Stoppages

by MissMoe

Summary

James Miller is an American pro-footballer living a carefree life of success as the starting tight end for the Denver Broncos. Jean-Louis Lamarck is a young French paleontologist saddled with eidetic memory and an addiction to weed and Catholicism. When their paths cross and re-cross, existential mayhem ensues in a desperate game of love and lust.

[Updates on Tuesdays]

Notes

I wrote this long, rambling, angst-ridden love story in January 2016 as a way to indulge some of my favorite things: humor, tragedy, smut, romance, art, wine, football, baseball, paleontology, hot guys. I know, a very weird mix indeed.

I had posted this story to AO3 in July 2017, but then I accidentally deleted it, so I am reposting it again, chapter by chapter, once a week.
Never Agree to an Interview on ESPN

James fidgeted with his tie, beads of sweat breaking the surface of his forehead as he averted his eyes from the lights and the three cameras pointing at him. He sat perched atop a small stool, the seat a hard overstuffed mushroom cap, the wooden legs spindly like toothpicks. To make matters worse, it wobbled just enough to drive him to distraction. His trimmed-down two hundred forty pounds of rippling muscle and sinew suddenly felt like a real drawback.

“Why the fuck did I agree to do this?” he chastised himself aloud.

He glanced over the shoulder of the woman from makeup patting his face with a parchment tissue and caught Jean-Louis staring back at him from across the set, arms folded over his chest as he stood off to the side in a darkened corner, his expression one of bitterly furious regret. James accepted with despair that he was a dead man and wouldn’t get laid for at least a day or two, maybe even a week, God forbid. Things had been going so swimmingly after his injury and rehab had forced an early retirement almost a year ago. He thought he had broken free of the game but, like all addicts, he couldn’t forgo the adrenalin rush of fame revisited. What idiocy!

ESPN analyst Trevor Mayfield took his seat next to him. His stool was six inches taller so their heads would line up correctly on camera. James noticed that Trevor’s stool didn’t wobble.

“Hey, can I get a different stool?” James asked. “This one’s not—”

“You’re fine, kiddo,” Trevor interrupted with a smile, clapping him on the shoulder as if they were old O-line comrades. “We’re going to kill this one.”

Trevor was fifty-two going on twenty-five by the look of things. Clean-shaven his entire career, he had lately lost his mind and taken to maintaining a two-day’s growth of facial hair. Unfortunately for Trevor, his hair, already painfully thin on top and supplemented with a very obvious weave, came in on his cheeks and chin in a Rorschach pattern of uneven density. It reminded James of the flocked wallpaper in his grandmother’s bathroom with its meandering crazy-quilt texture. The makeup woman brushed some tinted gloss onto Trevor’s lips and then made an ominous move towards James.

“Please don’t,” James begged and defensively jerked his head back. He was uncomfortable enough wearing the suit and tie, not to mention the gel in his hair and the powder on his face like some emasculated, metrosexual wimp.

Trevor seemed disappointed in him, rolled his eyes as if to say, Duh, you fool. “The camera loves it,” he insisted, all basso profondo and smarmy grin. He leaned in close in mock conspiratorial friendliness, veneered teeth gleaming like peppermint Chiclets. “I’ll let you in on a secret: the ladies love to see a man show his more vulnerable side.” Then Trevor winked and it made James want to punch him in the face and send those ivory teeth flying.

Trevor was married with two kids, but everyone in the business knew he batted for the other team. If it were not for his deep radio-quality voice and the fact that his father had been the iconic announcer for a major league baseball team in the NL East during their heyday in the 1980s, it was unlikely he would have risen so far in the world of pro sports broadcasting. His hour-long segment for ESPN, A Look Back in the Life, drew steady and loyal viewership. There seemed to be an insatiable appetite for stories focusing on athletes who had fallen the farthest. The format was always the same: a gravitas laden studio interview with Trevor interspersed with archival photos and grainy video tracing a player’s meteoric rise from scrawny adolescent wannabe to the heights
of pro glory in high definition followed by the inevitable plummet into abject failure of one kind or another, usually self-inflicted. Tearful confessions of drug abuse and wife-beating would be juxtaposed with charming scenes of the offender making pancakes at the stove for the kids, singing in church on a Sunday morning, or taking soul-searching walks with the family dog on the beach at dusk. Good stuff for sure.

They had already spent two days the previous week at James’s sprawling “cabin” in the Denver suburbs shooting faux-candid footage of him riding his ATV on the gravel paths crisscrossing his twenty acres of land, working out in his basement gym, shopping for diapers at the local Costco with his seventeen-month-old twins, Benjamin and Chloe. The children’s mother was represented by a photograph of Jean-Louis’s sister Charlotte posing in a bikini on the island of Capri taken before they had ever met. At one point they had James standing next to the wheelchair in the corner of the garage, a disgusting ploy aimed at tugging at any recalcitrant heartstrings. Even as they shot the footage, James knew it was going to take a miracle for Jean-Louis to forgive him this latest venture back into the public eye. Private and reticent by nature, his errant lover had initially balked at being filmed but relented when James’s mother insisted. Jean-Louis was always a sucker when it came to blond haired women. He was introduced as the children’s uncle, no lie there, and made to appear in a seemingly innocuous family gathering with James’s parents and the kids all huddled around the fire pit roasting marshmallows and acting as if it were just another day in Mayberry. The fact that the twins kept crawling into Jean-Louis’s lap, no mother in sight, made for a pitifully awkward scene.

“And…we are go!”

Trevor’s sonorous voice filled the now quiet studio as he effortlessly read the teleprompter sitting just off-camera. It took a moment for James to hear what he was saying over the roar of the tsunami in his brain. All he could think about was losing Jean-Louis’s favor for good this time, completely blowing it and for what? To sit across from a pair of obscenely glossy lips under the hot lights of media scrutiny? I’m so sorry, baby, so very, very sorry.

“Here you are, coming off of a stellar season where you set team records for total receptions, yards and touchdowns for your position, you have four Pro Bowls under your belt, you’re on the cover of Sports Illustrated for the third time, you’re in the sixth year of an exceptionally lucrative contract, still at the top of your game and then (insert pregnant pause) disaster strikes. Take me through it.”

Trevor stared earnestly into James’s face, eyes like laser beams slicing through the fog of memory, Adam’s apple bobbing at his throat in pensive anticipation.

James followed his lead like one of Pavlov’s dogs and gulped a few times himself before answering. “It was the third game of the season. We were in Seattle playing the Seahawks. Ten minutes into the second quarter I went up and caught a fifteen-yard pass. As I came down, I got hit on two sides, in the ribs and in the legs. Then someone landed on my back when I was down. I remember feeling a weird popping sensation. That was it.”

“Let’s take a look at that,” Trevor panted breathlessly. “I’m sure you’ve watched this replay over and over and wondered what if?”

“No, actually, I haven’t watched it.”

“Too painful to revisit? I should warn the audience that this footage might not be suitable for everyone.” After a brief pause, Trevor continued, reading directly off of a sheet of paper. “You suffered fractures in two lower vertebrae accompanied by compression and partial rupture of the sacral nerves, a very serious and scary injury but, thankfully, not life-threatening.”

“But it left you partially paralyzed and in a wheelchair for how long?”

“After the surgery, I was in a wheelchair for three months, and then on crutches and braces for another four months, all in all, nine months of intensive physical therapy. The people who worked with me at the spinal treatment center in Denver were amazing. They pushed me pretty much every day for nearly a year to get me back to where I can walk on my own and live a normal life again.” He looked gratefully into one of the cameras.

“But your career in pro football is over. All that you’d worked so hard for cut short in an instant. Do you bear ill will towards the sport? The men who inflicted the damage? Do you have regrets?”

“No, no, not at all. First, you have to understand: no one made me play football except me. It’s what I’ve always wanted and I’m grateful to have had the kind of career and success that I’ve had. Second, the guys who hit me were just doing their job. I don’t believe anyone set out to put me in a wheelchair. It’s just the risk you take when you play this game. If you can’t live and play with that risk, then you better get out of the game.”

“Would you feel this way if you were still in a wheelchair, paralyzed for the rest of your life? Would you be so forgiving?”

“You know, Trevor, I don’t go down that road. I look back and I can’t see how I would have done anything differently. If it came to this, then so be it. All I know is I gave it my all. I didn’t cheat the game, my teammates, or the fans. I’m proud of what I was able to accomplish and at this point in my life, I can only look forward to the future and move on from here.”

“Speaking of moving forward, you have kids now.”

“Yep.” The room suddenly felt ten degrees hotter. James was hoping it wouldn’t get personal, but what else could he expect? He would have to tread carefully.

Like a dog on a bone, Trevor went for the marrow. “Two years ago, you met a woman and fell madly in love.”

Here it comes. James had been raised by hardworking, middle class parents who stressed decency and honesty to their sons. He had never had any difficulty upholding their standards until fate dictated that he cross paths again with one of his college tutors, an inveterate stoner and boy genius who proceeded to tear his guts out with no mercy. The lies and appalling actions that came afterward effectively wiped out his previously pristine record. It made him question his sanity and judgment, the things he did for love and lust, especially on a day like this when he had no one to blame but himself.

“I fell in love and I have two beautiful kids to show for it,” James stated. Score a point for honesty. “Unfortunately, things didn’t work out between me and their mother. It happens.” He shot Trevor a threatening look, but Trevor wasn’t giving up so easily.

“She’s a French restaurateur from what I understand. And you met her on a visit to New York, am I correct?”

“Yes.” Fine. You wanna play that game, asshole? I’m giving you the bare minimum.

“Do you still maintain contact…for the sake of the children?”

“Nope.”

“But you are on good terms with her brother, her fraternal twin, I might add. You’re very close to
him, as are the kids, wouldn’t you say?”

What the hell was that son of a bitch getting at? Fucking hypocrite. “Yes, I’d say my kids are close to their uncle.” James cleared his throat and hoped against hope that he sounded cool and collected. “I’m sure your kids are close to their own relatives. Having family to fall back on is always a good thing. But it’s also our job as people in the public eye to protect the privacy of our family members.”

Trevor tried a different approach. “Have you thought about marriage in the future? After all, you are known as one of the most eligible bachelors in pro sports.”

James was getting exasperated. He wanted badly to plaster Trevor’s rouged and lip-glossed face all over the floor, slap that rug off his head. But he did some fancy footwork instead. Suck on this, you goddamn prick!

“Marriage? Hell, yeah!” James enthused. “When I meet the right person, I’ll know it. Try and stop me then!” He smiled into the camera, eyes twinkling.

“Well I’m sure your myriad fans who follow you on Facebook and Twitter would love to know: what would be your ideal woman? It’s a fact that you receive hundreds, if not thousands, of marriage proposals from women, not all of them single, by the way.” Then Trevor added with a salacious smirk, “You even receive proposals from men, too, from what I can gather on social media.”

It was true, and those sadly hilarious proposals always seemed to open with the caveat, “I’m not gay, but…” Whatever. He wasn’t gay either as far as he was concerned. He was just a man hopelessly in love. James shot the camera a corn-fed, aw-shucks, abashed grin, ignoring Trevor’s last comment.

“Well, let’s see.” James made it a point to gaze soulfully off into the distance. “She’d have to be someone who’d be happy to spend a Friday evening at home with me and the kids, a bowl of popcorn and a movie on TV—maybe Aliens or Predator or Tremors—someone real down-to-earth who’s not about money and fame and fancy this and that, and…what else…oh, I know, someone who really enjoys cooking, ‘cause I love to eat.” He figured that should turn off just about everybody on the planet and it put a genuine smile on his lips.

“Whoa there, big guy,” Trevor chuckled. “That doesn’t exactly register high on the excitement meter.”

“Yeah, well, I’m a pretty boring guy, what can I say? I live a very simple life.”

“So, to all you single ladies out there, and all you interested men, be forewarned,” Trevor advised with a wink. “Expect a snooze fest on Friday nights.”

James stood up, being careful to duck under the microphone floating above his head, and wordlessly left the set, not daring to look in Jean-Louis’s direction. Inside he was a seething ball of rage. Nothing would have given him more satisfaction than to rip a new hole into Trevor right then and there, but that would only have ended up on YouTube and gone embarrassingly viral. He made a beeline for the green room where he could calm himself before proceeding with this charade. The room was blissfully cool compared to the hot lights of the set. He considered putting a fist through a wall but thought better of it and cracked open a bottle of water instead, emptied it in four gulps. This was all too soon. He should have waited another year, when all the details of his life wouldn’t matter to a public that would have largely forgotten about him anyway. He had let his ego lead him off the cliff and now, like hapless Wyle E. Coyote, he hung mid-air for the few excruciating
moments before the humiliating faceplant in the dirt. After a few minutes a pimply-faced intern approached and stood nervously in the doorway.

“Excuse me, Mr. Miller. They’re waiting for you on set.”

James took a deep breath and followed the kid back out. As he balanced himself atop the rickety stool, he whispered to Trevor in pseudo-friendly fashion, “So sorry about that, just a little upset stomach. You know, I’d really like to talk about my charity work. Why don’t we get into that, keep it all positive?”

Trevor blinked a few times and then smiled warmly. “Not a chance.”
Jean-Louis's deteriorating health has James worried.

The trip from Los Angeles back to Denver was a clusterfuck of agony that rendered the shafting he endured during the ESPN taping the previous day enjoyable by comparison. The air-conditioning in the car taking them to LAX gave out fifteen minutes into a two-hour crawl through traffic at ten in the morning with the temperature already pushing near ninety degrees. It was the height of a summer heat wave in late July and despite sweating out a good portion of five Dasani bottles of water, James still had to pee. He drained his bladder into an empty bottle in the back seat while Jean-Louis sat slumped beside him in silent misery, sweat rolling off his face and forearms.

“Go ahead and say it,” James sighed, his voice low and apologetic. “You told me not to do it, and I did it anyway. I got what I deserved. Right?”

He reached over and tried to touch his cheek, an olive branch offered with genuine contrition, but Jean-Louis flinched and turned his face away.

“Va te faire foutre,” he muttered. Go fuck yourself.

James laughed, kick in the groin duly noted. After all these years, this was one of only a handful of phrases he understood, solely by dint of use. Jean-Louis had a habit of slipping back into his native tongue when he was pissed or, more and more rarely, in the throes of passion.

“You should have smoked that other joint before we left this morning,” James chided.

A pained groan escaped Jean-Louis’s throat. “You have no idea how much I hate you right now,” he said softly.

They looked at each other, two animals caught in the same trap, too exhausted to gnaw their limbs free. James smiled fondly at him, drank in his beauty and wrath like a man dying of thirst in a desert oasis. They had taken a quiet meal together in their hotel suite yesterday evening after the taping, neither of them very hungry after the long day. Jean-Louis hated LA and was still angry over the media stunt and not in the mood for going out. He smoked a joint and drank a bottle of Sauvignon blanc, leaving his plate of cold poached salmon barely touched. It numbed him enough to let James crawl into bed beside him later that night, smelling of beer and loneliness. James knew better than to try anything beyond a few innocent caresses.

“This is what it’s going to be like, huh?” The car lurched to another full stop, exhaust fumes from a million other vehicles wafting through the open windows and choking the air inside the cabin. “Even if we were the last two people on earth, you’d still punish me.” James shook his head, talking mainly to himself. “I don’t care what you do to me. I will never stop wanting you.”

He took Jean-Louis’s hand and squeezed the slender fingers gently in his battered and scarred fist, remembering the first time he had held him in his arms and how the whole world had collapsed around him leaving nothing of meaning except this one golden boy trembling beneath his touch, the intoxicating scent of his skin and hair, a mouth that reminded James of the summer peaches he
ate as a child. The longing to devour him never ceased. Jean-Louis had once likened sex with him to being mauled by a crazed bear. He had told him so after what James had thought was a first-rate performance on his part but, then again, Jean-Louis had never been particularly sanguine in his role as a bottom. Not that he was lacking in desire or unable to experience pleasure, but their lovemaking had always left James wondering if Jean-Louis merely complied out of pity or if his own skills were truly deficient. No matter. He would have the rest of his life to find a way to please him.

Jean-Louis pulled his hand away and wiped his brow. “I think I’m going to throw up,” he said flatly, laying his head against the backrest.

“For real?” James asked.

“Yes.”

James rummaged around in his carry-on and removed the zip lock bag holding his toiletries. He emptied it and held it open under Jean-Louis’s chin. In another moment, he vomited and then sat back heaving. James put his hand on his forehead.

“You’re burning up. You have a fever.”

“No, it’s just the heat,” Jean-Louis said, eyes closed, hands clutching at his gut. “Goddamn fucking LA.”

James was worried. Jean-Louis’s appetite, light to begin with, had been dwindling for months. James could see and feel the weight being shed off his already slim body. On weekdays Jean-Louis had started going to bed by eight in the evening and despite sleeping longer hours, would wake up dead tired the next morning, barely able to muster enough energy to get through the work day. James wondered if it might be his liver. He drank like a fish after all, but had always maintained a very healthy diet otherwise, pot smoking notwithstanding.

“When we get home, you’re going to the doctor,” James ordered.

They missed their scheduled flight and had to wait three hours for the next available seats. A technical problem saw them grounded on the runway for another hour before they could finally take off, only to fly smack into a wall of turbulence that had Jean-Louis reaching for the barf bag more than once. By the time they arrived home, nearly six hours later than planned, both were fit to be tied. They went straight up to the bedroom, stripping off their sweat-soaked clothes and thinking of ways to murder each other.

Jean-Louis tore off his vomit-stained shirt and threw it at the hamper, livid and shaking with exhaustion and weed deprivation. He walked out onto the balcony wearing just his briefs and lit up a joint, muttering, “Je pourrais te tuer.” I could kill you.

“In fucking English, please!” James shot back. At this point, he didn’t care how long he’d be in the doghouse. “And by the way, it’s not as if you’re the only one who’s been taking it up the ass all day long, so quit your whining.”

James was starving and in an especially foul mood from that alone. If he didn’t get some food in him soon, well, he really couldn’t be held responsible for any ensuing mayhem. He grabbed his phone and stumbled naked into the bathroom, desperate to wash away the stink of jet fuel and frustration as he turned on the water and then speed dialed his favorite pizza joint.

“Yeah, I need two large pies, all meat, no veggies.” As soon as he put in the order, he knew Jean-
Louis would hate it and refuse to eat. “You know what, throw in some mushrooms.” Who says I’m an insensitive jerk who only thinks of himself? He stepped into the shower stall, calling out to Jean-Louis, “Hey, garçon! Get your ass in here!”

Jean-Louis leaned against the balcony railing and reveled in the dry air against his bare skin, took another few drags, in no hurry to get molested in the shower, before he reluctantly pinched off the joint and set it in the ashtray on the nightstand. James was already done washing when he joined him.

“I’ll do your back,” James said, hoping to salvage the rest of the evening. He ran a soapy hand across Jean-Louis’s shoulders and down his spine, feeling each vertebra and rib under his fingers. “I don’t like how much weight you’ve been losing.”

“Then stop annoying me so much.”

“Oh? So this is my fault?” James turned him around to face him and pressed their bodies together, feeling his cock jump to life against Jean-Louis’s flat belly. He went for a kiss but Jean-Louis stopped him with a flattened palm to his chest.

“Don’t even think about it,” he said. “And don’t call me garçon!”

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They sat at the kitchen island, Jean-Louis’s hair still wet around his face and shoulders. He wore a loose V-neck grey cotton T-shirt adorned with a silk screened image of a kitten sitting in a teacup and the words The Bratty Cat Pub, a local bar that they frequented and for which James had served as celebrity spokesperson in an ad campaign three years ago. He was also part owner. They had a stack of these shirts in a box upstairs.

“C’mon, baby. One slice. You’re wasting away right in front of me.”

He watched Jean-Louis take a reluctant bite and swallow as if he were eating a piece of cardboard. He followed it up with a generous gulp of Pinot noir from his mother’s vineyard in Arbois, hand shaking as he set the glass down on the granite countertop.

“What’s the matter?” James asked. He put his arms around him and pulled him close. When Jean-Louis didn’t resist, he knew he was not himself. He touched his forehead again, feeling the heat pulsing underneath his skin, and put him to bed with two aspirins. Jean-Louis insisted on sleeping in one of the guest bedrooms, mumbling something about not wanting to disturb him if he had to get up in the middle of the night to throw up. Then James called his mother Laura in Michigan. The kids were on vacation with his parents in Traverse City for the next two weeks, staying in a rented cabin by the water like his family had done since he and his brother Ted were boys. He gave his mother a sanitized recap of the ESPN taping, then chatted with his father Peter for fifteen minutes before saying goodnight to the twins. He had initially planned to join them after the taping but decided that he could better use the time without the kids to patch things up with Jean-Louis. Now that he was firmly on the road to full recovery, he could feel Jean-Louis drifting away again, that all too familiar threat of loss looming on the horizon. He knew that the trip out to LA was a mistake and did nothing to earn him any love, but at this point it was like worrying about your new leather shoes after stepping into a steaming pile of dog shit. Best to move on.
My Cinderella

Chapter Summary

James struggles with the uncertainty of his relationship with Jean-Louis.

The next morning James woke at four-thirty and went down to the gym in his basement for his usual two-hour workout before breakfast. Getting back into his normal routine was one of the joys he did not take for granted. It wasn’t just vanity, although vanity was a large part of it no doubt. At thirty-one, he was old for football but still young by any other standards, and he was determined to start this new chapter of his life with the same all-in commitment he had shown going into pro sports. He had no real idea what he wanted to pursue post-football, maybe broadcasting—his undergraduate degree had been in communications after all—but the money he had wisely socked away on his mother’s advice and his rather monastic lifestyle afforded him the time to let things unfold slowly. A year ago, he didn’t even know if he would walk again or be able to take a crap in the toilet like a normal person. He did not fear a few more months of uncertainty after enduring the humiliation of sitting in his own piss and shit for weeks on end. Things could only get better if he didn’t make any more stupid missteps like the ESPN interview.

He showered and put the coffee on, his adrenalin still pumping from the workout, his mood bright and cheery from the endorphins coursing through his veins. He savored the ache in his leg muscles as he took the stairs two at a time whistling a happy tune. Pain, glorious pain: a triumphant rebuke to the terror of feeling nothing. He knocked lightly on the door of the guest bedroom.

“Baby, come down for breakfast.” His stomach grumbled eagerly at the thought of bacon and eggs and toast slathered in butter. Heck, he might even go all out and indulge in some of that jam that Jean-Louis would have sent from Fortnum & Mason in London, a tart, barely sweet concoction made from damson plums. No response. He went in and saw that Jean-Louis was still asleep, lying on his side with the barest rise and fall of his shoulder indicating life. James sat at the edge of the bed and shook him roughly. “Wake up, Cinderella.”

Jean-Louis moaned and rolled onto his back. He looked like a beautiful car wreck, his blond sun-streaked hair a tousled mess framing a delicate face still half-captive to Morpheus. James felt the feverish wetness under his palm and pulled the covers down, saw that the sheets were soaked through with sweat. “Jesus Christ. Again? What is going on with you?”

Jean-Louis lay immobile, unfocused eyes shifting behind heavy lids, his brain running ten steps behind. That would be Snow White, you moron. Cinderella didn’t need help waking up, but he was too exhausted and could only manage to mumble aloud, “What day is it?”

“Saturday.”

He drifted off for a moment, and then said, eyes closed, “I don’t think I can go to work.”

A scowl leapt across James’s face. This strangely airheaded version of Jean-Louis was not only wearing thin, it was downright disturbing. “I just told you it’s Saturday, baby. You don’t have to go to work.” James heard the impatient annoyance in his own voice and suddenly realized he was
looking at something he’d rather not see. He put a hand on Jean-Louis’s shoulder and shook him again, gently this time. “C’mon, get up and get in the shower. You’re soaking wet. Do you have the flu or something?”

“No, I’m just tired,” groaned Jean-Louis. “Let me sleep.” He rolled back onto his side, whimpering into the pillow and tucking one hand under his chin.

James had seen his own kids make that same gesture as they slept and for a split second he felt disoriented, old and lost, as if he had blinked and discovered that the best part of his life had already flashed by without the benefit of experiencing it. Well, that wouldn’t do at all. He slapped both palms onto his thighs and declared resolutely, “Half an hour and then I’m coming to get you.”

James went back downstairs and scrolled through the contacts on his phone. Never one to ask for favors or expect special treatment, this time he felt no hesitation in taking advantage of what little fame could offer him. His nine years with the Broncos and this past year of intensive physical therapy and rehabilitation meant regular contact with team physicians and specialists, a long list of medical professionals who went out of their way to see him back to the land of the living time and again. Of course, he had repaid them through the years by heading up annual fundraising events to benefit the hospitals and making generous donations, visiting patients in the children’s ward, lending his name and celebrity to worthy causes through his foundation. All he wanted in return now was an appointment for Jean-Louis without the usual three or four week wait meted out for regular folks. He texted his primary physician with his request and was surprised to get a response within fifteen minutes; the man normally played golf on Saturdays. He would open up a slot for him on Monday at ten in the morning, meaning at least one of his patients would be told to reschedule, but James was too relieved to feel guilty.

When he went back upstairs the bed was empty and he could hear the shower running in the master bathroom. “You okay in there?” he called out before opening the door. Jean-Louis stood inside the large glass enclosure with one hand propped against the tile wall, head bent directly under the showerhead, looking thinner than ever, nothing but lean muscle. “Do you need any help?” James asked through the steamy air.

Jean-Louis seemed not to notice him, he was in another place. Was he high already? It was rather early, even for him. He brought a hand up to his face absently, slowly rubbed a cheek, then his forehead, before covering his mouth. It took moments for James to realize what was happening, to hear the muffled sobs and see the shuddering ribs. He felt stabbed in the throat and frozen, panic washing over him like the day he almost drowned in the town pool when he was five years old and just learning how to swim. He had been clinging to a small Styrofoam float, making his way across in a steady crawl, when a passing swimmer knocked it out of his hands and he found himself sinking, choking on mouthfuls of water and wondering if this was what it felt like to die. Through sheer will he had managed to dog paddle through a gauntlet of thrashing bodies, getting an elbow on the side of his head along the way, until he reached the pool’s smooth concrete edge, gasping and vomiting chlorinated water and the piss of others. The same fear and helplessness hit him in the chest now. He wasn’t supposed to see this private display of misery, yet it sent him backing out of the room grateful and heartbroken all the same. He had to do better. He couldn’t bear to lose him again.

Jean-Louis came into the kitchen just as James was beating the eggs in the mixing bowl. “Feeling better?” James asked. He set the fork down on the counter and embraced him, kissing his smooth cheek and smelling his hair, fragrant and still a little damp but warm from the dryer. Tired blue eyes peered back at him. Jean-Louis leaned into him and offered himself, seeking the touch of the rough stubble on James’s face. They stood loosely entwined, tongues tracing lightly along lips, until that urgent twitch in James’s groin made him squeeze Jean-Louis a little too hard, bare down
on his mouth a little too roughly. He didn’t know his strength, had never learned to rein it in completely. It boggled his mind to realize that as time passed, the more he hungered for him, the more he desired to possess him.

James had read once that being in love was a form of mental illness akin to insanity, and that people aren’t supposed to remain in that initial state of blissed-out madness for good reason. While the brief but potent chemical bath washing over the brain engenders that distinctive feeling of nervous euphoria—the whole ‘falling in love’ business—continued exposure to such a heady elixir will drive a person to acts of violence, even suicide and other forms of socially unacceptable behavior. Surely he wasn’t included among the ranks of creepy stalkers, those unwashed losers with bad haircuts clipping random words out of magazines and sending senseless letters to the objects of their obsession. Even so, James couldn’t deny the shameful reality of his own desires. How many times had he wanted to crush Jean-Louis to smithereens, a fragile creature in the paws of a madman overcome by passion, rage, fear, longing? Yet he was the one who was flayed, suffering and laid low by his own salivating greed for an elusive prey. Jean-Louis had remained unmoved, untouched, unfeeling despite the bruises, too many to count but none forgotten. James would capture him still, bend his heart into a shape that would slot into his own so they could be as one.

Jean-Louis pushed free with barely concealed irritation and asked, “Do you want soft scrambled or an omelet?”

“Soft scrambled,” James replied. He grabbed a large frying pan, opened a package of bacon and threw in the entire slab.

“You’re going to eat all that?” Jean-Louis asked, eyebrows raised, not out of surprise, but in acknowledgement of yet another typical display of thoughtlessness.

After a moment of reconsideration, James reached into the pan and put half the contents back into the plastic package. “You’re right. Probably overkill.”

The bacon sizzled in the pan, filling the room with smoky, savory, carnivorous delight. James leaned against the stove, his hand lightly stroking the small of Jean-Louis’s back, watching him work his magic next to him. A generous scoop of butter went into a pan, melting and bubbling slowly over a gentle flame, then the beaten eggs mixed with a splash of heavy cream and a grind of salt and pepper, then the watchful stirring and folding, a tender coaxing of albumen and yolks into melt-in-the-mouth pillows of most delicate softness, finished off with another pat of butter before the eggs had barely set. James never had the patience to do it right.

“Shit.” He had forgotten the toast. No biggie. He slotted four slices of frozen rye bread into the toaster and poured the coffee. It was all going down the same gullet, James figured, the order didn’t matter. Jean-Louis had long gotten used to the American way of eating, something he laughingly called cuisine tragique. James wouldn’t apologize for it. Heck, he had grown up on green bean casserole made with cream of mushroom soup and topped with fried onions out of a can, macaroni and cheese out of a blue and orange Kraft box, turkey roll and bologna sandwiches on white bread, salt-ridden and processed into oblivion. He loved it all and considered himself to be the lucky one. He imagined with scorn an adolescent Jean-Louis, monogrammed linen napkin tucked under his chin and sitting in an ornate gilt chair, dining on frogs’ legs and snails, poisonous mushrooms and moldy cheese, baby pigeons and candied twigs, or whatever other weirdo foods the French ate. No thanks. James was American through and through and damn proud of it, although he had to hand it to Jean-Louis when it came to the proper cooking of eggs. He had James beat in that respect.
As he dug into his breakfast, James noticed that Jean-Louis’s plate sat untouched. “Don’t make me shove food down your throat,” he growled.

Even as the words left him James felt a sudden urge to throttle him, force his cock into Jean-Louis’s mouth, make him swallow him whole and beg for more. Deep throating was a skill Jean-Louis had never been willing to master for him and...goddamn it! What was wrong with him? He glanced over at Jean-Louis innocently drinking his coffee, lips still moist and puffy from the hot shower, unaware of James’s endless string of monstrous thoughts. When was this filthy infernal hunger ever going to stop? James shifted in his seat and took a bite of toast, hurriedly pushed aside his desire to fuck Jean-Louis’s face. “Don’t be mad, but I made an appointment for you to see my doctor on Monday morning. I’ll take you there.”

Jean-Louis looked surprised, then furrowed his brow in displeasure. “I have my own doctor, James. Why did you do that?”

“And I’m not letting you weasel your way out of this. Look at you. This is not normal.” He waved an accusatory hand in his general direction. “Why won’t you eat, baby? You never used to be like this.”

“I’m fine,” Jean-Louis grumbled, swallowing a forkful of eggs like he had meant to do it all along, just hadn’t gotten around to it. He took a slice of bacon off of James’s plate and chewed it with exaggerated purpose. “I don’t like you controlling my life.”

There it was. “How is this controlling your life?” James reasoned. “I want you to get checked out. How is that a bad thing?”

“I can make my own appointments. I have my own doctors, my own insurance.”

