt complex a mile wide. We didn't know each other, there's nothing you could have done. And that's fine, really, just having you here, now, knowing you care... That's more than I've had in a long time. Ever, maybe.”

"Breaks my heart you never had that," Nathan said softly. "Can't imagine how alone and hurting you must've been to..." he couldn't finish the sentence.

Duke nodded, not able to answer him with words, tears building in his eyes at the acknowledgement of his pain. The pain that no one had ever seen until now.
Nathan vainly brushed his thumb across Duke's cheek, trying to wipe away the ephemeral tears. "Hate that you were hurting so bad. Wish you could've been happy."

“I was. For a while, anyway. Then everything turned to shit again. Don’t know why I expected anything different.”

"Because you deserve so damn much better, Duke," Nathan said fiercely.

“No, I am...was...just a Crocker. Another in a long line of petty crooks and small time smugglers. Should’ve stuck with that life, least I wouldn’t have known any better. Having happiness snatched away was worse than not having it at all."

"That's not true! You're not just some Crocker, you're Duke, you're my best friend, you're more, you mean everything to me. You're kind and generous and selfless, you're always considerate of me, you believe in me more’n I believe in myself and you fight every day to get me to believe it too.. You're the best damn person I know, and that's the truth, Duke."

“And I love that you think that of me, but you wouldn’t think it if you’d known me then, if you knew some of the stuff I did.”

"Don't care," Nathan said stubbornly. "You did what you had to do to get by. I know you, and I know you wouldn't have done anything that really hurt innocent people."

Duke shrugged. “I didn’t stand a chance, Nate. This town… Don’t know why I ever came back.”

"Haven is full of assholes. You deserved better," Nathan said loyally.

“You make a very good point. You’re the exception to that rule,” Duke attempted a smile.

"You are too. You're a good man, Duke. You're amazing and kind and I sorta want to punch everyone who ever made you feel otherwise."

Duke laughed. “I could give you a list.”

"Sure, I'll get started," Nathan smiled gently.

"Nah, you’re not a fighter and I wouldn’t want anyone to damage that beautiful face.”

Nathan blushed a little, deflecting with, "Also I'd probably get in trouble punching the chief of police, since I assume he tops that list. Probably be worth it, though."

“You assume correctly,” Duke said. “Sorry, I know he's your dad but…”

"Still an asshole."

“One of many,” Duke nodded.

"If it's any consolation, he was an ass to me too. So it's definitely not you."

“I hadn’t thought of it like that,” Duke said. “Can imagine he wasn’t the world’s greatest dad.”

Nathan shrugged. "Not like you get to pick and choose your folks."

A bark of humourless laughter escaped from Duke. “No, you definitely can’t.”

"Guessing yours weren't too awesome either, huh?"
Duke scoffed. “You could say that.”

"I'm sorry. Lousy parents are the damn worst," Nathan sympathized.

“They definitely are, fuck up your whole life.”

Nathan nodded. "Wish you'd had better out of life."

“Back at ya, Nate. I think you've done pretty damn good but I know you're not totally happy with the way things worked out for you.”

Nathan shrugged. "That's different. That's no one's fault but mine."

Duke raised an eyebrow. “Really? Because I highly doubt that.”

"No one made me flunk out of med school, Duke. I just wasn't smart enough."

“You're plenty smart enough, you just didn't have the right support behind you,” Duke told him.

“You still thinking of the EMT training?” He asked, grateful for any distraction from his own thoughts.

"Yeah, might flunk out of that too but I want to try," Nathan nodded

“I won't let you,” Duke smiled. “You'll do fine.”


“Thanks for listening to me, Nate, I know it can't have been easy to hear but probably better that you know.”

"I'll always listen when you need to talk," Nathan promised earnestly. "Do you feel better for it?"


Nathan looked pleased and relieved. "I'm glad you're feeling better. I mean it, any time you want or need to talk, anything you want or need to talk about, I'll listen."

“Thanks, Nate. You know I'll always listen to you, too, whenever you need me.”

"Thanks," Nathan told him. "You're a good friend, and a good man. To hell with anyone who says otherwise."

Duke smiled and moved forwards to briefly kiss Nathan on the cheek. “Means a lot to hear that.”

"S'true," Nathan said, returning the gesture. "Anyone too dumb and narrow minded to get to know the real you doesn't deserve one second of your consideration."

“You're right, they don't,” Duke agreed, feeling lighter, somehow, and better than he had in years. A lot of years, he thought to himself.

Nathan looked pleased at Duke's agreement, seeing in the ghost's expression that it was genuine. "That's the spirit."

Duke glanced at him, catching his eye for a split second before he laughed.
Nathan grinned sheepishly. He hadn't been trying to be funny, but if it made Duke laugh, it was well worth it.

“You always know how to make me laugh,” Duke smiled.

"Planned or no," Nathan smiled ruefully.


"Guess so," Nathan smiled.


"I'll let you teach me how to cook something, how's that?" Nathan smiled.

“I'll do you a shopping list,” Duke replied immediately, delighted with the idea. “Store’s still open, right?”

"Sure is," Nathan smiled, happy at how pleased Duke was.

Duke quickly made a list and messaged it to Nathan - just a few ingredients for a basic pasta dish that wouldn't take too much time or effort to prepare.

"Sounds great," Nathan smiled, heading for the door. "C'mon, let's go get this stuff."

“Ok,” Duke said happily. Shopping for ingredients and teaching Nathan to cook seemed like the perfect way to unwind and stop thinking about everything else.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know if this is a thing anywhere else in the world, but in the UK if a television programme covers hard hitting issues, there's a voiceover on the end credits saying "if you've been affected by any of the issues in this programme, here's how to find help".

So, I hope no one needs to click this link but here's a list of where you can find help if you're struggling with suicidal thoughts:

Click here
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Duke possesses Nathan for the first time...

Teaching Nathan to cook that night hadn't gone well. In fact, he'd stomped outside, dumped the ruined pot into the trash and cheerfully announced he wasn't trying that again, thank you very much. Duke still harboured hopes that he might change his mind but he was letting it slide for now.

The old Victorian house had been sold - to Brenda, the friend of the couple who Duke had scared off. She'd turned out to be a kindly older lady with three cats and an obsession with the supernatural. It hadn't taken her long to extend an invitation for Nathan to come over for tea. He'd grumbled about it, tea was far too much like socialising, but Duke had gently talked him round to the idea, pointing out that it would give him a chance to reinforce the ghostly activity in the house. Tea had turned out to mean afternoon tea, with sandwiches and cakes which Duke had eyed up wistfully.

It was Brenda who put the idea of possession back into Duke's mind - she'd been talking about a ghost story she read a couple of weeks before and it reminded him of what Nathan had said. Offered.

"Did you have fun haunting?" Nathan smiled as they headed home.

"Yeah, it was kinda fun," Duke admitted. "She was so happy when I made the lights flicker and the TV come on."

"She's such a sweet person," Nathan smiled. "That time she was viewing the place and told you she could tell that the house was very well loved, and said that if you'd allow her to make it her home, she promised to look after it well - I admit, I got a little choked up."

"Yeah, I did too," Duke smiled at the memory. "She's a lovely lady. Lonely too, I think."

"Yeah, most people don't invite their realtors over for a visit. Pity, she's led an amazing life, she'd have a lot to share. Maybe I can find some gardening circles or book clubs or something like that she'd enjoy and make friends in."

"I'm sure she'd appreciate that," Duke told him. "Maybe we could make tea a regular thing, too? She's good company."

"If she likes," Nathan agreed. "She really is."

"You realise what this means?"

"What's that, Duke?"

"You made a friend," Duke smiled softly.

Nathan blushed. "She would've considered anyone a friend. She wants company, I just happened to be it."
“You still made a friend. That's a good thing, Nate.”

"Guess so. Glad she'll have company."

Duke nodded. “Was the food as good as it looked?”

"It was. Wish you could've had some," Nathan said apologetically.


"Wish I could do something about that," Nathan said softly.

“...could…” Duke said hesitantly.

"I could? How?" Nathan asked eagerly, his face lighting up.

“Remember a while back, you mentioned me possessing you…? Could we? Maybe…? I mean, I don't even know if you'd want to or if the offer's still open…”

"Absolutely," Nathan said, without even an instant's hesitation.

“Nate, take a moment to think about it,” Duke told him. “It's kind of a big deal, you don't have to say yes straight away.”

"Would've been willing all those months ago when it first came up, I've had time. It's a big deal, yeah, but I trust you."

“Thank you,” Duke whispered. “That means a lot to me, that you can trust me with this.”

"You deserve that trust. You earned it," Nathan smiled softly.


"By being wonderful and amazing and everything I could ever want," Nathan said seriously.

“Thank you,” Duke smiled. “For saying that and for agreeing to let me...possess you.”

"Any time, Duke," Nathan smiled. He pulled the car into the garage and headed inside. "How do you want to do this? Just jump right in, or start with like a hand or something?"

“Whatever you're most comfortable with,” Duke said. “And I was thinking of a time limit. Like thirty seconds. Make sure nothing goes wrong because I don't know how this works, Nate, anything could happen.”

"Makes sense. Speaking of which, should probably lie down on my bed, in case you can't keep me on my feet."

“Fuck, I hadn't even thought of that.”

"Probably not gonna be a problem. But better safe than sorry."

“Definitely,” Duke agreed. “There's no rush, Nate, it doesn't have to be now.”

"I want to give it a try," Nathan smiled, heading upstairs before hesitating, "Unless you don't want to."
“No, I do,” Duke quickly replied. “I just don’t want you to feel rushed. Or pressured.”

“I’m not,” Nathan reassured him, heading into his room and lying down on the bed.

“Ok,” Duke said quietly as he joined Nathan on the bed. “Thirty seconds?”

Nathan nodded and set a timer on his phone. “Ready when you are.”


Nathan lay back and closed his eyes, relaxing.

Duke hesitated for a moment longer, still amazed by Nathan's complete trust in him. Slowly, working purely on instinct, he tried to project the whole of himself into Nathan's mind.

It was as though something slipped, as though reality had stopped for a split second, and everything went dark. Cool, life giving, air, rushed into his lungs bringing to his nose just a hint of laundry detergent and a citrus burst of the soap Nathan preferred. His eyes flew open and he stared at the ceiling and, in a voice that wasn't his own, spoke.

“Nathan? Are you? Is everything…?”

The response came as a thought, shared with him mind-to-mind in breathtaking intimacy as if they were one soul. I'm here. I'm fine.

“Thank god,” Duke whispered. Can you hear me if I just think?

I can, came the reply. What about you? Are you okay? How do you feel?

I'm fine, Duke thought as he raised his (Nathan's?) hand. It felt awkward, clumsy almost, the muscles working in such a familiar but altogether different way. The sense of touch threatened to overwhelm him - the feel of clothes against skin, the soft support of the bed beneath him, warm breath rushing over his top lip - and he let the hand fall back to his side, closing his eyes at the intensity of the sensations.

Nathan's relief and contentment rested in the back of his mind (their mind?) like the warm glow of a hearth fire's embers.

The timer pinged, interrupting the moment.

Immediately, Duke gathered his consciousness and left Nathan's body. Mind. Whichever. He winced slightly at the reality shift and spun around to check on Nathan. “Nate?” He asked, panicked. Nathan's eyes were still closed. What if…? He couldn't finish that thought.

Nathan opened his eyes and glanced around, gaze immediately settling on Duke. "Duke, you okay?"

“Yeah, fine,” Duke brushed him off. “Are you?"

"Feel perfectly normal," Nathan smiled. "Wanna try again?"

“You sure? About feeling normal, I mean.”

"Yup, fine," Nathan rolled over and sat up. "See? Everything's working just right."

Duke nodded, relieved. “Good, that's good,” he said quietly.
"See? It was no trouble at all. Hop back in and I'll order some takeout, or we can go out to eat, or go to the beach, take a hot bath - whatever you want."

"Has anyone ever told you how amazing you are?" Duke smiled.

Nathan grinned. "You, lots."


Nathan smiled. "You're pretty amazing too. What do you want to do first?"

"Everything," Duke laughed. "Could we maybe go to the store, pick up some ingredients and I'll cook for you?"

"Absolutely," Nathan smiled. "I can imagine you must miss your own cooking. We can get all the junk food you want, too - or if it's seafood and vegetables and steaks you want, we can get those too - buy the whole damn store if you're minded."

"What do you like? Or is there anything you really don't like? I don't want to do something you won't enjoy," Duke worried.

"If you make it, I'm sure I'll love it," Nathan promised.

"Ok," Duke smiled, his mind already running, working out what he was going to make.

Nathan lay back down. "Ready when you are."

Concentrating hard, Duke projected himself and once again felt that same slip. Sensation overwhelmed him and he shivered lightly. Slowly, getting used to how Nathan's body moved, he sat up.

You okay? Nathan thought.

Yeah, Duke thought back as he stretched, feeling how tight Nathan's muscles were. You?

Just peachy, Nathan replied. Feeling okay to drive, or want to just enjoy the ride while I pilot?

I think I'm good, Duke smiled. You might need to do the driving though, I mean, I think I'd be ok but it's probably not worth the risk.

Fair enough. Mind if I see whether I can still control my body while you're in here?

Shit, yeah, sorry Nate, we should've checked that first, Duke immediately tried to back off.

No, it's okay, I just want to make sure I'm safe to drive. Feeling Duke's retreat, Nathan lifted his arm, wiggled his fingers, flexed his foot, turned his head. Looks good. Gonna have to communicate about that sort of thing or I'll look really weird out there.

Yeah, Duke worried. Sure you're ok with this?

Of course. Do you want to let me steer this trip? First time out might be a little much, could be better if you ride along. 'Sides, then you get to enjoy things without having to worry about managing my body. You can take control once we get back here.

Thanks Nate, that'd be really good, Duke thought, relaxing slightly.
Should be a good time, Nathan grinned, heading downstairs to grab his car keys.

Yeah, Duke smiled, getting used to the newness of it all. It was weird, he thought, hopefully only to himself. He could feel everything that was happening, every movement Nathan made, the brush of clothes on skin, he could taste the faint remnants of the coffee Nathan had drunk a couple of hours earlier and as they went outside he could smell the fallen leaves and fresh air. But for all that he could feel, he wasn't in control and it was the oddest sensation. Not bad, just... unusual. Which, he thought, is maybe not so surprising given the fact that this isn't really an everyday situation.

Nathan paused in the yard, giving Duke a chance to enjoy not only the view but the warmth of the sun and the soft brush of the breeze and the scents of autumn.

Easy to forget how beautiful it is, Duke told him, taking everything in, memorising every sense.

I'm sure, Nathan thought. Take all the time you want.

There's so much wonder in such tiny things. Don't ever lose sight of that, Nate.

Don't see how I could, with you here. Like seeing everything through new eyes, Nathan smiled.

Good, Duke thought, smiling back in his mind. Shopping, then? He asked, eager to cook some delicious food for Nathan, a tiny way he could give something back to him.

Sure thing, Nathan hopped in the car and headed to the store. Just tell me what to get and I will. And don't hold back on my account.

Ok, Duke grinned. Thanks, Nate, this is gonna be fun.

Nathan pulled into a parking spot and grabbed a cart, heading inside.

They went round the whole store, aisle by aisle, with Duke telling Nathan which items to pick up - fresh fruit, vegetables, salad, steak, smoked salmon - ingredients for the next few days worth of meals, along with some indulgences that Duke couldn't resist.

How d'you feel about wine? Duke checked. Know you're not much of a drinker but a nice red would go well with the steak.

I'll trust your judgement, Nathan headed to the red wine.

I won't have more than one glass, I won't get you drunk, Duke promised, looking at the wine labels and picking out one he liked.

Nathan couldn't help but grin. Pretty sure that wouldn't help you steer this meat-heap. Then again, if anyone who knew me saw, they'd probably just think I was trying to dance again.

Probably, Duke smirked. I still need to see this infamous Wuornos drunk dancing.

Hopefully not, Nathan thought.

Duke grinned. Ok, ok, I'll drop it. He checked the items in the cart. I think that's everything, for now anyway.

Roger that, Nathan headed up front to pay.

With everything bagged up and loaded into the car, Duke watched the scenery fly by as Nathan drove home. Anything in particular you'd rather have to eat tonight? He asked.
Whatever you think is best at its freshest, Nathan decided.

Steak and salad, Duke decided. And it doesn't involve much chopping or slicing while I'm getting used to doing stuff again...sorry, I was presuming you didn't want to try cooking again, but I can talk you through it if you'd prefer?

I'll take the backseat and let you drive, Nathan chuckled. Stuff's too good to ruin.

Thanks, Duke thought. Mind opening the car window? Would be good to feel the air.

Nathan rolled the window down immediately.

Duke smiled to himself, enjoying the breeze, warm with just a hint of autumnal crispness, the vaguest scent of rain on the air, a hint of salt from the distant ocean.

After dinner I'll run a hot bath, and tomorrow we can go to the beach, stop by that seafood place you said was so good, Nathan thought.

Sounds perfect Nate, thank you, Duke grinned.

Just glad I can share this with you, Nathan thought happily.

It's awesome, Duke agreed. Thank you. That doesn't seem like enough, but thank you.

Your happiness is thanks enough.

I am definitely happy, Duke told him as they pulled up outside their home.

Me too. And even more so once I taste your cooking, I bet, Nathan grinned.

That's a pretty safe bet. Steak isn't exactly adventurous though, wait til I make you some other stuff, Duke smiled, breathing in the cooling air as they went inside.

I'm sure anything you make will be amazing, Nathan thought loyally.

Maybe, but steak isn't difficult..like, there's no clever stuff to do with it, it'll just be a good steak, Duke pointed out.

I like a good steak, Nathan protested.

Me too, Duke grinned. I mean I could play around with marinating it and sauces and spices but I thought a well cooked steak would be pretty damn good right now.

It's your first meal in ages, you should get to enjoy whatever you want.

And I am definitely going to enjoy it. Just as soon as I remember how to move again, Duke laughed.

Well, give me a minute to finish putting the groceries away and I'll go sit on the couch and let you figure it out.

No rush, Duke replied easily. I'm just worried about fumbling with hot pans and knives, too much to go wrong.

I'd say you could just instruct me, but we've seen how that goes. We could leave the steak for a bit and do some kind of fine motor control practice with something less dangerous.
Actually that might be a really good idea. I mean, cooking is pretty second nature to me but I don’t want to risk hurting you by mistake, Duke worried.

I’m sure I’d be fine, but no sense making you worry. You can play around with my craft supplies until you feel comfortable, Nathan thought.

Uh, yeah, thanks...but you know how you are with cooking? That’s how I am with crafting. I’ll probably superglue your fingers together or something, Duke laughed.

So we don’t use the superglue, Nathan shrugged. There’s no wrong way to craft. There’s no screwing up, no failing. You just make something. Whatever you feel like making. It’s not good or bad, it just is.

No screwing up sounds good, Duke thought cheerfully. I might need your guidance, though, I have no idea what I’m doing.

Sure. But you don’t really need it. All crafting is, looking at what you’ve got to work with and seeing what it could become. And if you don’t see anything in particular, you just play around with the stuff.

Bit like taking a fridge full of leftovers and creating a meal, Duke mused.

Exactly, Nathan beamed, settling on the couch.

Duke waited until he was comfortable. Ready? He confirmed.

All set, Nathan agreed.

Ok, Duke replied before moving forwards and taking control of Nathan’s body. Tell me if you want me to stop, he focussed on breathing, on the way Nathan’s chest rose and fell with each breath.

Will do, but you’re fine, we’re fine, Nathan relaxed and let Duke have control, content to simply rest in the back of his own mind.

Duke started by lifting his - Nathan’s - hand and flexing the fingers experimentally. Ok, he thought. That’s not so different. He began moving his arms, stretching and feeling faintly ridiculous. So far so good... It felt so natural that he sprang to his feet and wobbled dangerously, collapsing back onto the couch. Not so good.

Easy, easy. Best not try too much all at once. You ok? Nathan asked.

I’m fine. Sorry, Duke replied. This time, he moved more slowly, steadily getting to his feet. He felt clumsy, his centre of balance was all wrong, but he was standing. Grinning happily, he took a step, and another, slowly walking around the living room.

How do you feel? Nathan asked.

Good, Duke beamed. Really good. Nate, thank you for this. He finished pacing around the living room and started a few stretches, getting used to the way Nathan’s body moved. Or didn’t. You’re really stiff, he thought/said, concerned.

I am? Nathan thought, confused.

You are, Duke confirmed. All your muscles. Ever done yoga?
Nathan laughed. *I look like the yoga type to you?*

Duke laughed with him. *Not in the slightest. We should do some.*

*Pretty sure that will end badly for all concerned.*

*Well right now, yeah, you're probably right,* Duke agreed. *But maybe I can show you some stuff sometime.*

*If you want,* Nathan said agreeably.

*Trust me, you'll feel better for it,* Duke told him as he moved around, picking things up and putting them down. Each movement he made felt easier, more graceful. *Ok, crafting supplies, what do you suggest?*

*Head to the crafting room, rummage around in my supplies, see if inspiration hits.*

Duke did exactly that. He stared at the supplies blankly and picked up some strips of paper. *Ok, you're gonna have to help me out here because I am lost,* he told Nathan.

Nathan patiently explained each of his supplies, what each one was, how they were usually used, what they could do, and so on.

*Thanks, that helps,* Duke smiled. He picked up a sheet of paper and a pencil and started to draw - shapes first, feeling how Nathan's deft fingers moved the pencil across the paper, then more complicated objects which turned into recognisable sketches.

*I didn't know you could draw,* Nathan said delightedly.

*I can't, not really, always been better with words, but I used to enjoy it occasionally,* Duke replied modestly as he moved the pencil, the lines gradually turning into a very rough sketch of Nathan.

*You're kidding, right? You're amazing! I always wanted to be able to draw,* Nathan's inner voice was tinged with admiration and envy. *I don't have any proper drawing supplies, though - we should go get some!*

Duke grinned. *Thanks, it's just something I pick up now and again. Words, languages, that's what fascinates me.*

Yeah? *You speak a lot of languages?*

A few. French, Spanish, Japanese, Mandarin, Russian, enough German to get by and a tiny bit of Greek and Italian.

Damn! Nathan's inner voice was very impressed.

Had plenty of time to learn, being out at sea a lot, and it was useful for...work.

Ever get bored out there? *No one to talk to, no TV, no internet?*

Not really, I mean a bit maybe, but I had loads of books. Characters who were like old friends. New languages to learn. Yoga to practice. I kept myself amused well enough, Duke contemplated the sketch he'd been doing and decided to call it finished.

*That looks great,* Nathan thought happily. *When we go get art supplies I'll grab a frame for it too.*
Glad you like it, Duke thought. You hungry yet?

Nathan chuckled inwardly. Are you?

Yeah yeah, silly question, Duke rolled his eyes at his own stupidity and made his way into the kitchen, much more steadily now he was used to controlling Nathan's body.

You feel ok to be cooking? Nathan asked. We could order out if not.

No, I think I'm good, as long as you are?

Ready. Maybe I'll learn something even.

You might, Duke smiled as he turned the heat on under a large frying pan and set about preparing the salad; chopping and slicing slowly at first, then speeding up as his confidence grew. As soon as the pan was hot enough, he dropped the steak in and leaned back to wait. Glass of wine ok with you? He checked.

Sure, Nathan answered. He wondered what effect the wine would have on their bond.

Duke poured half a glass and sipped at it slowly while the steak finished cooking. Smells good, he said, his mouth watering in anticipation.

Sure does, Nathan agreed, feeling his stomach rumble eagerly. Can't wait to try it.

Just needs to rest for a couple of minutes, Duke told him as he took the pan off the heat, leaving it to do exactly that while he set the table. That small task (and Duke was rediscovering the joy in simple, everyday, tasks) completed, he quickly plated up the salad and steak and sat at the table. Once there, he hesitated, worried that it might not be as good as he remembered.

Nathan whined internally when Duke said it had to rest (and what did that even mean? The cow was dead, it was pretty well rested), disappointed at having to wait for that amazing steak.

When Duke got to the table, and stopped, Nathan was concerned. You okay?

Yeah, Duke answered. Being stupid. He took another sip of wine and carefully cut off a bite of steak. It was delicious and he grinned happily at the knowledge that he hadn't lost his touch.

Nathan was about to protest that Duke wasn't stupid when the rich flavor of the steak hit his tongue and he moaned inwardly.

Good? Duke asked, knowing the answer but needing to check anyway.

Oh my god so good! Nathan sounded downright indecent.

Duke felt heat rush to his cheeks as he thought about Nathan saying those words in an entirely different context. “Sorry,” he mumbled out loud, quickly taking another bite of steak in an attempt to distract Nathan from that thought.

Nathan startled as he felt a twitch of arousal. Well. That's new.

Duke took a sip of wine, the deep, fruity taste combining with the steak so well, and tried to clear his thoughts.

Nathan took this to mean that Duke wasn't inclined to talk about or explore the reaction, so he didn't bring it up again.
Duke finished the last mouthful of his meal and sat back, grinning happily. Thank you, Nate, for all this. It’s... I don’t even have the words for it, it’s...it feels like some sort of miracle.

I’m happy I get to share this with you, Nathan smiled. It's like everything's for the first time, I'm seeing how amazing it is.

Everything is amazing, and I can't think of anyone else I'd rather be sharing this with, Duke told him.

So damn lucky I met you, won't ever stop being grateful for that, Nathan thought.

I won't either. When I think back...That day you first realised I was here...I'm just so grateful that you found me, Duke replied. And now I'm going to wash up so we can relax. If that's ok, of course, if I'm not overstaying my welcome...

Not at all. Promised a hot bath, didn't I?

You did, Duke smiled. And it would be wonderful but I wanted to check and yeah, I'll probably keep checking because I can't stand the thought of you sitting back and not telling me that you need a break from this.

You're so good to me, Duke, Nathan thought gently. Don't mind it one bit. Love feeling so close to you.

I do too, Nate, I just didn't want to assume the same was true for you.

Well, now you don't have to assume, so it's all good, Nathan smiled.

Yeah, Duke smiled and put the worry to the back of his mind.

Nathan's contentment could be felt as Duke went about cleaning up the kitchen, warm and soft in the back of their shared self.

Duke smiled as he cleaned - even such a simple task as wiping down the counters and the stove top was enjoyable given that he hadn't had the opportunity for so many years. And there was still a hot bath to look forward to. Maybe after relaxing on the couch with Nathan's feet up and just being. Or on the hammock on the porch. Either way, sit somewhere and exist and let every sensation wash over him.

Thanks for not leaving me with the cleanup, Nathan joked.

Yeah, we're gonna have to talk about this, Duke laughed. I cooked, shouldn't you be cleaning up?

Fair. Want to switch?

Nah, you're fine, I don't actually mind it, only takes a couple of minutes, Duke dropped the sponge into the holder. See, all done.


Beer and relax for a bit?

Sure thing. Lead on.

Duke plucked a beer out of the fridge and gathered up a blanket before he headed out to the porch. The evening was clear and cool - perfect for wrapping up and stargazing. He pulled the blanket
around himself and settled onto the hammock, lying back and relaxing, the beer bottle dangling from his fingers.

*This is nice. Never thought of bringing a blanket out here,* Nathan mused.

*Cozy, isn't it?* Duke thought, swigging at the beer. *God, this is good.*

*I'm glad you're so happy,* Duke, Nathan thought softly.

*I really am. Thank you for making it possible, Nate. I know there's nothing I can do to repay you but I want you to know that if ever there is anything, I won't even hesitate.*

*You repay me every day,* Duke. *You can't imagine what your company means to me.*

*Yeah, I think I probably can,* Duke thought quietly. *Because your company means everything to me, too. It's not just this, wonderful as it is, it's you.*

Duke could feel a blush warming Nathan's cheeks in involuntary response. Nathan wanted to protest that he was nothing special, but he held his tongue.

A flash of Nathan's thought landed in Duke's mind. *Hey,* he thought brightly. *That's the first time you haven't argued with me about that. Maybe you're starting to believe it.*

It wasn't Nathan's reasoning, but he didn't voice that either. If Duke's logic made him happy, that was good enough for Nathan.

Duke let out a deep, contented, sigh and wriggled his shoulders as he settled back more firmly. *The stars are so beautiful,* he thought, eyes cast towards the sky - silver pinpricks of light shining through dark blue velvet. *You ever been one for stargazing?*

*Only once, after prom. Took my date out stargazing.*

*You old romantic,* Duke smiled.

*Not that romantic - we went up to lover's lane.*

*So stargazing was just the excuse, huh?* Duke laughed.

*Might've hoped for a little something more. She was the one who suggested stargazing was better naked, though.*

*Stargazing is always better naked,* Duke agreed. *At least in summer, anyway.*

*Hell no, you think I want mosquito bites on my dick? Nudism is all yours.*

*I can safely say my dick has never been bitten by insects,* Duke chuckled.

*Nor mine but hell if I'm taking that chance,* Nathan snorted.

*Fair,* Duke smiled.

*Pants were invented for a reason,* Nathan grinned.

Duke laughed. *But naked is so much more free and comfortable.*

*How is having your junk flopping all over comfortable?*
How is having it constricted by two layers of clothing comfortable? Duke snarked back.

Not like I'm wearing a chastity belt, it's just soft cotton that's a comfortable fit.

Duke nodded and smiled. Ok, I take your point. Besides - the smile turned to a smirk - it leaves something to the imagination.

Nathan blushed. Nothing special.

Uh, I beg to differ on that.

...Differ away, Nathan's blush grew.

You are special, Nate, every part of you. All combined into this wonderful person with the most beautiful heart. Of course, if you're asking specifically about your dick then I will happily confirm 'above average', Duke grinned.

Duke! Nathan blurted, mortified.

What? Duke asked, feigning innocence.

You…..that….I didn't….that wasn't fishing for compliments! Nathan stumbled over the words even in his own head.

I know you weren't, Duke thought softly. Doesn't mean you don't deserve them though.

Well I don't. Despite his best intentions, the thought slipped out before he could hold it back.

You absolutely do, Duke insisted. You're warm and funny and soft but you don't take anyone's shit. You're a beautiful spirit wrapped in a beautiful body and I am so fucking proud to know you.

Nathan's embarrassment was bone deep, radiating along the bond between them, but he didn't reply.

Sorry, I'll stop, Duke promised, feeling Nathan's embarrassment. I just... I know you struggle to see what I see, but I want...I need you to at least believe that I mean every single word.

I believe you, the thought came back immediately, reassuring, concerned for Duke.

Good, Duke smiled and drained the last of the beer. Time to go in? Getting chilly out here even with the blanket. He shivered lightly.

Sounds good, Nathan agreed.

Duke awkwardly climbed off the hammock and stood up. You said something about a hot bath?

Yup. Put that huge old claw-foot tub to good use. That was such a good call, Nathan thought happily.

Definitely a good call, Duke grinned. Sure you're ok with it, though?

Sure. Why wouldn't I be?

Uh...the whole naked thing. Unless you want me to have a bath with your clothes on but honestly? That would be weird.
Don't have anything you haven't seen before, Nathan pointed out, still a little confused.

Yeah, it's just a bit different so I wanted to check, Duke shrugged. And yeah, I probably will keep checking because it's important to me that you're actually ok and not just saying it because you think something'll make me happy.

God, you're so good to me, Duke, Nathan's gratitude and affection flowed along their bond.

Duke smiled as the depth of Nathan's emotions hit him. Back at ya, Nate, he thought quietly. All of this, everything you do. It's... you're... exceptional.

Glad to do it, Nathan thought softly. Worth every second, if it makes you happy.

It does, it really does, Duke smiled and set the bath running before he poured in the foam (probably too much foam, really, but it was his first bath for years and he was going to make the most of it).

Duke's delight made Nathan glad he'd purchased the bottle of bubble bath, an unusual indulgence he'd picked up on a whim some time ago.

Every bath needs bubbles, Duke pointed out cheerfully as he checked the temperature and turned off the taps. What's the point otherwise?

Nathan chuckled. Never thought of it like that.

See, this is why you need me, Duke laughed. It's called indulgence, Nate.

Never much been one for that, Nathan admitted.

We'll have to do something about that, then, won't we? Duke smiled.

Nathan bit back his initial impulse to insist he didn't need indulging, saying only, Looks like we're doing a pretty good job already.

Yeah, Duke agreed cheerfully, perching on the edge of the bath to pull the socks off Nathan's feet. It's a start, anyway.

Steak and lounging in a hammock and a bubble bath makes for a solid day of indulgence, Nathan agreed, amused.

It does, but it's just one day out of many and I'm going to make sure you do stuff like this more often. Duke started to unbutton Nathan’s shirt. Sorry, is this weird? Would you rather get undressed yourself?

It's fine, it's no weirder than anything else about this, Nathan thought, amused.

Yeah, true, Duke laughed as he pulled off the shirt and started on the jeans.

Nathan's skin warmed in a blush as Duke continued disrobing.

Need me to slow down? Duke checked, pausing with Nathan's jeans undone but still around his hips.

It's fine. Just...not used to anyone seeing.

Duke nodded and glanced in the mirror, smiling at the reflection staring back at him. Nate, you're
gorgeous, don't ever forget that. I'd happily stare at you all day, dressed or undressed, or anywhere in between.

S'really sweet of you to say that, Nathan told him.

I'm not being sweet, Duke insisted. Just honest. I mean, seriously, look at those muscles, he ran Nathan's hand over his chest, briefly closing his eyes against the oddest sensation - that he was touching himself as well as being touched by someone else.

Nathan's reply was derailed by the contact, a strange flicker of arousal running through him.

You feel it too? Duke asked.

Yeah, it's....it's like you're touching me, but I'm touching myself...but not quite. Ugh, that makes no sense.

It makes perfect sense, Duke reassured him.

Are you, uh, are you okay with that?

Duke grinned. I am very ok with that, as long as you are.

Nathan blushed deeply. I, uh....wouldn't mind some....investigating.

Like this? Duke ran his thumb lightly over Nathan's lips and felt his breath catch in his throat.

God, Duke.... Nathan groaned inwardly.

Nate... Duke whined slightly. Was that as intense for you as it was for me?

Definitely, Nathan tried not to sound too eager.

Slowly, Duke trailed his fingers across Nathan's chest and down, shivering at the feel of the unique touch on his skin. Tell me if I'm going too fast, he thought, too impatient to wait for a response before he pushed Nathan's jeans all the way off.

Not a problem, Nathan managed to sound breathless even in his thoughts.

Tight, white, boxer briefs followed the jeans and Duke immediately reached for Nathan's hardness. I promise that next time, if you even want to do this again, I will make this so fucking good for you, Nate, Duke thought, a raw edge of desperation in his words. But it's been eleven years and I don't think I can do slowly right now.

Hurry up, Nathan's reply was tinged with amusement as well as arousal, his deadpan humor coming through clearly over their bond

Duke entirely missed Nathan's humour (or maybe he chose to ignore it). Pleasure coursed through his body as he took a firmer grasp and started to stroke. Fuck, that's so good.

Nathan groaned inwardly, his whole being agreeing with Duke as their shared pleasure echoed back and forth along the link.

Duke panted, his pleasure climbing ever higher. Their bond strengthened and it was as if their minds became one; a deep, intimate, emotional connection. A soft groan escaped from him and his hand worked faster, seeking the release he knew was coming.
Duke, yes, god you're so good, Nathan groaned silently.

“Fuck, Nate,” words fell from Duke, descending into incoherent curses and whispers as his mind spiralled ever higher until he came with a loud groan.

Nathan whimpered at the intensity of the pleasure, moaning softly as they slowly came down.

“Nate,” Duke whispered out loud. “I...That... Fuck.”

Crazy, Nathan thought back. So intense. Never imagined anything like it.

Was it ok? Duke couldn't help but ask. Even though he'd felt Nathan's enjoyment he felt suddenly, inexplicably, shy. Vulnerable.

It was amazing, Duke, Nathan thought, affection warm and tender through their bond.

Duke smiled, soft and sweet. I've never felt so close to anyone before.

Me neither. Not a virgin but this was.....a whole different ballpark.

It was , Duke agreed. It was like I could feel everything. All your emotions, your pleasure, what you wanted me to do. I couldn't tell where I stopped and you began and it was the most intense experience of my life. Duke sank bonelessly to perch on the edge of the bath.

Exactly, it was just like that, it was incredible, Nathan agreed.

I'm glad you felt it too, Duke smiled. And sorry, for the lack of...build up. Next time. If there is a next time.

Hey if I'd gone without for over ten years I'd probably be pretty impatient too, Nathan thought, amused.

Yeah but still, Duke said unhappily. I should've waited.

Duke. That was the best damn sex I've ever had in my life. If it had been any better, I think my brain would have exploded. Trust me, it's fine.

Duke grinned, relieved. Glad you enjoyed it as much as I did.

Damn right, Nathan grinned. How 'bout that bath to top things off?

You read my mind, Duke laughed and checked the temperature before slowly stepping in and sinking beneath the bubbles. Warmth enveloped him, calm and soothing and he sighed blissfully.

S'nice, Nathan murmured blissfully.


Probably shouldn't, though, Nathan thought sleepily.

Nope, Duke agreed. I don't know what would happen if we did. I don't think I even can sleep.

Might be you'd just pop out, Nathan mused. Or be really really bored in here.

Yeah, no, I'm not sure I want to find out, Duke worried, too many what-ifs running through his mind. If you're tired then we should get out, put you to bed.
But this is so nice, Nathan all but whined.

It is and I'd happily stay here all night but your body needs sleep, Nate, I can feel how tired you are.

C'n sleep here. Wanna stay, Nathan's jaw dropped in a yawn.

No, Duke panicked. Thoughts filled his mind with an awful, terrible, clarity. Nathan falling asleep in the huge bath, sinking below the water, waking up, coughing, gasping for breath and finding only water.

Duke's panic jolted Nathan awake, sitting up straight and looking around with wide, staring eyes, breath coming fast and jerky.

Sorry, Duke thought quietly, relaxing slightly now that Nathan was fully awake and back in control of his body.

It's fine, it's.... Nathan scrambled out of the bath, pulling the plug, feeling shaky and somehow cold to the bone in spite of the hot soak.

Nathan, I'm sorry, Duke thought miserably. I didn't think that was going to happen. If I'd known...

Duke, it's okay, really, Nathan bundled up in a towel and headed for his room. Not your fault.

Kinda is, Duke wouldn't, couldn't, accept Nathan's reassurance. Are you ok? You should wrap up in a blanket, maybe get a hot cocoa or something.

Kay. Not your fault though. Nathan repeated as he wrapped up in a blanket and trudged down to the kitchen. Couldn't have known.

I didn't know, I promise you that, Nate. If I'd known, I never would have...

Of course not, you never would, you're a good person, Duke, Nathan reassured him, putting a mug of milk in the microwave.

Duke didn't answer that. Are you ok? He checked again.

Fine, Nathan reassured him, even though his hands shook a little as he stirred in the cocoa.

You're not fine, Nate, I'm still here and I can tell you're not fine.

Just a little leftover adrenaline. I'll have the cocoa and go to bed and I'll be fine.

Would you rather be alone? Duke's voice was soft and small even in his thoughts.

No! God, no, just....no, Nathan's thoughts tapered from panic down to sheepish embarrassment.

Ok, if you're sure, I just... I want to make sure you're ok and more than anything I want to wrap you up in my arms and tell you everything's all right and remind you that you're safe and I won't ever let anything happen to you.

That sounds perfect, Nathan admitted, his body relaxing at the mere words. Helps having you here. Feeling like I'm not alone.

Good, Duke smiled and pushed the thoughts, memories, to the back of his mind. I'll stay for as long as you want me to.
Nathan ran a hand through his hair. *Should let you go, though. I should sleep, you said you don’t want to be there for that.*

*Only because I'm worried about what might happen,* Duke told him. *I'll stay right next to you, all night.*

*That helps,* Nathan admitted softly.

*C'mon, let's get you into bed,* Duke smiled, keeping his own pain, his own fear, well hidden.

Nathan drained the last of the cocoa and put the mug in the sink, before heading back upstairs and climbing into bed. But, as tired as he was, every time he started to drift off that terrible sensation came back, icy water covering his head, blinding his eyes, filling his ears and nose and mouth and then lungs. Each time, he jerked back awake in panic.

Duke felt it too, everything that Nathan was feeling, everything that was now coming from Nathan's mind instead of Duke's. *Sshhh, Nate, you're fine,* he tried. *You're safe. I'm right here with you, I promise you're safe.*

*Can you….just keep talking?* Nathan asked, his expression exhausted.

*Of course,* Duke replied immediately. *Anything you need. I'm not leaving, I'm not going anywhere. You're safe in your own bed, there's no water, it's all fine. Just relax and keep breathing. Let yourself go. Trust in me to keep you safe. Focus on my voice in your head. I'm here with you, Nate, for as long as you want me to be.*

Nathan latched onto his voice like a lifeline, clinging to the comfort, like a child hugging a beloved teddy after a nightmare.

*Everything's fine, nothing's going to happen, sleep, Nate, you're fine,* Duke kept repeating the words as he tried to project the image of Nathan in his arms, warm and safe and comfortable.

Nathan slowly began to relax, his body loosening and his thoughts growing fuzzy.

*That's it,* Duke dropped his thoughts to a whisper. *Sleep well, Nate, I'll be right here when you wake up.* He felt Nathan start to fall asleep and left his body, hovering close and whispering sweet nothings to make sure Nathan knew he was still close.

Nathan gave a sleepy whine when Duke left, feeling the loss even on the very edge of sleep, but it didn't stop him from drifting off.

Duke kept whispering to him until he was certain that Nathan was asleep, reassured by the soft snores escaping from him with every rise and fall of his chest. As he'd promised, he stayed with Nathan all night and once Nathan was sound asleep, he allowed himself to fall apart.

It was easier, being strong for Nathan, and without that to hold himself together, his thoughts spiralled. The awful thought of Nathan slipping below the surface of the bath, his lungs slowly filling with water, and now his slow drift into unconscious sleep, was all too reminiscent of his death and he couldn't *stop thinking* about it.

After a while his thoughts turned back to Nathan and guilt flooded through him. He'd turned a wonderful day into an angst filled hell. Stupid, really, to freak out about a simple bath, something he used to enjoy, but the image of Nathan falling asleep had sent panic flowing through him. With their connection being so strong, there was no way to hide it from Nathan. His only hope was that Nathan hadn't got the full terror of his thoughts, that he hadn't somehow managed to transmit
exactly how he'd felt at the moment he'd died. And that Nathan would be able to sleep it off and forget about it in the morning. He didn't know if that was even possible.

By the time morning came around, he'd resolved to not even think about the whole possession thing again. It wasn't happening. Not when the consequences were like this. He never wanted to put Nathan through anything like that. Once was one time too many.

He watched Nathan sleeping, quiet and peaceful, and kept a close eye for any sign that Nathan might be having nightmares. Nathan didn't stir until soft light filtered through the curtains. As soon as he noticed movement, Duke smiled softly.

“Good morning,” he said, quietly enough to not disturb Nathan if he wanted to go back to sleep.

"Morning," Nathan mumbled, his expression unguarded, a softly adoring smile on his sleepy face.

“Hey,” Duke matched his smile but his voice was full of concern. “You ok?”

"M'fine. C'mere," still half asleep, Nathan reached out to Duke as if to embrace him.

Duke's heart broke as Nathan's hand slipped straight through him. “Nate,” he whispered, wishing, more than anything else in the world, that they could hold each other.

Nathan's face fell, and he rubbed his eyes. "Oh. Well. You can still join me, at least. Thought we could go get some brunch and then….I dunno, go to the beach or whatever you want to do for the day."

Duke shook his head. “I can't, not after last night. I can't put you through that again.”

Nathan looked disappointed, and confused. "Put me through what, probably saving my life by stopping me from falling asleep in the tub?"

“I... hadn't thought of it like that,” Duke said slowly. “I meant that... it's just… this is what I was worried about in the first place. There’s so much darkness in me, Nate, stuff that you don't need to know about and you definitely don't need to experience, and if this connection between us keeps growing then you're just gonna get more and more of it and last night… last night I put you through hell because I couldn't control it and I never want to do that to you again.”

"Duke," Nathan said gently, "I can't argue the panic attack wasn't much fun, but yesterday was the most amazing, wonderful day of my life. I loved having you so close, sharing my experiences with you. If that means taking the bad with the good, well, that's what being part of someone's life means."

Duke stared back at him, hardly daring to hope that maybe Nathan meant what he said. “But... I loved that too, Nate, I really did. But being part of someone's life also means protecting them from the shit and that's what I'm trying to do. Don't think I don't want it, I really do, I just want to shield you from the worst parts of me.”

"And I want you worst parts and all, Duke. You don't have to shield me from anything. I'm not going anywhere."

“Nathan,” Duke whispered, his lips slowly creeping upwards into a half smile. “I don't... I'm not going anywhere, either,” he said decisively.

"Glad to hear it," Nathan smiled, pleased and relieved. "You don't have to hop back in today if you're not comfortable doing it again just yet. No pressure. Just know the door is open."
“Thank you,” Duke smiled softly. “Maybe I could hop in later, cook you something again? Just that. Half an hour maybe. I just want to do something to make up for last night.”

"Happy to, but you don't have anything to make up for," Nathan said, gently but firmly.


"My pleasure. You know, at some point we need a big fancy brunch. You haven't had bacon or pancakes in over ten years and that's just a crime."

“Ohmygod bacon!” Duke could almost feel his mouth watering at the thought. “Yeah, we definitely have to do that. I mean, it's brunch, right, nothing can go wrong with brunch…”

"Exactly. We don't even have to cook here if you don't want, you can just hitch a ride to the diner."

“That would be…. Yeah. I mean, if you don't mind…?”

Nathan lay back with a grin. "Hop on in."

“Now?” Duke asked doubtfully.

"No?” Nathan asked.

“It's just...you've still gotta get ready and everything, you sure you want that?”

"Don't mind. But if it'd be boring, you can wait."

“It's not boring, Nate, it's just….what if something happens again?”

"Just gotta thrown on some clothes, brush my teeth, shave, comb my hair. Everyday stuff."

Duke thought on that for a minute. "Ok," he smiled. "Can't see anything going wrong with that."

Nathan grinned. "C'mon in, then. I need to stretch, and I bet you'll like that."

“I am definitely gonna get you doing yoga,” Duke promised before focusing on projecting himself into Nathan's mind once again.

Duke could feel Nathan welcome him, affectionate and happy to have him back, curling against and around him and settling in beside Duke in a perfect fit, as if sharing a mind and body were the most natural thing in the world.

Hey, Duke thought softly, wanting to cry at the welcome he'd received from Nathan. He'd never felt so accepted, so wanted, so loved.

Hey, Duke, Nathan thought tenderly. You okay? Remember, we don't have to if you're not comfortable. Whatever you need, that's what's most important.

I'm fine, Duke thought quietly, still trying to get his head around Nathan wanting him to come back after the disaster of the previous night. Are you ok? It's not just about me, it's about both of us.

Happy as a clam, Nathan thought back at him, and Duke could feel the truth of it. He'd seen cats napping in patches of sunlight less content than Nathan was right now.

He relaxed slightly, knowing that whatever else might happen, Nathan wanted him here, was happy to share his mind and body with him. Ok, Duke thought-grinned at him. Lead on.
Nathan rolled over in bed and indulged on a long, luxurious, cat-like stretch.

*Oh my god,* Duke whined. *So good.*

Nathan rolled onto his back and just lay in the patch of morning sun slanting through the window, feeling it warm his skin.

Duke was happy to relax and enjoy it with him, feeling all of his fears and worries and guilt from last night being carried away by the light and warmth of the sun.

Nathan let Duke luxuriate until he was worried he might fall back to sleep. Reluctantly, he sat up and yawned.

*If you need to sleep more, you can,* Duke thought quietly. *I can go, we can get brunch later, don't feel you have to get up just because of me.*

*It's okay, just the sun making me sleepy. I'm rested well enough, can't drowse the day away.*

*You can,* Duke pointed out. *It's a Sunday, it's supposed to be a day for relaxing and if that means sleeping til the afternoon then you absolutely should.*

*But I want to spend the day with you,* Nathan thought sleepily, yawning again.

*You're still tired, Nate, just lie down and go to sleep, I'll be here when you wake up. Besides, it'd be nice, snoozing with you for a while.*

Nathan was already slumping back down toward horizontal, even as he worried, *But you'll be bored.*

*Nope,* Duke smiled. *If you're just dozing then I'm staying right here for sleepy pillow talk. If you start to fall properly asleep then I'll hop out. You're adorable when you sleep, I don't mind watching you for another couple of hours.*

*Y'sure?* Nathan yawned again, now flat on his stomach in the sunny patch

*I'm very sure,* Duke insisted. *It's nice, feeling how relaxed you are, the sun on your skin, the soft sheets. It's warm and cozy and comforting and I wouldn't change it for anything.*

*Mm, yeah, s'nice,* Nathan murmured, his eyes slipping closed.

*Yeah it is,* Duke smiled. *Enjoy it, we've got the rest of the day to do stuff if we want to. Sunday mornings are for staying in bed, coffee, reading the paper. They're not for getting up and rushing around.*

*You just trying to get me to sleep?* Nathan murmured.

*No,* Duke replied gently. *I'm trying to get you to relax so I can enjoy it with you.*

*Mm. Plenty relaxed,* Nathan agreed sleepily.

*Good. Sleep if you want to, you could do with catching up a bit.*

*I sleep okay,* Nathan protested. *If he'd been more awake, he might have realized that he didn't have much to base that comparison on.*

Duke laughed. *You kinda don't,* he said softly. *You go to bed late, you never sleep in and I know*
you wake up in the night, even if you don't remember it in the morning.

I do? Nathan sounded mystified.

You do. A couple of times a night, mostly. You wake up, move around a bit, punch your pillow, maybe have a drink of water. Sometimes you talk to me, but you don't make much sense, Duke smiled. Like I said, you're adorable when you sleep.

I talk in my sleep? What do I say?

Mostly gibberish, words that make no sense. Sometimes you talk to me but it's like you're not really there. You're so soft and sleepy and unguarded.

Adorable, huh, Nathan tried for grumpy but was too sleepy, and he ended up just proving Duke right.

Yeah, adorable, sorta like a sleepy puppy that's fighting to stay awake so it doesn't miss anything that's going on.

Fuck you, Nathan grumbled without any real temper at all.

Duke laughed. Yeah yeah, you know you want to.

Nathan blushed deeply. Be pretty hard to.

It would, Duke agreed. But you didn't say you didn't want to, he teased gently.

Shaddup, Nathan mumbled.

Ok, ok, I'll stop, Duke grinned and relented.

Dork, Nathan yawned.

Asshole, Duke smiled affectionately. You should sleep.

It's already getting late, Nathan hesitated.

Doesn’t matter how late it gets. If you're tired, you should sleep. Look, just pull the... Duke started to say something. Hang on. Are you ok if I take control for a minute?

Yeah, sure, Nathan settled back.

Duke mentally stepped forward and smiled. He reached out with Nathan's hand and pulled the warm sheets over himself, wriggling around until he was comfortable. Once he was warm and comfy and snuggled into a nest of pillows and sheets and blankets, he stepped back again. Good? He checked.

Mm, nice, Nathan snuggled in.

Good, Duke smiled. Now close your eyes and relax and sleep.

Nathan's eyes slid closed. You'll stay?

I'll be right next to you. I'm not going anywhere, just gonna stay here and watch you sleep.

Love having you close, Nathan murmured
I promise I'll be right here, every night - every time - you fall asleep, I'll watch over you.

Nathan smiled softly. *You're the best. Can't imagine not having you here.*

*You never have to imagine it because it won't happen. Go to sleep, Nate, I'll be beside you the whole time.* Duke slipped out of Nathan's mind and watched him smile sleepily. “See, I'm just here. Not going anywhere,” he murmured.

Nathan gave him a quietly adoring look. "You're amazing. Miss you already."

“Miss you too,” Duke whispered. “Get some sleep.”

"Mm," Nathan replied, yawning and curling up in the blanket nest Duke had made.

Duke smiled at the adorable cuteness of Nathan snuggling into the pile of blankets and wished, more than anything, that he could be in there with him, stroking and cuddling and nuzzling into his hair. “I'll be right here when you wake up,” he said, but Nathan was already asleep.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Nathan worries that he's holding Duke back from moving on. Later, they celebrate Nathan qualifying as an EMT.

Brenda had invited Nathan for afternoon tea again and, having finally sorted out a date which worked for both of them, Nathan waited on the doorstep for her to answer, Duke riding shotgun in his mind as he nearly always did when they were out and about.

*I wonder if she'll have that amazing looking caramel chocolate cake,* Duke grinned as they waited.

*I wonder if she'll have that amazing looking caramel chocolate cake,* Brenda answered the door with a smile, bustling Nathan into the sunny sitting room. She'd made the old Victorian a bright and cheerful place, with plenty of pets and potted plants and beautiful art.

*Can't believe how different the place looks,* Duke observed happily. *Hang on, I'm gonna do some low key ghosting shit for her.*

*Okay, have fun,* Nathan thought in reply, amused.

Duke grinned and left Nathan's mind. He started by making the lights flicker cheerfully, as if he was saying hello.

"Hello, dear, come in, come in," Brenda beamed. "He must like you, dear. He's always so much more active when you're around."

Duke smiled at how pleased she was that he was here and rattled the door on the dresser, careful not to disturb the decorative plates that he knew she was so proud of.

"Hello dear," Brenda smiled in Duke's direction. "It's good to see you so lively."

The lights flickered again, Duke agreeing that he was lively today. Momentary guilt crossed his mind that he'd tricked her into believing he was here all the time.

Brenda poured Nathan tea and set out sandwiches and cake and biscuits for him. "Here you are, dear, enjoy," she turned to the dresser, "I'm afraid I don't have any snacks you could share, but won't you come join us for a bit of a sit and chat?"

Duke looked longingly at the delicious food that Nathan was getting to enjoy without him but at the same time he was touched that she thought to include him in their socialising. Carefully, he moved a cushion on the couch to make it obvious where he was and arranged himself into a sitting position. "Hey Brenda," he said cheerfully, hoping that she could hear him.

Brenda looked delighted. "Oh, I can hear you now! I'm sorry I can't most times. These old ears, you know, they're not what they used to be."
“That's ok,” Duke reassured her, even as his heart broke that she was apologising for not hearing something that didn't happen. “Sometimes I'm very quiet, I don't always have the power to speak,” he flailed round for an excuse.

"Oh, I see. Well I'm touched that you're choosing to speak with me, dear. Don't wear yourself out, though, even ghosts need to take care of themselves."

“You're a wonderful lady, Brenda,” Duke said gently but loudly enough that she could hear. He came to a decision. He couldn't keep misleading her any more. She was too nice, too genuine, and he felt badly that he'd misled her for so long and that she'd bought the house under false pretences. Mind made up, he spoke to her again. “I've been here for years, making sure my house is being looked after by the right people. I know you'll take good care of it and I think it's time for me to move on. I know the house will be safe with you and I should leave it in your capable hands.”

Brenda looked a little sad but smiled anyway. "Thank you, dear, I'm honored that you would trust me with your beloved home. I hope you have a very happy afterlife, you're a good boy and you deserve it. It was lovely sharing your home, I always did want to live in a real haunted house."

“I've really enjoyed your company over the past few months and I hope you have a wonderful life. You never know, I might be able to pop back for an occasional visit to see you and maybe your handsome realtor,” Duke smirked slightly, covering the sadness he felt for Brenda. “I'm sorry I can't stay to keep you company, but I really should move on. Goodbye, Brenda, and thank you for taking such good care of my old home.”

"Oh my, dear, you don't need to feel bad for this old lady. I've enjoyed your company too, but how selfish would I be if I kept you away from whatever heaven you're bound for? I promise to take good care of your home for as long as I can, then find another good owner. And then after that maybe I'll see you again, in a place where I can serve you tea and give you a hug." 

“Thank you, Brenda,” Duke replied, genuinely touched. “I'll look forward to seeing you there, just not too soon, you hear me?”

"Oh, don't you worry, dear, there's plenty of life in this old bird yet," she told him cheerfully. "Once I've seen and done everything I want to see and do, I'll see you then, and not a moment before."

“Glad to hear it,” Duke smiled. “Be seeing you.” With that, he made the lights flicker cheerfully to say goodbye and hopped back into Nathan's mind.

"Goodbye, dear, have a nice afterlife," Brenda gave him a bittersweet smile, then turned to Nathan. "More tea, dear?"

"Thank you," Nathan said quietly, thinking over what he'd just witnessed. He was quiet for the rest of the visit, and on the drive home as well.

You ok? Duke asked, concerned that Nathan was unusually quiet on the way home. Normally they'd be chatting away about Brenda and her kindness and all the hobbies and groups she was part of.

Duke, do you ever.....want to move on? Nathan's thought was soft, tentative.

No, Duke's thought came back immediately and strongly.

You could be happy, though. Brenda's right, it's selfish of me to ask you to stay just because I enjoy your company. I should stop holding you back.
You aren't holding me back, Nate, I promise, I'm here because I want to be.

But you don't have to be. You could be in heaven right now if it weren't for me. I should never have asked you to stay, Nathan thought guiltily.

Or Hell, Duke pointed out. How do I know what's waiting for me? You didn't ask me to stay. I was here for ten years before I met you.

Yeah, but your house will be okay now. And you're definitely bound for heaven, of course you are. Nathan sounded as though any other possibility was bafflingly impossible.

Am I? Really? How certain are you, because I'm not.

Absolutely certain, Nathan told him, his conviction strong and clear across their bond. You're a good person, Duke.

I wish I had your confidence, Nate, really I do. I don't know what's waiting for me on the other side and I'm not sure I want to find out. But if you want me to go then I will.

Or course not! The thought came immediately, tinged with heartbreak and a little fear. I'd never want you gone. I just don't want to keep you from being happy. I don't want to hold you back. I don't want to be that selfish bastard.

Nathan's emotions flowed down their connection. Duke felt their full force and tried to offer reassurance. You're not. You're not holding me back. I am happy and you're not selfish. I promise, Nate, you're not.

But you could be happier, Nathan thought softly, trying to shove down how much he wanted Duke to stay, so as not to influence him. I know you're scared, anyone would be, but I know - I know - you're destined for only good things.

No. No, I couldn't be happier, Duke insisted. I don't want to go. It's not that I'm scared, it's that I'm happy here, with you, and I don't want to go anywhere.

Duke, it's okay, Nathan thought gently. No judgment. Like I said, anyone'd be scared. I just hate to see you miss out on what you could have just because my selfishness is a good excuse to stay.

You think I'm making excuses? Duke asked bleakly. After everything, you still don't believe that I want to stay. That I want to be with you.

Duke, even if I thought I was any kind of reason to stick around, I can't compete with heaven. No one could.

You can, Duke thought sadly. But maybe you're right. Maybe I should move on, let you get on with your life.

What, me? No, I'm fine, this isn't about me. I'm worried about you, Duke, Nathan said, confused and unhappy.

I don't know what else I can do or say to prove to you that I'm happy here, Duke said, devastated that Nathan didn't seem to want him to be here any more. I'm happy with you, Nate, there is nowhere better, but I don't seem to be able to get that across to you. You just don't believe me.

I do believe you're happy here, Duke, I do, Nathan said worriedly.
Clearly you don't, or you wouldn't be trying to get me to leave, Duke replied hotly, his defences up. And if that's what you want then just say the word and I'm gone but stop trying to dress it up like it's for my benefit because it isn't.

I don't, I don't want you leave, Duke, I just want you happy! I want you not to fuck up your life - your afterlife, what the hell ever - for my sake! Nathan thought, distressed.

And you think this... you... is fucking up my afterlife? You think that with the whole of eternity waiting for me on the other side, I don't want to wait a few years - decades, hopefully, but it's still nothing compared to forever - for you to come with me?

...Didn't think of it like that, Nathan mumbled.

Look, I don't know what's waiting for me on the other side but I do know that eternity is a very fucking long time and I'd rather spend the next... however many years... here, with you, than I would there - wherever the fuck there is - waiting for you to arrive and worrying about you.

Nathan was quiet, feeling very small.

And if, Duke said, gently now, if after all of that, you still think I should go, then just say the words and I'll go and I'll hope to see you there whenever the time comes, but I want to stay. You aren't keeping me here, this is what I want.

I don't want you to go. Even in thought, Nathan's voice was choked, his eyes suspiciously wet.

Then I'm not going anywhere, Nate, I promise, Duke told him softly.

Nathan pulled the truck over to the side of the road, folded his arms over the steering wheel and lowered his head onto them, shaking silently with held-back emotion.

Nate... Duke whispered, the strength of Nathan's emotions hitting him like a steam train now that Nathan wasn't hiding them from him. Hey, you're fine, we're both fine. C'mon, let me drive us home.

Nathan receded in his own mind to let Duke take over, curling up at the back of their shared consciousness, small and shaking.

Duke took control, efficient and all-business as he drove them home. He parked up and went inside as quickly as possible, pausing to make a coffee before he dropped onto the sofa and gave control back to Nathan.

Hey, he said softly. What is it? What's wrong?

I never wanted you gone. I thought....I thought you were gonna leave thinking I hated you or something. Nathan curled up as if he wanted to crawl back inside himself and not come out.

Duke stepped forward in Nathan's mind, just for a moment, just long enough to pull a blanket over them before he stepped back again. I never thought you hated me. It just sounded like you didn't want me around any more and it really fucking hurt that you were trying to dress it up like it was for my own good.

I didn't, Duke, I swear to god I didn't, it'd kill me to lose you, I just...I don't understand why anyone would want to be with me at all, much less give up heaven for it. Nathan admitted reluctantly. I thought you were....I dunno, still here for pity or something. I'd never forgive myself if my selfishness made you unhappy.
Pity? No, Nate, I'm not here for pity. I'm here because I like you, probably love you, and because you're you. I want to be here. You're everything to me and it's not like I'm missing out on the whole afterlife thing, I'm just waiting for a while, Duke tried to comfort Nathan.

Nathan went very still, and very quiet.  *You mean that?*

*Yeah, I mean that, Duke smiled. I've meant every word I've ever said to you.*

*You love me?* The thought was as soft and tentative as the first flower of spring.

*Yeah...sorry, maybe that's not what you want to hear, but yeah.*

Nathan's reply was in pure emotion as words failed him, joy and love and warmth as he opened his heart to Duke completely.

Duke welcomed him, wholly, unquestioningly. He took all of Nathan's emotions, his *heart*, and wrapped them up safe in his mind where they'd always be protected.

Nathan twined in and around him, his love fierce and intense and powerful even unspoken.

Duke made space for him, accepting him, yielding to him, his emotions strong and full of love, projecting warmth and comfort and *home*.

Nathan's joy grew, a quiet but no less powerful emotion, enfolding Duke in loving acceptance, eager welcome, and soft adoration.

*Nate*, Duke whispered as he was folded into Nathan's love. *Please don't let me go.*

*Never. Never till you ask otherwise,* Nathan promised.

And now it was Duke's turn to be small. Warm and safe in Nathan's mind, a small sob escaped before he could hold it back. Nathan's love was everything he'd always wanted and had never believed he could have, never believed he'd *deserved*, until now.

Nathan wrapped snugly around him, tender and comforting. *Love you, Duke*, the words came softly to him.

*Love you too,* Duke responded immediately. He relaxed into Nathan's warm thoughts, drew from his comfort, and allowed himself to be loved.

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Nathan was in such a good mood coming home that Duke could feel it before Nathan even entered the house, their minds so attuned to one another by this point.

“Hey, you're happy this evening,” Duke grinned when Nathan walked through the door. He knew exactly what today was, the day Nathan got the results from his EMT course. He'd been worried about it for weeks and Duke had used every distraction technique he knew to keep Nathan's mind off it. The happiness he felt radiating from Nathan could only mean one thing. “Congratulations.”

Nathan beamed. "Passed with flying colors. Ninety percent on the written, eighty-seven on the practical."

“I never had any doubts,” Duke smiled. “So proud of you.”

"Had more faith in me'n I did," Nathan smiled.
“Not like that was difficult,” Duke snarked goodnaturedly. “So, are we celebrating tonight then?”

"Hell yes. What do you want to do?" Nathan smiled, not even realizing how silly it was to ask that when he was the one being celebrated.


"You know, I never did care much for champagne. Rather sparkling cider, honest. For dinner...hate to ask. But you know I love your cooking more'n anything."

“What would you like?” Duke asked, without hesitation. “Can go to the store pick up whatever you fancy. Or there're ingredients for a few different things here. Anything you want.”

“I love everything you make,” Nathan grinned, shy and sheepish. "Could never pick one favorite.”

Duke smiled. “Grab yourself a beer and chill for a bit. I can definitely do seafood mac and cheese, or that paprika chicken thing you liked last time. Or, hold off on the beer and we'll pop out and pick up a steak.”

"Seafood mac and cheese?" Nathan perked up.

“Of course. I'll get started once you've had a chance to relax,” Duke smiled.

"Want to go sit in the hammock? Actually kinda nice today."

“Yeah, that'd be good,” Duke agreed.

Nathan grabbed a beer out of the fridge and headed out onto the porch, settling in the hammock and enjoying the autumn sun and gentle breeze.

Duke followed him out and watched the day for a moment. “Ok to hop in?” He checked, the same way he always did, no matter how much Nathan said he didn't need to.

"Always," Nathan replied as he always did, a small but warm smile telling Duke that the question was appreciated nonetheless.

Duke jumped in, settling straight into the back of Nathan's mind and relaxing, enjoying the feel of the sun and the breeze on Nathan's skin.

Nathan welcomed him with his usual happiness, their minds wrapping around one another in the way their bodies could not.

Nice evening, Duke thought. Good to share it with you.

Always good to share with you, Nathan thought softly.


Sure hope so. Already got a place. Know a guy in the fire department, emergency services is desperate for first responders, said they'd take me if I passed. Didn't want to say anything in case I screwed it up.

Nate! That's amazing! When do you start? Duke thought excitedly.

Gonna call 'em in the morning and see when they want me.
More reason to celebrate tonight then, Duke grinned happily.

Gonna be pretty amazing. Pretty hard, too though. Won't be home much.

Yeah, but you'll be out there, helping people, saving lives. The way you always wanted to. That's gonna outweigh everything else.


It'll be all of those things and you're gonna rock it.

Hope so. Be pretty amazing to make a difference.

Yeah. I know I keep saying it but I am so proud of you and so pleased for you, Duke thought softly.

Nathan felt a sudden lump in his throat, those words meaning more to him than he could ever say. All thanks to you, Duke.

I just came up with the idea, you did all the hard work, Duke thought quietly. You did it, Nate, just you, and you should be proud of yourself too.

Never would've thought of it on my own. Never would've believed I could, if I somehow had come up with it. Maybe I did all the work but I couldn't have done it on my own.

I'm glad I could help, Duke smiled.

Hope I do okay. Bad enough to screw up when lives aren't on the line.

You won't screw up, Duke reassured him, Nathan's worry hitting him through their connection. You know this stuff, you'll be working with a partner. You've got this, Nate.

Thanks, Duke. You're the best.

Yeah, yeah, you're the one who's gonna be out there kicking ass and saving lives. That's pretty fucking amazing and I can't wait to hear about it.

I'll tell you everything, promise, Nathan smiled.

Good, Duke replied, smiling. Now finish that beer so I can go and cook you dinner to celebrate.

Nathan chuckled and drained the bottle. Ready.

Good. Ok for me to take over? Duke checked.

All set, Nathan agreed.

Duke stepped forward and stretched luxuriantly before he stood up and went straight to the kitchen. He pulled ingredients out of the fridge and set about making the seafood mac and cheese that Nathan was so fond of.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

After his first major EMT call, Nathan meets FBI agent turned Haven PD detective Audrey Parker.

Nathan didn't let himself fall apart until it was over. A few days into his new job, he'd been on some relatively routine calls (as routine as these things ever got, his crew assured him). Today had been his first major scene. Multi-car pileup. Some of the people had been mostly okay. Some were now delivered to the hospital, their fight for their lives out of his hands. Some it'd been too late to save. He walked out of the hospital and headed for his ambulance, feeling like he might faint or throw up any second.

"Are you ok?" A concerned voice sounded from behind him.

"I'm fine," Nathan said automatically, turning around and seeing a small blonde woman in smart professional clothes.

"You don't look very fine," she said, noticing the pallor of his face and the slight tremble in his hands. "Here, sit down for a minute."

Nathan laughed, the sound carrying a wild edge. "I'm the guy who's supposed to be saying that sort of thing."

His benefactor shrugged and smiled. "Kinda my job too," she said, sitting down on the steps of the ambulance. "Looking after people, I mean."

"Doctor?" Nathan asked, sitting beside her.

"Detective," she replied, shuffling up to give him more space. "Audrey Parker, Haven PD."

Nathan blinked. "Chief sent over detectives?"

"All hands on deck," Audrey smiled. "You know the Chief?"

Nathan quirked a dry smile and held out his hand to shake. "Nathan Wuornos. Nice to meet you."

"Good to meet you, Nathan," Audrey shook his hand warmly. "So he's your father? Uncle? Much older brother?" She laughed.

"Father."

Audrey nodded and took Nathan's terse answer as a sign that he wanted no further discussion on the matter. "First big call?" She asked instead.

"Yeah. Signed on last week. Been out on calls for a few days now. Knew it'd be tough, but..."

"I'd tell you it gets easier but it doesn't," Audrey said kindly. "You just get better at dealing with it."
"Probably be a psychopath if ever I found this easy," Nathan nodded, unsurprised.

Audrey laughed. “That's a very good point,” she agreed. “After something like this, a load of us usually get together at a bar, drink, try to forget about it, support each other. You should come.”

Nathan wasn't normally much of a one for socialization, but support sounded good right about then. "Thanks for inviting the rookie. Where?"

“Grey Gull, out by the coast. You know it?”

Grey Gull, why did that sound familiar? "I can put it in my GPS."

“Ok,” Audrey smiled. “Just come over after your shift, there'll be a few of us there.”

"Sounds great. Fair warning, I'm not much of a people person."

“Really? I hadn't noticed,” Audrey teased gently, her eyes sparkling.

"Thanks for that, Parker," Nathan gave her a rueful grin.

“You're welcome, Wuornos,” she replied quickly, not missing a beat. “See you later - I get off at six.”

"Same. See you then."

“Later, rookie,” Audrey grinned and clapped him on the shoulder as she stood to leave.

"Why do I feel like you'll still be calling me than ten years from now?" Nathan snorted.

“Not ten years. Just until a new rookie comes along. Until then, you're it,” Audrey shot back over her shoulder as she walked away.

"Man I hope they hire someone soon," Nathan grumbled playfully, then pulled out his phone to message Duke's tablet and explain he wouldn't be straight home.

Audrey raised her hand in response and dimly wondered if lightly flirting with the Chief's son was one of her better ideas. She decided it probably wasn't but then all she'd done was tell him about the whole drinks-after-an-incident tradition and no one could read much into that. Could they?

Said flirting had gone entirely over Nathan's head, sadly. He was thinking only of unwinding with people who would understand.

The rest of Audrey's shift passed without incident - for once, she was relieved to be sitting in the office and doing paperwork. She was out of the door on the dot of six o’clock and at the Grey Gull by quarter past. The barman slid a beer across the bar to her and she nodded her thanks - he was a good man, Bill, never charged them after a day like today. As she chatted with her friend, Julia, she kept one eye on the door for Rookie Wuornos.

Nathan came ambling in not long after along with the rest of his crew, looking around for her.

“Rookie,” Audrey called out when she spotted him, waving him over. “You came,” she grinned.

"Glad to be here," Nathan said, cheered already.

Audrey smiled. “You already know Julia, I guess?”
"From the ER," Nathan nodded. "Hi, Doc."

Julia nodded back and raised her bottle to him. "Good to see you, Wuornos."

Unnecessary introductions over and done with, Audrey got up from her seat. "C'mon, we should get you a drink," she dashed off to the bar, not waiting to see if Nathan would follow.

Nathan did, puppyish and feeling a little lost.

"Hey Bill," Audrey greeted the bar owner. "New paramedic, Nathan, but we're calling him Rookie. He was on the call today."

"Hey man," Bill nodded and passed Nathan a beer. "After a day like today, the beers are on me. Thanks for all you do."

"Hey, thanks. Really appreciate that," Nathan said, pleasantly surprised.

Bill waved off his thanks. "Least I can do."

Audrey smiled. "Appreciated as always, Bill." She turned to face the room. "So who do you already know?" She asked Nathan.

"Met Stan on a police call once. And Gloria, couple times when she came to talk ME stuff with the chief."

"Ok, well you've got Rafferty over there, she's pretty new too, Laverne handles all the calls at the station, the FD crew you must already know," Audrey pointed out a few people. "Claire's always around if you need to talk to someone in a professional capacity. Don't expect any sense out of her if you don't make an appointment, she might be a psychiatrist but she's as mad as the rest of us."

"If she's a psychiatrist it'd be rude to expect psychiatry outside the office."

Audrey stared at him for a moment and then laughed. "I meant that she's as nutty as they come, which isn't what people assume a head shrinker to be like. She's cool though, you'll like her. And very good at her job if you need someone to talk to."

"I'm okay. Or will be."

"Yeah," Audrey nodded. "First one’s the worst. Have a few drinks, go home, talk to...your partner, family, whoever." She subtly tested the water, intrigued by the quiet, reserved, man whom she thought she'd like to get to know better.

"Yeah. Gonna call a cab though, I think. After today I'm never, never, ever getting behind the wheel after drinking, even if it was one beer two hours ago."

Audrey nodded again, feeling stupid. "Yeah, agreed," she said as she wondered whether he was that socially inept or whether he just preferred to keep his work and home lives completely separate. "Talking of which, you want another?"

"Think so, if it's not too much to ask," Nathan told her.

Audrey chuckled. "Well it's not like I'm buying them. Same again?"

"Sure, thanks."

Bill had overheard and had two more beers ready before Audrey had even turned around. She
picked them up, smiling her thanks, and passed one to Nathan.

"To bad days and new friends," she said, raising her bottle in a toast.

"To new friends. Could use fewer of the bad days," Nathan said dryly, double-clinking her glass.

"Couldn't we all?" Audrey smiled. "Don't worry, they're pretty few and far between."

"Good to know. You must've been doing this for some time if you've made detective."

"Few years. FBI first, then came here for a quieter life," Audrey told him. "How about you? Late career change, I'm guessing?"

"Yeah, just got my certifications. Done a bunch of this and that. Day job's real estate agent," Nathan nodded. "Not wanting to explain his failed medical school attempt to the very attractive ex-FBI agent, he added, "FBI, exciting. Chief must've leaped at the chance to have you on board."

"Real estate must be interesting, all the people you meet, houses you see," Audrey smiled. "The FBI wasn't as exciting as you might think. Chief thought having me on board would be good. Then he got to know me," she laughed.

"Knowing you're a pain in his ass makes me like you that much more," Nathan grinned.

"Then you'll definitely like me," Audrey laughed. "So I'm guessing you don't get on with him?"

"Well, I'm not a cop, so."

"Fair point," Audrey smiled, recognising that it was obviously a thorny subject.

"So why Haven? Got family here?"

Audrey shook her head. "No, just seemed like a nice, quiet, place which is what I was looking for. That sense of community, you know? You don't get that in a big city."

"Wouldn't know, never been further than Portland. But you definitely got community here. Sometimes more'n you'd like."

"You got that right," Audrey laughed. "The Teague's won't leave me alone, always bugging me for some update or other, asking if there's anything interesting they can put in that damn paper of theirs."

"Biggest busybodies in Haven. Possibly Maine," Nathan agreed, wrinkle his nose.

"I am so glad you said that because I was beginning to think it was just me!"

Nathan chuckled. "Everyone in Haven thinks that."

"See, I've been here for three years and you're the first person who's ever admitted that. Thank you, Nathan, for putting my mind at rest that I'm not the only one who thinks that," Audrey smiled warmly.

"Haven folk are insular, won't run down one of their own to outsiders. And before you ask, yes three years still makes you an outsider."

"Makes sense," Audrey nodded thoughtfully. "You're not typical Haven folk, are you?"
Nathan shrugged. "Bred, born, raised, spent my whole life here. Most'd tell you I'm as Haven as they come. 'Cept I don't like lobster."

"You don't like lobster?!" Audrey asked incredulously. "Nope, you're definitely not Haven, you're too normal."

"What's to like about boiled giant staring sea bugs?" Nathan snorted.

Audrey stared at him for a moment and laughed. "You might have a point there," she grinned.

Nathan grinned back. "Gimme pancakes any day of the week. Nothin' scary in those."

"Blueberry pancakes, stacked high, maple syrup running down…"

"The real stuff, none of that fake syrup," Nathan added, nose wrinkling.

"Of course," Audrey agreed. "The fake stuff should all be stacked in a pile and burned. It's an offence to the name of maple syrup."

"Couldn't agree more. Heard restaurants in Vermont'll give you the real stuff free but charge extra for fake."

Audrey laughed. "Sounds right."

"So how are you liking Haven now you're here?" Nathan asked.

"It's good. Insular, as you said, but the people are great, it's a lovely town. Not much detective-ing to do," Audrey smiled. "It's kinda restoring my faith in people, y'know?"

"Imagine you're in need of that, after the FBI."

"Mm," Audrey agreed, taking a long swig of her beer. "So why the late career change, Rookie? Doesn't seem like the normal way of things in Haven."

Nathan took a long slow sip of his beer, looking for a way to answer that wouldn't embarrass himself. "Call it a long-unfulfilled dream," he mumbled finally.

"Ok," Audrey said cheerfully. "We all have those. Real estate wasn't cutting it any more, huh?"

Nathan shrugged. "Still like it, now I work for a decent boss."

"A decent boss can make all the difference," Audrey agreed. "What do you like about it? Because - and genuinely, no offence intended - you don't strike me as a people person and I kinda thought that was a prerequisite for being a realtor."

"Not wrong," Nathan smiled ruefully. "Like houses, though. And finding the right house for the right person. When someone walks into a place and they're just….home."

Audrey's smile was warm and soft. "That must be amazing."

"Pretty amazing," Nathan found himself blushing inexplicably.

"Well now I know who to call when I'm ready to buy my own place," Audrey touched his arm, fleetingly, just a brush of fingers.

"Yeah, I'm, uh, I'd be happy to help you find a place," Nathan blushed harder. "Fair warning, I'd
need to know way more about your finances than you might want me knowing."

“Not a problem,” Audrey brushed him off. “You have a card?”

"Yeah, of course," Nathan pulled out his wallet and handed her one.

“Thanks,” Audrey smiled as she took it. “I should really be going, early shift tomorrow.”

"Yeah, I should get home too. Wanna share a cab?"

“I'd love to but I live upstairs,” Audrey said, a tinge of regret in her voice.

"Upstairs from a bar? That could be rough."

“It's fine, they're a pretty good crowd here and Bill keeps them in line. Occasionally I have to pop
down and kick some ass but not often. The roughest part of it is managing the stairs after a few too
many Martinis,” Audrey joked.

Nathan smiled. "Well, can't have that. If you want I can walk you up, make sure you get home
safe."

“You,” - Audrey leaned up to press a fleeting kiss to his cheek - “Are a gentleman. Thank you, but
I've had beers and not Martinis and I am perfectly capable of walking up a flight of stairs.”

Nathan's face went fire engine red and he stammered incoherently.

Audrey smiled reassuringly. “Now that I have your card, maybe I could call you sometime? I
mean, other than for house hunting help…?”

"Yeah, uh, I mean, um, absolutely,” Nathan managed.

“Great,” Audrey grinned. “It’s been good getting to know you, Nathan.”

"Yeah, you too, Parker," Nathan mumbled, still pink.

“I'll call you,” she promised, turning away and waving over her shoulder. As she climbed the stairs
to her apartment, she smiled to herself. Nathan was definitely intriguing and, Chief's son or not, she
wanted to get to know him better.

Nathan called a cab and headed home. The evening had been a more effective distraction than he
could have imagined.

Duke had been drifting around the house, waiting for Nathan to get home. He'd seen the news
report on the big accident and knew that Nathan would be having a rough time dealing with it. It
was a relief when Nathan's message came through, explaining that he was having drinks with some
of the other first responders after work. At least he had some real, human, support. And alcohol.
Duke was still firmly of the opinion that there wasn't much that couldn't be solved with alcohol.
Still, he worried. The news reports had mentioned fatalities and Nathan would definitely not be
handling that well.

When the cab pulled up outside, Duke raced to open the front door for Nathan. “Hey,” he greeted
as soon as Nathan could hear him. “Are you ok?”

"Duke, so damn good to see you,” Nathan said, half-reaching out to hug Duke before his arms
dropped.
“Good to see you too,” Duke murmured softly. “I caught the news, heard about the accident.”

"It was….it was bad," Nathan shuddered. "Trying to forget about it. Helped to go out after.”


Nathan bit his lip. What he really wanted was to be joined with Duke, to not be alone in his skin. But that was such an intimate act, it wasn't something he could ask. So instead he said, "Just your company."

“That I can do,” Duke said cheerfully. “Want this sort of company or the me-in-your-head sort of company?”

"....Would you mind?” Nathan said in a small voice.


"Please," Nathan said quietly, going to the couch and lying down.

Duke waited for him to get comfortable and slipped into Nathan’s mind, the act now as natural as if they’d been doing it forever.  You ok?

Nathan curled around him, clinging tightly, taking comfort in his presence. Better now.

Duke allowed him to cling as tightly as he needed to and wrapped him up, keeping him safe in his mind. Need to talk about it?

Nathan shook his head. Don't wanna think about it.

Ok, Duke thought easily. Tell me about the bar instead. You found some good people? Where’d you go?

Nathan blushed a little. Detective on the force asked me there. Parker. Seems nice.

Good, Duke smiled. I’m glad you’re making friends.

Yeah, she, uh, she took my card. Said she'd call.

Duke squashed down the irrational feeling of jealousy that hit him. Nathan needed friends, a girlfriend, if that’s what he wanted. What he didn’t need, especially now, was an insecure, clingy, ghost. Hey, that’s cool.

Yeah. Was nice of her to ask me out. Glad to be home, though. With you.

Duke smiled, slightly reassured. Glad you had a good time. You need people around you, especially after a bad day.

Was nice to be with people who understand, Nathan admitted.

Yeah, I’m sure, Duke thought quietly. Glad you had that.

Not that you don't Or aren't good company. Just....you know. A flash of memory Nathan couldn't quite suppress, screaming and sobbing and blood and worse.

Duke winced.  Fuck, Nate, that must’ve been awful, he thought softly. I know you don’t want to
think about it, but I’m here if you need to - talk or think, or whatever.


Doesn’t make it ok, or make it any easier to deal with, Duke pointed out. You’re allowed to be upset, Nathan, and you’re allowed to deal with it however you need to. But maybe bottling it up isn’t the answer.

Rehashing it would just be worse. Just want to forget it.

Yeah, ok, Duke thought. I’m not really one to give advice on this shit, my answer was always to hit the bottle and worry about it in the morning. Do whatever you need to do, Nate, whatever works.

Having you here works, Nathan thought softly.

Then I’m staying right here with you, Duke replied immediately. Tell me about your evening, he tried distracting Nathan.

Went to a nice place on the coast, owner doesn’t charge first responders after a major event. Talked with Parker. Had some of the rest of them pointed out. Then she had to crash so I came home.

That’s a good bar owner, Duke said appreciatively. So uh, this place, was it right on the water? Bar and kitchen downstairs, apartment upstairs? Things might have changed around Haven but there was only one bar on the coast that he knew.

Yeah, Parker mentioned she lives upstairs. How’d you know?

Is it still called the Grey Gull? Duke’s thought was soft and quiet, almost tentative.

Yeah, that’s the place. You know it?

Duke smiled sadly. Used to own it.

Duke, I’m sorry, Nathan thought softly.

Thanks, Duke replied, offhand. Nathan didn’t need him to be melancholy about what he’d lost. Not now. So he buried all the bittersweet memories deep inside himself and smiled, more genuinely this time. Nice to know it’s still being run as a bar, and it sounds like it has a good owner, he tried to be upbeat.

It’s a great place, if that helps.

It does, thanks.

I’m sure it’s the kind of place you’d be happy about, Nathan thought softly.

Yeah, Duke agreed. Just glad it’s still a bar, to be honest, always worried they’d knock it down and build condos in it’s place.

Yeah, no, still there. I can take some photos next time if you want, see what he’s done with the place.

That’d be good, thanks, Duke smiled, appreciative.
Course. Anything else I can do to help? Nathan asked.

It's supposed to be me helping you right now, Duke replied gently. But thank you.

This does help me, Nathan pointed out.

Ok, Duke replied quickly. Whatever you need. Tell me about the bar. Does it still have seating outside where you can sit and listen to the waves?

Think so. We just had a few beers at the bar, I didn't go outside. But any waterfront restaurant'd be nuts not to have outside seating.

It definitely would, Duke agreed. Always thought that was the main draw of the place. That and the food. When I had it, anyway.

Didn't try the food, but I can go back and see what I think. Won’t be as good as yours, though.

You're sweet, Duke smiled. So tell me about...Parker, was it? He asked, pushing aside his own feelings to try to keep distracting Nathan.


I'm sure I would, Duke smiled. She sounds great. I'm glad you met someone.

Maybe you can meet her too, come along some time when we hang out.

Yeah, maybe, Duke hedged, not entirely sure he wanted to meet Nathan's prospective girlfriend and especially not if she was a cop.

You don't want to? Nathan asked, confused.

Yeah, sorry, it'd be good to meet her, Duke said, more convincingly.

Nathan was quiet, a little confused by Duke's reaction.

You don't think it might be weird taking me along on a date? Duke pointed out.

What? Date? No, it's not like that, Nathan blushed. She's not interested in me.

So let me get this straight, Duke said, a slight laugh in his voice. She asked you out to a bar, spent time chatting to you, asked for your card and then said she'd call?

All the first responders went, s'not like she asked me one-on-one. Team would've invited me if she hadn't already. Nathan protested. She was just being nice to the rookie. And she wanted my card because she's looking to buy a place.

Right, Duke replied skeptically. So she spent time talking to you when she could've talked to anyone else in the bar, her friends and colleagues, but she chose you. And then said she'd call? Yeah, no, of course she's not interested in you, he laughed.

Like I said, she just took pity on me 'cause I didn't know anyone. And 'cause I have the social skills of a dead skunk. I know better'n to read too much into it. And even if she were, why'd I want her when I have you?
Dead skunk, Duke snorted, slightly cheered by Nathan's words. Pretty accurate description. Hers or yours?

Mine. She just agreed.

Duke laughed. Well she has a sense of humour, then. Maybe I would like her.

I really think you would, Nathan said earnestly.

Well if you like her... Duke replied. But still, she's a cop, Nate and you know how I feel about cops.

True, but then it's not like it matters much now, right?

Right, Duke agreed, bitterly. Not like she can arrest a dead man.

Nathan winced. Sorry, that was a shit thing to say. I'd say I didn't mean it the way it sounded but it would've been shit no matter what.

Yeah, it would've.

Sorry, Duke, Nathan mumbled. I was an ass. Guess I'd best just get to bed.

You were, Duke agreed. He took the mental equivalent of a deep breath and put his emotions to one side. Nathan was more important right now. Look, Nate, don't worry about it, ok? You've had a shit day, you weren't thinking. I understand that. If you're tired and you want to go to bed then you should. If not, then I'm here for as long as you need me.

Doesn't excuse treating you like shit. Nothing does. Nathan got up and headed for the stairs.

Nate, Duke said sharply. Wait, please.

Nathan hesitated obediently.

When did you last eat?

Nathan actually had to think about it. When he realized, he winced, knowing what Duke would have to say about it. Well....the pileup was right before we broke for lunch and by the time we got done with that and did all the wrap-up our shift was pretty much over, so....

And you ran out of here without breakfast, Duke groaned. Let me cook for you? I know you're tired but it'll only take me ten minutes to chuck something together.

Duke, no, you don't have to. I'm not even hungry. Beer is basically barley juice, that'll hold me for now, Nathan tried.

Beer is what, now?! Duke couldn't quite believe Nathan's logic. No. Just no. You haven't eaten since last night, you've been drinking, you have to eat. Let me make you something. Please.

Nathan hadn't really expected that to work. Don't have to go to the trouble, I can just raid the fridge n' pantry.


Okay, Nathan knew when he was beaten. But really, just a sandwich or something is fine. Simple and easy is fine.
Just sit back and relax, I'll make something quick but good, Duke told him as he stepped forward to take control of Nathan's body.

Nathan let him, sinking back in his mind, ashamed at how much comfort he took from it.

Duke busied himself with rustling up some pasta and a quick cheese sauce. It couldn't even rightly be called mac and cheese but it was warm and comforting and it would soak up the alcohol. He put the plate on the table and dropped back so that Nathan could eat.

Nathan hadn't thought he was hungry until the flavor hit his tongue, and he cleaned his plate embarrassingly fast.

Better? Duke asked, smiling to himself.

Yeah. Sorry you had to go to all that work, Nathan thought as he got started cleaning up.

It wasn't a lot of work, Duke argued. You know I'd do anything for you, the least I can do is make sure you don't go hungry.

Least I deserve, after what I said to you, Nathan mumbled.

I've heard worse, Duke tried to joke. Seriously, you've had a fucking awful day, don't be so hard on yourself.

Jesus Christ, Duke, the fact that other people always treated you like shit doesn't make it okay! Especially not from me, I of all people should manage to treat you with a little human decency and I couldn't even do that, I couldn't... Nathan's outburst shattered his reserve, his words dissolving into ragged grief and pain.

Nate, Duke said gently. It's ok, you're ok, you're gonna get through this, he soothed, thinking about wrapping Nathan up in his arms, projecting thoughts of safety and comfort. He could feel the almost physical pain in Nathan's chest, his stomach churning as great, harsh, sobs wracked his body. He stepped forward to take control, forced Nathan to breathe and steered him towards the couch. He stepped back again and Nathan collapsed bonelessly onto it, his head low, elbows resting on his knees. You're ok, Nate, it's all gonna be ok, he repeated quietly.

Nathan curled up in a ball, unable to stop now that he'd started, shuddering and gasping with his sobs. He shrank as if he didn't want to be present inside his own mind, clinging to Duke desperately.

Duke kept murmuring softly, words that meant nothing, useless platitudes, and let Nathan cry out the pain. Better than he bottled it up. He clung to Nathan just as tightly, holding his mind in the way he couldn't hold his body.

Eventually the wracking sobs slowed, then shuddered to a halt, leaving Nathan sniffling and hiccuping breathlessly.

That's it, Nate, you're ok, I've got you, just breathe, Duke murmured from inside Nathan's head.

Sorry, Nathan mumbled.

Hey, listen to me, Duke thought softly. You have nothing, nothing, to apologize for.

M'a fucking wreck, Nathan mumbled.
You're allowed to be. You're allowed to be anyway, Nate, there's nothing wrong with letting your feelings out, but what you've been through today? I'd be more surprised if you weren't a wreck.

You shouldn't be nice to me, I was an asshole to you, Nathan rubbed a hand over his face. You deserve so, so much better than me.

You're tired and hurting. I'll let you off being an asshole, Duke replied. This time anyway, he smirked, trying to lighten the mood.

S'no excuse, Nathan mumbled, exhausted.

No, Duke agreed. But it is a reason. And that doesn't make it ok but it does make it forgivable. So we should just put it behind us.

M'sorry. Never wanted you to have to forgive me. Never wanted to put you through the same crap all those people did. Told myself I'd never, never treat you that way.

Nathan, stop, Duke said quietly. You didn't, couldn't, put me through the same crap as everyone else did. You made one offhand comment. That's it. And you apologized. Please don't beat yourself up over it. It's forgotten, really.

I'll try to be better, Nathan closed his eyes wearily.

You don't need to be better, just keep being you, Duke told him. You should get to bed, try to get some sleep. Things'll look better in the morning.

Mm, Nathan agreed, but he didn't get up, or even so much as pull the blanket off the back of the couch to cover himself.

Duke stepped forwards again. He hated to do that without checking but Nathan wasn't in a fit state for anything tonight and he needed Duke to take control and look after him more than he needed Duke to be considerate. C'mon, let's go to bed, Duke thought, feeling how bone weary Nathan was as he dragged himself off the couch and plodded across the room to start climbing the stairs.

Nathan didn't object - in fact he seemed relieved to curl in on himself and let Duke take charge. Thanks. And sorry. For dragging my sorry ass upstairs. Don't think I could do a single thing on my own right now.

It's no problem, Nate, I'm always here for you. Whatever you need, Duke promised as he brushed Nathan's teeth and unceremoniously dropped his clothes in a heap on the floor before he collapsed into bed.

Can….can you make the blanket nest? Like you did that morning? I never get it right, Nathan asked in a very small, tired voice.

Already on it, Duke replied softly as he moved pillows and blankets around him into a cozy fortress. Try that, he said, stepping back so Nathan could check he was comfortable enough.

Nathan snuggled in, yawning hugely. Just right.

Good, Duke smiled. I'm gonna step out now, but I'll be just here, right next to you, the same as always.

Wish you never had to go, Nathan sighed.
“Me too, Nate,” Duke agreed. “But I'm not really going anywhere, I'm right here.”

“Mmkay,” Nathan yawned again, eyes already closed fast.

“See, you'll be asleep in no time,” Duke smiled. “Get some rest, Nate, there's no work tomorrow, I've already turned off your alarm. Sleep for as long as you need to.”

For a moment Nathan didn't answer, and Duke thought he might already been asleep. But then came two soft, sleepy words. "Love you."

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Nathan and Audrey's friendship grows and Duke pushes them closer together.

True to her word, Audrey had called Nathan and invited him for a drink. The drink had turned into dinner and even Nathan couldn't miss the fact that it was a date. As much as he'd enjoyed the evening, he'd hesitated to call her - he wasn't looking to date, no matter how much he'd liked her company, no matter how much he found her attractive.

In the end, it was Duke who got Nathan to call her. He knew Nathan would be far happier sharing his life with a real person than with a ghost so he put aside his own fears and jealousy, his worries about what might happen to him if Nathan didn't want him around any more - he wasn't going to be the one to hold Nathan back from happiness so he used every persuasive tactic in his playbook and finally, after several days of back and forth, Nathan had picked up the phone.

It was Duke's idea for Nathan to invite Audrey round for lunch one afternoon - more intimate than going out, more casual than dinner in. Nathan had objected, of course, he wasn't completely oblivious to how Duke might be struggling with this and he remembered how much Duke disliked cops, but Duke was convincing enough and when he'd promised to come and say hello to Audrey and at least give her a chance, Nathan had made the call.

Audrey had readily agreed, pleasantly surprised to be asked given the fact she hadn't received any interested signals from Nathan and he had (by his own admission) the social skills of a dead skunk. The whole 'is it a date? What if it isn't a date?' internal monologue had threatened to overwhelm her before she gave herself a kick. They enjoyed each other's company, it didn't need to be any more than that, and besides, Nathan hadn't exactly run away screaming from their last date.

So, feeling slightly awkward and not knowing what to expect, she knocked on the door of the big old house and waited.

It was only a few moments before Nathan opened the door, every pain taken with his appearance and looking distinctly nervous as he smiled and greeted her.

"Hey, Nathan," Audrey smiled and rested her hand on his shoulder as she leaned up to press her lips to his cheek. Her smile turned to a grin as he blushed prettily and she passed him the box she was carrying. "Cupcakes," she explained.

"Oh, uh, thanks," Nathan tripped over his own tongue. "I, um. Made lunch. Hope it's okay. C'mon through to the breakfast corner."

"I'm sure it'll be lovely," Audrey smiled and followed him through.

Duke looked on, silent as he stayed out of their way. He took in the easy familiarity between them, the physical contact that made Nathan glow red, and his heart broke. Nathan had been understating it when he said that Audrey was pretty. She was gorgeous, and she was alive and she could offer Nathan everything that Duke couldn't. Cop or not, he decided he didn't like her - not because of
who she was but because of what she represented. Life. Vitality. Happiness. He wouldn't stand in
their way. Nathan deserved that happiness. But he couldn't watch it either. Filled with a mix of fear
and sadness, he drifted away to the attic - out of sight, out of earshot and (he hoped, anyway) out of
mind.

“Wow,” Audrey said, her eyebrows raised as she took in the vastness of the big old house. “This is
some place. Do I need to start investigating you for some sort of illegal income?” She joked.

"Nah. Got it cheap because it's haunted,” Nathan explained.

Audrey laughed. “Funny. Guess that's one of the perks of being a realtor, huh? Pick up the cheap
places before anyone else gets a chance?”

Nathan shrugged awkwardly. He hadn't really expected Audrey to believe him, but he imagined
she’d change her tune soon enough when Duke came out to say hi.

“You are joking, right?” Audrey checked. “It's not actually haunted?”

"Sure is. Last owner was lost at sea, still lives here.”

“If you say so,” Audrey frowned at him and tried to work out if she should be amused or
concerned. Nathan seemed very convinced of what he was saying but maybe that was just his
deadpan humour again. She laughed again, in case he was joking.

Nathan decided not to press it. Duke would come out and say hi soon enough, he was sure.
"Anyhow, m'not much of a cook but I thought a brunch kinda thing with pancakes and bacon and
stuff…"

“Sounds perfect,” Audrey grinned. “I’m not much of a cook either, takeout is easier, especially
with working long hours.”

"I hear that," Nathan looked relieved. "Used to live off takeout n' frozen stuff."

“Used to?” Audrey enquired.

"Figured I oughtta learn. Been a kinda rough road. Ruined a pot burning instant rice, boiled all the
broth out of my soup, that sorta thing."

“Set fire to anything yet?” Audrey laughed. “I always think that’s how you know bacon’s cooked
- when the smoke detector goes off.”

"Fire alarm yes, actual flames no,” Nathan chuckled. "Or I should say, not yet. Probably happen at
some point."

“Well you’re up on me then,” Audrey giggled. “I had the fire department out one time when I
lived in Boston. Toast.”

"In a toaster? Or did you try to get fancy? I was trying to do that rice on the stove. Serves me
right trying to do it the grown-up way.”

“Yeah, same, trying to be fancy. I was toasting the bread before making grilled cheese. Forgot it
was under the broiler.”

Nathan winced. "Ouch."

“It wasn’t my finest hour,” Audrey laughed.
Nathan reached into the fridge and pulled out a couple glasses of mimosas, handing one to Audrey. "To cooking disasters. May we never repeat 'em."

Audrey clinked her glass against Nathan’s. “I’ll drink to that,” she smiled.

After drinking his toast, Nathan took the plates of bacon and pancakes from where they'd been keeping warm in the oven, taking them to the nicely laid out table in the sun room overlooking the backyard. A bottle of genuine maple syrup was conspicuously front and center on the table.

Audrey followed with the glasses. “This looks amazing, Nathan, thank you,” she said when she saw the table. “And you even got real maple syrup!”

"Never keep anything else in the house," he smiled. "This be enough? I got some fruit I could cut up, could make eggs. Or try to."

“It’s perfect,” Audrey grinned. “I’d rather you didn’t risk chopping your fingers off or burning the place down.”

"Suppose if I got this far I should just take the win," Nathan admitted with a sheepish grin.

“It’s definitely a win,” Audrey smiled as she sat down. “Thank you for going to all this trouble.”

"My pleasure. Thanks for coming over."

Audrey smiled and dug into her pancakes, now liberally poured with maple syrup. “Oh my god, Nathan,” she mumbled round a mouthful. “This is delicious.”

Nathan blushed handsomely. "Thanks. Full disclosure, s'about the only thing I can make well."

“Seriously, I could live off this,” Audrey told him, heat rising to her cheeks as she realised how that might be interpreted. “Honestly, the only thing I can make is cupcakes,” she added quickly. “Although I’m slowly branching out into more adventurous baked goods. It...isn't going well…”

"Cupcakes is all you really need though, right?” Nathan smiled.

“You make a very good point,” Audrey grinned. “Pancakes, cupcakes, bacon...that's all the major food groups, right?”

"Well, that covers fat, sugar, and salt - throw a cup of coffee in there for caffeine and I think we're good," Nathan grinned back.

“Right, right, caffeine,” Audrey nodded. “So that just leaves alcohol and we're sorted.”

Nathan grinned and lifted his glass.

Audrey smiled and raised hers before taking a sip and looking around her. “You have a beautiful home, Nathan.”

"Thanks. You should've seen it when I first laid eyes on it. Took a lot of work."

“Guess that's how you got it so cheap, huh?” Audrey was determined not to fall for the haunted house joke she was sure he’d been making. “Did you get an interior designer in, or is this all you?”

"Lot of it was by a guy I work with, does renovations and restoration. Good work, reliable guy."

“Well between you, you've done an amazing job,” Audrey smiled.
"Thanks. It's a beautiful home. Even when I first saw it, I knew how amazing it could be."

"You must have a real eye for this stuff, not everyone can see past the work that needs doing."

Nathan flushed. "I like houses. Architecture. You know. But don't worry, I won't bore you with it."

"I wasn't worried," Audrey frowned. "You aren't boring me, I like listening to you talk about something you have such a passion for."

Nathan smiled a little. "Sweet of you to say. Reminds me of someone very dear to me."

"I hope that's a good thing," Audrey said softly.

"It really is," Nathan reassured her.

"So, houses, architecture...what else lights your fire?" Audrey asked. "Except ghosts," she smirked. "I like small towns with small local businesses, and...um...crafting."

"Crafting?" Audrey's ears perked up. "What sort of stuff do you make?"

Nathan hesitated, dreading that admitting it would leave her laughing at him.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want," Audrey told him. "But I like stuff that's hand made rather than mass produced. I just don't have any talent for it myself, which is why I started baking."

"It's just...you'll laugh," Nathan mumbled.

"Why would I laugh?" Audrey frowned, confused.

"Because...decoupage," Nathan muttered.

"Decoupage?" Audrey smiled. "You mean the art of taking boring objects and making them beautiful?"

Nathan's shoulders relaxed out of the defensive hunch he'd unconsciously adopted, relief clear on his face. "You really mean that?"

"I do," Audrey reassured him. "I mean, you can take a battered old piece of furniture or whatever and turn it into a feature piece. That's pretty cool."

Nathan practically lit up. "Could show you my work, if you'd like," he offered shyly.

"I'd love that," Audrey was full of enthusiasm.

Nathan beamed and started clearing the empty dishes. "Let me just toss these in the dishwasher and I'll show you my workroom."

"Great," Audrey smiled warmly as she stood to help him clear the dishes. "Thanks again for a lovely brunch."

"Glad you liked it," Nathan smiled as he led the way into the kitchen.

"I did. Coffee and cupcakes later?" Audrey suggested.
"Sounds great," Nathan said happily.

Audrey smiled. “Good,” she said before draining the last of her mimosa.

Nathan gave her a shy smile and held out his hand for her to take.

Audrey's hand slotted into his, a perfect fit, and she stood on tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek again. “So. Decoupage. Lead on,” she smiled.

Nathan was shy as he showed Audrey his work but she smiled warmly and made appreciative noises. *His work really is beautiful*, she thought, and she told him so. Afterwards, they had coffee and cupcakes in the yard, enjoying the sun and chatting about everything and nothing.

They'd even shared their first kiss, a chaste brush of lips against lips - instigated by Audrey, of course - before she'd thanked him and left.

His mind whirling, Nathan closed the door and sat on the stairs, a goofy grin on his face.

Duke heard the door close and drifted down from his hiding place in the attic. "How'd it go?” He asked, his voice full of fake cheeriness which he hoped Nathan would be too distracted to notice.

"Duke, there you are!” Nathan said, his expression changed to one of relief. "I was worried when you didn't come out. Are you okay? What happened?”

“Of course I'm ok, why wouldn't I be?” Duke asked suspiciously.

Nathan looked confused. "You were going to come out and say hi."

“Oh, yeah, that,” Duke replied evasively. “Thought you two could use some time on your own. Didn't fancy playing the third wheel.”

"Duke, it wouldn't be like that,” Nathan promised earnestly.

“Yeah, no, it kinda would,” Duke said. “And you didn't answer my question. How'd it go?”

"It went fine, but Duke, you don't need to hide every time she comes over, that's not fair to you. This is your home."

“I wasn't hiding, I was diplomatically staying out of the way.”

"Same difference."

“No, it's not,” Duke argued. “Hiding would suggest that I was avoiding the issue, which I'm not. I was just being tactful and a good roommate.”

"Fine, then. Same effect. You not getting to move freely around your own home."

“Why are we even arguing about this?” Duke asked, not waiting for an answer. “I'm glad it went well. At least I'm assuming that's what 'fine' translates as.”

"Course, but clearly this was a mistake. Won't happen again."

Duke mumbled something that sounded like 'for fucks sake’. “Really?! You're going to be like that about it?”

Nathan looked hurt, but said, "Not gonna do anything that hurts you, Duke. Full stop."
Duke thought on that for a moment. “Thank you,” he said softly. “But no, you can't do that. I won't let you do that.”

“Duke. Listen to me. Not. Hurting. You. Wasn't lying when I said I love you. You're the most important thing. If spending time with Audrey hurts you, makes you feel sad or scared or lonely, it's not happening. End of discussion.”

If Duke thought but didn't say. “Nate, I love you too, and I love you more for saying that and that's why I need you to do this. Get to know Audrey. I left just after she arrived. I saw you two together. You're perfect for each other and you should see where it goes. And if it goes nowhere, well I'll still be here. And if it does, then I'll deal with it.”

Nathan shook his head. "Sure she's great, but you're great too, and you're much more important to me. I like her, but I love you. I won't hurt you just to have her.”

“And that means so much to me. I really mean that. It does. But she's gorgeous and she makes you happy and most importantly she's alive. She can touch you, Nathan, and I saw your reaction to that. You'll be happier with her than with the echo of a dead man. And I'll do whatever it takes to make you see that.”

Nathan's eyes went wide, his expression fearful. "What do you mean by that?"

“I mean that I'll keep bugging you every minute of every day until you call her and ask her out again,” Duke told him. “And believe me, I can be very annoying.”

Nathan looked downright relieved. "Oh, okay. Anyhow, I don't care that she can touch me and you can't. You can possess me and she can't, and I love when you do."

Duke nodded. “I love it too, but it isn't the same. Please, Nate, don't give up on her. Not for me.”


“Ok, I'll level with you,” Duke told him. “Yeah, seeing you two together would hurt me, of course it would, but you missing out on a relationship with someone real and whole and alive would hurt me more.”

"Duke, don't, you don't have to just say stuff like that so I think you're okay." "I'm not,” Duke insisted. “I mean it. The two of you are great together, I could see that the second she walked in. I can't sit back and watch you throw that away, no matter what.”

"And what about you, Duke? What if that worked out. Are you going to spend the rest of your life having to hide inside your own home?"

“No, I'll just learn to deal with it. And yeah, maybe I'll hide out for a while til I get used to the idea but I promise I'll make every effort to get to know her. When I'm ready to.”

"That sounds like a lot of pain for you with no end in sight.”

“Maybe, but I'd rather that than you threw away what you might have with Audrey.”

"Duke. You can't seriously tell me that you'd rather suffer than not get dumped just so I can have a lover whose corporeal instead of one who's not - a difference I don't even care about.”

“That's exactly what I'm telling you,” Duke dug his heels in.
"Sorry, Duke. Don't believe it."

"Like you don't believe anything else I say, either," Duke replied bitterly.

Nathan flinched like he'd been hit. "Duke, what are you talking about? When have I ever not believed you?" he asked, bewildered and hurt.

"How about every time I tell you how special you are? Or every time I tell you I'm not a good person? Or when I told you that I didn't want to move on, that I wanted to wait for you? You didn't believe any of those things either."

Nathan shrank in on himself a little more with each one, head bowing in defeat. He didn't answer the accusations, silenced by the growing lump in his throat.

"Call Audrey, Nathan, she's far better for you than I am."

"What's it matter," Nathan said dully. "Don't deserve her any more'n I deserve you."

"Don't," Duke said sharply. "Don't do that. Not now."

Nathan flinched and fell silent.

"I'm sorry, Nate, I shouldn't've snapped," Duke said wearily. "I. Am. Hurting. And I really need you to be strong and not spiral in on yourself because I can't reassure you right now. I can't pick you back up."

"I just want to help you," Nathan said very softly. "I just want you to be happy. That's all I want in the whole world."

"You being happy makes me happy. Call Audrey. See where it goes."

"I am happy, Duke. I'm happy with you. I was happy before I ever met her. This doesn't have to hurt you."

"But you could be happier with her. You won't know unless you try."

"Your happiness is my happiness too, Duke. How can I be happy dating her when I know how much it's hurting you?"

"I'm dead, Nathan, I don't matter any more."

"Of course you matter! I love you, Duke. You matter to me."

Duke attempted a smile. "I love you too. And we're just going round in circles here so can we maybe just drop it? For now?"

Nathan nodded, glad to. "Don't suppose you'd want to come join me?" he asked softly.

Duke hesitated. "I'd love to. If you're sure you want that."

"Please," Nathan reached out his arms to Duke.

"Ok," Duke replied quietly, moving slowly towards Nathan, buying himself a few extra seconds to put aside everything he was feeling so he didn't hit Nathan with it. As was so natural to them both now, he slipped easily and comfortably into Nathan's mind.
Nathan curled around him tightly, his love fierce and bright and warm. Where Duke held back, Nathan let everything show, not just his love but his worry for Duke, his heartbreak at the thought of hurting him, his fear of losing him.

Nate, Duke's voice sounded choked even in his thoughts. I...fuck...

You mean everything to me, Duke, even Nathan's thoughts were painfully earnest.

Duke couldn't answer. Being here, in Nathan's mind, feeling his love, his heartbreak, his fear, the depth of his emotions, echoes of what Duke was feeling...It made it impossible for him to keep his thoughts, his feelings, hidden from Nathan. He tried, determined to lock them away, deep inside himself where Nathan wouldn't find them.


I love you too, Nate, Duke replied, the words sounding hollow and empty, lacking the depth of the emotion that usually came with them.

Nathan's worry grew. I'm not leaving you, Duke. Even if anything did happen with Audrey, I'd never leave you.

Maybe you should, the thought crashed out of Duke's mind before he could stop it.

Duke, no! Nathan thought desperately, and there was no mistaking the vehemence of the thought - nor the way Nathan curled around him even tighter.

The force of that thought finally got through to Duke and he curled against Nathan, accepting his love, settling into him and trying to convince himself that there was some way this could last.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Audrey and Duke start to get to know each other.

It had taken Duke a couple of days to persuade Nathan that he should call Audrey again but after some cajoling (and maybe a threat or two), he finally did.

They started dating, seeing each other more often, and Nathan had started to spend the occasional night at Audrey's place.

Duke still stayed out of the way when Audrey came to visit - encouraging them to be together was one thing, having to stand by and watch it was quite another. Nathan seemed to understand that now and had stopped bugging Duke to join them and get to know Audrey. Duke had said he would, in his own time, and Nathan had come to accept that. It didn't stop him making sure he always had time to spend with Duke after Audrey left (and after he got home if he'd been spending time with her). More than anything, he wanted Duke to be reassured that he was still loved, still wanted, that there would always be a place for Duke in his life. His heart.

When Nathan had come to him, hesitantly, tentatively, explaining that he wanted to ask Audrey to stay over one night, Duke hadn't even hesitated before he'd agreed. It was a natural step in their relationship, he wasn't going to get in the way of that. So he'd hidden in the attic until they'd gone to bed, then wandered downstairs, and lurked in the kitchen, well out of their way.

As he lurked, he brooded. Knowing Nathan was with Audrey now was one thing - he was dealing with it, and Nathan's constant reassurance helped. But for them to be here, in his house, the home that had been exclusively his own right up until it had been his and Nathan's... It was a lot and maybe he wasn't dealing with it quite as well as he thought he might.

So when Audrey came down in the morning, dressed only in the shirt Nathan had been wearing last night, and started rummaging through the cupboards like she owned the place, all the fear and anger and sadness Duke had been feeling came rushing out and he couldn't help himself.

Audrey jumped and took a step back when the cupboard door slammed. The lights flickered overhead and a crazy thought crossed her mind - earthquake - before she dismissed it. A newspaper fluttered off the counter gently before it was launched at the wall. The mugs she'd got out ready to make coffee shattered against the opposite wall and Audrey kept very very still.

"What in the ever living hell?" She said quietly.

Nathan had been woken by the noise of the mugs shattering and dashed downstairs just in time to see the entire cutlery drawer being thrown onto the floor (well away from Audrey, he noticed).

"Duke, what the hell!" he yelled. "Stop that!"

Duke glared at him but stopped throwing things and hovered in the corner, glowering at them both.
Audrey stared at him as though he'd lost his mind (which was entirely possible, she reasoned, screaming at someone who wasn't there wasn't exactly normal behaviour). “Uh, Nathan…?” She said. “You want to tell me what's going on? Why things are flying round your kitchen and you're shouting at no one?”

Nathan waited a moment to make sure Duke was really done, then sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. "Remember when I said I got this place cheap because it was haunted?"

“I thought you were joking about that,” Audrey said, looking around at the mess that now littered the kitchen floor. “Guess not, huh?”

Nathan shook his head. "Duke's been laying low when you've been here, but I guess he got tired of that," he glared at Duke.

Duke glared back, unapologetically.

“Clearly,” Audrey said, somewhat amused by the thought of a temper tantrumming ghost. “I take it he doesn't approve?”

"Kept claiming he wanted us together, kept pushing for it, said he wanted me to be happy." Nathan folded his arms over his chest. "Made me feel like shit for doubting him, in fact."

Duke gave a guilty start. That wasn't what he'd intended at all.


"Duke Crocker," Nathan nodded. "Really was the last owner of this place, really was lost at sea, really was the reason I got this place cheap. If you google the address you'll see some old news stories about the haunting and such."

“Duke,” Audrey addressed him directly, looking at the empty space that Nathan was glowering at. “Do we need to have a chat about this or are you just going to clear up the mess you made?”

Duke tried to keep sulking in the corner but he was grudgingly impressed that she hadn't run out screaming. “Sorry,” he muttered, sounding anything but as he slowly made himself visible to her. “I'll clear up.”

Nathan blinked, surprised at the efficiency with which Audrey had brought Duke round to behaving.

“Good,” Audrey smiled encouragingly as Duke started picking up the mess. “Then maybe I can get back to making Nathan coffee? You must know what he's like without caffeine in the mornings.”

Despite himself, Duke smirked. She might have a point about that. The newspaper flapped around as he tried to fold it neatly again, before he gave it up as a lost cause and dropped it back onto the table in a crumpled heap. “Best I can do with that,” he said, sounding more apologetic than he had done before.

Nathan picked up the paper, separating the pages and laying them out methodically. He wasn't quite sure what to do with the situation.

“Mugs in here, coffee here, spoons there,” Duke told Audrey, carefully opening each cupboard and drawer, just a crack so she knew where he meant.

“That's helpful, Duke, thank you,” Audrey smiled as she went about making coffee.
"Sorry, Audrey, I'm not...," Duke started to say. "I'm quite friendly, really," he finished lamely.

"When you're not throwing things at strangers in your kitchen?" Audrey laughed. "I've had worse welcomes. I think." She put a mug of coffee in front of Nathan and leaned on the counter to drink her own.

Nathan sipped at his coffee. He wanted to be hopeful - the idea that the two of them could get along was his dearest wish. But after the way Duke had insisted he was okay when he clearly hadn't been, Nathan couldn't help feeling like the other shoe was yet to drop.

"I'm not sure I want to know what's worse than a ghost throwing things around the kitchen," Duke laughed. "But seriously, I wasn't throwing anything at you, I do actually have control over where things end up. I wouldn't ever hurt anyone."

"Trust me, you do not want to," Audrey laughed. "And duly noted, thanks."

Duke smiled at her. "I should, uh, probably leave you guys to it, I've caused enough trouble for one morning," he said ruefully. "Nathan, could we maybe talk later?"

"Definitely," Nathan nodded warily.


She waved him off and shook her head. "No harm done."

"Kinda is, but thanks." With that, Duke drifted out of the room and settled in the attic to give them their privacy.

Audrey turned to Nathan. "Well that was fun," she said cheerfully.

"Jesus, Audrey, I'm sorry," Nathan said unhappily, half expecting her to walk out and never come back. "If I'd had any idea he'd pull something like that, I'd never have put you in this position. Are you ok?"

"I'm fine," Audrey reassured him, giving his shoulder a squeeze. "He apologized, you don't need to."

"Kinda do," Nathan shrugged. "He was going to come out to say hi the first time you came over. And after, he kept saying he would when he was ready. I didn't want to push him."

"No, you were probably right," Audrey agreed. "So what is it with you guys? Because this seemed like more than just a ghost unhappy about someone new in his house."

Nathan blushed. "Duke and I are...close."

"I gathered that much," Audrey smiled. "Close close? Or overly possessive roommate close?"

"...it's complicated," Nathan mumbled. "Probably think I'm nuts."

"I thought that anyway," Audrey smirked. "It's fine, I won't push you to explain. Not now, anyway, but...if this, us, is going to be... something, then I'd kinda like to know what I'm getting into."

"That's fair," Nathan ran a hand through his hair. "I love him," he admitted quietly. "And he loves me. But he's been pushing me to you, saying I deserve a partner who's alive. Which isn't to say what I feel for you isn't real," he added hastily. "Wouldn't lead you on like that, I swear."
Audrey stayed quiet, taking a moment to think about that and gather her thoughts. “Ok. So, Duke and I need to get to know each other then. I can't make any promises to you based on one ten minute meeting where he spent half the time throwing things around the room. It's... unusual, Nathan, but I love unusual.”

Nathan looked surprised, but cautiously delighted. "You're really willing to try?"

"Yeah," Audrey smiled. “I mean, I like you and I'd really like to see where this is going and if that means trying to work things out with Duke then I'll give it a go.”

Nathan smiled, bright and hopeful. "I really think if you give each other a chance, you'll really like each other. Duke's smart, funny, caring - like you."

“I'm sure we will,” Audrey agreed. “He obviously cares very deeply for you.”

"He's my best friend. And I'm his, too. I was the first person in the ten years since his death who even knew he was here."

“He was alone for all that time?” Audrey said sadly. “No wonder he's upset about me being here.”

"Yeah. Trapped in his beloved home watching it fall into dilapidated wreck, people who didn't give a damn coming in and talking about snapping it up cheap and slapping a crappy coat of paint on it to cheat people into paying a handsome profit for it."

“No wonder he's upset about me being here.”

“Poor Duke,” Audrey said quietly. “So you two became friends, you bought his house, it's been the two of you against the world for the past... however many years. And now I'm here and he must be terrified that I'm going to come between you... Nathan, I should go, you two need to talk. You need to reassure him that that's not going to happen.”

"I've been trying," Nathan said unhappily. "I tell him every day I'm not gonna leave or forget about him, tell him how much I love and care about him, tell him that no matter what does or doesn't happen with you, I'll still be there for him. I don't know what else to say, or do. I don't know how to make him believe me."

Audrey wrapped her arms around him. “You can't. All you can do is keep showing him and give him the time to work it out by himself. He's scared and he's hurting. Don't be too hard on him.”

"Trying not to be," Nathan sighed, leaning against her and returning the embrace. "Breaks my heart to see him hurting so much. Just want him to be happy, you know? Pretty sure he never got to in life, he at least deserves it now.

Audrey squeezed him tighter and leaned up to kiss him. “You're a good person, Nathan, don't ever forget that.”

Nathan kissed her softly. "You're amazing.""}

Audrey smiled. “No, I just care. And I should go, you two need to work some stuff out, see if Duke is any more settled now he's met me and made his feelings known.”

Nathan looked deeply worried. "By 'go', do you mean...?"

“What? No!” Audrey replied immediately. “I mean that you two need some space, a coupla days maybe, talk things over, see if Duke will give me a chance. If he will, and I think he will, then we'll make plans for a casual midweek dinner or something.”
Nathan looked hugely relieved. "Have I mentioned you're amazing? 'Cause you really, really are."

“You're pretty amazing too,” Audrey smiled, already moving away to go and get dressed. “And Nathan? I know you're angry with him about today but try not to be too hard on him. This, me being here, it's gotta be tough on him. Whatever he said, whatever he promised, he's hurting and he's insecure.”

"I know. It's just….something he did brought up some really bad old stuff." 

Audrey went back to his side. “What is it? Are you ok?”

"When I said I didn't believe that he was okay, he accused me of not ever believing him, brought up a bunch of times...it really made me feel like shit. Like I was the bad guy."

Audrey wrapped her arms around him again. “You're not. You're really not. But it's not always a case of who's right and who's wrong, who's good and who's bad...Talk to him, tell him how you feel, how he made you feel. Hear his side of it. Be open with each other.”

"I'll try. I'm just….tired, Audrey. Really tired,” Nathan said softly. "Tired and scared this isn't ever getting any better."

“It will,” Audrey promised. “This, reading people, it's what I do for a living. Looking for what isn't being said, reading between the lines of what is being said. Trust me, it'll get better. We, the three of us, will work this out. But it has to start with you two. Duke has to be willing to give me a chance and he won't do that unless you talk to him.”

"I'll do my best,” Nathan promised. "I really want this to work, I really, really want that."

“I do too,” Audrey smiled. “I like you, Nathan, and I'm sure I'll like Duke as well.”

"I think you will, you both will, if you both can just try."

“Well I will definitely try,” Audrey promised. “See how it goes with Duke, you can always call me for reinforcements if you need to. He did seem to listen to me.”

"That was amazing," Nathan smiled.

Audrey grinned. “I wasn't actually expecting it to work. Glad it did though.”

"Me too. He hasn't had a tantrum like that since assholes were trying to buy this place."

Audrey frowned as her heart shattered a little. “So the last time he did something like this was when he thought that everything he held dear was going to be ripped away from him? And now he must feel like that's what's happening again. Poor Duke.”

Nathan nodded. "Some of the people were even talking about tearing it down. He didn't even know what would happen to him if they did. He couldn't exist outside of this place then, we were afraid if it got torn down he'd just…" Nathan swallowed hard, "Be gone."

“No wonder you bought the place,” Audrey smiled softly. “Will you talk to him for me, please? Tell him everything's going to be ok, that I want to get to know him.”

"I'll tell him," Nathan promised.

“Thanks,” Audrey said, turning to leave and go and get dressed. “And maybe call me later, let me know how he is?”
"Will do. And thanks, so much. For caring about me, and more importantly, about him."

Audrey brushed him off with an airy wave of her hand. “You both deserve to be cared about,” she called back as she climbed the stairs. She got dressed quickly and dashed back to the kitchen where Nathan was still sitting. “It’ll be fine,” she reminded him. “Just be nice to each other.”

"Always,” Nathan smiled and kissed her cheek.

Audrey returned the kiss and gave his hand a squeeze. “Talk to you later,” she murmured.

"Talk to you soon,” Nathan returned the squeeze and walked her to the door.

“Bye Duke,” Audrey called out, just in case he was in earshot. With a final squeeze, she dropped Nathan's hand and left, hoping that he and Duke would sort things out and Duke would be at least willing to try to get to know her. She liked Nathan, she didn't want to give up on what they might have, but she wouldn't come between them either. She sighed to herself as she started the engine and drove away. She might love complicated and unusual, but this could end up breaking her heart. All of their hearts. She had to try though.

Nathan watched her drive away then turned and headed back inside. "Duke?"

“Nathan?” Duke said quietly, hesitantly, emerging slowly from his hiding place in the attic.

"Duke, are you okay? I've been worried."

“No. I'm sorry, Nathan, I don't know what to say,” Duke replied miserably. “Is Audrey ok? Have I fucked things up for you?”

"Audrey's okay, and she's still willing to give this a try. She wants to get to know you, if you're willing."

“Really?” Duke looked hopeful. “She said that?”

"She did. I think you'll really like her if you give it a try," Nathan said earnestly.

“I'll try, Nathan, I can't promise anything because honestly, this whole thing...it feels like my heart's being ripped out. But I'll try.”

"Duke, I told her I love you. She accepted that. Didn't give me any shit, didn't tell me to move out, didn't tell me I had to focus on her now. Hell, she's trying to help us heal. She cares about you, Duke."

Duke nodded, absorbing what Nathan was saying, his heart already feeling lighter than it had done for weeks (since Nathan had met Audrey, in fact). “And what about you? Are you ok?”

I'm fi- " Nathan stopped himself, remembering what Audrey had said. "Maybe a little less than fine. I'm...kinda hurt and angry. Not about today."

“I'm sorry, Nathan, I didn't mean to do anything to hurt you,” Duke replied quietly. “Can we talk about it?”

Nathan nodded. "You remember when I didn't believe that you were okay with me dating Audrey?"

Duke remembered all too well. “Yeah.”
"You accused me of never believing you. Listed all those times. Made me look like the bad guy. That felt like shit."

"I'm sorry, Nathan," Duke said quietly. "That truly wasn't my intention and I'm so sorry for hurting you."

"It just...it felt like some of the people I used to know," Nathan said very softly.

"Fuck," Duke whispered, closing his eyes. "I'm sorry, Nathan," he said again. "I never wanted to be that person. I never should have done that."

"Just...will you tell me one thing Duke? Honestly?"

"Anything."

"Did you know I was right to doubt, and you just wanted me to stop questioning you?"

"No," Duke replied immediately. "I thought I was right. I thought I was going to be ok with it. And it hurt when you wouldn't believe me, and I was hurting anyway, even though I couldn't tell you that and I tried to hide it because I really really thought I'd get over it and be ok with you and Audrey, so I lashed out, just like I did this morning and I am so fucking sorry, Nathan."

Nathan took a deep breath. "Okay. Wasn't manipulation. Okay."


"Thank god," Nathan said quietly. "Don't think I could handle another round of head games."

"Another round? What do you mean?" Duke asked, concerned.

"Ex of mine used to do shit like that. Make me believe stuff she knew wasn't true, just to hurt or use me."

"That's...fucked up," Duke said quietly. "Sorry that you had to go through that."

"Thanks. I just...I got scared, thinking this might be turning into that."

Duke shook his head. "No. Definitely not."

"I'm so glad you're so good to me, Duke," Nathan said softly.

Duke snorted. "Just because I won't fuck with your head doesn't make me a good person."

"Won't lie, still hurts," Nathan admitted. "But hurts a lot less knowing it wasn't you trying to jerk me around."


"Apology accepted. You were hurting, and scared. Bound to make anyone touchy."

"Thank you," Duke attempted a smile, relieved that Nathan had accepted his apology and acknowledged his feelings. "Hasn't been easy, that's for sure," he said, a little shakily.

"I know. And I'm sorry I hurt you."

"Thanks," Duke said quietly. "You didn't, really, though. It was the situation, not anything you said
or did. You shouldn't have to apologize for that.”

"Still not convinced it wouldn't've been better to stay single, but," Nathan shrugged. "Water under the bridge, no point arguing over it now. Duke, I really think we have a chance to make things better."

“Yeah, you said Audrey took it pretty well?”

"Shockingly so. I figured she'd take off and never look back. If not for the ruckus, then for me saying that I love you. But she's game."

“I'm impressed she didn't run out screaming.” Duke admitted apologetically. “And thank you, for telling her about us, that means a lot, that you aren’t trying to hide it. It helps.”

"Wouldn't be honest if I didn't. Wouldn't be fair to either of you. She deserves to know what she's getting into, you deserve to have it acknowledged."

“Yeah, but still, thanks,” Duke smiled, still a little unsure of himself.

"Anything for you, Duke. Would you like to come join me?" By this point it was routine after a visit from Audrey, but Nathan always invited Duke, knowing he could use the comfort and reassurance but almost certainly wouldn't ask.

“Actually, no,” Duke replied quietly. “I mean, yes, I’d love to, but later. Could you maybe call Audrey first, see if she’ll come over tomorrow?”

Nathan blinked, but then nodded. "Okay. Don't know if she'll have reached home by now but if not I'll leave a voicemail," he pulled out his phone and dialed.

“Thanks,” Duke smiled and waited while Nathan called.

Nathan listened to it ring, biting his lip.

“Nathan? Everything ok?” Audrey answered her phone quickly, concerned.

"Yeah, fine, sorry for worrying you. Just talked with Duke, he wants to know if you'd like to stop by tomorrow."

“I’d love to,” Audrey answered immediately. “Afternoon ok?”

"Sounds great," Nathan smiled. "Look forward to it."

“Me too,” Audrey replied warmly. “See you at three-ish?”

"See you then," Nathan said happily, and turned to smile at Duke.

Duke smiled back. “That was a yes, then?”

"She'll be over around three," Nathan smiled, hopeful and excited.

“Great,” Duke replied. The look on Nathan’s face alone made it worthwhile. “I promise I’ll give it my best shot, see if we can get on.”


“Really not, Nathan, if I was then we wouldn’t have been in this mess in the first place. If I was,
then I wouldn’t have hurt you,” Duke’s voice was full of regret.

"Duke, it's okay. You were scared and hurting and trying to protect yourself. It's good that you made that the priority. I wouldn't ever want you to put me above your own needs, wouldn't ever want to see you hurting for my sake."

“That’s not an excuse,” Duke mumbled. “Should’ve just been honest instead of doing some fucked up manipulation bullshit.”

"You weren't manipulating me, you said so yourself. Maybe hiding and lashing out wasn't the best call, but you were scared. People do dumb things when they're scared."

“Yeah, no, I said I wasn’t manipulating you intentionally, doesn’t change the fact that I did.”

"Duke, no. Manipulation is inherently intentional. You can't do it by accident."

“I disagree. I made you feel like shit and intentionally or not, that’s not ok.”

"It's not. But I forgive you."

Duke nodded, still doubtful. “I’m sorry. If that’s worth anything. I know it’s not, it’s just a word, but I am.”

"It's worth everything Duke,” Nathan told him, his expression intense. "You think the people who treated me like that ever apologized? Ever admitted they were in the wrong? Ever acknowledged that they way they'd treated me was not okay? Never once, and they never would have. Not in a million years. But you did, that's how I know you're different. That you're not like them. And that's worth everything."

“Ok,” Duke said quietly. “I’m not like them, Nate, I promise you that. I wouldn't ever hurt you deliberately. And I don't ever want to hurt you again.”

"Thanks, Duke. I know you wouldn't ever do it on purpose. And if you do it by accident, I forgive you. If it's not too soon...come join me?” he asked softly.

Duke nodded, a small smile on his lips as he slipped into Nathan's mind.

Nathan curled around him, full of love and comfort as he always was after these visits, all the more so for Duke's doubting himself.

Duke quietly settled into him, desperately trying to accept the love he didn't feel he deserved, especially not now.

Nathan picked up on his insecurity, and projected as much forgiveness and acceptance and love as he could.

You shouldn’t... I... Nate, I don't deserve you. This. Anything.

You do, Duke. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. You didn't mean to hurt me. I forgive you.

You’re the best person I've ever met, Nate, and I don't know how you have it in you to forgive me but thank you, Duke thought. I'll try to be better, to never do anything like that again. Please, please, if I do, tell me. Right then, not weeks later. Don't keep it bottled up. Please?

I promise, Nathan thought back right away. Anything for you.
Thanks, Duke's thought was a whisper. So... Audrey... care to give me any clues about what she's interested in, any common ground we might have? I really want to get off on the right foot with her this time.

Nathan felt a wave of affection, and let Duke feel it too. You're the best, Duke. I mean, I guess you can both gossip about me, I'm something you have in common. She's a bit of a workaholic, trying to be less so. She likes my crafts. And cheesy romance novels.

Oh yeah, cheesy romance novels are definitely common ground, Duke laughed. I'm sure we can find something. Other than gossipping about you.

I'm sure you will. You're both really smart and funny and thoughtful and kind - probably like each other better'n you both like me, Nathan thought lightly, doing his best to hide a hint of real unease.

That won't happen, Duke thought back quickly. I want to like her, I want to get along with her, but I'm doing this for you. You're the most important person to me.

Nathan sent back a wave of love and gratitude, curled comfortably against him.

I love you, Nate, don't ever forget that, Duke told him quietly, the thought full of intensity.

Love you too, Duke. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, Nathan thought back, curling tighter around and against him.

Duke curled into Nathan, their minds twining together as though they were one. Slowly, he relaxed, accepting Nathan's love and acceptance and forgiveness and projecting the same feelings to him as he tried to make sure Nathan was in no doubt as to how Duke felt about him.

Nathan contentedly settled in with him, happy to simply love and be loved.

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Duke was on tenterhooks the next day, waiting for Audrey to arrive, desperate to make a good impression (or at least an improvement on their first meeting which, even he had to admit, wouldn't be difficult).

When there was a knock on the door (dead on time, he noticed), he waited in the living room while Nathan showed her in, wanting to give them a chance to greet each other.

Nathan smiled and greeted Audrey with a kiss, inwardly a little relieved that she really had shown up. "Thanks for coming."

"Hey," she smiled. "Thanks for inviting me. How are you both?"

"Better," Nathan smiled. "In large part thanks to you."

"That's really good to hear," Audrey smiled warmly. "Glad I could help."

"You definitely did. C'mon in," he led the way to the living room.

Audrey followed him, slightly nervous. Not that Duke would try throwing things at her, she was at least fairly sure he wouldn't try that again, but because she was worried she might say or do the wrong thing and upset him again.

"Audrey," Duke greeted her as soon as she and Nathan came through the door. "Thanks for coming," he smiled.
She smiled back. “Thanks for asking me, Nathan said it was your idea.”

“Yeah, I uh...kinda wanted to make up for yesterday,” Duke said sheepishly. “Get to know you a bit without emptying half the kitchen over the floor.”

“I'm glad you decided to give me a chance,” Audrey said. “And if you could maybe stick to only throwing things at Nathan, I'd appreciate it,” she smirked.

Nathan grinned and picked up a couch cushion, pretending to cower behind it.

“Nate? What the actual fuck are you doing?” Duke laughed.

“I think he thinks he's being funny,” Audrey rolled her eyes affectionately.

"You don't get to judge my humor, you thought I was kidding about this place being haunted," Nathan smirked as he put the cushion back.

“That's not strictly accurate,” Audrey frowned. “What I actually thought was that you were clinically insane and I was wondering if I should get Claire to talk to you.”

"Great, thanks for that," Nathan rolled his eyes.

"She might actually have a point you know, Nate,” Duke laughed.

"Says the ghost who is proof that I am not in fact clinically insane,” Nathan said dryly.

“Just because I'm not a symptom of your insanity doesn't mean...oh, never mind,” Duke gave up. “Go and make Audrey a coffee.”

"Yeah, okay," Nathan agreed, slipping out to let them talk.

Duke waited for him to leave and turned to Audrey. “I'm sorry about yesterday, and about not meeting you before now.”

"I'll accept the apology for yesterday, but there's nothing to apologize for in not coming out sooner," Audrey told him briskly. “That can't have been easy, even though you wanted what was best for Nathan. No matter how hard he tried not to rub your face in it, it must have still felt that way.”

“It really did,” Duke said quietly. “I mean, it's been great seeing him so happy - and he really is, by the way, I'm not just saying that - but it's been hard knowing it wasn't me putting that smile on his face.”

"You still do. Yesterday when he said he loves you, he was scared of admitting it but even through that I could still see the adoration on his face." 

Duke smiled softly. “That's good to hear, thank you. And thank you for taking the time to give me another chance.”

"Well, the way I see it is, Nathan cares about both of us, and we both care about him. If we both want him happy - and we do - then you and I need to figure out a way to get along." 

“We do,” Duke agreed. “And this whole thing is not really the ideal situation for starting off on the right foot but I'm sure we can get past it.”

Audrey smiled. "Not sure there's really any right foot, if that's any consolation. I'm meeting my
boyfriend's male ghost lover. It's gonna be weird however you look at it."

Duke laughed. “Well, when you put it like that…”

Audrey smiled. "But I'm game to make this work if you are. Nathan clearly cares deeply about us both and I really don't want to make him choose. I'm a big girl and I learned to share."

Duke nodded. “He does and I don't want to make him choose any more than you do, so yeah, let's make this clusterfuck of weirdness work. Somehow.”

"You got it. I'd shake on it but…” Audrey smiled ruefully. "So I imagine Nathan told you how he and I met, but how did you meet? Did he know you were here when he bought the place?"

"Yeah, no, you'd just get a very cold hand,” Duke told her. “Nathan was trying to sell the place. He was rude, I got annoyed, he realised I was here. He was the first person to notice me since I died.”

"He mentioned that. That must've been so hard," she said sympathetically.

Duke shrugged. “Ten years without exchanging a single word with anyone, yeah. Can't say it was the best ten years I've ever spent.”

"I'd have gone stark raving out of my mind with boredom. It's pretty amazing you held it together so well.”

Duke smiled slowly. “It was probably a close thing,” he confessed. “But then Nathan found me and he really turned things around for me. I think I did for him too. Maybe not so much, but I hope I've made a difference in his life.”

"I'm sure you have. Nathan doesn't strike me as the type to talk about love lightly. You must really be special if he loves you. Plus it's not every guy who'd step aside and let the man he loves look for romance elsewhere. That's really noble and selfless of you.”

"Just seemed right,” Duke shrugged. “You can offer him things that I can't and he deserves everything.”

"He does deserve everything, but Duke, I don't want to take him away from you. I want to work towards a someday where he can love us both, without neglect or jealousy or hurt feelings." Duke looked at her hopefully. “I'd like that,” he said softly.

"I think he's capable of it. And I think we are too, if we try," Audrey smiled.

“I want to try, Audrey,” Duke smiled back at her. Maybe (just maybe) he could see why Nathan liked her. “So, Nathan tells me you live above the Gull?”

"Yeah, it's a nice little apartment," Audrey smiled. "Gorgeous view, sea air in summer, and even as it's getting chillier, being over the restaurant kitchen keeps it warm. Which will hopefully still hold true once winter gets here. I have to admit I've had some concerns.”

"It'll be fine,” Duke reassured her. “You've still got that wood burning stove?”

Audrey blinked, then her eyes narrowed. "How do you know what's in that apartment?"

“Crap. Sorry… Nathan didn't mention it?” Duke asked, realising as he did that of course Nathan hadn't mentioned it because Audrey hadn't even known about him until yesterday. He quickly went on. “I used to own the Gull. I converted the rooms upstairs into the apartment, put in the stove. I
lived there while I was doing the major work on this place."

"Oh, I see," Audrey relaxed. "Well, you did a great job with it, and the Gull's a lovely place. And yes, the wood burning stove is still there."

"Thanks," Duke smiled. "Anyway, I spent a winter living there and it was plenty warm enough so it should be fine, but if for any reason it isn't then you should call Nathan and come here."

"Thanks, Duke. It means a lot that you're making me welcome. In case you never heard me say it to Nathan, this house is just gorgeous."

"Thank you," Duke beamed happily. "Nathan's done a great job of restoring it."

"You must be so happy to see it restored. Did you two replicate it exactly, or did you redecorate?"

"Bit of both, obviously we kept all of the original features, restored all the old woodwork, but the paint colours and tiles and flooring are all different. We chose them together but Nathan had the final say. He has a really good eye for this stuff."

"He really does. You can see it in his crafts, too. Has he shown you his decoupage?"

"He has," Duke smiled. "Have you seen that side table he upcycled? I keep trying to get him to bring it out and actually use it but he won't. He's so shy about anyone seeing how talented he is."

"It's lovely, he really is so skilled," Audrey paused, and frowned a little, "Do you ever get the feeling that he's had some people in his life that really weren't good to him? It was like pulling teeth to get him to talk about it at all, he thought I'd laugh at him for it! I'd have been offended if he hadn't looked so much like a puppy that expected a kick."

Duke nodded sadly. "He's said some stuff, not much, you know what he's like, keeps himself locked away pretty well. But yeah, I mean, you know his father and from what I can piece together, probably two ex girlfriends who treated him like crap. Beyond crap, to be honest, I'd call it emotional abuse, he just says they treated him like shit." He stopped abruptly, worried he'd said too much.

Audrey shook her head. "Idiots. But you must have helped him a lot for him to feel as comfortable with me as he has."

"Idiots might be understating it," Duke said. "I dunno, maybe I have, maybe it's the effect you have on him. He's different around you, Audrey, he's... softer."