“They always have to be such a stubborn little shit?” James slammed a fist onto the table to make his point clear but spilled the coffee instead. He took a deep breath to calm himself. He could hear himself yelling, knew his temper was ticking higher, but why did Jean-Louis have to push his buttons like that? Wasn’t he trying to do the right thing? James went on in a softer tone as he mopped up the spill with a napkin. “I’m sorry, but you’ve got me worried, that’s all. Let’s just have a good weekend okay? I don’t want to fight with you. Why don’t we go for a hike? We can take that one trail that you like. How about it?”

The half-hour drive up to the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains always filled Jean-Louis with a sense of awe. This same mountain range extended north to British Columbia where the famous Burgess Shale was discovered in the Canadian Rockies in the early 1900s, an enormous cache of fossils dating all the way back to the Middle Cambrian over five hundred million years ago. He had made a pilgrimage there as a doctoral candidate with his mentor and two other students. Though the site had been excavated well over a century now, new organisms continued to reveal themselves, too many to even study in depth, much less publish in journals. All this was lost on James, the magnitude of its meaning to the history of life on earth, but at least he could appreciate the epic splendor of his surroundings as much as anyone with eyes and half a brain. The titanic uplifting of continental crust smashing together like offensive guard against defensive tackle was what had brought them together in the first place.

They parked at the foot of one of the trails, alongside several other four-wheel drive trucks, and headed up the marked gravel path. It was a typical clear sunny day in late July with the temperature hovering at a comfortable eighty degrees due to the elevation and aridity, the perfect antidote to the smog-choked heat of Los Angeles. It put James in a fabulous mood and when Jean-Louis reached for his hand, he thought his heart would burst. The argument at breakfast, his anxiety over Jean-
Louis’s health, the relentless yearning that twisted in his gut, all of it melted away under the blessed blue skies of Denver. He gave brief pause to think about his former teammates sweating it out at training camp in a week’s time and was surprised by his own detachment. After his rabid passion for the game, he had assumed that he would sorely miss being on the field, like a soldier misses an arm lost in battle, but oddly enough there was no phantom limb, no gaping hole in his heart left from the absence of football. That part of his life, all-consuming for so many years, was over. He had more important challenges to face, like the infuriating twenty-four-year-old next to him.

They walked the two miles to the first rest area in relative silence, not wanting to spoil the peace between them. Jean-Louis was already winded, but James wisely kept his mouth shut and handed him a bottle of water from his backpack. They sat on a log that had been sawn across to form a comfortable bench. Below them sprawled Denver and its suburbs nestled low and snug in the valley. To their backs towered the snow-capped Rockies stretching as far as the eye could see. A dry warm breeze tossed Jean-Louis’s golden hair about his face, making James catch his breath; even now his beauty still startled him, made him feel small and weak.
They had first met a decade ago when James was a junior at the University of Michigan playing tight end for the Wolverines and barely keeping his head above water academically. Like all his teammates, he received regular tutoring to avoid academic probation but found himself, regardless, failing his final general education requirement, an Earth Science course that he was supposed to have completed in his second semester freshman year. The tutor assigned to him the first time around was a master’s student from the Rackham Graduate School, a khaki-wearing nerd with some serious body odor issues. James found it almost nauseating to be near him, this from a guy who’d been a gym rat since the age of fifteen and had inhaled more than his fair share of the ripest sweat imaginable. When his advisor told him that he wouldn’t be able to graduate the following year unless he passed the course, he had no choice but to retake it over the summer.

“Can you please give me a girl this time?” James pleaded.

His favorite tutor of all had been the one assigned for his Psychology 101 course, a green-eyed redhead from Iowa writing her thesis on the political validity of her own shifting gender identity. Her name was Siobhan and she believed that there was a she, he, and it all residing simultaneously within her biologically female body. James fucked her several times before she introduced him to her male persona via a strap-on dildo. He put a stop to their trysts after that, vaguely sorry that he’d no longer be enjoying what had been some pretty hot, albeit confusing, sex in retrospect.

On the first day of summer classes, he received an email from his advisor:

*Welcome back, James!*

*Please be sure to meet with your tutor at 11:30 am this Thursday at the Shapiro Science Library, 4th Floor Study Area. Your tutor for Earth Science 101 will be Jean-Louis Lamarck, one of our Rackham graduate assistants. Here is his contact information…*

Yikes. He hoped this one knew to use deodorant. On Thursday morning, after sitting through the first week of classes, James made his way to the library elevator and exited onto the fourth floor. The study area was straight ahead, an open well-lit room wedged in among the stacks of books and offices. He made a quick scan of the room: there were several study groups already in session, an older woman sitting alone typing vigorously on her laptop, and a blond, long-haired adolescent boy staring off into space, probably waiting for his mother to finish a meeting so he could get back to playing Halo with his burnout buddies. James checked his watch again and then the printout of the email from his advisor. Right place, right time, no tutor. He called the contact number and heard a phone ringing in the room, saw the stoner kid reach into his pocket, saw him mouth “hello” just as James heard the word spoken into his ear.

“Oh, you’ve gotta be shittin’ me,” James muttered. He flipped his phone shut and walked over to the kid. “Are you...?” He glanced down at the email again. “Are you Jean-Louis Lamarck?”

Blue eyes the color of the summer sky peered up at him, pupils the size of massive dinner plates. “Yes.”
“Jesus F-ing H. Christ. I think you’re my tutor for Earth Science 101. I’m James Miller.”

James felt stupid putting his hand out, but the kid shook it without hesitation and he was unnerved again by the intensity of his blue eyes, the way they looked right through to the back of his skull. The boy had the milky, alabaster-smooth skin of a child still unscathed by hormones or acne, no facial hair in sight, and a mouth that was obscenely pretty. Overlaying his unsettling appearance was a very pleasant scent about him that evoked lemons and sunshine. The whole situation made James cringe.

He sat down shaking his head. “There must be some mistake,” James insisted.

“What kind of mistake?”

“How can you be my tutor? How can you be in fucking graduate school? Shouldn’t you be at day camp or something?”

“Day camp?” Jean-Louis asked, all ignorance.

“Never mind. How old are you anyway?”

Jean-Louis sat up straighter in his chair, trying to appear more substantial than his scrawny one hundred fifteen pounds, and furrowed his brow. “Fourteen, but I’ll be fifteen in August. That’s next month, Mr. Miller, and I assure you I am a graduate student here.” He paused to let his anger pass and then went on in a calmer tone. “I will try my best to help you. If you are not happy with me as your tutor, your advisor can assign someone else I am certain.”

Besides his youth, he had a heavy accent and spoke very quietly in a mumble, making it hard for James to understand him. James sighed. If he flunked this course he would be up the creek with his mother. She was sure to skin him alive if he didn’t graduate next year with a degree. His younger brother Ted was going to be a sophomore at Michigan State and his parents couldn’t afford one extra semester of tuition, not after James had already had to retake two other courses due to failing grades. His high school guidance counselor had recommended either business management or communications degrees, the go-to majors for meathead jocks like himself. He had chosen communications and had done well within the major; he was great at bullshitting, a natural even. It was those darn general education courses that tripped him up. There was no way he could retake this required class again in the fall or spring, his schedule was already full and he wasn’t the type of student capable of handling any kind of academic overload. It was now or never.

“What the hell. Let’s do this.” James punched his fist into the open palm of his other hand for macho emphasis, unzipped his backpack and took out the assigned textbook, the syllabus, and the notes he had taken in class thus far. Jean-Louis looked the materials over, comparing the notes to the textbook chapters and the outline on the syllabus.

“According to your syllabus, the class is essentially split into five weeks covering the atmosphere, lithosphere, hydrosphere, biosphere, and pedosphere. Your advisor tells me you’ve taken this class before?” asked Jean-Louis.

“Yep. I failed it.”

“You failed for what reason?”

“Shit, I don’t know. It was boring. I couldn’t remember the terms. We were supposed to write a report and I didn’t do it. What else do you need to know?”

“Well, you are in luck.” Jean-Louis held up the syllabus. “No report. Just weekly quizzes. Good,
“Not good. I don’t do well on quizzes. I’m good at giving presentations, you know, talking in front of the class, bullshitting, but I’m not good at memorizing stuff, especially boring stuff.”

“It’s only boring if you are not interested. You are on the football team, yes? There are things to memorize and understand in every sport, special terminology, rules, strategy, concepts. Do you find those things difficult to remember?”

“No.”

“This is no different. Every subject has its own language. You only need to understand it as such. If you can master the language of football, you can master this too. May I write in your textbook?”

“Go ahead. I don’t care.”

For the next few minutes, James watched him underlining passages in the current assigned chapter readings.

“Here.” Jean-Louis handed him the open textbook. “These are the concepts you should be learning for this week. Your notes tell me you are missing many of the important points. What do you do in class? You are listening?”

“I thought I was. Maybe I was staring at some girl’s tits…”

“Indeed. How can the effects of solar radiation compete with a girl’s tits?” Jean-Louis said it like he was talking to himself.

“Are you really a student here?” James asked again. “You should still be in high school.”

“The school system is different in France. We graduate your high school with a baccalaureate. But it is true I skipped a few levels. I remember things easily.”

“So…you’re like Doogie Howser?”

“Who?”

“Just some show on TV when I was a kid. I remember my mom used to watch it.” James leaned back in his chair, thick arms folded behind his head, and let sweet nostalgia descend upon him like a warm shower. “It’s about a kid who’s a doctor but he can’t even buy beer because he’s like ten years old. You got that? He can’t even celebrate doing brain surgery with a delicious malt beverage…”

Jean-Louis seemed to have no interest in malt beverages. “Tell me about your football. In France we don’t have your sport.”

“Jesus Christ! Are you serious? Man, oh man, you poor fucks are totally deprived. Why do you want to know?”

“It will help me understand how to…how to teach you. Concepts are everything.”

“Okay. You asked for it.” James opened up his notebook and started drawing diagrams, Xs and Os and arrows. He explained the function of each position on offense, defense, special teams, the different run and pass plays, how to protect against each. As a tight end who also played on special teams, James had to know more than most of the other position players. An hour into it, Jean-Louis
stopped him.

“Did I lose you?” James asked.

“No. I have another student to see. I have to meet him at my residence hall.”

“Oh. Where are you living?”

“Munger.” Munger Graduate Residence, one of the newer accommodations on campus for graduate students right in Central Campus. Jean-Louis stood up and shook his hand again. “Thank you for the lesson on football. I will try to be useful to you. We will meet here again on Monday, same time, yes? In the meantime, try to memorize what I have underlined in your textbook. That is what you need to know for your first quiz.”

“How do you know what’ll be on the quiz?” James asked.

“I don’t. But it is what you should know. Goodbye.”

Over the weekend, James read and reread the passages Jean-Louis had underlined in his textbook chapter. The quiz on Monday consisted of twenty questions worth five points each, a combination of true or false, multiple choice, and fill-in-the-blanks. He scored a 70, which amounted to a C-grade. Jean-Louis was not happy.

“C’est des conneries,” he muttered under his breath when James showed him the quiz results on Tuesday after class. This is bullshit. “My other student got a B on the same quiz.” He looked dejected.

“Who’s your other student?”

“A freshman on the basketball team.”

“Well, fuck me. You don’t have to rub it in.” James was pissed.

Based on the reading assignment and syllabus, the next quiz would be on plate tectonics. Jean-Louis took out his notepad and drew some shapes.

“Okay. The earth’s outer layer is comprised of plates called the oceanic and continental crusts.” He pointed to some interlocking blobs. “The areas of convergence where the oceanic and continental crusts meet are called subduction zones. Where two continental plates collide, mountain-building occurs. Where plates meet in the ocean, volcanic activity takes place and you have island-building. Where plates pull apart or slide next to each other, faults occur. This is where you get your earthquake activity. Think of the plates as your offense and defense and the zones where they meet as your line of scrimmage.”

James leaned in and listened more carefully. This was language he could understand. Over the next hour, Jean-Louis translated the key points into football terminology using various analogies and metaphors. It was a ludicrous game plan, but on his second quiz, James scored an 85, a solid B grade. He began looking forward to his tutorials.

They met after class, Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, for an hour or so each day, to go over the notes James had taken, the contents of that day’s reading assignment, and the key points that would be covered in the weekly quizzes. His tutor was actually determined to help him do well in the course, even if he showed up on most days high as a kite but surprisingly lucid. James chalked it up to experience. The kid was no newbie to drugs.
He discovered that Jean-Louis was a genius when it came to creating mnemonics to help him remember various terms and facts. For the long list of geological eras and periods, he came up with a particularly obscene one with the singsong cadence of a naughty limerick to aid in memorization. For all his calm, navel-gazing demeanor, the kid had a very pronounced and wicked sense of humor, made even more entertaining by his perfect command of English spoken with what James thought was an hilarious accent.

“Hey, guess what was on cable last night?” James asked one morning. He didn’t wait for Jean-Louis to respond. “*The Pink Panther*. Man, I laughed my ass off thinking about you.”

Jean-Louis did not look amused. “Why were you thinking of me?”

“Why? You have to ask? You sound just like Inspector Clouseau!” He burst out laughing at the recollection, eliciting stares all around from the other study groups.


James passed the course, earning a rare B for his final grade and lifting his GPA to a whopping 2.23. As happy as he was to be done with the class, James felt a faint twinge of regret. He had grown fond of the kid over the past four weeks and actually thought better of him for being neither intimidated by James’s humungous size, nor impressed with his campus sports hero persona. Heck, Jean-Louis had never even seen what he kept calling “American” football, the only real football as far as James was concerned, the only kind that counted. *Fuck that soccer shit.* James couldn’t even begin to imagine what a paltry existence the kid had endured in France: horrifying recycled ’80s pop music, underpowered clown cars, questionable bathing habits, mandatory donning of berets and horizontally striped shirts, street mimes. It was no wonder the kid had a weed habit and wanted to be a paleontologist. What sane person would have any interest in digging up fossils? He met up with Jean-Louis one last time to thank him after his grade was posted, only to see disappointment in his normally placid face.

“What? You’re not happy I passed?” James asked.

“No, I mean yes, I’m happy you passed,” he said sheepishly, eyes down. The smudge of dirt on his phone seemed way more interesting than their conversation.

“Then what?” James punched him on the shoulder to make him talk. “What?”

“I didn’t win the bet.”

“What bet?”

“The GAs in my department, well, we all have students we tutor.” Jean-Louis rubbed diligently at the back of his phone. “We have a bet, a competition, to see which GA’s student garners the highest grade. I really wanted to win the money.” He looked up finally, the most dire seriousness plastered across his face. “You see, I need to buy a bike.”

The way he said it with such gravity made it seem as if his life depended on that stupid bike, as if he were going to die now because of James’s inadequate academic performance, that it had somehow caused him to miss out on the serum to counteract the poison he had accidentally swallowed.

James didn’t know what to say. “You were…using me,” he finally muttered.

“Yes, well, Devon did better than you,” Jean-Louis admitted.
“Who’s Devon?”

“The other student I was tutoring, the one on the basketball team.”

“I got topped by a b-ball? Fuck me!”

“Yes, James,” Jean-Louis said wearily. “Fuck you indeed.”

That fall was a blur of practice, games, workouts, and alternating bowel clamping and loosening anxiety, all leading up to the NFL Combine and Draft in the spring. James gave no further thought to his former tutor outside of seeing him by accident twice: once in the back of the student center, where he saw Jean-Louis smoking with a group of other burnouts, and once at a frat party, where he stumbled upon him in an upstairs bedroom, sprawled on a blow-up mattress between two topless sorority girls. The front of Jean-Louis’s shirt was wet with spilled tequila as they passed the bottle back and forth, another stain at his crotch. James could only guess what that was all about.

“You know he’s underage,” James warned the girls, less about the alcohol, more about the molestation.

They laughed at him, called him “old man” and “daddy” while Jean-Louis stared blindly back at him, no sign of recognition in his angelic face.
The Road Not Taken

Chapter Summary

Things are looking good for James.

James was drafted by the Denver Broncos as a thirty-third round pick and spent his first year as a back-up tight end, scratching his ass and rearranging his balls on the sidelines, waiting for opportunities that rarely materialized. A severe hamstring injury the next year knocked out the starter for most of the season, giving him a chance to shine at last. There was nothing really to prepare him for the initiation into pro football except to go out there and survive the brutal pummeling on the field and prove his worth on each play. At six-foot-six and two hundred sixty-five pounds, James was no wimp and already well versed in enduring pain. Still, each time he went up for a pass and took a hit, he wondered if any teeth remained firmly rooted in his jaws, if he had any bones left intact. He could taste his spleen in his mouth, iron on his tongue. After a while, he stopped thinking about his body and lived only in the moment, letting his adrenalin and ferocious desire to compete and win carry him through each punishing assault. There were times when he couldn’t even make sense of the calls, could barely will his body into action—sweat, saliva, and snot running down his chin as he crouched at the line of scrimmage, ears still ringing from the last hit, brain quivering like Jell-O in his skull, inhaling the fetid breath of the three hundred pound defensive end screaming obscenities into his face.

But he did it, and did it well, so well that the following year he was made starting tight end, and the year after he was offered a hefty six-year contract at the end of the season, a contract that would hopefully see him to the end of his pro playing career, barring any catastrophic injury. Goodbye shitty apartment rental! After a year of searching, he purchased an eight thousand square foot home designed to look like a glorified log cabin sitting on twenty acres of undeveloped land, with an adjacent twenty-five hundred square foot fully appointed guesthouse for his family and friends to use when visiting. The house had originally been built by a tech investor who placed all his eggs in the Blackberry basket. The guy had picked the wrong fruit to back, a boon to James, who was able to purchase the house already vacated and for a price just shy of exorbitant. He bought his parents his and her Cadillac Escalade sedans, his younger brother Ted a Chevy Camaro, and a Suburban for himself as a loyal tribute to his deceased and beloved grandfather who had worked for GM. He installed a professional gym in the basement of his house, the icing on the cake, as soon as he closed on it.

He moved in during the offseason in early April, the first year of his contract already under his belt along with the honor of playing in his first Pro Bowl, the next five years mapped out as clearly as his life had ever been, money in the bank to pay off his debts, pay back his parents for all the sacrifices they had made for him through the years. He would fly his family out for Easter, prove to them that it was all worth it. He didn’t have much to unpack. The small one bedroom apartment he had kept in downtown Denver had been rented fully furnished and all he had to move to the house were just clothes, CDs, DVDs, a potted ficus, and some odds and ends. He had already ordered the new furniture, bringing his current girlfriend with him to the store for her advice. She worked as an interior decorator for a local housing developer, staging show homes in the Denver vicinity. Her name was Krista and James had met her at a charity event co-sponsored by her employer’s construction company and James’s foundation to benefit Habitat for Humanity.
She had been Miss Teen Ohio when she was sixteen and living in her hometown of Columbus, a
tall, willowy brunette with sparkling hazel eyes and a killer smile. As the prettiest girl in school,
she had always dated football players from high school through college and beyond. She preferred
quarterbacks, who possessed bravado without being consummate meatheads, but receivers were
good, too, usually extroverted attention hogs and always fun at parties. At twenty-six, she was
ready to get a commitment from James, especially now that he had a semblance of certainty in his
career. They had been dating for seven months and hadn’t had a fight yet, a good sign. James was
generous and well mannered with her, careful to always open the door for her, get her tickets to the
game for her and her friends, take her out to dinner at least once a week if he was in town. His eyes
never wandered when he was with her, even when other girls flirted with him, he always made her
feel like no one else was in the room. He was enthusiastic in bed, though he lacked the awareness
and finesse of a good lover. Still, he had a more than pleasing cock, eight thick inches always at the
ready for her. She could see herself having his babies, being his wife.

She helped him pick out all the furniture, linens and kitchenware, the light fixtures and rugs. They
even broached the subject of living together, the possibility of marriage, although James was
nowhere near ready for that. The idea of settling down with one person and starting a family did
have its appeal and he had every intention of doing both eventually. Most of his teammates had
wives and children already, some several times over. But he couldn’t see it happening for himself
right at the moment, not while it took every ounce of his energy to survive game-to-game, not
while he needed to focus completely on being his physical best at all times. He really didn’t want
to answer to anyone for his crazy schedule, his grueling workout routine, his need to just be alone
sometimes to clear his head or give in to his inexplicable rage. He was a free man, living and
fucking as he chose within the current parameters of his career and means and he liked it just fine.
He was going to do it his way without apologies or compromise, even if it meant finding a new
girlfriend every few months for the next several years; there were plenty to choose from while he
was still young and in demand. Of more importance to him was how precious little time he had to
prove himself on the field. When his pro career was over and he had let himself decompose into a
soft, flabby mass, libido receding faster than his hairline, he’d see then what beautiful young
women were still itching to snag an engagement ring from him. As far as he was concerned, there
was no better way of winnowing the chaff from the grain.
Chapter Summary

James finally gets some.

James and Jean-Louis arrived at the University of Colorado Hospital third floor suite of Dr. Michael McKenna, James’s internist for the last seven years. The Broncos had their own cohort of team physicians, specialists and trainers who oversaw treatment of players during the season, but James had made sure to find his own doctor at the insistence of his mother, who was no fool. She knew her son was merely a cog within the NFL machine, one to be used to the limit and then discarded when broken. She did not trust the team’s medical staff to do anything beyond keeping James alive and capable of playing, regardless of the damages sustained. She wanted someone outside the organization to oversee his health, provide second opinions, make sure James’s long-term well-being was being monitored.

Dr. McKenna also happened to be in Jean-Louis’s own network of doctors participating in his insurance plan, so he had no recourse but to keep the appointment on Monday morning. By Sunday he had stopped protesting anyway, growing mute on the subject and strangely agreeable. Their hike on Saturday had tired him out instead of invigorating him. He insisted it was the thin air, though it had never bothered him so much before. He slept through the rest of the afternoon and night in the guest bedroom, but was up early on Sunday morning. James found him in the kitchen after his workout and shower, the smell of apples, cinnamon, and vanilla filling the air.

“What are you making?” James asked, crushing him in a bear hug.

He kissed him full on the mouth, hoping desperately that Jean-Louis would finally share his bed that night. He was horny as hell and with the kids away, James felt each day slipping by, another lost opportunity for an all-out, no-holds-barred, scream-at-the-top-your-lungs fuck-fest. He planted a sloppy, sucking kiss on Jean-Louis’s neck for good measure, nipped and licked at an ear lobe, just to make sure his intentions were absolutely clear: he was going to pound his face into the mattress the first chance he got. Jean-Louis moaned, unable to deny the pleasure shooting down his spine straight to his cock when James put his tongue on him that way, went all alpha dog on his most sensitive erogenous zones. He melted under the onslaught, letting James mouth him like a rag doll in the jaws of a pit bull, teeth just a hair shy of tearing into his skin. James’s huge hands were all over him, grabbing and kneading his buttocks, his hips slamming Jean-Louis’s slim six-foot-two frame against the counter. A shrill buzzing noise abruptly pierced the air.

“Oh merde.” Jean-Louis pushed them apart, wiping the back of his hand across his bruised lips. “It’s ready.” He turned off the kitchen timer and donned a pair of oven mitts.

“Are you kidding me?” James sputtered. “What about this?”

He waved helplessly down at the front of his shorts and the prominent bulge tenting the loose fabric. Jean-Louis gave it an unsympathetic once-over before taking a cast iron pan out of the oven and setting it gingerly down on the stovetop. A golden puffy pastry threatened to overflow the sides of the pan, aromatic steam rising from it with a soft hiss. James’s heart stopped. He watched, transfixed, as Jean-Louis dusted the top of the apple popover with a generous coating of powdered sugar, and then scooped a large portion onto a plate for James, a smaller portion for himself.
“Come, my love. Eat while it’s hot.” He gave him a light kiss on the lips before setting the plates down at the table.

James sat across from him, erection deflated and replaced by a knot in his throat the size of a boulder. Jean-Louis had made him this dish, an old French recipe taught to him by his grandmother Claudette, the morning after they had made love for the first time in Jean-Louis’s tiny New York apartment. He had never made it again for him since, this tender and fearless offering of his heart, not until this morning. For James, all the unadulterated passion of that first coupling and the ensuing years of thwarted, aching, voracious need seemed to punch a hole clear through his gut to the other side of the universe.

“Why do you do this to me?” James could barely say the words, choking even as he uttered them.

He took a bite, bitter tears burning his eyes as the pastry melted in his mouth, sending him right back to that blustery morning in February three and a half years ago in that cramped kitchen with the low winter sun streaming through the frost-edged window, the most beautiful creature on earth nestled in his lap still smelling of sex and sleep, feeding him ambrosia fit for a god, made with his own hands, just for him. James was riding on a rocket straight to nirvana thinking the trip would never end. He was so naïve, so wrong about everything. Every day henceforth was a slow death by a thousand cuts, a bloody crawl through loneliness and rejection. His relationship with Jean-Louis reminded him of the tale of Prometheus, that sad sack of a titan chained to a rock by a vengeful Zeus, his liver eaten straight out of his living, writhing body by an eagle, an agonizing ritual repeated each day as punishment for giving sacred fire to mortals.

“That pathetic fuck is me!” James had screamed after the discovery of yet another infidelity.

“And I’m the bloodthirsty eagle? Nah. I’d say you’re more like Sisyphus and I’m the rock you keep rolling up the hill,” Jean-Louis had said, almost bored and not a shred of remorse in his voice.

“Who made you this way? I fucking worship you, you goddamn son of a bitch! This is what you do to me? Stomp all over my heart? Eat me up from the inside out? I wish I could fucking kill you and be done with it!”

Jean-Louis had laughed, defiant smile twisting across his face. “Then do it,” he had sneered. He went right up to James and stood chest-to-chest glaring up at him, egging him on. It took only a split second to knock him down. James didn’t even recall punching him in the face, only his sore knuckles bore witness to the fact, and the swollen purple and green mosaic on Jean-Louis’s cheek, the left eye shot through with burst blood vessels. He wondered if Jean-Louis remembered all of it the way he did, all the hurtful, disgusting things that were said and done and regretted over and over again.

“Do you forgive me?” James asked now. “Is this why you made this? Are you saying you’re mine?”

Jean-Louis leaned back against the cushions of the banquette, body relaxed. “You will always have me, James. You only need to let go of fear. Then there is nothing to lose.”

He didn’t have the heart to say more. James would find out soon enough, that thing that resided within him, his precious tether to his father, waiting to lead him to his fate. He could see it now, almost touch it, the increasing clarity a dazzling thing to behold. He had never felt more certain, more settled and at peace. All the obstacles that prevented him from loving James were removed, tossed aside and forgotten. He would close the circle, bring it all to completion and step calmly into the light, unencumbered and free.
That night he didn’t even want the weed. The ache that had been thrumming softly in his veins for months was now a steady drumbeat, the slow tempo of Ravel’s Bolero building and building into an unmistakable march inside him, the crescendo still yet on the horizon. His body yearned for a different pitch of pain, fire to fight fire, in the hope of finding temporary escape from the relentlessness of it all. He returned to their bed, James practically manic with anticipation.

“You’re like a child on Christmas Eve,” Jean-Louis laughed. “So many presents to open. Which one first?” His eyes sparkled, teasing, goading James to passion.

With a feral growl, James pinned him down, crushing him beneath his immense bulk, his mouth hungry and greedy for every inch of his naked flesh, his pent up frustration making him throw care and caution to the wind. He knew Jean-Louis was hurting, but he didn’t want to stop himself and Jean-Louis wasn’t even resisting.

In a brief moment of lucidity, James suddenly asked, “Don’t you want a joint first?”

“No.” He stroked James’s chest, roughly pinched a nipple between his thumb and forefinger, making him wince and groan, cock hardening further against his stomach.

“Are you sure?” James couldn’t believe it. There were only a handful of times Jean-Louis didn’t get high before sex and it had never been of his own choosing. The first time James had insisted upon sobriety, Jean-Louis had given him that bewildered, deer-in-the-headlights look, not exactly the reaction James was hoping for. Afterwards, he had angrily accused James of forcing him to undergo the equivalent of a root canal without novocaine. “You’ve never wanted it like this before,” James reminded him, seeking to avoid any future retribution.

“I want to feel everything,” Jean-Louis breathed against his neck, biting into his shoulder. “Every fucking inch of you tearing me apart.”

“Oh, shit!” He loved it when Jean-Louis talked to him like that. It was almost enough to make him come right then but he had enough wits about him to quickly grip the base of his cock and squeeze tightly, forcing himself back from the edge. James sat back on his heels to calm himself and slow his breathing, and gazed down at Jean-Louis, so thin now and more fragile than ever. He thought he could see his heart beating under the smooth skin of his chest. Had he always been this vulnerable? No, not since the first time he had opened himself up this way. He thought he could see his heart beating under the smooth skin of his chest. Had he always been this vulnerable? No, not since the first time he had opened himself up this way. It drove James mad to see him like this, on his back, arms flung over his head with his fingers twisted in his hair, thighs spread, the lovely lines and curves of his cock and balls on full display. James reached down and stroked the rigid shaft, working the foreskin back and forth against the glistening head, his other hand lightly brushing his testicles, fingers tracing against his perineum and entrance. Jean-Louis moaned and then gasped when James bent over him, taking his cock in his mouth, all the way as far as he could bear down on it before hitting the back of his throat, then working just the tip with his tongue, quick flicks across the slit, longer strokes up and down the underside, around and across his balls, nipping at the insides of his thighs. He used his saliva to slick a finger, work it slowly inside, probing for that bundle of nerves. He knew he had hit the spot when he heard Jean-Louis cry out, muscles constricting tightly around his finger, hips thrashing now.

“Hurry, goddamn it,” Jean-Louis groaned, tossing him a bottle of lubricant from the nightstand. He turned over onto his stomach without any further encouragement, presenting the soft curves of his ass, so very ready. James reached towards the nightstand for a condom, but Jean-Louis stopped him, furious with impatience. “Now,” he demanded. “Now, all of you.” He had been a consummate cheater, had never been faithful to James in all the years he had known him, but now, at last, he would give James his fidelity.

Only the other week Jean-Louis had dreamt of his father Charles. In the dream, Jean-Louis was
eleven-years-old again and hunting for game for the first time alongside his father and two older brothers. “Reste près de moi, mon petit lapin,” his father had told him. Stay by me, my little rabbit. And Jean-Louis had replied, “Oui, Papa. Je promets.” Yes, Daddy. I promise. His eldest brother Paul had heard their exchange and knocked him to the ground with disdain, and when Jean-Louis had gotten back on his feet and brushed himself off, his father had disappeared into the forest. He had awoken, heart clenched in his chest, knowing he had failed his father, failed to stay by his side. He would give James what he had not given his father: a promise kept.

“I’m it then?” James whispered, planting wet kisses up his spine and neck, ending at his ear, which he took in his mouth and suckled. “There won’t be any others?”

“Never anyone but you.” Jean-Louis nestled his face into the sheets and sighed.

James brushed his hair away from his cheeks so he could see his profile clearly, a thing of such beauty and perfection it never failed to amaze him. He wanted to slow things down to a crawl, make it last into eternity. With no condom to dull his senses, he feared he’d revert back to his teenaged self, up and over in seconds. He kissed his way back down Jean-Louis’s shoulders, his sides, his hips, the firm cheeks of his buttocks, eliciting more sighs and soft whimpers. James nudged Jean-Louis’s legs further apart, kneeling between them, and slipped a lubricated finger inside, then another, then another, letting Jean-Louis grind against his knuckles. James recalled with regret his clumsy first attempt, the way he had barreled into him with no thought of preparing him for the assault, believing a lubed condom would be enough to allow for easy penetration. He had only fucked experienced girls before, and he knew they liked it hard and fast. Even worse, he had learned how to fuck a guy by watching porn, ignorant of all the things that weren’t shown, all the preparation that took place before the cameras rolled. When Jean-Louis had screamed, James had smugly assumed it was in ecstasy. When he kept screaming, he took it as a green light to keep going. It wasn’t until Jean-Louis had strayed with others and learned what it was to be handled properly, to be made love to with skill and knowledge, that James realized the error of his ways.

Jean-Louis was groaning into the sheets now, making urgent noises. James wanted to bring him as close to the edge as possible and keep him suspended there before entering him and all hell broke loose. With his free hand he stroked some lube onto his own cock, gauging where he was on the orgasm scale, how much more of this he could withstand before losing his mind. Not much time. He slipped his other hand out and grabbed Jean-Louis by the hips, lifting him up onto his knees against him, his cock lined up at the entrance. He pressed into him gently, watching as the head slipped in easily, then another slow push before he felt the muscles clamp down on him. Jean-Louis let out a small muffled cry, propped up on his elbows now, his hands clenching into fists each time James gave another nudge. The sensation of heat and tight wetness surrounding his cock was maddening. One more long push and he bottomed out finally, the whole length of him gripped in a furnace-like embrace, Jean-Louis impaled before him, writhing and moaning obscenely.

“Oh fuck,” James muttered. He was too close. What to do? He quickly ran some plays through his head, 896 H-Shallow F-Curl, Red Right 30 Pull Trap, and some of the really complicated ones that had always left him utterly confused and wanting to scratch his head through his helmet. He splayed his hands out and caressed Jean-Louis’s back and sides, holding his own body still in an effort to bring himself down before it was too late, took some deep calming breaths. Jean-Louis followed his lead and stopped moving, resting his forehead on the mattress and panting quietly. After a few moments James inched forward, raising himself up higher behind Jean-Louis to better position himself. He gripped Jean-Louis’s hips firmly and made a few exploratory thrusts, nice and slow and not too deep, each time varying the angle until Jean-Louis let out a strangled scream. There it was. James kept the same angle and thrust into him again, hitting the bundle of nerves around his prostate and prompting another scream, but he quickly realized that he wouldn’t be able to control himself if he continued, not like this with Jean-Louis over stimulated and completely at
his mercy, making the kind of noises that drove James absolutely insane. Any second now he would go at him too roughly, unable to hold back.

James bent his body over him, pulling his back up into his chest, and laid them both on their sides, felt Jean-Louis stretching out against him, body slowly unfurling and relaxing. James nuzzled his face into the back of Jean-Louis’s neck, inhaling his scent and heat, brought his hand around to stroke across his chest and stomach before wrapping his fingers lightly around his cock. He could reach all of him like this, touch all the right places with ease. Jean-Louis shifted with a groan, settled himself onto his back and flung a leg over James’s hip, his cock still buried deep inside him, and rested his head in the crook of James’s arm, let James stroke his hair, kiss and taste him, take ownership of him with his tongue. James put his mouth on Jean-Louis’s neck and sucked on his skin, then licked along his collarbone and back up behind his ear, thinking vaguely about the marks he was leaving on him even as he reveled in the sound of his moans. It made his heart quicken.

He tightened his grip on Jean-Louis’s cock, not stroking, just holding it firmly around the shaft, and began another series of shallow thrusts until he found the right angle and pulled a loud wail out of him. He could feel Jean-Louis straining desperately for release.

“Let yourself go, baby. I want you so bad, wanna make you come.” He began stroking his cock rhythmically, the pad of his thumb rubbing circles around the head. “C’mon, baby, come for me, let me see you,” James breathed into his ear.

“More, don’t stop, don’t stop,” Jean-Louis choked out, his voice tight in his throat. “Detruis-moi… tue-moi.” *Destroy me...kill me.*

James thrust deeper each time now. Lying on his side lessened the strength of his movements, prevented him from pumping his hips too violently. The build up was slow and excruciating, a wave of indescribable pleasure cresting again and again, each time rising a little higher before ebbing back, until there was no longer any boundary between agony and bliss, no going back, only a headlong rush over the edge. He felt Jean-Louis convulse against him at last, muscles gripping his cock so tightly James could only hold still and ride out each body-wracking spasm along with him, fill him to bursting even as Jean-Louis poured himself out, crying and gasping into his chest, his fingers digging so hard into his biceps that James was sure there would be welts for days. It seemed to take ages for them to come down, for their hearts to stop racing, their breathing to slow. James kissed him through it, tongue tracing deep circles in his mouth, owning him, making him know that no one would ever, could ever want him more than he did.

“I love you, baby, I love you so much I could die.” He gently kissed Jean-Louis’s closed eyes and tasted the salt of his tears beneath his lashes.
If All Else Fails, Channel Errol Flynn

Chapter Summary

Jean-Louis gets bad news.

As Dr. McKenna conducted the physical exam, Jean-Louis realized that he was covered in bruises. He didn’t recall James being that rough on him the night before and he had showered in a rush that morning, having overslept, and had not paid any attention to the state of his body. Dr. McKenna looked to be in his early fifties, with a neatly trimmed beard, reddish hair and a very gentle touch. The scent of his cologne was pleasant.

“Breathe in and hold for me,” he directed, pressing a stethoscope to his chest as Jean-Louis sat on the examination table wearing a loose hospital gown tied at the waist. “Breathe out.” He moved the stethoscope to his back, listened again, then under his ribs. “Have you always bruised easily?” Dr. McKenna asked, palpating along his neck, his fingers just above the large hickey near his collarbone and another one under his jaw. There were more purple welts on his chest, his arms and, dear lord, the insides of his thighs.

“Umm…no more than usual, I suppose.” Jean-Louis could feel his face turning red. The truth was, living with James meant he was never free of them.

“Do you recall how you got these?” Dr. McKenna prodded, laying him back onto the examination table and opening the front of the gown. “Put your arms over your head for me please.” He felt carefully along each armpit, down his sides, across his chest and nipples.

Jean-Louis broke out into a sweat despite the fact that the room was overly air-conditioned. “Uh… I…uh…had sex…last night,” he stammered.

“Mmm…so these don’t appear out of the blue. A good thing.” He pressed lightly down on his abdomen, then along the insides of his groin and thighs, checked his genitals, then his prostate. Jean-Louis flinched. “Does that hurt?” Dr. McKenna asked.

“Just a little sore.”

“Always, or because of last night?”

He withered under Dr. McKenna’s direct gaze. Christ. This was almost as bad as having his mother catch him masturbating. “Because of last night.”

“Okay. You can get dressed now.” He helped him into a sitting position. “We’ll talk in my office afterwards.”

They discussed Jean-Louis’s eating habits (formerly healthy but now AWOL), his drug and alcohol consumption (far too generous), his sexual practices (low-to-moderate-risk for disease, high-risk for hellfire), his physical activity levels (dwindling fast). They went over his family history and the glaring red flag of his father’s death at forty-eight from Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Jean-Louis always hated that part, what amounted to an act of betrayal. The memory of his father bordered on the sacred to him and to speak of his death was to heap profanities on something that should remain
shielded from the eyes of commoners, like an idol housed in the innermost sanctum, accessible only to the high priest.

His symptoms had begun less than a year ago, although the last few months had seen them worsen markedly. He was down to one hundred sixty pounds from one hundred eighty in the space of two months, his appetite nowhere in sight. Even the pot smoking didn’t bring it back, although it eased the pain in his body. The night sweats, fevers, and headaches were bothersome and left him drained and unfocused on top of the crushing exhaustion he already felt. Each day was like being buried alive under a pile of rubble. He wanted so badly to just lie there and never get up. The routine of his lab work was a respite from the worry, from the dilemma pulling him in two opposite directions, to run from his fate like a coward or to welcome it like a lover absent too long from his arms. Staring into the exquisite forms of ancient nanofossils dating back to the Mesozoic Era was oddly liberating, hundreds of millions of years reaching out to him to touch him with heartbreaking beauty, make him know he had nothing to fear. All he had to do was let go and return to time’s embrace.

“I know this may be difficult for you to talk about, but it’s important we understand your risk factors. Lymphoma is not hereditary. Because your father had it doesn’t mean you will have it. Let’s not jump to any conclusions at this point,” Dr. McKenna said reassuringly.

He watched Jean-Louis squirming in the chair, a picture of wretchedness. In his experience, it was not uncommon for the children of cancer patients to carry the trauma with them into adulthood, often later expressed as a rather morbid fascination with the disease. Some become obsessed with its avoidance and practice extreme forms of veganism or swear by raw diets or other such fads, others adopt an almost cavalier attitude towards their health, drinking, smoking, and fucking their way to any early grave. He had the distinct feeling that Jean-Louis fit into the second category. His symptoms, though, did warrant investigation. A complete blood profile was ordered and a battery of other tests, including X-rays and CT scans of various organs. When the results came in, Dr. McKenna immediately regretted the pep talk he had given earlier.

Jean-Louis received the call at work on a Friday afternoon as he was having coffee with his lab mate Sam and discussing the Colorado Rockies’ current status as basement dwellers in the NL West. The fact that Jean-Louis preferred baseball to football was a never-ending source of irritation to James, as well as a personal affront (“You dumbass French know nothing about real sports! Bunch of bike riding wimps!”); plus, the Rockies sucked. Not that it bothered Jean-Louis in the least since he was a Mets fan. Sam, a transplant from Chicago, was a long-suffering Cubs loyalist. Even that was better than rooting for the Rockies. Jean-Louis only watched the Rockies games to annoy James and rub salt into the wound, and it was especially amusing if a player suffered an injury doing something innocuous. That would really send James into a conniption (“Who pulls a hamstring jogging to first base? Fucking sissy!”). Jean-Louis listened calmly as Dr. McKenna gave him the initial results, voice almost trembling, apologizing profusely for having to tell him over the phone rather than in person, but time was of the essence, he was already stage four, he was sending him to the head specialists of hematology and oncology the following Wednesday and…

“It’s alright, Dr. McKenna,” Jean-Louis interrupted. “I feel much better now. Thank you, truly.”

“Everything alright?” Sam asked.

“Yes. Just a check-up.”

“So, what are you doing tonight for the big 2-5?” Sam had turned thirty last month and had celebrated the birthday with a trip to Nassau with his girlfriend Harmony, a massage therapist and fellow stoner. He had come back a week later, pale Scottish skin burnt to a crisp, but very relaxed.
“I think James is taking me out to dinner somewhere,” Jean-Louis said. He took a sip of his coffee, wondering what the hell he was going to say to him later.

“Hey, maybe he’ll pop the question,” Sam teased.

Jean-Louis was dumbstruck. “Did you get high without me?”

“What? You don’t believe in same sex marriage? You know it’s legal in Colorado now.”

“I don’t believe in marriage,” Jean-Louis countered.

Sam had no idea who James really was, had never met the man, knew just a first name and the fact that he had two kids. He understood Jean-Louis’s reticence to share details of his private life. Although Denver was considered fairly liberal, there was enough rampant homophobia in the country to make one believe that another asteroid hit would be well deserved. “Oh c’mon. You’ve already got the boyfriend and the kids. You’re not getting any younger.”

“You’re one to talk. Besides, the one I wanted already got away.” He stared dejectedly at the computer monitor with images of coccolithophores magnified several thousand times over.

“Right, the lovely Guy-Manuel. What’s he up to?” asked Sam. Jean-Louis talked way more about this Guy-Manuel than he did about his current partner, had even shown Sam pictures of his exotic ex-lover, and was still carrying the torch for him to this day.

“He’s married. They have a little girl now.” Jean-Louis had wanted to kill himself when Guy-Manuel had sent him the photo of him holding the tiny swaddled infant in his arms and beaming with joy, his beautiful wife Amelia smiling on the hospital bed. Everything Jean-Louis had ever wanted.

“You see. Time to move on, my man. The future is calling you.” He gave Jean-Louis an encouraging clap on the shoulder and returned to his workstation.

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Jean-Louis could hear the shrill voices of the kids echoing from the kitchen when he got home and James hollering at them to finish their dinner, something in a red sauce by the look of the mess down the front of their bibs. Their bare arms were still covered in mosquito bites from their stay with James’s parents in Michigan.

“Really?” Jean-Louis picked up the empty can of Spaghetti-Os from the countertop as James bent to kiss him. The children’s live-in nanny, Rosa, was in her native Venezuela visiting her relatives for another three weeks, leaving the twins at the mercy of James’s caretaking and limited culinary skills.

“It’s your birthday, sweetheart, so I’m going to pretend you’re not criticizing my cooking.” James nuzzled his neck, arms around him. “Besides, I grew up on this stuff. Look at me now.”

“Yes, you are so very proud of that, aren’t you?” Jean-Louis rested his head on James’s shoulder, eyes closed against a jumble of confusion in his mind.

“Long day?” asked James as he stroked his hair.

“Yes.”

“Too tired to go out?”
Jean-Louis sighed. “I’m sorry. I know you made reservations.”

“It’s okay. I can cancel the babysitter. We can do anything you want.”

“Just this,” he murmured. “Nothing more.” At the moment, it was indeed all that was perfect and good. He could hear James’s heart beating through his thin T-shirt, the warmth radiating from his neck onto his face, large hands caressing his back. A strange whine echoed through Jean-Louis’s skull, low and quiet, synching with the pulsing of his own heart. The room spun and he swayed unsteadily on his feet but James gripped him tighter, held him up. He wouldn’t let him fall, of course not. He was in a cocoon and safe, nothing could touch him, not with James standing guard over him. He heard Chloe mewling for him to lift her out of the highchair, “Papa! Up!”

“Papa’s tired,” James soothed above him. “So tired.”

Jean-Louis swallowed and roused himself, surprised and ashamed of his own weakness. James was staring down at him with concern clouding his face, and then teased, “It’s only a birthday, baby. Not the end of the world.”

A falsely brave laugh escaped Jean-Louis’s throat, the kind one gives when walking the plank channeling Errol Flynn, except no amount of swashbuckling derring-do was going to save him now. “Let’s get wasted tonight,” he whispered into James’s ear. “I want to forget everything. And James…” He looked up at him with a sad smile, his heart seizing inside him.

“What?”

“I love you.”
Jean-Louis leaves for Zürich.

In another week, Jean-Louis was on a flight to Zürich, his mother Catherine sitting beside him holding his hand. There was no way she was going to let her baby die in America with that brute of a man. She had let her son lose his way, indulged his whims all his life as an apology for the genetic hand he was dealt. She would show him the path to take now, late as it was. James had fought her like a cornered beast, begged and screamed, punched a hole in the door right in front of her as she led Jean-Louis out of that monstrosity of a house. Her boy knew to say nothing though he wept all the way to the airport. When he had called her to tell her the news days before, all she needed was to hear his voice to know what had happened, the words didn’t even matter.

“You have no time for nonsense,” she told him on the plane. “Do not look back.”

She wouldn’t let him go the way of her late husband Charles who had wasted away in a month, not able to even say goodbye to her and the children at the end. Jean-Louis was twelve at the time and just finding his way in the world after a childhood of isolation and struggle. Charles’s sudden death unmoored him, cast him adrift once more, a defenseless soul ill-equipped for life, accountability, self-preservation. The choices he made in adulthood, erratic at best, were no surprise to her. She could only hope that he would traverse the razor’s edge long enough to reach the other side. Jean-Louis’s twin sister Charlotte was there to greet them at the apartment in Zürich, inherited from relations on Charles’s side of the family who were Swiss bankers. The Hirslanden Klinik in Aarau was only thirty minutes away by train and was renown for its care of patients with lymphoma. James had argued for treatment in Denver, or at Memorial Sloan Kettering in New York, such was his selfishness.

“Who do you think you are?” Catherine had spat at him when he tried to stop her in the hallway. “My son will be with his family, where he belongs.”

“I’m his family now!” James had shouted. “Me! Not you, you crazy fucking bitch! He belongs here with me and the kids!” He had turned to Jean-Louis, imploring, sobbing, “Tell her. Tell her you want to stay with me. Please, baby. We can take care of everything here. Don’t go with her. You’re mine. You promised me.”

No amount of tears would move him. Jean-Louis had already left him behind and though he kissed James with desperate passion, his eyes betrayed an abyss of nothingness. So there it was. Over yet another year’s worth of effort to bind them together lost in an instant, only this time it wasn’t a matter of recapturing a wayward lover. He saw Jean-Louis’s life snuffed out and carried off into the ether so far away from the comfort of his hands and heart, never to be seen, touched, nor held again. He thought for sure his grief would choke him to death as he stood watching them leave in the car, then he trudged zombie-like down into the basement and worked the punching bag until his knuckles split open.
James’s mother Laura watched the car disappear down the long driveway before returning to the guesthouse to join her husband and the twins. She and Peter had flown out to Denver the day after James had told them the bad news. He had begged her to intercede for him when he learned that Catherine was coming to take Jean-Louis back to Europe. Laura had been the one to talk Jean-Louis into moving to Denver in the first place when James suffered the spinal injury; perhaps she could convince him now to stay or, if not that, persuade Catherine to rethink her intentions as one mother speaking to another.

Laura met Catherine in the driveway as soon as the car pulled up to the house and found herself embracing a haughty woman of intimidating beauty. She had been as taken aback the first time she had met Jean-Louis and could see now that he had his mother’s stunning blue eyes, fair complexion and natural grace. Though they were easily the same age and Laura was no slouch in the looks department, this impeccably dressed and coifed woman had her feeling as awkward as a country bumpkin.

“Hi there, I’m Laura, James’s mother,” she said with typical Midwestern warmth.

“Oui, I am Jean-Louis’s mother. You may call me Catherine.” She abruptly kissed both of Laura’s cheeks with no affection whatsoever and gazed at her surroundings. “Where is my son?”

“Well, he’s in the main house, but I thought we could talk for a little bit first. Won’t you come inside?” Laure waved her hand at the guesthouse. “I’d like you to meet my husband and…your grandchildren.”

A look of surprise briefly passed across Catherine’s face before her expression settled back into something unreadable. “If you insist.”

Laura did her best to make conversation as they took the winding slate walkway to the guesthouse, which sat back and off to the left side of the main house. “Is this your first time in America?”

“No, I have been to New York several times, and three times to California. I have been to Boston and Washington, DC. I have never been to Denver, though. It is quite beautiful here. I think my husband would have liked it.”

Peter was waiting to greet them in the foyer with the twins in his arms. Laura put her hand on his shoulder and said, “Catherine, this is James’s father, Peter, and these are your grandchildren, Chloe and Benjamin.”

“I am pleased to meet you,” she said to Peter and then coolly assessed each of the blond-haired blue-eyed toddlers. “Hmm. They must take after your son, yes?” There was no way she was going to accept as her grandchildren the spawn of that disgusting ape, even if her own daughter had given birth to them.

“Do you want to hold them?” Peter asked as he squeezed them tighter in his arms. “They’re just the best little kids in the world.”

“And Jean-Louis is so good with them,” Laura added, hoping to sway her.

“Pity, then,” Catherine said flatly. “I would like to see my son now.”

“But you just got here,” Laura stalled. “Can’t I make you some tea or coffee? I was hoping we could talk about Jean-Louis’s treatment plan. We have excellent medical facilities here—”

“I’ve already made arrangements at the best clinic for his condition. Everything is taken care of, I assure you.”
“But it’s more than that, I’m sure you can understand.”

“Understand what?” Catherine looked ready to explode with impatience.

“They need to stay together,” Laura pleaded.

“Who? Who are they?”

Was she really going to make her spell it out? It was obvious that Catherine didn’t like James, but even more hurtful was the realization that Catherine wouldn’t even acknowledge his existence. “Our sons,” Laura said and she wanted to cry for him, her baby, her son, who was going to be destroyed by this cold-hearted witch. “Our sons,” she said again. “They need to stay together.”

Now Catherine laughed, genuinely incredulous. The twins picked up on her glee and giggled along with her and clapped their hands. Laura stood mortified and looked to Peter, who gave her a confused shrug. “What’s so funny?” he asked.

“Funny, what is funny? Your ideas…they are an American thing, yes?” Then she turned on her heels and walked out the door towards the main house.

“Wait!” Laura called. She ran after her up the walkway. “Please. Catherine. You have to understand. They love each other. My James would do anything for your son.”

“Then he will do what is best for him.”

“Separating them is not what’s best for him!”

Catherine stopped mid-stride and turned to Laura. “My dear woman, when it is your own child who is dying, then you can decide what happens. But, as is the case, it is my son who is dying as we stand here and argue. Do you have any idea how I feel? Do you think I would wish this on anyone? Jean-Louis is my son, he is my youngest, he is the one my husband loved most and, God in heaven, I will do what is best for him. Your boy means nothing to me.”

Laura unlocked the door to the main house and led Catherine into the kitchen. They could hear James screaming and swearing upstairs, not exactly the kind of behavior that would endear him to Catherine. Jean-Louis’s muffled voice interrupted James’s tirade now and then (“Qu’est-ce que tu fais? Enculé!” What are you doing? Motherfucker!) The commotion went on for some minutes as the two women sat in uneasy silence at the kitchen table.

“I should go up and see what’s going on,” Laura murmured.

Catherine glanced at her watch. “We must get to the airport. Please show me upstairs.”

They found them in the master bedroom, which was in complete disarray. Jean-Louis was sitting on the edge of the bed with his head down and guarding one small carry-on piece of luggage in his lap while James stalked about the room cursing and shredding clothes with his bare hands. The women had to assume the clothes were Jean-Louis’s because another suitcase lay open at his feet, its contents nearly emptied out.

“Jean-Louis,” Catherine said quietly. Jean-Louis looked up and saw her standing in the doorway and his face, which had been expressionless, flooded with relief and unspeakable sadness as he burst into tears. She walked over to him, not even looking at a now-silent James, and kissed him over and over as he sobbed into her hands. “C’est l’heure de partir.” It’s time to go.

She led him out of the room past James and Laura, asking, “You have your wallet, your passport?
Jean-Louis pulled the items out of his back pocket as he followed Catherine down the stairs with his one carry-on bag slung over his shoulder. At some point, James grabbed the front of his shirt and shouted at him but Jean-Louis was beyond listening. He was so exhausted from the weeklong war of words with James, from divesting himself of all that he had finally allowed himself to feel for him, from shedding his attachment to the children. It was a process, he imagined, like flaying one’s own skin or lopping off a limb or two, pain and doom all mixed into one horrifying experience. So in a fit of delirium he kissed James to shut him up, he couldn’t stand to hear the sound of his voice anymore, the anger and terror and all the sorrow he had put there. He bit into his mouth and tasted blood and remembered their very first kiss, when it had been innocent and untainted by all the dreadful things they would do to each other, and all he had tasted then was the sweetness of strawberries and whipped cream.
Brothers and Sisters

Chapter Summary

Jean-Louis’s brothers pay him a visit. His sister, though, has a plan.

It was his last day in Zürich before starting treatment at the clinic in Aarau. He would remain there over the course of a twelve-week Stanford V regimen of high-dose chemotherapy, his blood collected upon arrival for any subsequent autologous stem cell transplant before the drugs could do their damage. Radiation therapy would be administered after the chemo. His two older brothers, Paul and Ernst, came by train to visit with him for a day and offer grim encouragement. They ate lunch at a restaurant down the street from their apartment while his mother and Charlotte did some shopping. His mother would leave with his brothers to return to Arbois later that evening. Charlotte would go with him to Aarau the next day to settle him in and have her blood collected as well during the coming weeks. She was a match and if the disease was still present in his body after the chemo, radiation, and autologous stem cell transplant, they could attempt an allogeneic stem cell transplant with her blood. The danger of using her blood was something akin to tissue rejection and all its problems. The beautiful irony, though, was that if her stem cells were recognized as foreign matter, it could prompt Jean-Louis’s immune system to destroy whatever cancer cells remained in his body.

“What kind of service would you like?” Paul asked gruffly. It was in his nature to be blunt and unsentimental, something he took great pride in as a man. A part of him had long wished his youngest sibling gone from the world for everyone’s sake, especially Jean-Louis’s. His little brother was a left-handed abomination, one he had tolerated out of familial love and obligation but whose choices and actions in life demanded punishment. He knew that Jean-Louis understood this better than any of them. The boy had trod upon the face of God too many times to be forgiven.

“Don’t be such an ass,” Ernst muttered. Always the softer of the two, Ernst had made half-hearted attempts through the years to help Jean-Louis, not in any overt manner, for he wouldn’t go against the wishes of Paul, especially when they were children, but in more subtle ways, like putting iodine on Jean-Louis’s cuts after Paul was done disciplining him or giving him extra money for his weed habit or showing him how to jerk off properly. Even when Jean-Louis had confessed his affair with that man he did not hate him, had not dragged him into the shed and punched the living daylights out of him as Paul had done. No, he had taken him aside in kind brotherly fashion and told him to keep his mouth shut for his own good, not that Jean-Louis would listen, he was always so hopeless when it came to saving himself.

Jean-Louis shrugged. “It’s alright. I know I’m going to die.” He chewed thoughtfully on a piece of bread, glad that Charlotte wasn’t there to start a fight. He noticed that Paul had a few streaks of grey already in his wavy mop of reddish-brown hair, though he was as fit and handsome as ever at thirty-four. Jean-Louis had always been proud of his two brothers’ rugged good looks and wondered if they would have accepted him had he been big-boned and thickly muscular like them, like their Uncle Auguste. Paul was dressed in jeans and a red and black plaid flannel shirt and bore an uncanny resemblance to that mystery lumberjack on the packages of paper towels Jean-Louis would purchase when he lived in the States. He admired Paul for his single-minded purpose in life and dreaded his disapproval even as he walked headlong into it. He had never figured out how to please him yet yearned to do so and feared him as much. Through the years, he learned instead to
accept and love his displeasure and the punishment that came with it.

“You don’t know that,” said Ernst. “Things have changed in medicine. It’s not like it was when Papa was sick.”

Paul snorted with contempt. “Oh, you’re a doctor now? You wave a magic wand and cure cancer? Is that how it works?” He lit a cigarette and dragged furiously on it. “What a bunch of fucking nonsense.”

“I just think it’s a little early to be asking him to pick out a casket,” Ernst shot back.

“That isn’t what I asked him.” Paul looked matter-of-factly at Jean-Louis, as if he were assessing the health of a farm animal. “You won’t need a casket, will you?”

Jean-Louis shook his head. “No, I want to be cremated,” he said as he bit carefully into an olive, avoiding the hard pit. “I want my ashes put into the vineyard and a cutting planted over me.” He thought some more as he took a sip of wine. “I’d like to have Shelley’s *Ozymandias* read…and a passage from Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*.”

“Christ,” Paul groaned. “You never stop, do you? You always have to…fuck…I don’t know. Even in death you’ve got to annoy the shit out of everyone.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Ernst told Jean-Louis, and then turned to Paul, “And stop acting like he’s dead already.”

“I’m a realist and a rationalist,” countered Paul, tapping two fingers against his right temple. “I don’t live in a fantasy world like the rest of you imbeciles.”

“And I do?” Ernst leaned forward over the table, his face inches away from Paul’s. “You’ve beaten the crap out of him his whole life and for what? To make him be like you? And now you’re telling him to lay down and die without a fight. Who’s being weak now?”

Jean-Louis slumped down in his chair, mildly embarrassed as he watched the two of them argue on either side of him as if he weren’t even there. They had always made him feel guilty for being alive and perhaps his quickening steps to the grave would be a goddamn blessing for all. His mind drifted to James, the first time he had even thought of him since he arrived in Zürich a week ago with his mother, but the man at the next table had his same build and hair color and he couldn’t help but remember. He saw James’s screaming face, red and pleading and contorted with anguish, one more thing to feel guilty about. The stabbing pain in his chest told him he missed him, even loved him still, though it was all too late now. He had been a very bad boy indeed. The tears were rolling down his face before he had a chance to stop himself. Even through the hot blur he could see his brothers staring at him, Paul looking stern and disgusted, Ernst at wit’s end. He got up and went into the men’s room, locked himself in a stall and clamped both hands over his mouth to smother his grief. If he could have strangled himself he would have, if only James were there to smash his skull into the stone floor and end this fiasco. Instead, his stomach heaved and he vomited his guts out into the toilet, legs shaking. Up came the wine, the olives, the bread, burning and bitter in his throat, but there was so much more he wanted out of him, so much more he could not stand to carry around inside him any longer.

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That night he and Charlotte made love, just as they had been doing each night that week. Although it was at her prompting he was glad for it. It was not a distraction. To describe it as such was to completely desecrate its meaning. Their coupling was a return to the womb, a return to the source
of their being, an act so sacred it could only be balanced by its equally deep profanity. How else
could it be, for to share in such an hubristic bond was to sit in the lap of Jupiter and, like Semele,
be annihilated for gazing upon the most profound, merciless glory. Charlotte was everything he
was not, that part of himself that left him at birth to go roaming about the world outside of his own
body. To become one with her was to be made whole again against the will of God, to eat from the
tree of life and dare to be struck down. He would willingly burn in hell for the both of them. It had
always been so.

Outside the rain came down in torrents, thundering against the roof of their apartment building and
beating loudly against the windows. Jean-Louis turned his head to listen and sighed, soothed by the
rhythmic drumming against the glass panes. Charlotte stirred against his back, an arm wrapped
around his chest, now caressing him beneath the covers.

“Can’t sleep?” she whispered into the nape of his neck.

“It’s raining,” he said. He clutched her hand, brought it up to his mouth to kiss. “I love the sound of
it at night.”

“Hmm, you used to hate it when you were little, especially at night. You were afraid the world
would wash away, like in Noah’s Flood.” She giggled softly, stretching her naked body against his.
“Do you remember?”

He rolled over to face her, pressing up tight against her breasts. “I remember everything. What
would I do without you, my Kali, my Isis, my Artemis? There is no one above you in heaven or on
earth. Promise me one thing.” He rested his forehead against hers. “Promise me you will be the last
thing I see when I leave this world.”

“I promise,” she said without hesitation. “The last thing in this world, and the first in the next. You
will never be without me, I promise.”

She kissed him tenderly, stroking his face, every detail known and memorized, his taste, his scent,
his skin, all of it hers to have and keep safe. Even if he turned to dust tomorrow, she would have
him inside her until her bones mixed with his in the earth. But really, it would not come to that, she
had no need for sadness or fear or loss. She had the strength of a thousand angels and demons and
the will to move mountains. Nothing was without purpose. The child, his child, growing within her
would save him, would give him the will to live. Whatever made him think he was alone in this?
She had always known they would enter through the fiery gates of hell hand in hand.
The extremely high dose of chemotherapy and radiation prompted his doctors to administer the autologous stem cell transplant immediately after to counteract the crippling damage done to his bone marrow and immune system. In a few weeks, new white blood cells formed, then new platelet and red blood cells. He lived like a prisoner in solitary confinement during the transplant stage to stave off potential infection, kept in a sterile room in a different part of the clinic with no visitors except the doctors and nurses who tended to him. He had allowed James to visit him in late September when he had not even begun to go through the worst of it, but James had broken down anyway as soon as he came to his bedside. There was nothing scary about the set-up. His private room was spare but comfortable with blond wood paneling, sleek Euro-style modern furniture, and large sunny windows facing southeast with a view of the town’s red rooftops. Large photos of green grassy fields covered the walls. He had his cell phone, iPod, laptop, and some favorite books, although he grew increasingly unfocused and spent most of his waking hours listening to music instead of reading, or staring blankly at whatever was showing on the television mounted on the wall opposite his bed.

Jean-Louis had cut off all his hair in anticipation of the side effects and wore a light blue cap knitted by his mother, making him appear oddly babyish, but he wasn’t that much thinner, wasn’t yet riddled with sores and puking all over himself. “Do I look that bad?” he asked as James sat next to him crying uncontrollably. It pained him to see a man of James’s size reduced to such a sad, slobbering mess.