"He's a sweet guy, but is he not soft with you?" Audrey looked concerned.

"No, he is, he really is, just more so with you. I think it's because you can touch him."

"That must be really rough for you guys," Audrey said sympathetically.

"Yeah, it's..." Duke flailed for the right words. "He needs that, I don't, not so much anyway, but it's tough watching him get that from someone else. That first time you came over? I was here, I had every intention of meeting you and then you kissed him on the cheek and he melted and I couldn't handle it. So I stayed away and...well, eventually exploded. For which I am, genuinely, sorry."

"Hey, I can't say I'd have done any better in your shoes. Are you so sure he needs it, though? Most guys, you can really tell when they're desperate. But Nathan? He was so content that at first I
wasn't even sure he was interested in me at all."

"Yeah, I'm sure," Duke replied sadly. "I don't think he's ever had much physical affection so he
hides his need for it. Like he's learnt that there's no point even looking for it. Plus he's scared and
lacks confidence - he just assumed that you weren't interested in him and you were just being nice."

"I could believe that. But still, he's never really seemed like he felt lacking, you know?"

"He needs it. Whether he admits it or not."

Audrey gave him a thoughtful look. "Not everyone needs sex. Or even touching."

"I wasn't talking about sex," Duke glared at her. "Just a simple hug. And yeah, ok, not everyone
needs that, but he does."

"Okay, okay," Audrey held up her hands in a gesture of surrender.

"You know what? Forget it, you probably know him better than I do anyway," Duke grumbled
quietly.

"Funny, I was just about to say the same thing," Audrey smiled a little.

Duke half laughed, pleasantly surprised by her ability to defuse the argument he'd been pushing
for. "Yeah, well, maybe we just know him differently, see different things."

"Maybe. But you've definitely known him longer than I have. How long has it been?"

"Four years," Duke told her. "Living together for three and a half of those."

"Damn, I'm a complete newbie compared to you, then. I should be counting my lucky stars you're
willing to share, I'd never hold a candle to you otherwise."

Duke smiled sadly. "No, you would, you're everything I'm not."

"Duke, let me ask you something. In the four years you've known each other, has he ever gone
looking for other companionship, romantic or otherwise?"

"...No..."

Audrey smiled. "In other words, if not for the combination of the sheer dumb luck of our meeting,
and my persistence in wanting to get to know him, he would have remained perfectly happy with
you." Her smile faded a little. "I'm sorry I screwed that up for you. If I'd had any idea he was
already involved, I never would have even tried to get to get close to him."

Duke shook his head. "No, don't you get it? You're special enough to make him want to be
involved. Four years, there's been no one, and I don't think there was anyone recently before I met
him. And then you came along and he changed. He wanted more with you. That makes you
special," he told her. "That makes you a threat," he added quietly.

"That makes me stubborn," Audrey shook her head. "If I'd said goodnight after that first evening
after the car crash and never spoken to him again, he wouldn't have cared. He'd have stayed happy
with you. I was the one who kept trying, kept hoping that he wasn't as disinterested as he seemed."

"You didn't see his face the first time he mentioned your name."

"And you didn't see his face when he talked about loving you. Even if he does see me as special,
that doesn't mean he doesn't think you're just as special - if not more so."

Duke nodded, accepting what she was saying. “So we just have to find a way to make this work. Because I'm damned if I'm going to let him lose either of us.”

Audrey nodded. "So far so good, I think."

“Well it's a start, anyway,” Duke smiled. “Just...I should probably be the last person to say this, but...Audrey, don't you dare hurt him.”

"I can promise I'll never hurt him deliberately. I can't honestly promise I'll never fuck up. I'm not actually all that great with people, really, and to tell you the truth, Nathan is the first relationship I've ever wanted to get serious about."

“That's all I ask,” Duke smiled, reassured. “And you're better with people than you think.”

"I'd say that I'd never want to see you hurt him either, but after four years I can't imagine you ever would.”

Duke made a noise like a sigh. “I've done plenty of that. None of it intentional, just... Yeah, maybe I'm not so great at the whole being close to someone thing. Too defensive, too much crap in my past, slight tendency to overreact. As you might have noticed,” he smiled wryly.

"Everyone screws up from time to time. The important thing is that you were able to talk it through, forgive each other, and still love each other."


"I'm sure he'd be over the moon to hear you say it, no matter how often.” She smiled, a bit ruefully. "One more way you're miles ahead of me."

“It's early days yet,” Duke told her. “Plenty of time for that. Could you do something for me?”

"Of course. What?"

“Go and give him a great big hug. From me. And drag him out of the kitchen, he's deliberately taking forever to give us a chance to talk but this should be about all three of us.”

"Yeah, okay. He must be bored as hell in there," Audrey laughed, heading for the kitchen.

Duke smiled to himself, reassured for the first time since Nathan had met Audrey. Maybe this could all work out.

Audrey found Nathan leaning against the kitchen counter, absentmindedly stirring a mug of coffee. “Hey,” she said softly as she stepped into his space and wrapped her arms around him. “Duke wanted me to give you a hug. I mean, I wanted to as well, but he asked specifically if I would.”

Nathan returned the embrace happily, gently kissing her hair. "Thank you. Both of you. I know it's hard on him that he can't touch me."

“I think that’s the hardest part for him,” Audrey said quietly, squeezing Nathan tighter before she let him go. “Are you coming back in?”

"If you guys are done working things out. I wanted to give you two some time."

"Thank you, it was a good thing to do,” Audrey smiled. “I think it might take longer than this to
work things out, but yes, we’re done for now and no one’s thrown anything.”

"That's….good?" Nathan asked, his expression warily hopeful.

Audrey nodded. “Yes, it’s good. So far, anyway,” she replied. “Come back in. You shouldn’t be lurking out here on your own. I’ll quote Duke, ‘this should be about all three of us’. He’s right.”

Relieved, Nathan nodded. "Yeah, but you two needed to talk one-on-one, just like you and I did and he and I did.

“And we have,” Audrey smiled. “Is that my coffee?” She asked, pointing to a mug on the counter.

"Sure is."

“Thanks,” Audrey smiled and picked it up, carrying it back into the living room, assuming Nathan would follow her.

Nathan tagged along after faithfully. "Duke? You okay?" he asked when they got back to the living room.


"Just wanted to give you two time to talk," Nathan mumbled.

“Thank you, it was helpful, I think,” Duke glanced at Audrey who nodded her agreement.

"I'm glad you two are getting along better," Nathan smiled tentatively.

“We are,” Duke told him. “I mean, I am, anyway, I don't know about Audrey.”

Audrey smiled. “So far, so good. How are you doing, Nathan?”

"I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?” Nathan asked, confused.

“Because this whole thing is weird for all of us and I was just checking,” Audrey frowned at him.

"Okay, you're not wrong. But if you two are getting along that's the most amazing thing and it really makes me happy," Nathan ventured a smile.

“We are. Anything for you, Nate, you know that," Duke smiled tentatively.

"How on earth did I ever deserve you two," Nathan said softly.

"By being you," Audrey smiled.

"Audrey," Nathan blushed. "Was a rhetorical question."

Audrey shrugged and smiled. “Doesn't hurt to remind you.”

“We'll remind you every day if we need to,” Duke added.

"Guys," Nathan mumbled, red faced and all but squirming.

“Does he always go like this when you're nice to him?” Audrey grinned at Duke.

"Oh my god, you guys are gonna gang up on me, aren't you?" Nathan looked half apprehensive, half delighted.


"If that's what it takes to make you believe good things about yourself, then yes," Audrey said softly.

"You're amazing, you guys, I," Nathan swallowed around a lump in his throat, "I don't know how I could ever have been so lucky to have you both."

"He really does get flustered every time, doesn't he?" Audrey smiled sadly.

"He does," Duke replied softly. "Hug him again, Audrey, please. I can't."

Audrey looked at him for confirmation that he meant it and when he nodded she folded herself into Nathan's arms, holding tight.

Duke looked on, a bittersweet smile on his face. At least Nathan's getting what he needs, he thought. That's the most important thing, but fuck, I wish it was me.

Nathan hugged her close but reached out one hand to Duke as well, mouthing 'later'.

Duke nodded and smiled more warmly, relieved that Nathan hadn't forgotten him.

Audrey held the hug for a heartbeat longer before moving away, concerned about how it must be making Duke feel. The last thing she wanted was for him to be left out. She took a sip of her coffee and grimaced slightly as she realised it had gone cold.

"Could reheat that," Nathan offered, noticing her grimace.

"Would you mind? Or I could make some more?" Audrey smiled at him.

Nathan gave Duke a worried look. "You're welcome to the kitchen if you want to get some fresh," he offered, hoping she would understand his unspoken desire to check in with Duke and make sure he was ok.

"I'll do that," she replied. "Would you like one?...Sorry, that's weird, offering you coffee out of your own kitchen."

"I think it's sweet," Nathan smiled. "Thanks, yeah, if you don't mind."

"Ok," Audrey smiled and, feeling slightly awkward, went out to the kitchen to start making coffee.

Nathan turned to Duke. "You okay?"

Duke's smile was slightly wobbly. "Yeah, I think so."

"You don't have to do this. If you're hurting too much, you don't have to."

"I know," Duke nodded. "It's ok. I'm ok. Better than I was, anyway."

"I'm never gonna neglect you just 'cause I have her," Nathan promised seriously. "I love you, and even if I come to love her, that'll just mean I love you both, not that I won't love you anymore."

"Funny, Audrey said something very similar," Duke smiled softly. "We'll work this out, Nate, all
of us."

“That'd be the most amazing thing,” Nathan said wistfully.

“Just...Yeah, it will be,” Duke said confidently.

"The three of us all settled on the couch watching a movie, both of you curled up against me, or going for a drive looking at unique old houses, or messing around in the kitchen..." Nathan smiled.

Duke smiled back at him. “That sounds really good. It's gonna work out, Nate, I promise, and I'm sorry I ever made you doubt that.”

Nathan looked relieved and cautiously hopeful. "That'd be amazing. So long as it's not hurting you. Do you think you can be honest with me from now on if you are, 'stead of trying to hide it for my sake? I'd really, really rather you came to me so we could work something out, than pretend to be ok for my sake."

“I'll try,” Duke promised. “It doesn't come naturally to me, but I'll do my best. And no, right now it's not hurting me. It's... not easy, but it's not hurting me either.”

"Thanks, Duke. Soon as we're alone we'll spend some time together, just you and I, promise."

“That'd be good,” Duke smiled. “No rush though. Maybe we could put a movie on this afternoon or something? All of us, I mean.”

"That'd be great," Nathan said happily.

“What would be great?” Audrey asked, catching the tail end of their conversation as she came back in and passed a mug to Nathan.

“We were just talking about a movie afternoon, all three of us. You up for it?” Duke answered brightly.

Audrey grinned for a moment before her face fell. “I'd love to, I really would, and I'm so glad you asked, Duke, but I can't,” she said quietly. “Chief's got me on the overnight shift tonight and I really can't stay too much longer or I'll be late. Could we take a raincheck, maybe do a movie evening during the week? Or, if that's too soon, then at the weekend?”

"Any time is fine by me," Nathan said, trying to hide his disappointment.

“Yeah, whenever you like,” Duke nodded.

“I'm off on Tuesday? Could pick up takeout, come over as soon as Nathan's finished work?” Audrey suggested.

"Sounds great," Nathan said happily.

“Duke?” Audrey checked. “Does that work for you?”

Duke laughed gently. “My social calendar isn't exactly full, Audrey. Yeah, Tuesday is fine.”

Audrey rolled her eyes slightly. “Good, that's settled then,” she checked her watch. “Crap, I should be going...”

"Thanks for coming, Audrey. Really appreciate it," Nathan said softly.
“My pleasure,” Audrey smiled. “Duke, it's been good getting to know you a little bit. Thank you for inviting me, and asking me to stick around and watch movies. It...means a lot.”

Duke brushed her off with an airy wave of his hand. “No problem, as Nathan said, thanks for coming.”

Audrey smiled. “Any time. Sorry I have to dash off but... yeah... work.”

"See you Tuesday," Nathan said, walking her to the door before going back to the couch and opening his arms to Duke.

Duke didn't hesitate, slipping comfortably into Nathan's mind, seeking the reassurance he needed, that he knew Nathan wanted to give him.

Nathan immediately enfolded him, surrounding him in love and warmth and gratitude.

She's nice, Nathan, Duke thought straight away. It's early days but I like her. She cares about you and that's really what I needed to know.

Nathan's delight and appreciation for Duke's open-mindedness was immediately apparent as he curled around him tighter.

And at least I can send her to give you a hug even though I can't, Duke smiled sadly.

Maybe someday she'd trust you enough to let you possess her so you can hug me for real, Nathan thought tentatively.

Even Duke's thoughts were breathless. Do you think she might? There's nothing else I want more than that. Just to do what I've always promised to do - wrap you up and keep you safe. Even if it's just for a split second.

I'd love that. I think one day you guys could get there, Nathan thought hopefully. You're getting along so well and you've just barely met.

Yeah, Duke agreed before his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the front door flying open.

“Sorry,” Audrey called out. “Forgot my phone, thought it was still in my pocket.”

Nathan gave an undignified yowl of surprise, flailing on the couch in complete panic.

“Sorry, didn't mean to give you a fright,” Audrey apologised from the doorway.

Realising that Nathan was in no fit state to respond to her, Duke stepped forwards. “You didn't,” he smiled easily as he stood up and shuffled awkwardly around her so he could get past and help look for her phone. “Maybe it's in the kitchen? Were you using it while you were making coffee?”

Audrey paused. Something seemed...off. Nathan's movements seemed different, smoother somehow, and that awkward dance that he did to get past her, like he didn't want to touch her... Even his voice seemed odd, the way he was speaking, the cadence was all wrong. “Nathan? Are you ok?” She followed him into the kitchen.

Fucks sake, Nate, get a grip, we're gonna have to explain this! Duke thought desperately.

"Fine!” Nathan managed to squeak, doing a poor job of hiding his panic.

“You don't seem very fine,” Audrey frowned. “Should I call someone?” She reached for her phone
which was on the counter, right where she now remembered leaving it.

That is a really bad idea, Duke thought, his mind racing through all the different possibilities before it latched onto the obvious solution. He fell out of Nathan's body, leaving Nathan in an undignified heap on the floor.


Nathan got to his feet, red-faced with embarrassment. "I'm fine, Audrey. Everything's ok. Nothin' to worry about."

“Nothing to worry about?” Audrey glared at Duke and tried to work out what he'd done, how and why he'd apparently been inside Nathan and… “One of you is going to have to explain this.” She looked from one to the other.

“Nate, I think this is gonna sound better coming from you,” Duke said quietly.

"Yeah," Nathan ran a hand through his head, his stomach slowly turning to lead as he realized just how likely Audrey was to run screaming. "I, uh, I sometimes let Duke possess me."

“I see...” Audrey replied, doubtfully. It would explain why Nathan had been so odd when she'd come back in. “And does he often just...drop you on the floor like that?”

“Not intentionally,” Duke said, somewhere between snarky and apologetic. “Generally when I leave, he's expecting me to, and he's sitting down or something. This time was an exception.”

Nathan nodded. "I'm always sitting or lying down whenever he joins me or leaves."

“Well that's... reassuring...” Audrey sighed and wondered if this whole thing could get any weirder.

“Honestly, Audrey, I promise that it's usually fine, you just surprised us,” Duke said.

Audrey nodded. “Feel like I walked in on something I shouldn't have.”

Nathan blushed. "Well, it is...a pretty intimate thing just not....you know."

“Could you, both of you, I mean, explain it to me some time? I really need to understand what's going on.”

"Well, it started off simple. Duke hadn't been able to taste food or feel sun or breeze or have a hot bath or anything like that in ten years. I thought, if I let him possess me, he can."

“Ok,” Audrey said slowly. “So it was your idea?”

Nathan nodded. "Duke was really hesitant about it at first."

“I was,” Duke agreed. “Look, this probably doesn't help, but I'd never do it if Nathan didn't want me to, and when I'm with him, I would never do anything he didn't want me to. And now you're around, I need you to know that I wouldn't do it without you knowing. Nathan's there the whole time, he can take back control at any point. It's...you're both safe, I promise.”

“No, that does help, Duke, thank you,” Audrey tried to smile reassuringly, seeing the naked honesty written on his face. “I can't say I'm not slightly weirded out by this but it's ok. I wish I had time now so that you could tell me more about it, but that's put my mind at rest, thank you. Both of
"It is weird," Nathan smiled ruefully. "But it's good. We'll explain more on Tuesday."

“Ok,” Audrey smiled. “Gotta run, see you then.” With that, she dashed back out of the door as quickly as she'd burst in a few moments before.

Nathan flopped back onto the couch. "Well that was embarrassing."

Duke laughed. “Yeah, it was. But look on the bright side, Audrey seemed to take it pretty well.”

"Yeah," Nathan privately hoped that Audrey really was taking it as well as she seemed to.

In fact, Audrey wasn't as ok as she might have pretended to be. If it worked for them then she had no issue with what they did when they were alone, but she wasn't at all comfortable with the idea that Duke might possess Nathan without her knowing, despite his assurances to the contrary. What sort of man had he been? She wasn't even remotely scared of him as a ghost but if he could possess Nathan's body (and she currently only had Duke's word that Nathan was at least partially still in control), could that put her (or more importantly, anyone else) in danger?

With a long slow night ahead of her, and little else to occupy her mind, she opened the Haven PD records system and typed Duke's name into the search box. Some of the records were computerised, others were in the archive room in the basement, but with each file she opened, she felt her heart grow heavier and heavier.
Tuesday evening came around and Audrey arrived as promised, knocking on the door not five minutes after Nathan had got home. Duke opened the door and greeted her, showing her through to the kitchen where Nathan was getting plates ready for the takeout Audrey had brought with her.

"Thanks," she mumbled as he took the pizza box from her. "Duke," she said hesitantly. "Maybe I've overstepped but I looked you up on the system. I just wanted to know who I was dealing with..."

"You went through his criminal file?" Nathan's head snapped up, a frown on his face. "None of that matters now, that was ages ago! Duke's a good man, he doesn't deserve to be judged for any of that."

Audrey looked at him, giving him a subtle shake of her head, trying to silently convey that he should hear her out, that he shouldn’t worry.

"So you know, then," Duke said bleakly, glancing at Nathan before staring down at the ground. "You know what I did. You know I did time. You must hate me."

Audrey shook her head emphatically. "No, I don't hate you. Duke, there's a lot there. Your file. Yeah, you did some stuff you shouldn't be proud of but half of what's there is bullshit. You'd have grounds for a complaint."

Nathan, standing close to Duke to comfort him, gave her a cautious look.

Duke looked at her, his expression hard to read but maybe (Audrey thought) there was a tiny glimmer of hope there. "Really?" He asked.

Audrey nodded. "Really. And...oh god, maybe I shouldn't have done this either, but I dug into your parents' files too. Something wasn't adding up with your file, how you went from nothing at all straight into shoplifting. It didn't make sense, most kids are caught vandalising, being antisocial, something. You didn't."

Duke stared at the floor, avoiding looking at either of them. "So you know that too."

"Probably not all of it but yeah. I saw the reports. Neglect reports from your teachers, abuse reports from the ER doc when you went there to get fixed up. And I'm guessing there were more times that you didn't go. Then your father's death certificate and, a few years later, another report from social services that your mother had skipped town and left you behind. You were fourteen."

Nathan looked horrified and furious, trying to get closer still to Duke. "They oughtta be glad they're dead, if they weren't I'd track them down and punch them right in the damn face."

Duke nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"And I saw how it was all brushed under the carpet. No one helped you. Not one person reached
out to you and that makes me so fucking angry Duke," Audrey shook with suppressed emotion. "You deserved better. Far better."

"Was that here? Was that here in Haven?" Nathan demanded.

"Yeah," Duke said quietly.

"So my old man probably knew and didn't do shit," Nathan concluded, scowling.

Audrey nodded. "His name was on some of the reports. And a Josiah Wuornos, your grandfather, I guess?"

Nathan nodded, mute with sickened fury. He half rose from the couch, intending to go have it out with his father right there and then.

"Sit down, Nathan," Audrey told him, frowning.

"I'm gonna tear his head off," Nathan growled, but he did sit back down. "The hell kind of police officer treats an abused and abandoned child like a criminal instead of helping him? Where's his 'protect and serve' he's so proud of?"

"I know you're angry, but Duke needs you right now, and honestly? So do I," Audrey said, her face pinched. "So can you put that to one side for a minute. Please."

Nathan nodded, forcing his anger back down. He'd deal with the Chief later. "How can I help, Duke?"

Duke shook his head, closing his eyes against the painful memories. "There's nothing you can do. It's in the past, long gone. Leave it there."

Nathan bit his lip. He felt weird offering in front of Audrey, but Duke clearly needed comfort… "Do you want to join me?" he asked softly.

"Not really," Duke said listlessly. "Actually, if neither of you mind, I'd rather be on my own right now."

Audrey nodded, thinking. "You should do whatever you need, Duke, but if you're worried about…joining Nathan while I'm here, then please don't. I don't mind and, if you'd prefer, I can leave, give you two some privacy."

Nathan gave her a grateful look, telling Duke, "If space is really what you need and want, we'll give it to you, but are you sure?"

"It is and I am," Duke tried to smile. "Thanks. I'm not trying to shut you out, either of you, I just…need some time, coupla hours maybe."

Audrey nodded. "If you're really sure. If you need just Nathan, I really am happy to go, I can always stop by tomorrow or something."

"No, don't go," Duke shook his head. "I'm sure, and Nathan probably needs you here."

"I'm fine. But we can go for some coffee or something, give you your couple hours."

"No, stay, eat your pizza, it's better knowing you're here if I change my mind."

"We could take it out onto the patio," Nathan offered. "You don't have to go off and hide. S'your
"Thanks, that’d be good," Duke said gratefully.

Audrey was already on her feet, ready to give Duke the space he needed. "I don’t really know how all this works, but can you come out with us? If you want to?"

Duke nodded. "As long as Nathan’s there, I can."

"Ok," Audrey smiled tentatively. "I hope you do, when you’re ready."

"If you need anything, hope you won't hesitate to ask," Nathan agree, standing up and picking up the pizza boxes.


Audrey was halfway out the door when she turned back to him. "I’m sorry Duke, I shouldn’t have dragged all that up again. If you come and see us later, I’d like to explain why and apologise properly."

"It’s ok, Audrey, I think I understand," Duke said.

She nodded and followed Nathan outside.

"Duke might understand, but I’d appreciate that explanation," Nathan said once the door closed behind them. "Be honest with you, I'm not thrilled you went nosing into what's not your business and stirred up so much that doesn't even reflect badly on him anymore but still hurt him so much."

"You’re right," Audrey said immediately. "I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have done it. I shouldn’t have pried and maybe I shouldn’t have brought it up once I did know. It was just...this whole possession thing. Seeing him leave your body, you crumpling to the floor. It scared me, Nathan. I just wanted to know who I was dealing with so I did a quick search on his name and everything was there. I looked at a couple of files and...God, it was so obvious that it was mostly bullshit and I wanted to know why. Why every cop in Haven seemed to hate him. And there weren’t any answers but what I found out...all that stuff about his childhood…” She trailed off, fighting back tears and swallowing hard. "Once I knew, I had to acknowledge that. He deserves to know it was all bullshit. He deserves to know it was wrong. The abuse he suffered, the crap from the department. I know I don’t know him, not like you do, but if he’s lived with that for his whole life, if he’s still...living...with it… He needs to know it wasn’t his fault."

"That's.....not wrong, that last part," Nathan said slowly. "He keeps insisting he's not a good person, no matter how much I tell him otherwise. I knew a little of it. I knew he went hungry as a kid and no one helped. Knew his family had a rep, and people thought he was just like them. Knew he'd broken the law. But he turned it around. Got out of that place, made an honest life for himself, helped people who were still struggling the way he had. And when it went bad he refused to go back to that life. What he did back then doesn't make him a bad person, n'if you ask me it never did."

Audrey nodded. "I agree, he’s not a bad person, he’s a good person who did some bad things. From what I can tell, he just did what he needed to to survive," she said quietly. "What do you mean by 'refused to go back to that life'?"

"Not mine to tell," Nathan shook his head. "And I'd appreciate if you didn't ask him about it. He's had enough bad times dredged up. If he wants you to know, he'll tell you."
"Fair," Audrey agreed, already putting two and two together and hoping she had it wrong. She pushed away her uneaten slice of pizza. "I just want to do something for him, Nathan. Anything to make it better but I have no idea what to do."

"I know. Feel the same a lot of the time. Don't know what to do, beyond telling him I love him and he's a good person. Just hope one day it convinces him."

"I think it will," Audrey smiled sadly. "You two are good together. Good for each other."

"Try to be. He deserves good things, deserves the best. That's...not me, but I do what I can."

"Don't underestimate yourself," Audrey smiled. "Do you mind if I ask...? When he possesses you, can he feel everything you can?"

Nathan nodded. "First time he got to do all the things he'd been missing, you should've been there, it was amazing for him. Practical terms, it's like...sharing a car. We're both in there, both aware. Sometimes he sits back and let's me drive, he's just along for the ride. Sometimes he drives, if there's something he wants to do that I can't or he'd rather. Cooking, surfing, yoga, stuff like that."

Audrey smiled. "I'm glad you can give him that, it must make such a difference to him," she hesitated before carrying on. "Why I was asking... If he's possessing you, and I hugged you...he'd feel that, right?"

Nathan nodded. "But he never would without your permission. Now that you know we do this, if we're joined, you'll know. So you won't end up hugging him thinking it's me. Or anything else. Both of us are a hundred percent on that."

"I didn't have any doubts, but thank you for saying that," Audrey smiled. "That isn't why I was asking... When he's ready, when he comes out or we go in or whatever, can we ask him if he'd like that? I know I'm probably a poor substitute for you, but maybe it would be better than nothing. Do you think he'd be ok with that?"

Nathna's face positively lit up. "I bet he would, and I'd love that. It breaks my heart I can't just give him a damn hug, sometimes he needs it so much."

"He does and especially now," Audrey agreed. "I keep worrying about him, he's in there on his own and I know he says that's what he wants but... I can't stop worrying."

Nathan nodded. "Not gonna disrespect his wishes, but can't help feeling like being alone is the last thing he needs right now."

"Yeah, that's how I feel too. I think he's spent too much of his life dealing with stuff on his own, he doesn't know how to do anything else."

Nathan nodded. "But I don't know how to do anything about that without refusing to respect his wishes."

"No, I don't know either," Audrey sighed. "I guess it's just a case of reminding him, showing him that we're here for him, whatever he needs. I don't think he'll ever truly believe words, he needs us to show him."

"Couldn't agree more," Nathan nodded unhappily.

Audrey glanced at the door. "I hope he'll come out soon," she said before she turned back to Nathan. "How are you doing?"
"Okay. Really hopeful we can make this work. That'd be a dream come true," Nathan said softly.

“We can make it work,” Audrey smiled before her face fell and she leaned forward to reach for Nathan's arm. “I was asking about you, though. You were furious earlier. At your father. At me…”

Nathan's expression darkened. "Still gonna give the Chief a piece of my goddamned mind, the heartless bastard. How he could turn his back on a starving abandoned kid...."

“It doesn't bear thinking about, does it?” Audrey said sadly.

"All this time I thought Haven PD stood for something, you know? I never wanted that life but I still thought they really were about keeping people safe. About helping them. Now I find out it's rotten at its core for the last two generations."

Audrey shifted uncomfortably. “I can see why you think that. But for what it's worth, it isn't all rotten. Some of us still want to help people, keep them safe.”

Nathan's scowl lessened. "Didn't mean you. I know you're a good person, know you genuinely want to help. I just mean, he always talked about this family legacy. This noble cause the Wuornos men upheld for generations, pillars of the community. Gave me hell for not wanting to continue it. Worse when….well, when what I wanted to do instead didn't work out. I know he thinks I'm a failure - never shied away from telling me so. But at least I didn't turn my damn back on a starving kid," he said angrily. "That it, that's his great and noble legacy. The suffering of a child. And who knows how much worse it got?"

“That can't have been easy for you,” Audrey frowned. “I mean, that sort of pressure to follow in his footsteps, being made to believe you're a failure. Which you aren't, by the way, not by any stretch of the imagination.”

Nathan shrugged, his smile bitter. "Not easy, no. But next time he says so, I'll have this to throw in his face. So."

“I hope he never says that again,” Audrey said softly. “I hope you never hear those words from anyone again. And I hope that one day you'll believe they aren't true.”


Audrey chewed her lip and closed her eyes briefly. “That doesn't make you a failure, that just means you tried to do something that wasn't a good fit. Not like….” She took a deep breath. Now wasn’t the time to drag up her own issues. “Doesn't matter. You're not a failure.”

"Thanks," Nathan smiled, clearly not buying her logic. "Least paramedic training was something I could muddle through. That actually really helps. Duke's idea, actually."

Audrey nodded, shaking her own thoughts. “You're a great paramedic, I'm glad Duke came up with the idea.”

"Me too. He's really amazing," Nathan smiled fondly.

“He must be. I'm looking forward to getting to know him,” Audrey smiled. “I just...hope I don't fuck it up. For you two, for any of us.”

"I don't think you will. I think if we get past this, we can get past pretty much anything."
“I hope so. Right now I just want to drag him out here and give him hugs and start trying to put it behind us.”

"Me too,” Nathan got up and paced to the back door, glancing in before settling back down with a worried expression.

“No sign of him?” Audrey asked, already knowing the answer from the pained frown that Nathan wore.

Nathan shook his head.  "Maybe if I opened the door and just called?"

“I know you want to respect his privacy, Nathan, but it's your home too. If you want to go in then you should. Just don't bug him if he still wants to be on his own.”

"Don't give a damn about in or out.  Just want to know if he's okay," Nathan fretted.

“Then you should go in and check on him. Or I could. Not to pressure him, just to make sure he knows we're here for him.”

"You don't think that's ignoring what he wants?” Nathan worried.

“Maybe, a little, but I was suggesting a quick 'hey Duke, you ok? Need anything?'” Audrey pointed out. “Not trying to force him to spend time with us, or even talking to him, beyond just checking in.”

Nathan bit his lip for a moment, then went to the door and cracked it.  "Hey, Duke, sorry if this is an asshole thing to do but I just wanted to check if you need anything.  You don't have to say anything if you still want your alone time, I'll just leave you be.”

**

Duke drifted around the living room, his thoughts and emotions running on overdrive. So many old memories stirred up. He couldn't blame Audrey for looking into him. Hell, if he'd had the resources he probably would have done the same thing in her shoes.

He wouldn't have blamed her if she'd hated him, either. Like she'd said, there was a lot in his file that he shouldn't be proud of. He'd go a step further, he should be downright ashamed of it. The thought that she might tell Nathan everything filled him with dread. There were things he'd done that he never wanted Nathan to know about. Over his dead body and all that.

And yeah, maybe some of it had been bullshit, just like she'd said, but a lot of it hadn't been. Maybe he should have stood up against it more. Made a formal complaint or something. But then that might (would) have made things worse.

He thought that maybe the chief had warned everyone else in Haven off helping him. Everyone in Haven PD, anyway. Not that he could make sense of why that might be. None of it made sense. The whole town had known what his parents were like, how they'd treated him. It made no sense that no one, no one at all, had helped him.

No one until now anyway. Nathan. And now Audrey as well. They might not be able to change what had happened but their caring, their anger on his behalf. That was worth a lot. That was worth everything.

They'd given him his privacy, respected his wishes, his boundaries. That meant the world to him.
Even though maybe he'd been wrong about what he needed. He was so used to dealing with everything alone that he didn't know how to do anything else.

When Nathan's voice sounded softly from the door, Duke was startled out of his reverie. "Hey, no, it's fine. Are you guys coming in?" He answered.

"Not if you don't want us to," Nathan said promptly. "But if you've had enough alone time and you'd prefer company now, we'll come in."

“You can come in,” Duke replied hesitantly.

Nathan held the door open for Audrey and followed with the mostly untouched pizza boxes. He set them down on the kitchen counter and hesitantly went over to Duke. "Are you okay?" he asked softly.

“Yeah, I'm fine,” Duke sounded less than convincing.

"Do you want to join me?" he asked gently.

Duke glanced at Audrey briefly before he replied. “Maybe later?”

Audrey smiled reassuringly. “No, you should join him, Duke. If you want to, of course, but Nathan tells me that you can feel everything he can and… if I hugged you while you were together… if that's something you'd want…”

“That's... I mean… If you… Yeah,” Duke trailed off, embarrassed.

“Are you sure?” Audrey confirmed. “There's no pressure, just if that's something you'd like.”

Duke nodded. “I'm sure, it's just...no one's ever wanted to do that for me before and I don't really know what to do with it.”

"Think it might do you a world of good, if you're comfortable with it," Nathan said gently. "Always wanted to give you a hug myself."

“I’m comfortable,” Duke smiled. It wasn't like he'd never been hugged before, just...not in this way. Being hugged just because he was hurting... he'd done it often enough for other people but for someone to offer it to him, especially when that someone was Audrey, who barely knew him and still wanted to try to do something to take the pain away… It was just a lot to take in.

Nathan smiled and settled on the couch, opening his arms to Duke.

Duke went to him and, after an apologetic glance at Audrey (to which she responded with a slight incline of her head to say ‘it’s fine, go on’), he slipped inside Nathan's mind.

Nathan immediately wrapped around Duke, holding tight, conveying all the warmth and comfort he could. "I'm gonna let you drive, okay?" he said aloud for Audrey's benefit.

Duke settled in, relaxing into Nathan's warmth, taking the comfort he wanted to give. He nodded and stepped forwards to take control.

As Audrey watched, Nathan...changed. Even just sitting on the couch, he sat more upright, the slight hunch of his shoulders was gone. His arms hung more loosely and, despite the new sadness in his eyes, his face was more relaxed. “Hey Duke,” she said, smiling softly.
Hey," he replied. "Sorry, I know this must be weird for you."

"Not as much as you'd think," Audrey said thoughtfully. Her concerns that she might not know if Duke was in control of Nathan's body were proving to be completely unfounded. She knew straight away. As soon as Duke took control, she could see the difference in them.

"Well that's good, but still, if it gets weird then tell me and I'll let you have Nathan back," Duke told her. Same goes for you, Nate, just let me know when you want me to stop, he thought.

I'm fine, Nathan thought, watching Audrey's reactions with nervous curiosity.

"Roger that, but I'm good. Still want that hug?" Audrey smiled.

"More than anything," Duke said quietly, standing up.

Audrey stepped forward and wrapped him in a fiercely tight hug, just shy of leaving him struggling to breathe.

Duke closed his arms around her, gently holding her close. He rested his chin on the top of her head and tried to blink away the tears that were threatening to form. His breath hitched in his chest. It was the first physical contact he'd had with anyone in fourteen years - longer, probably, given the fact he couldn't even remember the last time he'd been held like this. If he ever had been. A brief thought of this is wrong, this is Nathan's girlfriend, I shouldn't be doing this, shot through his head and he tensed.

You should definitely be doing this, Nathan thought back gently, catching the stray thought. You need this so much. Besides, I'm right here, it's not like you're going behind my back. Honestly, I'm just really damn glad you're finally getting a damn hug.

"I won't judge you if you need to let out a few tears," Audrey said softly. "Or a lot of tears. There's nothing wrong with feeling emotions. And the ones I kicked up today must be really strong. I'm sorry, Duke. I'm sorry I went looking, and I'm sorry I told you about it. I just want you to know that the way you were treated, that wasn't right. You didn't deserve that. It wasn't your fault. It was complete bullshit."

Duke stopped breathing entirely. He closed his eyes as he clung to Audrey, his mind latching onto her words. It wasn't your fault. He didn't know if he could ever truly believe that but... fuck, it was good to hear someone say it. He tried to speak, tried to tell her it was ok, that she didn't need to apologize, but all that came out was a strangled sob.

Audrey held on tight, rubbing his back gently with one hand. "It wasn't your fault, Duke." she repeated. "You didn't deserve that. You're a good person. All that bad stuff people have said about you, all that poison that latched on and formed your self image, it's all garbage. I can tell from your file, you only ever did low-level stuff to survive, and you never hurt anyone."

"I..." Duke started to say before it turned into a sob again. This time he didn't try to hold it back, crying openly, all of the memories and emotions storming out of him even as he tried to focus on one thought - I didn't deserve it. All those years he thought he had. The times he'd been told it was his fault. How one thing had led into another and into another and how one day he'd woken up to the dawning realisation that in, spite of everything, he'd followed in his father's footsteps, just the way everyone had told him he would. And now, finally, someone, Audrey, had seen the truth.

Audrey rocked him back and forth slightly, rubbing his back and stroking his hair, murmuring gently to him. "It's okay, Duke, you're okay. You're a good person, this wasn't your fault, you
didn't deserve it. You did what you had to, you didn't have any choice. Nathan told me you managed to break free of that life and make an honest living and help people and that is so, so amazing, I'm so proud of you and I know Nathan is too."

Nathan agreed wholeheartedly, holding Duke just as tightly in mind as Audrey was in body, echoing the comforting murmurs and broadcasting every bit of love and admiration he held for Duke as hard as he could.

Slowly, Audrey's words and Nathan's thoughts sank in. Duke's breathing calmed and with a final hiccup he got control of himself enough to speak. "Thank you," he said, his voice still wavering slightly. "I don't...can't... thank you."

"My pleasure," Audrey smiled softly, pulling a pack of tissues from her purse where it rested on the couch, and handing them to him.

"Thanks," he mumbled, taking them from her. "Sorry Nate, he thought ruefully. You're the one who's gonna be stuck with the stuffed nose and sore eyes.

*Small price to pay, for you to get that off your chest,* Nathan thought back warmly.

"I really needed that," Duke said quietly. "Audrey, thank you."

"I'm glad I could help. I can't even imagine what it's been like for you."

Duke nodded. "There have definitely been some very not-fun parts of my life," he chuckled wryly.

"And your afterlife, too, it sounds like," she agreed sympathetically.

"Yeah. 'Til Nathan came along anyway," he sent a wave of gratitude and love to Nathan.

Nathan received it happily and returned the love and affection with all his heart.

"You two really are so good for each other."

"Well he is for me, anyway," Duke smiled. "And Audrey, you are too. This whole thing, you've just been so accepting of it, of me and I don't know how I can thank you. It hasn't been the best beginning to a friendship but I hope you'll stick with it. With us."

"I'd love to," Audrey smiled. "This has been really amazing."

Duke laughed. "I can't believe that. Wait til you taste my cooking, that's amazing. Me crying on your shoulder," he wavered his hand in a so-so gesture. "Yeah, not so much."

"I very much look forward to trying your cooking, but don't sell yourself short. I just got to give a guy his first hug in almost fifteen years, that's pretty amazing."

"Audrey Parker, you are a very special person," Duke smiled softly. *You both are,* he sent to Nathan.

"You're pretty damn special too, Duke," Audrey smiled, and Nathan heartily agreed.

Duke shifted awkwardly, a small half-laugh escaping from him. "Thank you, both of you."

Audrey hugged him a little tighter and stroked his hair. "Our pleasure. Feeling better?"

"Better than I have for years," Duke admitted quietly, briefly tightening his arms around Audrey
and trying not to think about how right it felt.

"Good," Audrey said decisively, and the sentiment was echoed by Nathan. "How about we settle in for that movie and later reheat that pizza in the oven. Have you had pizza since you and Nathan started doing this?"

"Actually, no," Duke said. "I usually cook. I could make you something, if you'd like?"

"That's sweet, and I've love to try your cooking, but you don't need to go to any trouble for me. Besides, far be it from me to keep a man from his first pizza in fifteen years," she smiled.

"It wouldn't be any trouble," Duke started to argue.

Audrey hugged him a little tighter. "Yeah, but pizza. And hugs."

"Ok," Duke smiled. "Pizza and hugs." Ok with you, Nathan? You want me to step back?

I'm fine, Nathan thought happily. Pizza and hugs sounds great.

Duke relaxed a little more. "So what movie are we watching?"

Audrey gave him a teasing grin and asked, "How 'bout 'The Notebook'?"

Inside Duke, Nathan groaned.

"That works," Duke said agreeably, sending an inward smirk at Nathan.

Audrey blinked. "I was teasing, Duke. I like plenty of movies besides sappy romantic chick flicks. I'd be just as happy with Pacific Rim or The Avengers or Clue or How to Train Your Dragon."

"Damn," Duke laughed. "I thought it might be good for Nathan to get in touch with his romantic side."

"I can imagine his reaction," Audrey looked at him curiously, as if looking for the man whose face Duke currently wore.

"Well there was a noise sort of like this," Duke tried to imitate Nathan's groan. "In fact, why doesn't he just answer for himself? You've probably spent enough time with me for this evening."

"If Nathan wants to...to drive, that's his call, as I'm sure you'd agree. But you needn't hop in the passenger seat just because you think I'm not enjoying spending time with you. I am."

"You are?" Duke said quietly.

"I really am," Audrey smiled and gave him a little extra squeeze. "You're a really interesting person, Duke. I like you."

Settled in the back of their shared mind, Nathan beamed with delight, broadcasting his happiness to Duke.

Duke gazed at her adoringly, already hopelessly smitten. "I'm looking forward to getting to know you better, Audrey," he said, picking up on Nathan's happiness. "Maybe, if it wouldn't be too weird, for any of us that is, would you...? Could I...maybe take you out some time? For dinner?"

He inwardly cursed at himself for that hesitant, stumbling, invitation. He'd been much smoother than this when he'd been alive but then this wasn't exactly an everyday situation.
"Well, I'd have to talk to Nathan about that," Audrey said, cautiously neutral. "I know you agree that hurting him is the last thing either of us wants to do."

"Yeah, sorry," Duke said quickly, with a slight shake of his head at his lack of consideration. "Would you like to talk to him now or later?"

"Probably now is better," Audrey decided.

"Ok," Duke smiled softly. "Nate, stop grinning like an idiot and come and talk to your girlfriend," he spoke aloud for Audrey's benefit.

Nathan came forward, taking his body back with all the subtle changes in body language Audrey had seen before. He smiled at Audrey and then said aloud, "Duke, do you want to pop out just for a bit, so we can all discuss this together? We can go back to snuggling after."

Yeah, Duke agreed, immediately leaving and hovering awkwardly in the middle of the room.

Audrey smiled and patted the empty space on the couch beside her. "Come sit with us? I know we can't snuggle properly but we'd still like your company, right Nathan?"

"Absolutely," Nathan nodded.

Duke smiled and drifted over to them to sit not-quite-on the couch. "You guys are the best," he said quietly.

"You too," Nathan smiled. "But yes, I have no problem with you two going on a date. Think it's cute. I'd hoped you'd get along but this is beyond my wildest expectations." Without Duke still in his head, he could say it with a smile without worrying that Duke would pick up on the nagging insecurity he felt.

"Are you sure?" Duke asked. The smile wasn't quite echoed in Nathan's eyes.

"I'm sure," Nathan nodded.

Audrey gave him a thoughtful look. "Nathan, I don't care for you any less because I'd go on a date with Duke. If you are capable of caring about both of us, I can assure you we're capable of doing the same."

Duke nodded. "And you'd be with us the whole time, it's more like all three of us going on a date. Maybe I should've suggested that instead," he said, feeling guilty.

"A romantic candlelit evening for the three of us out on the back porch sounds amazing," Nathan cheered up.

"That sounds amazing. I can pick up some takeout on my way over," Audrey agreed.


"We're not going to make you cook for us," Audrey shook her head.

"Specially when you can't even eat it, if we're going to be separate all evening," Nathan pointed out.

"You're not making me cook, I'm offering," Duke pointed out. "I enjoy it. And it doesn't matter that I can't eat it because I'll have tasted it as I cook. I'll do something that I can make in advance and Nathan can just heat up in the evening. That way we can all spend the time together."
Audrey hesitated.

"Make enough so you can have some for dinner the night we make it? Not just taste tests during cooking," Nathan bargained.

Duke laughed. "I know you like my cooking, Nate, but I'm not sure even you can eat two portions in one evening."

"It'll be lunch?" Nathan grinned. "Seriously, you should get to enjoy it too."

“Ok, ok,” Duke gave in, rolling his eyes. "I'll make enough for three. Audrey, is there anything you can't eat? Or anything in particular you'd like?"

"I'm fine, can't wait to try your cooking," Audrey smiled.

"I'll come up with something good," Duke promised.

"Sounds great," Nathan said happily. "You guys still up for pizza and movie cuddles on the couch?"

“Yeah,” Duke grinned. “If you both are...maybe you'd prefer some time alone…”

Nathan smiled and held out his arms to Duke "Get back in here."

"You need cuddles," Audrey nodded.

Duke went to Nathan and settled at the back of his mind, smiling and contented.

Nathan curled around him contentedly, then smiled at Audrey. "Still me. He's letting me drive for now."

“I can tell,” Audrey smiled softly back at him. “So, movie first or pizza first?"

Nathan's stomach growled, and he looked sheepish. "Pizza?"

“Shall I do that while you choose a movie? I'll watch whatever,” Audrey suggested.

"Okay, but if I choose something crummy, feel free to veto it," Nathan said agreeably. After a moment of fiddling with the remotes, he asked curiously. "You can tell which of us is driving?"

“I can,” Audrey confirmed, standing up to go and sort out the pizza. “You hold yourselves differently, even your face, your smile, the way you speak. It’s subtle, but it’s there."

"That's amazing," Nathan grinned.

Audrey smiled back at him. “I'll video it sometime, so you can both see.”

"Thanks, that'd be really interesting to see the difference. I wonder if anyone else has noticed," Nathan mused.

* Doubt it, Duke snorted inside Nathan’s head. *I haven’t been driving when we’ve been around anyone else.*

Audrey shook her head. “Probably not. Like I said, it’s subtle. Call it cop’s instinct,” she smiled.

Nathan grinned. "Should do it around the Chief, freak him right the hell out."
Yeah, maybe not, I’d end up getting you arrested for assaulting a police officer, Duke pointed out.

“Probably give him a heart attack,” Audrey said, already on her way to the kitchen.

"Doesn't sound like an argument not to," Nathan told Audrey dryly. To Duke, he added, Not that different from when I see him as myself.

Not a good idea, Nate, Duke worried.

Don't worry, Duke, wouldn't ever try to make you do what you wouldn't want.

Thanks but I was thinking more of you saying or doing something you’ll regret. With or without me with you.

We're still gonna have words, Nathan thought, a distinctly ominous note to it.

And what exactly are you gonna say? “Oh, by the way, Dad, my girlfriend went looking through your old files on my ghost boyfriend and now I know what you did”? Yeah, I can just imagine how that’s gonna go down.

I'll say I found out about how he and granddad ignored and persecuted you, and how it's bullshit, and if he wants to know how I found out I'll say it's none of his goddamn business.

Nate, Duke thought softly. I really appreciate you sticking up for me, but really, leave it. What’s done is done, there’s no point dragging it all back up again.

There is, though, Nathan said softly, Because I doubt you're the only one he treated that way. Or still does. I'm years too late to do anything for you, but I can at least make sure he's not still making anyone else suffer what you did.

A sudden shock ran through Duke. Fuck. You're right, Nate, I never thought of it like that. Always thought it was just my family name that made him like that but... God, what if there are other kids, still suffering now, not getting the help they need?

Nathan curled tightly around him. If there are, I'll find out and put a stop to it.

Duke stayed silent, unable to bear the idea that there might be others like him. His thought, when it came, was small and soft. Please help them, Nathan.

Nathan wrapped himself around Duke tightly. If there's anyone who needs help, they'll get it, he promised.

“Nathan?” Audrey’s voice sounded from the kitchen. “Or, actually, probably Duke would be better...How do you work this damned complicated oven? I can’t even work out how to turn it on,” she sounded frustrated.

"Here, I'll come help," Nathan offered, getting up and heading into the kitchen.

“Thanks,” Audrey said gratefully. “I did warn you I couldn’t cook. Apparently that extends even to reheating pizza,” she added with a rueful grin.

"If it makes you feel any better, the first night I moved in I tried reheating something in the oven and burned it to a crisp."

Audrey laughed. “Yeah, thanks. At least it isn’t just me. Duke must be laughing.”
"Laughed his head off when I burned that hot dog to a crisp."

"I bet," Audrey smirked. "How do you even burn a hot dog??!!"

Inside Nathan, Duke smiled slightly at the memory. *She has a point, Nate, how did you manage to burn that?*

"I didn't have a microwave yet! I put it in the oven and then I got distracted, and…"

"It took me a year to work out my oven timer. Couldn’t work out why everything kept coming out black and crispy," Audrey laughed.

*You two are hopeless!* Duke thought. *Good job you have me around to make sure neither of you burns the place down.*

"Yeah, Duke, it is a good thing we have you," Nathan agreed aloud, with a fond smile.

"Let me guess," Audrey smiled. "He thinks we’re both hopeless and not safe let loose in his kitchen."

"And would burn the place down if not for him," Nathan grinned.

"Probably not far from the truth," Audrey admitted. "What film did you decide on?"

Nathan looked sheepish. "Kinda didn't get that far."

"Everything ok?" Audrey frowned. "You two weren't arguing about the merits of rom-coms against action movies or anything?"

*Ok to tell her?* Nathan asked Duke.

*Yeah,* Duke agreed. *Just don't let her get dragged into it, it'd probably put her job on the line.*

*Fair enough,* Nathan agreed, telling Audrey, "He was trying to dissuade me from having words with the Chief about what you found out. Which I won't bring you into it, don't worry."

"I wasn't worried," Audrey raised her eyebrows. "Actually, I was going to suggest you leave it to me. I can bring Internal Affairs into it, call in some FBI contacts if I need to."

Nathan's eyebrows rose. "Won't that end up backlashing onto you?"

"It shouldn't, I can do it anonymously if I need to, but honestly, I don't care if it does. It needs to be put right and I won't drop it until something happens."

Nathan considered this - he hadn't expected that outcome. "Would you have a problem with me talking to him about it first? Might give him a chance to cover it up, so I can see why you'd rather not. But he's still my father. I want to see him apologize and do better, make amends for the past and start helping people for real - not get thrown in jail."

"I don't think that's the mostly likely outcome," Audrey told him. "If anything comes of it, they'd probably just push him to retire. But yes, if it makes you feel better, then you should talk to him first. Calmly. I don't want to have to arrest you for throwing punches."

"Can't promise that," Nathan muttered.

"You either promise that or you leave it to me," Audrey said firmly. "I mean it, Nathan, if talking
to him doesn't work and you resort to punching him - and I can't honestly say I'd blame you - I won't be able to do anything official.”

"Fair point," Nathan grumbled sulkily.

Audrey studied him for a moment. “Ok, I'll take that as agreement. Don't make me regret letting you talk to him first.”

"Will do my best. Can't promise he won't make you regret it, though."

“I am more than capable of dealing with him,” Audrey smiled and rubbed Nathan's shoulder reassuringly.

Settled at the back of Nathan's mind, Duke listened intently, touched that Audrey was prepared to do something about a long-dead case, then worried about what Nathan might do. Relief flooded through him when Audrey made sure that Nathan wouldn't do anything that might land him in the proverbial creek.

"Just….be careful, okay? I know how buddy-buddy law enforcement and the judicial system can be, especially in a small town like Haven, where you're still seen as an outsider. And don't forget they didn't think much of Duke either, and they think he's gone with no one who cares if his name is cleared. They're not gonna want to see the Chief go down for his sake," Nathan cautioned.

“I'll be careful,” Audrey promised. “I just... I can't leave it, Nathan.”

Nathan hugged her tightly. "Wouldn't be the woman I love if you could," he said softly.

Audrey folded herself against him and buried her face into his chest. “You love me?” She asked, her voice soft and small.

"Yeah, I do," Nathan said gently, holding her close, checking with Duke to see if he was okay.

*I'm fine, Duke smiled. Happy for you both, but maybe I should give you two some time together.*

*You're welcome to stay. If this is gonna work, it's gonna be all three of us, all ways, all equal. No one left out,* Nathan thought as he leaned down to softly kiss Audrey.

Before he could, Audrey wriggled out of his embrace. She took a step backwards and gently stroked his face. She smiled reassuringly. ‘Thank you, Nathan, for telling me that. I'm... I don't want to say I'm not ready to answer that because I am, but I won't. It isn't fair on Duke. Not until I'm ready to say it to him too.”

Nathan smiled broadly, stroking her cheek. "You are the most amazing woman," he said reverently. "We're so lucky to have you."

Inside Nathan, Duke was quietly listening to every word they said. *Can you thank her for me, Nate, please,* he thought softly.

"Duke says thank you," Nathan smiled. "He's really touched."

Audrey shook her head. “It's just the right thing to do, it isn't just about you and me any more, Nathan.”

"I know. But that's what makes you amazing," Nathan said happily. "This is beyond my wildest dreams."
“Or your craziest nightmares?” Audrey teased. “I’m glad it makes you happy.”

"So, so happy," Nathan said softly, speaking to both of them. "I love Duke and I was so scared to hurt him by dating you, but you're amazing and brilliant and beautiful just like he is and I can't believe I'm able to love you both."

You're all of those things too, Nate, Duke smiled. And I don't know how I feel about Audrey yet but I think we'll get to the point where we can all say that to each other.

"You guys both know there's no rush and no pressure for you to feel that way about each other too, though, right?"

Audrey nodded and smiled. “I do. Duke and I need to get to know each other and then we'll see where we are.”

I know that, Nate, I just want this whole thing to work out, Duke thought. Can’t stand the thought of you getting hurt.

Nathan nodded to Audrey and spoke to Duke aloud for Audrey's benefit. "I know, Duke, I want it to work out too, but you can't force feelings. If you guys end up just friends - or even just cordial acquaintances - who are okay with sharing me, that's fine too."

But are you ok with sharing either one of us? Duke asked.

“Duke? If we're talking, do you want to come out? I'm worried you aren't getting a chance to say what you need to,” Audrey checked.

Actually, she might have a point, Nate, you mind if I go?

Go right ahead, Duke, Nathan nodded.

“Hey Audrey,” Duke smiled once he'd left Nathan's mind. “Thank you for checking in on me, Nathan's right, you are amazing. And kind. And brilliant. And…” He trailed off and made a noise as if he was clearing his throat. “So, I just asked Nathan if he's really ok with sharing either one of us.”

Audrey smiled and blushed slightly at his praise. “And are you, Nathan?”

Nathan opened his mouth to immediately say he was fine with it, then paused. They deserved his full honesty, he reminded himself. "If I'm being truthful, there's a part of me worried you'll like each other better'n me. But I know it's not true, you wouldn't do anything to hurt me like that, either of you."

“That won't happen, Nate,” Duke tried to reassure him, flailing for the right words to say what he needed to without offending Audrey. “It’s… no matter how much I like Audrey, whether we fall in love with each other or not, I won't ever hurt you like that.”

“That goes for me too, Nathan,” Audrey added. “We're working towards this being all three of us. All equal.”

"Thanks, guys," Nathan said quietly. "S'just...you're both so amazing. Beautiful, smart, funny, good. Struggle sometimes to feel like I could ever measure up."

“You do,” Audrey insisted as she folded herself into his arms. “You're everything. Please don't ever think you aren't.”
“I wish you could see what we see, Nate,” Duke said softly. “See what a wonderful man you are, so kind and caring and clever and generous.”

Nathan blushed brightly. "Wasn't fishing for compliments, I swear," he mumbled.

“You never are,” Duke smiled.

“Doesn't mean that we shouldn't keep reminding you how amazing you are,” Audrey added.

"You guys are sweet, but c'mon," Nathan protested.

“C’mon what?” Duke laughed. “You deserve to be told every day, every minute, that you're awesome.”

“We won't ever stop telling you that,” Audrey promised.

Nathan turned even redder, hugging Audrey tight and reaching out a hand to Duke.

Duke smiled and moved towards him before a white wisp of smoke caught his eye. “Pizza's done,” he laughed. “One of you want to rescue it before you set fire to the kitchen?”

"Ah crap,” Nathan blurted, hastening to the oven in a couple of long-legged strides.

“How bad is it?” Audrey groaned. “Thank you, Duke, for spotting that. I think Nathan and I were too caught up to remember it was even in there.”


"We could maybe scrape off the worst-burned bits?” Nathan grimaced.

“Yeah, no, that's not happening,” Duke told them. “I'll chuck something together.”

"I'm okay with that if Audrey is," Nathan agreed.

“Duke, you shouldn't have to cook just because we screwed up,” Audrey frowned. “We can just do some toast.”

“Uh-uh,” Duke shook his head. “Nate, tell her.”

"Duke doesn't trust me with toast. He, uh….he may have a good reason for that.”

Audrey laughed. “You could have told me about that when I mentioned having the fire department out when I had that toasting mishap.”

“Seriously?!?” Duke asked incredulously. “That's it, neither of you are allowed in the kitchen again. One of you’ll burn water next!”

Nathan looked at Audrey. "Does boiling away all the water and almost setting the pot on fire count?"

Duke groaned loudly and wished he could bury his head in his hands.

“I think that counts,” Audrey smirked.

"Think we should get out of the kitchen before he starts throwing the burnt pizza at us," Nathan laughed.
“Don't tempt me,” Duke growled. “Good job I can cook or you'd both starve to death.”

"Or eat takeout nonstop," Nathan agreed.

“That was takeout,” Duke grumbled. “And it's still burned to shit.”

“Sorry, Duke,” Audrey smirked slightly and he glared at her. “But hey, on the plus side, at least this means I get to try your cooking.”

“Yeah, but, Audrey, that's not the point,” Duke grumbled. “I can throw a stir fry together for you now but I wanted to plan a proper meal, you know, something that was actually impressive.”

“Duke, the fact you can cook at all is impressive, especially given the fact you're a ghost. I'm sure I'll love anything you make for us,” she smiled.

Nathan nodded. "And you haven't even tried his cooking. His 'quick thrown-together stir fry' is still better than most of the takeout in Haven."

“Good to know,” Audrey grinned. “So I'll go and choose a movie - no chick flicks, I promise - while Duke cooks and then maybe we can finally do not-pizza and hugs.”

"Sounds good," Nathan smiled. "Go ahead and hop on in so you can cook."

Audrey waited until Duke was settled into Nathan and very clearly in control and gave his arm a squeeze. “Thank you for doing this, Duke.”

“It's no trouble,” he smiled softly. “I love to cook.”

“I gathered, but still, thank you,” Audrey said. “I'll try and pick a movie you'll enjoy.”

“Thanks,” Duke grinned as he watched her leave the room, then turned his attention back to cooking. Keep her, Nate, he thought.

Will do my damnedest, Nathan agreed, settling comfortably in the back of their mind.

Good. And don't you dare hurt her, Duke fired at him.

Nathan was downright delighted at the scolding, laughing not in mockery but in amused happiness that Duke had become so fond of Audrey as to be protective.

I said the same thing to her about you, in case you were wondering, Duke added more softly as he started pulling ingredients out to start cooking.


Love you too, Nate, Duke smiled. And you're pretty amazing yourself.

Nowhere near you or Audrey, Nathan gave a mental shrug.


Funny, Duke, Nathan snorted.

I wasn't being funny.

Not intentionally, no.
Whatever. You're amazing. Accept it and shut up, Duke grumbled good naturedly.

Shutting up, Nathan thought with amusement.

Good, Duke was equally amused as he gave the food a final stir and called it ready. He quickly plated up. Want to drive again? He asked.

It's okay, you can have cuddles with Audrey, Nathan told him affectionately.

Sure? Duke checked.

Very, Nathan reassured him.

Duke smiled and quickly carried the plates of food through to the living room so Audrey could eat before it went cold. “Dinner's ready,” he grinned.

"It smells great," Audrey told him with a smile.

Duke grinned back, feeling stupid and giddy and awkward. “So what movie did you pick out?”

"Clue. Ever seen it?"

“Nope. Any good?” Duke groaned inwardly because of course she thought it was good, she'd chosen it.

"It's really funny, I think you'll like it," she smiled.

“I'm sure I will, you have impeccable taste,” Duke groaned inwardly again, embarrassed by the useless words that were coming out of his mouth. “Shall we start it while we eat?” I don't even care if it's good at this point, just anything to stop me talking and saying stupid stuff and cheesy lines, he thought.

"Sounds good," Audrey took her plate and fork and started in. At the first bite she made a sound that was half surprise, half pleasure. "Oh my god, Duke, this is amazing!"

Duke grinned. “Glad you like it,” he said as he picked at his own food, not even feeling remotely like eating despite Nathan's hunger.

"You're not hungry?" Audrey observed, concerned.

“Yeah, yeah, I'm fine, sorry,” Duke blushed and started eating (much to Nathan's relief).

What's wrong? Nathan wanted to know

Nothing, Duke was quick to reassure him. I'm just being an idiot, turned back into a schoolboy with a crush and I feel stupid. Please tell me she has this effect on you as well?

Every damn time, Nathan thought with fond, rueful amusement. She's really something else.

She really is, Duke thought softly.

So happy you get to have this, Nathan thought gently.

Thank you for letting me be a part of this, Duke replied, smiling as Audrey laughed along with the movie.
Thank you for being willing to be a part of it, Nathan thought softly.

I'm sorry it took me so long, and that I was such a dick to you about it.

Duke, it's ok. You were hurting. I'm sorry that I hurt you so much, Nathan thought sadly.

Nate, no, it wasn't you, it was the situation, please don't apologise for that, Duke insisted as he picked at the last of his food.

Before Nathan could answer Audrey glanced over, frowned, and paused the movie. "Duke?" she asked gently.

"Audrey," Duke smiled at her.

"Please talk to me. I can see something's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong," Duke reassured her. "You finished with that?" He indicated her empty plate.

"Was it ok?"

"It was delicious, but that's not the point. You've been picking at yours again, and I know Nathan's hungry. You haven't once laughed at the movie, and your eyes were sad just now. You don't have to tell me what's bothering you if you don't want, I won't pry, but please don't lie about being okay when you're not."

“I am ok,” Duke insisted. “I was... having a conversation with Nathan and if my eyes were sad then it was because I was apologizing for being a dick about things before,’ he explained, hoping that would be the end of it. “And I might have been picking but I still finished everything,” he waved his empty plate around and started to get up to clear the dishes away.

Audrey didn't argue, but she did look worried. "Want me to restart the movie, if you were talking with Nathan?"

"Yeah, if you don't mind,” Duke smiled and stood up. “Don't look so worried, Audrey, I'm fine. Promise."

Audrey didn't look convinced, but told him, "When you get back, I'll restart. And thanks again for dinner, it was amazing. Nathan wasn't kidding when he said your cooking is better than most of the restaurants around here."

"Thanks," Duke grinned happily, turning pink at her praise. He raced off to finish clearing the kitchen and stacking the dishwasher, taking a couple of extra moments to at least try to get his thoughts in order so he stopped behaving like a lovesick puppy.

Audrey greeted him with a warm smile, patting the couch next to her. "I believe snuggles are on the agenda, hm?"

"If you're not comfortable and you want to slow it down, I understand. We can just sit and talk if you'd prefer that," Audrey said gently. "But if you're worried about what I want and what I'm okay with, you needn't be. As a first date, making me dinner and snuggling on the couch with a good comedy sounds pretty great to me."
“Sounds pretty great to me too,” Duke replied quietly, suppressing a grin that she'd referred to it as a date. He opened his arms to her and said, “C’mere, I'll try not to cry on your shoulder this time.”

Audrey shifted over, curling up against his chest contentedly. "You can cry on my shoulder any time, Duke," she told him softly.

“Thanks,” he murmured as he closed his arms around her, feeling her soft and warm against him. He hadn't been able to appreciate this earlier, had been too distraught to take in much of anything, but here, now, he was able to relax and soak up the sensation of having her in his arms - something he thought he'd never be able to experience again. Ok, Nate? He checked in.

\textit{Ok, Nathan thought back. It's a great feeling, isn't it?}

\textit{Really is, Duke grinned and tried to concentrate on the movie.}

Audrey had been right, the movie was funny and they laughed together, Audrey curled against them, Duke's arm wrapped around her.

“Audrey,” Duke murmured into her hair (and he was \textit{definitely not} nuzzling into her hair, no matter what anyone else thought). “Thank you.”

"It's my pleasure, Duke," Audrey smiled and hugged him a little tighter. "I'm having a wonderful time."

“So am I,” Duke agreed, abandoning the pretence and nuzzling into the softness of her hair for a moment before he stopped, feeling guilty. \textit{Sorry, Nate.}

\textit{Duke, it's okay, Nathan reassured him. This is a good thing.}

Reassured, Duke closed his arms around Audrey more tightly, laughing softly into her ear as they watched the movie.

Audrey smiled and leaned up a little to kiss his cheek.

Duke thought his heart might stop as he grinned stupidly. Her lips were so soft against his skin and he blushed deeply.

"You are really cute, Duke. Really sweet and really cute," Audrey smiled.

“It's...I'm not, really, sweet and cute aren't words that have ever been used in connection with me,” Duke said quietly. “Forward, maybe. Charming, definitely. Smooth, even. It's just...been a long time and I don't know if I'm overstepping - with you, or with Nathan - and I feel like an awkward teenager.”

"I think we all do," Audrey stroked his cheek. "This is new to all of us. It's exciting and wonderful but it's also a little scary and awkward. So you don't need to feel bad about it, we're all in the same boat. And in your case, I do think it's sweet and cute," she smiled.

Duke leaned in towards the contact, a soft half smile on his lips. “You're sweet and cute too,” he murmured. “And you, Nate, both of you.”

"Nathan \textit{is} sweet and cute, but I'd bet ten bucks he's disputing that right now, isn't he?"

Nathan was, in fact, protesting the adjectives.

“He is,” Duke sighed and tried to project to Nathan how much he meant them. “I think we're gonna
have our work cut out getting him to believe it's true.”

"Or anything else good about himself," Audrey agreed sadly.

Duke nodded. “I hate that he can't believe it, can't see what we see.” Sorry, Nate, shouldn't be talking about you like you aren't here... maybe I should hop back out for a bit.

That's okay, Nathan told him. I appreciate that you guys think well of me, even when I have a hard time believing it. Would you tell Audrey I said so?

Duke duly repeated what he'd said to Audrey. “We'll just have to keep reminding him,” he smiled. “Every day.”

"Every single day. Just like we'll keep telling you every single day," she agreed, and kissed his cheek twice. "One for you and one for him."

Duke smiled. “You're the best, Audrey,” he tightened his arms around her.

Audrey hugged him tight. "So are both of you."

“Maybe,” Duke cautiously agreed. “And we're missing most of this movie,” he chuckled.

"Sorry," she kissed his cheek again. "I can put on something else if you're not enjoying this."

“No, I am,” he assured her. “I'm just maybe enjoying the company more.”

Audrey grinned. "Well I can certainly see why people called you charming and smooth."

“I have my moments,” Duke murmured into her ear.

"Definitely," she said appreciatively. It was so weird - in a good way - to see how different Duke was even in Nathan's body.

“You ok?” Duke frowned as he caught the slightly odd expression crossing her face. “Look like you're lost in thought.”

"You're just so different," Audrey smiled. "It's Nathan's face, his voice, his body - but it's you, Duke. I think even if you guys hadn't been panicking that first time, I'd have known the difference."

“That's actually really good to hear,” Duke said quietly. “I'd hate for you to ever think you were getting Nathan and ending up with me instead.”

"You guys would never do that to me," Audrey said confidently. "And you don't need to talk about 'ending up with me' like that would be some sort of crappy consolation prize," she hugged him tighter.

“We never would,” Duke promised. “Maybe I'm not a consolation prize, but I'm not the winning prize either. That's Nathan.”

Audrey hugged him fiercely tight. "No, the winning prize is all three of us in love with each other equally, like Nathan said. You are not second best, Duke, no more than Nathan is. You never will be."

Duke hugged her back. “It's a good thing to be working towards,” he said softly. “All three of us, I mean.”
"It's gonna be amazing," she smiled, reaching up to stroke his hair.

Duke murmured his agreement, closing his eyes and practically purring under her touch.

"You like that, hm?" Audrey smiled, combing her fingers through the short strands.

“Yeah,” Duke whispered, angling his head towards her. Nate…? Is this ok? He worried.

More'n ok, feels fantastic, Nathan murmured back blissfully.

Good, Duke relaxed slightly, lulled by Audrey's touch and Nathan's equal enjoyment.

Audrey smiled at feeling him relax, using her other hand to rub slow circles on his back soothingly.

“You're really good at this whole snuggling thing, huh?” Duke said, the goofy smile firmly back on his face.

"Never thought of it that way. Maybe you just have low standards," Audrey teased.

“You might have a point there,” Duke said quietly.

Audrey hugged him tight. "Well, I am going to spoil you so much you are going to have the very highest standards for cuddles on this whole earth."

“You're... really something special, Audrey,” Duke smiled and pulled her close.

"Could say the same about you, Duke," Audrey smiled.

Duke thought about arguing that he really wasn't, he was just Duke, but Nathan's thought came strongly through their shared connection, insisting that Audrey was right. So instead, he smiled and tried to accept it, thinking about how lucky he was to have found both of them.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Nathan confronts Garland; Duke and Audrey help him with the aftermath of that conversation

Nathan stormed into the police station, the building he hadn't set foot in since he was a kid and being dragged off to his dad when he was in trouble. He marched through the maze of desks, exchanging terse nods with people he knew, feeling as though each step he took towards his father's office was a step back in time. By the time he knocked on the office door, he felt like that naughty child once again. Screwing up all of his courage and determination and with thoughts of Duke filling his mind, he swept through the door without waiting for an answer.

"Nathan?" Garland looked up in surprise. "Something I can help you with?"

"You can explain why the hell you treated Duke the way you did," Nathan said flatly. "Leaving him to suffer as a kid, the bullshit arrests, I know about all of it."

Garland glared at him. "Crocker? He deserved everything he got."

"When he was six years old and being beaten and starved?" Nathan snarled. "How exactly does a six year old deserve that, go ahead and explain that to me."

"He was a Crocker," Garland replied, as if that explained everything.

"He was a child!" Nathan slammed his hand on the desk.