James shook his head and wiped his nose on his shirt, leaving a large wet stain down the front that was weirdly in the shape of Texas. “No. You look great.” He shook his head again as if doing so would wake him up from this nightmare. “Your hair…is it all gone?”

“Yes, I had it shaved off. Charlotte did it for me.” Jean-Louis removed the knit cap so James could see for himself. “You have a problem with the shape of my head?”

“No.” He started sobbing again into his fists. “It’s just that…your hair…” His beautiful hair was gone. Like the fragrance of his skin and the softness of his mouth, it was something that defined Jean-Louis for him. James could press his face into those silken honey-gold strands with his eyes closed, run his fingers through them and know it was him and no one else in the world. The loss of it made him despair for the future; how many more pieces of him would disappear before he no longer recognized him?

“Stop it, James. Don’t be like that. You’re getting upset over nothing. This is why you cannot be here.” Jean-Louis passed him a box of tissues and put the cap back on his bare head, gave him a few minutes to get a hold of himself. “Did you bring me what I asked for?”

“Yeah.” James opened a plastic bag by his feet and took out three T-shirts that he had slept in and not washed so his scent would be on them. He handed them over to Jean-Louis. “Will these work
Jean-Louis put them to his face and closed his eyes, breathing them in, remembering. “Yes, they smell like you,” he said with a smile. “Just like you. It’s almost like having sex.”

James let out a sigh of disgust. “You are such an asshole to say something like that. Aren’t things bad enough the way they are?” The very real prospect of never making love with him again had run through James’s mind on an endless loop ever since the illness had come to light. That the sex mattered to him as much as Jean-Louis’s life had filled James with remorse and shame, but he couldn’t deny the truth of it.

“Let me have what little pleasure I can get,” Jean-Louis chided. “I need this.” He took another sniff and smiled again. “This way I’ll have you with me when I’m sad and lonely.”

“Then let me stay here,” James begged. “I can send for the kids. I’m sure I can find an apartment to rent in town. I can come see you everyday. We can do this together.” He reached over and squeezed his hand. “Please, baby.” But he saw the wall coming down in Jean-Louis’s eyes and knew he had overstepped.

“No. Charlotte is here with me. I won’t have you here, too.” He stared down at his feet under the covers.

“That fucking sister of yours…” James muttered to himself. “She wouldn’t even want to see her own kids? Don’t you want to see them? They ask for you all the time. They don’t understand why you went away—”

“Stop it!” Jean-Louis shouted. He was upset now, so very upset. It was a mistake to let him come. He should have stuck to his plan and had him mail him the shirts but James had been so insistent and to hear his voice had made Jean-Louis want to feel his arms around him again. He should have taken Charlotte’s advice, she always knew the right thing to do no matter how cruel. “Please stop it. I can’t talk to you about this anymore. I want you to go.” He was crying now and silently cursing his own stupidity and weakness. “Please go, James. Go home and live your life.”

“No, baby, listen to me,” James pleaded. “I’m sorry I—”

“Get out,” a voice said over his shoulder.

“Fucking hell…” James knew who it was even before he turned around. “Charlotte.”

“James.” She looked down at him with Jean-Louis’s eyes, but hers held no love. “It’s time for you to leave. Look what you’ve done to him.”

He couldn’t argue with her. Jean-Louis was miserable and sobbing and he had made him so. She followed James outside the room into the hallway and let him have it.

“My brother doesn’t have an ounce of energy to spare on the likes of you. So go back to America where you belong and leave Jean-Louis alone. He can’t go through this with you dragging him down.” Charlotte didn’t bother to hide her contempt for him. She could never understand how an idiot like James, a man who behaved like an ill-mannered barbarian and was paid for it of all things, could have ever held any attraction for her brother. He wasn’t even a good lover, for Christ’s sake, just a coarse slab of mindless brute force and expansive flesh with no artfulness, subtlety or flair, Frankenstein’s monster incarnate. Jean-Louis deserved so much better.

“I want him to live and I love him with my whole fucking heart,” James snarled into her face. “And you don’t know a goddamn thing about me you controlling, manipulative bitch. I can’t even
Imagine the shitty, selfish, perverted things you’ve done to him. You’re the reason he’s so fucked up. You’re the reason he can’t have even one goddamn normal relationship, why he can’t love anyone or anything. You did it to him.” He jabbed a finger in her face but what he really wanted to do was rip her head off and stick it on a pike like that bloodsucking Vlad the Impaler or maybe like some kickass Christian missionary converting those sun-worshipping pagans in the New World, just like he had learned in fifth grade history class. Charlotte wasn’t backing down, though, and he had to admit a certain admiration for her fierceness.

“You are so wrong about everything. My brother has loved well and deeply and you’ve done nothing but stand in his way and destroy everything that ever mattered to him. You’re the one who’s selfish. He loved Guy-Manuel—remember him?—Jean-Louis wanted to be with him, not you, but you couldn’t let him alone, could you? You couldn’t let him be with the one he wanted. No, it had to be you or no one else. Do you have any idea what you did to him? You broke his heart into a million pieces. You ruined him. The only reason he went back to you was because you had already killed him inside, you fucking greedy bastard, he was already dead because of you.”

James was shaking and speechless with rage and something else…regret, black, bottomless regret. Did he really do that? Had he really hurt him that badly? He knew that if he opened his mouth his fists would be following suit, so he clamped his jaws shut and swallowed all the bile in his throat. They stood rooted in place for a long moment staring into each other’s red faces, tempers ablaze, before collapsing onto the upholstered bench against the wall, gasping and trembling with barely contained fury. Staff and patients gave them a wide berth as they passed by.

“I can’t believe I ever fucked you,” James said finally, voice raw and broken. Had he been shouting? He stared straight ahead at the large framed photo hanging on the opposite wall. It was of a lone tree silhouetted against a bright blue cloudless sky. It looked like an oak.

“Was it worth it?” Charlotte asked.

“Yeah, for the kids. It was worth it for the kids.” How ironic that the biggest mistake of his life, a one-night stand with a mortal enemy, would result in what might be his only lasting connection to Jean-Louis. Through the children Charlotte bore him, James would always have him, even if he were taken away—his one and only love, the only one who mattered, his whole world—he could look into their eyes and see him, hold them and know that somewhere inside them he was present in some form, if only because he had shared a womb with his whore of a sister. This James liked to tell himself when all seemed utterly lost.

Charlotte put her hands protectively across her belly and smiled. “Good. When do you leave?”

“For Christ’s sake, I just got here.”

“When do you leave?” she asked again, this time with less patience.

“Jean-Louis gave me a week. I’m at one of the hotels in town…I can’t even remember which one.” He rubbed his eyes and saw stars and suddenly realized how jet lagged he felt. “My parents are at my house watching the kids…why am I telling you this? You don’t even give a shit about them…your own kids.” He rested the back of his head against the wall and sighed wearily. “Just give me this one week to be with him without you messing with his head. That’s all I’m asking. Please, Charlotte. I’m begging you.”

“Let me speak with him first. Wait here.”

“Oh, for crying out loud…”
She cut him off with an angry glare as she got up and walked back into the room. In a few minutes she came back out looking no less angry.

“You can have this week. Consider yourself lucky.”

“Why? Because you’re letting me have what’s mine?”

“No. Because he’ll be in agony after next week and we all know how well you’d be able to handle that.” She put her jacket on and walked away, hoping she’d never have to see him again. That smug, self-centered fool had no clue what it was to truly love someone, to bear unspeakable pain on another’s behalf and not flinch, to go willingly into the fire over and over until one’s body was a mass of thickened scars. She wasn’t weak like James; she would triumph or die trying.

Jean-Louis was calm when he went back into the room, still clutching the shirts but no longer distraught.

“What did Charlotte mean about next week?” James asked. “What are they going to do to you?”

He stroked Jean-Louis’s arm, being careful not to touch the IV needle inserted and taped into the back of his hand. He was on fluids and anti-nausea meds.

“Another round of chemo. This week is a down week to let me recover. Next week they increase the dose.” He was propped up on pillows and looked as fragile as a bird. With no hair to soften his face, his features were starkly defined and at turns alien and childlike, eyes larger than ever, fine nose straight as an arrow, high cheeks bordering on gauntness now, and a mouth that should really be hidden behind a veil. *No one should get to see that, no one but me,* James had always thought. That was for him alone.

“Will it hurt?”

Jean-Louis looked out the window. “I don’t want to think about it. What is pain anyway? When I’m dead I won’t have to feel a thing.”

James wanted to scream, wring his neck for talking like that. How dare he make him feel like his world was spinning out of control? But he realized that Jean-Louis needed that escape and death was the only door that offered a way out of an impossible situation. One day it would be him, too, faced with that dilemma. What to do when your own mortality is upon you staring you in the face? His spinal injury had given him an inkling of what it was to have an uncertain future, but he had never for a moment thought he would die from it. He couldn’t even say he would trade places with Jean-Louis in order to save him now. Was Charlotte right? Maybe he really didn’t love him enough, didn’t deserve to have him if he weren’t willing to make that kind of irrevocable sacrifice. The promises he had made to him in the past were lies after all.

“What are you thinking?” Jean-Louis asked.

“I was thinking...that your sister is right. I’m not good enough for you. I’m so sorry, baby.”

“For what?”

“For wanting something I didn’t deserve, for making you so unhappy. I never meant to hurt you.”

A melancholy smile settled onto Jean-Louis’s lips. “I never meant to hurt you either.”
James and Jean-Louis spend some quality time in Zürich.

James spent the next few days visiting with him with no interference from Charlotte, who had gone back to Arbois to check on her son, Étienne, now six. They took walks on the grounds of the clinic to pass the time, played cards and board games with some of the other patients in the spacious visitor’s lounge on their floor, watched bizarre shows on TV, most of which James found incomprehensible but they helped put Jean-Louis in a relaxed stupor so he didn’t complain. Towards the end of the week Jean-Louis was allowed to leave the clinic. His vitals were stable, the dizziness had abated, and he was able to take food and drink without difficulty. James suggested a few nights’ stay at his hotel.

“No,” Jean-Louis said. “Let’s go to the apartment in Zürich. I want you to see the city. It’s beautiful this time of year.”

The apartment was within easy walking distance from the Zürich Hauptbahnhof, the main train station servicing both the city and all its European connections to Spain, France, Italy, Austria, and Germany. If it were not for Swiss organization and precision, the place would be a chaotic zoo tilting out of control. Thankfully, it was more of a Grand Central on steroids but sparkling clean and running like a Patek Phillipe. Jean-Louis seemed oblivious to the crush of people around them, just happy to be out and about after a month of confinement. As they wended their way slowly through the station’s various terminals and arcades of shops and restaurants, James felt a certain pride creeping into him. He slipped easily into offensive mode, dodging and feinting through the crowd, keeping Jean-Louis in his protective wake, stiff-arming people who came too close, practically knocking down anyone who threatened to bump into them, young or old. Someone sneezed near them and James immediately snapped his head around and saw some hapless teenager wiping his nose on a sleeve.

“Cover your fucking mouth!” he shouted. The poor kid didn’t have a clue why he was suddenly getting mowed down by some red-faced lunatic. “Keep your goddamn germs to yourself!” James had the kid by the front of his jacket and was ready to stuff him into a nearby garbage bin.

“James, let him go,” Jean-Louis said quietly, glancing around nervously at the people staring at them. He pulled them apart and took the stunned kid aside, spoke to him apologetically in German for a few minutes before the kid nodded and walked away quickly with nary a backwards glance.

“What did you say to him?” James asked. He wasn’t in the mood to feel contrite.

“I told him you were my mentally deranged cousin from America.”

“That’s it?”
“What more did I need to say?”

When they finally exited onto the street the sun was shining brilliantly, the air crisp and smelling of autumn and diesel fuel. They walked several blocks to a three-story corner building sited on a busy intersection. It had a tall dark carved mahogany doorway with brass knobs capped by a marble pediment with the number of the building chiseled into the stone. A small brass plaque by the side of the door indicated that it was constructed in 1788. Their apartment was the entire second floor, a spacious suite of rooms with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Sihl River. The furnishings were strangely sparse to James’s eyes. A large Prouvé table in what served as the dining room, classic sofas and armchairs by Mies in the living room, a Henningsen hanging lamp in the entry hall, a Bertoia sonambient sculpture by the fireplace. Not that he knew what he was looking at. His former girlfriend Krista would know what to do with a place like this. A large leather sectional with built-in cup holders would be a nice start.

Jean-Louis led them into a bedroom so James could unpack his bag. The room was equally austere, just a double bed with floating wall-mounted nightstands and a large mirrored dresser. A sitting area with two armchairs was tucked into a corner. A doorway led to a large en suite bathroom. There was a rolling clothes rack along one wall with several shirts and jackets already hung up. James recognized one of the shirts, the one with the kitten in a teacup.

“Are you going to be comfortable in here?” asked Jean-Louis.

James turned from emptying his bag. “Where will you be?”

“I thought I’d use the room next door.” Jean-Louis approached him, putting a hand on his chest to soothe him after he saw the scowl instantly flash across James’s face.

“No,” James said, shaking his head and pulling Jean-Louis to him. He dipped his face down so he could brush against his cheek. “Stay with me.” He squeezed him in his arms even as he felt his heart tighten like a clenched fist. “I can’t go on like this. I need to be with you.”

“James.” Jean-Louis grabbed him by the short hair on the back of his head and looked him in the eyes. “You can’t have me like that anymore. I can’t…it would be unbearable…do you understand? We shouldn’t torture ourselves like this. It’ll be better if we’re apart.”

James was shaking, his body wracked with crippling need and desire, a fucking tornado twisting around in his brain, years and years of fury and frustration tossed around like shards of glass and shattered fencing. He wanted to destroy everything around him. It was too much, too much to be without him, too much to hold him and not take all of him for himself. How could it have come to this, all the wanting and striving and yearning burning a hole inside him that seemed to have no bottom? And now the end was so near, nipping at his heels, the Devil demanding his payment, his only love, his beautiful Jean-Louis to be handed over and obliterated to balance the sick scales of the universe. How could he stop it all from happening?

“I wouldn’t do that,” James whispered, desperation a noose tightening around his neck. “I wouldn’t hurt you like that. We can be together…I can make it good for you. I promise. You have to trust me.” He kissed him over and over, caressing him through his clothes, feeling how loosely they hung on him, the brittleness of his body underneath. “You have to trust me.”

He lifted him up easily and carried him to the bed. Jean-Louis was whimpering softly even as he kissed him back, not trusting him at all but too exhausted to put up a fight. He let James strip him naked and lay fully exposed for him to see his lack of desire, his cock slumbering and soft against a pale thigh. James stared at him, not saying a word, then took off his own clothes, leaving them in a pile on the floor. He stood by the bed out of hands’ reach, his own cock already thick and rigid,
and slowly stroked himself. He had been working out like a madman in his basement gym, the only thing that had kept him sane since the separation, and he wanted Jean-Louis to see him and know it was all for him, every square inch of muscle forged and pounded out in sweat and pain, an offering to the one he adored. Jean-Louis watched mesmerized for a few moments, then sat up and threw his legs over the edge of the bed, thighs spread wide for James’s pleasure as he urged him in close enough to straddle his hips with his knees. James groaned as he brought forth a glistening drop of fluid to the tip of his cock and wiped it onto his thumb, then onto Jean-Louis’s lips. Jean-Louis stared up at him, taking his thumb into his mouth, sucking down on it, then did the same to each of his fingers until the sensation was enough to make James want to scream. He pulled his hand free of Jean-Louis’s mouth and kissed him, sinking his tongue deep into him, wanting to eat him alive. He kept one hand at the back of his head, the other wrapped around his throat, holding him prisoner.

“It’s always the same,” James grunted between kisses. “What you do to me… it never ends…” He trailed his tongue down his neck, went to fondle Jean-Louis between the legs but was stopped with a hand to his wrist.

“No, don’t touch me,” Jean-Louis said, panic sparking behind his eyes. “Just let me watch you. Let me see you come.” He spread his legs wider and leaned back on his hands, leaving himself completely open and defenseless. “I trust you.”

James wanted to bury his face against the soft mounds of his balls, rub the coarse stubble of his chin against him there and drive him crazy with it, take his plump but oddly quiescent cock in his mouth and waken it with a violent tongue-lashing. But he didn’t, he kept his word. Jean-Louis had given him his trust. James propped a bent knee against the mattress to steady himself. All the blood in his body seemed to have gone to his cock, leaving none in his brain, and he felt increasingly lightheaded. He began stroking his cock again with his right hand, using his left hand to pin Jean-Louis’s knee back so he could have a full view of what was being denied to him. Who said they shouldn’t torture themselves? He was going to rape him with his eyes in the worst way and not feel one iota of guilt for doing so.

“Oh, fucking hell… this is all for you, baby… all for you…”

In seconds he emptied himself all over Jean-Louis’s chest, his neck and face, an ejaculated abstract expressionist masterpiece. He imagined if the ceilings weren’t quite so high, some of it might have ended up there too. Jean-Louis was motionless, frozen like a statue, staring back at James as if in a trance, mouth agape, then he slowly slid his tongue along his upper lip for a taste. Godlike, James surveyed the scene before him, admired his virile handiwork with macho satisfaction. Pollock would’ve been proud. The pleasure was short-lived.

Jean-Louis bit into his lower lip to stifle a sly grin, his pupils blown wide with wicked intent. In a soft voice, he ordered, “Now lick it off of me.”

“Huh?” James was pretty sure he hadn’t heard him right. There was no way he could …

“You made the mess,” Jean-Louis scolded. “You clean it up.” He leaned his face closer to James, pearlescent strands starting to drip down his cheeks. “Do it.”

Oh, fuck me. James gulped, then, like an obedient dog, he bent down and cleaned his face with his tongue, licking tentatively at first and then more diligently when he heard Jean-Louis sigh into his ear. When he reached his chest he started retching, not used to nor liking the taste of himself. He regretted not jerking off that morning in the shower – there was so much of this stuff, for shit’s sake! He thought of all the times that Jean-Louis had swallowed for him, done it without complaint to make him happy and stroke his ego. James had loved holding his head right there, forcing his
own eyes open so he could watch Jean-Louis receive what he proudly thought was the nectar of the gods, made sure he gulped down every last drop before he let him go, lips bruised and chin smeared. He had never asked him if he liked it, had just assumed he was as eager for him as…

what? That James would take Jean-Louis’s cock into his own mouth and suck on him like a juicy bratwurst, well, wasn’t that proof positive that they were meant for each other? God knows, James would never abide any other man’s cock in his mouth, or in any other orifice, for that matter, but Jean-Louis’s taste and scent had driven him wild from the start. Jean-Louis wasn’t like anyone else. He was made for him.

And now Jean-Louis took pity on him—or maybe he was just sick of listening to James gagging on his own cum—and told him, “Okay, that’s enough. I don’t want you vomiting on me.” He pulled a grateful James onto the bed beside him and kissed him deeply, made a thorough sweep with his tongue. “You’re an acquired taste, you see? Be glad I have an adventurous palate.”

They nestled under the covers and fell asleep. When they awoke, the sun had barely dipped past the horizon and was casting a red glow up onto the plaster walls through the windows. Jean-Louis woke first, touching his chest and groaning. He was sticky and James’s scent on him had taken a ripe turn. He went into the bathroom and started filling the tub, then padded into the kitchen for a bottle of wine from his mother’s vineyard, the local vin jaune or yellow wine, similar to a dry sherry and good with cheese and nuts. He took out a wedge of Comté from the fridge and opened a canister of smoked almonds, put everything on a tray and carried it into the bathroom with some glasses. He set it all down on a low bench next to the tub, a large cast iron behemoth weighing half a ton. Jean-Louis was already in the bath and halfway through his first glass by the time James stumbled in, disoriented and scratching idly at an ass cheek. He lifted the seat of the toilet at the other end of the spacious room and took a long and very sloppy piss, paying little mind to accuracy.

“Nous pourrions aussi bien être mariés,” Jean-Louis muttered under his breath. We might as well be married. He didn’t know if he should be amused or disgusted.

James flushed the toilet, fondled his balls absently, scratched his other ass cheek—a precise ballet of masculine form and technique that could only have been mastered through countless repetition of movements—then sauntered over to the tub and lowered himself gingerly into the steaming water, hissing through his teeth. “Ssss…you really like it hot, don’t you? Good thing I’ve already got kids.”

“Indeed. You wasted a billion little ones on my face today.” He handed James a glass of wine and mulled with genuine regret his lost hope for fatherhood. The chemo and radiation would render him infertile, and he had decided against saving an untainted sample before treatment. He wouldn’t live long enough to raise any offspring, so why bother? The bitter truth was he would never have children of his own, never see them grow up, never have opportunity to right all his own wrongs in a meaningful way. He poured himself another glass and drank deeply.

“Your doctors let you drink?” James reprimanded, frowning like some chaperone at a high school prom.

Jean-Louis rolled his eyes at him and scoffed, “I’m not dead yet and I am allowed some semblance of life between doses.” He took another long, indulgent swallow just to rub it in, gave James a mischievous smile. “There’s a club I want to take you to. Tonight they have a cover band that plays American songs from the ’80s. Isn’t that right up your alley?”

“Excuse me, wisenheimer, that’s my parents’ era, okay? I’m not that much older than you.” He downed an angry mouthful of wine, still miffed and in the mood to chide. “Aren’t you overdoing it
“a little? They just let you out of the hospital today and you want to go clubbing already?”

“This is my only chance, James. I won’t be doing anything after next week. My life will be finished. Here, try this cheese.” He sliced off a corner of the Comté and passed it over to him.

James chewed and swallowed, showing no appreciation for the subtleties. “What if someone sick breathes on you?”

“Yes, like that boy you almost murdered for sneezing? He said it wasn’t even him, for Christ’s sake.”

“I don’t know how you can be so…so…uncaring about your health.”

“The word is ‘cavalier.’”

“What?”

“‘Cavalier.’ Never mind. Stop acting like a mother hen.” He kicked him under the water, pressed his foot against his testicles.

“Hey, watch it, buddy.” James tensed against the back of the tub, nearly spilling his drink onto the floor. “I can make you sorry for that.” He grabbed Jean-Louis’s errant foot and brought it up to his mouth, sucked on a toe until Jean-Louis squirmed and moaned. James was pleased, smugly so.

“Am I making you horny? Do you want me?”

“Hmm…” Jean-Louis emptied his glass and set it on the tray. Then he reached down with both hands and touched himself lightly, slowly tracing his fingertips along the length of his cock, sighing. James ran his tongue around Jean-Louis’s ankle several times, strokes his calf, then his thigh. He could see him hardening under the water, felt his own cock twitching with feral purpose. He put his glass down on the tile floor and moved in close, trapping Jean-Louis against him. He draped Jean-Louis’s legs up over his knees, lifting his ass off the floor of the tub.

“No, no,” Jean-Louis cried. He gripped the sides of the tub to keep from sliding further into James.

“It’s alright. I’m not going to hurt you. I promise. Just relax.”

He put his fingers at his entrance and caressed him gently, feathery touches just enough to elicit some stuttering moans. With his other hand he gripped Jean-Louis’s cock firmly and stroked him with a steady rhythm, feeling him swell and harden fully under his palm. Jean-Louis laid his head back against the marble tile wall, eyes shut, lips parted, a look of desperation spreading across his face. James quickened his strokes as he felt Jean-Louis’s thighs tense and then tremble against his legs, his knuckles whitening as he gripped the sides of the tub harder. At last he arched his back and cried out, “Oh, oh.” A thick cloud of milky fluid spiraled through the hot water tinged undeniably with red.

“Shit.” James quickly loosened his grip on him and stared mortified into the water. “You’re bleeding. Did I do that to you?”

“No. It’s nothing,” Jean-Louis sat up, wincing. “It’s just from the catheter they had in me. I was too dizzy to make it to the bathroom. I kept falling so they hooked me up to…whatever. It still hurts like hell to piss.”

Guilt lodged in James’s throat. “Does it hurt to come?”

“I know now it does.”
James pulled him close and hugged his delicate frame to him, traced a wet hand across the bones in his back, the jutting ribs. “I’m so sorry, baby. I just wanted to…”

“I know, James.” Jean-Louis kissed his cheek and folded tightly against him. “I know you love me. And I want you to.”

Chapter End Notes

I have to apologize for my awful French. If anyone spots a mistake (I’m sure there are many), feel free to let me know in the comments section.
What's the Difference Between Swiss, Raclette, and Velveeta?

Chapter Summary

A night out clubbing. On stage: skinny dudes from Slovenia rocking American power ballads.

James was starving and bit ravenously into his hamburger. They ate at a restaurant by the train station catering to tourists and though it offended Jean-Louis’s sensibilities to be dining on anything but truly local fare, he knew it was pointless to make James stretch his culinary boundaries. The man was stubbornly resistant to any food he deemed un-American, with the one exception of take-out Chinese, as long as it wasn’t too authentic; General Tso’s Chicken was as outré as things got. James’s idea of acceptable food was further warped by his conservative Midwest upbringing and a childhood dominated by frozen, canned, and processed meals. Kraft was king of the household pantry. Jean-Louis had told him more than once that Velveeta was not cheese nor was it even food, American or otherwise. It was a lethal manufactured product masquerading as something edible. In response, James had called him a know-it-all snob, a spoiled French brat, and various other unflattering things before the argument veered off on a tangent uniquely James’s, a tendency that Jean-Louis found to be both immensely frustrating and amusing in equal measure.

“You fucking French lost the war, baby. We won! USA!” James flipped the grilled cheese sandwich in the pan with its melting slices of Velveeta, source of the disagreement.

“You mean the Seven Years’ War? What you Americans call the French and Indian War? The French side won. Those American colonists defending your precious British king got their asses kicked all over the place.” Actually, the French hadn’t won and wound up ceding Canada in the 1763 Treaty of Paris, but he figured James wouldn’t know that. “And what does that have to do with Velveeta?” he asked, all innocence.

“Don’t try to change the subject, Einstein. I’m talking about World War II.”

“We were on the same side! The Allied side!”

“You wish! The French were on the side of the Nazis, drinking champagne and heil Hitler-ing and goose-stepping right alongside those Commie-Fascist motherfuckers.”

“Commie-Fascist…?” Jean-Louis decided to let that one go and plowed onward. “And how do you know about all that champagne-drinking and goose-stepping? From watching all those ‘based on a true story’ Hollywood movies?”

“No. Everyone knows the French were best bros with the Nazis. It’s a common fact!”

“Right. And Adam and Eve had a pet dinosaur.”

“What? Now you’re being ridiculous. You have some nerve calling yourself a paleo…calling yourself a scientist. USA! USA!”
Jean-Louis ordered a serving of rösti, hoping the pan-fried dish of thinly grated potatoes and raclette cheese topped with bacon would be something appealing to James’s limited palate.

“You should try at least one thing that’s Swiss,” Jean-Louis insisted.

“I already have. I’ve got Swiss cheese on my burger. See?” He waved it in his face for emphasis. “Stop foisting your evil ways on me.”

“Foist?” Jean-Louis raised an eyebrow. “That’s a new word for you. And besides, I thought you liked my evil ways.” He smiled sweetly and held a forkful of the rösti out to him. “I swear this is one hundred times better than those fries on your plate.”

James grabbed the fork out of his hand. “If I eat this, do you promise to stop annoying the shit out of me?”

“Yes.” He took a sip of water, still bemoaning the fact that James wouldn’t let him have a glass of wine with dinner. Whatever. He planned on drinking once they got to the club and snagging a joint. Let him try to stop him then. He watched James sample the rösti.

“Yeah, it’s tasty,” he admitted reluctantly, handing the fork back.

“Do you want more?” ventured Jean-Louis.

“No, now shut your face or I’ll do it for you.”

When they arrived at the club on Schiffbaustrasse in the Kreis 5 district, the streets were heavy with tourists and pub crawlers, even on a Thursday night. It was almost 10:30 pm and the band was due to go on stage in thirty minutes, enough time to get a drink first. They could already hear an opening act downstairs, a woman’s lilting voice accompanied by a violin and drums. The bar upstairs, part of a row of converted warehouses, was decorated with taxidermied heads of deer, boar, and fox. Strings of Christmas lights tacked along the walls and wound around the heavy steel posts lent the place a festive mood year round despite the industrial setting. Jean-Louis ordered a Belgian weissbier for James and a glass of Chasselas for himself. They took their drinks downstairs where it was already smoky and buzzing with low conversation. Cove lighting illuminated the long rectangular space with its Roman brick rib-vaulted ceilings, its heavy masonry walls, and polished concrete floors. The side and back walls were lined with overstuffed red velvet banquette seating, with a low stage at the far end of the room where they were now setting up for the band.

It was a relief to be out in public with no fear of recognition. Here in Zürich, nobody knew or cared who James was, even if there were the odd American tourist, they were likely snowboarders and skiers, not fans of football. He could let himself relax and have a good time. They crowded onto a bench along the side, started up a conversation with three international exchange students, one from Florence, one from Gröningen, and one from Berlin, all earning their master’s at the Zürich University of the Arts. They spoke fluent English; James expected no less, the US ruled the world and rightfully so in his opinion. Within ten minutes he was extolling the virtues of real football (American) versus fake football (soccer). The conversation got heated fast but he wouldn’t back down in typical pig-headed fashion.

Jean-Louis pulled him aside and whispered loudly, “For Christ’s sake! You’re arguing about football with an Italian, a Dutchman, and a German. You’re not going to win this one.”
“They don’t know shit,” James retorted.

“Fine. Be an asshole. I’ll be right back.”

He disappeared into the crowd before James could stop him. When he turned back to the three stooges, he saw they were on their phones and shooting him snarky glances.

“Fucking pansy art students,” James muttered.

He emptied his beer glass and set it on the tray of a passing barmaid, then elbowed his way around the room looking for Jean-Louis. The place was shoulder to shoulder with a young crowd, mostly X-Game types in their twenties, and a good number of very attractive women. He couldn’t understand why they’d be interested in music from the ’80s. Most of them hadn’t even been born yet. The band, comprised of five anorexic dudes from Slovenia of all places, took the stage and the lights dimmed. They played a two-hour set of popular American power ballads from the ’80s, songs by Journey, REO Speedwagon, Foreigner, Styx, Chicago, the Eagles. They threw in some early Prince and Guns N’ Roses for good measure. It was appalling and glorious. James’s father still kept his stacks of LPs in the basement of their family home next to the old stereo system. Every once in a while, when James was a child, the old man would slap a record onto the turntable and revel in his teen glory days.

“They used to make out to this song in high school,” he’d grin all misty-eyed, a can of Miller Genuine Draft in one hand, the 12 x 12 album cover with the number four in sans serif in the other, while a tinny high-pitched voice crooned, “I’ve been waiting… for a girl like you… to come into my life…”

“Ah, gross Dad!”

Hearing the songs now, though, almost brought a tear to his eye. They didn’t sound as lame as he remembered them and some were indeed seriously kiss-worthy. Maybe his parents had been onto something. He looked around and saw how everyone was really getting into the set and goddamn it if it didn’t make him proud to be an American. “That’s my country’s music,” he wanted to shout. And where the hell was that little shit? James could feel his impatience running away with him when he felt a thin pair of arms wrap around his waist from behind, a lit joint dangling between slender fingers.

“Where the fuck have you been?” James scolded. “You left me alone with—”

Jean-Louis shut him up with a hand to the groin. He moved around to face him, throwing his arms around his neck and planting an acrid kiss on his lips. His pupils were dilated and huge like a homeless waif’s in a Keene painting. Bodies pressed against them on all sides, strangers all moving together as one flowing organism, arms raised and hips grinding. The floor thumped with low bone-shaking bass notes, Prince’s lyrics sung like a panther in heat and arcing like an electric current down their spines:

Dig if you will the picture, of you and I engaged in a kiss, the sweat of your body covers me, can you my darling, can you picture this?