"I damn well don't understand, and I never want to. What I do understand is that you let an innocent child suffer because of who his parents were, which is completely bullshit logic. You always told me that Haven PD helps people. 'Protect and serve', how many times did you drill that into me? When what you really meant was 'protect and serve the people we approve of, and to hell with the rest'."

"There are things you don't know, things I tried to protect you from. You don't understand, that's fine, maybe it's better that you don't, but you don't get to judge me for what I did."

"The hell I don't. You gave me shit ever since I told you I didn't want to be a cop. You can say I'm a failure, but at least I never turned my back on a starving, beaten child. So yeah, I'll damn well judge you, and a lot harsher than you judged me all this time. Because it turns out I made the right damn call." Nathan turned to go.

"That's it, son, you walk away, same way you always do when things get tough."

"Least I only walk away when things get tough for me - better'n walking away when things get tough for someone else," Nathan said curtly.
“How did I ever raise a son like you?” Garland spat the words out. “Tried to teach you to be a man but you'll only ever be the boy who failed. I don't even know who you are any more.”

Nathan paused and half-turned back. "Guess you failed too, then. Good. Rather be a failed boy than a man like you."

“Nathan, I am still your father and you don't get to speak to me like that,” Garland growled. “You've been spending too much time with Crocker’s ghost.”

Nathan looked at him for a long moment. "No, I don't think you are my father anymore. Goodbye, Chief."

Garland's face hardened. “If that's the way you feel, you'd best get out of my station,” he said coldly. “And if I find out that you, or any of your friends in the department, have been prying into old files, there'll be hell to pay.”

Nathan turned and left. He'd best warn Audrey.

Garland watched him go and slammed the door behind him. He slumped into his chair and buried his head in his hands. *There's no way back from this,* he thought to himself.

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"Audrey?” Nathan called as he arrived home.

“Hey, you're back,” Audrey called back. “We're in the kitchen.”

Nathan headed in. "Went to talk to the chief. Best be careful - he suspects someone was looking into Duke's file and he's mad as hell.”

“Crap,” Audrey said. “Didn't go well, then?” She mentally kicked herself. Judging by Nathan's thunderous expression and the way he was shaking, 'not well’ was an understatement.


Nathan snorted. “Don't think it could have gone worse. He couldn't give me any kind of a reason, just bullshit about your family and how I didn't understand and that crap.” He left out the part about how the chief had claimed Duke had deserved it. Duke didn't need to hear that, and it was a load of garbage besides. "Said I didn't get to judge him, I said the hell I don't, called him on the crap he gave me, he said a lot more and worse, I told him he wasn't my father anymore and left.”

“Bastard,” Duke said quietly.

Audrey nodded her agreement. “Here, you should sit down,” she said, lightly touching his arm.

"S'fine. Not exactly surprised to hear it.” Nathan said, but the devastation in his voice and the bleak grief in his eyes told another story.

“Ok, but you should sit down anyway,” Audrey gently pushed him towards the chair and let the lie slip past unmentioned.

Duke, however, didn't. “It isn't fine, Nate, nothing about this is fine. What do you need?”

Nathan was about to make a bitter joke about a new father, but managed to choke it back in time. He had no right to complain, not to Duke, not to Audrey. Whatever his flaws, the chief had always put food on the table and kept a roof over his head. He should be grateful for that.
Abandoning her attempts to get Nathan to sit down, Audrey wrapped her arms around him and held him tight. “Whatever he said, it's bullshit,” she said softly.

"I know," Nathan mumbled. "If he thinks badly of me, just as well. Reflects well on me, coming from a guy like that."

Audrey squeezed him tighter. “You're twice the man he'll ever be.”

“No,” Duke disagreed. “Twice, a hundred times, a thousand times. It's all irrelevant. There shouldn't even be a comparison. You're you, Nate, and he's him. Don't measure yourself against him or his fucking bullshit ideals.”

"I know. I know no matter what I do or say, no matter if I run or fail or am a stranger to him, I'll still be better'n he ever will. I know that." From Nathan's tone, he knew but he didn't believe.

“Well, if you don't consider him your father any more, guess I can get Internal Affairs involved now,” Audrey said.

“Audrey!” Duke admonished. “Not exactly the right moment.”

Nathan's expression went hard, anger hiding the hurt, if poorly. "Far's I'm concerned, he's fair game. He brought this on himself, and has no regrets. He deserves whatever comes of it."

“Sorry,” Audrey muttered guiltily. Duke might have a point. But… “I'll call them first thing,” she said.

“Well no,” Duke argued. “Nate, are you sure that's what you want? We're talking about something that happened decades ago. Are you sure you want to see him punished for that?”

"I want to see justice done. You deserve that. And I want to see that no one else was or still is being hurt or neglected. If he won't change, he lost his chance."

“Ok, yeah, making sure it didn't - isn't - happening to anyone else would be good, but Audrey can check on that without making anything official. Right Audrey?”

She nodded cautiously. “I can. Duke's right, Nathan, you do need to be sure this is what you want.”

"He'll come after you, though. Kicking this up the ladder will be the only way to protect yourself," Nathan reminded her.

“Maybe he will, but I don't much care about that. I just want to see this put right. Preferably without hurting you,” Audrey replied.

"Maybe you don't, but I do. Damned if I'm gonna see you fired because the chief's a corrupt old bastard trying to protect himself. If it's you or him, he's the one that brought this on himself."

“Ok,” Audrey said softly. “Then I'll do what I have to and I promise I won't let it rest until it's sorted.”

"Thank you," he kissed her forehead.

Audrey smiled and relaxed into him.

“Thank you,” Duke added. “Both of you. Neither of you would be caught up in this if it wasn't for me.”
"Nothing needs thanks. This is decades late being put right."

"Saying it anyway," Duke said stubbornly. "Can we get back to worrying about you now? Because I can tell you're not as ok as you're pretending to be."

Nathan gave him a crooked little smile. "Doesn't matter. Nothing for it."

"It matters," Duke insisted. "And yeah, maybe there's nothing either of us can do but at least let us in."

Audrey leaned up to kiss Nathan on the cheek. "You're so strong and I know you're trying to hold it together but you don't need to hide from us."

"Nothin' to hide. Told you what happened. Sucks."

"If you say so," Audrey sighed. "Sucks probably sums it up pretty well."

"Sucks is probably an understatement," Duke snorted. "What do you need, Nate?"

Nathan shrugged. Nothing could make this better.

Audrey wrapped him up tighter in her arms. "I don't know what he said to you but I can't imagine it was anything good. Whatever it was, please believe it isn't true."

"Nate," Duke said softly. "She's right and I know you don't want to talk about it but if thinking it would be easier, I can always hop in."

"I'd welcome that," Nathan said softly. "Won't be pretty though."


Nathan lay down on the couch, opening his arms.

Duke went to him, immediately projecting love and comfort and warmth, while Audrey sat beside them, stroking Nathan's hair and murmuring softly.

Nathan curled around them both, Duke in mind and Audrey in body.

What happened, Nate? Duke asked, concerned at the immediate feeling of closed off he was getting from Nathan.

Reluctantly, Nathan shared his memory of the conversation.

Fuck, Duke thought, curling more tightly around Nathan. He really said all that? God, Nathan, I don't know how you didn't punch him.

Wouldn't've done any good. As if a wall had been breached, Duke could feel Nathan's bone-deep hurt, his grief for the lost last hope of any loving relationship with his father.

I'm so sorry, Duke thought quietly. I know you haven't seen eye to eye with him for years, but this... He trailed off. It's gonna be ok, Nate. You've got me, you've got Audrey, we'll get you through this.

I know. Don't know what I'd do without you.

Don't know what I'd do without you either, Duke replied affectionately. Everything he said. It's shit.
Nathan gave a mental shrug.

*It is *Nathan. Every word of it. Every single fucking word. You're not a failure, you don't walk away when things get tough, you dig in and fight back and think your way around problems. You're a good man. The best I've ever met and I won't ever let you forget that.*

Nathan wrapped himself around Duke a little tighter, grateful for those words.

*So, we are going to snuggle for as long as you need, then we're going to get something to eat and maybe some alcohol and then we're going to put this behind us and pretend he doesn't exist. Plan?*

*Yeah….sounds good,* Nathan mumbled.

*Ok,* Duke smiled and curled tightly around him, making sure Nathan knew that he was loved and wanted and the most important person in Duke's world.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

The three gulls enjoy a romantic dinner :) 

Audrey stayed until she was certain that Nathan was, well, if not better than at least ok. As soon as he reassured her that he was (and Duke had confirmed), she dashed off to the station to gather evidence she could take to Internal Affairs, hoping against hope that the Chief wouldn't have already taken steps to hide it.

It took up most of her time for the next few days and she didn't see Nathan or Duke again until the romantic dinner they had planned.

Duke had spent all day fussing, wanting to make sure it was perfect, which Nathan tolerated with amused affection. Despite Nathan's objections, Duke had only made enough for two, with promises that he'd indulge himself with waffles for breakfast instead.

By the time Audrey knocked on the door, everything was ready and Nathan poured glasses of wine while Duke let her in.


Duke smiled warmly. “He is. Come on through.”

Audrey followed him. “Oh my god, that smells amazing,” she said, her mouth already watering.

"Right?  Duke's so amazing,” Nathan agreed, greeting her with a kiss on the cheek.

“He is,” Audrey agreed, grinning at Duke.


”'Just a bit of dinner,' he says," Nathan snorted. "Like diamonds are just shiny rocks.”

“Well they are,” Duke argued. “Anyway, it’s all ready whenever you both are, just needs to go on plates.”

"Shall we? Or you want some wine first?” Nathan asked.

“Food. Definitely food. Haven’t eaten all day,” Audrey said sheepishly.

“Audrey!” Duke whined. “Do I need to nag you as much as I do Nathan?”

“Sorry, Duke, I know you’re right, I just got busy,”

"Think that's a yes," Nathan smiled fondly.

Duke rolled his eyes. “Busy is not an excuse,” he grumbled. “Nate, you’re ok with putting food on plates? Do I need to remind you to use a pot holder this time?”
"That was one time," Nathan grumbled, dishing up the food.

“One time too many,” Duke laughed.

“Well it’s nice to know that I’m not the worst cook around here,” Audrey grinned. “Good to have some competition for a change.”

"Race to the bottom?” Nathan smiled wryly.

“Well neither of you are going to win that one because I’m going to teach both of you to cook. At least some simple stuff. And I have a long time and a lot of patience, so deal with it,” Duke snarked.

Audrey laughed. “Fair. Are we still eating on the porch?”

"Weirdly nice day for October, be a shame not to," Nathan agreed. "Set up some citronella candles to keep the bugs off."

“You’re so thoughtful,” Audrey told him. She picked up the wine glasses and went out onto the porch where Nathan had set up the table with candles as well as a white tablecloth. “This is fancy,” she remarked appreciatively. “You guys are the best.”

"Not a romantic dinner if I don't do it right," Nathan smiled as he put the plates down.

“It’s lovely and you definitely did it right,” Audrey told him, pulling out a chair for Duke before she sat down.

“He did,” Duke smiled affectionately.

Nathan blushed. "Just want everything to be perfect for you guys."

“And it is,” Duke reassured him.

Audrey nodded her agreement and took a sip of her drink. “Good wine,” she smiled. “Duke’s choice, I’m guessing?”

“You would be right,” Duke smiled.

"Duke always knows the best stuff," Nathan smiled.

“Well, when it comes to wine and food, anyway,” Duke said. “And music. Nate has terrible taste in music.”

"Hey!" Nathan protested with mild indignation.

Duke grinned widely. “He likes country,” he stage whispered to Audrey.

She nodded. “I see your point…”

"I play it when I'm in the car, where you guys don't have to listen to it,” Nathan pointed out.

“Which is very considerate of you,” Duke smiled.

"Just keeps me from hearing you two grouse," Nathan teased.

“I don’t grouse,” Audrey grinned. “I’d just switch it off and put some proper music on.”
Duke laughed. “Yeah, no, pop is not proper music either.”

“Oh, so what is?” Audrey grumbled. “The nineties grunge that you listen to?”

“What’s wrong with a bit of Nirvana and REM?” Duke snarked back.

Nathan turned to Audrey, "Can't you just picture him in flannel shirts trying to start a garage band?"

Audrey laughed and nodded. “A terrible garage band.”

“Hey!” Duke glared. “I’ll have you know we were good. We did gigs and stuff.”

"I was right?" Nathan laughed. "Here I thought I was just kidding. Were they paid gigs, or free?"

“Yes, you were right,” Duke grumbled. “Paid gigs. Well, mostly. Some of them were paid in beer but it all counts, right?”


“You really are,” Audrey agreed. “And this food is delicious. Thank you,” she smiled warmly.

“You’re welcome,” Duke said. “Glad you’re enjoying it.”

"It really is," Nathan said happily. "Best cook in Haven, I swear."

“Always was,” Duke smiled. “So, Audrey, Nathan tells me you bake. We should do that together some time.”

“I’d like that,” she smiled. “You can tell me where I’m going wrong.”

“I’m sure you’re not going wrong,” Duke reassured her. “And you might have noticed that Nate has a sweet tooth, he’s definitely not gonna object if we make too much.”

"Really not," Nathan agreed.

Audrey grinned. “If you’re lucky, we might let you lick the spoon.”

"Sounds good," Nathan said innocently, not imagining anything risque in that concept.

“Or other things,” Duke grinned wickedly.

It took Nathan a moment to get it, but when he did he blushed brightly.

“Well now I know which one of you has the dirty mind,” Audrey laughed.

"Can't have been much of a surprise, I'm not exactly a wild child." Nathan said ruefully.

“You’re perfect,” Audrey smiled softly and leaned in to kiss him on the cheek.

"You're sweet," Nathan returned the kiss, then turned to Duke and told him, "You're perfect too, wild child and all."

“You’re both perfect,” Duke smiled sweetly. “I can’t think of anyone else I’d rather be spending time with.”

"Always with the smooth lines," Nathan smiled admiringly.
“Wasn’t trying to be smooth,” Duke said sheepishly. “Just honest.”

“It was definitely smooth,” Audrey laughed. “But it’s nice to know it isn’t just lines.”


“You're amazing, Duke. Wish I could talk like that,” Nathan admitted.

Duke shifted awkwardly. “It helped with work,” he said. “Anyway, you do talk like that. How often do you tell us we’re amazing or perfect?”

“But not eloquently, like you,” Nathan shook his head.

“Maybe, but you speak from the heart and I know that isn’t easy for you,” Duke told him. “That’s what makes it even more special when you do.”

“He’s right,” Audrey agreed. “I’d rather hear a fumbling attempt at telling me something sincere than a smooth line that means nothing - no offense, Duke, I know you mean it.”

Duke nodded to let her know he wasn’t taking offense.

“You guys are amazing,” Nathan said softly, his heart in his eyes.

“So are you, Nate,” Duke smiled.

Audrey grinned happily. “My perfect boys.”

"Can't believe I ever got so lucky. This is…not even a dream come true, I never could have dreamed anything this perfect."

“And you say you’re not smooth,” Audrey teased lightly.

"M'not," Nathan blushed.

Duke laughed. “That was pretty damned smooth.”

"C'mon, guys. 'This is not a dream come true'? That's awkward as hell and not really flattering."

“‘I never could have dreamed anything this perfect’,” Duke pointed out. “That’s not awkward, that’s lovely.”

“As is ‘can’t believe I ever got so lucky’,” Audrey agreed. “You shouldn’t sell yourself short,” she smiled. “You’re better with words than you think you are.”

Nathan's blush deepened. "Guys…"

“Oh god, he’s got embarrassed again,” Duke smiled and turned to Audrey. “How long do you reckon before we can tell him stuff like this and he doesn’t go red and awkward?”

“A long time,” she smiled. “But it’s just all the more reason to keep doing it. So he gets used to the idea that we love him. Just as he is.”

"I know you do, just can't understand why," Nathan said quietly.

“Because you’re you and you’re amazing,” Audrey told him affectionately.

“And you’re sweet, and funny, and caring, and you stand up for what you believe in, no matter
what it costs you. You’re brave and clever and you’re really, really hot,” Duke added.

"Duke!” Nathan spluttered, blushing.

‘‘Duke’ what?” He asked, feigning innocence.

"You know what," Nathan told him.

“Yeah, yeah, you don’t like being reminded that you’re attractive,” Duke rolled his eyes. “I’ll shut up.”

"M' not ‘really really hot’,“ Nathan mumbled.

“You are, but anyway,” Duke replied.

“I’d agree with Duke, to be honest,” Audrey smirked. “But you two have got me wondering now…”

“That's dangerous,” Duke laughed. “Go on, what are you wondering?”

“Have you two…? I mean… Are you sleeping together?” Audrey asked, a light blush on her cheeks.

Nathan’s face immediately went a deeper shade of red than anything either of them had seen before, and he mumbled something utterly indecipherable.

Duke laughed. “I have no idea what Nate just said but to answer your question, yes, in a manner of speaking.”

“Really?” Audrey raised her eyebrows and leaned forwards, resting her elbows on the table. “How does that even work? Sorry, maybe I shouldn't ask, but… I've gotta admit I'm intrigued.”

“Who wouldn't be?” Duke smirked back. “Nate? Want to explain?”

"Not really, no," Nathan muttered. "Why don't you?"

Duke grinned. “Gladly,” he said and turned to Audrey. “Well, sometimes I talk dirty to him while he jerks off - and *fuck* that's a pretty sight - and other times I possess him which is...intense. Like, we can both feel everything, strangest sensation, it's touching and being touched at the same time, and sometimes I jerk off and he sits back and enjoys it and other times he does and I sit back,” he shrugged. “Might seem a bit weird but it feels good and that's all that matters.”

Audrey gazed at him for a moment, then shook her head slightly and raised her glass. “Well, boys, those are some very... interesting... thoughts,” she said with just a hint of laughter in her voice.

Nathan was so red he was almost purple, his shoulders hunched, looking like he wanted to hide under a rock.

“I'd be very happy to tell you more but I think Nate might need to finish that bottle of wine, and then another one, before he's ready to talk about this,” Duke said, glancing affectionately at Nathan before leaning in towards Audrey. “I take it from your response that you don't mind?”

“Not in the slightest,” Audrey smiled. “But Nathan looks traumatized so maybe we should shelve this conversation for another day?”

"S'not…” Nathan tried, stopped, cleared his throat, tried again, "S'not something I'm much used to
talking 'bout."

"Sorry, Nate, we'll leave it," Duke promised.

"For now," Audrey added. "But you know... if it's something that all three of us want to do at some point - and I'd like that, just getting that out there - then it's going to involve a lot of communication."

Duke raised his eyebrows and caught her eye. "You want that?" He whispered and indicated all three of them. When she nodded, he sat more upright and grinned. "Cool."

Nathan couldn't help a different kind of flush as he thought of all three of them in bed. Still...he rubbed a hand over his face. "You're not wrong 'bout communication," he admitted. "We'll need that."

Audrey smiled. "Will you be ok with that?" She asked. "Communication, I mean, not sex, you don't have to answer about that now," she went on hurriedly, her cheeks rosy.

"Be honest, I'd probably be more at ease with the sex," Nathan smiled wryly. "But I'll do my best."

"Good to know we're all on the same page, at least," Duke smiled. "Everything else is just... logistics."

"Yeah," Nathan blushed all over again. He wondered if his capillaries were getting tired.

Duke took pity on him. "Buttercream or cream cheese frosting?" He asked Audrey.

"Random subject change," she laughed. "Or are you asking which I'd prefer to lick off Nathan?"

Nathan squeaked, and squirmed just a little at the very appealing idea.

Duke laughed. "Actually I was asking which you prefer on cakes but now you've got me intrigued."

"Buttercream," Audrey replied. "In answer to both questions," she took a sip of wine, her eyes sparkling as she smirked at Nathan.

"Audrey," Nathan all but whined.

"Ok, ok," she grinned and raised her hands in surrender. "I'll stop. But we do need to talk about this stuff at some point."

"Do we get to finish dinner first?" Nathan asked plaintively.

"Yes," Audrey smiled. "When I said 'at some point', that's what I meant. Not tonight, or next week, or next year, or whenever. Just when we're all ready to discuss it."

Nathan looked down at his plate, poking at the food with a fork. "But...you shouldn't get held up on account of me."

"Nate," Duke said quietly. "All three of us, remember? All equal. Nothing - and I do mean nothing, not even talking - is happening until we're all ready."

"I know, and I appreciate that, but it's not fair to you two to have to sit around waiting because of my hangups."
“It's not fair on you if we don't,” Duke said firmly. “We're waiting. End of discussion.”

Audrey nodded her agreement. “We'll take things as slowly as you need to. And if you never want to, then that's fine, there's no pressure for this to be a physical relationship, any more so than it already has been,” she said. “Of course, if it's just the talking bit that you have an issue with, you could always join with Duke and think at him instead. Let him speak on your behalf.”

Nathan perked up. "Might be easier," he admitted.


“That's a plan then,” Audrey grinned. “But not tonight. Let's just call tonight an... expression of interest.”

Duke smirked. “Oh, I am definitely interested.”

Nathan managed to nod, though his face was still distinctly red.

Audrey smiled affectionately at him. “Eat your food, Nathan, it's too good to waste,” she said. “So, Duke, this band you were in...?”

“Oh god,” he groaned. “What about it?”

“Did you play guitar and look moody?” Audrey laughed.


“You sang?” Audrey raised her eyebrows and turned to Nathan. “He can sing?”

"I don't know that I've ever heard you sing,” Nathan mused.

“I sang,” Duke confirmed. “And yes, I can sing. At least I could when I was alive. Haven't tried since, it seemed a bit pointless. I mean, what was I going to do? Hum the funeral march to myself?”

Nathan looked like he wanted to jump up and hug Duke at those words.

Audrey laughed softly, shaking her head.

“At least you get my humour,” Duke grinned at her.

“I do,” she nodded. “But it is in terrible taste. No wonder Nathan looks horrified.”

"It's not funny," Nathan said softly.

Audrey glanced at Duke. Maybe Nathan had a point. “No, you're right, it isn't. Sorry.”

Nathan reached over and gave her hand a light squeeze. She smiled reassuringly at him and squeezed back.

“Sorry, Nate, I shouldn't have said that, I know how much it bothers you,” Duke said quietly. “It's just that if I don't laugh about it, what's the alternative? Pretend it didn't happen?”

Nathan shook his head. "My fault for bringing the mood down. Sorry."

“No, I think I did that,” Duke smiled wryly. “Anyway, if you've finished with your dinner, don't
forget there's dessert in the fridge."

"Dessert?" Audrey grinned. "You really did go all out."

"Oh, it was nothing," Duke smiled. "Just something I threw together."

"Dessert sounds good," Nathan smiled.

"It really does," Audrey nodded enthusiastically.

"Well it's all ready to go," Duke said. "Someone just needs to get it out of the fridge." He looked pointedly at Nathan.

Nathan took the hint, going to the fridge to retrieve the dessert.

"Oh my god," Audrey said after she'd taken a bite. "This is amazing."

Duke smiled. "Glad you think so, it's a new recipe I wanted to try."

"What's it called?" Nathan asked curiously.

"It's a mille-feuille," Duke told him.

"It's a million kinds of awesome," Nathan said happily. "Looks really difficult to make, too."

"Yeah, it's not easy," Duke admitted. "All the different steps. I made sorbet too," he added, for Audrey's benefit.

"You're the best, Duke," she said affectionately. "Thank you, both of you, for going to all this trouble for me."

Nathan stood and got the sorbet as well. "I'll second that."

"You're both welcome," Duke smiled. "It's been a pleasure."

"You are the best boyfriend I could imagine ever having," Nathan said fondly.

"Definitely," Audrey agreed. "Crap, I just said that out loud, didn't I? Sorry, guys, I know we haven't discussed labelling whatever this is, maybe I got carried away..."

"Audrey Parker, did you just call me your boyfriend?" Duke smiled sweetly.

She blushed in response and glanced guiltily at Nathan.

Nathan just looked confused. "I thought that's what you were. We all agreed we wanted this to be equal all around."

"We did," Audrey said quickly. "It's just that we said that's what we were working towards, and apparently I'm already there and I don't know if you two are."

"You know me, I've been there for weeks," Nathan said. "But Duke, there's no pressure if you're not."

"I'm there too," Duke replied, gazing adoringly at both of them with a goofy grin on his face.

Nathan beamed as if all his Christmases had come at once, too happy for words.
“You guys are the best,” Audrey smiled. “I couldn't ask for anything more. Except…”

"Anything," Nathan said immediately. "You name it, it's yours."

Audrey chewed her lip. “A kiss? One from each of you?”

Duke nodded, his grin even wider than before. “I'm definitely good with that.”

Nathan smiled and leaned over to kiss her softly.

Their kiss was familiar, full of love and tenderness and warmth. When it was over, Audrey smiled happily. “Duke?” She said quietly.

Duke gazed at her, matching her smile. “Ready when Nate is.”

"C'mon in Duke, I'll take the backseat,” Nathan offered.

Duke went to him and settled himself into Nathan's mind. Really ok? He checked in, waiting for Nathan's confirmation before he rose to his feet. He took Audrey by the hand and pulled her up. “Audrey Parker, you're the most amazing woman I've ever met,” he said softly, smiling down at her.

Audrey stood on tiptoes and tilted her face up for Duke to kiss her. Where Nathan was gentle and tentative, hesitant almost, as though he couldn't quite believe that he was allowed to kiss her, Duke was insistent, hungry, leaving her in no doubt that he wanted this - wanted her - and it took her breath away.

Her lips were soft, yielding beneath Duke's and his breath caught in his chest as his mind whirled. He was filled with a sudden doubt that he might have lost his touch in the fifteen or so years since he last did this, but then she was kissing him back and his heart melted.

Audrey was pink and flustered when he drew away and Duke grinned as he sat back down. Leaving now, Nate, you ready? He checked.

Yeah, all good, Nathan thought quietly.

Duke slipped out and settled back into his chair, glancing down to check that he wasn’t hovering above it in some sort of weird fashion. “So that was fun,” he said brightly.

Audrey nodded, biting her bottom lip and looking away before she took a sip of her wine.

"I'm glad for you guys,” Nathan told them, quiet but earnest.


"I'm fine," Nathan smiled. "What do we want to do now? Snuggle in the hammock? Put on a movie?"

“Movie and snuggles,” Audrey smiled. “If that works for you both, too?”

“Good with me,” Duke nodded.

"Sounds good. You're welcome to c'mon back in if you want snuggles with us, Duke. Or you can stay out so you can chat with Audrey, either's fine."

“I’ll come in, if you’re sure you don’t mind,” Duke said hesitantly.
"Always happy to share for snuggles," Nathan reassured him.

“Ok,” Duke said happily.

Audrey grinned. “I’ll let one of you choose the movie this time. I should clear up seeing as you both put so much effort into making it special.”

"I can help clear up, I didn't really do anything," Nathan started gathering the dishes. "Duke, you wanna pick the movie?"

“You did lots,” Audrey said firmly. “Go and sit down. Let me do this.”

"If you're sure…” Nathan obediently went and sat on the couch.

Duke followed him. “So what movie are we watching?”

"You can pick, I'll be happy with anything," Nathan offered.

“Ghost?” Duke suggested, laughing.

Nathan chuckled. "Sure."

“Well I was joking, but why not?” Duke smiled.

"I meant it, Duke, anything you want is fine by me."

“You’re so good to me. Us,” Duke gazed adoringly at him.

Nathan blushed. "Least I can do."

“I mean it,” Duke said quietly. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you two.”

"You're an amazing, wonderful, interesting, selfless person," Nathan smiled.

“Well that goes double for you,” Duke told him. “And Audrey.”

“And Audrey what?” Audrey asked as she came into the room and caught the tail end of what Duke had said.

Nathan grinned. "That you are an amazing, wonderful, interesting, selfless person."

Audrey blushed. “Well you both are too,” she smiled. “What film did you decide on?”

“Ghost,” Duke laughed.

“Really?!?” Audrey giggled. “That doesn't seem like a Nathan sort of film.”

"He suggested it as a joke, I said sure, and here we are," Nathan smiled sheepishly.

“Seriously, I was joking, we can watch something else,” Duke said.

“No, no, Ghost it is,” Audrey grinned and sat on the couch, curling herself against Nathan and wriggling to get comfortable.

Nathan cuddled up against her. "Duke was going to join me for the snuggling," he explained to Audrey.
“If that's ok with you,” Duke checked quietly.

“Of course,” Audrey smiled warmly.

Duke grinned and slipped into Nathan's mind, settling comfortably at the back and curling around him. Ok, Nate?

Nathan curled around him, but he also tried to step back. Fine. You can drive though.

No, Duke insisted. You should, I did last time. I don't want to take over and I don't want you taking yourself out of the equation just because you want to make me happy.

But you've missed out on fifteen years of cuddles, you deserve them more than I do.

I have but how many cuddles did you get in that time?

Nathan didn't reply, but his silence was distinctly sheepish.

Thought as much, so no, I don't deserve them more than you do. Give Audrey a kiss from me and I'll stay right here. It's not like I'm really missing anything, I can feel everything you can.

But I could have had cuddles if I'd tried. Besides, I think she'd be happier too.

That's not the point. You haven't had them so I don't deserve them any more than you do. And no, Audrey wouldn't be happier. She might like me but she loves you.

She loves you too, Duke, or at the very least is fast falling for you - that's obvious. And you're better at this stuff than me anyhow, Nathan said.

Maybe she is, but isn't that what we were all hoping for? All of us together? That doesn't mean me and Audrey and you're just along for the ride, Duke curled around him more tightly. We love you. You're getting the cuddles. Stop arguing with me.

“Are you two alright?” Audrey frowned. “You've gone very quiet. Is something wrong?”

Nathan looked sheepish. "We were arguing over who got to cuddle with you. Both of us thought the other should get to."

“That's... incredibly sweet,” Audrey smiled. “Presumably I get a say in this, so my suggestion would be that you guys split the time.”

Crap, Duke thought. She kinda has a point about not asking what she wanted. Can you apologize for me. And it's a good idea about splitting the time. You first though.

Nathan looked mortified. "You're absolutely right, should never have left you out of it. Was a jerk thing to do. Sorry. From both of us."

Audrey snuggled in closer to him and kissed his cheek. “It's fine, we're just working out our communication. And really, I wouldn't want to have to choose between you like that.”

Nathan kissed her forehead. "We'll do our best to never put you in the middle like that again. And I know Duke will agree with me on that."

Inside Nathan, Duke nodded his agreement.

“I know you won't,” Audrey smiled and hugged Nathan tighter.
Nathan hugged her close and leaned down for another kiss. As much as he felt inferior for not kissing the way that Duke did, he couldn't bring himself to be anything but gentle and tender with her.

Audrey kissed him back, softly, slowly, soaking up his tenderness. His kisses made her feel as though she was special and valuable. Precious, even. He made her feel as though she mattered and stole away all of the negativity and insecurities in her mind. She melted against him.

Nathan held her close, lifting one hand to stroke her cheek as delicately as if her skin were the finest silk.

As Audrey leaned into the contact, she sighed happily and closed her eyes.

Their love radiated along Nathan and Duke's shared connection. What you guys have, it's so special. She trusts you completely, Nate, Duke thought, smiling.

I'd die before I hurt her. Like I'd die before I hurt you, Nathan thought back. You'll get there too, with her. Just a matter of time.

Maybe, Duke agreed cautiously. But still, it's special and rare, the way she's so unguarded with you.

Of course she'll trust you this much too, how could she not? Nothing to distrust, Nathan conveyed the thought as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

You might be right, but do you know what she said to me the first day we met properly? Duke didn't wait for an answering thought. She told me that you were the first relationship she's ever had that she wanted to get serious about. Don't underestimate how special you are to her, Nate. Or to me.

Nathan blushed deeply. Had no idea.

Well now you know, Duke smiled. I might be the wild child but you...you're like marriage material.

You are too, you know, Nathan told him as he leaned down to kiss Audrey's hair. I'd marry you.

Thank you, Duke thought quietly, smiling to himself. He curled even more tightly around Nathan's mind as Audrey squeezed Nathan and let out a blissful sigh.

"You've gone quiet again," Audrey said softly. "You both ok?"

Nathan smiled and gave her another kiss. "We were just talking about how amazing you are, and how special you are to both of us, and how special Duke is to you and I."

"You're both so special to me," Audrey said softly. "I'd have been lucky to find just one of you but to have both of you is... incredible."

Nathan smiled, soft and joyous. "That's exactly how I feel."

Audrey wriggled against him and nuzzled into his chest, smiling happily to herself.

At the back of Nathan's mind, Duke sent a wave of love down their shared connection. That's how I feel too, he thought at Nathan. I never want to lose either of you.

Nathan gently held them both tight, Duke in spirit and Audrey in body, sending his own wave of love back toward Duke. "Duke feels the same way. He says he'd never want to lose either of us,"
he shared with Audrey, knowing Duke had meant the words for both of them.

“He's never going to,” Audrey promised. “Neither of you are and I know it's early days yet but I'm not going anywhere.”

Duke grinned to himself and curled up happily, relaxing and enjoying the closeness the three of them shared.

Nathan smiled and kissed Audrey on the cheek. "You two want a turn to snuggle?"

“That would be nice, if it's ok with both of you,” Audrey smiled.

*I'm happy right here, Duke thought. If you guys want to keep cuddling then you should. I'm fine taking the backseat for a while,* Nathan reassured Duke.

*Ok,* Duke agreed softly and stepped forwards to take control. “Hey Audrey,” he dropped a kiss onto the top of her head and wrapped his arms tightly around her.

“Hey Duke,” Audrey smiled and curled against him. Even the way they cuddled was different - Nathan was warm and solid and dependable, Duke was carefree and relaxed and open. Both gave her the same feeling. Home.


Nathan quietly curled up against Duke's soul, as comforting and dependable to Duke as he was for Audrey. He echoed Audrey's sentiment, as rock solid an anchor as Duke could have ever wished for.

“I mean it, Duke,” Audrey told him. “It's too early to really be thinking like that, but I am.”

“I think we all are,” Duke confessed. “And yeah, maybe it is too early but it's good to know we're all on the same page.” We are all on the same page, right, Nate?

*Definitely,* Nathan agreed.

"Nice to know I'm not alone," Audrey smiled, and leaned up to kiss his cheek.

“*You're not,*” Duke said softly. “None of us are, not any more.”

"And that's pretty damn amazing," Audrey smiled. "*Never figured I'd want to settle down. But this...I couldn't have asked for anything more.*"

“*Me neither,*” Duke smiled. “*Did you mean what you said earlier, about me being your boyfriend? As well as Nathan, I mean.*"

"*Yeah,*" Audrey smiled, stroking his cheek. "*I'd like that. You two would be the most amazing boyfriends ever.*"

Duke grinned and leaned into the contact for a moment before he took her hand and kissed it. “In that case, you should turn around because I give great shoulder rubs which are reserved for very special people. Like girlfriends and boyfriends.” I wish I could do this for you as well, Nate.

"Really?" Audrey shifted around, squirming into position with almost comical eagerness.

*Maybe someday you will,* Nathan told him.
I promise that if I ever can, I will, Duke thought back. “Yes, Audrey, really,” he laughed and waited while she made herself comfortable. He rubbed her shoulders, gently at first, then more firmly, searching for the knots and pressing to release them.

Audrey went limp beneath his hands with a groan that made Nathan squirm restlessly in the back of Duke's mind, his slight arousal bleeding through to Duke.

Duke felt his face flush and quickly shut down that line of thinking. This was just a shoulder rub. But oh god, that sound she made… He cleared his throat. “Better?” He asked her, his hands resting lightly on her shoulders.

"Better doesn't do it justice. You're *magic*," Audrey said blissfully.

“Good,” Duke smiled and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close so she was leaning back against his chest. He dropped a kiss onto the top of her head and closed his eyes.

Audrey happily snuggled against him. "Careful, I'll fall asleep on you," she warned playfully.

“That's fine with me,” Duke smiled. “Good to see you so relaxed.” *You too, Nate, if you want to snooze, I can always hop out.*

*Don't plan to, but can't promise it won't happen,* Nathan thought, contented and relaxed.

"You make a good pillow," Audrey yawned, snuggling against him kittenishly.

Duke smiled and stroked her hair. “I have my uses then,” he teased. *Maybe I should go, just in case,* he worried at Nathan. *I could get a blanket for you both…*

Audrey opened her eyes and looked at Duke very seriously. "Duke, I want you to know something, and I feel pretty safe speaking for Nathan here too. We will *never* use you. You deserve so much better than that. Everything you do for us is so appreciated, but it's never the only thing we want or value or care about. *You* are what matters, it's you that we love and want and enjoy having around. I hope to god we never make you feel like we're just using you, but if you ever do feel that way, please, please, tell us right away so we can stop hurting you like that. Okay?"

*Goes for me too,* Nathan confirmed. *Don't ever want to make you feel like that.*

“Audrey…” Duke started to say that he had just been teasing but thought better of it. “Thank you. For saying that and most importantly for being *you*. Both of you. Neither of you have ever made me feel like that, but I promise that if you ever do - and I'm sure you never will - I'll tell you,” he gently brushed a strand of hair from her face and leaned down to kiss her softly, his hand gently cupping her cheek.

"Good, she murmured, returned the kiss. "I know you were probably just joking," she added as they pulled apart. "But I just wanted you to know that. It felt like something that needed saying."

“It didn’t,” Duke tried to brush it off. “But thank you anyway. It never hurts to be reminded of that and I want you both to know that the same goes for me, I never want to use either of you or take you for granted.” *Especially you, Nate, it would be too easy to take...this, the possession, the snuggling, for granted and I don’t ever want to do that.*

*Not something you need to be grateful for, Duke, I'm happy to. Love doing it.*

Audrey smiled and kissed Duke. "Duly noted, thank you Duke."
Well I am grateful, Duke curled tighter around Nathan and pulled Audrey back so she was tucked into his chest again. “Didn’t you say something about going to sleep?” He said softly.

"That sounds good...but I probably should sleep in a real bed," she sighed with disappointment. "And so should Nathan."

“You should,” Duke agreed, deliberately keeping his own disappointment out of his voice. “Sofa snoozing isn’t good for either of you.”

Nathan stirred. She's welcome to stay if she wants. We wouldn't be getting up to anything, but falling asleep with both of you would be pretty amazing.

Maybe you should ask her, Duke thought tentatively.

Nathan agreed, stepping forward but curling tighter around Duke to show that he didn't want him to go. "Hey, Audrey, Nathan again. You're welcome to stay the night if you wanted. I know we're not ready to...uh...get frisky. But might be nice to just...sleep together. Literally," he offered, pink-cheeked.

Audrey grinned and kissed his cheek. “Then I’ll stay,” she agreed. “I guess you both thought-discussed it first, I don’t need to check in with Duke?”

Nathan nodded. "He was the one who suggested I step up to ask you."

“That was a silly question,” Audrey said ruefully. “Got a spare t-shirt I can borrow to sleep in?”

"No such thing as a silly question when it comes to this stuff. And yeah, of course," Nathan nodded.

Say thanks from me, please, Nate, for checking on me, Duke thought softly. Means a lot to know I'm not forgotten.

“Thanks,” Audrey smiled. “Ready to go to bed now? Or do you want to stay up for a bit?”

"Up to you, I'm good either way. And Duke says thanks for checking on him. He appreciates knowing we're not forgetting about him."

“You're welcome, Duke, I'll always check in with you, even though I know Nathan will have already,” Audrey said softly. “So, bed, then?” She grinned.

"Sounds good. Wanna use the shower?"

“Yeah, long as you don't mind wet hair,” Audrey laughed. “I mean, I'm assuming you don't own a hairdryer.”

"Nah. Could get one, though, if you'll be doing this regular," Nathan offered shyly.

“You,” Audrey smiled and kissed his cheek. “Are the best. I'd love to stay over more often, if that's ok with you both.”

Fine with me, Duke quickly thought at Nathan.


Audrey grinned happily and stood up, offering her hand to Nathan. “C’mon then you two.”
Nathan took her hand and, with a rare playful grin, pulled her down into his arms and nuzzled her hair.

Audrey giggled as she half-fell into his lap. She tucked her hair behind her ear and leaned in to kiss him, a soft brush of lips against lips. “I like impulsive Nathan,” she grinned at him.

"See if I can bring him out more often," Nathan promised, returned the kiss happily. "Maybe I should carry you upstairs like a caveman," he suggested, eyes twinkling.

“Maybe you should,” Audrey smirked.

No, you definitely should, Duke chuckled.

Nathan laughed. "Well I have approval from both parties, so.” He leaned down and picked Audrey up in a fireman's carry, surprisingly gentle for all he was pretending to be rough.

Audrey giggled again, feeling silly and girlish and not at all like herself. “Ok, no, no, hang on, you can't carry me all the way up the stairs,” she laughed.

"Watch me," Nathan said confidently, even though he hesitated a little, uncertain if that was a request to be put down.

“Fine,” Audrey laughed. “But you're the paramedic, if you get injured you're doing first aid on yourself.”

Reassured that Audrey wasn't actually uncomfortable, Nathan headed for the stairs. "Ogg no need doctor," he declared in his best caveman voice. "Ogg have mate!"

What the actual fuck? Duke thought, somewhere between amused and embarrassed. Sometimes it's better to say nothing at all, Nate, he teased.

Audrey laughed. “Ok then, Ogg, but don't say I didn't warn you.”

Nathan blushed at Duke's teasing and stopped talking. A little too impulsive, he guessed. It was just as well - carrying Audrey up the stairs was hard, and he needed to concentrate on the effort.

Audrey let out a little squeal and dug her fingers into his shirt as he wobbled dangerously on the top stair.

Careful, Nate, Duke grumbled at him, worried.

Nathan gripped the railing with iron determination, steadying himself and making it up the steps. He managed to make it to the bedroom where he dropped Audrey - still gently on the bed. "Ogg tired," he mumbled ruefully, flopping down beside her.

“I'm not surprised,” Audrey laughed quietly. She rolled over and propped herself up on one elbow, gazing down at him with soft affection before she kissed him again. “It was very sweet, and Ogg is funny.”

Nathan looked tentatively relieved. "Didn't think it was dumb?"

“Nope,” Audrey said cheerfully. “It made me laugh. Nothing that makes me laugh is dumb.”

She's right, Duke thought softly. I love hearing her laugh.

Nathan smiled and kissed her. "Duke says he loves your laugh. I do too."
“Then I'll try to do it more often,” Audrey promised. “Got that spare t-shirt so I can go shower?”

"Got you,” Nathan hauled himself reluctantly off the bed and pulled a t-shirt out of his dresser, then went to the linen closet for a towel. "Anything else you need?"

“Toothbrush?” Audrey asked, without much hope.

Nathan considered this. "Think I might still have a goodie bag from the dentist in a box of stuff I was gonna donate. Lemme check."

“Thanks,” Audrey smiled warmly.

Nathan went into a spare room and rummaged for a bit, coming back with a little plastic bag with a cartoon tooth on it

“Cute,” Audrey laughed and took it from him. “Back in a couple of minutes,” she said as she disappeared into the bathroom.


Yeah, I'm good, just been enjoying spending time with you both. It's...the way you two are together, it's so intimate and it's such a beautiful thing to be a part of.

Nathan curled around him tightly.  You are a part of it, you know that, right?  Not an observer, not on the outside looking in, you are fully and completely a part of us.

I know, Duke thought softly. It amazes me but I know and it's... He trailed off, losing the ability to come up with the right words even in his thoughts.

Wish I could kiss you, Nathan thought wistfully.

I wish that every day, Duke replied sadly. And hug you and hold your hand and squeeze your shoulder.

I'd just hold you for hours and hours, the whole damn day. Hold you close, kiss you gently, run my fingers through your hair the way Audrey does that you like so much.

Sounds like the perfect way to spend a day, just kissing and touching and relaxing. Loving each other.

Telling you how much I love you, telling you how wonderful you are, telling you all the things I treasure about you.

You tell me all of those things anyway, Nate, and every single one of them is precious to me. And maybe I don't tell you how I feel often enough but I love you. With all of my heart and everything I am.

Nathan curled around him more tightly, letting Duke see how much the words meant to him. Want to say it to your face, he thought softly. Want to say it aloud, while I hold you, kisses between each time I say it so you know it's more'n just words.

I want that too, Duke thought, twining himself around Nathan. More than anything else in the world. But I know it's not just words, everything you think, everything you feel, it's right here, Nathan. You don't hold back when you're telling me those things. I know you mean every single word.
Nathan wrapped himself around Duke all the more closely, welcoming his embrace. *Gotta admit, wouldn't want to be without this. Sharing with you is...something really special.*

*It really is, it's... It feels like a miracle to me. Every part of it. Being able to experience life again, that you trust me enough to let me do this. Most importantly, how close I feel to you. And I wouldn't want to be without it either, but it's you that matters to me, not this.*

*Course I trust you, Duke. Never been a reason not to.*

*Maybe, but it still amazes me that after everyone who's hurt you, everyone who's screwed with your head, you have enough trust left in you to let me do this.*

*You're not like them. Never have been, never will be.*

*No, but in your shoes I don't think I could... Duke stopped thinking as Audrey came in, dressed in Nathan's t-shirt, still towelling her hair dry.*

"Your turn," she smiled. "I don't think I used up all the hot water."

Nathan gave her a soft, goofy smile. "You look amazing."

*She really does,* Duke agreed.

Audrey looked down at herself doubtfully. "Uh, thanks," she smiled.

"You'd look amazing in a burlap sack covered in mud. You know that, right?" Nathan told her.

"You are adorable, Nathan," Audrey grinned, bouncing onto the bed beside him. "And that sounds very much like a line straight from the Duke Crocker playbook."

*She's not wrong,* Duke laughed. *Maybe I'm having a bad influence on you.*

Nathan blushed. "Just the truth," he mumbled. "Isn't a day goes by I don't think you're gorgeous, no matter what you're wearing or doing."

"You're gorgeous too, both of you," Audrey leaned over for a kiss.

Nathan gave her a lingering kiss, pulling away only reluctantly. "Be out in five," he told her, grabbing a fresh pair of briefs and heading for the bathroom. *You're welcome to stay and enjoy the shower, or keep Audrey company, either way,* he told Duke.

*I'll stay,* Duke replied. *You won't be long and Audrey might appreciate a few minutes to herself.*

*Fair enough,* Nathan agreed, and told Audrey. "Duke's gonna stick with me, just so you know."

"Ok," she smiled and curled up with her head on the pillow. "See you both in a few."

Nathan smiled fondly at the sight before heading into the bathroom. He emerged shortly after, clean, underwear-clad, with his damp hair sticking up in spikes.

"Ready for bed?" Audrey murmured sleepily.

"Definitely," Nathan got into bed, reaching over to stroke her cheek. "You're absolutely adorable. Do you and Duke want to snuggle some more?"

"If that's ok with both of you," Audrey smiled and turned her face towards his touch.
Sounds perfect, as long as you don't feel you have to, Duke replied.

"Happy to," Nathan smiled and settled sleepily in the back of his mind so Duke could step forward. Duke rolled towards Audrey. “Hey,” he said softly as he opened his arms to her.

"Hey, Duke," Audrey said happily, scooting over and cuddling up against his chest. "Mm, you're nice and warm."

“You are too,” Duke smiled and pulled the covers around them more tightly. He gently stroked her still-damp hair and dropped a kiss onto her forehead. “We'll get you a hairdryer soon,” he promised.

"You guys are the best. My sweet boys," she smiled.

“You're the best too,” Duke smiled and pulled her closer. “I...uh... I usually stay with Nate while he sleeps but if you aren't comfortable with that then I'm happy to go. I know it's probably a bit freaky.”

"Stay with as in like you are now? Or do you pop out and just hang out in here doing whatever?"

“I hop out and I...uh, sorta watch him sleep,” Duke said sheepishly.

Audrey bit her lip. "I don't want to kick you out, especially if that's how you usually spend your evenings. But as much as I care about you, I think I might need a little more time for that,” she hugged him tightly, kissing his cheek to soften the admission.

“Hey, no, that's fine, that's why I mentioned it,” Duke squeezed her. “I won't do anything you're not comfortable with, I'll go in a couple of minutes, before you go to sleep so you don't have to worry.”

She hugged him back, giving him another soft kiss. "Thanks, Duke. I'm sure I'll get there, it's just...the idea takes some getting used to."

“Yeah, I'm sure,” Duke said quietly.  *Nate, be honest, is it freaky? You always said it's like I'm watching over you and now I'm wondering if you meant in a stalker-ish way,* he tried to joke.

Nathan stirred sleepily.  *Nah. Idea might've freaked me out at one point, but now it's comforting. Know if anything goes wrong, you'll be here.*

*I'll always be here, Nate, I promise you that,* Duke thought. Speaking aloud, he said “I should go, let you two cuddle a bit before you go to sleep.”

**Up to Audrey, just as soon you'd stay,** Nathan clung to him a little more snugly.

*I'd rather stay too but she already said she's not comfortable with the idea so I'll go. Watch TV downstairs or something,* Duke pointed out as he prepared to leave. He gave Audrey a final squeeze.  “G'night, Audrey,” he said, lightly kissing her on the forehead.

Nathan reluctantly uncurled from around Duke. He didn't imagine his hold could keep Duke from leaving, but he wasn't about to risk it.

“Night, Duke, thank you for a lovely evening,” Audrey smiled sleepily and brushed her fingers against his cheek.

**Night, Nate,** Duke thought before he slipped out. He drifted to the door and turned back, just for a
split second, seeing them move closer together now that he'd gone. He smiled to himself and left, already replaying the evening in his head.

Nathan sleepily snuggled against Audrey, kissing her cheek.

Audrey curled more tightly against him. “You two are the best,” she murmured.

"So happy you feel that way," Nathan mumbled contentedly.

“Do you think Duke's ok?” Audrey worried.

"He's okay. He gets how someone could find it creepy. He said he's gonna go downstairs and watch some TV."

“Good,” Audrey wriggled her shoulders to get more comfortable and pulled Nathan closer to her. “I don't like to think of him downstairs on his own, he's been on his own too long, but...yeah, just not ready for that.”

"It's okay, we both get it," Nathan reassured her. "And it's not like being stuck in an abandoned house for a decade. We're right upstairs, we'll see him in the morning."

Audrey nodded. “What does he like for breakfast? Maybe we could make him something?”

Nathan grinned. "Waffles. We have a long standing debate over waffles vs pancakes."

“I like both,” Audrey smiled. “We'll make him waffles in the morning.” She yawned.

"Assuming we don't burn them to a crisp," Nathan said ruefully.

“There is that,” Audrey laughed softly. “Ok, so maybe we take him out for breakfast instead.”

"Sounds great. I know a little diner, looks like a hole in the wall, but does a great breakfast."

“Perfect,” Audrey grinned. “If you're ok with that, if it isn't too much like me and Duke going out without you, I mean.”

Nathan looked puzzled. "Why would it be? I literally can't not be there."

“Yeah, fair point,” Audrey smiled. “So breakfast out and a lazy Sunday, maybe take in some of your favourite old buildings.”

"That sounds amazing." Nathan stroked her cheek, his expression absolutely adoring. "You're incredible, Audrey. Won't ever stop being so grateful you accept Duke."

Audrey gazed back at him, her eyelids heavy. “I won't ever stop being grateful that he accepts me,” she said. “If he hadn't pushed you, if he hadn't made this ok, we wouldn't be here. You're both incredible.”

"He's so selfless. Much as I was interested in you - and I really, really was - I dragged my feet, I didn't want to hurt him. Never could have imagined it'd turn out so well."

“It's amazing,” Audrey smiled and kissed his cheek before she turned over and pulled his arm around her, snuggling her back against him.

"Really, really is," Nathan murmured happily, curling around her and nuzzling her hair.
“Love you,” Audrey mumbled, already half asleep.

"Love you too, Audrey," Nathan yawned.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Nathan struggles with his insecurities when Duke and Audrey grow closer

With Nathan still working paramedic shifts in addition to his real estate job, he was out of the house a lot. Audrey had started popping over to spend time with Duke, partly so that he didn't get lonely with Nathan being gone so much but partly so that she could grab every possible moment with Nathan by being there when he arrived.

One evening, Nathan came home to the sound of laughter coming from the kitchen.

He went to the kitchen doorway and looked in. Audrey and Duke were bent over at some burned mess on the stove, Duke's expression was incredulous and Audrey's was rueful. Duke made some comment Nathan couldn't quite hear - it must have been witty, because they both broke into peals of fresh laughter. Neither noticed Nathan, and after a moment he backed away and headed quietly for the stairs. He'd just make an early night of it.

He wasn't quiet enough, Duke knew every sound that the house made and the slight creak of the stairs caught his attention. "Nate?" He called as he drifted out into the hallway.


Duke frowned at him. "Everything ok?"

"Yeah, fine. Just a long, busy day. Didn't mean to interrupt you guys, sorry. Have fun with Audrey."

"What? You're not interrupting... Nate, what's going on?"

Audrey came through from the kitchen, drying her hands on a tea towel. "I've put that pot in to soak, see if we can save it," she said cheerfully. "Nathan, you're back," she threw herself at him and kissed his cheek.

Nathan blushed at her enthusiasm, hugging her tightly. "Sorry I interrupted, looked like you guys were having a good time."

“You're not interrupting,” Audrey told him. “Duke was just trying to teach me how to cook. It...uh...isn't going well.”

Duke laughed. "Understatement."

Audrey glared at him before she chuckled. "Yeah, maybe," she turned to Nathan and squeezed his arm. "I know you've been exhausted with work and I wanted to do something nice for you. I'm sorry it didn't work out."

"You tried to do something really sweet for me. That's what matters," Nathan said softly.

"Yeah, tried,” Audrey grimaced. “So, we're ordering takeout. You joining us?”
"We'll get your favourite," Duke grinned. "If you want to, of course, I know you said you were going straight to bed but you should really eat something first."

"I know, but I'm really tired. Think I'll just crash. You two enjoy yourselves."

"Nuh-uh," Audrey said, grabbing his hand. "Not taking no for an answer. Come and sit down, we'll get some food, then you can go to bed."

"Guys, it's okay. I'm tired and you were having a really good time. I'll just crash and you can go back to what you were doing," Nathan protested as he was reluctantly dragged to the couch.

"What we were doing - or maybe I should say what I was doing, despite Duke's best efforts - was ruining pots. You're not interrupting anything," Audrey said firmly as she gave him a gentle shove so he fell onto the couch. "So. You are going to sit there and relax, Duke's going to keep you company and I'm going to finish clearing up the mess I made."

"Guys, no, I don't want to ruin it, you two should keep each other company."

"Nope," Audrey said cheerfully, already going to the kitchen. "Duke, stay there, that's an order."

Duke laughed. "Well if you put it like that…"

"But you guys were having such a good time," Nathan said unhappily.

"And now you're here, we'll have a better time," Duke smiled.

Nathan doubted that, but he knew better than to voice it.

"Nate, what is it?" Duke asked softly. "Was it really a bad day or is it something else?"


"Ok, let me put it another way," Duke said. "I know there's something wrong, beyond you being tired, and I'd really like it if you told me what it is."

Nathan's shoulders slumped. "It's nothing. Just me being stupid."

"What's you being stupid?" Audrey asked, catching what Nathan had said as she came back in.

"Nate's been trying to convince me he's just tired," Duke told her. "He was about to tell me what's actually wrong."

Audrey frowned and dropped onto the couch beside Nathan. She lifted his arm and cuddled into him. "What is it? And don't say it's just you being stupid."

"It is, though. It's great that you two are getting along, it's amazing, it's perfect. It's what I wanted, what I dreamed of."

"But…?" Duke asked as Audrey curled more closely into Nathan's side.

Nathan shifted. "You're both always telling me you think I'm amazing, wonderful, great, all that sort of thing. Don't think you're lying. Should have more faith in you."

"You're all of those things," Audrey said as she squeezed him tightly.

"We'd never lie to you, Nate," Duke promised. "What brought this on?"
"I know you're not lying, know you never would. Just...can't see it. 'Specially when I watch you two together. You're both gorgeous, smart, funny...don't know what the hell you see in me. Don't really feel like I'm bringing anything to the table. You don't need me," Nathan mumbled.

“Nathan...you're all of those things too, and we love you and of course we need you. We're not complete without you, when you're not here it's like there's a part of us missing,” Audrey said softly, her arms wrapped around him, holding him close.

Duke nodded his agreement. “That's exactly it, Nate, you're as much a part of this as either of us are. More so, even. You brought us together.”

"Just sometimes wonder if you'd be happier without me," Nathan said very softly.

Audrey cupped his cheek in her hand and guided his face so he looked her in the eyes. “Nathan, no, please don't ever wonder that,” she murmured.

“Nate?” Duke said softly. “Could I come in?”

Nathan nodded, trying to lock down his feelings as Duke joined with him. But he'd never been as good at it as Duke was, and his emotions leaked through - fear, inadequacy, hurt.

Nate, I'm so sorry we made you feel like this. Never want to do anything to hurt you and I know Audrey feels the same, Duke told him, wrapping closely around his soul.

"You didn't do anything wrong, either of you. This is all me. I'm happy you're getting along so well, I swear I am," Nathan said, almost desperately.

Audrey kissed his cheek, then his forehead, holding him tight as she spoke. “We love you, Nathan, everything about you, everything you are.”

Everything, Duke echoed in Nathan's mind. Neither of us is going anywhere, you're ours and we're keeping you.

Nathan curled around both of them, holding tight even as he asked quietly, "But if you'd met each other first, would either of you have even looked at me?"

“Yes,” Audrey said without hesitation. “Yes, I absolutely would have. Because you're brave and caring and considerate and when you touch me it lights up my whole being and, most importantly, you feel like home and I've never felt that before.”

I would have too, Nate, Duke added. You're kind and sweet and you make me laugh. You're you, and you're pretty fucking amazing.

Nathan blushed, but hugged them tighter. "Both so amazing. Don't deserve you two."

You absolutely do, don't ever want you to forget that, Duke threw all of his emotions at Nathan. He held nothing back, sending love and want and affection as he tried to project his complete and utter devotion to Nathan.

“It's us who don't deserve you,” Audrey said quietly. “Not if we've made you feel like you're not a part of this.”

"It wasn't you, you didn't do anything wrong, I'm serious," Nathan said earnestly, his brow creasing with worry. "It's just me. Like I said, it's stupid."
“It isn't! Nathan, you aren't stupid,” Audrey insisted. “This whole thing is different and unusual and honestly...? A little weird. Of course it's going to take some working out.”

She's right, Duke agreed. Remember how I was when you two first met? Trust me, I know how you're feeling. But we're all together because of you, don't ever forget that. He tried again to push a wave of his love and emotions to Nathan, hoping that this time they'd get past the defensive barrier Nathan had up even in his mind.

"Maybe so, but I don't want you two thinking you did anything wrong,” Nathan said, softly but insistently. "Literally nothing you could've done differently would've made any difference."

Audrey nodded. “It isn't easy, not for any of us. We love you, Nathan, and that isn't going to change.”

Nate, please believe what she says, she means it from me too. Half the time we're together, you're all we talk about. Think about. Whatever Audrey and I might feel for each other, you're a part of that. The biggest part. We're not going anywhere, Nathan, neither of us are and we hope you won't either.

Cradled securely against them, Nathan sighed softly and slowly began to relax. "Love you too," he mumbled. "So much."

Audrey pulled him closer to her. “You're the most important person in my world,” she said quietly, whispering into his ear with their cheeks pressed together.

Goes for me, too, Duke added as he curled more tightly around Nathan, their souls intertwined.

Nathan cuddled against them, physically and spiritually. "Sorry I was an asshole about it,” he mumbled.

“You weren't,” Audrey said fiercely. "There's nothing wrong with feeling insecure, we all do from time to time. We'll always do our best to reassure you."

Just promise me one thing? Duke asked, not waiting for an answer before he went on. Tell us if you're feeling like that. Before it gets as bad as it did today. Let us help you, don't try to shut yourself away. Let us be here for you.

"But you were so good to me. You were making me dinner because I'd had a rough week, you practically pounced on me when I came in, so happy to see me, you took care of me and cuddled me, and all this time I was thinking you didn't want me," Nathan muttered.

Audrey snuggled against him, nuzzling into his neck. “I'm sorry we made you feel like that.”

"But you didn't, that's my point," Nathan said unhappily. "You were doing everything exactly right and I still twisted it into some stupid martyr bullshit."

“Because you were hurting and that's on us,” Audrey said. “If we'd done everything exactly right then you wouldn't have been.”

We should've been reassuring you more, Nate, explained why Audrey's been here so much. We've made mistakes and that's on us. You're not stupid, or a martyr. It was bad communication, that's all.

"It wasn't bad communication and it wasn't on you. That's what I'm saying. There's nothing you could have done different that would have prevented this," Nathan said, upset. "Never wanted you
to feel guilty, it wasn't your fault!"

“...Ok....” Audrey said quietly, pulling back slightly and studying him intently. “I don't know what you want me to say, Nathan, I don't know what you need to hear.”

*Hey, you had an insecure moment, it’s allowed. We love you. It’s ok, Nate, however you’re feeling is valid but you need to let us in, let us help you through it, whatever you need.*

"I need you to not blame yourselves for what's not your fault. I'd hate for you to feel guilty about this. Please?" Nathan said softly.

Audrey nodded and smiled. “Ok, I can do that, long as you promise to tell us if we do something that hurts you, intentionally or not. Don't just try to run off and hide. We're here for you.”

"Duke said that too. Funny - just the same thing I told him after he got upset at you that first time. Guess it makes me a hypocrite."

*Makes you human, Nate, easier to say things than it is to do them.*

"I'll try," Nathan mumbled. "Can't say I'll succeed, but I'll try."

"That's all we can ask,” Audrey smiled and kissed his cheek again, nuzzling into him.

"You guys are so amazing. Deserve better'n me."

*There isn't anyone or anything better than you in the world.* Duke curled tightly around Nathan's mind. *No one else I'd rather be with, nothing else I'd rather be doing than spending time with you.*

"Same goes for you," Nathan yawned, exhausted.

Audrey shuffled backwards on the couch, pulling Nathan with her so he could lie down with his head in her lap. She ran her fingers through his hair. “Why don't you snooze for a bit? We'll wake you when dinner gets here.”

"Mmm," Nathan mumbled agreeably. "So good to me. Both of you."

Duke quietly slipped out of Nathan's mind. “No more than you'd do for either of us,” he smiled. “Pizza ok with everyone? I can order online.”

"S'fine," Nathan told him, hiding his disappointment at Duke's absence.

“Hey,” Duke said softly, seeing the expression on Nathan's face. “I'll be back in a bit, have a nap now, like Audrey said, and I'll join you for pizza and more cuddling in a little while.”

Audrey smiled at Duke and gave Nathan's shoulder a light squeeze. “And I can stay over. If you like.”

"Please," Nathan snuggled closer against her, his eyes closing. "Duke, can I...can I ask you for something?"


"I can't feel you as I fall asleep, I...I want to know you're here. Can you...talk, or sing, or...just let me know you're here?"

“Ok,” Duke said softly, quickly running through which songs would be most likely to help Nathan
sleep. He smiled and launched into a passable rendition of one of Nathan's favorite country songs, which earned him an eyeroll from Audrey.

Nathan blinked at him slowly, lips curving in a soft smile as he relaxed further, his expression one of complete and total adoration.

Duke gazed back at him, similarly adoring, as Nathan slowly drifted into sleep. “He's exhausted,” he murmured to Audrey. “Could feel it while I was with him.”

"I hate to think how long he's been worrying himself ragged with this," Audrey said, letting her guilt show on her face now that Nathan wasn't awake to see it.

“A while, I think,” Duke admitted. “He thinks he can hide it from me when I'm with him but he can't. I didn't want to call him on it so I've just been letting it go, not bringing it up. Now I think I should have. I shouldn't have let it go on like this.”

"You did what you thought was best for him. Don't blame yourself just because hindsight's 20/20," Audrey said gently.

Duke nodded. “Maybe. It isn't just us, either, it's work as well. Trying to do both jobs, running himself into the ground. I keep trying, Audrey, I really do. Try to persuade him to take a day off, stay in bed, have a bath, just relax for one damned day...But he won't, not unless I'm with him and I tell him it's what I want to do and that just isn't the same.”

"He's always been better at taking care of others than himself," Audrey said with fond exasperation. "But you're right, two jobs isn't healthy. I know he loves what he does - both of them - but he has to find a way to cut back." 

Duke nodded. “He does but I don't know how to persuade him to do that. He loves both of his jobs and both of us and he's just stretching himself too thin trying to love everything and it breaks my fucking heart that he won't accept that back from us.”

"I've talked to him about cutting back his hours, but he's worried about being able to keep this place up if he does," Audrey frowned.

“Which is stupid,” Duke said. “He could afford it when he was just working real estate and the payments have only gone down since then. I've run the figures for him and yeah, ok, he couldn't afford to completely give up the real estate job, but he can easily halve his hours. It's just like...oh shit,” Duke trailed off as a sudden thought occurred to him.

"What?" Audrey asked worriedly.

“It isn't the money he's worrying about, it's failing,” Duke said. “I bet you anything that he's either worried that having to cut back his hours makes him a failure, or that if he cuts back his hours he won't be as successful as he is and that'll make him a failure.”

"Oh god, you're right," Audrey groaned.

“And then he came home and found us laughing and it must've been like a kick in the gut. No wonder he got so upset,” Duke gazed down at Nathan's sleeping form. “He's so peaceful like this,” he smiled softly. “I'd do anything to keep that look on his face.”

"Me too. Guess we'll just have to keep showing him how much we love him. Like that's hard.”

“Yeah, the only hard part is in getting him to believe it,” Duke said sadly.
"I know. But we'll just keep at it. Like he and I do for you," she smiled gently.

"Yeah," Duke agreed. "Everything you do, both of you, I do appreciate it and I promise I'm getting there. It's just taking me a while. But I'd hate for either of you to think I don't notice all the little things. I do and I cherish every single one."

"I never doubted it, Duke," she smiled softly at him.

"And I just realized...I've never said it, I've always said 'we' and never 'I'. I'm sorry, Audrey," Duke looked away, hesitating, worrying that maybe he shouldn't say it while Nathan was asleep. He looked back at her. "Audrey Parker, I love you."

Audrey smiled and reached up as if to caress his cheek. "I love you too, Duke Crocker."

Duke smiled warmly and turned his face towards the almost-touch. "It just didn't seem right not telling you that and only ever using 'we' or telling you both at the same time, I've told Nate often enough, it only seems right that I should tell you too."

"I appreciate that. You're so sweet, Duke," she smiled.

"So are you," he replied. "Both of you," he added, just in case Nathan could hear him in his sleep. "I'll order that pizza, make sure you guys get something to eat before you go to bed."

"You're the best, Duke. You do so much for us. I hope you never think it goes unappreciated."
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Audrey rights the wrongs from Duke's past and there are many hugs

With Nathan's confidence in himself restored, at least for now, and after he'd promised to consider slowing down a little bit, Audrey turned her attention back to the investigation into Garland.

As she'd suspected, he'd tried to fudge the evidence but she was fast enough to make copies and deliver them to Internal Affairs before he could do too much damage. A few weeks later, she triumphantly bounced into the house, letting herself in with the key Nathan and Duke had insisted she have.

"Good day at work?" Nathan smiled, greeting her with a kiss.

"You could say that," Audrey grinned and returned the kiss. "Although…," her face fell slightly. "Maybe not…"

"What is it?" Nathan asked, looking worried.

"Just...sit down, I'd rather wait for Duke, it involves both of you."

Nathan looked even more worried. "Duke? Can you come here please?" he called.

“What's up?” Duke called back, already on his way. “Oh, hey Audrey, I didn't hear you come in. Good day?"

“Uh, yeah,” she said hesitantly. “At least I think so, you guys might not…”

"Just tell us, for god's sake," Nathan fretted.

Audrey took a deep breath. “The chief’s gone. Forced retirement, just like I thought.”

Nathan's face shuttered, his expression closing instantly.

“Nate…?” Duke said hesitantly, immediately going to his side.

"Who's taking over?" Nathan asked emotionlessly.

“Temporarily, Stan’s stepping up while they work out something permanent,” Audrey told him, chewing her lip.

"Hope whoever you get is a good boss," Nathan told her.

“Actually... I thought I might... I mean, there's going to be a whole application process and I'm an outsider, probably don't stand a chance, but…” Audrey said softly.

Duke glared at her. “Can we not worry about that right now? Nate, are you ok?”

Nathan gave Duke a brief nod, then turned back to Audrey. "You should give it a shot. Can't hurt
“Will do, but Duke's right, are you ok? I mean, I know what you said but now it's come to it... I'm sorry, Nathan, I should've just stayed out of it.”

"Don't apologize. Injustice should never go unaddressed, 'specially knowingly. Was past time to put things right for Duke. Chief reaped what he sowed. You broke a cycle that'd been going on for generations," Nathan told her, his expression still locked down tight.

“Yeah, maybe. On that note, Duke, the department should be issuing an apology and retraction. I couldn't tell them you were still here but I think the Teagues are going to run something in the paper. I know it isn't much, but it's...something, I guess. Some sort of acknowledgement.”

“Thanks Audrey,” Duke tried to smile. “Just... please tell me it was just me, it wasn't an ongoing thing?”

“Just you, you don't have to worry about anyone else. I don't know if that makes it better or worse, but no, no one else suffered the way you did.”

Duke nodded. “Good, that's good.”

"Glad we at least don't have other hurting kids to worry about. Glad it's a public apology. Even if people think Duke's not around, town still oughtta know he wasn't what everyone thought he was.”

“That's what I thought,” Audrey nodded.

Duke looked away, hiding the emotions that he knew would be written on his face. “Thanks, Audrey.”

“It's ok, Duke, it needed to be done. I'm sorry for stirring it all up in the first place.”

“Nathan's right, you shouldn't have to apologize,” Duke told her. He shook his head slightly, as though clearing his thoughts.

"Are you okay, Duke?" Nathan asked softly, looking worried.

“I'm fine,” Duke replied, still not looking at either of them. “It's over, right? I don't have to think about it any more.”

"Do you want to join me?" Nathan offered.

“If you don't mind. Either of you,” Duke glanced at Audrey.

“You should, Duke,” she said quietly. “Let me give you a hug.”