James wanted to fuck him right there on the dance floor, go all porn star on him and leave him a soaking disheveled mess. Jean-Louis handed him the joint and he gave in to it, took a long drag and then squeezed him tighter. No random drug testing to worry about anymore. That was all in the past. He had always been so fixated on striving for the future, a desire so vast it filled his entire frame of vision. Now that future was gone. No more football. No more Jean-Louis. He knew it even if he couldn’t accept it. As he held him in his arms he let the music and its ghosts from the
past sweep over him. It was there, still there, waiting and patient, there to show him how to live again, his road forward. He would take strength from it, breathe it in, open his eyes and really see for the first time. Jean-Louis was right. There was nothing to fear. He just had to let go and set himself free.

Afterwards, they took a cab back to the apartment and stumbled straight to bed, both of them too exhausted to bother showering though they smelled of smoke and sweat. It reminded James of a younger self he had never been, someone he could have been if he had chosen a different path. Would he have been happier he wondered as he drifted to sleep, or had he been on a fool’s errand his whole life?

The next day they spent a few hours in the late morning at the University of Zürich’s Zoological Museum, then took a leisurely stroll through the city after a coffee break at Café Henrici. They bought chocolates and toys for the kids, hand-knitted sweaters for James’s brother, sister-in-law, and parents. For a blissful few hours it felt as if they were just on vacation like any normal couple, doing toursty things, collecting souvenirs, making memories. The only reminder that something was off kilter was Jean-Louis’s shaved head. James missed his hair, the silken feel of it in his fingers, the way it set him apart and raised him above all others. He knew Jean-Louis was departing, piece by piece, slowly peeling away the tangible and concrete, slipping into another form altogether to go somewhere James could not follow. He held his hand tightly as they walked along, not caring who saw. What did it matter now anyway? He would never have this again. They took the train back to Aarau that evening and stayed in James’s hotel. The next day Jean-Louis went back to the clinic and James was on a flight returning to the States. James had wanted to leave him something, a gift, he knew not what, something to hold onto, something to keep them tethered together, a lifeline to span the ocean of separation between them but there was nothing. He had to let the door close.
Jean-Louis returned home to Arbois in January after he was released from the isolation ward. He would go back to the clinic in late April for a follow-up exam and another round of CT and PET scans to check for recurrence. For now, the first hurdle had been cleared. He moved back into his childhood bedroom, small as it was, the confines of it served to keep his world from flying apart. For the first two months he stayed to himself, remaining upstairs in his room or sitting in the small den downstairs next to the fireplace with the door closed. He did his best to avoid being seen by the guests renting their cabins who would eat in the communal dining room at mealtimes. He still looked like some kind of burn victim with patchy sores and skin sloughing off in sheets. He couldn’t stand to look at himself, why would anyone else want a gander? The insides of his mouth, nose, and throat were equally riddled with open sores. It was excruciating to swallow, much less eat. The act of urinating or defecating was sheer torture. His hair was coming in straw-like and coarse and of a color he didn’t recognize as his own, so he kept it trimmed close to his skull with the electric clippers. He spent hours lying still on his bed or curled up under a blanket in an armchair, thinking about why he was even still alive, the pointlessness of it all, how he got here in the first place, not in a self-pitying way, but like a cinema-goer watching a movie.

He was born the youngest of four children, named after an ancestor who had fought and died in the infamous World War I battle of Verdun in 1916. His mother Catherine, who was a great niece of the dead guy, thought it would be a terrific way to honor this fallen hero, a mere twenty-four years old when he was buried alive under a mud slide precipitated by the heavy rains and unrelenting artillery barrages, leaving behind a wife, two daughters, but no sons. Jean-Louis’s father Charles thought it a bad omen to say the least. However, Catherine had let him name their two older sons, Paul and Ernst, after relatives on his side of the family, Swiss bankers no less, so it only seemed fair to let her have a crack at it. Perhaps it was his desire to shield Jean-Louis from the tragedy of his namesake that he loved the child far more than the others. His parents decided together on the name for his twin sister, who was born exactly eight minutes earlier than Jean-Louis. They named her Charlotte, after the dessert Charlotte russe, which Catherine was fond of making and Charles was fond of eating.

Their family home in Arbois in the Bourgogne-Franche-Comté region was situated on twenty hectares of productive land held since the 1600s by Catherine’s ancestors. Some of the vines were nearly a hundred years old, gnarled and practically ossified, ancient friends slumbering in the gravelly layers of limestone and earth. For generations her family produced the local vin jaune from Savagnin grapes and the rich, sparkling Crémant du Jura from Chardonnay as their main wines. Fifty-three years ago, when Catherine was born, her family began cultivating Pinot noir to a fair amount of success. When Catherine was thirty-three, her parents retired to an apartment in Paris. They had made enough to enjoy a very comfortable life in the city, something they had long wanted. A brother born three years before Catherine had died as an infant from pneumonia. The vineyard and estate were left to her to manage, which she did with great enthusiasm as she was often absent her husband. Charles was a paleontologist who worked for British Petroleum, traveling abroad for extended periods of time analyzing core samples brought up by drills for the presence of certain microfossils, a process of biostratigraphy useful in oil exploration. In fact,
Charles was trapped in Reykjavik on assignment when Paul was born, snowed in by a massive storm in April.

Catherine began an ambitious renovation of the former workers’ cabins on the property, converting them into modernized cottages that could be rented out to tourists year round. Their ancestral home, the main house, had been constructed in the early 1600s, originally a simple two story farmhouse with thick masonry walls, slate slabs over a pounded dirt floor, and huge timber beams supporting a high-pitched roof. In the old days, the central room with the hearth, known as the hall, would be converted into a dining room at mealtimes, with trestle tables set up and broken down for each meal. Through the centuries, the house was gradually updated and expanded to accommodate more and more rooms. By the time Jean-Louis was ten, his mother had added a separate wing with a professional kitchen and had turned the original “hall” into a large communal dining room for the guests staying in the cottages to share their meals and socialize with each other. The vineyard was producing well with fine harvests yearly, the tourism trade had never been better with visitors from Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Belgium, Sweden, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, even as far away as Canada and the United States. She had the energy to manage a rather extensive team of workers and overseers. Above all she had unerring taste and an eye for detail.

It was not long after Jean-Louis was born that she noticed something amiss. Her youngest child did not cry. If it were not for his twin sister, she would never know when to change his diaper, he never made a peep. She relied almost immediately on Charlotte to let her know if she were hungry, at which time she would feed them both. She worried that he might perhaps be brain damaged. He had been born with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck, although the obstetrician had assured her at the time that his vitals had been normal both prior to and upon delivery. She watched him closely for any other strangeness, but found him to be alert and seemingly aware of his surroundings. He was not overly fearful or withdrawn, just oddly quiet for an infant. At two years of age Charlotte already possessed a masterful range of vocabulary yet Jean-Louis was still mute and would remain so until he was four, when they discovered that he could respond in several languages, picked up solely by his watching foreign language channels on television. This is what Charlotte had told them and since the two were inseparable, they had to believe that this was the case.

His first year in school was troubling. The teachers reported to Catherine and Charles that their son was non-interactive, inattentive, stubborn, and uncooperative when given instruction. They couldn’t understand this. Neither Paul nor Ernst, nor Charlotte for that matter, had any difficulties in school. They had him evaluated by their pediatrician, who recommended a child psychiatrist trained in identifying cases of autism, ADD, schizophrenia, and other such mental disorders. Catherine was frightened by the idea that their youngest child might be a lunatic or retarded even, but Charles scoffed at the thought.

“Schools expect every child to be the same. That’s the real problem.” He said it knowing that Jean-Louis was not ordinary. But what was ordinary? What was normal? It was all relative to some standard that probably didn’t even apply to him, he thought. After all, he didn’t consider himself to be ordinary or normal. Where was the value or fun in that?

In the end, he was evaluated by three different psychiatrists, specialists in childhood development, each arriving at similar conclusions. Jean-Louis was not retarded, nor was he autistic or schizophrenic, nor did he have ADD. His IQ was well above normal but not what would be considered genius level. He did possess what seemed to be a form of eidetic memory, an uncanny ability to recall with accuracy whatever he saw, heard, read, and smelled even. It may have explained his late entry into speech, the muteness a reaction against the imprinting of too much information and an inability to make sense of it.
Catherine was relieved and, at the suggestion of the doctors, they placed him one level ahead of his peers to see if this would alleviate his boredom. Eventually, he would find himself four levels ahead of his peers, but this did little to change or reconcile the utter disconnect he felt with the world, the endless torrent of confusion raining down on him at all times, the intensity of life grinding him to a pulp. The family physician recommended an antidepressant to control his anxiety, but Catherine would not hear of it. There was no reason for her youngest to suffer from anxiety, none whatsoever. He had two confident older brothers to show him the way and a father who favored him. What more could he ask for? Maybe her eldest son was right; maybe all he needed was more discipline.

Jean-Louis was nine when he got his first whiff of pot in the boys’ bathroom. By then he was in with the thirteen-year-olds who were housed in a separate wing of the school from the kids in the lower levels. There was a world of difference between boys twelve and younger and boys thirteen and older. If he had been a pup among domestic dogs before, he was now among wild wolves. He didn’t understand his dread beyond the fact that each day felt like the Goya painting he saw at the Prado when his family vacationed in Madrid one summer; he was that poor soul in the white shirt, arms raised as if crucified, awaiting the bullets of the firing squad.

The pot was a godsend and a revelation. Something about that distinctive, acrid smell put him in a different frame of mind. That day in the bathroom he didn’t hesitate, went right up to the huddle of teenagers and asked for whatever it was they were smoking. They had laughed riotously, thinking it hilarious to get a child high. One of the boys passed him the joint and he inhaled like his parents and brothers inhaled their cigarettes, like he had secretly done with Charlotte once behind the shed. When he gagged and coughed they laughed some more and shook him roughly.

“No, you moron. Like this.” The boy named Cyril showed him how to take a slow drag, then hold it deep in his lungs before exhaling with an indolent sigh.

It burned his throat and lungs at first, but only in the beginning and it was so well worth the brief pain of initiation. For the first time, he found himself in the calm eye of the hurricane. Life became more bearable and his academics improved. The pot dampened the chaos and noise around him and in his head, allowed him to focus on the task at hand. His favorite subjects were literature, history, languages, and chemistry, but not mathematics or music or architecture which, like the fine arts, he could stand in awe of but not “do” in the sense of creating something original. By his thinking, there was a difference between being a Pythagoras or an Archimedes or an Einstein or Newton, and being a Van Leeuwenhoek, a Mendel or even a Darwin. He could see nothing arriving naturally through pure reasoning and observation to account for the theorems of Pythagoras or the inventions of Archimedes, that was genius requiring a leap of the imagination along the lines of Leonardo or Mozart, men so gifted as to defy explanation. On the other hand, it seemed sensible to him that the ideas proposed by Mendel and Darwin would have arisen eventually, if not through them, then through someone else. Their contributions were revolutionary and influential, provable through time and technology, but not an act of creation, singular and godlike.

Another favorite subject was religion, well, Catholicism specifically. The school he attended was run by Jesuit priests. His mother was adamant that all her children attend Catholic school, although she was not a particularly strict adherent of the faith aside from attending Sunday Mass, Easter services, and midnight Mass on Christmas. Even as a child Jean-Louis knew for a fact that his mother used birth control, had lovers besides her own husband, told lies, and various other things condemned by church doctrine. None of this bothered him or lessened his love of Catholicism, especially the readings from the Old Testament with their bizarre and cruel stories of a fickle, hotheaded, impetuous god, a god driven to madness practically by his own ineptness. The New Testament stories about Jesus and Paul couldn’t hold a candle to the humiliating Drunkenness of Noah, or the epic Flood or Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, or even the story of Cain and
Abel, clearly a justification for the nomadic, pastoral life led by the ancient Hebrews over the agriculture practiced by the dominant and therefore evil Sumerians and Babylonians, not to mention the Egyptians, but told with such pathos as to break one’s heart. He’d take the nutty acts committed by Abraham and his equally nutty descendents over the ghoulish Four Horsemen of John’s Apocalypse any day.

Besides the religious instruction given at school, Jean-Louis always looked forward to attending Sunday services with his mother. His other siblings thought it drudgery, but he went willingly and eagerly. The parish church to which they belonged was a late Romanesque structure, and although it sat atop a rise it still gave the solid, hunkered down impression of a bulldog guarding its bowl of food, rather than something reaching for the heavens. The small punched windows let little light into the interior space which, despite the fairly high wood-beamed ceilings, always felt closed in and hushed. Though the church was completed in the late 1200s, it had none of the size and grandeur of the famous abbey churches of France, and there was nary a hint of the attenuated grace of the Gothic churches already built by then. It seemed stubbornly resistant to the world around it, so sure was it of its own integrity and rightness. Once a week in the amber glow of the nave, he would sit between his mother and Charlotte and listen to Father Benoît reciting the day’s text in Latin. The echoing timbre of his voice and the cadences of that old tongue would mix with the cloying, sickly sweet smell of the incense and send him into a trancelike state where he felt his mind completely emptied of thought. The words would fill him like wine into a vessel and something approaching ecstasy would pulse through him, low and quiet like some ancient magic, making him forget to breathe.

It wasn’t that he believed in religion, its true meaning or purpose or relevance. He knew there was no God, no Devil, no angels, no such thing as sin, retribution, salvation, mercy, atonement, damnation. All of these things were human constructs, created for good and ill. But they were as necessary to him as food, shelter, clothing, air and water. It wasn’t just a matter of wanting it, desiring it. There was something in the beauty of the rituals and the ruthlessness of scripture that went beyond the mere indulgence of a guilty pleasure. Catholicism provided a framework on which to hang his sanity. To be told that he was committing a grave sin gave him a semblance of peace; he knew where he stood with a certitude that he found absent in the rest of his life. Catholicism was that directory at the mall that said “YOU ARE HERE” in capital letters with a big red arrow pointing to a dot within a circle. As someone completely amoral, he needed that directory like nobody’s business, needed to know where he stood on that ladder linking heaven and hell. And he had good reason.

Jean-Louis was no stranger to sex from an early age. He could often hear his parents making love, even saw them once when he was around six. It was late at night and he was sick with a fever. He had gone into their room to seek out his mother for comfort. They didn’t hear him come in. He stood by the bed, watching his father laying on top of his mother, moving around in a steady rhythm, his mother making those peculiar noises, something between a cry and a whimper. They didn’t notice him until they had finished. As shocked as they were, they were even more stunned when he calmly crawled into bed between them and complained of feeling ill. His parents never made mention of the incident, but Jean-Louis spoke to his sister about it the next day. He was in their room convalescing, still a little feverish and drained.

“Was Papa doing this?” Charlotte asked, and she lay on top of him, wiggling around.

They both burst out laughing, it tickled so much. “Yes,” Jean-Louis said. “Have you seen them, too?”

“No,” she replied, “I saw Paul with a girl in the field doing that.” They lay quietly next to each other, holding hands, thinking about what they had seen and what it all meant. That night, they
played a game. They took turns lying on top of each other. It seemed pointless and they soon tired of it.

Later, he remembered seeing both of his brothers behind the shed. They were masturbating, only he didn’t know what that was. He was six or seven and still innocent in those things. He had touched himself countless times out of curiosity and had even let Charlotte have a go at it but never felt anything beyond a mild thrill. He liked it better when she let him put his hands on her. They looked very similar, except that she was missing what he had between his legs. Best of all was when they kissed, pressing their lips together, like they saw their parents doing or like the actors on the TV shows. It always made him feel a little funny inside, as if a small animal were running around in his stomach.

Though they were only fraternal twins, they were bonded in ways they knew to keep to themselves, and shared little in common with their older siblings, who were nine and seven years their senior. To Charlotte, Paul and Ernst were crude beasts, distant subhuman relatives who she wished belonged to some other family. She and Jean-Louis were not like them at all, with blond hair that bleached almost white in the summer, blue eyes, and long thin limbs. When she looked at Jean-Louis, which she often did at night facing him in bed, she could swear she was looking into a mirror, and the image she saw stirred her heart in ways she didn’t understand but craved nevertheless. It was not long after their seventh birthday that their mother moved them into separate adjoining rooms. There were plenty of nights, however, when Catherine could hear the door opening and closing. She never confronted them. God knows what they are doing together, she would think, and drift off to sleep.
Fathers and Sons

Chapter Summary

A father’s tender care is lost.

When Jean-Louis was eight, he began accompanying his father on his annual summer sojourn into the foothills of the Jura Mountains. Charles’s work for British Petroleum took him traveling around the world for weeks or months at a time but his real passion was fossil hunting in the field. So for one of the four weeks each summer when he took time off from his paid work, Charles would decamp to the family’s hunting lodge on the eastern boundary of their property. His two older sons had never shown any interest in paleontology, preferring to hunt and chop down trees, and his daughter was too attached to Catherine to leave her for more than a day, but Jean-Louis was different. The boy was quiet, observant, and curious. He had a patience and gentleness his other sons lacked. Charles did not fail to see that his youngest often turned up at the dinner table with bruises on his face or arms, results of the constant rough housing between the boys. Although he had misgivings, he felt it best to let his sons work it out amongst themselves. He would make it up to Jean-Louis in other ways, share his passion for nature with him, open up his world to the beauty of the past.

They would often be joined on these excursions by his father’s old school chum, Henry Wallace, who was a curator of invertebrates at the Natural History Museum in London. Charles and Henry had been students together at Cambridge, where they had suffered through a months-long confinement on the blasted and bleak island of Spitsbergen off the coast of Norway when they were classmates. There they had hunted for fossils of trilobites amongst the shale outcrops, frozen to the bone though it was the height of summer. Years later, they would look back upon those early days and laugh at the hardships they endured, the disgusting grey grime that seeped into their woolen underclothes, the nauseating odors from sweat-logged socks that even the blistering cold air failed to dissipate, the monotonous meals of rehydrated beef cubes, legumes, and oatmeal. Now the two men would sit around the fire pit outside the hunting lodge at sundown and tell stories of adventures so fondly remembered, it felt to Jean-Louis as if they had shared a magical past that held the secret to bliss.

For eight hours a day, they would chip away at the mountain face. His father showed him how to tap the rock with the hammer, how to recognize the different strata in the limestone, how to interpret the strange imprints of ancient creatures and plants. In the evenings, Jean-Louis would help them sort through the samples collected that day, storing them in carefully labeled boxes to be carted back to the home office for further study. One summer, Henry brought along a few samples of trilobite fossils to amuse Jean-Louis, and even gave him one to keep at the end of his visit. The boy was his godson for all practical purposes and always called him 'Uncle,' a fact that Henry found endearing.

“See here,” Henry said, pointing to two bulges on either side of the head shield. “Those are its compound eyes. Their eyes were made of calcite rods, hundreds and sometimes thousands of them bundled together. It must have been like seeing the world through a prism. Imagine that!”

Henry was a handsome man, with sparkling grey eyes and thick salt and pepper hair. He spoke with an accent that reminded Jean-Louis of Michael Caine, the British actor who starred in one of
his father’s favorite films, *The Italian Job*. Henry had packed on a few extra pounds around the chest and waist, unlike his father who had remained lean and firm, but he still made a pleasing impression. Henry’s wife Joan was a stage actress and very beautiful. Jean-Louis had first met her when she visited Arbois one Christmas and Henry had given him a delightful book titled the *Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear*. Joan had red hair and wore an emerald green dress and very bright red lipstick. He thought her the picture of a movie star. Still, he preferred his own mother’s cool blond looks and understated elegance to Joan’s brasher sensuality. No one could come close to his mother for beauty, except perhaps his sister Charlotte, whom he adored beyond reason.

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When he was eleven, Jean-Louis was finally allowed to go hunting with his father and older brothers. His father had already taught him how to handle a shotgun and rifle, to clean, load, and fire them. Although he was small and wiry at the time, Jean-Louis had a keen eye and good aim for someone young. At first, he merely observed, following along beside his father, and learned how to issue commands to their gun dogs, a pair of Brittanys named Castor and Pollux though they were both females. He tried his hand first at shooting pheasant, woodcock, duck, and small game like rabbit and hare. Then he moved on to bigger game like deer, a rite of passage in his family. When it came time to bring down his first buck though, his shot was errant, only grazing the animal’s shoulder, and his brother Paul, who had the deer in his sights, made the kill instead. Jean-Louis was grateful; the animal would have suffered otherwise. On his second attempt, he made a clean kill. Charles was unreservedly proud and had the rack mounted and displayed in their family’s living room above the fireplace, next to the ones from stag taken by his other sons. Now his youngest was worthy of becoming a man, worthy of his older brothers. They would have to accept him, protect him, just as he had tried to show them by example.

A week before Jean-Louis’s thirteenth birthday, his father died of Hodgkin’s lymphoma, diagnosed when the cancer had already metastasized in his brain and rendered him mute, deaf, and blind, seemingly overnight. There were no farewells exchanged. Jean-Louis sat with his family in their parish church, listening to Father Benoît reading passages from the book of Psalms and the book of Lamentations; Henry Wallace gave a long and tearful eulogy. His father lay inside a closed casket directly below the modest dome marking the transept. Charles had wasted away very quickly and was nearly skeletal when he passed. As they lowered the casket into the ground in the churchyard, Jean-Louis’ mother began weeping, her grief genuine. He looked over at his siblings and saw them wiping at their reddened, teary eyes and wondered at the time why he felt nothing except a strange confusion, as if he had been daydreaming in class and only realized later that he had missed the lesson plan. It occurred to him that his father had never attended Mass with them. What would his father say to Saint Peter if heaven existed? Would there be some heated debate about evolution at the Pearly Gates? He kept his father’s most prized fossil specimens in a box under his bed. From time to time, he would take them out and hold them in his hand, one by one, remembering how his father had stared so intently at them, the smile that would settle onto his handsome face as he made his drawings and notations. He was certain that his father was somehow residing in these fragments of limestone, now one with the glorious past, but not truly gone. No. His father would wait for him, he was sure of it.

A month after the funeral, Charles’s widowed brother Auguste came to live with them and help manage the estate. He was five years older than his deceased brother and much heavier set. Auguste had lost his own wife to cancer ten years prior—his son and his daughter were grown and out of the house—and he had been a frequent visitor to Arbois since, having a keen interest in viticulture after a career spent in sales for Moët. He looked very much like Jean-Louis’ oldest brother Paul, who shared his uncle’s big bones and barrel chest. Now twenty-two, Paul had opted to forgo university and help his mother run the vineyard instead. He loved the land, working it, making the vines come to life each spring and putting them to rest after each harvest in the fall. In
the winters, he would hunt, ski, chop wood, and service the tools and equipment in the large shed behind the main house. By then, his mother had completed renovating all the old workers’ cabins on the property into modernized dwellings that the family rented to vacationers. Their region was renown for its hiking and biking trails in the summer, and ski trails in the winter. Visitors would come also for the wine tastings offered year round in the large building where the grapes were processed, aged, and bottled.

It was a good and purposeful life in Paul’s mind. His younger brother Ernst was twenty and majoring in marketing at university, at his mother’s urging, and was planning on joining Paul in the family business when he graduated. Charlotte, only thirteen, was already adept in the kitchen and would likely go to culinary school. Jean-Louis was another story altogether. He had been a mystery to Paul from the start. As the eldest child, their father being away for long stretches of time during their adolescence, Paul felt an obligation to care for his siblings, to teach and discipline them. Ernst was easy. He was in many ways a younger version of himself: big boned, square jawed, fleshy; the same reddish brown wavy hair and hazel eyes. They shared a love of working with their hands, breaking things apart and then putting them together again to see how things ticked. They believed that all things could be figured out, all problems fixed in this manner. Charlotte was opinionated and exuberant and, being a girl, was left to the care of their mother who doted on her. Jean-Louis was asocial from the beginning, quiet and standoffish. He liked digging holes in the ground and collecting found objects: pieces of agate, oddly shaped leaves, bones and feathers, carapaces of insects. Paul imagined he had been deprived in the womb of the mental and physical toughness necessary for manhood. His father had coddled the boy, tolerated his oddness, even encouraged it perhaps with his undisguised preferential treatment. Paul had always seen it as his job to correct that mistake.
The First Cut is the Deepest

Chapter Summary

Jean-Louis falls in love for the first time.

When he was thirteen and newly devastated by his father’s death, Jean-Louis fell in love with Charlotte’s best friend, Sophie. She had the blond hair and blue eyes of his sister, and clear creamy skin. Her family had moved into the area the summer before, and that fall he finally understood what his brothers had been doing. Sophie came over after school at least once or twice a week to study and gossip with Charlotte. They were in the same class and were both obsessed with boys and sex. His mother had warned him to stay clear of Charlotte. His sister was a woman now (he knew what *that* meant) and all the freedoms he enjoyed as a child with her were now painfully off limits. He would sit in his room with the door closed, listening to their muffled squeals of laughter through the wall, and do what he had seen his brothers do behind the shed. He completely surprised himself the first time he brought himself to orgasm. The feeling was indescribable and he didn’t know where it was heading until he made a mess all over himself. The second time, he made sure to keep a wad of tissue ready.

One night, he was lying in bed thinking about Sophie and focused very much on stroking his erection, when Charlotte entered his room and crawled into bed beside him. He had no time to react. She let out a stifled shriek when she realized what was going on under the covers and slapped him on the arm.

“You bad boy,” she whispered, giggling. “What do you think you’re doing?” Of course, she knew exactly what he was doing. She reached over and grabbed his cock. He didn’t move, didn’t try to stop her. He was too embarrassed to think of an excuse.

All he said was, “I’m dead if Mama catches us.” It had been a long time since he had been this close to his sister and, despite his shame at being discovered, he secretly reveled in the warmth of her body next to him. She had breasts now and they were pressed against his arm as she continued squeezing him. “What are you doing?” he said, his throat tight. “I’m not your boyfriend.”

“I want to know what I’m doing when I lose my virginity. Does this feel good?” She jerked him much too roughly.

“No, not like that,” he groaned, pushing her hand away.

“Did you know, me and Sophie practice together?” She licked his ear, making him flinch.

“What do you mean?” he asked. He was beginning to sweat; his groin felt like it was on fire and he covered it with both hands in a protective gesture.

“We practice, like this.” She turned his face towards her and kissed him full on the mouth. The sensation of her tongue sliding wet and aggressive against his own made him moan aloud in shock and pleasure. A part of him knew he was kissing his sister and that was probably a big no-no, but another part of him felt like he was merely kissing himself and he did not want her to stop, it felt too good, so how wrong could it really be? She continued probing his mouth with her tongue and placed one of his hands on her breast, holding it to her chest and squeezing. He could feel her
nipple, hard and erect under his palm through her nightgown. His mother was going to kill him. Any minute now, she was going to walk in and chop off his penis. Maybe even shove it down his throat.

Charlotte brought his hand down her body and stroked herself with his fingers. It was wet and slick between her legs, he could feel how velvety soft she was and he wanted so very badly to kiss her there, take her in his mouth and devour her. He rolled on top of her, his heart beating out of his chest and his mind ablaze with fear as he pressed his cock against her pelvic bone, his balls nestled in the wet heat between her legs. She grabbed his buttocks and pulled his hips to her, rubbing her clitoris in long strokes against the underside of his cock, that exquisite ache building, building, until finally, she was over the top, her body gripped in spasms. She could feel him convulsing above her, his face buried in her hair as he let out a strangled cry, the hot wetness on her belly as he came. Afterwards he was very quiet. She could tell he was upset so she kissed him again to comfort him and gently stroked his face. He looked like a golden angel to her, full of innocence, free of guile. He knew he should feel ashamed of what he had just done, but he didn't. He had never kept any secrets from Charlotte and there was no point in starting now. Besides.

“I’m in love with your friend,” he confessed. “Sophie. I’m in love with her.”

“Really?” Charlotte said. “Well, she hasn’t noticed. Maybe you should stop acting like some creepy stalker and say something to her.” She laughed, seeing the hurt in his eyes. “Oh my beautiful brother, whom I love most in the world,” she continued, teasing him. “How could I ever share you with another?”

“She’s never said anything to you about me?” he pressed. “I don’t know what to say to her.”

In school, all the boys in his class were bigger than him. At thirteen, he was still only average in height and quite thin. Being academically precocious did nothing for his self-confidence since he was in with the seventeen year olds, men practically with their deep voices and facial hair and intimidating size and swagger. Socially, the older boys didn’t accept him, treating him like the annoying kid brother or, worse yet, like some kind of sexual prey, at turns punching and fondling him at will, it was all equally threatening to him though he would never show it.

“It’s your own damn fault,” Paul had told him in disgust when he came home one day with a black eye after a particularly unfortunate wrestling match in the schoolyard.

The older boy had apologized, it had been an accident, they were just fooling around and things had gotten a little out of hand, there was just something about the way Jean-Louis had looked when he had been held down that prompted the unnecessary roughness. He and the other boy, Didier, had only been given a light reprimand from their headmaster, Father Vallois, and no other punishment would be forthcoming.

Paul had been less forgiving, “He should have cut off your fucking hair! You look like a girl, for Christ’s sake.”

“You shut up!” Charlotte had yelled in defense. It was for her that Jean-Louis kept his hair long; she liked it that way. She held a bag of ice to his face as he sat in the kitchen. “Don’t you listen to him. They don’t pick on you because of your hair.”

“Oh, really?” Jean-Louis had asked. He had smoked a joint on the walk home from school and was feeling no pain.

Charlotte looked down at him in his school uniform, his dark blue pants and white shirt rumpled and streaked with dirt, his light blue tie loose and askew, his hair in disarray. He was the most
beautiful boy in the world, and nobody could stand it except her. “You’re too good for them,” she had said. “And they know it.”

The only thing that saved him was the fact that he shared the same drug dealer with everyone in his class; at least he had one thing in common with them. He didn’t feel like he stood a chance with girls. In school, he had seen an ad posted on the bulletin board: a martial arts studio was opening in the next town. He was thinking of asking his mother for permission to go. He hoped that this might help him focus on something besides his inadequacy, and perhaps calm the panic and confusion that seemed to grip him more and more. When he ran the idea past Charlotte, she laughed again.

“You?” she said, stifling herself. “Well, no, I take it back.” He had turned his face away, dejected. “I’m sorry. I’m being mean and terrible. If that’s what you want to do, then I think you should do it. Just don’t make yourself into a meathead.”

She meant their older brothers. She got up and crept back to her own room. That night he dreamt of a blond haired girl. He didn’t know who she was.

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The next time Sophie came over, she shot him a mocking smile instead of ignoring him completely. He guessed that his sister had said something to her on his behalf. The whole thing made him feel awkward and turned his stomach in knots but he was grateful for the attention. A month before Christmas, Charlotte started dating a boy named Jules who was in his class. She invited him to their holiday dinner on Christmas Eve. He was tall and lanky with dark hair, worn long. He couldn’t understand what Charlotte saw in him. It occurred to him that they likely shared the same pot dealer. His sister had also invited Sophie, more for his own benefit he suspected. It was clear that both of the girls had been after the same boy; his sister had won out. He wasn’t sure if Charlotte was being cruel or if Sophie was simply willing to concede the loss and settle for Plan B: him.

Christmas Eve dinner was always an enormous affair. It was an opportunity for the family to thank the people who worked the estate. Guests staying in the cabins were also invited. His mother’s parents would come in from Paris a week ahead to begin preparing the food. Pheasant and venison would be served, along with various other smaller game taken on their land. The meal was served communal style in the main house’s dining room. He sat across from Sophie and suffered through an evening of anxiety trying not to stare at her too much and grateful that he was allowed wine just like the others. He had little awareness of what he was eating. After the meal, he snuck upstairs and lit a joint. It calmed him enough to go back down and help bring out the desserts: iced sponge cakes, meringues, chocolate and fruit tarts, crispy thin almond cookies, cream filled puff pastries. His brothers were drunk. Ernst was home from university with a new girlfriend, Paul had come with his fiancé and her parents. Charlotte and Jules were nowhere in sight. He figured they were off in some quiet corner making out. He made a plate of sweets and brought it to Sophie. He was high and blissfully numb. They sat in the den, surrounded by people he didn’t even know. The anonymity made him feel brave.