"Please," Nathan nodded, opening his arms.

Instead of the usual warm welcome Duke got from Nathan, this evening he was closed off, hollow. Strung tight, as though he would lash out if anyone even so much as thought the wrong thing. Nathan was only just holding things together and Duke curled around him tightly and tried to offer as much comfort as he could. I know you're not ok, he thought.

Yeah, well. Neither are you. Nathan replied wryly, wrapping around him as well.

Fair point, Duke laughed humorlessly. You driving or am I?
Don't much care.

Ok, then, Duke thought, confused. You should care.

Maybe. Still don't. Trust you.

Nate... I… I've never felt you like this before. It's like you don't give a fuck about anything, Duke thought, frantic with worry.

Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you.

Don't be sorry, just...go and get a hug from Audrey.

“Guys?” Audrey said quietly. “Neither of you are talking to me, what's going on?”

"Sorry. We're worried about each other," Nathan told her, shifting over to give her a hug.

“I'm worried about both of you,” Audrey said as she wrapped her arms around him.

"Not wrong to. Both pretty much a mess," Nathan mumbled.

“Yeah,” Audrey murmured, stroking his hair. “Can you talk to me about it? Or am I better off just doing this and letting you two think it out between you?”

"Don't want you feeling worse than you already do."

“Well, I'm not sure that's possible right now so you might as well talk to me. Yes?"

"Duke's upset by having this all dredged up."

Hey! Duke fired at him. You might have a point but I think Audrey was asking about you.

Nathan grimaced a little. "Now he's scolding me. Fair enough, s'pose I deserved that."

Audrey rolled her eyes but held Nathan tighter. “You're both hurting. Be nice to each other.”

Yeah, sorry Nate, I just... You're trying to hide behind me, trying to talk about me instead of what you're feeling. Trying to speak for me. And that isn't ok.

"No, you're right. He's right. Shouldn't try to speak for you, Duke. Not my place." If anything, Nathan shut down even tighter.

Duke curled around him tightly. It's ok, Nate. You're ok. Whatever it is you're feeling that you won't let me see, we'll get through it.

Audrey ran her fingers through Nathan's hair, her nails lightly scratching the back of his neck as she kissed him on the forehead. “I love you,” she murmured. “Both of you. And I'm here for as long as you need me. You don't have to speak, either of you, just try not to hide.”

"Can't do that," Nathan said quietly. “I let go, it all falls apart.”

Audrey held him tighter still, gently rocking him as Duke curled around his mind.

So fall apart. One night. Let yourself go, sleep, pick yourself back up in the morning. But this...? Closing yourself off from both of us? Yeah, that's not gonna help. I'll go, if you want me to, if that makes it easier, if you'd rather be with just Audrey. I'm sure she'd say the same. Whatever you
need, Nate, we'll do it.

Don't go. Please. Don't go. Nathan wrapped around him fiercely tight. Aloud, he said, "Can't fall apart. Not sure I'd ever go back together."

Ok, ok, Nate, I'm not going anywhere, I'm not leaving you, Duke thought softly.

“You would,” Audrey whispered. “We won't let you break, Nathan, we've got you. Whatever you need.”

"Won't do any good anyhow. I'll get past it."

Audrey's heart shattered. What have I done? She thought as she blinked back tears, burying her face in Nathan's shoulder so he wouldn't notice.

Nathan caught the slight shake of her shoulders, though. "Audrey? Are you okay? What's wrong?"

“I'm fine,” she insisted, mumbling into his shirt. “Nothing wrong.”

Bullshit, Duke thought. She's upset, Nate, about all of this.

Nathan stroked Audrey's hair. "So that's all three of us fibbed about it."

“Yeah,” Audrey half laughed and half sniffled.

"I'm sorry, Audrey. I should never have hurt you over this. You absolutely did the right thing," Nathan said earnestly.

“You don't have to apologize,” Audrey shook her head. “I know, I know I did the right thing, I just wish I hadn't hurt both of you in the process of it.”

"Was worth it, to get justice for Duke," Nathan said. "I'd rather you do it a hundred times over."

Thanks, Nate, means a lot to hear you say that, Duke thought softly.

“Maybe,” Audrey said quietly. “I have to be honest, even knowing how much it's hurt you both, I'd still do it. It wasn't right, and I couldn't leave it alone. I do wish that I hadn't gone digging in the first place but I don't regret what I did afterwards, I'm just sorry that it's dragged up all those memories for Duke, and that it's destroyed what little relationship you had with your father.”

"So he'll hate my guts now. Not really much different," Nathan shrugged.

Doesn't matter what he thinks of you, only thing that matters is what you think of him, Duke pointed out.

Nathan gave a mental shrug. "Audrey, I don't resent you, I know - I feel - that you made the right call. You didn't hurt me. He did, by betraying everything he claimed to stand for."

Audrey breathed a small sigh of relief. “I can only imagine how much that hurts, Nathan,” she said, tucking herself into his chest once again. “I'd be furious in your shoes. Furious and devastated. I'm amazed you're holding it together so well.”

Nathan snorted. "Don't think most people could call my way of handling it exactly healthy."

Inside his head, Duke echoed his snort. Can say that again.
“No,” Audrey smiled slightly and rubbed his back gently. “But everything you grew up with, all the beliefs and morals and ethics he brought you up with... everything that's so central to who you are...that's all been tainted now and it's ok to grieve for that, to take your time to rebuild from it, and to do that however you need to.”

She's right, Nate, I'm sorry for pushing you, Duke thought softly. It's just...it scares me when you shut us out, feels like we might lose you...

"Sorry for scaring you both," Nathan said softly. "This is...just how I am. I can't fall apart. So I build walls. Sure, stuff leaks through, but a little at a time. I can handle that much. That keeps me together until there's enough distance that I can deal. Otherwise....well, it's like the night of that big pile up."

“What happened then?” Audrey frowned. “You seemed ok when you left the Gull.”

"Cause I wasn't thinking about it. I got home, and thought about it."

Audrey nodded. “I can understand that. So you fell apart, I'm guessing. How did you deal with that?”

"I cried like a baby. A hungry, angry baby. Then I made Duke pilot me to bed so I didn't just fall asleep where I was. Wasn't pretty."

And the blanket nest, don't forget the blanket nest, Duke smiled slightly, trying to find the single positive out of that horrible night.

“IT was a fucking awful day,” Audrey agreed. “I cried when I went home. Well, actually, I polished off a bottle of wine and then cried myself to sleep. That wasn't pretty either. I'm glad you had Duke to look after you. I get the feeling he's pretty good at that.”

Nathan hugged her tighter, hating to think of her going through that alone. "Yeah. Makes a damn fine blanket nest. Bet he could make one with room for two, if you ever feel that way again."

Any time, Duke thought affectionately. It's nice and warm and cozy and relaxing, it doesn't actually have to be saved for when either of you are falling apart.

"Thanks, Duke. Tonight might not be a bad night, honestly."

“Duke, if I stay tonight, could you do that for us? And if you wouldn't mind, would you stay with us? All night?” Audrey asked quietly.

Yes, Duke agreed immediately, trusting Nathan to answer for him.

Nathan smiled for the first time since Audrey had delivered the news. It was small, but genuine. "He says yes."

Audrey kissed his cheek twice. “Thank you both. Duke, are you ok?”

I'm fine, Duke thought. Dealing, anyway, the memories aren't much fun but it's kind of a relief to know it's over and it's been acknowledged.

"He's as okay as can be expected. He's not enjoying the memories, but he's relieved that the fuss is over and that the wrongs are being acknowledged."

Audrey nodded. “I'm glad something good came out of the mess I made,” she smiled wryly.
"I can't speak for Duke, but far as I'm concerned, it needed doing. Maybe I didn't become a cop, but who knows how many of the younger ones he spread that poisonous bullshit to."

*It needed doing, Duke agreed. And it means so much to me that you were both prepared to do it.*

“It's a good point, Nathan,” Audrey told him. “I've asked around a bit and it doesn't sound like it's a prevalent attitude in the department. I'm hopeful he didn't pass that bullshit on.”

"Hope so," Nathan agreed, asking Duke, *Okay to pass that along?*

*Of course, Duke agreed immediately. Pass along anything I think at you, I can always ask you not to if it's something I'd rather Audrey didn't know but I don't think there're many secrets left.*

Nathan frowned slightly, but merely conveyed Duke's message to Audrey.

“*You're welcome, Duke,*” Audrey said softly. “*Do you need to talk it through, cuddles, anything?*”

Duke thought for a moment. *No, I don't think so, just need some time. And maybe a blanket nest,*
he laughed quietly.

"He says thanks but no, he just needs some time," Nathan gave another tiny smile. "And maybe a blanket nest."

“Ok,” Audrey replied, gently cupping Nathan's cheek in her hand. “It's not easy talking to you through Nathan but I hope you guys are looking after each other.”

*Yeah, this whole relaying messages thing isn't great,* Duke thought, finding himself torn between wanting to communicate directly with Audrey and wanting to stay with Nathan wrapped around him, where it was warm and comforting and Nathan needed him. He savoured the feeling of Audrey's hand on Nathan's cheek.

"Yeah, I don't mind one bit but I wish you could talk to each other without Duke having to leave. That's not fair to either of you. But I can't think of a way other than us constantly switching back and forth who's driving," Nathan sighed.

*I'd rather stay with you,* Duke thought, making up his mind. Nathan needed him more than he needed to talk to Audrey.

"He's going to stay with me for now," Nathan added.

“Ok,” Audrey smiled. “So, we need to take your mind off things, stop you thinking about stuff ‘til you’re ready.”

"You don't have to do anything for me, I'll be okay. I can just go to bed."

“We can go to bed, snuggle up in a blanket nest. Whatever you need,” Audrey hugged him a little tighter.

"That sounds pretty good," Nathan admitted softly. "But you haven't had dinner."

*I can do something quick,* Duke offered.

“I’m not really hungry,” Audrey admitted. “But I guess Duke won’t let me get away with that.”

"Probably won't let me get away with it either. He offered to make something quick."
“That would be good, Duke, if you don’t mind,” Audrey smiled. “Maybe some toast?”

*Toast?! Toast is not a meal. I'll make something if you don’t mind me driving for a bit. And no, you’re not getting away with it either,* Duke grumbled good-naturedly.

Nathan smiled a little. "Okay, you can drive."

Duke stepped forwards to take control. “What do you fancy, Audrey? Not toast. Pasta’s quick, or stir fry?”

“I don’t mind, Duke,” Audrey ran a hand across her forehead. “I’m really not that hungry, just tired.”

“Stir fry,” Duke decided, leaning in to kiss her on the cheek. “It’s faster.” Ok with you, Nate?

Anything is fine by me, you’re amazing.

Just glad you’re not arguing with me about needing to eat, Duke smiled as he made his way into the kitchen and started throwing ingredients into a pan.

*Know there's no point,* Nathan thought back, wryly amused.

Progress, Duke laughed. *You think Audrey’s ok?*

Hopefully she'll be better if we're better. I gotta make more of an effort not to let it show.

I don't think that's the problem, Nate. She knows you as well as I do, she can see when there's something wrong, no matter how much you try to hide it.

Probably. *Sharp as a tack, she is.* Nathan thought with rueful pride.

She is that, Duke smiled. Doesn't miss a thing.

Can you tell we're talking about how smart she is? And that we're worried about her? Please?

“You ok, Audrey?” Duke called.

“I'm fine,” she said, coming into the kitchen and picking up a bottle of wine and two glasses. “Just worried about you two.”

“Funny, we were both worrying about you,” Duke smiled. “And talking about how smart you are. You don't miss a trick, do you? No matter how much we pretend everything's fine, you always know.”

Audrey paused in pouring the wine. “Part of the job,” she said. “Sometimes it's like I can't switch it off. Want some?” She waved the bottle in their direction.


Rather not. Might help me sleep, might also turn me into a sobbing mess.

Yeah, good point, Duke agreed. “No, thanks,” he told Audrey, keeping one eye on the pan as he leaned over and kissed her. “Not being able to switch off isn't great,” he frowned. “What would help?”
Audrey smirked and raised her glass, taking a long sip.

“Understood,” Duke smiled. He gave the food a final stir and, with uncharacteristic haste, dropped it onto the plates. “Go and sit down, I'll bring it through.”

Audrey nodded and picked up her glass, taking the bottle with her for good measure.

“That's a little worrying, Nathan fretted.

Yeah, Duke agreed. Not that I'm really one to criticise. I'd be most of the way through a bottle of whisky by now.

Maybe cuddles will help. And food, definitely good she's not going to drink a whole bottle on an empty stomach.

I'm hoping she won't drink the whole bottle but yeah. Duke passed a plate to Audrey and sat down on the couch with her.

“Thanks,” she smiled and curled up with her back against the armrest, knees tucked up to her chest, her feet nestled under Duke's thighs.

“Any time,” Duke told her. “You know I love to cook.” You want to drive again, Nate? Get something to eat?

I'll still get it, you go ahead and enjoy your cooking.

Ok, Duke agreed. Shout if you change your mind. “Food ok?” He checked with Audrey.

"It's great as always, Duke," Audrey smiled.

Duke nodded, accepting the compliment. “Are you really ok? Nathan's worrying about you drinking.”

Audrey looked a little defensive. "Okay, maybe not the healthiest coping strategy, so sue me."

“Hey, I'm with you. I mean, whisky rather than wine, but it all has the same effect. Numbs everything. And yeah, maybe he shouldn't fuss, but his heart's in the right place, he's just worried. And feeling guilty that he isn't hiding things well enough to convince you that he's ok.”

Hey, Nathan protested halfheartedly.

Yeah, sorry, Duke thought apologetically. Hypocritical of me.

Well. I did it to you, so turnabout's fair play I guess.

Not really the point. “Sorry, Audrey, Nate's just pointing out that I'm speaking for him and I shouldn't be,” Duke shook his head. “I was out of order. Anyway, you didn't answer my question. Are you really ok? Or pretending about as well as we both are?”

"I think….I'll be okay once you're both okay. Which is not now, but...we'll get there."

Duke nodded and took the empty plate from her. “We will. I think Nate just needs time and space and I'll...bounce back,” he rubbed her knee. “So don't go worrying about us too much, k?”

"I'll try. I can't help worrying about you two, though. I love you too much for that."
“We love you too,” Duke shuffled across the couch, opened his arms to her and inclined his head. “C'mere, cuddles before I go and make this blanket nest that Nate loves so much.”

"You're the best, Duke. You and Nathan both," Audrey said contently as she snuggled against him.

“You are too,” Duke told her as he closed his arms around her and squeezed her gently. “I know you put your job on the line to put things right for me and I want you to know how much I appreciate it.”

“It was the right thing to do. I can't just turn a blind eye when I see something like that,” she shrugged off the praise.

“I know,” Duke kissed her forehead. “But still. I'm long dead and it doesn't really matter any more, not in any practical sense, but you did it anyway. And that means everything to me.”

"It still matters. Even if you weren't still around, it'd still matter. Justice should be served because it's the right thing to do, not because there's any practical purpose.”

Duke nodded. “Maybe you're right. But still. It's...huge for me, having that put right. And you did that so stop underestimating what it means.”

Audrey hugged him tight. "I'm glad I could do that for you,” she said softly.

“Having it all dragged up again...it isn't fun but it's worth it. Feels like a weight's been lifted,” Duke kissed the top of her head. “I just have some processing to do. So don't you go worrying about me, ok?”

"How could I not worry when I love you so much?” Audrey smiled gently.

Duke ran his thumb across her cheek. “Because I'm asking you to not worry. Because Nathan needs both of us more than ever. Because I'm ok and he isn't.” Sorry, Nate, but you aren't.

"You're not wrong about Nathan. Don't worry about him, we'll take good care of him." 

“We will,” Duke tried to smile as he curled himself tightly around Nathan's soul. I'm sorry, Nate, sorry that I can be so...relieved... about this when I know it's destroying you.

It's not. And honestly, it helps to know how relieved you are. Reminds me it was worth it.

I'm glad you think that, Duke nodded. He squeezed Audrey a little tighter. “You both ready for the famous blanket nest?”

"Sounds great," Audrey smiled, as Nathan internally agreed.

“Good,” Duke grinned and gently extricated himself from Audrey's embrace, standing and stretching before he offered her his hand. “C'mon, we've got some serious snuggling to do.”

"Couldn't ask for better," she smiled, and took it.

Duke led her up the stairs and, after the usual awkward interlude of who was using the bathroom first, set about arranging pillows and blankets into the perfect level of coziness. That ok for you, Nate? He checked while they waited for Audrey to come back.

Looks amazing, Nathan thought wistfully.
“That looks cozy,” Audrey smiled as she quietly closed the door.

Duke grinned and kissed her on the cheek. “Get comfy, we'll be with you in five.”

When they came out of the bathroom, Audrey was happily curled up under the covers, hugging a pillow to her chest. Duke gently pulled it out of her grip, ignoring her protesting glare, and slipped into bed beside her. “See, we're better than a pillow,” he smiled, snuggling against her. He pulled the blankets closer around them and made minor adjustments to the pillows for maximum coziness. He wrapped Audrey up in his arms, smiling as she sighed against him, content. “I'm gonna switch with Nate now,” he said quietly. “Did you mean what you said about me staying all night? I promise I won't do anything creepy, I don't stare or anything like that, I mostly meditate, plan recipes, that sorta thing.”

“I meant it,” Audrey murmured. “It'll be nice knowing you're here and I know Nathan will appreciate it.”

Duke smiled. “Then I'll be right here. Love you, Audrey.”

“Love you too, Duke.”

He lightly kissed her cheek and stepped back so Nathan could enjoy the blanket nest.


Love you, Nate, Duke sent a wave of affection to him.

“Love you, Nathan,” she murmured. “How are you doing?”

"Better now. You?"

“I’m ok as long as you both are,” Audrey rubbed his shoulder.

"This helps,” Nathan closed his eyes, relaxing a little.

Duke wrapped himself a little tighter around Nathan’s mind. Glad it’s helping.

“That’s good,” Audrey said quietly. “Maybe things’ll look better in the morning,” she added, kicking herself for the trite words.

"Maybe. Hopefully he won't track me down and give me an earful.”

“I don’t think he will,” Audrey reassured him. “He seemed pretty...defeated.”

"He would be," Nathan said quietly. "He lived for his job. Believed in it with all his heart. Not sure there's anything left of him without it.”

Audrey hugged him tighter. “I’m sorry Nathan, I wish there had been another way.”

Nathan shook his head. "Had to be done. Duke talks like it's ancient history, but if the chief could, he'd still be persecuting Duke that way. And we didn't know if there were others. And trying to hide it, when he thought it'd come to light? Destroying evidence and fudging reports?” Nathan shook his head. "Had to stop.”

It is ancient history, Duke protested. I mean, I’m glad Audrey was able to put things right, but I wouldn't ever have wanted it. Not like this.
Audrey sighed deeply. “I know, it did have to stop, but still...I’d rather it hadn’t come to this. For your sake rather than his,” she said. “But, Nathan, I have to tell you...I didn’t take any pleasure out of it. Destroying his career like this. It was me who pushed for the early retirement, full pension, the lot, rather than just firing him. It wouldn’t have even come to that if he’d apologized, like you asked, like I asked. Stubborn old bastard.”

Nathan looked baffled. "Why would I think you took any pleasure in it? Of course you didn't. You did what had to be done. Besides, you're right, it's his own damn fault." To Duke, he thought, That's true, for you, too. This was his fault. No need to feel bad how it turned out.

I don’t. For him. I do for you, though, Duke thought back at him.

Audrey nodded. “Yeah, I know. Just can’t help feeling that I might have been a little bit too...gleeful when I came home. And I never should have brought up the fact I’m thinking of going for his old job. That isn’t why I did it and I really hope you know that,” she chewed her lip.

Nathan looked baffled. "Never even crossed my mind you were gunning for his job."

“Good,” Audrey relaxed, breathing deeply. “But still, it wasn’t the right moment to bring it up and for that, I’m sorry,” she let out a huff of humourless laughter. “I seem to be saying sorry a lot tonight.”

"Don't need to," Nathan hugged her closer.

“Ok,” Audrey said softly, settling into his arms again. “I’ll stop, I just wanted you to know that I am.”

"Don't need to stop either if you don't want," Nathan kissed her softly. "Wasn't trying to shut you up or anything."

“I know,” Audrey smiled and ran her fingers through his hair. “And I’m really not doing a good job of taking your mind off things like I promised earlier,” she laughed.

"That's okay," he kissed her forehead. "Being with you makes me happy no matter what."

Duke had been settled quietly at the back of Nathan’s mind, relaxing and enjoying the comfort, but Nathan’s words - aimed only at Audrey - pierced him like an arrow. He quickly covered the jolt of pain before it reached Nathan. You two are the best, he thought instead.

You too, Duke. You know that goes for you too, right? Nathan voiced the thought as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. Being with you makes me happy no matter how rough a day I'm having. Even that day I came home and I thought you two wouldn't want me when you had each other, much as I intended to just slip away and leave you be, even when I felt bad about interrupting, I was still so damn glad to have you come out to welcome me home.

Yeah, no, I do know, but it’s always good to hear you say it, Duke thought. And you'll never be interrupting. Even after all these years, I’m always happy when you come home. And I’ll always be here to welcome you.

You're amazing, Duke. And I mean it, I do. Just being with you makes the worst days less awful and the best days that much better.

I’m glad I can do that for you, Duke thought softly. I feel the same, you make my not-life so much better. Audrey, too.
Nathan gave Duke a little extra 'hug' before telling Audrey, "Duke says he feels the same, being with you make him happy too."

“You both make me happy,” Audrey smiled. “So happy. Every moment I’m with you.”

"You're sweet," Nathan gave her a small but adoring smile.

Audrey lifted her fingers to his cheek. “It's nice to see you smile,” she said softly.

"For you, any time," Nathan promised.

Audrey made a contented noise and wriggled against him, throwing her hand over his waist as she curled herself into him, her head finding that warm nook of his chest that she loved so much. “My special boys,” she murmured sweetly.

Nathan ran his thumb over her cheek. "Our amazing girl."

Audrey yawned and closed her eyes, lulled by the soft swish of his heartbeat, feeling his chest rise and fall with each breath he took, slow, steady, calming.

Nathan cuddled her shamelessly, glad to have her close. He mentally curled around Duke, adding, Our wonderful guy.

Duke twined around him. Love you both, he thought affectionately. Through Nathan, he could feel Audrey go heavy against them as she drifted off into sleep. You should sleep too.

Nathan made a sleepy sound, sighing softly as he slowly relaxed as well.

I'm gonna go, now, but I'll be right here, Duke promised.

Nathan gave a sleepy whine, even as he slipped into sleep.

True to his word, Duke stayed with them all night. He tried not to stare - really, he did - but they were both so beautiful, so cute, snuggled into a fortress of blankets and pillows, that he couldn't help watching them. They gravitated towards each other even in sleep, as though neither could bear the loss of physical contact even for a moment. He couldn't help feeling like he was missing out, that he was intruding on something he wasn't truly a part of. So he tried not to stare and he meditated and he tried to process the idea that what had happened to him as a kid really hadn't been his fault, that he had been overlooked, that he'd been persecuted by Haven PD, and that there was now an official acknowledgement that what had happened was wrong. He thought that maybe he might be able to stop blaming himself for everything. Maybe.
"Y’know," Duke began conversationally. He'd picked his moment to start this conversation - after a good meal and a couple of glasses of wine, just enough to hopefully loosen tongues (well, Nathan's, anyway), not enough to completely throw caution to the wind. "We never did have that talk about sex," he tried not to smirk (and failed miserably, the twinkle in his eye giving him away).

Audrey half laughed, blushing slightly as she glanced at Nathan who was staring down at his wine glass and hoping it would swallow him up.

"I mean, I'm just pointing out that it was a while ago, and I know Nathan and I... aren't," Duke went on. "And I'm guessing that you two aren't, unless you're sneaking off somewhere but I think I'd notice, and that means that none of us are getting any and we should probably do something about that."

Nathan was blushing handsomely, but he did give the two of them a longing look.  It was meant to be subtle, but at the moment he was not doing so well with subtle.

Audrey caught him looking and smiled encouragingly.  “Does that mean you’d like to do something about that?”  She asked him.

Nathan's blush deepened, but he managed to mumble, "Sure's hell wouldn't say no."

“So that’s a yes from all of us, then?”  Audrey said.  “Sorry, Duke, I was assuming it was a yes from you seeing as you brought it up.”

“That would be a fair assumption,” Duke laughed.

Audrey smiled at him.  “Nathan, am I right in thinking that it’s just talking about it you’re not comfortable with?”

Nathan nodded.

“Is it easier if I come in and do the talking, you can just think at me, or disagree with anything I say?  Because I really think we need to have some sort of conversation about this rather than leaping straight into it,” Duke said.

Nathan bit his lip.  "I'd rather.  But then one of us can't talk directly to Audrey.  Could be a problem?"

“It could be,” Audrey agreed.  “But I trust Duke not to leave anything out and if it makes it easier for you…”

“If you have something you want to say directly, I can always hop out,” Duke said.  “It’s more important that you’re comfortable.”
Nathan nodded, relieved. "C'mon in, then."

Duke did, immediately sensing how awkward Nathan was feeling. *Sure this is what you want?*

*Definitely want you both. Just...the talking, not so much.*

*Yeah, I can understand that, Duke thought. So just throw any thoughts at me and I'll tell Audrey, or tell me if you want to speak and I'll leave straight away.*

*Okay. Thanks.*

"You guys comfy?" Audrey smiled. "Feeling better, Nathan?"

Duke waited for Nathan’s confirmation before he answered. “Yeah, all good,” he smiled. “How are you feeling about all this?”


Embarrassed as he was, it was clear from Nathan's thoughts that he felt the same.

Duke leaned in to purr in her ear. “Good to know,” he sat back, holding her gaze, and took a sip of wine, savouring the flavours on his tongue for a moment before he answered. “We're....also excited, eager, turned on...and maybe a little impatient,” he smiled.

"Well, then, let's not dance around. Do you want to watch Nathan and I? Do you want to ride along while he and I have fun? Or do you want to drive?"

Duke let out a huff of laughter, a little surprised at her forthrightness. “Well I know what I'd like but I'm gonna check in with Nate before I answer,’ he replied cautiously.

"Of course," Audrey smiled.

Anything you want is fine by me, Nathan thought before Duke could even ask.

*Thanks, Nate, Duke thought softly. I need to be sure you're really on board with it though, because I'd like to drive. That way I can give pleasure to both of you.*

*Of course I really am. If Audrey's okay with it, you should absolutely have a chance with her. I'll give you two as much privacy as I can, I promise.*

What? No. Nate, no, that isn't what this is about, I'm not asking for privacy, I'm asking for you to enjoy it with me. All of us, as equal as we can make it. Not me and Audrey and you in the background.

But....I've been with you, and I've been with Audrey. One on one. You two should have that same chance.

Not the point, Duke curled around him tightly. All of us or nothing. And yes I really do mean that.

You sure you don't want that? What about Audrey?

Yes, I'm sure, and I'll talk to Audrey in a minute, at the moment I'm worried you're trying to take yourself out of the equation again and I need to know if you're truly into this. Not just comfortable with it, not just ok with it, but that you actually want it. For yourself. Not for me and Audrey.

*Definitely.* Nathan let Duke feel just how much he wanted it. *Just want things to be fair.*
Well 'fair' isn't you trying to give us privacy, I want you with me, Nate, not just sitting back and waiting for it to be over.

Okay, Duke. But ask Audrey if she'd want to, please?

“Sorry, Audrey, that took a while,” Duke apologized. “Nothing wrong, just being clear with each other so that we don't give you any mixed messages.”

"It's good, that's good that you're communicating." Audrey agreed. "What did you talk about? If it's not private, that is."

“No, not private, we're all a part of this. So, long story short, I said that I'd like to drive so that I can make both of you feel good, Nate said he'd give you and me as much privacy as possible, I told him that wasn't really the point and it was about all three of us being as equal as possible. And here we are,” Duke twirled the wine glass by its stem, staring down at it before he smiled and leaned forwards, elbows on the table as he gazed into Audrey's eyes. “So the question is, Audrey Parker, what do you want?”

Nathan stirred.  Duke, that's not my point. That's not what I asked you to ask her.

Duke rolled his eyes slightly. “Apparently even thinking at each other doesn't make for flawless communication. I think - and hopefully I've got it right, now - Nathan wants to know if you'd like some one on one time with me, or as close as possible.”

So that it will be fair, because I had that with her and I had it with you, Nathan thought insistently. Please.

“He thinks that would make it fair, even things out. He's slept with both of us individually and he thinks you and I should have the same chance,” Duke explained.

Nathan relaxed in Duke's mind, relieved and grateful.

Audrey smiled. "That's really sweet of you, Nathan, and so like you to want things to be fair. Maybe at some point Duke and I will, but I think for tonight I'd like to be with both of you. Is that okay with you?"

Very much so, Nathan thought shyly.

Duke nodded. “That was a shy but very enthusiastic yes,” he confirmed to Audrey.

"Excellent," she leaned in to press a lingering kiss to his lips.

Duke kissed her back, slowly, thoroughly, his hand gently stroking her hair. “I'm glad we got that sorted out,” he said softly when they'd broken apart.

"So now the only thing left to sort out is, what exactly are we doing?" she asked with a wicked grin.

“We,” Duke said, leaning in towards her again. “Are going to go upstairs and find out how many times you can come in one night.”

Audrey shivered a little, delighted. "Speaking of coming," she said conversationally, "I'm thinking that even with your shenanigans with Nathan, it's been a long time since you got to enjoy a blowjob. Nathan has many, many wonderful qualities but extreme flexibility is not among them."
Duke laughed, low and soft. “You would be right,” he agreed, grinning slightly ruefully as he added. “I’ll probably embarrass myself.”

“No embarrassment in the bedroom,” Audrey smiled. “Sex is a pretty undignified thing when you think about it.”

“It is. Doesn’t mean I don’t want to be good at it, though,” Duke said, his eyes downcast as he tried desperately not to let his sudden bout of performance anxiety show.

“Hey,” Audrey cupped his face in her hands and leaned in for a tender kiss. “You’ll be amazing.”

_Better’n me, probably_, Nathan agreed.

“Thanks,” Duke mumbled, embarrassed by needing reassurance. He used to be _good_ at this, dammit, he’d had no complaints, anyway (although he suspected that might not be saying much, there never were complaints in polite company and one night stands). But this mattered. Pleasing both of his lovers _mattered_, and that...? That was a whole lot of different.

“We can take this slow, as slow as you like,” Audrey kissed his forehead. “I know you’ll be fine.”

Duke murmured his appreciation. “Kinda not aiming for fine, more along the lines of mind-blowing and that isn’t going to happen if I come in Nathan's pants like a teenager,” he groaned, laughing slightly as he did so. “And worrying about it couldn’t be any less sexy, so shall we...?” He stood and took Audrey gently by the hand.

Audrey squeezed his hand as they headed upstairs. “You know, personally I’d find it pretty damn flattering if I can get a guy off without so much as touching him. And it’s not like we don’t have all night to get around to mind-blowing. It’s better when you have to wait for it.”

“I promise we will get to mind-blowing,” Duke smiled as he followed her into the bedroom. “And I _never_ break my promises.”

“I look forward to it,” Audrey grinned. “But first we should get you out of those pants so they’re not ruined.”

“You make a good point,” Duke smiled wryly. “But first...” he leaned in to kiss her, slowly and deeply.

Audrey wrapped her arms around him, returning the kiss with slow-burning passion.

Duke’s hands went to her hair, gripping lightly, holding her still as he kissed her thoroughly, twining around Nathan in his mind.

She’s an amazing kisser, isn’t she? Even Nathan's thoughts seemed slightly breathless.

_Fuck, yes_, Duke thought back, just as breathless. _I’m beginning to think she really does have a point about the pants._

_Then get ’em off_, Nathan grinned mentally. _Save the striptease for another time._

Duke chuckled slightly as he broke the kiss. “Nathan’s in agreement with you about the pants,” he grinned as he loosened his belt.

Audrey chuckled and slid her hands under his shirt, caressing the bare skin. “Seems about time for this to go, too.”
Shivering slightly at the feel of her hands, warm on his skin, Duke hurried to undo the buttons even as he kicked off his shoes.

Audrey pulled his shirt off, openly admiring the view. "How about we finish getting you naked and then you lie on the bed so I can drive you out of your mind?" she grinned.

"You have the best ideas," Duke grinned back at her as he removed his pants. "Just as long as you allow me to repay the favour."

"Delighted to - once your brain has reconstituted itself from the mush I plan to make of it," Audrey teased.

"Some time next week, then?" Duke joked, briefly checking in with Nathan, who was equally enthusiastic, before hooking his fingers under the waistbands of his briefs and sliding them down his legs. He flung himself onto the bed and grinned at Audrey. "I'm feeling very underdressed here," he laughed, waving his hand at her.

Audrey grinned, looking him over hungrily. "That's half the fun of it. Once I've reduced you to jelly, you can watch me undress."

Duke propped himself up onto one elbow and looked her in the eyes. "That...is something I am very much looking forward to."

"Patience," Audrey murmured, getting on the bed and crawling over his naked body. "It's better when you have to wait."

Duke all but stopped breathing as she crawled over him. "Such a tease," he sighed softly.

"A terrible tease," she agreed, trailing one finger over his collarbone. "Nathan likes that. Do you?"

Duke nodded. "I do, but you should be careful because two can play at that game," he half-laughed.

"You're assuming I don't like that too. And I have an advantage here - I know every...." she leaned down to kiss a particularly sensitive spot on Nathan's neck, punctuating each word with kisses and licks and little bites, "last sensitive spot on this body."

Fuck, Duke thought, a soft whine escaping from him as he arched under her touch. He reached for her, his fingers pulling her blouse free from her pants, slipping beneath the soft material, seeking skin.

"Mm, that feels really nice," Audrey purred, working her way down Nathan's body, her fingers teasing the warm bare skin as her mouth teased Duke. "Are you enjoying that?"

"So much," Duke murmured. Nate? He checked in, almost pointlessly as he could feel how much Nathan was enjoying it, needing to ask anyway.

Nathan whimpered wordlessly in reply, eager but willing to abide by Audrey's choice to take it slow.

"Nathan is too," Duke told her, smiling. "He's lost the ability to think in words."

"I love when he gets like that, don't you?" Audrey smiled back, tracing her fingertips down the contours of Nathan's chest and stomach. "I love knowing how badly he wants this - wants us."
Duke shivered. “Yeah, and just…” he whined as Audrey’s fingers brushed his ribs. “Being here with him, sharing his thoughts, feeling his pleasure as well as mine...It’s…” he trailed off.

*Intense*, Nathan supplied.


Audrey chuckled, walking her fingers down the trail of hair that led down from Nathan's bellybutton. "Hope he's enjoying himself in there."


Audrey smirked and leaned down to nip at Duke's hipbones, teasingly running her fingers down the creases between leg and body. "Just imagine how much better it's going to be, oh so soon."

“Audrey,” Duke whined breathlessly as her hair brushed his thigh. “Please…”

"You look so good like that, desperate and begging," Audrey murmured, rewarding him with a long, slow lick up his length.

“Fuck,” Duke whispered, his fingers curling into the bed sheets. Her tongue was warm, soft, her breath light across his skin and it was too much and not enough all at once. He forced himself to breathe, to wait patiently for whatever she wanted to do to him.

“You taste good," she grinned and sent a puff of warm breath across the damp skin.

Duke whimpered as his cock twitched, wanting more contact. “Want to taste you too,” he managed to say.

"All in good time," Audrey said cheerfully, settling comfortably beside him and giving a light, flicking lick to the tip before running her tongue around the ridge separating the head from the shaft. "At the moment I think you're a little too distracted to give that task the proper focus," she teased.

“You might have a point,” Duke admitted grudgingly, every muscle in his body tensing. *Fuck, Nate, I can't take much more of this. What does it take to stop her teasing?*

*Beg*, came the succinct reply, in a pleading tone. It wasn't a hard thing to do - Audrey had started to place wet, sucking kisses slowly down the shaft, humming a cheerful tune as she went.

“Audrey, please,” Duke whimpered, half hating the whiny note in his voice, half loving it because it was *Nathan's* voice and hearing him beg was...exciting and arousing and it sent shivers through him. “Please stop teasing.”

"Well, since you asked so nicely," she murmured, taking him in her mouth and wrapping her hand around what couldn't fit.

Duke moaned, low and content as he fought to keep still and *wait*. His fingers found their way to her hair, stroking gently and calmly. “God, Audrey, you're so good at that,” he whispered.

She hummed agreement, sucking lightly on her mouthful, her hand stroking the shaft with a loose, twisting grip.

Every nerve in Duke's body was tingling and his fingers tightened involuntarily in Audrey's hair. He made himself relax and dropped his hand away to grip the sheets instead. Within his mind, he
reached out for Nathan, twining around him intimately, clinging to him as pleasure coursed through them both.

Nathan moaned softly, clutching him desperately, shuddering with shared sensation.

"Fuck, Audrey," Duke choked out breathlessly, their pleasure climbing ever higher. "Don't stop, please don't stop," he trailed off into a low moan.

Audrey hummed agreement, massaging her tongue against the hot skin.

Every movement she made was bringing Duke closer and closer to the edge. He fought to keep still, to hold back, his body tensing and flexing. He never wanted it to end, but everything she was doing was too good and he pushed at her shoulders. “Gonna come,” he warned her.

Audrey pulled off, using her other hand to keep working him, shifting down to nuzzle at his balls.

Duke’s hips moved instinctively, pushing him up into her hand as she worked. “Faster,” he pleaded.

Audrey grinned and obliged him, licking and kissing the soft skin.

“Fuck...yes,” Duke groaned loudly as he wrapped himself around Nathan, their shared pleasure echoing between them, doubling the intensity as their climax hit.

Nathan had gone fully wordless, his pleasure a stream of pure sensation all the more intense for being shared.

Audrey grinned brightly, shifting up to kiss his cheek before she slipped off to the bathroom for mouthwash and a warm washcloth to clean up the mess.

Fuck, Nate… Duke thought, incapable of anything more coherent than that.

Nathan sent back a glow of blissful contentment, still too gone for words.

"You boys have a good time?" Audrey smirked as she gently cleaned him up.

"Incredible," Duke said softly as he tried to sit up and take the cloth from her. "You don’t have to do that."

Audrey smiled and gently pushed him back down. "I want to."

Duke nodded, a small smile on his face as he relaxed under her tender care. “You’re amazing.”

So good to us, Nathan murmured sleepily.

“Nathan agrees,” Duke told her. “And says that you’re so good to us. You really are, Audrey, you’re...perfect.”

"No one's perfect," she leaned up for a tender kiss. "But I will take amazing and good to you."

“You are,” Duke insisted quietly, stroking her cheek before pulling her close to him and kissing her again.

The very best, Nathan agreed.

Audrey settled in beside him, wrapping him in her arms and cuddling him close.
“Nathan says you’re the very best,” Duke murmured, holding her tightly.

"Well I think you're both the very best, so that works out," Audrey smiled and stole another kiss.

Duke deepened the kiss, his hands running down her back. He dropped his lips to her neck, dropping soft kisses before he murmured into her ear. “We still need to get you out of those clothes.”

"Gladly, but we don't have to do this right now if you need more of a rest. I know Nathan always gets sleepy after - it's so cute," she said fondly.

Duke laughed gently. “He does and it is, but no. Not my style.”

"Fair enough," she grinned. “Want to do it yourself, or want a show?"

_Nate, any preference?

...._both_? Nathan said after a moment, despite the impossibility of his preference.

_Helpful_, Duke laughed. “Can we watch you?” He asked Audrey.

"Absolutely," Audrey agreed laughingly, getting up and beginning to unbutton her shirt with tantalizing slowness.

Duke gazed at her, biting his lip as she slowly undressed. “God you're gorgeous,” he sighed.

"You are too, you know that, right? Audrey told him. "You both are. And I know neither of you probably believes it, but it's true."

“Working on believing it,” Duke smiled, beckoning her over for another kiss.

_You should, it's true_, Nathan thought as Audrey obliged Duke.

_True for you, too_, Duke thought back at him even as he kissed Audrey.

Nathan didn't reply, opting instead to admire Audrey.

Duke gazed at her openly, watching as she slowly revealed herself to him.

Audrey grinned at her boys' rapt attention. "Like what you see?" she asked playfully, finally pulling the shirt off her shoulders and tossing it away.

“So much,” Duke murmured, drinking in the sight of her.

_Gorgeous, beautiful, amazing_, Nathan agreed. _Tell her I said so?

Duke climbed to his feet and wrapped his arms around Audrey. “Nathan says you're gorgeous, beautiful and amazing,” he said softly, whispering into her ear. “I'll second that and add stunning and sexy.”

"You guys sure know how to flatter a girl," Audrey grinned, blushing as she snuggled up against Duke, the lace of her bra tickling his bare chest.

“Just being honest,” Duke smiled into her hair, reaching behind her and expertly undoing the clasp of her bra with one hand.
"Smooth," Audrey grinned, squirming away and pulling the straps down over her shoulders teasingly.

Duke laughed. “I'll have you know that these are very talented fingers.”

"Oh? Gonna show me just how talented?" she challenged playfully, letting the bra slip down her chest but not quite all the way off.

“Patience, Audrey, patience,” Duke murmured, not taking his eyes off her.

"Says the man who couldn't wait for me to undo my bra," Audrey teased, laughing.

“You mean the bra which still hasn't come off? I'm beginning to think you're shy, Audrey,” Duke grinned, keeping his tone playful but watching her closely for any sign that he might be right, that she might be uncomfortable.

Audrey leaned in and give him a lingering kiss. "You're the one who asked for a show - not much of one if I just rip my clothes off. Have you changed your mind about liking when I tease you?"

“Not in the slightest,” Duke reassured her, smiling. “But you just blew my mind and I'm...enthusiastic to repay the favour.”

"Maybe another time for the striptease, then?" Audrey chuckled, letting the bra slip off.

Duke laughed softly. “Another time, I would love to see that,” he said quietly as he watched her drop the bra to the floor.

Audrey smiled. "I'll keep that in mind," she promised, her hands going to her hips to slip off her pants.

Duke's hands covered hers as he leaned in to brush his lips against hers. “Allow me,” he whispered, his fingers deftly undoing the button of her slacks.

"Gladly," Audrey grinned, stroking her hands over his bare chest.

Duke's breath caught slightly in his chest as her touch sent a flicker of arousal through him once again. His fingers didn't falter as they unzipped her pants and he kneeled in front of her to slowly push them down and slide them over her feet before his hands skated gently back up, skimming her thighs and coming to rest on her hips. He dropped his head to place a kiss just above her belly button.

"Almost there," she smiled playfully, her breath coming faster.

“Almost,” Duke said softly, gazing up at her with open adoration.

She hooked a thumb in the band of her panties. "Do you want to do the honors, or shall I?" she smiled.

“I will,” Duke murmured, dropping soft kisses onto each of her hip bones. He tucked his fingers into the band and slowly, gently, slid them over her hips and down her legs. He sat back on his heels, admiring her openly, his lips slightly parted as he gazed up at her. Nate, she's...god, she's beautiful.

Isn't she? Work of art. Took my breath away, first time I saw.

Audrey blushed a little, cupping his cheek in her hand, her thumb stroking over warm skin.
Enjoying the view?"

Duke nodded. “We were just saying how beautiful you are, how you took Nathan's breath away the first time he saw you, and now you've taken mine away too.”

"My sweet boys," she smiled, her blush deepening. "You two sure do know how to make a girl feel special."

“You deserve the world, Audrey Parker, and making you feel special is only a tiny part of that,” Duke said softly. He gracefully got to his feet and leaned down to press his lips to hers. His hands rested lightly on her shoulders, thumbs stroking gently as he kissed her deeply, insistently, full of restrained passion.

Audrey wrapped her arms around his neck, standing on tiptoe to meet him, their bare skin pressed together.

Duke's hands moved to her hips, gently steering her towards the bed as they kissed. “Lie down,” he whispered.

Audrey obliged, pulling him down with her, kissing him all the more intently.

Duke went with her eagerly, covering her body with his own, feeling her soft warmth beneath him. He moved his lips to her neck, nibbling and kissing.

"You know, we've just barely gotten started and I am already feeling really damn impatient," Audrey laughed breathlessly.

“Mm-hmm,” Duke murmured his agreement as he nipped and kissed her neck, slowly working downwards. “Tell me to stop teasing any time.”

Audrey ran her hands through his hair. "Thinking I might want more than your mouth, if that's not too much."

“Nothing will ever be too much for you,” Duke promised, growing harder at the thought. He cupped one of her breasts in his hand, thumb stroking across the nipple as his lips mirrored his movements on the other side.

Audrey all but purred at the touch, arching her back. "There are condoms in the bedside drawer."

Duke paused to look at her and smiled. “All in good time.”

"Your turn to tease me now, huh?"

“Mm-hmm,” Duke agreed, kissing his way down her ribs and nibbling at her hip bones. “If that's what you like…”

"Depends on my mood. Some days it's fun. But some days..." she grinned sharply, "some days I just want to flip you over and ride your dick."

Duke groaned at the thoroughly distracting thought. Nate? What do you want?

Give the lady what she wants, Nathan thought eagerly.

“Go on, then,” Duke grinned, nipping gently at her hip before kissing his way down her thigh.

"Well I can't flip you when you're all the way down there," Audrey grinned.
Duke rolled his eyes. “Always with the practicalities,” he snarked goodnaturedly, moving back up so his body covered hers again. “Better?” He murmured softly, then leaned in to kiss her before she could answer.

Audrey kissed him thoroughly before she rolled them over so Duke lay on his back. "If it's any consolation, I almost didn't ask. Much as I wanted this, you were being very distracting down there," she told him as she straddled his waist.

Duke's breathing grew faster, his hands resting on her thighs, his fingers drawing small circles on her skin. “I hope you'll let me... distract you another time,” he smiled up at her.  Nate, we are so lucky, he thought

*Insanely so, hell knows how we lucked out this much.*

"Very much looking forward to that," she gave him a wicked grin and shifted backwards a bit, wriggling enticingly against some very sensitive parts of Nathan's body.

Duke groaned, immediately forgetting whatever he was going to say in response. His eyes were dark as he reached over to the bedside drawer, pulling out a condom and tearing the foil packet open with his teeth.

"Let me?" Audrey murmured, reaching for it.

Duke nodded and allowed her to pluck it from his fingers.

Audrey slid down his body, making sure to rub against him the whole way, before rolling the thin latex over his shaft.

*That should not be anywhere near as hot as it is,* Duke thought, twining around Nathan.

*She can make anything sexy,* Nathan agreed.

"Any requests before I ride you mercilessly?" Audrey smiled.

Duke shook his head, his mouth going dry. “Just do it,” he said, his voice hoarse and low and urgent.

Audrey gave him a sly smirk before lifting herself up, positioning him, and then sinking down in one swift smooth movement.

“Fuck,” Duke whispered breathlessly as he was enveloped in her soft warmth. His hands went to her hips, holding her still.

"God, that's good," Audrey groaned, biting her lip.

“So good,” Duke agreed, relieved that she was more affected than she'd been letting on. He flexed his hips slightly, just enough to let her feel him.

Audrey made a little choked noise, grinding down against him.

*God, that sound, Nate, I love the noises she makes,* Duke thought as he took her hands in his and pulled her forwards for a kiss.

Audrey leaned forward to kiss him eagerly, rocking atop him.

Duke wrapped his arms around her, his hands running across her back, down her ribs, before
gripping her hips. He pushed up into her as she rocked, matching his speed to hers.

Audrey reached down and took his hand, guiding it between her legs.

“Impatient?” He smirked, curling his fingers to find just the right spot.

"Like you're not?" Audrey laughed breathlessly, her voice stuttering as he found it.

Duke watched her face, listened to her breathing, the soft sounds of enjoyment that she made, working out what she liked best so he could do it again and again.

It wasn't long before Audrey was whimpering and cursing, riding him hard, eager for the pleasure he brought her.

“God, Audrey, you're beautiful like that,” Duke whined breathlessly. “I want to see your face as you come.”

"Yours too, tell me you're close," Audrey panted.

“So close,” he said, breathing hard, every muscle in his body tensing as he flexed his hips against her, his fingers still teasing at that sensitive spot.

"Yeah Duke, come for me, come for me now," Audrey commanded, clenching around him.

With a final thrust, Duke did, clinging tightly to Nathan once again, making wordless sounds of pleasure.

Audrey groaned, grinding down against him hard, shuddering through her own peak.

Duke pulled her close, holding her against him as they came down, relaxed and happy. Nate? Ok? Duke checked in, holding Nathan as close in his mind as he was holding Audrey.

Nathan gave him the same wordlessly blissful stirring of attention, sleepier now, cuddled against him in perfect contentment.

Duke nuzzled happily into Audrey's hair. “That was...you're amazing,” he said, grinning.

"I could say the same," she grinned back, peppering little kisses over his collarbone.

Duke made a noncommittal sound. “Doesn't seem fair, I got to come twice, you only did once. It's the wrong way round,” he said apologetically.

She shifted up to kiss him on the mouth. "But I had an awful lot of fun driving you out of your mind,” she laughed softly.

“Next time,” he said, stroking her hair. “Next time, if we all want to do this again, I plan to live up to my promise of finding out how many times you can come in one night.”

"Since I can say with quite a bit of confidence that we all do, I'm looking forward to that," she told him happily.

*I'd like to, but I don't want to answer for you, Nate,* Duke worried.

Nathan curled around him a little tighter with a happy positive thought in response.

“So are we,” Duke said, smiling as he twined himself around Nathan. “At least, I think that’s what
Nathan wants, he’s gone wordless again,” he added, laughing fondly.

“Poor baby, he must be so sleepy, he never goes two rounds,” she smiled affectionately.

“I don’t think either of us were expecting that,” Duke chuckled. “And yeah, he’s sleepy. Clean up first,” he said, kissing her on the forehead before he got up and went to the bathroom.

He was back in a couple of minutes, pulling on a pair of briefs before he asked, “Anything you need before cuddles? Glass of water?”

"I'll take care of it, but thanks for offering," Audrey smiled and gave him a kiss before slipping off to the bathroom for her own cleanup.

You ok, Nate?  Duke checked.

Mmhmm, came the sleepy murmur in reply.

Can you stay awake til Audrey gets back? Duke thought, amused.

This time the murmur was more negative. If they hadn't been sharing minds, his responses would have been completely incomprehensible.

I should probably go, there was a hint of regret in Duke’s thought.

Nathan whined, clinging tighter, not wanting to let Duke go - something he never would have done if he'd been awake.

Nate, Duke thought softly. You know I can’t stay, not while you sleep. He didn’t want to leave Nathan either, but he didn’t want to risk breaking Nathan’s hold on him.

Nathan retreated mournfully, curling up sadly within his mind.


Nathan snuggled against him needily. Audrey hurried back in. "What's wrong?"

“I don't know, exactly,” Duke ran a hand through his hair. “He's sleepy, which means I need to go, but it's like he won't let me. I don't want to pull away from him, I don't know what would happen, but when I tried to get him to let me go, he just...retreated further in on himself and I don't know what to do, Audrey.”

"Hey, it's gonna be okay," Audrey slid into bed and curled around them. "Hey, Nathan, I'm here, I love you, it's okay. How about you snuggle with me and let Duke go, okay?"

Nathan released his grip on Duke, though he stayed in the back of his own mind.

Nate, you can't stay there, Duke thought, trying to be encouraging even through his worry. I love you and I need you to step forward so I know you're ok before I go.

M'ok, Nathan mumbled.

Ok, Duke thought reluctantly. We'll talk in the morning and I'll be right beside you, all night. He wrapped his arms tightly around Audrey and kissed her softly. “He says he's ok so I'm gonna go,” he told her.
Audrey nodded, snuggling Nathan close.

“Love you both,” Duke said quietly and slipped out of Nathan’s mind, worried that Nathan might not step forwards, watching him closely for any sign that there was anything wrong.

Nathan lay quietly in Audrey's arms for a moment, then let out a soft snore.

"Well...I guess he's okay then," Audrey said, half worried and half amused

“Guess so,” Duke said, still worried that Nathan hadn’t actually come forwards to take control again. He prepared himself for a long night of worrying and staring at Nathan for any sign that he was waking up. “You should sleep too,” he smiled at Audrey. “I’ll stay here, keep an eye on him.”

"Yeah, okay. I'm sure he's fine, Duke. He gets clingy as hell after sex, he was probably just too sleepy to realize he needed to let you go so he could sleep," Audrey reassured him.

“I know,” Duke said. “I know that, he’s just...he’s never been like that before and he was just retreating completely. Maybe it’s because I’ve never stayed so close to when he falls asleep, maybe that’s just what it feels like.”

"Maybe. We did keep him awake long after when he would have normally fallen asleep, plus getting him off a second time. I'm honestly surprised he didn't crash despite your best efforts.”

“Yeah, I maybe shouldn’t have pushed him like that,” Duke said, his voice full of regret. “I mean, I didn’t push him, he wanted to as well, but...I should’ve been more considerate.”

"Duke, c'mere," Audrey reached out a hand to him. "For one thing, if there were fault to be assigned, it'd be as much mine as yours. I pushed for more every bit as much as you did. Secondly, there is no blame to be assigned. If we ask Nathan in the morning, he will doubtless say he had a fantastic time and loved every second of it.”

Duke drifted closer to her and nodded. “You’re right, I know you're right,” he said quietly. “I loved every second of it, please don't think I didn't, I'm just worried about Nathan.”

"I know. I am too. But maybe it's like you say, maybe that's just what him mentally tucking himself in to go to sleep is like.”

“Yeah, I hope so, he just seemed so...sad, like he didn't want to be there and it broke my heart.”

"You know what I bet? I bet he didn't want you to go and that's why he was sad." 

Duke nodded. “That's exactly what it was, he does that sometimes, but he's never clung to me before and he's never just curled up in the back of his own mind before and I hope to fuck that was just him falling asleep because I won't forgive myself if it was anything else,” Duke said bleakly.

"I'm sure that's all it was, Duke. I'm sure he'll wake up hungry and contented and happy to see us both.”

“Yeah,” Duke tried to smile. “Get some sleep, Audrey.”

"I can keep you company a while longer. I don't nod off the second I come," Audrey grinned.

“Then I'm not doing my job right,” Duke laughed.

Audrey laughed. "You did a damn fine job."
“Honestly? I'm just relieved you had a good time and I didn't embarrass myself by shooting in Nathan's pants,” Duke said, just a hint of laughter in his voice.

"I must be losing my touch," Audrey laughed.

“Not in the slightest,” Duke reassured her. “It was amazing. You were amazing.”

"Glad you had a good time," Audrey smiled.

“I really did,” Duke nodded. “I still can't believe how lucky we are to have you in our lives. Or, not life in my case, but you know what I mean.”

"I can't believe how lucky we are to have you in our lives," Audrey replied. "You're amazing, Duke."

Duke smiled softly. “Thanks, Audrey. Between you, you're starting to make me believe it. I mean, maybe I don't believe amazing, but...maybe I'm not all bad.”

"It's a start. We'll get you to amazing," Audrey smiled fondly.

“If anyone can, it's the two of you,” Duke said. “Just as long as you believe you're amazing too.”

"You tell us often enough," Audrey smiled fondly.

“Because it's true,” Duke told her. “For both of you, and I'll never stop reminding you.”

"It's true of you too, Duke," she smiled softly. "And we'll tell you as often as you need to hear it."

“I don't know how you do it, Audrey,” Duke said quietly. “With the job that you do, how do you stay so kind when you see the worst of people every day?”

"Because sometimes I see the best of people, too. Like Nathan, you should have seen him the day of that big wreck. He was such a hero, he worked so hard to save as many people as he could.”

Duke smiled. “I wish I could've seen him. He won't accept what a hero he was that day, just blames himself for the people he couldn't save. Some of his memories... they're…” he trailed off.

"I can imagine how hard that must be," Audrey said softly.

Duke nodded. “Well you were there, you don't have to imagine. Tough day for both of you,” he said. “Thank you, for getting him to the Gull that night. He really needed that.”

"Thank you for taking care of him after he came home. He needed that, too."

“He did and I’m glad he has both of us now,” Duke smiled.

"I'm so glad too, he deserves the world," Audrey smiled, stroking Nathan's cheek and getting a contented sound and sleepy little smile in response. "Don't ever think he doesn't need you too, Duke," she said, looking back up at him. "There are things I can't give him that you can, and he loves you so much it'd break his heart if you ever decided he'd be better off without you."

“I’m not going anywhere, Audrey. I won’t break his heart,” Duke promised. “He tried, once, to get me to move on, said he felt selfish for keeping me here...That was the first time I told him I love him,” he smiled at the memory of Nathan’s tentative response, asking him if he really meant it.
Audrey smiled. "That sounds like Nathan, so selfless. He'd break his heart to make us happy."

"He would," Duke agreed. "I just...wish he wouldn't sometimes, y'know? I mean, I love him for it but it worries me that he takes himself out of the equation so often."

"Yeah, it's worrying," Audrey agreed. "He puts others first, but he puts himself last, too much so sometimes. He does it even when it's not necessary. I guess we just have to keep an eye on him."

"That's all we can do," Duke agreed, gazing at Nathan with soft adoration. "Goes for you too, you put others first too often."

"That is literally my job, Duke," Audrey grinned.

"And at work, that's fine," Duke said gently. "Off duty, not so much."

Audrey's grin turned sheepish. "Okay, I walked right into that one."

"You kinda did," Duke laughed. "So let me look after you both. I don't have anyone or anything else to worry about."

"It's not healthy to make us your whole world, Duke," Audrey said gently. "You're just as prone to putting yourself last as either of us, and it's no healthier when you do it."

"It's not like I have much of a choice, Audrey. What does the rest of the world mean to me? It might as well not exist."

"That's not true!" Audrey worried. "You can come out with us, you can use your computer to make friends all over the world, virtually visit anywhere, do all kinds of things."

"I can go out with Nathan," Duke corrected her. "And making friends? What would I even say? 'Hi, I'm Duke, I'm a ghost'? Yeah, because that's not freaky at all," he laughed.

"It's not like you have to tell people you're a ghost, Duke," Audrey rolled her eyes. "S'pose you've got a point," Duke said grudgingly.

"Just give it a try, okay? For me?"

"Ok," Duke agreed softly. "For you."

"Thanks, Duke," Audrey smiled then yawned. "We're so lucky to have you, you know that right?"

"I'm the lucky one," Duke said. "And you should get some sleep."

"Yeah, okay," Audrey yawned again, snuggling against Nathan. "You'll stay?"

"I'll be here, all night," Duke said softly, gazing down at them both.

"You're the best, Duke. We love you so much," Audrey smiled softly.

"I love you both too. Sleep well, Audrey. Tonight was amazing."

"Sure was. Looking forward to more," Audrey gave him a sleepy grin.

"Me too," Duke grinned back at her. "G'night."

Duke stayed close as she fell asleep, then tried to meditate to clear his mind. He groaned in
frustration, it just wasn't working, his mind was too full of the evenings memories - the good and the bad. Without having Audrey to talk to, his worry about Nathan grew. That feeling as he curled up at the back of his mind, preparing for a night on his own, he’d seemed so forlorn and helpless and as though he didn't want to be left alone even in his own thoughts. The way he hadn't stepped forward before Duke had left was the most concerning and Duke couldn't stop playing the what if game.

Nathan stirred quietly, not awake but not in such a deep sleep as he had been and Duke couldn't resist the temptation to whisper his name quietly. There was no response and Duke thought back to what Audrey had said about not putting himself last. Maybe this was a good time to put that into practice because he was worried and he knew that Nathan would prefer to be woken up than to know Duke had been stressing about him all night. He hesitated for a second longer, then whispered his name again, this time trying to touch his shoulder at the same time.

Nathan shivered from the cold touch, blinking and looking around, confused.

“Nathan?” Duke said, panic rising at the sight of Nathan's confused, blank, expression.

"Duke?" Nathan yawned. "Whazz' wrong?"

Relief flooded through Duke. “You're ok.”


“It's fine, Nate, go back to sleep,” Duke smiled affectionately. “Sorry I woke you.”

"Mm. Cuddles?" Nathan said hopefully, not awake enough to remember it wasn't possible.

“Audrey’s right there beside you,” Duke said. “She hasn't stopped cuddling you since before you fell asleep.”

"Want you though," Nathan mumbled, already more than half asleep again.

“I know, Nate, I want you too,” Duke said softly. “Go back to sleep, I'll be here when you wake up.”

"No Duke hugs," Nathan mumbled, sounding forlorn as he hugged Audrey.

Duke tried to say something comforting but words failed him. Not for the first time, he wondered whether him being here was hurting Nathan more than anything else. “Sleep, Nate,” he murmured. But Nathan already was.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Baking, hugs, smut, and Duke and Nathan come to a decision...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Ooh, baking," Nathan grinned as he walked into the kitchen and found Audrey gathering together ingredients.

"Yup," Audrey replied cheerfully. "Want to help? We'll even let you lick the spoon..."

Duke snorted, remembering where the conversation had gone last time one of them mentioned licking the spoon.

"I can stay and at least follow basic kitchen orders, right Duke?" Nathan smiled wryly.

Duke snorted again. "Yeah, the most basic one anyway."

Audrey raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Stay out of the way," Duke explained, laughing.

Audrey laughed and leaned up to kiss Nathan on the cheek. "Stay, help, it'll be fun," she said, her eyes twinkling. "Besides, I just had an idea...what if we threw flour all over the floor and see if Duke can leave ghostly footprints in it?"

Duke let out an indignant squeak. "You are not throwing flour all over my kitchen floor!"

"We would never do such a thing," Nathan said virtuously. "On purpose, anyhow. Accidents happen. Can't be helped."

Duke glared at him. "Don't you dare, Nathan."

Audrey smirked and, while Duke's attention was on Nathan, she picked up the bag of flour, 'accidentally' letting some fall onto the floor.

"Audrey!" Duke whined, spinning around to glare at her instead.

Caught in the act, Audrey laughed. "Ok, sorry," she said, putting the bag back down on the counter.

"I'll clean up. I can at least do that much in the kitchen," Nathan smiled. "But you should try leaving some footprints."

Duke rolled his eyes. "Fine, but I'm telling you now, it's pointless," he said, gliding across the
mess of flour which was now covering the floor. His movement scattered some of the powder, as though a breeze had blown across it. “See? No footprints. More proof that I don’t exist.”

“Sorry, Duke,” Audrey said quietly. “I didn’t really think that through.”

"Sorry, Duke," Nathan looked thoroughly chagrined. "You do exist. You matter. We love you. And we don't love you any less just because you don't have a physical body."

“Yeah, yeah,” Duke brushed them off. “Are we baking this cake or just throwing ingredients all over the floor?”

"Cake sounds good," Nathan ventured, but gave Duke a worried look.

“We’re baking,” Audrey said decisively, already pulling the rest of the ingredients out of the cupboard. “Nathan’s clearing up the mess, I’m going to start and you’re going to tell me what I’m doing wrong.”

“You won’t be doing anything wrong,” Duke told her as Nathan started cleaning the floor. “I’ve eaten your cakes and Nathan doesn’t stop raving about them.”

"They deserve every word of praise," Nathan agreed.

“Thanks,” Audrey went pink and started measuring ingredients into a bowl.

“Chocolate cake?” Duke asked as she added cocoa powder, grinning when she nodded.

"My favorite kind," Nathan said happily, looking over her shoulder.

Audrey grinned. “Still want to lick the spoon when I’m done?”

Nathan smirked. "Of course."


Nathan's smirk grew. "You weren't saying that when you were watching Audrey and I last night."

Audrey giggled. “No, that’s definitely not what he was saying last night. I think what he said was something like ‘fuck you two are hot’.”

“Well you are,” Duke reasoned. “So I told you so. And now Nathan’s behaving like an overgrown child so I’m telling him that too. Don’t worry, Nate, it’s adorable.”

"Smartass," Nathan said fondly, giving Duke an affectionate grin.

“Yeah,” Duke said proudly. “So that makes you ‘greatest ass’ and Audrey ‘finest ass’.”

Nathan laughed. "Well I can't argue that assessment for Audrey," he playfully pinched hers.

“Hey,” she flicked a tea towel at him. “Hands off, otherwise I’m going to end up getting distracted and then there won’t be cake.”

"It would be a fun distraction, though," Nathan said wistfully, dropping his hands obediently.

“Last night not enough for you?” Audrey teased him.

"Won't ever get enough of you," Nathan smiled and kissed her cheek.
Audrey returned the kiss and turned back to the counter, starting to mix the ingredients.

“You two are adorable,” Duke smiled.

“Won't ever get enough of you either,” Nathan smiled, coming to stand by him.

“You're sweet,” Duke smiled, watching Audrey pour the cake mix into the pan.

Audrey scraped the last of the mix out and passed the spoon to Nathan. “Want the bowl as well?” She grinned.

Nathan actually looked torn for a moment, but said "I'm good."

Audrey frowned slightly but shrugged and set it back on the counter.

“Not like you to turn down an opportunity to overload on sugar,” Duke said. “You lost your sweet tooth?”

"Don't wanna be greedy," Nathan admitted.

Duke raised an eyebrow. "...Ok...Well, I don't think it's greedy, I think it's cute, makes me think what you might have been like as a kid."

Audrey closed the oven door and nodded. "It's either eat it or wash it up," she pointed out.

"Well..." Nathan eyed the bowl with poorly hidden covetousness. "If you're sure."

Audrey grinned and passed it to him. “I'm sure.”

"Oven timer," Duke reminded her.

"Crap, thanks," she said as she turned to set it for the right time. "See, told you you'd be spotting all the things I got wrong," she smiled ruefully.

Duke smiled. "Easy thing to forget," he said, watching Nathan gleefully tucking into the cake mix.

He suspected Audrey might have deliberately made slightly too much so there would be some leftover for exactly that purpose.

Audrey smiled warmly at Nathan. “Good?” She asked.

Nathan gave her a slightly sheepish grin and nodded. Despite his best efforts to be neat about it, he hadn't managed to keep the chocolate entirely off his face, and he looked very much an older version of his childhood self as Duke had mentioned. "Reminds me of helping mom bake when I was little. Well...I say helping, but mostly I was doing this."

“Good memories?” Duke asked, smiling slightly as Audrey passed Nathan a cloth to clean himself up with.

"Yeah," Nathan smiled a little bittersweet. "She died when I was very young but I really treasure the memories I have."

“I'm glad you have those memories,” Duke said softly, glancing at Audrey who was looking suspiciously busy cleaning the counter that she'd cleaned a couple of minutes before.

Nathan seemed to realize who he was talking to, and abruptly changed the subject. "Thanks. Ancient history, though. What kind of frosting are we putting on here?"
“Duke was going to talk me through a chocolate mirror glaze but I’m thinking chocolate buttercream instead,” Audrey smiled. “Want to help?”

"Love to, but am I allowed?” Nathan grinned at Duke.

Duke rolled his eyes. “Long as you don’t throw the ingredients on the floor like Audrey did,” he glared at her and softened when she glanced at him apologetically.

Nathan picked up a few chocolate chips and threw them at Audrey instead, giving Duke a smug grin.

“That’s it, you’re definitely not allowed to help again,” Duke laughed.

Audrey flicked the teatowel at him again. “It’s supposed to go in the bowl, Nathan,” she grinned.

"Oh come on, like you object to being showered with chocolate,” Nathan laughed, picking up the ones that had fallen to the floor.

“There are worse things,” Audrey chuckled, putting the chocolate chips into the microwave to melt them, relieved when Duke didn’t protest that she wasn’t doing them ‘the proper way’. “You should tell us more about baking with your mom.”

"Oh, that was all long ago," Nathan protested, not wanting to upset his lovers.

“But if they’re good memories, you should share them,” Duke said.

“You should,” Audrey encouraged. “I’d like to hear them.”

Nathan hesitated a moment before quietly admitting, "I don't want to hurt you guys."

“You won’t,” Audrey leaned in to kiss his cheek. “Well, me, anyway. It’s kinda nice to hear about normal family stuff, all the things I missed out on.”

“Audrey?” Duke asked, looking up sharply. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

“It’s fine,” she brushed off his concern. “Group home, string of crappy foster homes. C’mon Nathan, tell us about your mom.”

"If you're sure. Duke?"

Duke nodded. “Long as they’re good memories for you, don’t let us push you into it if you’d rather not talk about it.”

"Always happy to, just didn't want to make you guys sad," Nathan said softly.

Audrey kissed him again. “You’re always so sensitive about how we feel,” she smiled. “But you should absolutely tell us.”

"Just want you happy," Nathan kissed her back and gave Duke a smile. "Mom was kind and gentle and loving but still so strong. She made us a family. Whatever else you can say about the chief, he loved her."

“That explains where you get it from,” Audrey smiled.

Nathan blushed. "I'm not as good as her. I always remember her like she was an angel. I know she wasn't, but….I don't know, maybe all four year olds think of their mom that way."
Duke laughed bitterly. “No. No, they don’t.”

Audrey shrugged. “Wouldn’t know. And I’m sure you’re every bit as good as she was. It’s nice hearing you talk about her.”

"Sorry, Duke,” Nathan said softly, giving him a worried look. "Didn't mean to dredge up bad memories."

“You didn't,” Duke reassured him. “She sounds like a great mom and I'm pleased you had that.”

Audrey nodded and squeezed Nathan's shoulder. “I'm sorry you didn't get more time with her.”

Nathan turned and gave her a hug. "I'm sorry you didn't get a good mom. Both of you. My mom would have adopted you both if she'd known you."

Audrey accepted the hug gratefully, only for a moment, giving him a squeeze before she pulled away. “I didn't even know my mom. I used to dream about her, or someone, arriving in a great big bus and collecting all the kids from the group home and taking them to a huge house filled with love and comfort and safety.”

Nathan looked sad. "Wish someone had."

“The group home wasn't great,” Audrey said quietly. “Foster homes were worse.”

Duke nodded. “I can imagine...heard some stuff from kids I knew when I was living rough. Half of them were runaways from foster homes.”

Nathan gave her shoulder a squeeze, looking as if he wanted very much to hug her again.

Audrey shook her head slightly. “Could've been worse, at least I had a roof over my head and food to eat,” she said briskly before adding more softly, “Not like you, Duke, I'm sorry, I shouldn't be complaining.”

He drifted closer to her and smiled. “If you need to talk about it then you should, don't worry about me.”

She shook her head again. “No, you had it far worse.”

“Audrey,” Duke said, his tone firm but gentle. “Don't do that, don't draw comparisons. If it hurt you then it hurt you and you have every right to be upset about it and to talk about it.”

Nathan nodded. "Not the 'shitty childhood olympics' over here. It could always be worse. Could always be better, too."

“I know,” Audrey snapped, her face tense as she tried to keep her emotions in check. “I know that. But everything Duke went through, being beaten and starved and homeless. And you, losing your mom so young, all the awful things your dad said to you. What happened to me was better. Ok, so no one gave much of a shit about me but I just learned to stand on my own two feet and deal with things myself.”

“And now you don't have to,” Duke said softly. “You have us now, we're here for you, whatever you need.”

Audrey nodded, not trusting herself to speak, and angrily brushed her hand over her face, wiping away the single stray tear which was rolling down her cheek.
"Audrey, I'd really like to hold you right now. Is that okay?" Nathan asked softly.

"I don't...Nathan, I don't need holding," Audrey said sharply. "I don't need pity, I don't need sympathy, least of all from the two of you who had it just as bad as I did."

Duke shook his head. "It's not pity, or sympathy, just an acknowledgement that what you went through was shit, same as both of us. And if it was one of us, you'd want to hug us, so let Nathan do the same for you."

Audrey glared at him. "Don't try to manipulate me, Duke," she snapped.

Duke shrugged. "If it gets you to have a cuddle when you need one..."

"I don't need one! I don't need anything," Audrey's breath caught on the last word. "I don't..." She started to say something else but all that came out was a tiny, broken, sob.

"Please, Audrey," Nathan said, his voice pained. "I know you don't need it, but I want to. Do it for me, if you can't do it for yourself."

Audrey wrapped her arms tightly around herself and nodded.

Nathan immediately enfolded her in his embrace, hugging her tight and kissing her hair.

"I know you're used to dealing with stuff yourself," Duke said quietly, hovering close to them. "I do the same, but you have us now and you don't have to be alone anymore. Let us help you."

Audrey sniffled slightly and nodded against Nathan's chest, relaxing into his contact.

"We love you so much, Audrey," Nathan murmured, rubbing her back. "Wish we could undo the part of the past that hurt you, but at least we can make sure you never hurt like that again."

"We'll do everything we can to make up for it. We're a family. A strange, unconventional, family, maybe, but we are," Duke added.

"Yeah," Audrey mumbled into Nathan's chest, uncurling her arms from around herself and wrapping them around Nathan instead. "Love you both too."

Nathan looked relieved at this development, cuddling her unashamedly.

Audrey snuggled in tighter to him, taking the comfort he so desperately wanted to give, and smiling at the thought of them being a family, something she'd never believed she could have.

"We're the best family," Nathan smiled, kissing her hair.

"We are," Audrey said quietly, wriggling out of his embrace enough to lean up and kiss him.

Nathan returned the kiss, soft and slow and gentle, stroking her hair, thinking about them as a family.

"You two are..." Duke started to say before the oven timer went off and Audrey dashed to retrieve the cake before it could burn. "Beautiful," he finished.

Nathan let her go, watching fondly as she rescued the cake. "She's still beautiful."

"She is," Duke agreed. "You both are. Unless you'd prefer handsome. In which case, Audrey's
beautiful and you're handsome,” he grinned.

"And you're a sweet-talker," Nathan grinned.

“Yeah, I’ll take that,” Duke laughed. “Cake looks great, Audrey.”

“Thanks,” she said, checking with a skewer to see if it was done. “You helping with the icing, then, Nathan?”

"Gonna try," Nathan offered.

“Well let’s get it made now, then we can have a cup of coffee while the cake cools,” Audrey decided, grabbing the ingredients. “Sieve that into there,” she directed Nathan.

Duke groaned. Powdered sugar and Nathan was likely to end up in a mess.

Sure enough, Nathan dumped the entire box of powdered sugar into the sieve, sending up a cloud of the sweet sticky stuff.

Duke rolled his eyes. “Could you make any more mess?” He snarked.

Audrey laughed. “Yeah, maybe not the whole box. Here,” she carefully spooned some of it back into the box. “Try that.”

Nathan gave them a rueful look, powdered with sugar from his eyebrows to his belt. "Guess I should follow your one most basic instruction, huh Duke?"

Duke burst out laughing at the sight of him. “No, no, definitely do not, that's the funniest thing I've seen in years.”

"Yeah, yeah," Nathan grumbled, peeling off his shirt and heading for the sink.

“Oh, I get it now, you did that deliberately,” Duke laughed. “Just so we could see you shirtless.”

Her back to them, Audrey's shoulders shook with barely controlled laughter.

Nathan rolled his eyes at them before rinsing his face, coming up dripping with rumpled hair. He gave Duke a wink and a smirk before toweling off.

“Are you trying to distract us from this cake?” Duke snarked.

Audrey laughed softly. “He is very distracting when he's all rumpled and there are definitely some spots of sugar he missed…”

Nathan looked down at his chest and tried to work out how sugar had even got under his shirt. He ran his finger through one of the aforementioned patches of sugar and licked it clean, his smirk all the wider.

“Need some help with that?” Audrey grinned.

"Sure wouldn't mind," Nathan grinned. "And I bet Duke would enjoy the show."

“Yeah, you'd win that bet,” Duke laughed. “You two are gorgeous together.”

Audrey smiled and leaned in to slowly and thoroughly lick off a patch of sugar, her hands resting lightly on Nathan's hips.
"Audrey, you are amazing," Nathan told her, his face flushed and his breathing a little quicker.

"Mm-hmm," she agreed, moving onto the next patch, diligently making sure she'd got all of the sugar off.

Nathan bit his lip to hold back a groan, meeting Duke's eyes.

Duke smiled. "Don't hold back, Nate, I like hearing you."

"Yeah but - " Nathan's voice trailed off in a choked sound as Audrey found a particularly sensitive spot.

Audrey nibbled at it, again and again, until Nathan was shaking and barely able to stifle the soft moans of pleasure which fell from his lips. She stopped and drew back, grinning wickedly. "That's all the sugar cleaned up," she said.

Nathan outright whimpered, his expression pleading.

"What?" Audrey asked, feigning innocence.

"Audrey, you're killing me," Nathan groaned.

Duke grinned. "He's so gorgeous like that, all wanting and hopeful."

"He is," Audrey agreed, smiling. "Tell me what you want, Nathan."

"Anything, everything, just don't stop, please," Nathan begged.

"Fuck that's hot," Duke murmured into his ear.

Audrey moved closer to him, smiling at them both. She lightly trailed her fingers down Nathan's chest, nibbling his neck as she spoke. "Be specific," she told him.

Nathan whimpered again, shivering at Duke's rich voice in his ear and Audrey's teasing touch.

"'Please Audrey' what?" She asked, dipping her fingers below the waist of his jeans.

"Please touch me," Nathan begged, arching his hips eagerly.

"You only had to ask," Audrey grinned as she rewarded him with a firm rub through his jeans. "Want more?" She teased as she paused with her fingers on his belt buckle.

"God, Audrey, yes, please," Nathan begged shamelessly.

"I love hearing you like that, seeing how desperate you are, knowing exactly how you're feeling," Duke murmured, watching as Audrey made quick work of Nathan's jeans, slipping them down his thighs, his briefs following.

"Do you want to come in, or do you want to keep watching?" Nathan asked Duke breathlessly.

Duke hesitated, torn.

"You guys should be together," Audrey said, grinning. "I'll even do that thing you both like."

"You mean…?" Duke asked, his eyebrows raised.
Audrey smirked and nodded.

Duke grinned widely. “Ready for me, Nate?”

"Always," Nathan smiled, welcoming.

Slipping eagerly into Nathan's mind, Duke curled up happily at the back, content to settle and enjoy it with him, Nathan's arousal immediately obvious as they twined around each other.

Audrey waited, giving Duke a chance to get settled before she leaned up to kiss Nathan, softly and slowly and full of passion.

Nathan curled around Duke in turn, sharing his pleasure, feeling it echo back and forth between them as he returned the kiss.

Without breaking the kiss, Audrey slipped her hand between them, wrapping her fingers firmly around Nathan. She slowly moved her hand, running her thumb around the head on each upstroke.

Nathan moaned, slipping his hands up under her shirt to explore the warm, soft skin.

"Want me to take it off?" Audrey murmured, her lips tickling the soft skin on his neck.

"Can I?" Nathan asked hopefully. "You're so beautiful, I want to see you."

Audrey smiled and nodded, leaning back to give him room.

Nathan gently drew off her shirt, caressing the bare skin with an expression that was almost reverent.

*She's so beautiful*, Duke thought as Audrey moaned lightly under Nathan’s touch, her eyes going dark as his fingers brushed over the ticklish spot on her ribs.

"Duke says you're so beautiful. I couldn't agree more," Nathan murmured, his hands going to the clasp of her bra with a questioning look.

Audrey gave him a slight nod, silently giving him permission. “You’re both gorgeous,” she smiled, a light blush rising to her cheeks at Nathan’s hands grazed her skin.

Nathan kissed her softly as he undid and pulled off her bra. "Duke really is a handsome guy," he smiled.

“He is,” Audrey agreed. “And so are you,” she said, running her hands across his chest and leaning up to kiss him again.

Nathan happily returned the kiss, his hands sliding to her waistband hopefully.

Audrey grinned. “Maybe we should take this somewhere more...comfortable?”

Twined around Nathan, Duke wholeheartedly agreed.

Nathan grinned back. "Duke'd never forgive us if we contaminated his kitchen."

*Nope*, Duke thought cheerfully. *Bad enough you throw ingredients all over the floor, let alone fucking on the counter.*

Nathan laughed. "He agrees. Says I've done enough damage for one day."
"I think I played a part in that too," Audrey laughed. "Sorry, Duke."

You're both as bad as each other, Duke agreed. Bedroom or couch?

"Couch?" Nathan suggested, too impatient to go upstairs.

"Works for me," Audrey grinned, already turning away and heading into the living room.

Nathan watched her, eyes focused on her ass as he trailed after. "Hate to see you leave, love to watch you go," he quipped with a grin.

Audrey flipped him the finger over her shoulder and added a little ass wiggle into her walk. "Gonna come and finish what you started?"

"Hell yes," he agreed enthusiastically, reaching out for a handful of that tempting wiggle.

So perfect, Duke thought happily as Audrey turned to face them. She took Nathan by the hand and dragged him to the couch, falling onto it and pulling him with her so he landed half on top of her.

Nathan grinned as he caught himself, careful not to land on her. "Love a woman who knows what she wants."

"I want you," Audrey said, slightly breathlessly. "Both of you." She wriggled her hips encouragingly.

Nathan groaned and rolled his hips against her. "We're yours," he promised. "How do you want us?"

"Right here, right now, just like this," Audrey replied urgently, her fingers unbuttoning her jeans and pushing them down.

Fuck, Duke groaned. I love when she gets all demanding like that. Help her with those jeans, Nate.

Nathan eagerly obliged, telling Audrey, "Love it when you talk like that, we both do."

"Stop talking and fuck me," she grinned, pushing her panties down and kicking them off.

"God, Audrey," Nathan groaned and rummaged under the couch cushion for the condoms he kept there for just such occasions.

Impatient, Audrey plucked it out of his fingers and carefully tore it open with her teeth. She rolled it onto him and lay back. "Come on then," she smirked up at him.

Wrapped around Nathan’s mind, Duke was equally impatient.

"You drive me crazy, both of you," Nathan murmured, giving Audrey what she wanted.

Audrey gasped as she opened up for him, tilting her hips up and wrapping her legs around him, pulling him close. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him hard.

Nathan moaned into the kiss, pulling her close, overwhelmed with sensation.

Audrey bucked her hips against him, encouraging him to move.

I don’t think she’s interested in slow and gentle right now, Duke thought, somewhere between
amused and aroused.

As he started a fast rhythm, Nathan's mental response was wordless, amusement and arousal and love for both of them.

Audrey groaned, matching his rhythm, rocking against him so he was hitting just the right spot. Her breath was coming faster now, a soft whine on each exhale.

"Good?" Nathan panted, wanting to please her.

“So good,” she breathed as she reached between them, her fingers seeking out that sensitive spot.

"Let me,” Nathan said, stealing a kiss as he reached down to touch her.

Audrey wrapped her arms around his neck, shifting so he could reach her. “There,” she whined, pushing against his hand.

Nathan obliged her, rubbing his finger over the sensitive spot, wanting to bring her pleasure before his self control gave out.

“Faster,” Audrey moaned, all of her muscles tensing as her pleasure grew, building towards her climax.

Nathan increased his pace, kissing her passionately, moaning softly against her lips.

Audrey rocked against him harder, kissing him deeply, lost in the sensations. She broke the kiss and groaned loudly. “So close.”

Harder, Nate, Duke urged, thinking how beautiful Audrey looked, her head thrown back in pleasure, hair spilling over the couch cushions

Nathan did as Duke encouraged, groaning as he tried to hold back.

Audrey moaned, low and deep and satisfied, as she came, muscles clenching tightly around him.

Nathan groaned deeply, letting himself fall over the edge after her.

Duke twined himself more tightly around Nathan, clinging to him through their shared pleasure.

They stayed there for a moment, coming down together, before Audrey stirred. She kissed Nathan softly. “That was...unexpected…”

"That a complaint?” Nathan asked, amused. He shifted to lie beside her, cuddling her close.

“Not in the slightest,” Audrey grinned. “Just...surprising. I thought I wore you out last night,” she laughed and settled into his arms.

"You did. Wore me out again now,” Nathan said happily, nuzzling her hair.

“Good,” Audrey smiled. “Want to nap?”

Nathan gave her an adoring look. "God, I love you. You're perfect."

Goes for me too, Duke thought, just as adoring.

“I love you both too,” Audrey smiled.
Nathan smiled and kissed her. "Duke agrees with me."

Audrey snuggled into him happily. "You're both perfect."

Duke wrapped himself around Nathan just as tightly as Nathan was holding Audrey, warm and content at the back of their shared mind.

Audrey relaxed into Nathan's arms, smiling to herself, thinking about how lucky she was to have both of them, thoughts about her past now firmly at the back of her mind where they belonged.

It wasn't long before she stirred and kissed Nathan softly, announcing that she was going to finish icing the cake before work.

As she dashed out of the door, with a hurried kiss goodbye, Duke sighed. I hate it when she leaves. Do you think...maybe...?

Nathan murmured a sleepy inquiry, having let himself drift.

Nathan! Duke thought, exasperated. Will you wake up, this is important.

"What, what's wrong, who needs help?" Nathan snapped awake so abruptly the jolt of adrenaline slammed into Duke as well.

No one needs help, Duke reassured him, mentally wincing at the sudden adrenaline surge. I just want to ask you something.

Oh. Jeez, Nathan rubbed a hand over his face.

Hang on, this is gonna be better face to face, Duke thought, leaving Nathan. "Don't look so worried. It's a good thing. I think, anyway."

"Yeah?" Nathan still looked worried.

"I was thinking... About Audrey and being a family and how I wish she didn't have to leave - but not in a weird creepy way, just that I wish she stayed every night and do you think maybe the time's right to ask her to move in?" Duke said quickly.

Nathan's worry vanished in a beaming smile. "Been wanting to ask for a while," he admitted. "Wasn't sure how she'd feel 'bout it, being so independent. Wasn't sure how you'd feel, either."

"She definitely is independent," Duke smiled fondly. "And yeah, maybe she won't want to let go of that, but we could make sure she has her own space here."

Nathan nodded. "Got plenty of rooms. She can have some."

"So we can ask her?" Duke grinned.

"Yeah," Nathan was back to looking nervous. "What if she says no?"

Now Duke was nervous as well. "She won't," he said, trying to sound more confident than he felt.

"What if...what if she gets upset? What if she wants to...to end things?" Nathan asked in a tiny voice.

"Maybe we just need to make it clear that we're happy with the way things are but we'd like to move forwards and if she doesn't want that then that's fine, nothing has to change," Duke tried to
sound reassuring.

"Of course," Nathan nodded, though he didn't seem very reassured.

“It'll be fine, Nate,” Duke tried. “I mean, what if...what if she's ready to take that step and she decides to break it off with us because we haven't asked?”

Nathan gave a squeak of dismay.

“Exactly,” Duke agreed with Nathan's wordless response. “So...we should ask her, right? At least find out what she thinks?”

"Yeah, I guess so. When she gets back,” Nathan got up and paced restlessly. "Which isn't for at least eight hours."

“‘You guess so?” Duke frowned. “Are you sure you want to ask her?”

"Of course I do, I'm just…” he couldn't bring himself to admit he was scared.

“Nate, it'll be fine, she's practically living here anyway, this is just making it official.”

"I know.” He knew, but it didn't help.

“So can you just sit down and stop pacing? Because you're making me nervous,” Duke complained.

Nathan obediently sat, taking a pillow and fidgeting with it.

“Yeah, because that's helpful,” Duke snarked. “Just...go and do something if you can't keep still.”

Nathan drooped a little, but got up and headed to his crafts room. Even if he couldn't focus on a project, he could do some mindless prep work.

Without Nathan's fidgety distraction, Duke's thoughts spiralled until he'd convinced himself that Audrey would hate the idea of moving in and they'd never see her again. After a while he followed Nathan to the craft room. “Sorry,” he said sheepishly. “It will be ok, won't it? She won't hate us for asking?”

Nathan wasn't sure at all, but he could see Duke was as anxious as he was. "Of course it'll be okay. She loves us."

Duke nodded, agreeing, albeit slightly doubtingly. “So we just need to keep busy for...the next few hours until we can ask her.”

Nathan nodded. "You could help me with this. Or you can hop in and do some cooking, know that helps when you're not happy.”

“I'll help,” Duke said agreeably. “What are we doing?”

"Cutting out pictures."

“Ok,” Duke said, pleased to have any sort of distraction from worrying about what Audrey might say.

By the time Audrey came back after her shift, Nathan and Duke had resorted to stressing and snapping at each other.
“Ok, what's going on with you two?” She frowned at them. “Some sort of argument going on that I should know about?”

"Audrey!” Nathan stood and immediately went over to hug her tightly.

“Nathan,” she laughed, tucking herself into his embrace and reaching out towards Duke. “Everything ok?”

"Yeah, okay," he mumbled, not letting up.

Audrey rolled her eyes. Something was clearly going on and she wasn’t going to get any sort of an answer out of Nathan. “Duke? Everything really ok?”


Audrey frowned at the obviously fake grin that he wore. “Right, that’s it, one of you needs to tell me what’s going on.”

"We’ve just been a little...anxious today," Nathan mumbled.

“Ok,” Audrey said patiently. “Why?”

Duke glanced at Nathan, wondering if Nathan was going to ask her or if he should.

Nathan glanced back at him, concluded he wasn’t going to ask, and blurted, "We're gonna ask if you want to move in."

Audrey grinned. “You’ve been anxious about that?”

"Yeah," Nathan wasn't sure what to make of her response. Surely she wouldn't mock their fear over this…

“And this is coming from both of you?” She looked to Duke for confirmation.

“It is,” he nodded. “I brought it up, Nate said he’d been wanting to ask for a while. We’ve been snapping at each other ever since, worried you might say no. Or hate us. Or something,” he looked away.

“You two are the most ridiculous, precious men,” she smiled affectionately at Duke and squeezed Nathan’s arm. “Of course I’ll move in, I’m pretty much living here anyway. Thank you, both of you, for asking and I’m sorry you were worried about what my answer might be.”

Nathan sighed deeply, hugging her close. "So damn glad," he mumbled into her hair. "Are you mad we took so long to ask?"

“No!” Audrey told him firmly. “It’s a big step. You guys have lived together for years, it’s been Duke’s home for longer. I’m just really pleased that you both want me to share your home with you.”

Duke smiled at her. “We do. We really do.”

"Can't imagine anything better," Nathan said happily, cuddling her.

“I’ll give my landlord notice tomorrow, let him know I’m moving out next month, if that’s ok?”

"That's fine, whenever you're ready," Nathan reassured her. "Can have a welcome party for you,"
he smiled.


“Very ok with me,” he smiled. “I just...there are a couple of things I need to do first, or maybe I should say that I need you both to do first.”

"Anything for you," Nathan said immediately.

"It's just that...if we're all moving forwards with this then there shouldn't be any secrets between us, Nate. And I know what you're going to say, it doesn't matter to you, it's in the past, but it matters to me," Duke said quietly. "I need you to look at my police files. I know what's in them, so does Audrey, it's only right that you know too, so we can all move forwards on an equal footing. The same as...Audrey, you should know how and why I died. Nathan knows and you don't and that just doesn't sit right with me."

"I already know, Duke, I worked it out, pieced things together, stuff Nathan let slip, what was in the file investigating your disappearance," she said. "That was bullshit too. I know it wouldn't have made a difference, but they didn't do enough."

"What was in there?"

"Financials, coupla people who claimed to know you, said you had a drinking problem..."

Duke snorted. "The rev, I guess? He accused everyone of having a drinking problem to cover up his own."

Audrey smirked. "Yeah, he was one. Anyway, the assumption was that you got drunk and made a mistake so they wrote it off, didn't even look for a body. I wish we could do that for you, Duke, bring you home, but I guess it's too late now."

"Yep, I was fish food a long time ago," Duke said cheerily, ignoring Nathan's horrified expression. "And that anchor would have held for a while but the currents would have moved me, I wouldn't be anywhere near where I went in. So yeah, no point in even looking."

"I'm sorry, Duke," Audrey said softly. "I'm glad you feel you could tell me, even though I already knew, and if you want to talk about the why, or anything else, then I'm here for you."

"Thanks," he murmured. "You're a clever woman, Audrey Parker, working all that out," he smiled and turned to Nathan. "So, police files, yes?"

"If it makes you feel better. Can already promise it won't change how I feel," Nathan agreed. After a pensive moment, he asked, "Never thought to ask before, but did you ever want us to do any kind of….of service, for you? We can't bring you home, can't give you a proper burial or scatter your ashes, but is there something else we can do that you'd want?"

Duke shook his head. "Thank you, really, thank you, for asking, but no. There’d only be you two there anyway, and it would feel….fake. I mean, I’m still here. What would I do? Turn up to my own memorial and watch you both pretending to be upset even though you know I’m right there? I mean, it might be funny but no."

Nathan actually looked relieved as he nodded. He was glad - what if they'd held a funeral and it sent Duke's soul onward?
“If you change your mind, you should let us know,” Audrey said gently, deciding a change of subject was in order. “I can bring the files home for you, Nathan, let you go through them at your own pace.”

"Okay, sure," Nathan agreed. Hardly in keeping with protocols, but this wasn't exactly normal circumstances.

“And if you have any questions, just ask,” Duke told him. “I know Audrey agreed there was a lot of bullshit in there but there’s a lot that wasn’t and I’d hate for you to jump to any conclusions.”

"I promise I will. Far’s I'm concerned it's all bullshit though."

“Yeah, well, it isn’t,” Duke pointed out. “There’s stuff that I did that I’m not proud of and I did the time for it. Better that you know what it was.”

"I know. Not saying I won't read it."

“Good,” Audrey said briskly. “Now that’s settled, can we celebrate the fact I’m moving in? Have you two already polished off that cake?”

"Haven't touched it, actually." Nathan's stomach growled, and he looked sheepish. "Guess I forgot lunch too."

“I think we were both too stressed for lunch,” Duke said just as sheepishly. “Maybe I should make some proper food before we have cake?”

“Or we could get takeout?” Audrey suggested.

"I'm okay with dessert first," Nathan grinned.

Duke laughed. “You would be.”

Audrey shrugged, smiling as she did so. “To be honest, I’m fine with cake for dinner. It’s all food, right?”

Duke just stared at her reproachfully, shaking his head slightly. “Ok, ok, for one night I won’t nag either of you about eating proper food. Or the lack of it. Whichever.”


Duke rolled his eyes. “Don’t think this is going to become a habit,” he grumbled. “I still feel like I should be making a celebratory dinner.”

“You’re sweet,” Audrey smiled at him. “How about you do that for the day I move in instead?”

“That was a given, anyway,” Duke smiled back. “But yeah, I definitely will, just let me know what you’d like.”

“Anything you make is wonderful, Duke.”

“Thanks but it’s for you, so I’ll make whatever you’d most like,” Duke gazed at her, a small, adoring, smile on his lips.

“Ok, I’ll think about it,” Audrey promised.

Nathan beamed. "This is going to be amazing."
Eagle eyed readers might have noticed the chapter count has changed - there will now be a bonus chapter of deleted scenes at the end - things that we wanted to write but which didn't fit the flow of the fic. And yeah, it's smut ;)}
“Hey Bill,” Audrey greeted him as she walked into the bar. “Just wanted to stop in and give you notice that I’m moving out at the end of the month. You’ll let me know what I owe you?”

“Yeah, I’ll work it out,” Bill nodded. “Shame to see you go, you’ve been a good tenant. You mind leaving me a forwarding address for mail?”

“Sure,” Audrey pulled out her police-issue notepad and pen and scribbled it down.

Bill took it from her and glanced at it. “Duke Crocker’s old place?”

“You know it?”

“Everyone in town knows the place. All that stuff, few years back, ‘bout the place being haunted. Was that all true?”

“I believe so,” Audrey replied evasively.

“He still there?”

“Why do you ask?” Audrey narrowed her eyes at him.

“We were friends once, back in the day. Me and Duke. He was a good man.”

Audrey relaxed. “Oh, in that case...yeah, he’s still there.”

“Huh, fancy that. Always thought it was a bit of a scam to drum up publicity for selling the old house. Anyway, if he is still there, I’ve got some stuff you might like. Or he might like back, rather.”

“Stuff?” Audrey asked doubtfully.

“Yeah. I was outta town when he disappeared. We'd had a bit of a falling out. Didn’t find out he was gone til I came back a few years later. Soon’s I heard the estate was being sold off, I broke in and...hang on, you’re not gonna arrest me for this, are you?”

“No,” Audrey smiled. “It was a while back and there’s no one to make a complaint. Go on.”

Bill grinned. “Knew they’d be sending the vultures out to empty the place. Knew he’d have hated that. So I broke in and took some of his things. Personal effects, you know, nothing of any real value, but he might appreciate having them back.”

“Bill, that’s brilliant,” Audrey said excitedly. “Could I take it with me now?”

“You’re gonna need your boyfriend and his truck for this,” Bill laughed. “Took me two trips when
I picked it up.”

“I’ll call him now,” Audrey said. “You should stop by, I’m sure Duke would love to see you.”

Bill shook his head. “Doubt that. It was a helluva falling out we had. I might’ve given him some business advice he didn’t much like. Send him my best though, will you?”

**

Nathan had dashed over straight away and loaded up the Bronco. It was full to bursting with boxes and as soon as they pulled up outside their house, Audrey rushed straight in to find Duke, leaving Nathan to start unloading.

“Duke!”

“Audrey,” Duke called back.

“Come see!”

“Come see what?” He grumbled.

“Just…c’mere,” Audrey grinned.

Duke drifted into the hallway and caught sight of the Bronco and all the boxes packed inside. “You’re moving in today?” He said happily.

Audrey shook her head. “No, that’ll still be at the end of the month. This is better,” she promised.

Nathan brought the first box inside, staggering slightly as he came up the steps, and grunted with the effort as he carefully put it down on the floor. He lifted the lid. “Look familiar?” He grinned.


Duke looked more closely. There was a smudge of engine oil on one of the books. Surely that wasn’t a coincidence. “How did you…? How did you find my old books?”

“Not just books,” Audrey told him gleefully. “Duke, it’s everything. Books, ornaments, papers, photos, even a half empty bottle of whisky and an old sweater. All of your stuff.”


Leaving Audrey to explain, Nathan went to bring in the rest of the boxes, keen to get Duke’s stuff inside and unpacked as soon as possible.

“Bill McShaw,” Audrey explained. “I went to give him notice that I was moving out, told him I was moving here, he told me what he did.”

“Bill?” Duke asked incredulously. “Wait... Bill owns the Gull now?”

Audrey nodded.

“And he came by and collected all this?” Duke was struggling to get his head around it. After everything that had happened between them, Bill had still done this for him.
"He did. As soon as he heard they’d...well, once they’d made things official," Audrey said tactfully.

Duke smiled softly. "I can’t believe he did that. I knew someone had, obviously, I was here. I heard someone coming in, but I wasn’t ready to deal with people in my house so I hid out in the attic. I never could figure out why these things were cleaned out first when the rest didn’t happen till months later."

“Well now you know,” Audrey grinned.

“And he kept this stuff. All these years,” Duke said quietly. “Will you thank him for me, please.”

“Of course. I think he’d like to see you, if you'd be okay with him stopping by.”

Duke shook his head ruefully. "Dunno, Audrey. We didn’t part on good terms. I...uh...I wouldn’t take his advice, about the Gull and all the free meals I was giving out. Turns out he was right but he was gone by then, never got a chance to tell him.”

Audrey looked at him thoughtfully. “He thinks the same. That you wouldn’t want to see him, I mean. If you don’t want to then I won’t, but if you do, maybe I could sort things out?”

“Could you?” Duke said. “Just see if maybe he’d stop by. I’d like to thank him. Apologize for what happened.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Audrey promised.

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When Audrey approached him, Bill cautiously agreed to pop over and meet with Duke. He wasn’t entirely sure which was more nerve wracking - the thought of meeting a ghost, or the thought of sorting things out with his old friend and all the bad blood that had passed between them. More than anything, he hoped they could get past it.

“Hey Bill,” Audrey greeted him, answering his knock. “Come on in.”

"Audrey," Bill took off his shoes in the hallway, looking around. “Like what you two've done with the place." 

“Great, isn’t it?” She smiled. “Duke and Nathan did it all up a few years ago, with Dwight’s help. They did a lovely job.”

"Duke had a say, huh?" Bill glanced around nervously. "Is, uh, is he here now?"

Audrey suppressed a smirk. "He’s in the kitchen, with Nathan. Come on through.”

Bill followed her, trying not to be too visibly tense.

In the kitchen, Duke was just as tense, worrying about what his old friend might say, whether the argument might flare up again. “Hi Bill,” he said cautiously as they walked in.

Bill stared. That was Duke, sure as could be. He hadn't changed a bit - except for the whole being somewhat see-through these days. "Holy shit," he managed to get out.

“Yeah, that pretty much sums it up,” Duke laughed. “How you been?”

"Um. Fine. I'd ask how you've been but, uh," he waved a hand at Duke's translucent form, "Not so
good, I guess."

“Well, there’s the whole being dead thing,” Duke agreed, smirking slightly. “But apart from that, all good.”

"Well, uh. That's good, then," Bill offered awkwardly.

“Sorry,” Duke said, not looking even remotely apologetic. “I joke about it. Nathan tells me I shouldn’t, but here we are…”

“Bill, can I get you a coffee?” Audrey offered. “Or something stronger?”

"Whiskey might help this go down, if you don't mind,” Bill admitted, adding with a weak smile. “I must look like I've just seen a ghost.”


Audrey narrowed her eyes at him as she poured the whisky and set the glass and the bottle down on the table. “Play nice,” she mouthed. “We’ll be out on the porch if you need us,” she smiled and took Nathan by the sleeve to drag him outside.

Bill took a sizeable swallow of whiskey. "So, uh. Audrey said you wanted to see me?"

“Yeah…” Duke didn't know how to start. Too many ‘sorrys’ and ‘thank yous’ that needed to be said. “Uh…You were right. Bout the Gull and the free meals and…quite a lot of stuff actually,” he said ruefully.

"Wish I hadn't been," Bill said honestly. "You were doing good, and that's too rare a thing in this world."

“Not much good if it bankrupted me,” Duke told him. “Should've listened to you, taken some advice for once in my life.”

"You couldn't bear to turn someone away hungry. More'n most people ever do," Duke shrugged. “Maybe. Still wasn't a good business decision,” he said. “And I'm sorry for everything I said back then. I was pretty harsh, said a lot of shit you didn't deserve.”

Bill shrugged. "You were in a bad way. It happens."

“You knew?” Duke said quietly. “Thought I did a pretty good job of hiding it.”

"Had an inkling it wasn't going well. Restaurants being the family business, I knew they run a damn thin margin. I hoped you'd either see sense, or sell it and move on. If I’d known how it’d end, I'd never have flown out to help Geoff launch his new bistro.”

“Wish I had seen sense,” Duke admitted. “Thank you for trying. I know it didn't go down well back then but I appreciate it.”

"Wish I'd done more. I'm sorry I wasn't there. Always wondered, if I had been, would it have gone down different,” Bill said quietly.

“What? The Gull? Nah, there's nothing you could've done to make me listen.”

"Maybe not, but even if you'd still lost it, maybe having a friend there would've helped after. Was a pretty shit friend to just take off.”
"Wasn't like I gave you much choice," Duke pointed out. "You tried, Bill, and I appreciate that, even if I didn't back then. There wasn't anything else you could've done."

"I wasn't even there, Duke. Maybe it wouldn't have made a difference, but maybe it would've."

"It wouldn't. Trust me."

Bill shrugged. "Maybe not. Still. Sorry I wasn't there."

"Don't be," Duke said. "I'm kinda glad you weren't. You being around to see me screw my life up even further would've been worse."

"But maybe you'd still have it, screwed up or not, if you'd had a friend," Bill said quietly.

Duke studied him, working out whether Bill knew more than he was saying. "No, I can safely say not. I always was too proud to ask for help and by the time everything went to shit I was spiralling hard. Nothing would've made a difference."

"Might be. Still sorry."

"Thanks. And for rescuing my stuff. Couldn't believe it when Nathan and Audrey turned up with all those boxes and told me what you'd done. Couldn't believe you still cared enough to do that."

"Least I could do. Couldn't save everything, but I figured at least the stuff that meant something, the stuff that'd have ended up in the trash - I could spare space for some boxes in the attic of the Gull. Seemed only right."

"Means a lot to me that you did that. Breaking in, keeping hold of it for all these years. Not many people would've done that."

Bill took a sip of his whiskey. "Figured I owed you one. Glad you got it back."

"Was good to get it all back," Duke smiled. "And you didn't really answer my question, how've you been? Meg ok? The kids? Geoff?"

Bill smiled. "Meg and the kids are fine. Geoff's still an arrogant ass, he's a celebrity chef in New York City now, busy pretending that he doesn't know any of us hicks and was certainly never from such a little hick town."

Duke laughed. "Sounds about right. Good to hear you're all doing well. How's business at the Gull?"

"It's never easy, and we'll never get rich, but we keep our heads above water."

"I'm glad it's in good hands," Duke smiled. "Still can't believe you bought it."

"Always hoped for a place of my own. Nothing fancy like Geoff's, but a place to serve some drinks and good old fashioned comfort food. Thought about renaming it the Second Chance Bistro but...nah."

"Second Chance is a good name, but I'm glad you kept it as the Gull," Duke said. "Shame it's turned you grey," he smirked, just now taking in how much older Bill looked.

Bill gave a self-conscious chuckle. "Pretty sure that's as much turning forty-five as anything else."

Duke laughed. "One of the advantages of being a ghost. Fifty two and don't look a day over thirty
"seven," he grinned. “Seriously though, you're looking well and, man, it is so fucking good to see you.”

"It's real good to see you too. Felt like I left a lot of things unsaid," Bill took a sip of whiskey to hide the sudden lump in his throat.

“Yeah…,” Duke agreed. “Me too. But we can just leave it in the past, Bill, no point going back over old shit.”

Bill gave him a crooked smile. "Already said mine. You're welcome to say yours too."

Duke shrugged. “I dunno, just...sorry for being such a dick back then. Thank you for trying to help me anyway. I wish I could've seen things more clearly but...you know what they say about hindsight.”

"I hear that loud and clear," Bill nodded.

“Yeah,” Duke nodded and changed the subject. “Would be great to see the Gull some time. I'd say I'd pop in for a few beers but…” he laughed.

"Be pretty hard. Guess at least if you gotta be in one place, it's a nice one. Did a good job cleaning it up. I thought about buying it, when I saw it go up for sale, but it was the house or the Gull, I could only afford one."

“That's good of you, Bill,” Duke smiled. “Yeah, it's a good place to be stuck. Or at least, it is now, anyway, it wasn't so good for a few years, til Nathan bought it.”

"And you like it here, with him and now Audrey too?"

Duke smiled softly. “I love it.”

"Good. Can imagine it'd suck if you were stuck here and assholes moved in."

“That's basically why Nathan bought the place. I hated pretty much everyone who walked through the door, chased them out, one way or another. He lost his job over it, still wouldn't give up on me. Turned up one afternoon with the keys and the deeds, announced he'd bought it and was moving in. He's a good guy. And Audrey's amazing.”

"His day job's real estate, isn't it? Pretty sure I heard Audrey mention that once. Was he the realtor trying to sell this place?"

“Yeah, that's it. He was the only person to realize I was here and try to communicate with me. We became... friends.”

"I'm glad to hear it. Must've been a long lonely ten years. Woulda come sooner if I'd known.”

“It was,” Duke nodded. “I was here, you know, when you came and picked up my stuff. I didn't know it was you, figured it was just vulture bastards clearing out the place. I didn't want to watch so I...uh, hid out in the attic. Sorry. If I'd known...but then you probably wouldn't have been able to see or hear me back then anyway.”

"Huh. Guess I should be glad you didn't come to axe murder me or something," Bill laughed.

“It was tempting,” Duke chuckled. “But no, I couldn't even open a door or anything then. Not like now.” To prove his point, he carefully moved Bill's glass of whisky to the opposite side of the
table, out of his reach.

Bill's eyes widened. "Damn, you're not even touching it."

"Nope," Duke grinned and switched the radio on. "Just have to think at stuff. Electrical stuff, electronics, is easiest but I can move stuff around too."

"Pretty sweet. Must've been useful for scaring away potential residents."


"What else besides moving stuff?"

"Well there's moving stuff and then there's moving stuff," Duke grinned. "Whisky glass moving a couple of inches across a table, not scary. Making every door in the house slam at the same time as every light goes out and every tap comes on, slightly more so. Making electronic stuff start or stop working is pretty fun too, especially phones and tablets - when someone's staring at a screen and it suddenly starts doing things it isn't supposed to and then a message appears like, I dunno, 'I'm watching you' or whatever. Oh and touching people but that's only really scary when someone can't see me. Works best if I shout down their ear at the same time. Combine them all together, which I can do, and you get horror movie shit and people running out of here like the hounds of hell are after them." He couldn't quite hide his gleeful amusement.

"You must've really hated some of those people," Bill said with amusement.

"Yeah, pretty much," Duke laughed. "Some of it can be useful though."

"Now that you're not trying to scare people off?" Bill said curiously.

Duke nodded. "I mean, it was useful for that but now I can do stuff like throwing a blanket over Audrey or Nathan, fetching and carrying stuff. It doesn't always go well so I don't move anything too heavy or breakable, but it's kinda good to feel useful."

"Guess I can see that," Bill mused.

Duke smiled. "I can go out with them, too, well, Nathan anyway. Might surprise you in the Gull one evening."

"You're welcome to stop by. Can just anyone see you?"

"Most people can't see me unless I'm trying to be visible. I guess there might be some who can. I'll talk to Nathan, maybe try to stop by when it's quiet or something."

"You're welcome to stop by after hours if you'd rather," Bill grinned suddenly, "Or come when there's a crowd, might drum up business."

Duke laughed. "Yeah, no, the amount of people in this town who hate me, it'd probably drive you out of business."

"That's what gullible rich tourists are for."

"You make a very good point," Duke grinned.

"Speaking of tourists, once Audrey's out I was going to offer it up as a rental - for the whole winter season, or for two week blocks in the summer. If you guys want to get away and spend a couple weeks on the water, you can have first shot at a reservation each year."
“Really?” Duke’s face lit up. “That would be amazing, thank you. I’ll speak to them.”

"Feels only right, was Audrey's place for a long time and she always said it was real nice in summertime."

Duke nodded. “It is, and it would be great to spend a couple of weeks there, watch the waves, listen to the ocean. You’re a good friend, Bill. Sorry I fucked it up.”

"No apologies needed. Just glad to have you back," Bill smiled.

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

The Gulls discover that Duke is linked to Audrey as much as he is to Nathan which prompts Audrey to make a suggestion...

Early summer came around, before the crowds of tourists arrived, the weather just starting to warm up. Audrey had moved in several months before and, after the usual teething problems (she was even messier than Nathan was and Duke had thought that would be an impossibility), was all settled in. It was Nathan’s idea to take a trip to the beach before it became a tourist hotspot and the others had readily agreed.

Lying in the warm sun, after a delicious lunch that Duke had prepared, Nathan drifted off. Deciding to leave him in peace, Audrey and Duke wandered down the beach, lost in conversation.

Nathan woke slowly, blinking sleepily at the soothing sounds of the waves and the gulls. But after a moment, he realized it was all he could hear - from his lovers there was only silence. “Audrey? Duke?” he called, sitting bolt upright and looking around wildly.

Further down the beach, Audrey was collecting pretty shells which she thought Nathan might able to use for a crafting project. Duke was chatting away to her, talking about tides and waves and surfing. Neither of them heard Nathan calling them.

Nathan spotted the far-off figures, tiny but so familiar as to be recognizable even at that distance. Relieved but baffled, he got up and jogged down the beach toward them.

“Hey,” Duke called when he got within earshot. “Good sleep?”

"Fine, but are you okay?” Nathan asked worriedly.

“Yeah, why?” Duke replied, confused.

Nathan pointed to their blanket and other beach stuff, far down the wide strip of sand. "Woke up and you were all the way down here."

Audrey frowned. “Duke, you can’t usually go that far from Nathan, are you sure you’re ok?”

Duke blinked. “I didn’t realise how far away we were. Sorry, Nate, you must’ve been worried.”

“Well yeah, but are you all right?” Nathan fussed.

“I’m fine,” Duke insisted. “Honestly, I didn’t even notice how far away we were.”

"Are you getting stronger? You can just go further now?” Nathan wondered.

“I...don’t know…” Duke puzzled. “Hang on, I’ll find out. Stay there.”

Nathan put an arm around Audrey and waited, still a little worried.

“He’ll be fine,” Audrey said, even though she wasn’t entirely convinced. She snuggled into him
and watched Duke closely for any sign there might be something wrong.

Duke drifted up the beach, trying to lose himself in his thoughts the same way he’d lost himself in conversation with Audrey. As usually happened, it was as though there was something stopping him. He turned to look back. A hundred feet, the usual distance he could go. He shrugged and called back to them. “Same as always.”

Nathan considered that. "Audrey, can you go join him?"

“Yeah,” Audrey grinned as she clicked. She bounced up the beach to where Duke was. “C’mon, let’s walk.”

“Why? Ohhhhh,” Duke’s grin matched hers as he followed her further away from Nathan. “Best not go too far, he’ll start fretting.”

“Yeah, that’s probably far enough,” she agreed before turning to check on Nathan. “Ok?” She shouted.

Nathan jogged over, but stayed a little ways out of Duke's 'range'. "Can you get to me if Audrey doesn't move?"

Duke quickly drifted back towards him but ran into the usual invisible barrier. “Nope,” he replied. “Same as with you, a hundred feet away.”

Nathan came closer until there was a little overlap, but not much. "Now that I'm closer, can you continue coming in this direction?"

Rolling his eyes slightly, Duke moved until he was beside Nathan.

"So it's not just her now," Nathan looked relieved.

“Sorry, Nathan, I didn’t realise that’s what you were worried about,” Duke said quietly. “No, it looks like it’s both of you now.”

Audrey joined them. “All ok?”

“Yeah,” Nathan's smile was still tellingly relieved, but genuine. “We're both anchors now.”

“That’s pretty cool,” Audrey grinned.

“It is,” Duke smiled. “Can come out with you, surprise Nathan for lunch while he’s at work or something.”

"You guys can go out and do stuff together, too - just the two of you," Nathan smiled. To be honest, the idea made him the slightest bit insecure - but that just made him realize how Audrey must have felt whenever Duke and Nathan had gone out. More so, in fact, since she hadn't even had that option.

“We can,” Duke said. “Still want to come and surprise you for lunch. If Audrey doesn’t mind.”

“I think that’s a great idea. We’ll just turn up one day when you aren’t expecting it,” she smiled.

"I'd love that,” Nathan admitted.

“We’ll do it,” Duke promised, relieved that he wouldn’t have to be quite so dependent on Nathan for everything - not that he’d ever admit that, it would seem ungrateful, but it was always at the
back of his mind that maybe Nathan would feel like he should invite Duke everywhere, just so he could get out of the house.

"Glad you two can do this," Nathan said softly.

“Me too,” Audrey grinned, already thinking about possibilities - albeit mostly a list of bars they should go to. She knew Nathan wasn’t keen on going out drinking and it was something Duke used to enjoy so maybe it was something they could share together.

Duke smiled. “It’ll be great. Not as good as all three of us going places, but it’ll be awesome.”

"We'll still do that too, of course," Nathan said immediately. "Just like you and I could still go places, if you'd want."

“Of course I want that,” Duke replied softly.

"Me too,” Nathan said, reassured.

“It’s good that you have a choice now, Duke,” Audrey smiled. “I know how much you love going out with Nathan and I hope you’ll enjoy coming out with me, too.”

“I’m sure I will,” Duke said. “Three days with each of you and a day at home on my own, enjoying the peace and quiet,” he joked. “Like arranging childcare. Who gets to look after Duke today?”

"More like fighting over custody," Nathan smiled. "Who's privileged to spend time with Duke?"

“You,” Duke said. “Are the sweetest.”

“Hey,” Audrey objected. “I’m sweet too.”

“Ok, ok,” Duke laughed. “You’re both the sweetest and I love both of you.”

"We both love you too, Duke. We both love spending time with you, at home or anywhere else. I'm always happier when you're with me."


"You do, Duke. You belong with us. You'll always have a home with us, no matter what. Even if a nor'easter leveled the house tomorrow, you'll never be without a home," Nathan said earnestly.

“We're a family,” Audrey smiled. “Your place is by our side, for as long as that's where you want to be.”

Duke smiled softly. “It's a great family to be a part of.”

"You're so much of what makes it great, Duke," Nathan said, getting as close to Duke as he could and putting his other arm around Audrey.

“You really are, Duke,” Audrey said, spotting the doubtful look which crossed his face.

“We all make it great,” Duke said, off-hand. “It wouldn't be right without any one of us.”

"Yeah, but couldn't be without you, Duke. It'd break our hearts," Nathan said softly.

Audrey tucked in closer to Nathan and nodded her agreement, not trusting herself to speak now the
stupid, irrational, thought that Duke might leave had crossed her mind.

“Mine too,” Duke said quietly. “I'm not going anywhere, though, you're stuck with me forever.”

“Good,” Nathan said emphatically. "We want that. Want to come home to you, want to talk about our day, want to listen to yours, want to enjoy your cooking, sit with you watching movies, have sex with you, have you there when we fall asleep, know you're there through the night, wake up to you and spend time with you over breakfast and hate to leave for work. Want to go out with you here there and everywhere, and I'll never want to stop sharing with you, it's the best damn feeling in the world.”

“That's what I want too,” Duke smiled. “It's everything I ever wanted. Sharing my...not life...with you both. It's more than I could ever have dreamed of.”

"Same here. I'm happier than I ever thought I could be," Nathan said happily.

Audrey chewed her lip. “I am too,” she said. “But the whole...sharing... thing, Duke possessing you. It's...could we, maybe, Duke?”

“You'd want me to possess you?” Duke asked, surprised.

“Yeah, I mean, I think so. I'd like to experience what you two have. That connection.”

“Are you really sure, Audrey?” Duke asked. “You shouldn't feel that you have to, if it'd weird you out or whatever. Like...Nate and I kinda...well, we share the same plumbing, for lack of a better expression, and I understand if it would be too weird for you. There's no pressure.”

"I don't feel like I have to," she said immediately. "I mean, it does kind of weird me out, especially the plumbing, but I think it probably always would. I still want to try. The way you two talk about it, like it's the most intimate thing in the world, that complete sense of togetherness without losing yourself....that sounds pretty amazing.”

“It is amazing,” Duke smiled. “And I'd love to share that with you. If you're ok with it and if Nathan's ok with it.”

"Course I am, why wouldn't I be?” Nathan asked, confused.

Audrey smiled and kissed his cheek. "You're amazing too, Nathan. When we get home, then? I don't think I want to do it out here, where it's so exposed.”

“Yeah, definitely at home,” Duke agreed. “And Audrey, there's no rush. Next week, next year, whenever you want to. It means a lot that you feel you can trust me with this, it doesn't have to be today.”

"I appreciate that, but the anticipation would be worse," Audrey grinned ruefully. "I'd rather not have days or weeks or months to make up things that could possibly go wrong."  

“Nothing's going to go wrong,” Duke promised. “But if you have any worries then we should talk about them before we do it. I'd hate to find out afterwards that you weren't happy about something.”

"No, I can't honestly think of anything and Nathan does it all the time, I'm sure it'll be fine. I just know that if I give it time, my nameless worries will go out and find themselves some names.”

“Yeah, I hear that,” Duke half-laughed. “It'll be fine, it'll just be for a short time first and Nathan’ll
"Of course. And Duke will be so careful with you," Nathan reassured Audrey. "The first time we tried it, he only stayed for seconds."

"I know you'll take good care of me," Audrey said softly. Trust didn't come easy to her, not after her childhood had drilled into her that you never relied on anyone but yourself. But she did - she did trust them.

"I will, Audrey, I promise," Duke said quietly. "Thirty seconds, or less, whatever you're comfortable with. I won't try to take control, I'll just be there. I'll know if you aren't happy, you don't even have to say it, I'll leave straight away."

Audrey hesitated a moment before asking, "Will you...know everything?"

"That depends a lot on you, I think. Anything that crosses your mind while I'm with you, yeah, that'll come through to me, even if it wasn't a conscious thought. Your emotions will be right there, I'll know exactly how you're feeling. I won't go looking through your memories, I won't pry into anything, and I'll respect any boundaries you set. But it’s... intimate, there isn't much room to hide. You'll get the same from me, anything I think or feel will be transferred to you and...there's a lot of shit in my mind that you probably don't want. As Nate knows all too well. It isn't always pretty."

"It's not, but it's also not a complete surrender of privacy," Nathan reassured her. "I'm not exactly an expressive guy, and I keep anything I don't want Duke to see or feel locked down pretty tight. Honestly I could probably partition everything if I really tried, even off-the-top-of-my-head stream of consciousness thoughts and emotions. I've never wanted to, though. I was the one who proposed it, even encouraged Duke when he was worried. Joining was something I wanted very much. If it's different for you, if you're warier, that's okay."

Audrey nodded and gave Duke an uncertain look. "I probably will have a lot more walls than Nathan does. It doesn't mean I don't trust you or don't love you or don't want to do this. It's just how I am."

"I understand that," Duke smiled softly. "I have more walls than Nathan does, too, and there are parts of my mind that I'd rather you didn't look into. I trust you not to. It doesn't mean that I don't trust you with what I keep separate, just that I want to protect you from it."

"Of course, Duke. I'd never go prying into what you didn't want me to see," Audrey was horrified, even sickened, at the very idea.

"And neither will I," Duke promised. "It's the same for both of us. And honestly, the first time, I'm just gonna pop in, say hi, leave again. Nothing more. Then you can decide if you want to spend longer with me."

Audrey nodded. "Okay. That sounds good."

"It'll be fine, Audrey. I appreciate you trusting me with this and I won't do anything to destroy that trust."

"I know you won't," Audrey said softly. "I wouldn't have offered if I didn't trust you. And that's not a thing that comes easy to me, but you earned it."

"And that makes me appreciate it all the more," Duke smiled.

"You're amazing and I love you, you know that, right?" Audrey said softly.

"Do we want to go home and do this?” Audrey suggested.

“I'd like to,” Duke smiled. “Nate?”

"Absolutely," Nathan agreed, already picking up the blanket and beach towels and shaking off the sand.

**

“Coffee, sit, relax,” Duke told Audrey when they got home. “We're not rushing, there's no pressure, just let me know when - if - you're ready.”

Audrey sipped at the coffee they'd picked up on the way home. "So do you just...jump in? Like you go in and out of Nathan all the time?"

"We have some practice. You might find it better to lie down the first time. It can be disorienting," Nathan advised.

"It can be," Duke agreed. "Lying down is a good idea but there's nothing to worry about, it's just like... like you know that feeling when you're really drunk? And everything's spinning and nothing feels real? It's like that but it's really sudden and it only lasts a second or two and there's no hangover afterwards."

"Good times," Audrey's smile was nervous.

“It’ll be fine,” Duke reassured her. “We don’t have to do this, not now, not ever. When, if, you want to, I promise it'll be fine but there’s no pressure. Just because you’ve mentioned it doesn’t mean we have to.”

"I know, but I do want to. I'd be nervous whenever we did this. It's just weird."

"Yeah, it’s definitely that,” Duke agreed. “So, time limit. Thirty seconds? Or less?"

"Maybe five?” Audrey suggested. Thirty seconds could seem like forever in the right - or wrong - circumstances.

“Five is fine with me, you’ll hardly know I was there," Duke smiled.

"We can try again for longer if we're okay," Audrey agreed.

“We can,” Duke nodded. “Just let me know when you’re ready.”

Audrey drained the coffee and went over to the couch. She took a moment to close her eyes and center herself, carefully walling herself off. "Okay, ready."

Nathan pulled up a chair beside her and held her hand with a reassuring smile.

“Ok,” Duke said softly. “Just gonna pop in, say hi, go again. It probably won’t even be five seconds.”

"That sounds like a good start,” Audrey smiled, anxious but genuine.

Duke smiled back and slowly, carefully, slipped into her mind in the same way he did with Nathan. *Hey Audrey*, he thought gently.
Audrey took a deep breath at the sensation. It should have felt intrusive, but Duke was so gentle and respectful of her wishes, so cautious and attentive to any potential hint of reluctance.

It was intimate in a way physical lovemaking could never have matched.

Duke smiled to himself. She hadn’t been kidding about the walls, but she was there and she was warm and she was welcoming, if cautious. Not wanting to risk overstaying his welcome, he gathered himself to leave. Going now, he told her, not waiting for any response before he left her mind. “Audrey? Ok?” He checked, watching her closely.

"Yeah, I'm okay. I'm….that was really something." She looked at Nathan. "I see what you mean," she told him, earning a beaming smile.

“It was for me, too,” Duke said quietly, smiling at her. “Thank you for trusting me to do that.”

"Thank you for being someone I can trust that much," Audrey said softly.

“Any time,” Duke said. “And Audrey, I trust you too, it isn’t easy for me either. Just because I’m used to it with Nathan doesn’t make it any less…intense for me.

"I never thought of it that way," Audrey looked guilty. "I never meant to pressure you into this. You were so considerate of me and I didn't even ask if you were okay with it."

“You didn't pressure me at all,” Duke reassured her. “And I'm perfectly ok with it. I just don't want you to think it isn't special for me because it is.”

"It is pretty special," she smiled softly.

“So any time you want to do it again, just let me know,” Duke said quietly. “I'd love to spend more time with you. If that's what you'd like. But right now you should get a hug from Nathan.”

Nathan nodded, opening his arms. Audrey cuddled against him gladly. "I do want to do it again. It was….amazing," she said softly. "It might be a while before I let you drive, though. You keeping me company is one thing, that I enjoyed, but being a passenger in the back of my own head while someone else steers my body around is….I don't know if that's ever gonna be for me, honestly."

“It never has to be,” Duke said immediately. “It was a privilege to spend time with you like that. It doesn't have to be any more than that. It'll only ever be what you're comfortable with.”

Audrey smiled. "And that's why I'm okay with having you in my head."

“You're an amazing woman, Audrey Parker,” Duke smiled affectionately.

"And you're an amazing guy, Duke Crocker," Audrey smiled fondly.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Audrey has had A Very Bad Day and needs all the hugs

Audrey slammed the door behind her and dropped her purse onto the side table. She stomped up the stairs, ignoring Duke calling out to her, asking if she was ok. The temptation to curl up in bed and just fall asleep and escape for a while was almost too much. In the end she settled for changing into her pyjamas and going back downstairs. She pulled a tub of ice cream from the freezer, a bottle of wine from the fridge and flung herself onto the couch.

"What?" She glared at Duke who was watching her, bemused.

"Nothing," he said, raising his hands. "Just wondering if everything's ok?"

"Does it look like it?" Audrey said archly, attacking the ice cream with a spoon.

"Nope. That's why I'm asking."

"Sorry," Audrey sighed. "Bad day. I shouldn't be taking it out on you. I try to leave this crap at work but...clearly this evening wasn't successful."

"Anything I can do?"

Audrey shook her head and poured herself a glass of wine.

"Need space?"

"Yeah," Audrey replied quietly, running her hand across her forehead. "Sorry, Duke, I didn't mean to snap."

Duke shrugged. "Don't worry about it. Shout if you need me."

He gave her the space she'd asked for and when Nathan came home, Duke met him at the door.

"I don't know what to do, Nate," Duke worried. "She says she wants space so I've given it to her. I think she really needs a hug but I can't even do that," he said miserably.

"I'll do what I can," Nathan promised. "Maybe in a bit you can join me and give her that hug."

Nathan peered into the lounge and took in the sight of Audrey curled on the couch, a glass of wine in one hand (the half empty bottle on the floor in front of her), her fingers drumming on her knee as she stared into space. He headed over to the couch. "Hey, Parker. Room there for two?"

Audrey looked up at him and shrugged. “If you like,” she said. “I’m not feeling particularly sociable though.”
"Fair enough," Nathan sat down. "I'm here if you need anything. If not, s'ok too."

"Thanks," she replied quietly. She drained the remainder of her glass of wine and refilled it from the bottle. Curling her legs beneath her, she sat back and wrapped her arms around herself. "Bad day. Just want to forget."

"Understandable," Nathan nodded. "Got hugs if it'd help."

"Hugs always help," Duke agreed. "Anything you need, we'll do."

"Not everything in life can be helped by a hug," Audrey said after taking a deep breath, trying to make sure her words didn't come out too harshly.

"Okay," Nathan said softly. "Got it, will leave you be, sorry." He took the book he'd been reading off the coffee table and settled in, hoping his presence would be better than nothing.

Audrey glanced over at him. "Thanks. Sorry. I just...don't know how to get past this," she took a long sip from her glass. "Except alcohol."

Duke smiled tentatively. "The answer to life’s problems."

"I know you know it, but you're not alone anymore, Parker," Nathan said quietly. "You don't have to do this alone. We'll listen, help - whatever you need."

"I know," she said, an edge of frustration in her voice. "But you can’t help with this. No one can."

"Okay," Nathan said again, not pressing the issue.

"No, not ok," Duke said. "Audrey, if there’s one thing I know it’s that bottling stuff up is the worst thing to do."

"Oh, because you’re the world’s greatest expert on talking about things," she snapped.

"No, I’m the world’s greatest expert on not talking about things," Duke said quietly. "That’s why I know it’s not helpful."

Audrey glared at him, not ready to admit that maybe he had a point.

Nathan looked between them, expression slightly anxious.

"Talk to us, Audrey, please," Duke said gently.

She shook her head, her face set even as her eyes filled with tears. "I can’t, Duke. I can’t tell you because it’s awful and it’s work stuff and I fucked up and I don’t want either of you to think any less of me and if you know then you’ll..."

"Still love you and know you tried your best to do the right thing," Nathan picked up when she couldn't finish the sentence, tentatively reaching out to touch her shoulder. "Couldn't think less of you if we tried, Parker."

"My best wasn’t good enough," Audrey said quietly, leaning ever so slightly into Nathan’s touch.

"Breaks your heart when that happens, I know," Nathan said softly and coaxed her towards him, rubbing her shoulder soothingly.

Audrey tensed, closing her eyes and desperately trying to take the comfort he wanted to give.
After a moment, she pulled away. “It didn’t just break my heart,” she said quietly. “It broke me. I failed. That’s why I left the FBI, that’s why I came to Haven. All that crap I said, that first night we met, about wanting a quieter life. All bullshit. I couldn’t admit how badly I’d screwed up and now that bastard’s back out walking the streets and I don’t know how to live with myself.”

Much as he wanted to take her in his arms and hold her tight, Nathan let her go. He didn't give her any platitudes about having done her best - as an EMT, he knew how useless those words were when your best just wasn't enough. "Even if you couldn't put him away for life, people will know what he is now - will know to stay away. And chances are, they'll get the bastard anyway. Chief always said crooks are always either stupid or arrogant, and one way or another it gets them in the end."

“That’s just it, they won’t get him. Because I fucked up on procedure, he pleaded to a lesser charge. The only way they’ll get him is if he does it again,” Audrey said bleakly.

"They might find something in the original case they missed, some new charges to bring. That kinda thing happens more than you'd think, and if the FBI's anything like Haven PD, they hate to see a threat running loose because of a technicality."

Audrey raised her eyebrow. “You think I don’t know that? I went over those files for three years, Nathan. There’s nothing.”

"I know. You're a good cop, Parker. But it's been a long time. Who knows what new evidence or witnesses or other changes have come to light?"

“I know you’re trying to help, but really, there’s nothing. It was an old colleague who called me to let me know he was out. There’s been a team going back over everything. There’s nothing new, nothing missed, nothing changed. He’s free to do it again and that’s on me."

“Audrey,” Duke said quietly. “Maybe this isn’t what you want to hear, but you can’t keep blaming yourself. You can’t change it, it’s in the past. All you can do is focus on making sure you don’t make the same mistake again.”

Audrey smiled bitterly. “Yup. That’s why I can’t let anything go, why I spend so much time at work, why I’m incapable of letting a case drop. I won’t let it happen again.”

Nathan stretched out his hand, offering it for her to hold if she chose. "Whenever I feel down about losing someone, you always tell me to focus on the people I saved, not the ones I couldn't. Veterans of the job say the same, say you gotta think about the successes so you don’t think about the failures 'till they drag you down to ruin. Don't expect that advice is much welcome, but...maybe think about it?" Nathan said.

“That’s what’s kept me going this long,” Audrey said. “I think I’d have given up and started a bakery - a very bad bakery - if I hadn’t. I just need one night to wallow in it. Then I’ll pick myself up and carry on as normal because that’s all I know how to do.”

Duke smiled. “That sounds more like the Audrey Parker we know and love.”

"I'd have still come to your very bad bakery, if only to see you,” Nathan said loyally.

Audrey nodded, a tiny but genuine smile on her face. “Is that hug still on offer? From both of you?”

Nathan smiled broadly, and opened his arms to her, relieved. "Always."
Audrey uncurled herself and tucked in against Nathan. “Want Duke, too,” she mumbled into Nathan’s chest. “If that’s ok with you both.”


"Always," Nathan said again, giving them a smile.

Audrey waited until Duke and Nathan were together and wrapped her arms around them, snuggling close. "Sorry for being snappy earlier," she said quietly.

"We forgive you," Nathan told her, knowing Duke would agree. "Everyone has bad days sometimes."

"Yeah," Audrey murmured. "No excuse to take it out on you two though."

"We forgive you anyhow," Nathan cuddled her close and kissed her forehead.

"Thank you," Audrey said in a small voice, relaxing into his arms. "I know I'm not good at this stuff. Too used to dealing with everything on my own."

_Know the feeling_, Duke thought wryly.

"I think that's something none of us are really great at. But we'll get there," Nathan said gently.

Audrey nodded against his chest. "Is there any more ice cream? I sorta finished that tub..." She said ruefully.

"Bet there is. Want me to go look, or want more cuddles?" Nathan asked.

"Ice cream then more cuddles?" Audrey said hopefully. She pulled away from him slightly. "And maybe more wine?" She said, waving the mostly empty bottle in the air.

"Anything for the lady," Nathan smiled, tucking a blanket over her while he got up for more ice cream and wine.

"Thanks," Audrey smiled softly. She snuggled under the blanket and closed her eyes.

_Maybe I should do some food too_, Duke thought. _Or order a pizza. She never says no to pizza._

_Good call_, Nathan agreed. "You hungry for actual dinner? We could get a pizza."

"Pizza sounds good," Audrey mumbled from under the blanket. "Wake me up when it gets here?"

"Okay, let me just sit a sec while I place the order," Nathan agreed. He sat back down by her head and patted his lap invitingly.

Audrey smiled and moved so her head was resting in his lap. "Love you both," she said softly.

"Love you too, Audrey," Nathan smiled and stroked her hair softly.

Knowing that Nathan meant it from Duke as well as himself, Audrey settled more deeply against him. She closed her eyes and slowly relaxed under his touch.

Nathan smiled and kept up the soothing motions, letting her share in his quiet calm.
Audrey breathed deeply, almost a sigh, as she let him stroke away all the stress and worries from her mind. Maybe she'd never let go of the guilt and the pain but maybe she didn't have to. It was part of her, part of who she was, and all she could do was accept that. Being here, in Nathan's embrace, knowing Duke was there too, she thought she might finally be able to do that.
The Gulls have an important discussion about the future.

The emergency services had been invited to give a talk at the school - representatives from the Haven police department, fire department and ambulance crews. Audrey and Nathan had gone together, along with Vicky Dutton, a new firefighter.

"You should've seen him, Duke," Audrey said when they got home, smiling affectionately at Nathan. "He was a natural with the kids."

Duke smirked. "Takes one to know one, huh Nate? Just a big kid talking to someone on your level," he softened the smirk to a smile. "He's always been good with kids. Dwight used to bring Lizzie to visit when she was younger."

Nathan rolled his eyes at the 'takes one to know one' comment. "You were pretty good yourself, the older kids loved you."

"You think?" Audrey said doubtfully.

"Are you kidding? You didn't bullshit them like most adults do."

"Well, yeah, kids don’t deserve bullshit, they understand far more than most people give them credit for," Audrey shrugged.

"You're right, but most people don't get that and kids know it and hate it. They appreciate when someone's real with them, like you are."

"Maybe," Audrey said. "Still not sure it makes me good with kids, though."

"Well, I think it does. But if you disagree then I'm guessing that means you weren't planning to have any of your own then, huh?" Nathan said lightly, making a joke of it to hide how much the answer mattered.

Audrey studied him, trying to work out if that was a serious question or not. Either way, she decided, it needed a proper answer. "I've thought about it," she said slowly. "Always thought I wouldn't, but...now...."

Nathan took her hands. "No pressure, Audrey. You don't have to worry about what I'd want, or what Duke wants. If you decided you wanted to be a mom, you'll have our love and support every step of the way. If you decide that's not right for you, then you'll still have our love and support."

Audrey glanced at Duke who nodded. "You're the only one who can make that decision, Audrey, and whatever you decide, you'll still have both of us," he said gently.

"No, I know, and honestly? No, I don’t want kids of my own. The whole idea of being pregnant and giving birth and hormones, that’s really not for me, and if this mythical maternal instinct was
going to kick in for me, it would have done by now,” Audrey said, quiet but determined. She chewed her lip, wondering what Nathan’s response would be, whether there was any possibility they might be on the same page.

"Okay then, that's settled,” Nathan gave her a reassuring smile and kissed her cheek. "What do you want to do for lunch?"

“No, that’s not settled,” Audrey shook her head. “And I don’t want lunch, I want to know what you both want. Are you hoping for kids?”

"You know how much I love kids, but that's never going to be more important to me than your happiness. I would never ask or expect or pressure you to have kids you don't want. I'm not gonna bullshit you with some 'you'll change your mind' or 'you'll want them once you're pregnant' or 'but all women want children' garbage. If you don't want kids, then we're not having kids. That simple."

Audrey nodded. “Duke?”

“Hadn’t really thought about it,” he shrugged. “I’m happy either way. I mean, yeah, of course if there are kids running around the place, I’ll love them and care for them but in terms of practical help, I’m pretty much useless. You two would be doing all the hard work and right now you’re not even on the same page. Until you are, until it’s something you both want, my opinion doesn’t matter. But for what it’s worth, I’m with Nathan, it’s your decision and you need to be all in, not just doing it because you think it’ll make him happy. Or because it’s conventional or expected.”

Nathan nodded. "I'd never want you to agree to having kids just for my sake, no matter what."

“No, I know you wouldn’t,” Audrey rubbed her forehead and closed her eyes, gathering her thoughts, trying to work out how to tell Nathan what she really wanted. “I don’t know, maybe this is a thorny subject, I know it is for some guys, but are you attached to the idea of having your own children? I mean, if we have kids, would they have to be biologically yours? Or would you consider adopting?”

"Adoption would be fine," Nathan said without the slightest hesitation. "Don't see anything special about it being my genes making up half the kid. But like I said, only if you'd want to."

“Do you mean that?” Audrey asked. “Because if you do…”

Nathan squeezed Audrey's hand. "I mean it. Any kid we raised would be loved and cherished no matter where they came from. One thing I think we can all agree on, blood is overrated."

Audrey smiled hesitantly. “It’s something I’ve always wanted to do. Since I was a kid and dreaming of someone turning up and taking me away from it all. That’s why I don’t want my own children, there are too many stuck in awful situations and I didn’t think I’d ever be in a position to help but...maybe...now that we’re all together...maybe we could give one of those kids a stable family…?"

Nathan hugged her tight. "Audrey, I would love to give an unhappy, lonely child a wonderful loving home with us. You’ll be an amazing mom for them, I just know it."

“You will be, Audrey. And you’ll be an amazing dad, Nathan,” Duke said quietly.

Audrey nodded. “He’s right, you will be,” she agreed. “Could we maybe start looking into it? I mean, I know it’s still early days for us, but...it takes a while…”
"Of course we can. And you'll be an amazing dad too," Nathan grinned at Duke and gave Audrey a soft kiss. "We'll need to think about what, if any, qualifications we want, set up rooms for the kids, start getting letters of recommendation, find an adoption lawyer, put together a portfolio - that'll be huge, we'll need photos, we'll need finance records, we'll need to write up biographies - we need to think about safety issues, we'll need to make this the perfect home..." Nathan's mind was already off running a hundred miles an hour, happy and excited.