“Do you like that guy? Jules?” he asked. She was wearing a pink cashmere sweater that fit her snugly. His mouth felt uncomfortably dry.

“He’s alright,” she said. “Why don’t you stop being such a pervert?”

“What?” He realized too late that he had been staring at the soft mounds of her breasts. When he looked her in the eye, though, he saw she was pleased. “Sorry. I can’t help it…I really like you.”

He watched her put a piece of fruit in her mouth and was overcome with a desire to kiss her. “You already know that. Right?” He felt a cold sweat break out over him but pressed on, his head
swimming. “Do you want to go up to my room?” He couldn’t believe the words coming out of his mouth. *Thank God I’m wasted*, he thought. He stood up and she followed him upstairs to his room. Her hand felt clammy in his. He closed the door behind them and waited awkwardly, wondered if he should offer her a joint.

In the dark, she pressed her body against him and said, “You can kiss me if you want.”

So, he kissed her, remembering the things he had done with Charlotte. Her mouth tasted sweet and vaguely of cherries, the scent on her cheek reminded him of vanilla. He felt the tickle of her tongue on his, her hands on him, rubbing him through his clothes. He kissed her harder, lightly biting her lips, then her neck. She unzipped his fly and reached in, grabbing hold of him before he could stop her.

“I think…” he gasped, but it was too late. He came into her hand, dying, dying of shame. What must she think of him now? Was she disgusted? “I’m sorry,” he stammered. “I didn’t mean to do that.” His face felt like it was on fire and he was grateful the light wasn’t on.

“It’s alright,” she said calmly. “What do you want me to do with this?” She held up her palm with its pool of glistening cum.

“Oh.” He hobbled over to his dresser, grabbed a sock out of a drawer and wiped her hand with it. She laughed and said, “You should probably put yourself away.” He looked down at himself, his cock still out and leaking.

“Right,” he said, tucking himself back in, wishing the earth would open up and swallow him. Would it always be this awful, he wondered. “Do you hate me? Because,” he didn’t wait for her to reply, “I’m in love with you. I just wanted you to know that. In case.”

“In case what?” she asked, handing him the damp sock.

“In case you might ever want me, too.” He put his face in her hair and hugged her to him. He had only ever done this with Charlotte, with whom he had nothing to fear. Now all he felt was fear. How could he face Sophie again if she didn’t like him after this hideous performance? She was beautiful and perfect and smelled wonderful; he had nothing to offer her but his horny thirteen-year-old self. How did other people go about this whole falling in love thing? He wished his father were alive to help him, teach him how to win a girl’s heart. He had seen photos of his mother when she was young, a stunning blond haired blue eyed teenager, at seventeen already in love and pregnant with her first child. How did his father manage to snag a beauty like that? True, his father was ten years older than his mother, and already tall and dashingly handsome when they first met. Jean-Louis knew with a certainty that he would marry Sophie, she would have his children, love him and never leave him. There would never be anyone else but her. How would he ever convince her to choose him?

All she said was, “You’re a funny one. We can do this again when I’m back from vacation.” Her family was going to spend the Christmas and New Year break in Lyon where her grandparents lived. “I better get home. I still have to finish packing my things.” When she kissed him on the mouth again, her lips felt softer than ever, as soft and fragrant as rose petals. In his mind, he saw a door opening, as surely as he had seen a door closing when his father had died. It was a vision he conjured to comfort himself, to make sense of his life, always the same house with the same hallways, rooms, and doors. Each room held someone of importance to him, the most sacred being the one dedicated to his father, sealed shut and hallowed, and the one reserved for his sister, in which he would dwell forever. After all, she was that part of himself that walked around outside of his body, the only part of him that had ever mattered.
It was well past midnight by the time all the guests had left and he had finished helping with the
clean up. His mother and uncle were staying up late with his grandparents, drinking by the fire,
talking about Paul’s upcoming summer wedding. Jean-Louis went up to his room, tired but unable
to sleep. He lit another joint and tried to clear his mind. There was a knock on his door. Charlotte
came in and sat on the bed next to him. He passed her the joint. She leaned her head against the
wall and closed her eyes, inhaling; they lay there in a druggy silence for a while.

“I didn’t see you all night,” he said finally, half awake.

“Mmm,” she murmured.

“Have you already done it with him?” Jean-Louis asked, taking the joint out of her fingers.

She shook her head. “No. He wants to, but I don’t think I even like him?” She said it like a
question. “I was just curious. Did you know, he has no balls?” She started laughing, then kept
laughing.

“What are you talking about?” Jean-Louis thought he had misheard her. Plus, he was fairly high at
this point and she was, too.

“You heard me.” She grabbed her stomach and gulped for air before bursting into another fit of
laughter. “Oh Christ. Move over. I’m cold.” She pushed him aside and got under the covers. “Are
you naked?”

“No, I’m wearing my nipple clamps. What do you mean he has no balls? Stop laughing and tell
me.” He held the joint out of her reach. “Not until you tell me.”

After awhile, she finally got a hold of herself. “Well, I was, you know, going to give him a blow
job…” The image of another guy’s cock in his sister’s mouth made him want to gag. “But, when I
got down there, there were no balls…just this weird empty sack of skin, like a deflated balloon. I
really didn’t want to have sex with him after that.”

“Wow.” Even in the locker room at school, he’d never seen anyone missing their testicles. “I
wonder if he had some type of accident.” He imagined some grey haired news anchor discussing
the phenomenon on I-Tele.

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask,” she said, suddenly concerned. “He seemed pretty normal otherwise.
No. I’m definitely not going to do it with him.” She turned onto her side and hugged him for
warmth. “So. How did it go with Sophie? Did she let you put your greedy paws on her?”

He wasn’t sure what to tell her. Maybe Sophie wouldn’t want him blabbing. Then again, he knew
the girls spent all their time talking about sex anyway, what did it matter. His sister would find out
either way, and he couldn’t imagine ever keeping secrets from her.

“She let me kiss her,” he said. “I came all over her hand.”

“No! You pervert! You didn’t!” She sat up and pounded his chest, knocking ashes onto his bare
skin.

“Stop it, Charlotte. You’re wasting a good joint.” He took a final hit and pinched it off between his
fingers, laying the stub carefully on the nightstand. “It wasn’t my fault,” he went on. “I couldn’t
help it. I really love her. Do you think she’d go all the way with me?”
Charlotte peered down at him, scanning his face for any hint of sarcasm. A part of her wanted to kill her friend, another part of her wanted to kill her brother. She realized she was jealous, jealous that he could feel this way about someone else.

“Don’t you love me anymore, little brother?” She stroked the side of his cheek.

“Yes,” he said, with the utmost sincerity. “But I can’t go around having sex with you, can I?” He sighed and closed his eyes. “I want to go to sleep now.” He pulled her against him, holding her tightly. “Stay.” He didn’t care if his mother found them together; she could go ahead and beat him with a shovel. Tonight, he would be happy.
My Love Can Do No Wrong

Chapter Summary

Jean-Louis loses his virginity.

He began his martial arts lessons after the New Year, a beginning level class in ju-jitsu. His mother had made a Christmas present of it. His brother Paul took him to his first class, glad to see Jean-Louis show some interest in improving himself. The boy had spent the months following their father’s death sullen and withdrawn, mooning over some stupid girl and wasting his time holed up in his room, smoking weed, reading and weeping over sappy letters exchanged between those pathetic medieval fornicators—Abélard and Héloïse—and masturbating like a fiend. This would instill some discipline in the fool, Paul thought, maybe make a man out of him.

There were eight other people in his class, some younger, some older. The head master was from Shanghai, a compact man in his fifties with jet black hair, a square face, and sad eyes. He had a quiet, calm demeanor, and his French was surprisingly fluent. When Jean-Louis faced him for the first time, he felt like the man looked straight through into his brain, into his heart and soul, and could see all his faults, all his fears and desires. He was naked. He thought to himself, “I will give myself over to this man. He’ll either kill me or save me.”

Sophie had come back and kept her word. They continued seeing each other occasionally, sometimes just talking, sometimes he would share a joint with her, other times they would kiss and fondle each other if they could find some privacy. The urgency of their first tryst dissipated, replaced by a more relaxed certainty as they grew used to each other’s company. She came to one of his ju-jitsu classes one Saturday to watch him and was surprised that he didn’t let her presence rattle him. He seemed strangely focused, even confident. It made her less afraid of his obsession with her, to know that there was something else out there for him besides herself. Afterwards, they ate lunch together at a small café. Spring was nearing. Jean-Louis would be helping in the vineyard soon, pruning and training the vines, getting them ready for the new growing season. They wouldn’t have much time to see each other then. In the late afternoon light, she thought he looked more mature, more settled within himself. She began to feel as if she might love him.

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Jean-Louis didn’t see Sophie during the Easter break. She had gone away with her family on a short cruise along the eastern Mediterranean. Before leaving she had given him a gold locket holding a tiny wisp of her hair. He wore it around his neck now, regretting only that they had not yet made love. Charlotte had already lost her virginity to some older boy who worked at a bar in town. Their mother didn’t know about it. Charlotte had made him go into the pharmacy to buy a pack of condoms for her. The woman behind the counter gave him a curious glance.

“They’re not for me,” he explained, red in the face.

“Obviously,” she smiled.

He handed the package over to Charlotte in the street outside. “Please don’t ask me to do that again.”
He was depressed and in no mood to contemplate what his sister was planning. That Saturday night, he walked into town with Sophie and Charlotte. While he and Sophie went to the movies, his sister disappeared to meet her young lover. Sophie could see that Jean-Louis was out of sorts the whole evening; she knew well why. When he walked her to her door afterwards, he only kissed her briefly, saying he was tired. He didn’t even want her to touch him.

At home, he shut himself in his room and lit a joint. He could hear his uncle’s voice in his mother’s bedroom. They had started sleeping together six months after his father’s death, maybe even sooner, for all he knew. Now they were open about it. He bore them no resentment. His mother was only forty-two and beautiful still, perhaps even more so than when she was younger. His Uncle Auguste was a far more physical man than his father; he had huge hands and a lusty appetite for food, sex, wine. His father Charles had been more aloof, more cerebral, leaner in body and temperament. It was obvious that his mother enjoyed his uncle’s company, probably needed and wanted the sex that came with it. Who was he to hold that against her? He had always wondered if his uncle had fathered his two older brothers, they looked so much like him; he wondered if they had ever asked themselves that question.

He had almost finished his joint and was drifting off when he heard Charlotte come in. She slipped off her shoes and got under the covers next to him, still wearing her clothes.

“Well?” he asked, handing her the stub.

She lay thinking for a while. When she spoke, he could hear the disappointment in her voice. “It was nothing great,” she finally said. “We did it in the back of his car. He was just kind of sweaty and clumsy. He couldn’t even get the rubber on at first. Then, he was just in a hurry. I don’t think it even felt good."

“Did it hurt?” he asked. He had heard the older boys talking about such things.

“Just a little, at first.” She sighed. “I thought it would be so much better. Maybe I need to be in love.”

“You think being in love means you’ll have great sex? Then I should be having some really great sex…if I ever get to have sex before I’m dead.” He was frustrated and in a bad mood. In his mind’s eye, he saw his mother fucking his uncle, his sister fucking some loser in a car, his own self failing miserably with the girl he loved. He fell asleep and dreamt about standing at the top of a cliff and stepping off into the thin air. It was all so effortless.

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After almost five months of martial arts training, he had become calmer, happier, less given to fits of anxiety. He was finally starting to grow taller and his voice had changed drastically. He would be sitting for his baccalauréat général série scientifique in June. If he did well, his mother would send him to live with his grandparents in Paris for university or abroad if he so desired. By this point, he figured he would follow in his father’s footsteps, earn a masters and then a doctorate in geology and paleontology. If he bombed, he could always come back home and work for the family; he would marry Sophie, have children, live a settled life. She had finally let him have her that spring. His persistence had become such a nuisance that she thought it easier to give into him than go on enduring his sad-eyed suffering. His mother and uncle had gone out for the evening. Charlotte kept watch for them downstairs. She had shown him earlier how to roll on the condom, made him practice until he could do it quickly. He could be an idiot about a lot of things and she didn’t want him to make a fool of himself.

He was nervous and very excited. He and Sophie sat on his bed kissing for a while, a million
thoughts racing around in his mind, none of them making any sense. Finally, he asked, “Do you want to smoke a joint first?”

“Maybe just a little,” Sophie said, her face flushed and beautiful. After a few hits, they both calmed down, relaxing into each other, grateful for the distraction. She undressed in front of him and, though he had seen his sister naked many times, still he was taken aback by the sight of her fully bare skin, milky and smooth, the perfection of her high firm breasts, the delicate round pink nipples. She pulled off his shirt and unzipped his pants, freeing him. He felt suddenly shy and uncertain. Of course she had touched him many times before, even put him in her mouth on several occasions, but this was going to be different.

“Do you have it?” she asked.

His mind went blank. She was sitting next to him now and all he wanted to do was suck on a breast. She pushed his hands away. “Are you listening to me?”

“Oh.” He reached for his pants and pulled the condom out of the pocket. Now what? Should he turn around to put it on? He was embarrassed with her watching him fumbling with the packet. What good was all that practicing when he couldn’t get the job done when it counted?

“Give that to me, you dummy,” she said, grabbing it out of his hand. In seconds she had it rolled onto his erection. He was amazed at her skill.

“Have you done this before?” he asked. It hadn’t occurred to him until now that he might not even be her first. The realization came as a shock.

She pushed him down on the bed and straddled him, guiding him into her. The heat of her body took him by surprise. “Oh…God.” The sensation confused and thrilled him. It wasn’t the same as when he masturbated. Rather, he felt lost in an inferno and wanted nothing more than to be consumed by it. Sophie was bent over on top of him, grinding her hips roughly against him; it was maddening. He put his hands on her breasts and let himself go, hoping she wouldn’t hate him for coming so soon. When he had finished, she sat looking down at him for a few moments, thinking whatever it is that women think after sex. He wondered if she were disappointed in him, but was afraid to ask.

“Are you alright?” he said instead.

“Of course,” she answered, rolling off of him. “Are you?”

He sat up, not knowing what to do with the condom, so he covered himself with his shirt. “I’m not your first, am I?” he ventured. He wasn’t angry, just crushed, like an ant under a shoe. He loved her so much his heart felt like it would burst.

“Stop worrying,” she chided, avoiding his question. “You were fine.” She dressed quickly, a bemused smile on her face, and left.

A minute later Charlotte came up to check on him. He was still sitting on the bed naked, staring off into space. “Why didn’t you tell me I’m not her first?” he asked.

“Why should it matter?” She lit a joint and passed it to him. “Didn’t you like it?”

“Yes. But, I don’t think I made her love me.”

She saw that his hurt was real. “Don’t be silly. What does it matter if she loves you back or not? Besides, you’ll always have me to love you. Isn’t that enough?” She patted him on the back like a
dog. “Now that you’re not a virgin, we can practice together.” She gave him a light kiss on the cheek and left him there to ponder the hellfire he would surely burn in once he left this mortal existence. What would she do to him next, he wondered. Not that he had any desire to resist her; he was happy to go wherever she might lead him. But he knew full well from the church sermons that he was heading for that eternal barbecue in Hades. Charlotte, though, was a goddess and untouchable. He would roast for both of them.

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He scored high on his *baccalaureat* exams, no surprise to him. He had an unusual knack for retaining information. Perhaps it was photographic memory, he wasn’t sure. All he knew was that he could retrieve data as if he were reaching into a file cabinet. As long as he had learned it once, he could find it again upon reflection. Sometimes, all he had to do was close his eyes and he could see whatever it was he was looking for; other times, the image was vague, and he would have to wait for it to come back to him, or, he would systematically run through the letters of the alphabet until the right letter triggered the right memory file. It always did. Nothing was ever truly forgotten. He found it much harder to manage his experiences, some of which were simply unbearable, he knew not why. Smoking pot helped tremendously. Now and then, he wondered why he had no real interest in his peers, in other people, and why the love he did feel made him want to gnaw off his own limbs.

In August, Sophie left again with her family, this time for Ibiza. They had made love a few more times over the spring term, not nearly as much as he would have liked, but he was grateful each time she allowed it. He tried very hard to please her, making sure to kiss her and touch her the way Charlotte had showed him; his efforts never seemed to move her to passion. Now, he likely wouldn’t see her until Christmas break.

“I don’t understand,” Jean-Louis said. It was hot that night as they lay on his bed, the window open to let in any breeze. He passed Charlotte the joint. “When I’m with her, I feel like I’m going to die of happiness. I don’t know how to make her feel the same way. Am I too ugly for her?” He turned onto his side to face his sister.

It shocked her to hear him say that. She had always thought he was beautiful. Even her schoolmates, who all considered Jean-Louis to be just some perpetually wasted misfit loner, even they thought he was, well, oddly interesting to look at. She would hear some of the older boys make rather horrible comments, threats about raping him, but she knew they weren’t just saying it to be cruel; they were revealing their own desires. Jean-Louis had a way of bringing out that vicious streak in others, an irrational deep-seated desire to dominate him, perhaps because he didn’t seem to care. He had no friends among his classmates, who were all older than him, and apparently no ability to connect to peers his own age. Apart from his family and girlfriend, the only other people he seemed to like were his pot dealer and his sensei at the martial arts studio. Not exactly a recipe for social success.

“Why would you say something like that?” she scolded him. “Is she mean to you?” In a way, she secretly hoped that Sophie was making him suffer. He’s too good for her, she thought, he just doesn’t know it. The pain he feels now will make it easier for him later when the shit really hits the fan. She knew that Sophie had other boys on the side. Her brother wasn’t the one for her and Charlotte was glad of it, though it hurt her to see him endure it. She would offer him solace, soothe his wounds, love him, give him what others could not. He was bound to her and it made her feel powerful. Her destiny was hers to control, even if she dragged him drowning in her wake.

“She’s not like you,” he said, his eyes shiny and unfocused. He was flying high as a kite. She brushed his hair away from his smooth unblemished brow. This was how she liked him best, open
and vulnerable, the wall of indifference that normally shielded him was down, she could reach inside his heart and claim what was hers. She bent over him, unzipped his fly, and took him in her mouth. He made a feeble effort to push her away.

“Don’t,” he begged, trying to sit up, the room spinning. “Mama will…”

She slapped him hard, stunning him. “Shut up!” she whispered. Then, gently, kissing his face, laying him back down, “Shh…be good…be good…” She continued her ministrations, feeling his excitement build, the fear coursing through his veins. It made her mad with desire; she knew what she wanted to do to him. In moments, he moaned and grabbed her hair, came into her mouth, gasping. When she had all of him, she quickly put her mouth on his and kissed him deeply. He gagged. She held him down, her hands on his chest.

“Swallow it,” she ordered. “All of it.”

Like a child, he did as he was told, choking on himself, then lay bewildered, crying. “Now you’ve made me happy,” she told him. She licked his cheeks, tasting the saltiness of his tears. He tasted, she thought, so much like herself.
Fly Away, Little Bird

Chapter Summary

Jean-Louis is faced with Sophie's rejection.

Fall was grueling. Besides the strangeness of living in Paris with his grandparents, he had thirty-five hours of classes to sit through each week, not counting homework, and little opportunity to get high. The students in his classes were mostly wealthy kids from the Paris suburbs, eighteen or older and more experienced, worldly in ways he was unfamiliar. He was fourteen and left out of their social activities. Some of the girls treated him like a pet dog or cat, stroking his hair or touching him in other inappropriate ways. Some of the boys did the same, which confused him greatly. He wasn’t exactly miserable. Paris was humungous and chock full of things to do and see. He loved his grandparents, having spent his early adolescence with them. They were gentle and tolerant, and didn’t seem to mind his odd quirks. Each evening, they would eat a light meal together, always with wine. He was grateful that they didn’t treat him like a child and let him smoke cigarettes. A month into the term, a classmate hooked him up with a dealer, which eased matters further, although he was careful not to let his drug use affect his academic performance. He never lit up until he had finished his homework. Some days he stayed completely sober and even enjoyed it.

His mother visited him in November when she had business to take care of in the city with some of her wine distributors. She fussed over him and seemed genuinely to have missed him. Not seeing her for an extended period of time made him realize how beautiful she was. Though she had fine lines around her eyes and mouth now and wore her hair up in a chignon like mature women do, she had maintained a trim figure and flawless complexion and was more stunning than women half her age. He couldn’t believe such a pitiful creature as himself could have come from her. When she kissed him he noticed she wore a different perfume, which meant a new lover, and felt an inconsolable ache deep inside.

“Oh,” she laughed, “Just something I’m trying out.”

They were eating lunch together at a nearby café. It was a Saturday and she wanted to take him shopping for new clothes before she left the next day.

“I don’t need more clothes, Mama. Help me pick something out for Sophie. You know, for Christmas.”

The look on her face betrayed her displeasure. “I know you really like her, Jean-Louis. But it’s not good to be so fixated on just one person at your age.”

“What do you mean? You knew you loved Papa right away, you’ve said so yourself.”

“That was different.”

“No, it’s not different. I’m going to marry her. I love her and I want her to love me.”

Catherine shook her head. “How did you get to be like this…so stubborn? Your sister has had at least four or five boyfriends. I can’t believe I’m telling you to be more like her, but you need to
keep an open mind. When it comes to matters of love, it’s best not to give yourself completely.” She reached out and squeezed his hand. “My dear baby boy. It’s true we don’t choose who we love, love chooses us. But the same goes for the object of your affection. Do you understand?”

He stared back at her wide-eyed. “You’re saying that Sophie doesn’t love me, is that it? How do you know that? Has she said something to you?”

He could feel that familiar tightness gripping his chest, the panic that used to overwhelm him. Without Sophie, all his hopes for the future would be lost. When his father died and she came into his life so soon after, he took it as fate, one door closing, another door opening. He had walked through that open door and never looked back for fear of chasing his luck away. Now, no matter how steady he kept his gaze ahead, his girl was slipping away into the distance.

“Sophie and I are meant to be together,” he insisted. “You want me to be miserable and alone!”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Jean-Louis,” she said, exasperated. “God, I wish your father were here. A boy needs a man to talk sense into him.”

At times like this she regretted her last pregnancy. She could have stopped at two children like any sensible woman. What madness had possessed her to have more? Of Charlotte, she had no real regret. She had always wanted a daughter and in so many ways Charlotte reminded her of her younger self: willful, confident, even selfish and manipulative if she were to be honest. She considered these to be assets for a woman. But Jean-Louis was like a person without a skin, all raw exposed nerves with no ability to negotiate the world around him. He was both overly sensitive and unfeeling at the same time, an exasperating combination that made him almost impossible for her to tolerate. She didn’t try to prevent his reliance on weed; she knew it calmed him, provided respite from the turmoil inside him. If her husband were still alive, then maybe she would be stricter with him, maybe she wouldn’t even need to be if Jean-Louis had a father to guide him. But Charles was gone and she was done with childrearing. Catherine had her own life to consider.

She selected a belted cashmere sweater in coral with a soft fur collar for Sophie, all to please her love-smitten son, who kissed her with such gratitude in front of the other customers in the boutique it nearly made her weep on the spot. He chose a perfume for Charlotte at Annick Goutal, a scent that told Catherine more than she wanted to know about those two. She had long had her suspicions but, at this point, she didn’t know which was worse, her son’s obsession with Sophie or with his own sister. At Christmas Eve, though, it all fell apart, just as she knew it would. After dinner, Sophie grabbed his hand and led him into the den and finally told him the truth, that she had another boyfriend, that it was over between them. The girl was being kind to end it, she had never loved him in the first place. It was only Jean-Louis’s bottomless need that had rendered her powerless to end it sooner. Despite his undisguised shock, she stood her ground.

“Why are you doing this to me?” he asked, giant tears rolling down his cheeks. “Why don’t you want me anymore? You know I would do anything for you.”

He sat down on the ottoman and hugged her to him, burying his face in her belly. She smoothed his unruly hair and patted his heaving shoulders. She was smart enough to know that pity was no substitute for love. He would get over it. Charlotte had promised her that she would pick up the pieces and glue him back together again. Of that she was certain and it helped her remain steadfast.

“Jean-Louis, you think you love me, but really, you’re just in love with being in love. You’ve always lived in a fantasy world of your own creation. Besides, we both know there’s only one girl for you, and I’m not that girl.” She looked him right in the eyes in rebuke, her fingers grasping his hair. “Don’t ask me to stand in for Charlotte. Don’t ask that of anyone ever again. So. Let’s just say we are sorry, and that we wish each other happiness. Okay?”
He felt humiliated beyond words. As much as he wanted to tell her she was a cruel and horrible liar, he remained mute and stunned by her accusation. Had she really looked inside him and seen that? He had always believed that part of him was safely buried and unreachable, something held so secret and sacred that only he had access to it. Yet Sophie had seen it, seen him and his soul that was destined for hell and it crushed him with shame.

“Go and be happy,” he mumbled, staring at her delicate hands. He kissed each one, wetting them with his snot and tears. “I won’t bother you anymore.”

That night he drank himself sick and spent the next morning puking his guts out. He didn’t come downstairs until two o’clock in the afternoon and lay curled up on the couch while his brothers and their wives finished decorating the tree. His mother, his Uncle Auguste, and his grandparents were in the kitchen, laughing, drinking, and finishing the preparations for their family dinner. Charlotte was at her latest boyfriend’s house for the holiday. He hadn’t seen her at all since he had come home from school. He was miserable and confused. His brothers tried to cheer him up, telling him that getting dumped the first time always hurt the most, that it would get easier the next time around, don’t you worry. What did they know? Things had always come easy for them. They had married their sweethearts, girls who didn’t cheat and lie to them. Paul and his wife Claire already had a boy named Claude, now two years old, with another child on the way. Ernst had married his girlfriend Marie over the summer. She was already three months pregnant. They were madly in love still. Jean-Louis could hear them going at it while he had his head in the toilet. He wanted that kind of love, the kind that makes a woman moan and call out your name and give you babies. He had wanted all of that with Sophie, but now someone else was going to have it instead of him.

His grandparents had made roasted loin of venison, normally his favorite, but he couldn’t stand to eat. Nobody in his family made mention of his breakup with Sophie and for that he was truly grateful. He was the accident on the side of the road that no one was allowed to stare at.

Afterwards, they attended midnight Mass, a distraction that had the unfortunate effect of reminding him of his father’s funeral service. The smell of the incense was nauseating. As they left the church, he felt someone grasp his hand from behind. He knew who it was immediately. They kissed each other on the cheek. When he didn’t say anything, Charlotte knew that Sophie had succeeded in doing the right thing. She smiled to herself. She knew it had taken courage for her friend to break his heart. No one wants to bear the wrath of a scorned lover after all. But now he would be hers again to have and to do as she willed. All was right in the world.

They opened their presents and drank champagne. With Charlotte home again, Jean-Louis’s appetite slowly returned. He nibbled on some smoked fish and crackers. He had her dab on the perfume he had picked out for her. It excited him instantly to think about it on her skin and when she held out her wrist for him to smell he felt the room spinning like a top.

“This was supposed to be for Sophie,” he told her, handing her the shiny foil wrapped box. “But it will look better on you.”

Later that night she put on the sweater and went into his room to show him.

“Well? Do you like it on me?”

He reached out and touched her breasts. She was naked underneath and he could feel her nipples erect through the soft cashmere. “Yes, I like it on you. Only you.” He kissed her hungrily, the scent of the perfume behind her ears and on her neck filling his nostrils, and then he pulled the sweater off her, cupping her breasts in his hands and sucking hard on each nipple. He got down on his knees, removed her skirt and pressed his face between her thighs, brushing his lips and tongue against her clitoris, the soft folds of her sex. He could smell the perfume on her smooth belly
mixing with her own special scent. It was enough to make his whole body shiver with desire. He pushed her onto the bed, throwing her legs over his shoulders as he knelt between them and brought her to orgasm with his mouth. She tasted of tears and courage and everything his heart could ever yearn for. Charlotte bit the palm of her hand to keep from screaming as she came, heat pouring off her skin in waves, then pulled Jean-Louis on top of her, sighing, “I have you, little brother. Come to me.” When he entered her he was no longer afraid of burning in hell. All the rest of his life was hell. This was ecstasy, whether from God or the Devil it mattered not, its intensity matched only by its painful brevity, that momentary spark of pure joy amidst the misery of his waking life apart from her.

“I need to go away,” he told her, lighting a joint to keep from sinking. They lay together naked under the covers. “I can’t be here anymore. I can’t breathe. I can’t stand to think.” He stared up at the ceiling through a blur of tears. “I just want this all to end…and start over again somewhere else.”

“Where would you go?” she asked. “Somewhere far from me?” She kissed his wet cheek.

He turned to look at her. “You’re always far from me. You’re my goddess in the sky. How could I ever reach you? Tell me what to do, Charlotte. Save me.”

She thought in earnest. Several of her classmates had relatives in the United States and would tell stories of the bizarre, work-obsessed, gun-loving, soul-bearing, money-crazed Americans who reveled in their lack of culture and taste. Would that be enough to make him come back to her?

“Go to America,” she said. “You don’t fit in here. There, it won’t even matter. They’re all heathens. You’ll be a foreigner for real. You won’t even have to try to fit in. They won’t expect you to be like them. You can just be yourself.”

The next day he told his mother he wished to transfer to another school. He wanted to leave France and go study abroad in America. She was taken aback at first by this sudden request. She had no doubt it was brought on by his current emotional state, but she had real concerns about his commitment. If she said yes, would he see it through? He insisted that he would, he had never failed academically. And if he didn’t do well, he told her, she could always pull the plug on the tuition and send him back home. Another problem was his age; he would need an appointed guardian if he were to go abroad. Catherine had one cousin who taught foreign languages at the University of Michigan, a school that had well-respected masters and doctoral programs in earth sciences. That was an option if he consented to serve as Jean-Louis’s guardian until he came of age. His Uncle Auguste, who had always made it a point not to meddle in the lives of his nephews, piped up.

“Let him go, Catherine. His father studied abroad. Charles always said it was the best experience of his life. Opened his eyes to things he never imagined. The boy is miserable here. Can’t you see it? Let him try his luck somewhere else. A change of scenery may be good for him.”

“Thank you, Uncle.” Jean-Louis kissed him in gratitude.

They had an amicable enough relationship, if somewhat distant, but then Jean-Louis was not the easiest person to relate to, family included. It was only in the last few years that he would mumble more than a few words in conversation. Charles’s death had come at a time when the boy needed the most guidance. Auguste wasn’t surprised to see him floundering. The one thing he appreciated the most, though, was the boy’s acceptance of him as his mother’s paramour. He had thought for sure that Jean-Louis would lose his mind over what many children his age, boys especially, see as betrayal of the most hurtful kind. But to his disbelief, Jean-Louis never protested, never showed him any anger or resentment. It was puzzling. He knew how close he had been to his father but,
somehow, he had allowed him to take his father’s place in his mother’s bed with nary a complaint. Auguste wouldn’t forget this kindness.