“Nathan, breathe,” Audrey laughed. “It starts with a phone call. One step at a time. And I’m guessing by the fact you said ‘kids’ that you want more than one?”

"Did I?" Nathan said sheepishly. "That's up to you. I'd be happy with one or one dozen, whatever you decide."

“I think a dozen might be pushing it,” Audrey said drily. “Maybe we could start with one?”

"One it is," Nathan agreed. "And if that's all we ever have, that's fine." he hesitated a moment before asking tentatively. "You wanted an older kid, right?"

Audrey nodded. “I mean, it doesn’t have to be, it’s just that I know how much it would mean to an older child.”

"An older child is fine," Nathan smiled. "I'm sure they'll be so glad to have a home."

Audrey hugged him, nestled against his chest. “I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

Duke watched them, a half smile on his face. “You guys are going to be amazing parents,” he said. "I'm sure they'll be so glad to have a home."

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Nathan got a wary look at his face, and asked Audrey, "What are your feelings on that, Parker?"

Audrey took a deep breath and shook her head. “I have every intention of spending the rest of my life with you both, and I don't need a piece of paper to prove that. It wouldn't feel right to do something that Duke couldn't be a part of,” she replied.

Nathan sighed, his expression deeply relieved. "My thoughts exactly."

“But what if it sets things back with your application? I mean, I have no idea how these things work, but could it?” Duke asked. “I appreciate that you're considering my feelings but it’s not like you two being married would change anything for us in any practical sense. Maybe you should give it some more thought?"

"You're probably not wrong that it'd help. But I don't want to compromise who we are and what we mean to each other, not even for a kid." Nathan said.

Audrey nodded her agreement. “You’re the most important person in the world to us, Duke, that’s never going to change."

“Ok, but…” Duke started to say.
“But nothing,” Audrey interrupted. “Not happening.”

"If we can't marry you too, we're not marrying at all," Nathan said firmly.

Audrey gave Nathan’s arm a squeeze and smiled at Duke. “I love you both so much and if there was any way to do that, I wouldn’t hesitate.”

Duke smiled back at her. “I wouldn’t hesitate either,” he said softly.

"I wish we could," Nathan nodded wistfully. "But if we can't, we're not gonna make you feel like a lesser part of this relationship, Duke. Not ever."

“Thanks,” Duke said quietly. “Both of you. You’ve never made me feel like that, and I still wouldn’t feel like that even if you did get married. So I need you to promise that if it comes down to a choice between getting married or not being able to adopt then you’ll do it.”

"Don't know that I can promise that, Duke," Nathan said gently.

“How’s this? If - and only if - it comes down to that choice, we’ll talk again,” Audrey suggested. “I can safely say that my answer won’t change, but if it makes you feel better then I’ll agree to at least sit down and talk about it.”

Duke smiled. “Then that’ll have to do. I do mean it though, I don’t want you guys to miss out on the opportunity to have a family just because you're worried about me.”

"At the cost of wearing a wedding band every day that's a slap in your face?" Nathan frowned.

Duke rolled his eyes. “You do know that wearing a wedding band isn’t actually compulsory?”

"Because that won't look odd," Nathan snorted.

“Plenty of people don’t wear them,” Duke argued. “And this is an irrelevant conversation because we’ve literally just agreed it isn’t happening and we’re not even discussing it unless it becomes an issue with your application. So can we please just get back to talking about how great you guys are gonna be as parents?”

Nathan chuckled. "Fair enough."

“How great all of us are going to be as parents,” Audrey corrected him gently.

“Ok, ok, how great we’ll all be as parents,” Duke laughed.

"Be interesting introducing you to the kid,” Nathan mused.

“Yeah, that's not gonna be fun,” Duke worried.

"Well, kids are more open to things than adults. It'll work out," Nathan said hopefully.

Duke nodded. “Maybe. And if it doesn't, I can just...stay out of the way.”

"Absolutely not," Nathan said immediately. "It will work out. We'll make it work."

“Kids are adaptable,” Audrey said reassuringly. “It won't be an issue. They'll probably be fascinated more than anything.”

“Yeah, you might be right,” Duke said. “I mean, it's not like I do scary stuff any more. I just don't
want to terrify an already traumatised kid.”

“I know, and you won't. We'll put Casper the friendly ghost on TV or something, introduce you that way,” Audrey smiled.

Duke laughed. “Yeah, that's not such a stupid idea.”

"Hey, whatever works,” Nathan chuckled.

“You're really on board with this, Duke? I'd hate for you to feel pressured into it because you think it's what we want,” Audrey asked.

“I really am,” Duke replied, smiling more genuinely now. “Having kids is something I never thought I could have, I hadn't even really thought about it, but I promise I'm completely with you both on this. It'll be fantastic.”

"They'll love you,” Nathan predicted with a smile. "And not just because you're a ghost and that's the coolest thing ever."

“They will, Duke,” Audrey agreed. “Because you're going to be a wonderful father and you're going to show them all the love in the world. All the love you didn't get when you were a kid.”

“Yeah,” Duke said quietly.

Nathan put an arm around Audrey and gave Duke a soft smile. "We'll be great. We won't make the same mistakes our parents did. We'll raise our children with love and kindness and respect, and they will never want for anything."

“Sounds good,” Duke smiled.

Nathan kissed Audrey's forehead. "Now, how about a big snugglepile? Duke can join me, so we can both cuddle. How about that, Audrey?"

“Actually, Duke?” Audrey said softly. “Would you like to come and join me, instead of Nathan?”

Duke hesitated. “Do you really want that? I don't want you to feel you have to, because you think you owe it to me or you're worried that I'm upset or whatever.”

"It's not that," Audrey promised. "I want to try again, if you're okay with it. It was good that we started with a short trial, but I barely had time to see what it was like. I want to see what it's like for something longer. Like a cuddle on the couch."

Duke smiled warmly. “Yeah, a cuddle on the couch would be good.”

Audrey smiled. "Let me just get settled, okay?"

“Of course,” Duke said. “No rush, no pressure.”

Nathan lay down on the couch and opened his arms invitingly. Audrey nestled against his chest comfortably, snuggling close as she centered herself, again putting her walls up. "Okay, I'm ready."

As slowly and carefully and gently as he had the last time, Duke slipped into her mind. Hey, he thought softly.

...Hi? came the tentative reply, uncertain how two-way communication worked.
You just need to think, I'll... 'hear' you, Duke told her, picking up on her uncertainty. You ok? I can go if you aren't.

I'm fine. Audrey thought, carefully exploring the sensation. It's a little weird, but...but I kind of like it. I get to feel close to you, it's like...it's like a hug. No wonder Nathan would spend every hour of every day like this.

It's just like a hug, Duke smiled. It's good to feel so close to you, and to feel Nathan holding us so tightly. I've never had that before.

Nathan gives the best hugs, doesn't he? Audrey thought, the question tinged with guilt that she'd made him wait so long for this.

He really does, Duke agreed, soaking up the sensation of Nathan's arms around them, warm and strong and anchoring. Safest I've ever felt is here with both of you... And Audrey, don't feel bad. I would never have asked you for this, or wanted you to do it before you were ready. It's amazing you're letting me do it now and I'm treasuring every moment of our time together.

I know you never would have. I'm just sorry I wasn't ready sooner. For both our sakes.

Don't be sorry, Duke thought gently, tentatively reaching out into her mind, the mental equivalent of offering her his hand to hold.

Audrey felt him reach out, felt the offer of comfort and affection and closeness. She didn't really know how to respond in kind, but she tried her best to reach out to him in turn.

Is this ok? Duke checked as their souls touched for the first time.

Audrey let out a shaky breath, electrified by the soul-to-soul contact. It was intense, it was wonderful, it was almost too much but at the same time she wanted more.

Her wishes came through clearly to Duke and he slowly - so slowly, giving her time to adapt, alert to any sign she wasn't comfortable - curled himself lightly around her. That's more like a hug, right? He thought softly.

She made an effort to curl around him in turn, still getting used to how all this worked. Duke, I....I don't have words.

You don't need words, he replied, gently sending her a wave of his love and gratitude and appreciation.

She settled in against him, sending back her happiness and affection and contentment.

Duke wrapped himself around her a little more tightly. Tell me when you want me to go, he told her.

Not sure I ever will, this is wonderful, Audrey thought back, only half joking. Is it weird for you?

Not at all, Duke reassured her. It's just as wonderful for me and I'll stay for as long as you want me to.

Audrey snuggled a little closer. So...you can feel everything? Physically, I mean, I know you're not feeling everything in my head.

I can, Duke thought as he curled around her, wrapping her in more of an embrace. Like, I can feel
that you’re hungry and your ankle is still sore from when you twisted it last week. I can feel Nathan’s breath on your cheek, the slight scrape of his stubble, his arms around you. I can feel you, Audrey.

Audrey felt sheepish as he picked up on her hunger and sore ankle - both of which she hadn't admitted to. Guess we shouldn’t do this when I’m on the rag then, she thought laughingly.

Duke laughed with her. That bad, huh?

Everything you've ever heard women bitch about is 100% true, including periods being so bad you can mistake appendicitis for them.

Ouch, Duke winced. That does not sound good. But, Audrey, I’m not just here for the snuggling on the couch and all the good stuff. It doesn’t seem fair that you should go through that alone so I’ll always be here if you need me.

You're sweet, but I wouldn't put you through that, Audrey told him.

Well, the offer’s there but I understand if you’d rather not. I’ve had enough things thrown at me to know that most women prefer to be left well alone, Duke smiled.

Audrey snorted. Maybe I should make you come along one month after all, see how the other side lives. Throwing things will seem pretty understandable.

I have never doubted that, Duke told her. And yeah, if you’d be comfortable with that, I’d actually like to understand what you go through.

Audrey did the mental equivalent of blinking in surprise. You really mean that. It wasn't a question - she could feel his sincerity. She just never would have expected it.

Don’t be so surprised, Duke thought, amused. I’m not one of ‘those guys’ who run a mile at the slightest mention of periods. I’ve done midnight runs to the store for tampons and Advil and chocolate. And if there’s the opportunity to better understand what it’s like, then I’d like to take it. If you don’t feel awkward about it, that is.

There’s an awfully big difference between 'willing to run out for tampons if needed' - which honestly should just be baseline decency if you ask me, not the heroic 'look how awesome I am' thing some guys make it - and 'would actually experience one voluntarily', Audrey thought, amused.

There is a difference, Duke agreed. And I hope you don’t think I was claiming to be heroic because I wasn’t. Just letting you know that I’m not the sort of guy who freaks out over it. I’d like to understand what it’s like.

No, no, I didn’t mean you, I really did mean 'some guys' - the kind of guys who think they should be rewarded with sex every time they treat a woman as a person and not an animate inflatable doll. If you're seriously down for it, we can do it, but let me warn you that it gets really ugly. Also, I can't promise that Nathan and I won't place bets on how fast you bail, she teased.

I’m seriously down for it. However long you want me there for. And I want in on those bets, he smiled.

We’ll have to wager in kisses, then, Audrey smiled.

Works for me, Duke grinned and curled around her more tightly.
You've never really gotten to kiss Nathan, have you? Audrey mused.

No. Never even touched him, except when I’ve been possessing him and it’s great but it isn’t the same. Hugging like this… It means a lot to me.

I'm glad I could do that for you, Audrey thought gently. A spark of mischief entered her mental voice as she added, We should do something about that kissing, though. He's a great kisser, you definitely should get to experience that.

That would be… Audrey, that would be amazing.

Audrey stirred and stretched, drawing Nathan's attention. "How are you two doing in there?" Nathan smiled, stroking her hair. "I figured you were working things out, so I let you be."

"Which is very much appreciated," Audrey smiled and stroked his cheek. "But it's come to our attention that Duke's never gotten to kiss you, and that's just a crime."

"We definitely can't have that," Nathan agreed. "As a member of Haven PD, it's your sworn duty to prevent crime."

He makes a very good point, Duke smiled, savouring the feel of Nathan’s skin beneath Audrey’s fingertips, soft and warm.

"Well, then," Audrey grinned and leaned in for a kiss.

Duke was hit with a wave of pure emotion. He’d wanted this for so long and now he was here, in Nathan’s arms, being kissed by him, and it was everything he’d ever dreamed it could be. Coherent thoughts were lost to him and he tried to project to Audrey just how much it meant.

Nathan returned the kiss tenderly, slowly, pouring everything he felt into the soft press of lips, that one kiss born of the thousands of kisses he'd wanted to give Duke over the years.

Audrey was quiet, touched by the depth of Duke's love, by the immensity of the moment, by the glimpse of all those years of aching longing.

Thank you, Audrey, Duke thought afterwards. His inner voice was small, quiet, as he took in what had just happened, memorising every last detail of the kiss. I don't think there are words to tell you what that meant to me.

I'm happy you got to have this. You can have more kisses, plenty of them.

I'll treasure every single one, the same way I treasure every single time I get to kiss you when I'm with Nathan.

Audrey smiled, and leaned in for another kiss.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Garland pays an unexpected visit to the Gulls

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The rumour mill worked fast in Haven and word soon got round that Nathan and Audrey were planning to adopt. Everyone was full of good wishes and asking if there was anything they could do to help with the approvals process. Audrey had threatened to arrest the Teagues for something - anything - when they camped out in her office hoping to be the first to hear the news so they could run an announcement story.

It wasn’t long before the news reached Garland. He tried to phone Nathan but his calls went unanswered. Which is how he found himself, one Saturday afternoon, nervously knocking on Nathan’s door.

Audrey opened the door and blinked in surprise. “Chief…?” She said, surprised.

“Not any more,” Garland shook his head. “I gather that title belongs to you now. Congratulations.”

“Uh, thanks,” Audrey said. “Can we help you with something?”

“Nathan around? I was hoping to have a chat with him.”

“He is, but…I don’t know…”

“No, I know, things didn’t go so well last time we spoke,” Garland said quietly. “If he doesn’t want to see me, that’s fine, I’ll go, but could you ask him for me, Audrey? Please.”

“Oh,” Audrey decided. “Wait there.” She closed the door (careful not to slam it, no matter how much she was tempted) and went into the kitchen. “Uh, guys…Nathan…your dad’s here.”

Nathan looked up and scowled. "Why? Couldn't take the hint when I didn't pick up his calls?"

Audrey shrugged. “No idea. Want me to get rid of him?”

Nathan looked severely tempted.

“Hear him out, Nate, at least find out what he wants. If you don’t like what he’s got to say, at least you’ll have the satisfaction of kicking him out yourself,” Duke said.

"Fine," Nathan grumbled. He went to the front hall and opened the door himself, standing silently aside to let his father in.

Garland stepped cautiously into the house, remembering what had happened last time he was here. “Nathan,” he greeted. “How’ve you been?”
"Well enough. How's retirement?"

“Fine,” Garland replied, choosing to ignore the barely hidden disdain on Nathan's face. “Glad they chose Audrey to fill the role, she’ll do a good job.”

Nathan nodded curtly, biting back the impulse to respond, 'better than you'.

“Work going well?”

"Saving lives and earning enough to afford this place," Nathan said, as if challenging his father to call him a failure again.

Garland nodded. “Proud of you, son. Should've said that before now.”

Nathan gave him a long look. "Kinda having a hard time believing that. Might sound cold, but after a whole lifetime of hearing the exact opposite from you, maybe you can understand why."

“Yeah, I do understand. I got a whole helluva lot wrong in my life. The way I treated you...I'm sorry, Nathan.”

Nathan considered that. "What brought this on?"

“Been thinking through some stuff. Retirement, y'know, it's given me some perspective.”

"S'pose you got plenty time to think," Nathan allowed warily.

“Too much, sometimes,” Garland nodded. “I'd really like to sit down and talk. Got some stuff to say. If you'd be willing to hear me out.”

Nathan nodded, and turned to lead the way into the kitchen. "Want a beer?" he asked over his shoulder.

“Coffee, if you wouldn't mind?” Garland hesitated as he followed Nathan into the kitchen. “Last time I was here...Duke wasn't so pleased to see me…”

"If he wasn't pleased to see you, you'd know by now," Nathan said, going over to the coffeepot and pouring a couple of mugs. "If you're here, he's tolerating you.”

“Good to know,” Garland nodded, looking around the room. “He here now?”

Nathan shook his head. "He's giving us some privacy. But if you've got something to say to him, I can ask him to join us."

“Maybe in a little while. I'd like to talk to you first.”

Nathan handed over the mug of coffee. "I'm listening. Can't promise more'n that."

Garland nodded and took the mug. “More than I deserve. You're a good man, Nathan. Better than I ever was or will be.”

Nathan sipped his coffee, listening, silent.

“I should've done better by you. Should've learnt from my father's failings and been a better one to you. Especially after your mom...you needed me and I wasn't there. Worked too much, pushed you too hard. I didn't even give you any time to grieve for her. I thought if I kept you busy, told you to man up, it'd go easier on you. I was wrong.”
Nathan couldn't imagine how being told to man up could ever possibly help a young child grieving the death of his mother, but all he said was, "Preciate you saying that."

“I got it wrong, Nathan. All of it. Everything you've achieved, you've achieved in spite of me. And I just want you to know that I'm proud of the man you've become.”

Nathan nodded. "Thank you."

"Heard a rumour you and Audrey are looking to adopt. You'll make a good father," Garland's voice was suspiciously gruff.

"Thanks. We'll do our best for 'em." Nathan eyed his father, wondering.

“Know you will,” Garland nodded and sipped his coffee. “You mind seeing if Duke'd give me a couple minutes?”

Nathan nodded, and raised his voice a little. "Duke, do you mind coming in here a sec?"

“Everything ok?” Duke called back.

"Yeah, fine, the ch- my old man wants a word," Nathan corrected himself.

Intriguing, Duke thought as he floated through the wall into the kitchen (a calculated choice, appearing through the solid wall, but he was disappointed by the lack of reaction from Garland).

Audrey smirked slightly to herself and made her own way into the kitchen. She stood beside Nathan and folded her arms across her chest, her chin tilted in a clear 'I'm staying, fight me' gesture.

Garland nodded in her direction. There was a slight tremble in his hands as he put down the coffee mug. "Duke. Thanks for seeing me."

"I'm hearing you out for Nathan's sake, not yours," Duke replied, his expression guarded.

Garland took a deep breath and launched straight into what he had to say. "What I did...what my father did...we should've helped you, Duke. Back when you were a kid. Should've got you out of there."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry I didn't. If I'd been man enough to stand up to my father, to not get sucked into a generations-old family feud..." Garland shook his head. "I'm not here to make excuses. It was wrong. I was wrong. You didn't deserve any of it. Not when you were a kid, not when you were an adult and I was persecuting you."

Duke stared at him. It had been one thing hearing from Audrey that what had happened was wrong. It was quite another to hear those words from Garland. "Ok," he said, eventually.

"I'm sorry, Duke, for everything. I know that doesn't mean anything, but I thought you deserved to hear it. I'm not going to make excuses for why I did it, they're mostly bullshit and you deserve better. I was weak and stupid and I was wrong."

Duke nodded, an acknowledgement rather than an agreement. "Thanks," he said. "I can't forgive you, I don't think I have that in me. But I can accept your apology."
"More than I’d hoped for," Garland replied.

Nathan looked quietly pleased, a little warmer for having heard his father apologize for mistreating Duke.

Garland drained the last of his coffee and stood up. “Don’t want to overstay my welcome,” he said. “Thank you - both of you - for hearing me out.”

"Thank you for saying it," Nathan said, standing to walk him out.

“I know it’s probably too little, too late,” Garland said. “But remember the last thing you said to me? That I’m not your father anymore?” He paused. “You’re still my son, Nathan, and I still want to be a part of your life. If you’ll let me. Doesn’t have to be any more than a coffee and a civil conversation every now and again, but if you can bring yourself to do that, it’d mean a lot to me.”

"If you can be a real father to me, I can be a son to you. This was a good start."

Garland nodded, the hint of a smile on his face. “I’ll try my best,” he promised.

Nathan nodded. "See you soon, then."

“See you, son,” Garland said as he left.

Duke and Audrey waited in the kitchen for Nathan to come back. “Ok, Nate?” Duke asked as soon as he walked back in.

"Guess so," Nathan said quietly. "You?"

“Yeah, fine,” Duke shrugged.

"Okay," Nathan went and got himself another cup of coffee.

Audrey rolled her eyes. “Either of you want to give an honest answer to that question?”

Nathan looked a little sheepish. He took a drink of his coffee while trying to find the right words. "Called him chief for decades. Called him dad when I was a kid trying to be what he wanted. Don't know what to call him now."

“There’ll be time to work that out,” Audrey said. “The most important thing is that you’re talking again."

"Yeah," Nathan shrugged.

“He’s trying, Nathan,” Audrey said quietly. “I’m glad you talked to him.”

"I know. Just….don't know where to go from here."

“Maybe it doesn’t matter. It’s the first step and that’s always the hardest one to take. See what happens. You don’t have to have all the answers now.”

Nathan shrugged again.

Audrey squeezed his shoulders. “I know it’s awkward, I know there’s so much hurt. If you don’t want to see him again, you don’t have to.”

"Just don't know what to say. We'll both be sitting there drinking our coffee in silence. Damn
Awkward.

“Awkward coffee in silence is an improvement on wanting to punch his lights out,” Audrey ventured hesitantly.

"Yeah, but...what's the point? Why do that to ourselves? Anyhow, I'm more worried about you, Duke."

“Don’t be,” Duke said. “I’m fine. If coffee’s awkward then go out and do something instead. Fishing, if you have to. Least it’d give you something to talk about.”

"Maybe. But are you really okay, Duke?" Nathan worried.

Duke nodded. “Yeah. I mean....he apologized. That’s something.”

"Just wish there were a way he could actually make it better," Nathan grumbled.

“No one can,” Duke shrugged. “Doesn’t much matter now.”

"Still," Nathan muttered.


“Never say no to hugs,” Duke managed a tiny smile.

Nathan brightened. "I'd like that."

“Come on, then,” Audrey smiled, making her way to the couch and getting comfortable. She centred herself, the way she always did, and opened her arms to Duke, the sensation of him being with her much more normal than it had once felt, but no less intense. She waited for him to get settled. Would you like to drive?

Duke thought on that for a moment, surprised by her offer. Are you sure that’s what you want?

Yeah, Audrey confirmed. It’s a hug, sitting on the couch. I think I’d still feel weird about you piloting me around but hugging is fine. You two need each other, and it’ll give me a chance to get used to how it feels for you to drive.

If you’re certain, then I’d love to, Duke thought hesitantly.

I’m certain, Audrey thought, curling around him.

Thanks, Audrey, Duke thought softly. It means a huge amount to me that you can trust me with this. He sent a wave of appreciation and love to her.

Audrey accepted it gratefully and returned all of her love to him. “Duke’s going to drive for a bit,” she told Nathan. “You two need to hug each other.”

"Are you sure?" Nathan looked worried.

“I’m sure,” Audrey smiled. “And Duke’s just asked the same thing. It’s all good. As long as you are.”

"Of course, if you are," Nathan nodded.

“We both are,” Audrey squeezed his shoulder. “Give us a moment.”
"Take all the time you need," Nathan agreed.

Audrey smiled reassuringly at him.  

_Ok, Duke, I have no idea how this works, I’m in your hands._

_It’ll be fine. Ready?_

_Go for it._

Duke stepped forwards in Audrey’s mind.  

_That’s it. Feel ok?_

_Fine so far. Go on, give him a hug. I can feel how much you need it and I know he does too._

_Thanks, Audrey. You’re the best._ “Hey Nate,” he smiled, biting back a laugh at the sound of his words coming through in Audrey’s voice.  He shuffled awkwardly on the couch, twisting around to face Nathan, getting used to how Audrey’s body felt, small and soft and so very different from his own or Nathan’s.

Nathan blinked, his expression wondering.  "I see what Audrey means about being able to tell the difference."

“Is it really obvious?” Duke asked.

"It is. Can't put my finger on exactly why, but I can tell right away."

Duke smiled.  “At least neither of you will ever be confused about who’s driving.”

"Definitely not," Nathan agreed. "You doing okay in there?"

_I’m fine. Not as weird as I thought it would be,_ Audrey confirmed.  _Go get that hug._

“Audrey says she’s ok,” Duke said, opening his arms to Nathan.

Nathan wrapped his arms around them, pulling Audrey's body close for a cuddle.  "Meant both of you, actually.  This is a lot less close to what you're used to than my body is."

“I’m fine. It’s different. Moving around would definitely take a bit of getting used to, but it’s good,” Duke tucked himself into Nathan’s arms and sighed happily.  “Waited a long time to do this.”

"Yeah," Nathan hugged tightly.  "All those years before we met Audrey, I always wanted to give you a hug."

“Me too,” Duke said quietly, wrapping his arms just as tightly around Nathan.  _Thank you, Audrey, for letting us do this._

_You’re welcome._ Audrey thought back softly, overwhelmed by the emotion that was pouring from Duke.  She curled around him, the same way he did to her when she was in control.

Nathan nuzzled the soft blond hair.  "Can't believe I get to have the two people I love most in the world right here in my arms," he said happily.  "Must be the luckiest damn guy there ever was."

“No, that’d be me,” Duke said quietly.  “You’ve both been so accepting of me. Still can’t get over it. All the things I didn’t think I’d ever experience again, everything you do for me. I don’t know how to thank you.”

"Pretty sure I can speak for Parker when I say we're both glad we can give you all that."
Audrey’s agreement came through loud and clear to Duke and he curled more tightly around her, sending her all of his love and gratitude.

Nathan settled comfortably against them, perfectly content to spend all afternoon exactly like that.

Chapter End Notes

You might have noticed the chapter count has increased again, because apparently we can't write anything short....

Chapter 30 will be the final chapter of the main fic, then chapter 31 will be a deleted scene and chapter 32 has worked out to be more of an epilogue.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

The family grows :)

With their adoption application past the first part of the process, Nathan and Audrey were invited to meet with the social worker and a three year old boy called James, along with his baby sister, Jean. The goal was to adopt them out together.

Audrey had been nervous at first, worried about whether they could handle two children arriving at once, but the adoption agency assured her that there was plenty of support available and there was no pressure - it was just the initial meeting.

Despite Nathan and Audrey's best efforts, Duke had insisted on staying at home - he wasn't about to turn up in ghost form and he said he didn't feel right about possessing one of them and meeting people who didn't know he was there.

The social worker met them first - a perpetually frazzled young man with tired but kind eyes. “We don't get many people looking to adopt older children,” he explained. “James is used to people who are only interested in Jean. He's been overlooked and ignored and he's wary. He's a good kid but it'll take a lot to win him over,” he cautioned.

Nathan frowned. "You seriously get people who overlook him for his sister? What kind of parent does that?"

“The type that are only interested in a cute baby to coo over,” he told him, shaking his head with resigned disgust.

Audrey shook her head. “Unbelievable,” she said quietly.

"Don't they realize babies don't stay babies more'n a year?" Nathan asked incredulously.

“Apparently not,” the social worker snorted. “They're in the nursery, James won't leave Jean's side. Would you like to come through, see how you get along with them?"

"Absolutely," Nathan said eagerly.

Audrey nodded her agreement. “Yes, please.”

“Right this way,” the social worker led them down dingy grey corridors, brightened by children's paintings, and through a heavy door to a nursery filled with cribs. Only one was being used - Jean, Audrey presumed - and a small boy with blonde hair sat alongside.

“Hi James,” the social worker crouched beside him. “This is Nathan and Audrey and they're here to meet with you.”

James glared up at them. "No they're not. Don't lie."

Nathan knelt down. He did want to coo over baby Jean, but he knew that to do that would be to
destroy any hope he ever had of having a good relationship with James. "He's not lying, James. We're here to see you."

"Hey James," Audrey greeted him. She crouched alongside Nathan and smiled. “I promise no one's lying to you. We wanted to meet you.”

James stuck out his lower lip and folded his chubby arms over his chest. He didn't believe them. Everyone said that. But they only cared about Jean.

Nathan sat down beside James. "That's a very grumpy face you got there, buddy."

"Guess you got a lot to be grumpy about, huh?" Audrey said.

James pouted and refused to look at them.

"Can't blame you there, James. But we really do want you too," Nathan coaxed, trying to hide his growing worry.

Audrey exchanged a glance with Nathan and gave him a slight shake of her head. “Ok, I can see you don't want to talk, so I'll just sit over here and you can come find me if you change your mind. How's that sound?” She moved a few feet away and sat down, leaning against the wall.

James watched her suspiciously.

Fearing that pressing the issue would do more harm than good, Nathan asked the social worker, "How long have they been here?"

"A few months now. James isn't old enough that he'll really remember his parents in the long term, but he remembers well enough now."

Audrey tuned out their conversation and pulled her phone out of her pocket. She hummed to herself as she opened an app and started playing - a silly game with a catchy song and lots of sound effects. She watched James out of the corner of her eye.

James watched them warily. The sounds of the game drew his attention and after a bit he crept over to see what Audrey was doing.

Audrey smiled. “Want to see?”

James glared distrustfully, but nodded.

Audrey leaned towards him and held out her phone so he could see what she was doing. “You've gotta make the frog hop from one lily pad to the next by tapping the screen, see? The longer you press the screen, the further the frog jumps. Want a go?"

James hesitated a moment, but then nodded and went to sit by her. Once in a long while one of the grownups would let him do this sort of thing, but it was a very rare treat.

Audrey waited while he sat down and passed him her phone. “Go on then,” she smiled.

James started playing, his chubby fingers going through the simple motions. Soon he was climbing into Audrey's lap to get more comfortable.

Nathan looked over, and beamed with joy.

"That's remarkable," the social worker smiled. "Your partner has quite the gifted touch."
Audrey glanced up and smiled at them. “You're good at that, James, you've beaten my high score already,” she said, placing one arm around him so he didn't wobble off her lap.

James glanced up at her for a moment before going back to the game, a little less wary than before.

There was just a tiny hint of a smile as he glanced up at her and Audrey thought she might melt. She'd had so many doubts about this, about whether she could - even *should* - be a mother. She'd had no role model growing up, no family even, no clue how this was supposed to go. But James didn't seem to care about that, didn't seem to care that she had no idea what she was doing.

“Y'know,” she said. “I grew up in a place like this. I know it isn't much fun.”

James made a face and shook his head.

“Yeah,” Audrey copied the face he'd made. “Is right.” She smiled warmly. “Nathan and me... we live in a big house with lots of space. If you wanted to, you could come live with us. Only if you want to though, you have a choice and you can absolutely say no.”

James thought about that. He did want out, he did want a real home, but he didn't know if he could trust them. "Family?" he mumbled.

“Family,” Audrey confirmed.

James glanced over at Jean's crib. He didn't want her left behind, he loved his little sister. But if they took her, would they decide later they wanted her and not him?

Nathan, who had been watching, knelt down beside them. "That's right, family. All of us. We'll always love and want you just as much as we love and want Jean.”

Audrey nodded. “There's room for both of you and we have lots of love to give. If you'd like that and if you think Jean would be happy with us too, we'd love to have both of you come live with us.”

James bit his lip, but nodded.

“Would it be ok to meet Jean? Maybe she won't like us,” Audrey asked.

"Will you still like me?" James asked warily.

"Of course we will, James. That's a promise," Nathan told him solemnly.

“Absolutely. That isn't going to change. We're going to love you both the same. No one's being left out,” Audrey said, giving him a little reassuring squeeze.

"Okay," James nodded reluctantly.

Nathan went over to the crib, smiling at the baby girl inside. "Hewwo, Jean," he cooed, picking her up. "How 'bout we go say hi to your big brudder. I bet he'd like that huh?" He folded himself carefully down to the floor beside Audrey, cradling Jean and smiling over at James.

Audrey rolled her eyes affectionately. She leaned down to whisper in James’s ear. “I know, he sounds like an idiot but when he reads bedtime stories, he does the *best* voices.”

James looked up at Nathan guardedly. Nathan smiled back, shifting to cradle Jean with one arm while he put the other around Audrey's shoulders. "See? Family.”

Audrey leaned against him and tightened her arm around James, still just one arm, no matter how
much she wanted to pick him up and cuddle him, she wanted him to have the space to move away if he wanted to. “I bet if you asked him nicely, Nathan would read a story now. I know it isn’t bedtime but it might be fun…”

"Really?" James looked up at Nathan.

Nathan smiled. "Once upon a time, there was a handsome prince named James…"

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When they'd left, James had clung to Audrey's leg, refusing to believe that they meant what they said and they were coming back. Her heart shattered into a million pieces. The social worker promised to expedite their application and Nathan led Audrey, sobbing, back to the car, his arm around her shoulders, biting back his own tears. Audrey cried all the way home and they visited James and Jean every day until the day finally came that they could take them home.

Duke waited on tenterhooks. They'd talked about this a lot, working out the best way to introduce him to the kids, and they eventually decided that he should hang back and stay invisible to give them a chance to get settled in first.

Audrey turned into the driveway and breathed a small sigh of relief. The short trip from the group home had felt like an eternity with their precious family in her car for the first time. She pulled on the parking brake and turned to Nathan, a tiny, nervous smile on her face.

Nathan held her hand reassuringly, turning to smile at the children in their car seats. "So this is home. What do you think?"

"It's big," James said, suitably impressed.

"It is," Audrey agreed. "Want to go inside?"

"Uh-huh," James nodded.

James' car seat was a little more stubborn than Jean's, and Audrey told Nathan, "Go ahead and bring her on in first while I get James out of this."

"Everything go ok?" Duke asked when Nathan came inside, his voice low enough not to carry.

"Everything's official," Nathan smiled. In his arms Jean stirred, staring at Duke. She giggled and cooed, reaching out for him with chubby little hands.

"Uh, Duke? Tell me she's looking at you and we don't have two ghosts," Nathan said.

"Definitely looking at me," Duke smiled softly, gazing at her in wonder as he reached towards her and wiggled his fingers. "Hi lil one."

Jean squealed with laughter, waving her hands excitedly.

"Who's that?" came James's voice from the doorway, where Audrey had just led James in.

Audrey switched her gaze from James, to Jean, to the spot where Duke apparently was, and back again. “This is Duke,” she said. “He lives here as well, and he’s... very nice.” She floundered, widened her eyes in Nathan’s direction and mouthed the words ‘help me’.

“You must be James,” Duke said, going fully visible and dropping down to James’s level. “I’ve
heard a lot about you.”

James considered him for a moment. “How come I can see through you?”

Duke raised his eyebrows at Audrey who shrugged back at him. This was definitely not going the way they’d planned. “Because I’m a ghost,” he answered simply. “And that makes you very special because not everyone can see or hear me.”

“Oh. Okay. Are you gonna be my dad too?” James wanted to know.

“Yes,” Duke said, smiling softly at him. “If that’s ok with you.”

James grinned. “I get two dads?”

Nathan grinned too, relieved. “You sure do, buddy.”

“Two dads, and your own bedroom,” Audrey said, smiling at them all. “Want to see?”

“Yeah!” James nodded.

“Come on then,” Audrey took him by the hand and led him up the stairs. “This is it,” she said, opening the door into the cozy but spacious bedroom which they’d spent hours perfecting - decorating, building furniture, filling with toys and books and everything he might want. On top of the decoupaged toy box sat a large teddy bear, almost as big as James himself.

James stared, eyes huge. “This….this is for me?”

“All for you, buddy. And Jean's right in the next room.”

“All yours,” Audrey smiled, tears glinting in her eyes as she watched his expression change from disbelief to delight. “Go look in the toy box, see if you can find something you like,” she encouraged him.

Instead he turned and hugged her fiercely. “This is the best family,” he mumbled against her shins.

Nathan bounced Jean in his arms and smiled softly at them - James with his arms around Audrey, Audrey smiling down at him and ruffling his hair, Duke gazing at them with an expression of rapt wonder. Their family was going to be just fine.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

One final journey

Chapter Notes

So here we are at the end of the fic and fair warning that we both cried bucket loads writing it. It's difficult to know how to tag this because (spoiler alert below)

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it should probably be tagged as major character death. So if you're really against that, then please don't read. Otherwise, we hope you'll all agree that this is a perfect and fitting end to what turned into a giant monster of a fic.

Preemptive hugs and tissues for all...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Years went by in a blur of living their lives and raising their children. James grew up to be tall and lanky like Nathan, with blonde hair like Audrey's, looking for all the world as though he was their natural child. Full of smiles and laughter once he overcame his initial distrust and suspicion, he brightened all their lives. Jean, the apple of Nathan’s eye, was small and slight, dark hair curling around her face no matter how neatly it was tied back. She was sharp and wary and questioning and if Duke didn't know better he would have sworn that she was his daughter. Both found it reassuring that Duke was there to watch over everyone each night, to chase away the monsters under the bed and the boogeymen in the closet.

Twenty years had passed and James had graduated from the police academy, following his mother into Haven PD - albeit only after an earnest discussion with Nathan that this was what he really, truly wanted for himself, and not just what was expected of him. Jean was heading to medical school, thriving in all her studies and making her father proud. Duke was fiercely proud of them both, insisting that they come home as often as possible so he could make them some proper food. Living in Haven, James did exactly that. More independent and living further away, Jean visited as often as she could and Skype’d regularly so they didn't worry about her too much.

Thirty years and Jean and James now visited with their own families. James had the traditional wife and two kids, a white picket fence and a dog. Jean was now a doctor in the ER, saving lives. With no time or inclination for romance, she’d formed a platonic, lifelong, partnership with her best friend. They'd adopted three children and moved closer to Haven, knowing how important family was.
James stepped into Audrey's shoes as chief when she retired and ran Haven PD in the same calm, no-nonsense fashion as she had done.

Nathan retired gradually - giving up the more physical EMT work first and slowly reducing the amount of time he spent at his real estate job.

Not that being retired slowed them down - Audrey finally had time to learn to surf, a long held ambition that Duke was happy to help her with. Nathan started to sell some of his decoupage pieces and was soon taking commissions from people in Haven and further afield.

Fifty years. Long lives filled with love and laughter and happiness. But now their bodies didn't keep up with their minds. James and his family had moved into the beloved old house to care for Audrey and Nathan, watching them with concern, fretting over every slight wobble, rushing over at even the most gentle fall. Jean came by to check on them daily, often bringing her partner and children to visit and ensuring they received the finest medical care. But even with the best of loving care, time would not be denied.

It was a bitter winter night when Nathan knew the end had come. They'd both been failing steadily, but Audrey moreso. She'd fought like a tiger, bright and fierce of spirit to the end, but there was nothing more to be done. They lay in bed, as they had for months now, and in his arms he could feel her body straining just to breathe. Duke hovered over them worriedly, staying by their side as he had all this time, wondering if this was the night he'd have to keep his promise to stay joined with them when they breathed their last.

"Nathan?" Audrey breathed. "Duke?"

"I'm here, Audrey. Not going anywhere." Nathan reassured her.

"I'm here too. If you want company in there, let me know," Duke said quietly.

"I think….I'm all done," she wheezed.

"That's okay," Nathan told her, kissing her softly. "You fought hard, I know it's been tough. If it's time, it's time. We'll be with Duke and it'll be okay. I love you.” He nodded to Duke, who nodded back and slipped in to join Audrey, wrapping tight around her as he had so many times, feeling her love for them burn undiminished.

"I'm tired," Audrey said softly, and then that was all. Holding her close, Nathan felt her last slow heartbeat, felt her last weak breath, felt her go utterly slack in his arms.

Duke stayed with her, curled around her soul, protecting her as she let go. Her slow, gradual, demise was like falling asleep, so very different from his own. Her spirit left her body and he followed her, standing alongside her as she gazed back at Nathan.

“You ok?” He asked her quietly.

“I'm fine,” she whispered. “He needs you.”

“I know, I'll be with him, same as I was with you,” Duke promised. “Wait for us?”

“Forever.”

Nathan kissed Audrey's forehead tenderly and lay still, closing his own eyes. He was tired too. It had been so hard to hang on for her, so exhausting, so painful. He couldn't bear to leave her alone,
to leave her grieving, so he'd fought to stay with her. But that fight was done now, and he too was ready to rest. His life had been long and rich, full of love and laughter and helping others. His children and grandchildren loved him, but it hurt them to see him like this, he knew. They needed an end, needed to grieve and move on. It was time. "Duke?" he whispered.

Duke slid gently into Nathan's mind, wrapping around him, sensing that Nathan was ready to go. Audrey's fine. She's waiting for us, he thought softly. I'm here for you, as long as you need me. I'm not going anywhere. Let go, Nate, if you're ready to. We'll all be together.

Nathan replied without words, love and gratitude and acceptance, eagerness to be with him and Audrey. He twined around Duke, his soul strong in spite of the rapidly weakening connection to his failing body, and let go.

Souls intertwined, Duke went with him, guiding him through the darkness to the light that he knew was Audrey until they were all together, beside each other in a way they never had been before.

Nathan gave one last brief glance to their former selves, cuddled together on the bed with gentle, peaceful smiles on their faces. He was glad that this would be how they were found. He turned back to his loves, reaching up to touch Duke for the first time, fingertips brushing over his cheek, over skin that felt warm and alive and real.

Duke turned his face, leaning into the touch, the first contact he'd had in so many years. “Nate,” he whispered as he stretched his hand towards Audrey.

Audrey went to him, wrapping her arms around him and tucking herself against his chest, the way she'd wanted to for so long. His arms tightened around her, holding her close, keeping her safe and she never wanted to let him go.

Nathan wrapped his arms around them both, pressed all along Duke's back, nuzzling the soft warm hair. Duke smelled like spices and the sea, and the scent was like a puzzle piece falling into place that he'd never even realized was missing.

Tucked between them, Duke savoured the feel of them pressed against him - so warm, so familiar, yet so different. Nathan's stubble scraped against his neck, Audrey's hair tickled his nose and he was here, he was real, and they were together. He leaned back into Nathan's solid, dependable, bulk, letting Nathan anchor him, and closed his arms tightly around Audrey's soft, gentle, warmth, accepting her loving embrace as she wrapped her arms around his waist and held him tight.

"Think I could do this forever," Nathan murmured, pressing a kiss to the corner of Duke's mouth in the hopes it would get Duke to turn his head for a proper one. The tickle and scratch of facial hair was new, but it felt good.

“We have forever,” Duke smiled and turned his face towards Nathan so their lips met, brushing against each other gently at first, then harder, more passionate, more intense.

“Duke,” Audrey murmured into his chest. “I promise that we're going to take such good care of you, the way you have of us for all these years.”

Duke dropped his face away from Nathan and smiled. “I know you will. We'll all take care of each other. I love you both so much.” He gently tilted her chin up and leaned down to kiss her, his hand resting on her jaw, Nathan's arms still wrapped around them both, sandwiching Duke between them.

"Waited more than fifty years to see that," Nathan said happily. "You two are so beautiful
“You two are too,” Audrey smiled.

“Been waiting for this a long time,” Duke murmured, relaxing into their contact.

"Feels like forever," Nathan nodded. "And now….now what?"

“One last journey,” Duke smiled softly. “You both ready to go?”

They nodded their agreement. It was time.

Duke took their hands and moved forwards. Side by side, they walked out of this world.

Chapter End Notes

And that’s where we decided to leave them *passes out more hugs, more tissues, and some cookies*

There are still 2 more chapters to come - a deleted scene and The Smutty Epilogue - which will be posted in line with the usual update schedule.

Thank you to everyone who has come on this journey with us, and an extra special thank you to everyone who's commented (especially those who prompted us to write more when we thought we were done). We love you all!
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Deleted scene - Audrey makes a suggestion...

Chapter Notes

For those who like a bit of context with their smut, this probably fits between chapters 28 and 29 :)

“So, I...uh… I had a thought,” Audrey said, pink cheeked as she fiddled with the label on a bottle of beer.

“Always dangerous,” Duke tried to keep a straight face and failed miserably. “Go on, what’s up?”

Audrey glanced at Nathan and chewed her lip. “I was wondering how both of you might feel about… Well, what if we made love while Duke was possessing me…”

Duke stared at her with his mouth slightly open. “Is that something you’d really want? I don’t want you to think you have to offer because of some fucked up way of keeping things equal or whatever.”

“No, no, it’s not that. I’m intrigued. The way you two describe it, pleasure echoing back and forth and… Yeah, I’m intrigued. I’d like to try it, if you both want to. No pressure.”

Duke nodded and turned to Nathan who had been silent, his face giving nothing away except for the fact he’d turned as red as he always did when they discussed sex. “Nate?”

Nathan opened his mouth, made a sort of croaking sound, stopped and cleared his throat before attempting to continue. "I'm…intrigued."

Audrey smiled at him. “Is that a yes?”

Having apparently exhausted his vocal capacity on the subject, Nathan nodded.

Audrey rolled her eyes slightly. “Ok. Duke?”

He hesitated for just the briefest second. “Yes. Definitely yes. Although I will admit to being slightly nervous.” He glanced at Nathan.

"I'll take really good care of you, we can take this as slow as you want,” Nathan reassured him.

“I know you will,” Duke smiled softly. “Never doubted it.”

“There's no pressure, Duke, it was just a thought I had, but if you do want to, you should drive. That way you can tell Nathan if it's getting too much or you need to slow down. It's... probably
more intense than you're used to.”

“I definitely want to,” Duke said quickly. “Are you sure you want me to drive, though?”

“Absolutely. If Nathan's ok with that.”

"I’m fine if you're both okay with that. If you'd both be more comfortable otherwise, I'm okay with that too.”

“I'm good. You're right, Audrey, it kinda makes sense and it means you won't have to worry about it being too much for me.”

Audrey grinned. “So we're all on the same page, then?”

"Sounds like it," Nathan grinned. "Oh, one thing….how would you feel about my using my mouth first?"

“Well you both know how much I enjoy that,” Audrey smirked. “Duke, I promise it'll feel amazing, Nathan's very good at that…”

“If it's even half as good as the blowjobs you give us, I am totally on board,” Duke grinned.

Nathan grinned happily. "I'll do my best."

“Shall we, then? I mean, if we're all ready - especially you, Duke, I don't want to rush you - none of us have to be anywhere until Monday...kinda seems like a good time…”

“I'm ready whenever you both are. Nate?”

"Hell yes," Nathan said eagerly.

Audrey grinned and settled more comfortably on the couch before she opened her arms to Duke, inviting him in. He went to her eagerly and twined around her soul.

Are you sure, Audrey?

I'm sure, she reassured him. Enjoy yourself.

She stepped back so he could take control.

“Hey,” Duke said softly and reached out with Audrey's hand to run a finger down Nathan's jawline.

"Hey, Duke," Nathan smiled at the familiar gesture and leaned in for a soft kiss. "Feeling comfortable?"


Fine with me, Audrey thought at him. Whatever and wherever you're most comfortable.

"Sounds like a good idea," Nathan smiled and stole another kiss before leading them upstairs.

In the bedroom, Duke pulled Nathan close and kissed him again, his hands slipping beneath the soft fabric of Nathan's t-shirt.

Nathan returned the kiss, running his fingers through the long blond hair and then holding his lovers close. "Looking forward to this?” he murmured.
Always, Audrey was grinning.

“So much,” Duke whispered back. “Wanted to touch you like this for a long time.” He sent a wave of appreciation to Audrey who sent a wave of gleeful enthusiasm back to him.

*You're gonna have so much fun*, even her thoughts came across in a sing-song voice.

Duke smiled. “Audrey's just as enthusiastic.”

"I've wanted to touch you too, Duke, so much," Nathan murmured. He reached for the buttons of Audrey's shirt. "Okay?"

Duke waited for Audrey's somewhat amused confirmation before he nodded.

*I know how huge this is for you both*, Audrey thought, the strength of Duke's emotions hitting her. *You don't need to keep checking in. Relax, enjoy it. I'm good with whatever, you both know what I like. I trust you and I'll just happily enjoy it with you.*

*Thanks Audrey, I don't... I don't really know what to say*, Duke let her feel how much he loved her - loved both of them.

*Then shut up and enjoy it*, she replied, almost giddy with happiness that she could let them have this.

Nathan finished unbuttoning Audrey's shirt and gently slid it off her shoulders, caressing the soft warm skin as he went.

Duke shivered lightly as Nathan's hands ran over him and he reached out to pull off Nathan's t-shirt before standing on tiptoes to kiss him again.

"You okay? Not too weird for you?" Nathan asked, his hands on Audrey's bra but not unclasping it yet.

“Better than ok,” Duke grinned. “Nope, not weird. You touching me...it feels amazing, Nate. I always knew it would…”

"I've wanted to for so long," Nathan murmured, leaning in for a kiss as he unclasped the bra and drew it off. "And thank you Audrey, for making this possible. You're amazing too."

*You're both amazing. My special boys. I'm glad I can give you this.*

Duke repeated what Audrey had said/thought, interspersing the words with soft kisses down Nathan's neck.

Nathan whimpered a little as Duke kissed his sensitive neck, running his hands down Audrey's back and around to cup the soft breasts in his hands. "Love you both so much," he murmured, already a little breathless.

“We love you too. More than I have words to tell you,” Duke's lips found the sensitive spot where Nathan's neck joined his collarbone - just for a moment before Nathan brushed his fingers over Audrey's nipples and Duke let out a soft moan.

"Good?" Nathan shivered a little at the kiss, waiting for Duke's reaction.

“So good,” Duke breathed as Audrey wholeheartedly agreed.
Nathan grinned, playful and still a little shy, and he caressed the soft skin and rubbed his thumbs over Audrey's nipples.

Duke's moan was more of a whine as he felt Audrey's nipples grow harder in response to Nathan's touch. At the same time, he was aware of the slightest tingle between Audrey's legs.

Is that what it feels like?

Getting turned on? Yeah. This is just the start though, Audrey sounded amused.


"Just wait 'till I get my mouth on them," Nathan grinned, suiting deed to word.

"OhmygodNate," Duke breathed, the words falling from him in a rush as his fingers dug into Nathan's shoulders, Audrey's pleasure echoing his.

Nathan's eyes crinkled with amusement as he lingered there, his mouth teasing the taut nipples and long fingers stroking the smooth skin around them.

Duke moaned softly. Audrey, how do you stand this? It's so....intense.

Audrey laughed. I don't, I'd have pushed him off and backed him into the wall by now.

With a quiet laugh, Duke did just that and scraped Audrey’s fingernails down Nathan’s chest, leaving pink stripes which he followed with his tongue. “Audrey's suggestion,” he smirked.

Nathan chuckled. "I wondered, it's such an Audrey move that for a second there I thought she'd just gotten too impatient and taken over the driver's seat. Just think, you haven't seen anything yet," he smirked.

"Neither have you," Duke nipped at Nathan’s neck. “Believe it or not, I do have a few tricks of my own.”

"I do not have words for how much I'm looking forward to that," Nathan told him, his hands at Audrey's waistband. "Okay?"

Duke nodded. “And don't forget I have the added advantage of knowing exactly what you like,” he murmured as Nathan undid Audrey’s slacks and pushed them down.

"You're not the only one who can say that," Nathan smirked, sliding his hands down and finding the sensitive crease where the top of Audrey's legs met the curve of her ass.

The noise that Duke made was definitely more of a whine than a moan and he would have been embarrassed by it except it was such a uniquely Audrey sound and that was...hot. He reached out and deftly undid the buckle of Nathan's jeans so he could drag them down his thighs, his fingers grazing the sensitive skin.

Nathan made a little impatient noise at the back of his throat. He hooked his thumbs in the waistband of Audrey's panties and gave Duke a hopeful look. "Please?"

Duke swallowed hard and nodded.

Nathan knelt before him, slowly drawing the delicate fabric down Audrey's legs, pressing soft kisses to her belly and hips and thighs as he did.
Duke curled his fingers into Nathan's hair, lightly scratching his scalp.

_Tug his hair, Audrey prompted, grinning. Oh, and you're gonna want to lie down before he touches you. Trust me._

There was just the hint of a giggle in her voice and Duke wondered just what he'd let himself in for. He tugged gently at Nathan's hair, encouraging him to look up. “Bed. Now,” Duke said, low and urgent.

"Hell yes," Nathan agreed eagerly, leading him to the bed. He settled at the foot of it, the better to continue pressing kisses ever closer to his goal.

Duke shivered as Nathan's lips climbed higher and he clung to Audrey as her reactions mirrored his.

Nathan broke off sucking gently at Audrey's inner thigh to murmur, "Spread your legs for me?"

And that...should not have been anywhere near as hot as it sounded. Duke let his legs fall open, a rush of vulnerability flowing through him as he was exposed in such a uniquely different way.

"You okay?" Nathan murmured, taking Audrey's hands and giving them a gentle squeeze.

“I'm fine, Nate, everything you're doing...it feels amazing. I want to make you feel this good too.”

_Relax, Duke, _Audrey reassured him. _Don't forget it's not one-and-done like this. There's plenty of time for anything and everything you want to do._

Duke curled tightly around her, trying to tell her how much he appreciated her letting him have this, to experience something that he'd never even dreamed about.

"Soon, Duke,” Nathan smiled. "Once we've made love, you can do anything and everything you want to me."

“I'm holding you to that,” Duke grinned as he stretched and wriggled his shoulders into the bed.

"Anything for you, Duke," Nathan promised softly as he kissed up Audrey's inner thighs.

“Back at ya, Nate,” Duke said, with a quiet gasp as Nathan's hair tickled his thighs. He reached out to run his fingers through the soft strands.

"Ready?" Nathan murmured, pausing as he reached his goal.

“Ready,” Duke nodded as Audrey reminded him to relax. And really, why was he so stupidly nervous, surely it couldn't be _that_ different?

He revised that thought as soon as Nathan's tongue touched him and he nearly jumped off the bed with a loud moan that was just short of a scream. He could feel Audrey giggling.

Feels good, huh?

_So good, _Duke answered her before speaking aloud to Nathan. “Nate? Do that again…”

Nathan looked relieved - that reaction had worried him a bit. He bent his head again and slid his tongue against the hot skin.

More prepared this time, Duke whined softly and curled his fingers into Nathan's hair. “So good,”
he breathed.

Nathan gave Audrey's thigh a gentle squeeze, exploring with his tongue, letting Duke feel everything.

Duke shuddered, every muscle in Audrey's body tensing as heat rose within them. He breathed harder, faster, whining softly on each exhale as he clung to Audrey in their shared mind.

Nathan slid his tongue inside, exploring the opening before pulling back to the most sensitive skin.

“Fuck,” Duke whispered. *Oh my god, Audrey, is this what it's like every time?*

*Every time,* she confirmed, grinning slightly. *Ready for more?*

*More?!* Duke tried to catch his breath.

Audrey chuckled. *Tell him 'faster'.*

“Nate?” Duke panted, his hips subconsciously pushing him against Nathan's tongue. “Audrey said 'faster’.”

"N' you?” Nathan murmured, waiting to make sure Duke wanted this as much as Audrey.


Nathan obliged him, pleasuring his lovers in the way he knew Audrey liked best.

Words fell from Duke's mouth, soft nothings, quiet 'I love you’s, descending into sharp gasps and loud moans as his and Audrey's shared pleasure grew and they began to fall apart completely under Nathan's careful touch. Heat pooled, low and deep, Audrey's muscles clenching, tightening, as Nathan's tongue worked them ever closer to the beautiful crescendo, drawing a cry from Duke on every stroke until it was one long, continuous, moan broken only by Duke's ragged gasps for breath. Coherent thoughts were lost to Duke, all he could do was cling to Audrey in their mind as their pleasure peaked and the final release hit them in a wave of throbbing that went on and on.

Nathan slowed as his lovers shivered through the rippling aftershocks of their climax, careful to avoid overstimulation and let them enjoy the soft, relaxed pleasure.

Audrey curled tightly around Duke. *Ok? That was pretty intense…*

Duke let out a soft laugh. “I think I might be dead. Again.”

Nathan chuckled. "And just think, we're not even done…”

A light shiver of anticipation ran through Audrey's body as Duke reacted to Nathan's words.

*Feels so good, doesn't it? Everything Nathan’s doing, the way he's touching us…* Audrey managed to sound breathless even in thought, her pleasure obvious.

*So good,* Duke agreed as he started to sit up. “I think it's your turn now, isn't it?” He grinned at Nathan.

"I thought we weren't done here yet," Nathan gave a long, slow lick to the sensitized skin.

Duke made a sound that was somewhere between a sigh and a moan. “God, Nate, that feels so good.”
"You know," Nathan said conversationally, interspersing his words with a tongue massage, "the first night you and Audrey were together, you said you were gonna see how many times she could come. Would you like some first-hand knowledge on that?"

Audrey's response was one of gleeful delight as she twined around Duke more tightly. *If you're up for that, you should, Duke. You'll love it.*

"I would definitively like some first-hand knowledge on that," he answered them both aloud as he curled around Audrey.

"Think you'd be okay with my fingers inside you?" Nathan murmured.

Duke hesitated, waiting for Audrey's eager confirmation before he answered. "I think I'd be more than ok with that," he said softly.

Nathan smiled, giving Duke a soft, adoring look and a kiss on the inner thigh. "Anything for you."

Duke reached out to run his fingers through Nathan's hair. "You're amazing."

"You too. Both of you. Never know how I got this lucky," Nathan murmured. He reached for the lube and slicked his fingers, letting the gel warm for a moment before rubbing the pads of his fingertips over her entrance.

*I love you both so much,* Audrey thought tenderly.

Duke could feel the intensity of her thoughts as he told Nathan what she'd said. "Goes double for me," he added, his words cut off by a soft moan as Nathan's finger slipped inside him.

"Love you too. You okay?" Nathan asked, holding still, ready to pull out if need be.

"Feels so good, Nate," Duke breathed the words.

Nathan looked relieved, placing kisses along Audrey's thigh. "Tell me if it gets to be too much, okay?" he asked, slowly moving his finger in and out.

Duke nodded, adjusting to the new - and very pleasurable - sensation, a whine building in his throat.

Nathan sought out all the spots Audrey particularly liked, adding another finger and watching Duke's expression carefully for any sight of reluctance.

*Oh god,* Audrey moaned. *He always hits just the right spot. Just...there.*

Duke whined as Nathan hit the spot that Audrey loved so much. "More, Nate…"

Nathan smiled and obliged his lovers, while bending his head and putting his tongue to good use once more.

"Fuck," Duke breathed as heat grew in them once again, shivers running down Audrey's spine. "Faster."

Nathan did as he was bidden, adding another finger. "Let me know if you want more, too."

Duke made a wordless sound of agreement as he tried to keep still under Nathan's fingers and mouth.
"You know, I could slow down, make this last, draw it out until you're just out of your mind with pleasure," Nathan murmured contemplatively.

Within their shared mind, Audrey chuckled. Want to? She asked. I mean, I like that and I know you do too, but I can understand if you'd rather just...get to it.

“Nate,” Duke whined softly, contemplating the decision. “Yeah...do that.”

Nathan smiled, immediately slowing his pace to let the pleasure build and build the way he knew Audrey loved.

Duke's whine as Nathan slowed was echoed by Audrey in their shared mind, deliciously frustrated by the tease, and Duke dug his fingers into Nathan's hair - more insistently this time, the way he knew Nathan loved so much.

Wrapped around each others souls, their pleasure grew, echoing back and forth along their shared link until neither of them could take it anymore. “Harder,” Duke said, his voice full of urgency, speaking for both of them.

Nathan knew that tone of voice and he gave his lovers what they wanted, what they needed.

“Oh god, Nathan,” Duke cried out, panting as he came, Audrey’s muscles clenching around Nathan’s fingers.

Nathan grinned and stretched their pleasure out this time, coaxing wave after wave of it.

Duke shuddered, reaching to hold Audrey tightly in his mind. **Fuck, Audrey, I never knew...never dreamed it could be this good...**

*Amazing, isn’t it? And - god - having you with me, it’s... Duke, it’s so intense. Is this what it’s like for you and Nathan?*

Emotionally, yes... Physically it's completely different. This is... It’s so much...more.

Duke shifted his weight as their pleasure subsided and nudged at Nathan’s shoulder. “Come up here,” he said softly.

Nathan gently withdrew his fingers, wiping them with the tissues they kept by the bedside for cleanup, before shifting up to take Duke in his arms.

“That was incredible,” Duke murmured, snuggling tightly into Nathan's chest.

"Glad you enjoyed it," Nathan smiled, kissing him on the forehead and stroking Audrey's hair.

“We really did,” Duke practically purred under Nathan's touch. “You're amazing.”

"Nowhere near as amazing as both of you," Nathan smiled. **Same response every time, Audrey thought sadly. Kiss him for me, Duke, please.**

Duke gently pressed a kiss to Nathan's cheek. “From Audrey,” he said, then kissed him again. “From me. You're just as amazing as we are,” he said firmly.

Nathan hugged them close, nuzzling Audrey's cheek. "Love you both so much."

“We love you too, more than I have words for right now seeing as you've turned my brain into
Mush seems pretty accurate. Duke could feel Audrey laughing.

Nathan chuckled. "My work here is complete."

"Mine isn't," Duke gave him a wicked grin.

"If you feel up to it, I sure wouldn't say no," Nathan admitted. By this point he was painfully hard. "Only if you're really okay with it, though."

Duke raised an eyebrow. "Are you kidding? There are things I've wanted to do to you for years."

Nathan let out a breathless laugh, his length giving an eager twitch. "Yeah?"

"Mm-hmm," Duke grinned and wriggled out of his embrace. Ok, Audrey? Duke checked in, not really needing to - he could feel how enthusiastic she was.

Fine, looking forward to learning some of your tricks so I can use them on you both next time.

Duke smiled and leaned in, one hand cupping Nathan's jaw as he kissed him slowly and thoroughly.

Nathan ran a hand through Audrey's hair as he returned the kiss, marvelling at how different - though equally good - Duke's and Audrey's kisses were.

"Lie back," Duke murmured, gently pushing Nathan back onto the bed.

Nathan obeyed eagerly. "Did you like finding out how Audrey tastes?" he grinned.

Duke laughed softly. "Tasting Audrey on your mouth was incredible, the taste of you mingled with her...yeah..." he leaned over to kiss Nathan again.

Nathan returned the kiss happily, letting Duke chase the taste of them in his mouth.

Duke broke away to gently kiss his way down Nathan's neck, lingering over the spot he knew was particularly sensitive as he carefully manoeuvred so he was sitting astride him, Audrey's thighs bracketing Nathan's hips. He ran his hands down Nathan's arms to take hold of his wrists and gently push his arms above his head. "Got you right where we want you now," he grinned.

"Duke, please," Nathan all but whined, his hips arching.

"Please what, Nathan?" Duke moved, keeping hold of Nathan's wrists with one hand and running the other across his chest, scraping Audrey's nails across his nipple.

"Please, for the love of god, touch me, I want..."

"You want my hand round your dick?" Duke peppered kisses down Nathan's neck. "Or would my mouth be better?"

"Anything, Duke, just need you so much, please."

He's so gorgeous like that, isn't he? All needy and desperate, Audrey grinned.

He really is, Duke's thought was breathless as he sucked at the point where Nathan's neck met his
shoulder, leaving a mark that would still show in the morning. “You’re ours now,” he growled.

"Yours," Nathan whimpered, "all yours."

“Good,” Duke murmured as he kissed his way down Nathan's body, lingering over every sweet spot.

"God, you're gonna get me off just doing that," Nathan groaned.

“Hmm? Maybe I should stop…”

"Duke, no!" Nathan whined.

“Well...if you're sure…” Duke smirked and licked a long, slow, stripe up Nathan's length.

Nathan cursed heartily, his hands clenching in the sheets.

_God, I love it when he gets like this, _Audrey thought._

Duke murmured his agreement, licking and kissing at Nathan.

"Duke, you're killing me, don't stop, whatever you do, don't stop," Nathan panted.

Duke swirled his tongue around the sensitive head before taking Nathan into his mouth and sucking.

Nathan made a strangled sound, his fingers combing restlessly through Audrey's hair.

_That sound gets me every time, _Audrey thought._ her building arousal matching Duke's.

_Me too,_ Duke agreed as he took Nathan deeper, moving up and down the stiff length, slipping a hand between Nathan's legs to rub at the sensitive skin behind the heavy sac.

"Gonna come," Nathan choked out, pushing at Audrey's shoulders in warning.

Duke pulled off - he might be ok with swallowing but he knew Audrey preferred not to - and began to stroke Nathan, hard and fast.

Nathan pulled Duke up, clinging to him as his climax hit hard.

Duke kept stroking through his climax, bringing him down gradually. “You're so gorgeous, Nathan. Beautiful and handsome and I love you so much, everything about you. You and Audrey both, you mean the world to me.”

_Back at you, Duke, _Audrey sent a wave of affection to him which he returned gladly.

"You're amazing, Duke, don't even have words, you and Audrey too, love you both," Nathan mumbled, snuggling him like a teddy bear.

Duke nestled against him and closed his eyes, settling into Nathan's contact with a soft sigh.

"This is amazing. So glad I got a chance to make love to you," Nathan murmured.

“It was incredible,” Duke smiled and sent a wave of appreciation to Audrey. “Although...reckon you might be up for a second round later? Because I would _love_ to feel you inside me…”

"Really?" Nathan asked eagerly. "You sure?"
“Very sure,” Duke grinned at Nathan's enthusiasm. “Audrey is too. In fact, I think her exact words were 'fuck, yes’.”

"God Duke," Nathan pulled him close for a thorough kiss. "I wanted that so much but I figured if you weren't volunteering it was because you thought it'd be too weird, or maybe Audrey did, I didn't want to push you."

“Definitely not weird,” Duke reassured him. “I would've suggested it earlier but you were so hot when you were all wound up and I just wanted to make you feel as good as you made both of us feel.”

"You certainly did," Nathan smiled and kissed him, adding with a bit of a twinkle in his eyes, "though to be fair, what you're proposing definitely would also have accomplished that."

“Maybe,” Duke wriggled against him suggestively and murmured softly, “but I wanted to taste you too.”

_I'm glad you're getting to do some of the things you've been missing for so long, Duke, Audrey curled herself around him more tightly. And I'm glad we can enjoy it together._

_Me too, Audrey, I can't believe we can all do this. It's amazing, incredible, and I'll never stop being thankful that we can have this - all of it, I mean - but especially this. I don't know how I can thank you._

_You don't need to thank me, I'm enjoying it as much as you are. It's fantastic sharing it with you._

_Good, but still...thank you,_ Duke thought as he pulled Nathan closer.

"You're so good, Duke, you're amazing," Nathan pulled him close for another kiss.

Duke kissed him back as he raked Audrey's fingernails down Nathan's ribs, leaving pink lines which echoed the ones he'd left on Nathan's chest earlier. Between those and the suck mark on his shoulder, Nathan was looking thoroughly _owned_ and that was sparking both Duke and Audrey's possessive streaks.

"I can't believe you're getting me riled up again already," Nathan groaned, his length gamely attempting to recover.

Duke laughed softly. “Maybe I should let you nap first?”

"After teasing me with this?  Like I could sleep now…"

“Oh but you love the tease…” Duke nibbled at Nathan's neck between words.

"Can't argue that. Guess that makes all three of us," Nathan tilted his head to give Duke more room to work.

Duke murmured a sound of agreement, the nibbles turning to soft nips as he worked his way downwards.

Nathan ran his hands through Audrey's hair. "Can't believe how lucky I am to have you both."

“We're just as lucky to have you,” Duke said as Audrey curled herself around him, wholeheartedly agreeing.

Nathan stroked Audrey's cheek, not agreeing but at least not arguing.
Progress, Audrey chuckled softly. *Normally he'd be protesting by now.*

Yeah...maybe he's starting to believe it, Duke turned into Nathan's contact and closed his eyes, almost purring under the gentle touch.

"I love how much you love being touched," Nathan said softly, almost reverently.

“Your touch is amazing, Nate, you make me feel so loved and so special and… And after so long without it…” - Duke's voice cracked - “God, I don't even have words for it. It's like... I'm so full of emotion that I want to burst and I kinda don't know what to do with it.”

Nathan gently tugged him up and pulled him close, kissing him tenderly. "You *are* so loved and so special, Duke, I love you more'n I could ever have words to say."

Within their mind, Audrey tried to let Duke feel how much she loved him, letting down the last of her mental barriers and opening up to him, twining around him so completely that neither of them knew where one stopped and the other began.

*I love you, Duke, so much.*

*I love you too, Audrey. Everything I just said, that goes for you too. When I'm with Nathan and you touch us, it hits me just as deeply.*

*I know Duke and I love that we can do this for you.*

Duke clung to Nathan, holding him tightly as they kissed.

Nathan held Duke close, kissing him softly, interspersing the kisses with words of love.

“Nathan…” Duke murmured, “please…. I want to feel you, I want...need...that connection.”


Duke kissed him deeply, full of passion, his hand sliding down to grab Nathan's ass and pull him closer.

Nathan made a soft sound against Duke's lips, quiet but eager, his hands stroking along Audrey's body.

Their movements were slower this time, unhurried as they enjoyed touching and being touched, exploring each others bodies, Audrey encouraging Duke in their mind, their arousal slowly building into frustration.

*Duke, I swear to god if you don't hurry this up I'm going to…* Whatever threat Audrey had been going to make was cut off by a whine when Nathan's hand brushed up the inside of her thigh.

Duke moaned softly and shifted to give Nathan easier access. “Please, Nate…”

Nathan nodded and grabbed a condom, thankful he'd recovered as he rolled it on.

Duke bit his lip and pulled Nathan down on top of him to kiss him.

"You okay?" Nathan murmured against Duke's lips.

“Mm-hmm,” Duke mumbled back.
"Tell me if you're not okay, all right Duke?" Nathan said, positioning himself and watching Duke's expression closely.

_Relax, Duke_, Audrey picked up on his nerves and wrapped herself around him. _Trust me, Nathan will be so gentle with you._

_I know...I know he will be, that’s not what I’m worried about...Audrey, I want to be good at this...everything else, I kinda knew what I was doing but this...? Not so much, and I want it to be good and to mean as much as I hope it will, for all of us._

_It already means so much, look at Nathan’s face, his eyes...full of love for us both. He worships us and nothing you do now is going to change that. As for knowing what you’re doing, there’s not much to it. Let Nathan lead, do what feels natural, we’ll all enjoy it. I mean, hey, I just got to come twice without having to lift a finger so that’s already pretty awesome in my book, Audrey chuckled softly._

_Yeah, Duke let out a shaky breath he hadn’t realised he was holding. Thanks for the pep talk._

“Hurry up then, Nate,” he smirked.