By the end of the spring term, all the arrangements were finalized. His mother’s cousin Georges would serve as his legal guardian and would meet Jean-Louis at Detroit Metro Airport and settle him in at the University of Michigan, where he had been accepted into the masters program at the Rackham Graduate School. He was given a graduate assistantship that would begin in the summer. He had one suitcase of clothes, a Sony Vaio laptop, and a small backpack full of his favorite soap. He didn’t know if he was making a huge mistake and he didn’t care; he was so sick of his own misery. All his life he had felt buffeted on all sides by noise and confusion. Even moments of solitude would overwhelm him with anxiety. His brief stint at the martial arts studio had taught him how to clear his mind and focus only on the present, but it took a will power he couldn’t always muster. He hoped the strangeness of his new surroundings would be enough to distract him from the chaos in his head. He knew he had made the right decision, though, when he arrived on campus and not long after received an email from Sophie. She had changed her mind. She did love him and wanted him once more.
Burning Bridges

Chapter Summary

Sophie dumps Jean-Louis for good.

He enjoyed being at the University of Michigan. The campus was beautiful and expansive, the faculty of the Rackham Graduate School was as impressive as those in Europe, the students varied and friendly, especially those from the United States. Americans were bizarrely open, willing to share personal information with strangers and without any prompting. They couldn’t be insulted because they were oblivious to it. Upon arrival, he was assigned two undergraduate students to tutor as part of his graduate assistantship duties. Both were student athletes and taller than anyone he had ever met, taller even than his brothers, who were not small by any standards. The food was another matter and took some getting used to, but once a week he would have dinner with his guardian, his mother’s cousin Georges and his wife Suzanne at their home on the outskirts of campus. There he could have a proper meal and conversation in French.

During the Christmas and Easter breaks he went home to Arbois and continued what had become an almost Victorian romance with Sophie, the long dark periods of chastity punctuated by brief and blindly passionate reunions when ardent professions of love and promises of faithfulness would be uttered with tears and kisses. After completing his Masters of Science at U of M, he was accepted into the doctoral program at Cambridge, his father’s alma mater, where he would labor under the supervision of one of the foremost specialists of Cambrian fauna. It all seemed too good to be true. He was focused and untroubled by anxiety, the research and writing were a challenge but not without satisfying reward and he had opportunity to visit sites in Norway, Germany, Canada, and Greenland. Sophie was studying Medieval French literature at Jean Moulin University and when he visited her in Lyon, he felt a deeper connection with her and a more certain future when happiness could be grasped and held close rather than merely yearned for. And then, as if a harbinger of more good fortune, Charlotte gave birth to her son, Étienne, while he was home for a week during the summer. The child was the product of a liaison with one of her instructors at culinary school, a talented young chef named Gaston. The father, a proponent of molecular gastronomy, was in Montreal at the time overseeing the opening of a new restaurant and Catherine was on a tour of Napa Valley in California with Auguste. Jean-Louis was the one at Charlotte’s bedside as she labored. He had never been so terrified and in awe of his sister, nothing seemed to frighten her, not the interminable agonizing pain, not the horrific rivers of blood. She triumphed as she always had and Jean-Louis was carried aloft on her victorious wings, flying high without taking a single hit of weed. He would have this, too, for himself one day, he thought, a child to call his own with the girl he loved most in the world.

Then, on the New Year before completing his doctorate, it all came crashing down to earth with an abrupt announcement from Sophie. She would be marrying someone else, a fellow student named Philippe who was studying business law at her university. The kicker, though, the final nail in the coffin was that she was pregnant with Philippe’s child. Jean-Louis knew without a doubt that she had done this on purpose, had done it to sever their ties with a finality that bordered on death. She didn’t even need to tell him that she had never loved him. He knew it even before she said it. The pain of it was devastating beyond belief and for the first time in his life he wanted to kill someone, he knew not whom, perhaps himself, perhaps Sophie. Perhaps he just wanted to go to sleep and never wake up.
He was grateful to return to Cambridge and throw himself into his work. There was nothing left to do except to finish what he had started. As far as his heart was concerned, well, he was done with that. No one would enter that room again, save for Charlotte, who now existed in her own separate wing of the house, the sacristy in which he would worship on his knees, lips pressed to the floor in reverence. He bitterly waded through a series of meaningless hook-ups with women, the more beautiful and self-absorbed the better. It meant they wouldn’t see him—only themselves—wouldn’t see what a monstrosity he was and wouldn’t care. He could give himself completely for one night and never have to look at himself in the mirror the next morning; the slate would have been wiped clean hours ago.

The closest thing to emotional connection came when he visited his father’s old schoolmate Henry Wallace over Easter break during his last year at Cambridge. Henry had served as his legal guardian in England, as well as mentor and friend, and he wanted him to look over the final draft of his dissertation and prepare him for his defense. He stayed with Henry in his London flat. His wife Joan was at their home in Sussex and so they had the whole place to themselves. Henry treated him to a lovely dinner of lamb and truffled potatoes at a restaurant in Mayfair, then for drinks at the club frequented by Cambridge fellows. Before he left, Henry had given him a box of photographs taken when he and his father had been on Spitsbergen. He didn’t look at them until he was back on campus and alone in his apartment. His father, when still alive, had kept a framed photograph of Henry in his office, showing him wearing his Wellingtons and parka on the rocky shores of the island, the sun casting long shadows behind him. The set of photographs in his possession now were from that same period of time, probably all taken within a few days, maybe even a few minutes of each other, all of his father Charles trudging through the bleak landscape. One photograph, however, was different. It was a picture of his father laying in a puffy sleeping bag in his tent, thick dark hair wild about his face, eyes still tired from being awakened unexpectedly, looking young and handsome and unguarded. There was something deeply intimate about that photo and, though there was no nudity, overtly sexual.

Underneath the stack of photographs was a bundle of letters tied together with string. They were all addressed to Henry in his father’s handwriting. At first he wondered if Henry had accidentally included the letters and therefore, he should not read them. But then curiosity got the better of him and he did read them, all fourteen of them. He really needn’t have read them to know what they were about, not specifically, but in a general sense. They each began with the same salutation, “My Dearest Henry,” and concluded with the same words, “Yours forever.” What was written in between didn’t matter. He didn’t know why he felt shocked. He shouldn’t have. He had known all along that they were close, that they had loved each other, as two people often do who share so much in common. Yes, that they had loved each other was obvious, but that they had been lovers, well, it was hard to say for sure. There was no direct mention of any sexual liaisons, but the feeling behind the words was so open and raw and honest, certainly not the sort of thing one would share casually. Perhaps reading the words made it strange somehow, like seeing something glaringly in bright sunshine when it should really be seen softly in moonlight. In the end Jean-Louis was glad, happy to receive this gift from Henry, mistakenly given or not, and from his father in retrospect. It made him feel that everything would be all right, that there was love and joy everywhere in the world, if only he would open his eyes and embrace it.
Chapter Summary

James meets Jean-Louis's family for the first time. Lamb is served.

Chapter Notes

The beginning of this chapter picks up where the narrative left off at the start of the story: Jean-Louis has finished his first round of cancer treatment at the clinic in Arau and is back in Arbois living in his childhood home. There is then another flashback to earlier events.

By spring he was well enough to go outside and help prune the vines. He could eat again and, though he tired easily, he had enough strength to spend some time hiking around the hunting lodge chipping away at some of his father’s favorite rock ledges. He had gone back to the clinic at the end of April and was deemed in remission and, as if to confirm his good fortune, Charlotte had given birth to her son, Marcel, in early May upon his return. He brought Marcel and Charlotte’s other son Étienne along with him to the hunting lodge later that month so that she could go into Paris with their mother on business. Étienne was seven now and full of boundless energy and questions. Jean-Louis wondered if he had been such a nuisance when he was that age.

James would be coming to see him in early June and he planned on having them stay at the lodge instead of in the main house. All the cottages were rented and the hunting lodge would offer them privacy at least, austere as it was. It had a generator for heat, hot water, and electricity, a bathroom, a small kitchen, and a living room with a fireplace that doubled as a bedroom. His family could barely tolerate James, a fact that made Jean-Louis feel deeply ashamed. He had always thought them to be cultured and progressive, and that it was James’s family that had no worldly outlook, but when it came down to the fact of their relationship, it was James’s family who had accepted, even welcomed him into their fold, and his own family who had closed the doors on them. It wouldn’t do either of them any good to flaunt their ties in front of them, however, thus the trip out to the lodge to give it a good cleaning.

“I see a spider, Uncle!” Étienne was standing outside on the front porch waving a broom at the kitchen window. There was indeed a rather large spider sitting in an elaborate web spun onto the corner of the window frame. One more whack of the broom, though, and there would be a hole in the window. Jean-Louis grabbed the broom out of his nephew’s hands and gently brushed the offending creature off the side of the glass. He tapped the bristles onto the ground and then handed the broom back.

“Here, just sweep the floor. Don’t break anything.”

While Marcel slept in the car, Jean-Louis went inside and finished uncovering the furniture, then opened up the windows to give the place a good airing out. This wouldn’t be the first time he had
brought James there, although it would likely be the last. The first and only other time they had stayed there together was two months after they had finally made love. In a way it was like some weird honeymoon period when they were both smitten with each other and caught up in that false sense of happiness. Two months before, Jean-Louis had gone home for the winter holidays and over Christmas dinner in front of the family his brother Paul made a comment about Jean-Louis being there by himself.

“I’d have thought you’d have someone new by now,” he said. “A year should be enough time to get over a breakup, don’t you think Jean-Louis?” He was referring of course to the unceremonious dumping by Sophie the previous New Year, but he didn’t say it to be cruel, although Charlotte called him a bastard. He only meant it to be what he considered a gentle prodding, like one does with a dumb ox. If he didn’t point his loser brother in the right direction, who would?

Paul’s comment, though, did more than poke Jean-Louis in the side. Up until that moment, he had thought of his ‘affair’ with James to be something of a joke with no punch line. They had engaged in some unexpected shenanigans, it was fun and perhaps naughty in a juvenile way, but it wasn’t something he had considered pursuing beyond what it already was: an amusing way to pass the time until his real life started up again. Now he felt a stabbing rage in his heart, a yearning to be in love again and to be engulfed in its fury. He missed Sophie and would never have her, but he did have someone who wanted him the same way he had wanted her.

“I have met someone actually.” He blurted it out without thinking about what he was saying, like a soldier says, “Sir, yes sir!” on autopilot. “I met him when I was in Denver. His name is James. And, I think I’m in love with him.”

That last part was a lie, but at that moment he wished it to be true. After he said it, he looked up and scanned the faces of his family sitting around the table. What did he expect to see? Surprise, perhaps, then slow nods of acknowledgement and approval? He looked to Charlotte first, who met his gaze with no expression, then a raised eyebrow. No one else would look at him, not his grandparents, not his mother, uncle, brothers, sisters-in-law. They were looking at each other instead in a wordless fit of horror. Suddenly, all the sound and color was sucked out of the room and he was watching a silent black and white movie of a train wreck in slow motion. Well, fuck it, it was too late to take it back.

Finally, Ernst spoke up. “That’s funny, Jean-Louis, very funny. Ha ha.”

“Jean-Louis?” His mother was trying hard to keep her voice steady. “You are joking, yes?”

Paul looked like he was going to throw up and it made Jean-Louis burst out laughing. This was going to be a goddamn riot.

“No, Mama. I’m not joking. Perhaps I should have you all meet him.” He looked right at Paul and said, “I’m sure he could chop more wood than you.”

At that, Paul stood up and walked over to Jean-Louis, grabbed him by the back of his shirt, and lifted him out of his chair. His mother made to protest but Paul shouted, pointing his finger at Charlotte, “Don’t anybody move!”

Then he hauled him outside into the shed, where he proceeded to beat him to a pulp.

“You stupid little fuck!” Paul picked him off the floor and punched him in the ribs again. “You think you can get away with anything, don’t you? You think you can go through life doing whatever the fuck you want?” He hit him in the face, splitting his bottom lip. “What would Papa think of you? You think he would love you now? He’s turning in his grave because of you, you
disgusting piece of shit!”

Through it all, Jean-Louis couldn’t stop laughing. It was hilarious. Every blow made him want James that much more. It was then, with Paul’s fists pummeling him, that he made up his mind to let James have him, decided that it should be the worst punishment possible, far worse than anything Paul could inflict on him, and he had his brother to thank for it. At some point Paul left him lying on the floor, so he assumed he was done with him. He heard the door to the shed open and slam shut and then it was blissfully quiet. Jean-Louis stared up at the fluorescent bank of lights with what he was sure was a smile on his battered face, if only he could feel it. Then he heard the door open again and saw Charlotte and Ernst staring down at him.

“I can’t believe he hit you in the face!” Charlotte cried.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Ernst muttered. “Go run a bath for him. I’ll get him inside the house.”

“I didn’t mean to ruin everyone’s dinner,” Jean-Louis said. He leaned on Ernst on the gravel drive back to the house.

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t do it again if I were you.” He shook his head. “What is wrong with you? Why did you have to shoot your mouth off like that?”

“I don’t know. I just felt like saying it.”

“Is it true? You’ve hooked up with some guy?”

Jean-Louis shrugged. “I did meet someone.”

“Jesus Christ. I always knew you were off your rocker, but this is ridiculous. Why couldn’t you just be some mass murderer or something? People would hate you less. Listen. Just keep your stupid mouth shut. No one has to know about this. No one wants to know. So don’t go around telling people, okay? You’ll be lucky if Paul doesn’t throw you out on your ass.”

“Who made him God?”

“You’re really asking for it, aren’t you?”

He was. Easter was early that year, falling at the start of April when there was still snow on the ground from some late storms. He invited James to Arbois despite his family’s protests. Even Charlotte thought it a bad idea. It was the most awkward meeting ever, except James was a surprisingly good sport through the whole debacle. As embarrassing as it all was, Jean-Louis couldn’t help but let it unfold. He wanted to know how much pain James was willing to suffer for him. A whole lot apparently. The man had thicker skin than anyone Jean-Louis had ever met. First, he sat through the interminable Easter service. Being raised Protestant, James had no idea what all the genuflecting was about, couldn’t understand any of the Latin or the rituals, but he followed along like a good soldier and managed to stay awake despite the jet lag. Then he endured a long evening meal of lamb, which he didn’t like but forced himself to eat, all the while being grilled with demeaning questions about what he did for a living and treated like the lone Neanderthal amongst modern humans. Nobody, not even Charlotte, could understand how any of this had happened. Finally, Catherine decided to take charge.

“You understand that we don’t do this sort of thing here.” She lit her third cigarette in the last fifteen minutes. The thought of this uncouth beast from America of all lowly places, land of McDonald’s and people daring to wear sweatpants in public, laying his calloused hands on her sweet naïve boy was more than she could stomach. God knows what else he did to her poor
defenseless son. If only her husband had survived, then surely Jean-Louis wouldn’t have fallen into such debauchery. He was a good, Catholic boy, after all. He knew what was right and what was wrong. He had only been led astray by someone wishing to corrupt him, a Protestant, no less.

“What sort of thing?” asked James.

“The kind of perversions you and my demented brother engage in.” It was the first time Paul had said a word all evening. He stood only a hair shorter than James and was itching to defend the honor of his family against this usurper, this freak of nature who had dragged his equally sick brother into…what? He couldn’t even bear to think it.

Jean-Louis laughed aloud. There was no way his brother would get away with beating him up tonight. James could easily best him in brutality and he would never allow Paul to lay a finger on him, James would stand up for him, even if he had five shotguns pointed at his head. Just to rub it in, Jean-Louis reached over and put James’s hand to his lips and kissed it for everyone to see. He was being a right royal asshole and he knew it and didn’t care. It was James who pulled his hand away and tried to smooth things over.

“I swear we don’t do anything perverted,” James stated with surprising calmness.

“So you’re not fucking my idiot brother?” Paul asked. “Because you may as well be molesting a retarded child!”

Another guffaw escaped Jean-Louis. How was James going to get out of that one? He decided to help him out. “Oh, he’s fucking me alright.” He was drunk and buzzed by all the self-righteous disapproval floating in the air. “And I’m going to have his babies, too. Lots and lots of babies.” Jean-Louis roared with laughter.

“And what of it?” his mother snapped. She’d just about had enough of this nonsense. Her son had clearly gone bonkers and she looked to James now hoping to appeal to his simple mind. “What about marriage and children, James? Don’t you want that? You realize you can’t have any of that with Jean-Louis. Wouldn’t it make more sense to end this ridiculous infatuation? We all make mistakes. But we can choose to walk away from them, too. It’s not too late to redeem yourself. What do your parents think of all this? Hmm? Do they know what you are doing with my son?”

“Well, actually, I have told them. And they’re okay with it.” He squeezed Jean-Louis’s hand under the table, gave him an apologetic smile.

Jean-Louis stopped laughing, almost gagged on a chanterelle. He hadn’t a clue that James had said word one to his own family. And what did he mean by “they’re okay with it”? Jean-Louis didn’t want anyone to be okay with it. He wasn’t okay with it, for Christ’s sake. What the hell was wrong with James? All those silly declarations of love, he’d assumed that James had uttered them after those lapses of rational thought following orgasm, forgivable surely, but not to be taken seriously.

They left promptly after dinner, taking the old Citroën 2CV utility truck out to the hunting lodge. Jean-Louis wanted to drive off a cliff or into a tree, it would have been so easy, but he knew he owed James big time for the brave face he had worn all day. Did James really love him? How fucking awful if it were so! He had eaten lamb for him, endured the Latin and the vitriol of his family. It was too much. When they arrived at the cabin the air was crisp and pure and the stars in the sky were dazzling.

“Look,” Jean-Louis said, pointing up at the constellation. “Cancer.”

He lit a fire and unrolled the futon in front of the hearth, threw down some blankets and pillows
and kicked off his boots, worn out and ashamed by his own ghastly behavior. He had no business putting James through the wringer like that. He had done it for his own puerile amusement, to stick it to his brother, but James had gamely tolerated the ill treatment, his love for Jean-Louis an opiate in his veins making all pain bearable. Jean-Louis lit a joint to chase away his guilt.

“The bathroom is through there,” he said, pointing to a door. “You can wash up first.”

James bathed in the small tub, feeling exhausted and confused. It was obvious that Jean-Louis’s family despised him. He had expected no less, but it made James love him all the more knowing what Jean-Louis had lived through—that family, that judgmental, cold, hateful family—when he himself had enjoyed the benefit of a proper upbringing, a Leave it to Beaver childhood to be envied, full of encouragement and support and nobody forcing him to eat weird foods. He brushed his teeth, not bothering to shave, and laid in front of the fireplace while Jean-Louis took his turn in the bathroom. He must have fallen asleep in seconds because there were only embers glowing when he awoke with Jean-Louis tucked against him under a pile of blankets. His skin felt warm and smooth under his palms and though he wanted to make love to him, he was too darn tired.

When he awoke again the sun was out and Jean-Louis was at the stove cooking something that smelled delicious. James wrapped a blanket around himself and padded into the kitchen. It had snowed overnight and the brilliant light made him squint and yawn.

“Good morning, sunshine,” James said, embracing him from behind.

“Good morning? It’s almost noon.” Jean-Louis turned his head so James could kiss him on the cheek.

“What are you making me?” James asked.

“Venison sausages. Eggs. Coffee. Toast. After breakfast, we’ll take a hike. After that, we’ll come back here and you can fuck me to your heart’s content.”

They did, and he did. Jean-Louis let him have his way, let him go at him like a maniac. The rougher he handled him, the more he seemed to enjoy it, as if he wanted James to obliterate every cell in his body, reduce him to a form of life so ancient it had no nucleus, no mitochondria, no DNA to pass on. The night before they left to go back to the States, Jean-Louis questioned him about what he had said at Easter dinner, had he really told his parents about them?

“They know. My brother and his wife know. I told them about you, who you are, that I love you. I told them over Christmas. I broke it off with Krista on Valentine’s Day. Did I tell you that?”

“No. Why did you do that? You know we can’t be together.”

“Maybe not right now, but later, when my contract’s over. Why introduce me to your family then? This isn’t a fucking game, Jean-Louis. This is my life and your life. Don’t treat it like a joke.”

How could he tell him that that was exactly how he saw it, a joke and nothing more? A fantasy to indulge in, even the way they were playing at being lovers hiding up in the mountains, as if there were more between them than the simple thrill of pretending they wanted a future beyond this, beyond fucking, drinking, and sleeping. Why should there be more? It would be a disaster if it were so.
Jean-Louis meets James's family for the first time. Spiral sliced ham is served.

During the months that followed James was swamped with shooting product endorsements, taping television and radio interviews for the sports channels, and appearing at fundraising events for his charity. He was on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* again, then *Men's Health* magazine ran a cover story, then *Esquire* and *Cigar Aficionado*. The calls and texts dwindled to the point where Jean-Louis was beginning to believe that James had finally tired of him, that he was free at last of this crazy affair. By then, the casual relationship he had with a married co-worker was developing into a real friendship. He was happy to be unencumbered and responsible for no one else’s feelings, especially James’s. Then came the phone call. He knew he shouldn’t have picked up, but it had been two or more weeks since they last spoke and he was feeling confident that there was no longer anything between them.

“I want you to come to Michigan for July Fourth. My parents want to meet you, my brother, too. Will you come?”

It was strange hearing his voice. He sounded years younger and lonely. At first it put Jean-Louis in a panic, as if James were roping him in like some braying calf at a rodeo, ready to hit the dust in a jumble of flailing limbs. Then it dawned on him, a way out. He would go and be paraded about in front of James’s family, they would see him, meet him and be filled with disgust. He would let them talk sense into James, convince him to return to sanity, how could he have fallen for that? What did they have in common anyway, besides their alma mater, there was nothing, nothing except James’s desire and Jean-Louis’s indifference. How was that a relationship? So he went, back to Michigan, to James’s childhood home in Grosse Pointe Woods.

His parents met them outside their ranch home on the front porch, a concrete slab really, with a row of arborvitae lined up like toy soldiers for privacy. He stood behind James, watched him hug his mother, then his father.

“Mom, Dad, this is Jean-Louis.” James stepped aside so his parents could have a good look at him, assess him like a stray dog at the pound.

Jean-Louis couldn’t speak, couldn’t even work up a pathetic smile. James’s mother was petite and blond, lovely in that way that was quintessentially American. She could have been a cheerleader or the prom queen when young and had lost little of her looks in middle age. James’s father was stout around the middle, stocky in build with gray in his sandy brown hair. He would not have been out of place holding a shotgun and wearing hunting fatigues. Jean-Louis couldn’t fathom what was in store for him, these people were so different from his own family, they might as well have emigrated from another planet. Then he was caught in a warm embrace, James’s mother Laura holding him tightly, then kissing his cheek.

“Welcome to our home,” she said.
James’s father stuck out his hand, then got him in a bear hug, pounded his back with his fists. This was not right at all. James’s brother Ted was waiting for them in the living room, his wife Meredith standing next to him with a smile. He was surprised to see that Ted was even bigger than James, taller and meatier, as if that could be possible.

“Hi, I’m Ted. This is my wife Meredith.” Ted shook his hand, then embraced him, his wife did the same.

The whole thing was disorienting. Why were these people being so civil, friendly even? Why were they letting him come into their home as if they weren’t appalled? They sat down to a dinner of spiral sliced ham, mashed potatoes, canned mixed vegetables, and a salad of chopped iceberg lettuce, radishes, and dressing out of a bottle. They asked him about his work at the museum, polite questions that betrayed the fact that they had no idea what he was talking about but didn’t want to hurt his feelings. Why weren’t they swearing at him, telling him to go to hell, or at least to go back to where he came from? Was this all an act? Was there a dungeon down in the basement where they’d take him after dinner when it came time to chainsaw him to pieces? And why wasn’t there any wine at dinner? Christ, he needed a drink!

After dinner, there was no mention of going down into the basement for dismemberment. Jean-Louis helped clear the table, volunteered to load the dishwasher. He needed something, anything to distract from this surreal nightmare. He stood at the sink rinsing the dishes before handing them off to Laura. She insisted that she load the dishwasher, she had her own way of doing it. James had gone outside to sit on the back patio with his father, his brother and his wife. He could hear them talking and laughing through the open window as if nothing was wrong. What the fuck was happening? At some point between the forks and the knives he lost it, broke down crying like an idiot. Why had he done this, led him on, made him believe he should ruin his life over him? He had seen the pictures of Krista, framed in silver and sitting on James’s bedroom dresser at his house in Denver. She was beautiful and perfect for him, and now cast aside on account of his dishonesty. How could James ever forgive him when he finally woke up to reality?

“I know it’s hard,” Laura said. “It’s hard for all of us. But isn’t that what families are for? To stick together? Us against the world?”

She hugged him and all Jean-Louis could think was that she was holding a viper to her breast. When he and Laura went out back to join the others, he asked if he could smoke. It was ludicrous, but Americans were so weird about smoking, as if you were asking to stand naked at a bus stop. He excused himself and lit up, walked the perimeter of their backyard, a deep rectangular plot of green grass dotted with ash, maple, and oak trees, with a stand of blue spruce at the very back of the property. Another row of arborvitae formed a wall of privacy between their backyard and the adjoining property on the other side. He stood there, stubbed out his cigarette and lit a joint, gazed at the back of the Italianate villa and wondered who lived there.

“Are you okay?” James came up and stood next to him.

“No.” Jean-Louis was still wrung out from earlier in the kitchen; he couldn’t smoke that joint fast enough. “Why are we doing this?”

“We’re not doing anything. Why are you so afraid?” James asked.

“For you, I’m afraid for you. What are you doing with me? Tell Krista you’re sorry. Go back to her. I’m sure she would still love you. There’s no reason she wouldn’t take you back. Tell her you made a big fucking mistake. Tell your family you haven’t thrown away your life.”

James held him, let him cry himself into a stupor, then took him back inside and showed him his
old bedroom with its king sized bed taking up almost the entire space. Still tacked on the walls were the pennants from his high school days and his framed football jersey.

“Are we staying in here together?” Jean-Louis asked with dismay.

“Of course. We’re not children, for Christ’s sake. What’s wrong with you?”

“But your parents…”

“What about them? They know what we do. Get over it.”

Jean-Louis couldn’t imagine asking his own mother to let them stay in his old bedroom. The look on her face would have killed him. Yet he was pretty sure she knew what he and Charlotte had done and she didn’t seem to hate them for it. Maybe that was different. It had to be. Later, James couldn’t wait, for what he didn’t know, but it was all he could do to keep his face buried in the pillow to stifle his screams. The old mattress springs and wooden bed frame squeaked like a dying alley cat with each snap of James’s hips. Jean-Louis was sure that Laura and Peter were lying in their room next door gritting their teeth and rolling their eyes as they listened to them committing the unthinkable. How was he supposed to face them tomorrow? And for the love of God, why was James taking so long to finish? Of course he knew why. James had already had him in the shower not less than an hour ago. He had climbed into the tub with him without asking permission, not even using a condom, just bent him over and shoved a soapy cock into him as if Irish Spring would make it safe and acceptable, the only saving grace the quickness of it all and the numbing effects of the weed.

Now he was crushed under the sweaty bulk of his body enduring round two when he was still tender and sore from round one, James’s breath hot against the back of his neck as he pounded into him. At least he was wearing a condom this time. With some effort, Jean-Louis turned his head to the side.

“I can’t breathe,” he gasped. “I can’t breathe. Get off of me!”

In a moment he felt James slip out of him and thought with relief, ”Good, it’s over,” but it wasn’t of course. As James turned him over onto his back and flung his legs over his wide shoulders, Jean-Louis had the overwhelming desire to die, saw his body split open like Rembrandt’s Flayed Ox in the Louvre, wondered if his own innards had the same thick impasto texture as the paint. He looked up and saw James staring back at him, eyes gleaming in the dark and filled with wild need as he plunged his cock back into him. What did James see in him? Fear? Hatred? Regret? Jean-Louis clamped one hand over his mouth to keep from screaming, another hand set against the headboard to keep James from knocking his skull into it, choking back tears and vomit through a miasma of druggy panic.

“Oh, sweet Jesus, kill me now! How was he going to manage that? He couldn’t fake it like this, James would know for obvious reasons. Why Jean-Louis’s orgasms mattered so much to James was a mystery to him. Most of the time they were purely physiological reactions to stimuli with no enjoyment beyond simple release; on rare occasions he had thrown his heart into it and, with the right amount of drugs and drink, actually felt something close to love and desire.

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“I came in the shower,” he lied. “Now hurry.” He tried desperately to think of something to say that would put James over, something that would stroke his ego and cock at the same time. “It’s been so long,” he said. “You’re too much for me, I can’t take anymore of this. Finish or I’ll die.” All of it was true actually and in some weird way Jean-Louis hoped it would buy him a reprieve from
having sex with him again, make James let him go as a reward for being honest for once. He felt James getting close now, his movements becoming more erratic and violent. “You’re hurting me, James. You’re hurting me.”

That did it. Why it hadn’t occurred to Jean-Louis before stunned him. How could he have been so blind? He knew that James was a glutton for pain, everything he did centered around either the inflicting of it on others or the endurance of it within himself on the field, in the weight training room, and now in their relationship, if one could call it that. The more pain, the more he wanted it. James had no fear of it, craved it, he ate it like he ate his breakfast, with gusto and a voracious appetite for more. Jean-Louis had been stoking the fire like an idiot and, by the same token, taking it like a beating from his brother Paul, with a brave face and no complaints. He sobbed quietly into James’s chest, glad that it was over and completely wrecked inside.

“I’m sorry, baby. I didn’t mean to hurt you,” James whispered. “I can’t stand being apart from you.”

It only made things worse, hearing those stupid words, there was no escape from this monster he had created. Hadn’t he already taken enough punishment? This was supposed to have been a harmless joke, but maybe his brother Paul had been right all along. He had gone through life doing whatever he wanted and it was all coming back to bite him.
The Fourth of July in the American midwest.

The next morning he was awoken by James coming back into the room, a towel wrapped around his waist and another towel being rubbed through his wet hair. He sat down on the edge of the bed, eliciting another loud squeak from the mattress, and planted a soft kiss on Jean-Louis’s bare shoulder.

“Get up sleepy head. I’ve got plans for us today.” He dumped the wet towels on him and went over to his dresser, pulled on a pair of briefs decorated with the stars and stripes. “How do I look?” He modeled the red, white, and blue briefs by turning this way and that, proud to show off the prominent bulge at the front under the soft cotton fabric.

“Very patriotic,” said Jean-Louis. He sat up and pushed the towels off his chest. “And very sexy.” He wrapped one of the towels around himself hoping that James wouldn’t see the half-aroused state he was in and think he could have another go at him. He exited the room and jumped in the shower before he dug himself another pit. Over a breakfast of weak black coffee, toaster waffles, sausages, and overly polite conversation with Peter and Laura—which thankfully avoided any questions along the lines of “How did you sleep?” or other embarrassing inquiries—they discussed the agenda for the day.

The Fourth of July was apparently a big deal around here. At noon they would walk two blocks toting folding lawn chairs to the miles long stretch of road running past both the high school on the south end and the middle school at the north end, with the elementary school in between. A parade led by the mayor riding in an old Ford Model T would start at the municipal complex and wind its way down past this area, followed by various floats, high school bands, cheerleaders, groups of Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts, Brownies, and Girl Scouts, retired veterans in uniform, members of the Elks club and 4-H club, scantily clad girls tossing candy out to the crowds from the back of pick-up trucks advertising local businesses and associations, rumbling fire trucks and rescue squad vehicles blowing their air horns and sirens, American muscle cars blasting Ted Nugent, Bob Seger, and Lynyrd Skynyrd songs from the ’70s, a large and noisy contingent of leather-vested bikers on Harleys, and a motley gang of people dressed like Uncle Sam waving the American flag, some riding old timey bikes, others driving golf carts decorated with decals of the bald eagle, crossed shotguns, the twin towers, and other symbols of America.