Nathan saw something in Duke's face relax, and smiled. He leaned in for a soft kiss as he began to slowly press inside Audrey's body.

Duke wrapped his arms around him, holding him close as Audrey’s instincts took over, tilting her hips up, encouraging Nathan for more.

"Okay?" Nathan murmured, watching Duke's body language for any hint of discomfort.

“Very okay,” Duke arched beneath him, feeling the way Audrey’s body was accommodating Nathan’s length, stretching and opening up for him.

Nathan kissed him tenderly as he continued until they were fully joined. "How does that feel?"

Duke clung to him, holding him close as his breath hitched in Audrey’s chest. “So, so good,” he said, swallowing a sob as the enormity of the moment hit him.

Within their mind, Audrey wanted to cry too as the full force of Duke’s emotions hit her. Wordlessly, she curled herself tightly around him.

Nathan kissed Duke softly, holding him close and rubbing his back, murmuring tender reassurances of his love.

“Oh my god, I love you both so much,” Duke whispered as his eyes stung with held back tears.

"I love you too, Duke, we both love you so much," Nathan murmured, stroking Audrey's hair. _So much_, Audrey echoed him.

Duke nodded and tried to remember how to breathe, releasing his grip on Nathan just enough to run his hands down Nathan’s back to grab his ass. “Gonna show me what you can do, then?” He smirked slightly.

Nathan smiled and kissed him softly. "What I can do is make love to you and show you how I feel."

Nathan leaned in for another kiss as he began to move, a slow unhurried slide to draw out the pleasure.

Duke gasped, his pleasure echoed by Audrey’s, rippling along their connection as he wrapped his legs around Nathan to pull him deeper.

"Mm, you feel so good, love you so much," Nathan said blissfully.

“Love you too,” Duke reached out for Audrey in his mind as he began to move his hips to match Nathan’s gentle thrusts.

Nathan kissed and caressed Duke as he kept up the languid pace. As much as he liked it when his lovers were passionate and eager and impatient for him, this slow and tender lovemaking was the intimacy he loved best.

Duke shivered under Nathan’s gentle touch, Audrey’s body responding to every movement he made and it was pleasure. Sheer, wonderful, pleasure. He arched his back, his hands roaming over Nathan’s skin as they kissed.

"You're amazing, Duke, wonderful, gorgeous, incredible. I'm so happy I can make love to you, I've wanted to for so long."

“Me too, Nate. Being with you both like this is a dream come true, and experiencing what Audrey does...I just don’t have words for how different and amazing it is.”

"So glad you get to experience that," Nathan smiled softly. "I'm so glad you get to share this."

Duke...you know it’s good for me too, right? Audrey said. Having you with me....Sex with Nathan - and with you - it’s always incredible, but you being here, experiencing everything with me....I don’t have words either.

Yeah, no, I do know, I can feel how much you’re enjoying it but...yeah, it’s good to hear it from you, Duke smiled and dragged his nails down Nathan’s back.

Nathan shivered slightly, his pace picking up a little.

Duke moaned softly. “God that’s good. You’re so good Nate.”

"You too, you feel amazing, look amazing, sound amazing, I'm so in love with you."

Duke pulled him down to kiss him again, trying to put everything he felt into that one kiss as they slowly rocked together.

Nathan returned the kiss with equal passion, pouring all his love into that soft press of lips.

“Faster, Nate,” Duke murmured against his lips, his impatience matched by Audrey’s as their pleasure built.

Nathan obliged him, wanting to make this good for Duke.

“So good,” Duke breathed, his eyes half closed, his head thrown back.

"Yes, Duke, you are, you're so good," Nathan murmured, kissing Duke's exposed throat.

His words sent a jolt of pleasure straight to Duke’s core and he let out a soft whimper as he moved against Nathan, encouraging him to go faster, harder, deeper.
Nathan felt the change and responded, continuing the praise that Duke seemed to enjoy so much. "You're so good to me and Audrey, so thoughtful, such good company, such a good lover, we love sharing our lives with you, we're so lucky to have you, you're the best lover we could ever ask for."

Audrey echoed Nathan’s words, letting Duke feel how much she loved him, how good this was for her too, reminding him how good he was.

Duke clung to them both - Audrey in mind, Nathan in body - riding the waves of pleasure that coursed through him. “Nate…” He gasped. “Please….touch me.”

Nathan kissed him and slid a hand between Audrey's legs, adding to his lovers' pleasure.

“Oh god, yes,” Duke whined, calling their names as Nathan's touch sent him over the edge once again.

Nathan kissed him passionately as the clench of Audrey's body sent him over as well, holding Duke tight.

That was incredible, Audrey’s thought was full of happy contentment. Thank you for sharing it with me, Duke. I had no idea it would ever be this intense.

Duke cuddled Nathan close, breathing hard as they came down. It was amazing, Audrey, more than I ever dreamed it could be.

Nathan made a breathless, happy sound, pressing soft kisses all over Audrey's face.

“I love you so much, both of you,” Duke said, his voice raw with emotion. “I never want to let go.”

"You never have to," Nathan promised. "We'll be here for you always. Love you too much to ever let you go."

Not letting you go anywhere, Duke.

Duke nodded and squeezed Nathan tighter before he released his grip. “Was that ok?” He asked, hit by a sudden, uncharacteristic, shyness.

"That was amazing, wonderful, incredible, fantastic," Nathan smiled blissfully, cuddling Duke close.

"It was for us too," Duke tucked himself into Nathan's chest and sighed happily.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Nathan nuzzled his hair. "God, I've wanted to make love to you for years."

“Same, Nate, almost since I met you.”

"Back when I was just some asshole realtor trying to sell your beloved home to pretentious house-flippers?” Nathan grinned.

"Yup. You might have been an asshole but you were still a hot asshole,” Duke laughed.

Nathan laughed. "You're a funny guy, Duke."

“Yeah,” Duke grinned. “I wasn't exactly joking, though. Always thought you were hot, even when I hated that you were trying to sell the house.”
"You're ridiculous," Nathan said fondly, stealing a kiss.


"You're also really sweet," Nathan murmured, stealing another kiss.

"Mm-hmm," Duke grinned against Nathan's lips. "You're amazing, Nate."

Nathan gave him another kiss, then asked softly and very hesitantly, "Hey, can I….can I ask something of you? Of you both?"

"Anything," Duke answered straight away, Audrey listening intently.

"I've always wanted to fell asleep with you in my arms, and wake up in yours. If it's okay, would you mind staying together just a little longer? Just while I nap?" Nathan said hopefully. "I know it's asking a lot, so I'll understand if you want your independence."

I'd like that too, Audrey thought. I love having you with me, Duke. However long you want to stay for is fine with me.

Duke smiled softly. "Nap away, Nate, I'm staying right here. It's not asking a lot, it's not asking anything. I always wanted to hold you while you sleep."

Nathan reached up and stroked Audrey's cheek, giving them a soft, adoring smile. "I love you both so much," he murmured.

"We love you too," Duke ran his hand through Nathan's hair, lightly scratching the back of his neck.

Nathan made a blissful sound, looking positively about to melt. "Feels amazing," he murmured, yawning.

Duke kept scratching as he kissed Nathan softly. "Sleep Nate, I'll be right here when you wake up, I promise."

"Love you," Nathan murmured, settling down for his nap.

As Nathan's breathing slowed, Audrey reached out to Duke in their mind.

Duke...Nathan asked that of you and now I'm gonna ask more...and you're absolutely free to say no, in fact, I think you will say no, but...would you stay with me while I sleep?

Audrey....

I know, I know you're worried about what might happen, but it's a catnap. We can set an alarm if you're worried, but I'd love to feel you with me while I fall asleep...

Duke hesitated. Ok... we'll try it, but if the slightest thing feels wrong, I'm leaving. I'm not taking any risks.

I know you won't, Audrey told him, full of confidence as she curled up in her mind to nap.

When Nathan woke, it was to the sight of Audrey, fast asleep in his arms and he was momentarily disappointed that Duke hadn't kept his promise. Until Audrey stirred and, in a small voice, mumbled something -
“Audrey has really strange dreams.”

Nathan laughed, a soft, joyous sound. "Hi, Duke," he murmured lovingly, hugging his lovers close.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

The smutty epilogue...

Chapter Notes

So Yume wrote some lovely words about what sex in the afterlife might be like. We thought you guys might appreciate a little more...detail...but they were too good not to include:

*Reality became layers, sliding over each other as smooth as glass. Nathan felt Duke inside him at the same time he felt himself slide into Duke, their mouths around each others lengths, hands on skin everywhere, every constellation of bodies he could imagine. But in all the layers, one thing was constant - love.*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When they arrived in the afterlife, all of their friends and family were there to meet them. Dwight, Bill and Meg, and Brenda, the older lady from the big Victorian house that Nathan had sold her, who wrapped Duke up in a great big hug and kept telling him how pleased she was to see him.

Garland pulled Duke off to the side to explain that after he died, he tracked down Duke’s parents and that - while he didn’t want to say much - they weren’t here and never would be. Duke nodded his thanks and accepted Garland’s awkward, one-armed, hug before Garland told him to go and meet Nathan’s mother.

Elizabeth bustled out, drying her hands on a teatowel that Nathan recognised as one from his childhood and offering apologies for not being there to meet them when they first arrived - she’d wanted to get a cake ready to welcome them but the icing had taken forever and it was so good to finally see them. She hugged them each in turn, telling Nathan how proud she was of him and thanking Audrey and Duke for loving him and taking care of him, and that she knew what they’d all been through and that they were to go with her and let her look after them now.

Nathan found some closure in meeting people that he hadn’t been able to save on his paramedic calls, who said that they appreciated everything he’d done to try to save their lives. Audrey received thanks from victims of killers she’d brought to justice - even the one she had failed to do so, the one she’d never forgiven herself for. Duke, who hadn't expected much of anyone to be waiting for him, found person after person coming up to him to thank him for the lifeline his free meals had been.

Eventually, they were able to make their escape, feeling loved and happy but in need of some time to themselves.

Their home was waiting to welcome them, big and beautiful and beloved as ever. As they walked through it up to their room, they noticed that things seemed to shift subtly throughout the long
years they'd owned the place, even into decor and furniture that Audrey and Nathan didn't recognize, which Duke explained was from his own original remodel back when he'd been alive and his life was good.

The bedroom was warm, softly lit, with the biggest bed any of them had seen and plenty of pillows and blankets.

It was, in a word, perfect.

Nathan turned and grinned at Duke. "Told you you'd get into heaven," he said fondly.

"Yeah," Duke said quietly. "Kinda think you two had a lot to do with that though."

Audrey wrapped her arms around him and nestled into his chest. "Nope, you were always a good person, Duke. You deserve to be here and you would have done even if you'd moved on all those years ago."

"Absolutely," Nathan agreed, embracing them both and leaning in to kiss Duke softly. "It's not every person who can come from such a bad start and turn it into something good the way you did."

"Maybe," Duke said, settling into their contact. "Whatever. It's so good to be here with you both."

Nathan leaned in and stole another kiss. "You're so gorgeous, Duke. Is it bad to want to have sex in heaven? Because I really, really want to explore absolutely every inch of your body."

"If it's bad, then I'm bad too," Audrey grinned. "Because I have every intention of following through on that thought."

Duke kissed her softly. "Then we should all be bad together," he grinned wickedly.

Nathan kissed Duke again, more passionately this time. "There are so many things I want to do with you. I want to taste you, I want to feel you inside me, I want to take you, I want to kiss every inch of you."

"I want all of that too, Nate. With both of you. I want to experience everything possible and never let go of you both," Duke squeezed them both tighter, his hand stroking Audrey's back as he nuzzled into Nathan's hair.

Nathan grinned at Audrey. "What do you say we get rid of his clothes and then find every last sensitive spot on his body?"

"I think that sounds like a very good plan," Audrey returned his grin and dragged Duke down for a long, intense, kiss.

Duke kissed her back, soaking up the sensations that were so familiar but so different now he was back in his own body. "You two are gonna drive me crazy, aren't you?"

"Absolutely," Nathan grinned wickedly as he kissed down Duke's neck and nibbled at his ears. "I can't wait to see where else that goatee feels different."

"I'll make sure you get to feel it all over," Duke promised.

"And me?" Audrey’s eyes twinkled.

"And you," Duke grinned and kissed her again.
"You two look so good together," Nathan said happily, beginning to unbutton Duke's shirt.

Audrey helped him with the buttons and stepped behind Duke so she could pull his shirt off. She dipped her head to press soft kisses to his shoulders. "I really think you two should kiss, give me a bit of a show," she grinned.

Duke shivered under her touch and smiled at Nathan. "What d'you say, Nate? Are we gonna give the lady what she wants?"

"Hell yes," Nathan murmured, devouring Duke with his eyes. He couldn't resist reaching out to run his hands down Duke's chest. "God, you look amazing, can't believe we finally get to see you," he said as he stepped up to kiss Duke passionately.

Duke returned his kiss, exploring Nathan's mouth with his tongue as he grabbed Nathan's hips to pull him close. "Remember when I once told you that I could get hard just looking at you?" - Nathan murmured his agreement and Duke rolled his hips against Nathan's - "Feel that?" He smirked.

Nathan groaned, returned the gesture and reached for Duke's waistband. "God, I can't wait to get my mouth on you, I have been waiting for this for sixty goddamn years."

"Trust me when I say I can't wait for that either," Duke murmured.

"God you two are hot," Audrey said, her fingernails scraping lightly down Duke's back, making him shiver.

Nathan kissed down Duke's chest, fingers exploring everywhere his mouth didn't reach, only pausing to undo Duke's pants and slide them down. "You're so amazing. I love getting to know your body," he murmured against Duke's skin. "I'm so, so grateful that Audrey let us make love but I've wanted to see you and touch you so much."

Duke nodded, his fingers deftly undoing the buttons on Nathan's shirt and pulling it off him. "It was amazing, sharing with Audrey, sharing with you, but...god, having my own body, having all three of us here...the things I want to do to you both..."


Duke curled his fingers into Nathan's hair and gazed down at him. "I want to kiss and lick and suck every inch of you," he murmured. "I want to feel you writhe beneath me as I fuck you. I want to hear your moans of pleasure, knowing it's me - just me - giving that to you. I want to make love to both of you in every way possible."


Audrey stepped back too, drinking in the beautiful sight of Duke - all long and lean and tanned, the ink of his tattoos flowing across his skin.

"Enjoying the view?" Duke smirked.

"You're stunning, Duke," Audrey said.

"I'm wearing the word out, but you're gorgeous. Those tattoos..." Nathan licked at one that
decorated Duke's hipbone, following the flow of ink, tracing the contours with his tongue.

Duke whined softly and tightened his fingers in Nathan's hair as Nathan's tongue caressed his skin.

"You know, you teased me a lot over the years," Nathan grinned, kissing toward Duke's arousal. "If I weren't so eager to get my mouth on you, I might be tempted to return the favor."

Audrey chuckled softly. "I really want to find out how he sounds when he begs."

"Audrey," Duke whined and glared at her. "Don't give him ideas."

"You make an excellent point," Nathan mused, trailing the tip of his tongue up Duke's length.

"God, Nate," Duke choked out the words and reached out for Audrey, leaning down to kiss her deeply. Her nails across his chest drew a gasp from him.

"You two are gorgeous together," she murmured.

"You know, Audrey," Nathan smiled, pressing soft kisses up and down the stiff length. "My nipples aren't that sensitive but maybe Duke's are?"

Duke groaned.

"I think you might be right, Nathan," Audrey grinned and ran her thumb across Duke's nipple, drawing a soft moan from him.

"You two are going to kill me," he complained.

"Oh, they are," Nathan looked up with an expression of fascination for a moment before swirling his tongue around the head. "Can't wait to try that myself."

"God, Nate, you're so good at…" Duke's words were cut off as Audrey started nipping and kissing at his chest.

"You two taught me well," Nathan grinned, before sliding Duke's length deeply into his mouth.

"Fuck," Duke whispered. "Nate, that feels amazing."

"You have no idea how hot that is to watch," Audrey murmured, leaning up to kiss Duke.

Nathan looked up at them, enjoying the view, and gave a little hum around his mouthful.

Duke made a strangled sound. "Nate," he whined, holding Audrey close.

"Hm?" Nathan's eyes crinkled as he looked up at Duke. He sucked on the hard flesh, rubbing his tongue over the hot skin.

"Don't stop…"

Nathan hummed agreement, reaching up to cup and stroke Duke's balls.

Having both of his lovers touching him was too much for Duke. "Gonna come," he warned.

Nathan hummed and ran his other hand up in the inside of Duke's thigh, not pulling away.

Duke fought to hold back. "Fuck...Nate, you really want that?"
"Mmhmm," Nathan confirmed. He'd thought about this many times when he was alive, and had wondered if he would be comfortable having sex with another man, but now that he was doing it, he had no reservations at all.

“Duke,” Audrey murmured into his neck. “Let us see you come. Let us hear you.”

Duke groaned loudly, one arm wrapped around Audrey, his other hand curled into Nathan's hair, and he came, whispering their names.

Nathan swallowed until Duke was dry, pulling off the softening flesh with a wet pop before standing back up and reaching for Duke.

Duke practically threw himself at Nathan, clinging to him when his legs didn't quite want to hold him up. “You're amazing, Nate, that was so so good, it was incredible and...and hot and...you're amazing.”

Nathan beamed and kissed him tenderly. "Guess I did okay for my first time, then, huh? I'm really glad you enjoyed it."

“Better than ok,” Duke grinned and kissed him hard before turning to Audrey and kissing her too.

“Gotta say, I enjoyed watching that,” she said. “You two make quite the picture.”

"Got plenty more in store for you," Nathan grinned. "But I imagine you and Duke would like a turn."

Audrey smirked. “I wouldn't mind finding out how that goatee feels…”

“Your wish is my command,” Duke grinned. “Although... I am very talented and very coordinated and I really don't see any reason I can't get both of you off together.”

Nathan looked intrigued. "What did you have in mind?"

“Putting it simply, you both lie beside each other on the bed. One of you gets my hand, one of you gets my mouth, swap every couple of minutes…”

“I am totally there for that,” Audrey was already pulling off her top.

"You're gonna kill us," Nathan groaned, undoing his pants.

"Fair's fair, Nate, you've killed me more than once," Duke grinned and enjoyed the sight of them both undressing.

"But we hardly even get to touch you," Nathan sighed. Then he paused and added, "Unless you were lying the other way with your feet up by the pillows."

“Nate,” Duke kissed him softly. “You're amazing and so selfless and considerate. Please let me do this for you both. I just want you to relax and enjoy it.”

"If it's what you want, you know I'd do anything for you," Nathan promised. "But I think I said that wrong. I wasn't talking about getting you off, I didn't even mean sexually, I just...I like touching you. Feeling your skin and your body beneath and knowing you're really there, this is real, I can touch you now. We can still do it your way, no pressure. I just thought maybe I didn't explain it right and you didn't understand what I meant."

“Nathan…” Duke started, then stopped as he wrapped his arms around them both and pulled them
close. He kissed each of them in turn. “Everything you've both done for me over the years has been amazing, incredible, perfect. But I haven't been able to give much back to you. Not without borrowing one of your bodies, anyway, and it's...it's not the same. This is me. I'm here and I'm real and I'm solid and I want to make both of you feel good. I want to see the pleasure on your faces and know that it's me - just me - who's giving that to you.”

Audrey pulled him down for a kiss. “Duke, you don't owe us anything. You gave us so much, you don't need to worry about giving anything back. We just don't want to let go of you. Not even for a minute.”

Duke brushed his fingers across her cheek and smiled. “I know, I don't want to let go of both of you either. But the way you both touch me, it feels amazing and it'll be a distraction, even if you don't mean it to be, and I don't want that. I want my absolute focus to be on you two. Can you let me do that?”

Audrey smiled. “When you put it like that, how can I refuse?” She said softly.

Duke nodded and kissed Nathan gently. “Nate? I promise we'll snuggle for hours afterwards, you can touch me and hold me and kiss me for as long as you want, I just want to do this for you.”

"Anything for you," Nathan smiled and kissed him softly.

“Thanks,” Duke said quietly. He turned to Audrey and, with a grin, unclasped her bra with his usual one handed move that never failed to make her laugh. He knelt at their feet to help them finish removing their jeans and underwear, gazing up at them. “You two are so beautiful,” he murmured.

"You are too, Duke. Know I keep saying it, but I just can't get over it. Could look at you forever and not get tired of it."

Duke smiled, soft and sweet as he ran a hand up the outside of Nathan's thigh, his other hand mirroring the movement on Audrey's thigh. “We have forever.”

Audrey threaded her fingers through Duke's long hair, lightly scratching his head in the way she knew he loved. “And I'll cherish every moment I spend with you both.”


“Every moment, every second. I never want to be apart from you,” Duke practically purred under their gentle touches before getting to his feet with cat-like grace.

"Me either," Nathan agreed, pulling him in for another kiss.

Duke kissed him thoroughly, then leaned down to kiss Audrey just as deeply. “Lie down,” he murmured, waiting while they both got comfortable before he joined them, kneeling at the foot of the bed in between them.

Audrey let out a quiet sigh as his lips touched her ankle, slowly moving up the inside of her leg, just a slight tickle coming from the soft hair of his beard. Beside her, Nathan echoed her sigh as Duke's hand slowly teased up his leg. Shifting her weight slightly, she leaned over to kiss Nathan. “Bet you're glad to see me back in this body,” she joked. “Few less grey hairs and wrinkles.”

Nathan kissed her softly, drawing back afterward with a serious expression. "You never stopped being beautiful to me. From the moment I first set eyes on you until I closed them forever, I never looked at you without thinking you were the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.”
Duke murmured his agreement into Audrey's thigh, slowly working his way upwards with soft, teasing, kisses as his fingers did the same on Nathan's thigh.

Audrey grinned and gave Nathan a playful nudge. “Now who's the smooth talker?”

Nathan blushed. "Just the truth," he insisted.

“Maybe, but it still sounds like a Duke Crocker line to me.”

Duke stopped what he was doing and looked up at them both, a serious expression on his face. “It's the truth, Audrey. And I am very upset that Nathan is stealing my lines.” He glared at Nathan for a moment before smiling and dropping his head to kiss Nathan's thigh this time.

"Very funny, you can do so much better," Nathan told him, restlessly spreading his thighs a little.

“Really not, it was a beautiful line for a beautiful lady,” Duke skirted his tongue around where Nathan wanted it most so he could nibble at Nathan's hip bone.

There was a hint of a whine in her voice when Audrey answered. “That was smooth too,” she said. “Now are you two going to keep spouting poetry or are we actually getting on with this?”

Duke grinned. “Like this you mean?” He said as he pressed a kiss to her most sensitive skin, and took Nathan's length in his hand.

Nathan groaned eagerly, his hips arching up into Duke's touch. "Oh my god, Duke, that feels so good.”

Beside him, Audrey was moaning softly, and Duke delighted in the pleasure he was bringing to his lovers. Without missing a beat, he switched his focus - his fingers now on Audrey as he slid his mouth down around Nathan.

Nathan made a choked sound, his fingers twining in Duke's hair.


Duke murmured his agreement around Nathan. He let their pleasure build slowly, teasing them the way he knew they enjoyed, switching his attention between them, listening to their every sound and knowing it was all for him.

Audrey came first, bucking against Duke's tongue as she clung to Nathan, calling out their names. “Oh my god,” she panted.

Duke smiled up at her and rested his hand on her hip as he switched his focus to Nathan - no longer teasing, but sucking hard.

Nathan cried out in pleasure and shifted his hands to Duke's shoulders, kneading and squeezing impatiently.

Still breathless, Audrey snuggled into Nathan's side and nuzzled the sensitive spot on his neck. “Look at him, Nathan. Isn't he gorgeous, his lips wrapped around you like that,” she brushed Duke's hair away from his face. “He loves you - us - so much.”

Nathan whimpered, pushing at Duke's shoulders frantically.

Duke gently pushed his hands away, humming a sound around Nathan, wordlessly telling him not to worry.
“Relax, Nathan,” Audrey murmured. “He's got you.”

Nathan gave a long, low moan, spilling into Duke's mouth.

Duke swallowed every last drop before he pulled off, grinning as he flopped beside Nathan and pulled them both close.

Nathan lazily rolled over and threw an arm and a leg over Duke, wrapping himself around his lover. "You're incredible."

“Nah, I'm just Duke. But I will take 'good at sex','” he smirked.

Audrey wrapped herself around Nathan, linking her fingers with Duke's where they rested on Nathan's hip. “Compromise? Incredible at sex?”

Duke laughed. “I'll take it.”

"Mm, accurate,” Nathan said happily, snuggling his lovers. "That was just….amazing, so different, your goatee, and your hands are so much bigger, I never realized it would be such a difference."

“I'm glad you both enjoyed it,” Duke smiled. “And that apparently I haven't lost my touch.”

“You definitely haven't,” Audrey squeezed his hand. “It was fantastic.”

"Not lost it in the least, think you turned me to mush," Nathan grinned. Although a pleasant lassitude filled his body, he didn't feel the need to sleep like he usually would.

“Nah, you're still speaking in coherent sentences,” Duke grinned. “Clearly I need to try harder next time.”

"It's not that you weren't amazing, I'm just not as sleepy as usual," Nathan reassured him earnestly.

“That's not a bad thing,” Audrey nudged him playfully with her knee. “Maybe we can actually do some snuggling without you napping and snoring on us.”

"Sorry,” Nathan smiled sheepishly.

Audrey cuddled up closer to him and buried her face in his neck. “Just teasing you. The napping is cute.”


"Not like you'll have any shortage of either,” Nathan smiled.

Duke nodded as it began to really sink in that this was truly forever - he never had to let go or step back. He was real and he was here and he existed.

"You okay?” Nathan asked softly. "You look a little overwhelmed.”

“I'm fine,” the easy lie slipped off Duke's tongue.

Audrey raised her eyebrow at him and he sighed.

“No, I am, really. It's just... I spent more years as a ghost than I did alive and I'm still getting used to being real again. No matter how much you both tried to tell me I was real then, I wasn't and I
knew it and now I am and it's...a lot.”

"You weren't corporeal. You were always real," Nathan said gently, kissing him. "We didn't love you any less for it, and we don't love you more now because you're physical. Not even possible to love you more'n we already do."

In a flash, Audrey moved so she was behind Duke, sandwiching him in between them. She wrapped her arms around him and held him tightly, dotting soft kisses along his shoulder before she nuzzled into his hair. “We love you, Duke, so much. We always have. It's not about this body, as gorgeous as it is, it's about you and what a beautiful spirit you are.”

Duke smiled softly and shifted in their arms to kiss them both. “I love you both, too, and I never doubted that you believed I was real, you've never left me in any doubt about how much you love me. But there was something missing for me. Something in the way I saw myself that made me less complete, and there was always a nagging worry that I might just... disappear one day, that that’s what hell was - to give me everything I ever wanted and to snatch it away again. Not a day went by that that thought didn't cross my mind. And now... Now I'm whole again and... It's sinking in that I never have to worry again and... I'm me again and I never have to go anywhere or let go of you and it's just a lot to take in.”

Nathan hugged Duke fiercely, hating to think of Duke's heartbreaking worry. "Never letting you go, not even if I'm dragged down to hell."

Audrey’s hug was just as fierce, her heart shattering as she realised that he’d never mentioned it, had hidden it from them even in his thoughts. Protecting them. “Well, it's never gonna happen now...but I’m never letting go of you either, no matter what.”

“Thanks,” Duke said quietly. “Sorry for bringing the mood down, I seem to be pretty good at that,” he added ruefully.

"You didn't and you're not," Nathan insisted. "We love you. Always have, always will. Every day for the rest of eternity."

“And that means eternity, now,” Audrey pushed the point home. “Not ‘for the rest of our lives’. For eternity. You’re here. With us. Forever.”

“Yeah,” Duke smiled. “Nowhere else I’d rather be. Except…” - his smile became a wicked grin - “Maybe we can drop the mushy stuff and get back to the sex?”

Nathan laughed. "That eager to get your dick in me?"

“That and to watch your face while I fuck you.”

"What are you waiting for then?” Nathan smiled.

Audrey grinned into Duke’s neck. “Yeah, Duke, what are you waiting for? I’m hoping for a show here.”

Duke let out a soft moan and pushed Nathan back onto the bed, kissing him hard.

Nathan returned the kiss enthusiastically, panting when they broke for breath. "Let's give her a good one. Can't wait to feel you in me."

“God, Nate,” Duke groaned. “I’ve waited a long time to hear those words from you.”
"Sixty goddamn years," Nathan agreed, running his hands down Duke's chest. "Sixty years of thinking about it, wanting it, wondering how it'd feel."

"Since I first laid eyes on you," Duke murmured, using his knee to part Nathan’s thighs.

"And now you get to," Nathan pulled him in for a kiss.

"Tell me if you want me to stop," Duke shivered in anticipation and began to slowly ease his way into Nathan, feeling the way he opened up around him, exquisite, soft, warmth. Nathan moaned low in his throat at the feel of Duke inside him, hot and hard and thick. "God, Duke, so good."

"Nate…” Duke’s voice was hoarse with raw emotion as he started to move, slowly and carefully.

"Always wanted this, always. Wanted to be with you, feel you, show you how much I love you," Nathan held him close, kissing him tenderly.

Duke kissed him back, gentle tenderness giving way to insistent passion, nipping at Nathan’s bottom lip as he moved inside him.

Nathan groaned and wrapped his legs around Duke's hips. "So good, Duke, want to do this for you too, want to make you feel this good."

"I want that too, Nate, so much," Duke murmured.


Duke shuddered with the effort of holding back, still trying to keep things slow and gentle.

"Duke, you don't have to hold back, I want to feel you come in me, go ahead," Nathan encouraged breathlessly.

Duke shook his head. "Don’t want to hurt you if I go too fast."

"Don't think you even can," Nathan grinned.

"Fuck," Duke whispered, picking up his pace to fuck Nathan hard, driving him into the bed, the way he’d always dreamed of.

"Yeah, just like that, it's so good, Duke," Nathan slid his hands down, grabbing Duke's ass.

"Oh god, Nate," Duke whined and shifted his weight to reach between them and take Nathan in his hand.

Nathan moaned and arched, clenching down on Duke. "So close, Duke!"

Duke cried out as his orgasm hit, a wave of pleasure rolling through him, the motion of his hand barely faltering.

Nathan felt it and shuddered as Duke's pleasure triggered his own, his body hot and tight around his lover.

"Nathan…” Duke whispered, falling forwards and burying his face in Nathan's neck.

"Love you so much," Nathan murmured, cuddling him close. "That was amazing, beyond
amazing, unbelievable, incredible."

“It was perfect, Nate, everything I'd ever dreamed of and more,” Duke murmured, reaching out for Audrey as she snuggled against them.

She kissed them each in turn and brushed Duke's hair away from his face. “It was beautiful to watch,” she smiled softly.

"You okay?" Nathan asked her quietly. "We didn't mean for you to feel neglected or anything."

Audrey cupped his cheek in her hand, running her thumb across the soft skin as she smiled at him. “You're so selfless, Nathan, so considerate. I'm good, I don't feel neglected or anything else bad. I meant it, you two are beautiful to watch, the way your love for each other shines through. All those times you've watched me and Nathan together, Duke, I can...see the appeal.”

Nathan smiled and turned his head to kiss her wrist. "We love you too, Audrey. So much."

"Never doubted it," Audrey smiled.

Duke ran his fingers through her hair. “Good. I don't ever want you to doubt it. Not even for a single second. We love you, more than there are words for.”

“I love you both too,” Audrey said softly. “Now can you please stop worrying about me, I'm not going to break because you two made love. And just for the record, I'd be more than happy to watch you two together any time.”

Nathan chuckled softly. "No doubt there'll be plenty of times to watch. And I'll second that."

“I kinda like being watched, feeling your eyes on me...it's hot,” Duke smirked.

Audrey nudged him playfully. “You would.”

Duke raised his eyebrow. “Oh, and you're trying to tell me you don't? Because I've seen the look on your face when you know you're being watched and...you definitely seemed to be enjoying it.”

Audrey grinned. “Fine, guilty as charged, I have an exhibitionist streak.”

Nathan grinned. "Wouldn't mind indulging both your streaks."

Duke smirked again. “It'd be like the ultimate tease for you, wouldn't it? Watching me and Audrey together and not joining in. Maybe we should tie your hands so you can't touch, even if you want to.”

"God, Duke, are you trying to kill me?" Nathan groaned.

“I think he likes that idea,” Audrey grinned.

"Been a long time since you tied me up. Might be I miss that," Nathan grinned back.

“It's been a while, hasn't it?” Audrey leaned in to kiss him as Duke rummaged in the bedside drawer, emerging triumphantly with a silk tie dangling from his fingers.

"Says some things about heaven that it's still there," Nathan laughed.

“Mm-hmm,” Duke murmured against Nathan's skin as he kissed his way to Nathan's wrists and secured them to the headboard. He checked the tightness and whispered into Nathan's ear. “Tell
me if you're not ok.” He waited for Nathan's answering nod before he sat back on his heels.

Audrey grinned at Nathan. "You're ours now," she murmured, kissing him lightly - so lightly it was barely a kiss - before she pulled away, amused when Nathan lifted his head to try to follow her.

And then Duke's lips were on hers, insistent, claiming her as they kissed beside Nathan - close enough that they occasionally brushed up against him, drawing soft whines of frustration from him.

"I've wanted to do this for so long," Duke murmured, his hands and lips caressing every inch of her skin.


They explored slowly, taking their time to let pleasure build within them, soft movements becoming more frantic until Audrey pushed Duke down beside Nathan. She straddled him, leaning forwards to hold his wrists above his head as she kissed him once more.

"Audrey," he whined, bucking his hips towards her, seeking contact.

"Duke," she grinned mischievously. "Something you want?"

"Yeah, you," he growled.

"What do you think, Nathan? Should I fuck him?"

"Please, Audrey," Nathan strained toward them.

Audrey trailed her finger down his chest, stopping just short of where he most wanted her to touch and grinned. “Something you want as well, Nathan?”

Nathan whimpered pleadingly.

Duke reached out and ran his hand up Audrey’s thigh.

“You’re being so patient, Duke,” she took his hand and brought it to her mouth to kiss his palm. “So good and patient. Can you wait a little longer?”

He nodded and closed his eyes, biting his lower lip.

“Good,” she smiled down at him. “Nathan, what do you want?”

"I want to watch you, I want to feel you, I just want you both so much," Nathan begged.

“Well, seeing as Duke’s being so good and you asked so nicely…” Audrey grinned. She sank down onto Duke in one fluid movement, taking him deep inside her.

He groaned loudly. “God, Audrey.”

She leaned down to kiss him and pulled him up into a sitting position. “Thought this would give Nathan a better view,” she said, letting out a soft gasp as Duke’s tongue found her nipple.

"You're both so gorgeous, so beautiful," Nathan said breathlessly.

“Did you hear that, Duke? He thinks you’re gorgeous, beautiful. You’re so good, Duke, we love you so much,” Audrey kept up a litany of praise as she rode Duke slowly, her fingers tangling in
his hair, gently encouraging him to look at her.

Duke gazed into her eyes, seeing her love for him written all over her face, and knowing without a shadow of a doubt that it was aimed at him. “Audrey…God, I love you both so much,” he murmured, shifting his weight so he could flip them.

Audrey laughed softly as she went with him, ending up with her head resting on Nathan’s chest as Duke continued the slow and steady pace she’d set.

Nathan whined softly, wanting to touch her, wanting to touch them, wanting to kiss them.

Duke grinned and leaned down to whisper in Audrey’s ear.

She laughed and nodded. “Faster, Duke.”

He obliged her, picking up the pace until they were both breathless before he reached between them and she gasped as his fingers found the right spot, pleasure building until she came around him, carrying him over the edge with her.

“God, Audrey,” Duke breathed. “That was…you are…incredible.”

“Amazing,” she smiled happily.

Nathan watched them with soft eyes, happy and aroused and loving.

“Stay there,” Audrey told him as they moved so she was on one side and Duke on the other. Moving in tandem, they pressed soft kisses, all the way down his body, pausing to nip gently at his hip bones.

“Oh god, that feels so good, I want to touch you, please,” Nathan begged.

“What do you think, Duke?” Audrey licked a long, slow, stripe up Nathan’s length. “Should we untie him?”

Duke copied her, licking his own stripe and running his tongue around the head. “Sure you wouldn’t rather we kept doing this, Nate?” He licked again.

Nathan arched, his head tossed back. “You're killing me,” he groaned.

“We could always stop…” Audrey grinned.

"God no, don't stop," Nathan burst out.

“Ok,” Audrey murmured.

They took it in turns, licking and sucking and stroking, giving Nathan as much pleasure as they could.

Nathan writhed in his bonds, hands clenching at empty air, whimpering and begging openly.

Duke sank his mouth down around Nathan as Audrey kept talking.

“You look so good like that, Nathan, and I love hearing you beg. You’ve been so patient, so good for us, now I want to see you come.”

Nathan shuddered, the words alone enough to tip him over the edge.
Duke swallowed and hurried to untie him, kissing his wrists.

Unlike in life, there was not even a red mark on Nathan's wrists, no ache in his shoulders. He wrapped an arm around each of them, kissing them both contentedly.

Audrey tucked herself against him, snuggling into his chest as Duke did the same on the other side.

“Ok?” Duke murmured.

"Perfect," Nathan said happily, nuzzling their hair. "Could spend the rest of eternity just like this and be happy as a clam."

“I think we all could,” Audrey grinned.

Duke nodded. “Do you think we need to sleep here?”

Nathan considered that. "I don't actually feel sleepy. I feel like I could sleep, though. I bet that sleep here is deep and full of amazing dreams and you wake up beautifully refreshed."

“You have no idea how good that sounds,” Duke sighed.

"Did you never get any rest when you stayed joined with us while we slept, all those years?" Nathan asked softly.

“No...it was...I dunno, guess I was scared that if I did, I might not wake up again. I might just disappear. Not like I even needed to sleep, so I just stayed there, watched your dreams, there if you had nightmares...”

"I never did, once you started staying with us while we slept," Nathan said softly. "Not one single one."

“I didn't either,” Audrey said. “I didn't make the connection til now but you're right, Nathan, not once while Duke was with me.”

“I'm glad,” Duke said softly. “Guess even nightmares are scared of ghosts.”

Nathan combed a hand through his hair. "Even when you were staying with Audrey instead of me, I was never afraid. I was so sure that you would keep me safe that nightmares just...never happened."

Duke leaned into the contact. “You were always safe with me. I wouldn't have ever let anything happen to either of you, or to the kids, or grandkids.”

"I never doubted it. Remember when there was that carbon monoxide leak and none of us could wake up, and you saved everyone?"

Duke shuddered and Audrey clutched at his hand. “Fuck, that was terrifying. I knew there was something wrong. I was with Nathan that night and it just didn't feel right and then I couldn't wake him up and...” he trailed off, the memories of that night still painful to think about.

Nathan hugged him tight. "And you got us out," he said, gently but firmly. "Even though we couldn't wake up, you walked us all outside, you even had us pick up the dog and cat on our way out. You saved us all, Duke."

“You did that, Duke,” Audrey squeezed his hand. “You got us all out, you called 911 so we could get checked out but you caught it early enough that we didn't need anything more than some O2
and observation for a day. You saved our lives.”

Duke shifted awkwardly. “Yeah...guess things could've been a lot worse. I'd never let anything happen to you. Any of you. And I need to find out if we can go back and visit, watch over the kids, grandkids, great grandkids if they come along.”

"I bet we can stop in from time to time, or at least watch what's going on down there. But I feel like...like we shouldn't dwell too much. Like we've moved on and that's as it should be," Nathan struggled to explain.

Audrey nodded. “I think we should pop back, let them know we're ok and we'll be here for them when their time comes, but they have their own lives to lead and I kinda feel like we shouldn't interfere with that…”

Duke was silent as he thought through what they'd said. “Yeah,” he said eventually. “I guess I've been a ghost for so long that I can't remember what it's like to...not be.”

Nathan kissed him softly. "Well, what grown kids want their parents around all day every day?” he smiled. "I agree that they'd probably like to know we've moved on and are happy, but day-to-day I'm sure they'd much rather we stay up here and wait for them."

Duke smiled. “I think you're right. And hopefully we'll be waiting a long time for them.”

"Hopefully, but if not then we'll be waiting to welcome them and they'll be happy forever after," Nathan said.

“Yeah,” Duke smiled and changed the subject. “Hey, d’you think it's possible to get drunk here? Because I am really looking forward to that.”

Nathan laughed. "I bet you can, and I bet you don't get hangovers."

“No hangovers? That's it, where's the wine?” Audrey demanded, glancing round the bedroom as if there might be a bottle that she hadn't noticed (which was entirely possible, given that she'd been thoroughly distracted until now).

More than a bottle - along the side wall was a small but handsomely furnished bar that definitely hadn't been there in real life.

Duke let out a squeak of excitement and bounced out of bed to examine the different bottles. He turned back to them, grinning. “So what can your friendly naked bartender get for you to drink?”

"Just a beer for me," Nathan chuckled.

“A beer? A world without hangovers and you want a beer?” Duke said incredulously. “Ok, counter suggestion. We take it in turns to do shots off each other.”

“Body shots? I haven't done that since Quantico,” Audrey grinned.

Nathan's brain all but short circuited at the thought. "Well clearly it's unacceptable that other people have done body shots off you when I haven't," he responded without thinking.

"Oh? 'Unacceptable'?” Audrey raised her eyebrow and Duke tried to make himself invisible.

"...Or there's a really good bottle of scotch here," he said quietly, regretting his decision to mention body shots. Should've led with the whisky.

"Nuh-uh, you don't get away with it that easily. What exactly did you mean by 'unacceptable', Nathan?"

"Just meant I hated missing out on so much of your life," Nathan mumbled. "Wish I coulda been with you then, known wild young Parker as well as I know the amazing woman she grew up to be. Those guys who did body shots off you, they had a chance I never did. Wasted it, too - which I'm glad of, though it makes 'em idiots."

"Nathan..." Audrey said softly as she curled herself against him. "The guys...and girls...who did shots off me, they never stood a chance. I was young and stupid and spending too much time partying instead of working. I could never have made a relationship work back then, not like we have. So no regrets, it's a fun memory, nothing more. Let's leave it in the past."

"Or," Duke said, spinning a bottle between his fingers and grinning wickedly. "Or, we could just make new fun memories and give Nathan a taste of wild young Audrey and wild child Duke."

Nathan blushed again. "Pretty sure they'll both find boring young Nathan uninteresting. Never went through that phase myself. No alcohol, no tobacco, no drugs, just studying and good behavior. Loosening up is...not really my thing."

"Ok," Duke said easily, with a little shrug of his shoulders as he turned away. He picked up a bottle of beer for Nathan, poured Audrey a glass of wine - and a large whisky for himself, which he downed in one before he poured another and carried all three drinks back to the bed.

"Sorry to ruin the fun," Nathan said quietly. "I....wasn't saying no, I just figured I'd be too boring for anything like that."

"You didn't ruin anything," Audrey said firmly, leaning in to kiss him softly on the cheek.

"Agreed," Duke nodded. "But just for the record, nothing involving alcohol and your tongue would ever be boring."

"Can't deny there's some appeal to the idea," Nathan mumbled, his face a handsome shade of pink.

"Could be a lot of fun," Duke said, before draining his second whisky (and god that was good, he'd missed the taste, the burn as he swallowed). "No pressure from either of us, but I did happen to notice there's a bottle of butterscotch schnapps over there and I'm at least reasonably convinced that it would taste... delicious...being licked off Audrey. And you."

Audrey nudged him with her heel and leaned in to kiss Nathan. "Duke's right, there's no pressure here. You're not ruining anything and you aren't boring. If the idea appeals, then we can do it some other time. I'd like to, it'd be fun and wild young Parker is very enthusiastic about initiating young Nathan into the delights of body shots - if and when he wants to."

Nathan leaned over and kissed them both. "Would like to try that. And pretty sure most anything would taste good licked off you, but butterscotch especially." A thought occurred to him, and he grinned. "Wonder if we could use honey in bed without it making a god awful mess this time."

"No, Nate, just no," Duke said as he stood up to pour himself another whisky. "Honey is never coming in the bedroom again. Not after last time."
“Chocolate syrup, then?” Audrey grinned.

"With whipped cream?” Nathan added hopefully.

Duke rolled his eyes. “You and your sweet tooth, Nathan,” he grumbled goodnaturedly. “The way things work round here, there’s probably some in the fridge but one of you’ll have to go find out because I have some serious drinking to do.” He poured another glass of scotch and took the bottle back to bed with him.

Nathan lifted an eyebrow, his expression worried. "Do I have to be glad that alcoholism probably isn't a thing here?"

“Nope. It’s been a long time, that’s all. I’ve missed it.”

"Fair enough. Guess that's about the one thing you never really got to experience through us,” Nathan mused.

Duke nodded. “Probably not a bad thing, I always did drink too much.”

"And since I had no tolerance to speak of, you've probably have tried to enjoy a couple glasses of whiskey and suddenly I'd have been sick as a dog."

“Yeah, that and you’d have coughed and spluttered and complained about how bad it tastes,” Duke laughed.

"Probably would have choked on it. Never did like the taste of alcohol," he admitted.

Audrey took a long sip of her wine and made a wordless noise of appreciation. “This is great. You should try your beer, Nathan, if it’s like the wine, you’ll just get the taste of the beer without the flavour of the alcohol.”

"Really?” Nathan asked, surprised. He opened the bottle and took a curious sip, his face brightening. "You’re right. It actually tastes good!"

“Drink up, then,” Duke grinned.

Audrey rolled her eyes at him. “Should we have some food with all this alcohol? Maybe something like the aforementioned chocolate syrup and whipped cream?”

"Hell of a taste combo,” Nathan laughed, getting out of bed and checking the mini-fridge in the bar. Obligingly, it was stocked with the aforementioned items.

“Whisky, chocolate and cream…” Duke looked doubtful.

Audrey bounced out of the bed and plucked the items from Nathan’s hands. “So lie down and let us lick them off you,” she grinned at Duke.

Nathan set his beer aside. Who needed beer when he had chocolate and cream and Duke to lick them off?

Duke grinned and settled back onto the bed, his glass of whisky still within reach. “That sounds like a much better plan.”

Nathan ran a hand slowly down Duke's chest. "Where should we put it?” he grinned at Audrey.

“Right...here…” she grinned back, running her thumb across Duke’s nipple and making him whine.
“Chocolate or cream first?”

"Chocolate first," Nathan said decisively. "We can put cream on the other one."

Audrey leaned across Duke to kiss Nathan. “You have the best ideas,” she said, passing him the bottle of chocolate syrup.

Nathan kissed her slowly and thoroughly, knowing how much Duke enjoyed seeing them together.

“You two look so good together,” Duke murmured appreciatively.

"Better when we're with you." Nathan pulled away to kiss Duke just as thoroughly.

Audrey nudged her way in to demand her own kiss which Duke returned enthusiastically. Slightly breathless, she broke away. “Come on then, Nathan, are we doing something with that chocolate syrup or just thinking about it?” She grinned.

Nathan chuckled and poured a dollop of syrup onto Duke's nipple.

Duke hissed slightly at the cold sensation, then moaned softly as Audrey immediately licked it from him, her tongue warm and wet.

Nathan grinned at Duke's reaction, pleased. He added another bit of syrup and leaned down to lick it clean himself, sucking to make sure he got every last drop.

Duke whined. “You two are definitely going to kill me.”

“That’s the plan,” Audrey laughed.

Nathan added a spiral of chocolate leading out from the nipple on Audrey's side. "Work your way inward," he advised with a grin.

Audrey did what she was told, smiling when Duke whined again.

Nathan added more to his side, gently nibbling the sensitive skin.

Duke shivered under the pleasurable sensations. “I really hope you two are gonna let me do this to you.”

“Mm-hmm,” Audrey murmured, continuing licking her way inwards, making sure she got every last spot of chocolate.

"Of course," Nathan added some whipped cream, licking it up happily.

Audrey leaned over to kiss a spot of chocolate from Nathan’s lip. “Missed a bit,” she grinned.

"Can't have that," Nathan murmured against her lips, kissing thoroughly.

“You two,” Duke groaned, sitting up so he could work his way between them.

Nathan chuckled, kissing Duke in turn.

Duke plucked the can of cream out of his hands. “Who’s next?” He grinned.

Nathan took his place lying down, giving Duke an eager grin.

Duke grinned back and - working carefully - squirted the cream across Nathan’s chest to spell out
‘ours’. “What do you think?” He smirked at Audrey.

“Perfect.”

"I love it," Nathan said softly. "I am, you know. Every bit."

“And we're yours, Nate. Don't ever forget that," Duke said quietly.

“Never letting either of you go,” Audrey said, tears glinting in her eyes as she grasped Duke's hand and leaned down to kiss Nathan - squashing Duke's carefully written word as she did so.

Nathan wrapped his arms around them and pulled them close, kissing each of them in turn.

“...And now we're all covered in cream,” Duke laughed.

"So we go shower together, is that so terrible?" Nathan smiled.

“Definitely not,” Duke brushed his fingers across Nathan's cheek. “I get the feeling there's gonna be a bathtub big enough for three…”

"With perfectly hot water that never gets dirty no matter what you wash off," Nathan nodded.

“And scented foam and bubbles and candles,” Audrey was already clambering off the bed to check. She grinned. “Yep. Huge bathtub and a walk in shower. Take your pick.”

"That is a lot of showerheads," Nathan said as he peeked in the shower, impressed. "No more getting cold during shower sex because there's only room for one under the spray."

“Always a bonus,” Duke grinned. "Shower or bath?"

"Tough call," Nathan mused. "I'll let you pick. You know, what really impresses me is that this still looks like our bathroom. The curtains in the window and the morning sun and the tile we chose and the paint that complements it. It's just...better. The bathroom we would have had if we'd been able to."

“Amazing, isn't it?” Duke smiled.

“Bath,” Audrey decided, already turning on the taps and pouring foam into the running water.

"Smells great," Nathan said appreciatively. The bath foam had the scent of a spring day after a light shower, fresh rain and newly cut grass and flowers warmed by sunshine.

Each of them smelled something different. To Audrey it smelled of freshly baked cookies, like the ones Duke had baked for the kids when they were small, and tears rose to her eyes once again.

Duke silently pulled her into his arms, heedless of the cream which was now spread all over them. “Smells like the ocean,” he said quietly.

"Duke," Nathan said softly, wrapping his arms around them both. He knew what the ocean meant to Duke.

"Smells like home," Audrey murmured, leaning into them both.

"You two okay?" Nathan worried.

“Yeah,” Duke smiled softly as Audrey nodded against his chest.
“I’m fine,” she said. “Just remembering the good times.”

“So many good times,” Duke smiled and threw his arm around Nathan’s shoulders to drag him further into the cuddle.

Nathan hugged them tight, relieved that Duke seemed okay. Maybe this place had taken the pain from Duke, allowing him to remember only the ocean as he’d loved it.

“C’mon,” Duke said softly. “We really need to get rid of this cream or I’m instigating a ‘no food during bedroom related activities’ rule.”

"Can’t have that," Nathan said, leading his lovers into the massive tub.

They settled into the warm, scented, water with Duke leaning back against Nathan’s chest and Audrey leaning against his own, his arms and legs wrapped around her as he let out a contented sigh.

Audrey wriggled against him, getting comfortable with her head resting on his shoulder. “This is nice,” she said contentedly.

"It is," Nathan murmured, tempted into nibbling at the nape of Duke’s neck.

Duke tilted his head to give him easier access. “Keep doing that and we’re gonna have to get straight out of this bath and go back to bed.”

"Who says we have to get out?” Nathan bit lightly and then licked the mark he’d made. "Occurs to me we haven't had a Duke sandwich, and look how conveniently we're arranged…”

Audrey grinned and wriggled around to face them. “If I didn’t know better, Nathan, I’d say you arranged that on purpose.”

“Nah, that was me,” Duke smirked.

"You like that idea?” Nathan murmured in his ear, nipping and licking. He slid his hands between them, exploring smooth skin. "Want me to fuck you while you fuck Parker?"

Duke shivered under his touch and felt himself twitch in response. “I think I can safely say that that’s something I very much want.”

Audrey pressed herself against him and kissed him hard. “That makes all three of us then,” she grinned.

"Can’t wait," Nathan murmured, reaching down to stroke Duke’s length. "Want to be inside you, feel what that’s like. Bet you feel so good."  

“I want that too, Nate, want to feel you fucking me, slowly at first, then harder and…” Duke’s words were cut off when Audrey kissed him again, her hand joining Nathan’s, stroking him gently. He brought his hand up, fingers brushing across her nipples, earning him a soft whine.

Nathan moved his hands to Duke’s hips and then back around to squeeze his ass, kneading the muscular curves eagerly.

Audrey’s hands were still on Duke’s length, slipping over the soft skin. She smiled as he threw his head back, resting it on Nathan’s shoulder, and leaned in to kiss down his neck, holding him in place between them.
Nathan's fingers slid between Duke's cheeks, exploring, as Nathan continued to scatter little bites and kisses over the back of Duke's neck and shoulders.

Duke moaned softly. “God, Nate, that feels so good.”

"I'm glad," Nathan murmured, licking the bitten skin. "I want to make you feel good, I love knowing your pleasure is because of what I'm doing."

“I love watching your face, Duke,” Audrey cupped his jaw in her hand and ran her thumb across his cheek. “You’re so expressive, it’s so clear how much you’re enjoying everything we’re doing to you.”

Duke pulled her in for a kiss. “Everything you do, both of you...it feels amazing and I never want it to end.”

"So glad we can do this for you," Nathan licked around the edges of Duke's ears, rubbing his fingers over the tight ring of muscle and sliding one inside, teasingly.

“So good,” Duke choked out the words, shifting his weight to give Nathan more space.

"You want more?" Nathan added another finger, pressing his arousal against Duke's ass.

“No, I want you to fuck me,” Duke’s voice was hoarse with need.

"Tell me," Nathan murmured, twisting his fingers and looking for that spot that had felt so good when Duke had pleasured him.

Duke groaned loudly as he found it.

“God you look good like that, Duke,” Audrey murmured, running her hands over his chest. “Tell us what you want.”

“I want,” Duke panted. “Fuck...I want both of you. I want to feel Nathan inside me, filling me, pushing me deep into you.”

"Your wish is my command," Nathan bit lightly at the nape of Duke's neck as he pulled his fingers out and lined himself up, his hands on Duke's hips encouraging Duke to take what he wanted so much.

Duke pushed back against him, moaning softly as Nathan slid inside him and Audrey murmured sweet words into his ear, telling him how good he was, how much she loved him.

Nathan groaned deep in his throat. "Oh god, Duke, so good, so hot and tight, you feel amazing."

“Nate…” Duke whispered as Nathan filled him, hard and long and thick. “You feel better than I could ever have dreamed.”

"Wanted this for so long," Nathan panted, turning Duke's head to steal a kiss, barely able to wait for Audrey.

“So long,” Duke murmured against his lips.

Audrey climbed into Duke's lap and nibbled at his ear. “You two ready for me?”

"God yes," Nathan said eagerly, admiring the view.
“So ready,” Duke smiled, his hands on Audrey’s hips, helping her to balance as she moved into position.

“You two are so beautiful,” Audrey leaned forwards to kiss them both - first Nathan, then Duke, still kissing as she slid down onto him.

“Oh my god,” Duke breathed.

Nathan made a soft sound of appreciation, his length twitching where it was buried deep inside Duke.

Duke wrapped his arms around Audrey, clinging to her as he dropped his head to bury his face in her neck.

“Hey,” she said softly, her fingers under his jaw, gently tilting his head up to look at her. “You ok?”

His expression was openly adoring as he gazed back at her.

“Yeah. I love you both so much and being connected to both of you at the same time like this...it's special and powerful and emotional.”

She smiled and kissed him softly. “Good. I love you both too and everything we do together is incredible but this, right now, is something on a whole other level.”

"It really is," Nathan murmured. "Will you two do this for me too at some point?"

Audrey leaned across Duke to kiss Nathan. “Of course, a million times yes. Will you two do it for me as well?”

Duke moaned against Audrey’s shoulder. “Yes to both of you. Can’t think of anything better.”

"Anything for you, for both of you, I'd do anything,” Nathan promised, rolling his hips.

Duke let out a choked sound as Nathan moved inside him.

“Good, Duke?” Audrey murmured, clenching her muscles around him and smiling when he could only nod his response.

Nathan grinned at Audrey as he started a slow, deep rhythm. "Let's give him the time of his life."

Audrey grinned back and matched his rhythm, grinding down onto Duke as Nathan pushed him upwards.

Sandwiched between them, Duke could barely move, was entirely at the mercy of his lovers as they gave him pleasure - so much pleasure that all he could do was make soft sounds of enjoyment.

"I love hearing you," Nathan murmured, leaving more kiss marks along Duke's neck. His hands slid around to play with Duke's nipples. "Love the sounds you make when you're deep in pleasure.”

“Nate,” Duke's voice was caught somewhere between a choke and a whine as he pushed back against Nathan, encouraging him to move faster, harder, deeper. He slipped his hand between Audrey's legs, fingers searching for that sensitive spot.

She moaned softly when he found it, her fingers tangling in his hair as she leaned forwards to kiss him. “You're so good at that,” she murmured breathlessly against his lips.
"He's amazing," Nathan agreed, increasing his rhythm in response to Duke's wordless demand. "It's so amazing to be able to do this, I was so grateful you let me make love to him in your body but I love watching his face, hearing his voice, touching his skin…"

“All of that,” Audrey murmured, pausing in her movements as a sudden thought struck her.

“Audrey,” Duke whined in frustration as she stopped.

“You do both know that it wasn’t a case of letting you make love while Duke was with me? That it was just as good for me as it was for both of you…”

“We know,” Duke said, nipping at her shoulder. “Or at least, I do, anyway.”

"I know. And I loved making love to both of you, making you both feel so good all at once,” Nathan assured her. "Just don't ever want you to think I took for granted what you made possible for us."

Audrey nodded. “Good. And I didn’t take it for granted either, when you two were together. It was amazing and I loved every minute of it, the same as I’m loving every minute of having you both here with me.”

“Sharing with you both was...incredible. It’s something I don’t think I’ll ever have words for,” Duke murmured. “But this...being here with you both...yeah, it’s something else entirely,” he paused and wriggled slightly in between them. “Or at least it was, while you were both actually moving.”

Audrey laughed and leaned down to kiss him. “Sorry, Duke, are we teasing you too much?”

“Yes,” Duke pulled her down for another kiss.

Nathan chuckled and resumed his rhythm, nipping at Duke's ear.

“God that’s so good,” Duke breathed the words out, his hands gripping Audrey’s hips.

"You feel amazing Duke, so good, so hot and tight, I could do this forever," Nathan murmured.

“I could too,” Audrey said, pulling Duke’s hand back to where she wanted it the most.

He grinned and obliged her, watching her every reaction as his fingers sought out the right spot, completely focused on her pleasure and rewarded with a soft moan as he found it.

"Love watching you two together, you're so gorgeous," Nathan said breathlessly.

Audrey smiled softly. “I dunno, I think I have the best view. You two are...beautiful and I can watch you both, see how much you’re enjoying it, the pleasure written on your faces…”

"Glad you're enjoying the view," Nathan slid his hands over Duke's skin, reaching up to rub at his nipples.

Duke groaned loudly, his head thrown back against Nathan’s shoulder. “God you two…”

“You look so good like that, Duke,” Audrey murmured, gasping softly as his fingers hit her just right and grinding down on him harder.

Nathan took the opportunity to kiss Duke breathless, his pace picking up further, his fingers teasing the sensitive nub. “Wanna see you come,” Duke,” he panted.

“Don’t hold back, Duke,” Audrey murmured. “I’m close too and I want to feel you.”

“Audrey,” Duke choked out her name, his fingers moving more quickly against her, finding the rhythm he knew she liked best.


Audrey echoed his words, her muscles clenching around Duke, holding him inside her.

With a long, low, moan, Duke came, clinging to Audrey and taking her over the edge with him.

Nathan made a choked sound as Duke’s body tightened around him, drawing his own climax.

Audrey peppered soft kisses over Duke’s face, holding him close as they came down. “You’re both amazing,” she murmured softly, leaning over to kiss Nathan deeply.

“That was... incredible,” Duke sighed. “You two... god, I think you just broke me.”

Nathan laughed softly, nuzzling Duke’s neck and hair happily. "In the best possible way."


"I love you both so much,” Nathan said blissfully, cuddling them close.

Audrey settled herself into him. “I don't really have words for how much I love you both. Words don't seem like enough.”

Duke nodded. “Same, I just can't find the words. I feel like I'm filled with love and I can't describe it and I don't think there's anything I can do to show you.”

Nathan kissed him softly. "I remember being joined with you, feeling your love for me, how amazing that was."

“It really was, Duke. Don’t ever think we don't know how you feel. Your love for me shone through every minute we spent together,” Audrey told him.

Duke nodded, a small smile on his lips as he relaxed into them. “I could feel it from you both, too,” he said quietly. “It helped me believe that I was still...valuable.”

"You were, Duke, you were so loved, so treasured, so precious to us," Nathan murmured, kissing him gently. "It would have broken our hearts if we'd ever lost you."

“I thought about it a few times. Moving on, I mean. When things were tough and I thought it'd be easier on both of you if I...wasn't there and you were a normal couple, a normal family. But I couldn't do it. That connection, with both of you, feeling your love for me in that way... I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, how much it would hurt you if I left.”

Nathan hugged Duke so tight it should have hurt, though it somehow didn't. "Duke....you...” His words choked off in tears.

“I'm sorry, Nate, I shouldn't've said anything,” Duke said quietly.

Audrey stroked his cheek gently. “It's ok, Duke. No more secrets. Seems like you protected us from a lot of your thoughts over the years, stuff you thought would hurt us if we knew. You always
took care of us and now it's our turn.”

"Duke, we love you so much," Nathan said earnestly. "We don't ever want to be without you, we don't ever want you to suffer alone, even if you'd hurt us by telling us. We'd rather share your pain a thousand times over than leave it all on you."

“I love you both too,” Duke said, turning his cheek into Audrey’s hand. “So much. I’m sorry I kept stuff from you, it seemed like it was for the best at the time. Maybe it wasn’t…”

"You did what you thought was best," Nathan kissed him tenderly. "Maybe it wasn't, but that's all in the past now. You can come to us with anything."

“Anything, Duke,” Audrey said firmly. “Whatever you need - if you need to talk something out, or you need to be reminded how wonderful you are. If you need cuddles, or a blanket nest, or comfort food. Anything.”

“Ok,” Duke smiled softly. “I’ll try to be better.”

"And we'll be better about reminding you how much you're loved,” Nathan murmured, kissing him again.

Duke kissed him back, soft and gentle and sweet. “You don’t need to be better at that, you remind me all the time.”

"Then better at reminding you that you're valuable, that you can tell us anything, that no matter what's happening you can come to us and we'll still love you and want you in our lives." Audrey leaned in to kiss Duke. “You mean everything to us, Duke, and I love that you protected us from so much of your pain, but you don't need to anymore, ok? You can just...be.”

Duke nodded. “I’ll try,” he said quietly. “There is something I'd really like…”

"Anything for you," Nathan promised instantly.

“Could we maybe go to bed? Build a blanket nest and... maybe sleep? Because being a ghost for so long... it was kinda exhausting and maybe now I can get some rest…” Audrey cupped his cheek in her hand. “That sounds like a perfect idea,” she smiled. “We can snuggle you all night, in between us, with as many pillows and blankets as you like.”

"You can fall asleep safe and sound in our arms, and wake up in them warm and comfortable and loved," Nathan murmured, getting out of the tub and reaching for the towels to hand to his lovers. They were soft and fluffy and perfectly warm.

“Kinda nice here, isn't it?” Duke smiled as he wrapped a towel around Audrey.

“It's... heavenly,” Audrey couldn't quite suppress a smirk.

Nathan chuckled, and wrapped Duke in another one.

"Heavenly? Really? Audrey, have you picked up Nathan's terrible sense of humour?” Duke gave Nathan an affectionate nudge.

“No, Duke, I've picked up your terrible sense of humour,” she grinned wickedly.

“Well that's just not nice,” he complained. “I mean, accurate, maybe, and probably a well deserved
"dig, but we all know Nathan's sense of humour is worse than mine."

"Yeah, yeah," Nathan chuckled, drying them off, stealing kisses.

Audrey kissed him and nudged him to turn round so she could dry his back. "You make up for it by being sweet, though."

"I try," Nathan said fondly. That his smile was warm and affectionate rather than self-deprecating and uncertain was a testament to how much they'd helped him believe in himself over the years.

Duke pulled him into a close hug and planted a huge, smacking, kiss on his cheek. "It's all the sugar you used to eat, made you extra sweet."

"And rotted out my teeth," Nathan laughed. "Nice to have my own back. Dentures are no fun."

"That too," Duke grinned against his neck and stifled a yawn.

Audrey squeezed her way in between them and rested her head on Duke's shoulder. "Tired, Duke?"

He nodded. "Pleasantly tired, though, if that makes sense. Just...like I'm ready for sleep."

Nathan leaned over Audrey to kiss Duke's forehead. "Then let's get you to bed, love."

Duke smiled softly. "I love it when you call me that."

"Then I'll make sure to call you that every day for the rest of eternity," Nathan smiled gently.

"Come on," Audrey took Duke by the hand and led him back into the bedroom. "We need to cuddle you. Lie down."

She gave him a gentle nudge on the shoulder and he fell, laughing, onto the bed.

"Not getting any arguments from me, I've waited a long time to be cuddled up with both of you."

"Too long," Nathan agreed. "I'm so glad you can be with us fully. I hated seeing you feel like you were any less just because you didn't have a body, even though we never felt that way about you."

Duke twisted to face him. "I know, Nate, I know how much you hated it and how much it hurt you that I felt like that, and I'm sorry that I was never able to get past it."

Audrey curled herself around Duke, her arm thrown lazily across his hip. "It only ever hurt us because it was hurting you, Duke. Not for any other reason. You don't have anything to apologise for."

"Doesn't matter," he said stubbornly. "You were hurting because of me, whether it was intentional or not. So yeah, I have a lot to apologise for and a lot to be grateful for and I'll spend the rest of eternity making it up to you both."

"It does matter," Nathan said, softly but firmly. "You never have to apologize for your pain, Duke. Not then, not now, not ever."

"It matters to me," Duke said quietly, opening his arms to Nathan and patting the bed.

Nathan climbed into bed and wrapped his long arm around his lovers, pulling them close and kissing Duke. "You didn't hurt me, Duke. I only ever wanted you to be happy."
“You’ve always made me happy. Both of you. Since the day I met each of you.”

"And you’ve made us happy, physical body or no. Happier than I ever thought I could be."

“Duke…” Audrey said softly, running her fingers through his hair. “You made us happy every day of our lives and now you’re going to make us happy forever. Just by being you. You don’t have to be anything else and you don’t ever have to worry about anything again. We’re here with you.”

Nathan nodded. "We're here, we love you, and that's not ever going to change, not for the rest of eternity."

“I love you both too,” Duke murmured. “I just…I want to give something - well, everything, really - back to you. You’ve both done so much for me over the years and I know I don’t owe you anything, that you don’t think of it like that, but I want to do something."

"Duke, you have. You've done everything," Nathan said earnestly. "Look, who was it that encouraged me to ask Audrey out, when I never would have gotten up my nerve on my own?"

“And I seem to remember it was you who suggested Nathan become a paramedic,” Audrey added. “Look how happy he was doing that, and how many lives he saved. That was you, Duke.”

“Yeah, no, I know, it’s not like I did nothing, but it doesn’t compare to buying the house, or agreeing to share each other with me, or - god - letting me share your bodies, to come into your minds and to take over. It doesn’t compare to both of you giving me the family I never thought I could have.”

"But you did give us the family we never thought we could have, the perfect family. You did agree to share each of us with the other. You shared your home, your big beautiful home, and made it possible for me to buy it, I never could have done that without you. And how can you talk about possession like some kind of invasion when it was the best thing we ever had? We loved sharing with you, being so close, being able to be together soul to soul," Nathan told him. "You gave us everything."

Duke opened his mouth to argue his point some more but Audrey swatted him and he closed it again.

“Stop it,” she said gently. “You made our whole relationship possible. Everything that we had in our lives was down to you. You have nothing to make up for and you don't have to give us anything back. We’re together forever now and you can just... Duke, you can just be you. ”

“But what if…?” Duke swallowed hard. “What if there are things about me that you decide you can't live with? Like...I drink. A lot. And I have a slight tendency to...not wear clothes around the house. And…”

"And we accept everything that makes you you," Nathan kissed him softly. "We don't have to worry about alcoholism here, and to be honest you not wearing clothes sounds amazing."

“There is definitely not a downside to you not wearing clothes,” Audrey smirked and buried her face in Duke's neck.

“And I sleep til noon and I'm grumpy if I don't have coffee when I wake up…”

“Sleeping til noon sounds wonderful and I'm sure Mr Early Mornings over there will happily bring you coffee as soon as you wake up.”
"Unlimited morning cuddles with my sleepy lovers and bringing you two coffee every day while I watch you wake up sounds perfect," Nathan said happily.

Duke smiled softly. “Sounds pretty good to me too.”

“It'll be amazing, Duke,” Audrey promised.

"You'll be amazing," Nathan smiled and kissed Duke. "Because you always have been."

“You're both amazing too,” Duke relaxed into their contact - his worries not completely gone, but enough that he could settle. Nathan smiled and kissed him softly, running his fingers through Duke's hair. He'd never get tired of that. "We love you so much, Duke."

“Don't you ever forget that,” Audrey murmured.

“I won't,” he promised. “And I know you'll never let me forget.”

“We won't. Not ever,” Audrey tightened her arm around him.

Duke nodded and closed his eyes, knowing he was safe and loved and that for the first time in so many years, he could sleep.

Chapter End Notes

So here we are, at the end of this fic - for real this time! Thank you to everyone who has read and kudos'd and special thanks to everyone who's commented - you rock <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!