After the parade, neighbors and friends of the family, including James’s buddies from high school and college, would gather at the house for a barbecue. At nine o’clock, the Yacht Club would start their annual fireworks display. All they would have to do is look up from their backyard to see it. But before all that, James wanted to take Jean-Louis around town. He showed him his old high school, the field on which he had first played football as a lanky teenager, the ice skating rink at which he played hockey as a child, then Lake Saint Clair where he and his brother Ted had fished on Saturdays with his grandfather Martin, the gym where he first started his weight training, his father’s auto body detailing shop downtown, then a scenic detour along Lake Shore Drive to
admire all the mansions, a veritable Gold Coast in miniature, before stopping by the local meat market to pick up the burgers, sausages, and marinated chicken for the barbecue. A farmer’s stand set up next door had fresh ears of corn, ten for a dollar. They must have bought more than fifty pounds worth.

Throughout it all Jean-Louis hardly said a word. He let James do all the talking, let him open up his life like a photo album for him to see everything there was to know about him. The more he listened and looked, the more trapped he felt. This kind of torrential sharing of personal information was alien to him and deeply disturbing. He didn’t want to know anything about James or his family. Shit, he didn’t even want to know his own family. He had never been close to his brothers and while he had adored, revered his father, he would never have dreamed of bringing a lover home to meet him. A girl one was going to marry, that was one thing, but a lover, a man no less, that was an absolute impossibility. He felt sickened by it all. Here he was participating in an inane plan that was seriously backfiring, his own goddamn fault for sure, just another mistake in what seemed to be a quagmire of bad choices with no end in sight. How the hell would he get through the day? He didn’t know how close they were to the house, but he lit up a joint anyway. He couldn’t hold off any longer even if he had to deal with James’s displeasure.

“IT won’t be that bad,” James assured.

He drove them by the middle school with its new skateboard park to give Jean-Louis more time to smoke. They idled under the shade of a large oak tree and watched a lone kid wiping out on the concrete. Over and over the young teen attempted a jump and failed to stick the landing. If it weren’t for the helmet, gloves, elbow and kneepads he wore, he’d be mincemeat. The boy’s persistence was rather spellbinding.

“Please don’t tell your friends about us,” Jean-Louis muttered. There, he said it, though it made him feel like a coward, well, he was, wasn’t he? “It would really help me if you didn’t say anything about…you know.”

“Don’t worry. I wasn’t going to embarrass you.”

“What about you? You’re okay with this?”

James shrugged. “Inside, I’m okay with it.”

They’d had this conversation a million times already and each time they seemed to make no headway. James was adamant that they could continue seeing each other, keeping it all under the radar, until his contract was finished, and then he didn’t care who knew, that’s how fucked up he was in Jean-Louis’s mind. It didn’t seem to worry him that his career would go down in flames if anyone found out now. As far as James was concerned, no such thing would happen. It was Jean-Louis who determined that they should avoid being seen together in public and refused to be photographed with him. He hated letting James visit him at his apartment where the doorman on duty would see and know…what? That they were more than friends? James was the one with everything to lose, Jean-Louis had told him repeatedly. This whole thing was a very bad idea, why couldn’t he see that? It was like talking to a brick wall.

He sat through the parade in a daze, ass sunk into a folding canvas chair with a built-in cup holder in each arm, hordes of people talking in that peculiar nasal twang indigenous to the whole region. He sipped his Miller Genuine Draft under the shade of a maple tree, bottle stuck into an orange beer cozy printed with the words “Pete’s Auto Body & Detailing” in black script. James had disappeared into the crowd. He saw Ted and Meredith talking with another couple, Peter and Laura in amongst another group of people all wearing white shirts, red shorts, and blue baseball caps with the yellow “M” in the heavy block lettering of his alma mater. He wished he were dead.
An eon passed, or maybe it was just an hour or two, before he felt a hand on his shoulder and James telling him it was time to go back to the house. The parade was still progressing at a snail’s pace; marching in front of him now was a group of small children wearing top hats and holding red, white, and blue streamers and whirligigs and singing “Yankee Doodle Dandy” over the noise of a contingent of older kids playing drums and fifes. They were terrible and out of sync but the crowd seemed to love them.

“Do we really have to go now?” Jean-Louis asked. “I was just starting to enjoy this.”

Back at the house a flurry of activity erupted, assignments were meted and carried out with military precision. Jean-Louis’s task was to chop up last night’s leftover ham, grate two dozen hardboiled eggs, mix it all up with Kraft Miracle Whip and relish, and slather the goopy mixture between slices of white bread to make what Laura called deviled ham and egg sandwiches. It looked a little like vomit to Jean-Louis when he was done with it, but who’d notice if it was hidden between the Wonder bread? He trimmed the crusts off and arranged the triangular slices into a Star of David shape on the platter; it just seemed to fit so nicely together that way. James buzzed by with a large aluminum tray of grilled chicken thighs and grabbed a wedge off the top.

“Hmm…delicious.”

At the counter next to him Laura was draining cans of fruit cocktail, pineapple chunks, and mandarin oranges and mixing them with shredded coconut, a bag of miniature marshmallows and a tub of frozen whipped topping. A cup of maraschino cherries thrown in dyed the whole mess a festive pink color.

“It’s called ambrosia salad,” Laura explained when she saw Jean-Louis looking puzzled. Mortified is more like it. “Do you have this in France?”

“No, not to my knowledge,” he answered politely.

She shook her head in pity. “James has told us how you’ve missed out on a lot.” She patted him on the arm and gave him a sad smile. “We’ll fix that, sweetheart.”

Please don’t. Jean-Louis snuck out and smoked another joint as he hid behind the wall of arborvitae in the back. He saw someone watching him from the back porch of the Italianate villa so he crawled under one of the blue spruces and lay among the fragrant needles wondering if he could get away with staying there for the rest of the afternoon and evening. In the distance he could hear the murmur of voices growing louder, more and more people arriving, the aroma of meat cooking on the grill mixed with the cloying scent of citronella. James eventually found him by following the odor of weed.

“What the fuck are you doing under there?” He sounded annoyed.

Jean-Louis crawled out and sat on the grass, the sky spinning around him and the sounds of insects humming in his ear. James sat down next to him and put an arm around his shoulders. He was wearing a grease-splattered apron that said “Kiss the Cook” with a large arrow pointing to his crotch.

“I want you to meet some of my friends,” he said.

Jean-Louis groaned out loud before he could stop himself.

“Stop being a baby. I didn’t invite you out here for you to act like an asshole.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I’m doing the best that I can.”
“Well, you’re going to have to do better than this. You’ve got pine needles stuck all over you for Christ’s sake.” James made an effort to brush as much off of him as possible, then gave up and kissed him instead. “I love you.”

It wasn’t the first time he’d said it. Jean-Louis had never known a man to say it so often and so easily, “I love you,” “I want you,” “I miss you.” It had never made him happy to hear it. The first time it tore a hole in his heart, and every time after it was like removing the scab and starting all over again.

Once Jean-Louis had told him, “Don’t say that. It hurts me.”

“Why should it hurt you?” James had asked.

“It just does,” he had replied. Why couldn’t James see the burden he was placing on him? It was bad enough to love someone who didn’t love you back. Jean-Louis had already gone through that. But to be the object of someone’s adoration when one couldn’t return those feelings? That was even worse. That was being an ingrate; that was scorning a gift. He had never asked for that gift to be given, never even wanted it from James, but payment would be exacted later regardless, he was sure of it.
James kept to his promise. He introduced Jean-Louis as his former tutor from U of M and left it at that. All of his friends seemed like carbon copies of James: beefy, square-jawed, thick-necked jocks with all-American good looks, big toothy smiles and wearing the kind of casual sports attire that James lived in. They all talked in loud booming voices and seemed to have no interests beyond football, hockey, boating, fishing, hunting, and someone named Matt Kenseth. When they asked Jean-Louis what he did, he just cut to the chase and said he worked in New York in an office managing other people. That seemed to satisfy them. Conversation turned to golf and he wandered away only to be accosted by a group of high school juniors, all girls belonging to the French Club who had traveled to Paris with their teacher over spring break. He assumed they were at the barbecue because they lived in the neighborhood. They were at an age when a twenty-something-year-old foreign male was considered irresistible, especially if he were good looking and spoke with an accent. He amused himself by answering their silly questions, most of them blatantly leading and full of sexual innuendo. One of the girls asked him if he had ever eaten *coq au vin*, pronouncing the word *coq* with an emphasis that sent all her friends into a fit of giggles. They all wanted to run their fingers through his long blond hair and he let them. Why not? He had nothing better to do. The girls were drinking Cokes spiked with rum out of red plastic cups and as the afternoon wore on they became bolder and louder in their attentions. He sat back and laughed at their antics, kept still as they pawed at him, leaned into him, touched his cheek. Their come-ons were amateurish and sweet until their boyfriends showed up and spirited them off to some other party.

There was no wine at the barbecue, only beer, sodas, cranberry juice, rum, and vodka. He filled a plastic cup with ice and poured it full of vodka, then added a splash of cranberry juice as an afterthought. He took a long swallow and watched James tossing the football around in the backyard with his meathead friends as if he were sixteen and had finally made it as a starter on the varsity squad in high school, reliving the good old days. It made him know how wrong they were for each other, there was nothing here meant for him, not James, not his blinkered friends, not the overly-accepting family and neighbors, not the eight different kinds of potato and macaroni salads. He noticed with some surprise that all the deviled ham and egg sandwiches were gone. Who would have figured that? This was only his second day out here and he couldn’t wait to get back to his little New York apartment and away from all this strangeness. One night, he told himself, just get through this one night and then it’ll be over, he would never have to come back here again.

He drank himself into a comatose state, eyes open but brainwaves flat as a board. Laura called him over and he found himself sitting amongst a group of her friends, chatty suburban moms in their early fifties all riding high on the perimenopausal hormonal wave. They were worse than the teenaged girls. One of them, who was introduced as Cheri (“It’s pronounced ‘cherry’ like the fruit, but spelled with one ‘r’ and an ‘i’ instead of a ‘y’” she explained helpfully), quickly put a hand on his knee to get his attention and made to whisper something.
She asked, “Is it true that in France married couples all have lovers on the side?”

The whisper was loud enough for all the women to hear and they eagerly leaned in to hear more. It must have been the vodka talking because, in appallingly American fashion, he openly confessed that his own parents had had affairs with others.

“In France, these things aren’t discussed between spouses and therefore marriages remain intact,” he heard himself blathering. “In America, everyone can’t help but talk about these things and that’s why the rates of divorce are so high.”

Of course, he said all of this not knowing if any of it was statistically true but it sounded like the right thing to say based on their appreciative nods. He might as well have told them the reason their soufflés were failing to rise, it seemed to have the same effect of solving some kind of problem for them.

“So, people must take younger lovers, right?” That was Laura’s best friend talking, a woman named Carla. She was very tan and thin and looked to have robbed Fort Knox for all the gold jewelry around her neck and wrists and fingers.

His mind went blank. He had never considered age to be a determining factor when it came to matters of attraction. Why set such limits? Then he remembered his colleague Angela, the one with whom he was having an affair at work; she was in the same age group as these women.

“Oh… I suppose some take younger lovers. Why? Is that important?” He rattled the ice around in his plastic cup, the vodka gone, ashamed that he had shared something so personal with strangers. It was practically a betrayal of trust, though Angela was not there to hear it, he knew he had said too much for his own comfort.

The women all broke out in boisterous laughter. “Take a look at what we’re working with, honey.” Carla pointed to a group of middle aged men standing around the grill, Peter among them, beers in hand, hairlines receded or long disappeared, waistlines and guts marching onward and outward, their shorts and sandals framing atrophied calves and wrinkled knees. Jean-Louis assumed the men were their husbands. “Those guys haven’t seen their penises in at least fifteen years.”

“And neither have we!” Cheri said, prompting another round of laughter.

“Can you believe,” one of the women bemoaned, “they used to look like that?” She pointed at James and his gang playing football, probably their sons.

An image of James at fifty-five popped into his head, reduced to a Jabba the Hutt mass of glutinous flesh and flab, Jean-Louis struggling to cart him around in a wheelbarrow for some inexplicable reason. Where the hell would he be going in a fucking wheelbarrow? If he could barely stand to have James touch him now while the man was still young and undeniably fit, no amount of drink or drugs would help Jean-Louis later when everything had headed south in the worst way and was coming straight at him. Did that make him vain and superficial, to care about such things as the firmness of body parts and the unfortunate migration of hair from one place to another? Perhaps. But he considered that the least of his damnable sins.

He hadn’t eaten since breakfast. The heat, humidity, and depression had taken away his appetite for food, and now all the alcohol on an empty stomach was making it impossible to tolerate anything solid. The desserts were being brought out and he made it a point to politely refuse any offers to try this or that, especially that ambrosia salad which he figured would look the same coming up as going down. He busied himself instead with a tray of brownies, stumbling around looking for anyone interested in partaking.
“Hey, garçon! Over here!” That was James. Since when did he know to say “garçon”?

Jean-Louis walked over to the oak tree under which they were sitting, James and his friends and their wives or girlfriends, Ted and Meredith. Everyone stared up at him. He knew he was plastered and he hoped everyone else was too or he’d be in trouble.

“Here, I’ll take those,” James said. He grabbed the tray and set it down on the grass so people could help themselves. When Jean-Louis turned to leave, James caught his arm. “Where are you going? Sit down and hang out with us.”

There wasn’t much choice as James pulled him down beside him and kept his arm locked around his neck and shoulders. He could smell the beer on James, knew he had also had plenty to drink, could smell his sweat and his maleness. The sun had just settled below the horizon and the fireflies were now lighting up in the dusk. Faces and voices were blurred and muted as if seen and heard under water in Jean-Louis’s mind. If people were talking to him, he didn’t know it, couldn’t focus on anything being said. Everyone started laughing at some point, perhaps at him, he couldn’t tell and didn’t care. He felt James kissing the side of his face, a massive hand patting him on the chest. Jean-Louis laid his head against James’s shoulder and closed his eyes, oblivious to the world.

He must have passed out for some time because he was awoken by the sound of fireworks and a parched throat, still lying under the oak tree with his head now resting on James’s thigh. He looked up and saw James drinking a beer and staring into the night sky. A burst of colored lights rained down with a crackling, sizzling sound above the tree line, he heard “oohs” and “aahs” around him.

“Welcome back. You’re missing the show.”

“Is it almost over?” Jean-Louis asked. He propped himself upright with James’s help and sat rubbing his forehead.

“Nah. Probably another half hour.”

Jean-Louis wended his way back to the house in the dark trying not to step or trip on strangers sitting on the ground or in lawn chairs or standing about with upturned faces. He went into the bathroom, took a piss, washed his face with cold water. In the kitchen he drank three glassfuls of water and noticed that his arms were dotted with itchy red welts, the mosquitoes probably dead from alcohol poisoning already. Two older white-haired women he didn’t recognize were packing away leftover food into plastic containers and chatting about grandkids and so-and-so’s sciatica and the upcoming church bake sale. He sidled up to them and asked if he could help. They looked at each other in confusion, too embarrassed to admit they didn’t know him.

“Oh, but you’ll miss the fireworks,” one of them said.

“Oh, no, you wouldn’t want to do that,” her companion agreed.

“That’s okay. I’ve seen enough.” He showed them his polka dotted arms.

“Oh! Bessie, get the calamine lotion.”

He sat at the kitchen table and let them slather a thick pink liquid onto his arms. In seconds the gritty goop formed a dry crust and the itching gradually abated. Hunger finally caught up with him and the women made him a plate of cold grilled chicken and macaroni salad and some kind of corn relish with pickles and green beans.

Out of the blue he asked, “How come no one around here drinks wine?”
Again, the confused stares. The one named Bessie said, “Oh, you know, folks drink wine, sure they do. But it’s summer and they like their cold beers, don’t you know.” Her friend nodded.

James came in and overheard the last part of their conversation.

“Is he being a pain in the ass?” he asked.

“Who? Oh, him? No, sweetheart, he was just asking about the wine, why there isn’t any,” explained Bessie. Bessie turned out to be Laura’s mother, her “friend” was Laura’s aunt Margie.

“Ignore him,” James said. “He’s a spoiled little brat from France. Besides, he’s already had enough to drink for today, right baby?” James sat down next to him and smiled, half drunk himself. He grabbed a drumstick out of a container and they ate in silence while the two women worked around them, now chatting about a doctor they saw interviewed on some daytime talk show who was recommending the latest fad diet. James leaned over and put a hand on Jean-Louis’s thigh under the table, gave it a gentle squeeze, whispered into his ear, “I can’t wait to have you tonight.”

Jean-Louis gazed into the faces of the women to see if they had heard. When it was obvious that they hadn’t, he turned and gave James a smile, was even tempted to kiss him. It helped that he was still in a haze, now had some food in him, his mood gradually lifting. One more night, he told himself again, one and done.

After the guests finally left, they spent another hour or two cleaning up before Ted and Meredith gave him a departing hug, told him how nice it was to meet him, he should come for Thanksgiving, another holiday that was alien to him. What was it about Americans and their inviting of strangers to family gatherings? He had gotten his first taste of this habit when he was at U of M and every time there was a uniquely American holiday like Labor Day, Thanksgiving, even St. Patrick’s Day, he would be deluged with questions about where he would be spending the holiday. The other graduates in the program knew he would not be going home to France and were strangely concerned about his well-being at these times, as if he’d be lonely and commit suicide because he had no one to cook him a turkey or corned beef dinner. He had invited James home for Easter in a rebellious fit of spite, not because he wanted to force him to eat lamb or was worried about his emotional state. At times like this he wondered if it was he who was crazy or everyone else.

Perhaps because they were both tired and had drunk too much and they were finally showered and laying in a cool, air conditioned room after the oppressive heat of the outdoors, their lovemaking that night had none of the usual brutality and urgency. James was uncharacteristically tender, one might even say reticent, in his actions, kissing Jean-Louis for a long time and stroking his bare skin, wanting to linger around the edges of pleasure rather than crashing headlong through the door as he was wont to do. Jean-Louis felt a leaden weight in his limbs and a great void in his head. He didn’t often indulge in vodka and was not used to its peculiar effects, or maybe it was something else altogether, the slow ebbing of fear inside him as escape neared, escape and freedom, but he was overtaken by a desire to be pulled along with James, to go with him instead of against him, to be captured and filled with his love, his need, his strength, his innocence. He climbed atop him, straddled him and rocked against him slowly as James sat propped against the headboard, his hands caressing Jean-Louis, sometimes just resting on his hips, sometimes pulling him down, urging him deeper but not faster. Everything moved at an unhurried pace, it was late, but their parting would be soon enough and perhaps final, at least that is what drifted through Jean-Louis’s mind and drained the resistance from his body, untied the Gordian Knot in his heart. He heard himself moaning, a rare ache building at the base of his spine and somewhere else inside him an equally unbearable sensation was rising and engulfing him with its intensity. It was hard to know if it was pain or ecstasy, he only knew he would give himself over to it.
“Don’t touch me,” he groaned. “Take your hands off me.”

He was going to come from this alone, riding James’s cock, this alone and nothing else and he wanted James to know it, wanted him to see what he had done to him, dismantled completely and left in pieces, all because of him. He didn’t try to be quiet on purpose, wasn’t caring about James’s parents in the next room hearing, but when his orgasm finally gripped him he was rendered mute and capable only of a series of long shuddering sighs and words whispered into the darkness. Is this what it’s like to float in the dead of space, he wondered, all sound denied, breathing in stardust from Saturn’s rings while suspended in the shadow of Titan, feeling the enormity of time and space condensed in one’s body for a few obliterating moments?

James had never seen him like this, his body given freely as a sacrifice to him and then, finally, the words Jean-Louis had never spoken to him before, “Je t’aime, je t’aime.” It didn’t even matter if it were a lie, what mattered was that he had said it at last. Jean-Louis may as well have etched those words in stone, it meant that much to James just to hear him say it. He knew then he would lose him, maybe now, maybe later, it would be inevitable, “I love you” on the tombstone of their relationship, wasn’t that what it was? Jean-Louis’s parting words to him, what James had always wanted to hear from the moment he had fallen for him, he should have never wished for it.

He said the same to Jean-Louis now, “I love you, I love you,” in the desperate act of defying fate. James would give him everything inside himself, crawl through burning coals, swallow them one by one until they were made into diamonds through the crushing pain of heartbreak if it meant one more chance to prove his love for him, make him see that one thing could be transformed into another. Hadn’t James done it before in his life? He would do it again for Jean-Louis.

“Die for me,” he heard Jean-Louis say. “Would you die for me?”

James pulled him tightly to him. “Yes,” he cried against Jean-Louis’s mouth, like God breathing life into Adam, the word itself was life, the word was everything, and so he came, crying “yes” over and over, until all his love had been drained and offered up on the altar of his body.
Chapter Summary

Jean-Louis tries to end it with James. James has other ideas.

“I wish you were here,” James said. “I’ve got a bucketful of crayfish. You know what they are, don’t you? They’re like miniature lobsters.”

James had taken Jean-Louis to the airport the next morning and then headed up north with his parents to Traverse City for a month-long vacation in the cabin his family had rented on Grand Traverse Bay every summer since he and his brother were boys. James loved it as much now as he did when he was ten years old swimming in the sandy shallows of the bay, the water still bracingly cold at the height of summer, his face stained red from eating cherry pie, cherry jam, cherry everything. The place was called the Cherry Capital of the World for good reason and was host to the National Cherry Festival each July.

“And you’d love the cherries. I can send you some of the jam if you want.”

James had been there for five days and was still making the rounds to see the people he had gotten to know over all the summers spent up north. Today though he was on his way to Centre Ice Arena for some private rink time. The Detroit Red Wings held their training camp there and he was loosely acquainted with some of the players. One of the many perks of being in pro sports was access to the best of everything, the best facilities, the best equipment, the best doctors, drugs, and hookers, or whatever you wanted, if you were at the top of your game. He doubted that Tom Brady, another U of M alum, ever had to pay for anything. James wasn’t quite in that league, but he was sitting high enough to be recognized by any fan of football and to have doors opened to him if he knocked. He didn’t regret choosing football over his first love, hockey, but a session on the ice was as sweet as the cherries he’d eat until his stomach ached.

“Did I tell you, there are a million vineyards here, too? Betcha didn’t know that. Lots and lots of wine, baby. Are you sure you don’t want to come have a look?”

Jean-Louis wanted to smash his phone onto the pavement. “James, you know I can’t. I’m in DC this week for a conference and I’m on deadline for this exhibition. Besides, we just saw each other. And you have training camp next month.” He was standing outside the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History in the sweltering heat growing increasingly agitated. His colleagues inside were probably wondering if he had forgotten his appointment.

“That’s what I mean. We won’t be able to see each other once the season starts. If you could get away for just a day or two over the weekend…”

“I can’t. I have work and I can’t do this. We shouldn’t do this anymore. Please.”

James pulled into the arena parking lot, shut off the engine, and started heaving. “What are you saying?”

“I have people waiting for me. I have to go.”
“No. Tell me what you’re saying. What do you mean we shouldn’t do this anymore?”

“How much clearer do I have to be? Go back to your life. I want you to be happy. Don’t you understand?”

“There’s nothing to understand except you. And I don’t understand you at all.”

“Just let me go. Just forget about the whole thing. There was never anything between us anyway.”

“What are you talking about?” James pounded the steering wheel with both of his fists, rattling the phone sitting on the dashboard. “You told me you loved me!”

Jean-Louis wiped the sweat from his brow on the back of his hand, his body shaking with anxiety and no small amount of fear. “I don’t remember saying that,” he mumbled.

“You fucking liar! You said it, that last night, you said it. You said you loved me. You asked me to die for you and I said I would. I’d fucking die for you and now you’re telling me none of this means anything to you? I’d give you my life and you’d throw it all away? I fucking hate you… God…I hate you so much…” He was bawling his eyes out and he didn’t give a shit if anyone saw. “If I ever get my hands on you, I’m going to fuck you so hard you’ll spend the rest of your life in a goddamn wheelchair, do you hear me, you selfish, arrogant prick! I will fucking destroy you!”

“Oh, James.” Jean-Louis couldn’t believe it, couldn’t believe that what he was hearing actually hurt him to the core. Did he really tell James that he loved him? No wonder he wanted him dead. He couldn’t run away fast enough. “You’re right. I lied to you and I’m sorry. Please don’t call me again.”

He hung up and shut off his phone knowing there would be a million voicemail rants awaiting him later. Nothing he could do about that. At least he would be safe for the next few days. James didn’t know which hotel he was staying at and he seriously doubted he would seek him out in DC for some murderous payback. Surely that could be saved for a later date. He took a few minutes to calm himself and then he went inside to look through the archives of Burgess Shale fossils.

It took James three days to pull back from his initial rage. He spent several hours each day at the gym fighting his way through a smothering terror, then hours on the kayak paddling furiously like a man with a great white shark chomping at his ass. The remorse set in. He was ashamed of the things he had said in anger, the expletive laden texts and messages he had sent. He wished he could take them all back. It was juvenile and stupid and Jean-Louis hadn’t sent back a single reply, not even a “fuck you” or acerbic comment so typical of him, there was nothing but silence and it filled James with the bitterest emptiness imaginable. Why would Jean-Louis respond when he had threatened to kill him, shred him with his bare hands, choke him and fuck him to death? Hadn’t James known not to believe him when he said those words that he had so wanted to hear? Why should he hold him to that now, words spoken in a fit of orgasmic brain freeze? He should have known better. He had to remind himself how young Jean-Louis was. What the hell did he know about matters of the heart when he was twenty-one, twenty-two? Nothing. He was an absolute idiot about such things and probably no different now, but he knew he loved Jean-Louis, of that he was certain, ached for him until it felt like his heart would shatter. Why did it have to be so painful?

“I told him I was going to kill him. I said things a lot worse than that,” James confessed. He walked on the lake shore with his mother after dinner, unloading all the bile festering inside him. He could always talk to her, trust her to be honest with him, more so than his father who was too proud of him to criticize or point out his flaws. His mother didn’t buy into all the football glory bullshit.
“You and Dad, I always thought it would be the same for me. I’d meet someone, fall in love, get married, have kids. What did I do wrong? Why did I fuck it up with Krista?”

“Krista?” Laura laughed derisively. “You seriously thought she was right for you?”

She had met Krista for the first time when James flew her and Peter into Denver for Easter after he had moved into his new home. Krista was lovely with perfect hair, teeth and nails, perfect enhanced breasts that didn’t seem to move. She looked exactly like all the other football groupies, Barbie dollish young women who would wait outside the stadium hoping to catch some player’s attention after a game or who would populate the local sports bars favored by the athletes. She had her own career thankfully, but it was obvious that her son was interchangeable in Krista’s mind; he was as good as any other pro baller with a hefty contract. If he married her, she’d expect the white Mercedes, the live-in maid and nanny, the vacations at four star resorts, the spa weekends with her girlfriends, and plenty of time for affairs while James was off in some other city getting his ribs fractured so she could enjoy her pampered life.

Maybe she was just a bit jealous, a little overprotective as mothers can be when they lose their baby boy to another woman. But she didn’t raise him with discipline and a hearty respect for hard earned money to allow someone else to feast off him like a vulture on a bloody carcass. That Easter meal told her everything she needed to know about Krista. It wasn’t just the plain fact that the girl didn’t know how to cook. That could be learned. It was the way she fit so easily into that house, his house, as if everything in it was all her and not James, down to the flatware and dishes, the ostentatious furniture and decorative knickknacks. James was proud of the way Krista had put the house together but none of it, save for the basement gym, said anything about him, as if he didn’t even exist. And the way she spoke to James was too careful, too self-aware, too practiced, as if she were an actress on set playing a role. True, she may have been nervous in meeting the parents of her boyfriend, but they had been dating for months, long enough for there to be some genuine interaction. James didn’t even seem to notice. Was he that dense?

She was actually relieved when James told her at Christmas that things between him and Krista were going downhill faster than some Norwegian Olympian on the Super-G. It wasn’t Krista’s fault, he told her, it was all on him. He had made a gigantic mess of things and was in deep, deep trouble, had no idea how to fix it. James was at their home in Michigan explaining why Krista wasn’t with him, why she was with her own family instead for the holiday rather than sporting an engagement ring in front of James’s parents. He was cheating on her with someone else, Krista was sure of it or why else had he suddenly lost interest in sex with her? That wasn’t like him at all. Right before Christmas she confronted him with her suspicions and he readily admitted to it. Yes, he was guilty as charged. They were standing in the kitchen and to his surprise she didn’t throw any dishes at him. He expected at least a coffee mug or two, maybe a pan or some utensils, but no, she remained frighteningly calm. She would give him time to think about what he had done and then she expected an answer by Valentine’s Day: either he end his affair with this mysterious lover and beg for her forgiveness in the form of a ring on her finger or it was over between them.

“Dump her,” Laura had said. “It’s obvious you don’t love her.”

“That’s not the problem, Mom.” He looked guiltily at his family sitting around the living room with presents and wrapping paper scattered all over the plush carpet. In a little while the relatives would be arriving for an early turkey dinner. What a way to ruin things! But he was sick of lying and making excuses and he didn’t want them finding out from anyone but him. He felt like he hadn’t slept for ages or had a moment of peace. So he told them about Jean-Louis, how he met up with him again in Denver after U of M, the whole crazy business of falling ridiculously in love, how his fixation just wouldn’t go away. His brother burst out laughing.
“You’re gay? Jesus Christ! When did that happen? I had no idea! Man, you are so fucked!” Ted rolled on the floor in tears.

“Now wait a minute. I’m not gay. I want to make that clear to everyone. I am NOT gay!” James stood up and pointed his finger at no one in particular. “I don’t even know what this is. I’ve lost my fucking mind, okay? Maybe I need a goddamn lobotomy, I don’t know, I don’t know! Somebody fucking help me!”

Then his father chimed in trying to be helpful. “What about Justin?” He looked over at Ted who worked with him in the family’s car detailing business. “You know, the kid down at the shop who does all our custom pinstriping? The one with all the tattoos? He’s gay.”

“He is?” asked Ted. “How do you know?”

“He told me. The kids, they all look up to me, you know.” He smiled proudly. “Oh, and there’s Myra’s boy. Right, honey?” Peter turned to Laura, who was slow to take this all in. “Your cousin Myra. Isn’t her boy Ian gay?”

“For shit’s sake, Dad. I don’t need a list of every gay guy you know. How is that supposed to help me? I’ve already told you, I’m not gay. I just need to know what to do!” James loved his old man, but sometimes he could really miss the point by more than a few miles.

“I don’t know why you’re making such a big deal out of this,” said Meredith. She worked with the special needs children at the elementary school as a teacher’s aide. “At least three of our teachers are gay and the girls’ soccer coach is a lesbian if there ever was one.”

“That’s school, babe. That’s the teachers’ union protecting their asses,” Ted explained to his wife. “Out in the real world, you don’t get away with that kind of shit. Besides, all female athletes are lesbians.”

“He’s right,” James said in defeat. “It wouldn’t go over too well in the locker room. It’s just…I don’t know what to do.” He had known of other players who had been suspected of being less than ten thousand percent hetero macho male and the abuse meted out to them had been merciless. James wasn’t afraid of standing up to the harassment. There wouldn’t be any if no team would have him in the first place. That was the problem. Homophobia was so rampant and vehemently encouraged—despite all the bullshit lectures about honoring ‘difference’ and ‘inclusivity’—no hint of gayness would be tolerated, real or imagined. He should know; he had been an enthusiastic enforcer of the NFL mindset, even if he and most of the other guys didn’t actually care where people put their dicks.

“Why do anything?” asked Meredith. “So you’ve got a crush on some guy you used to know in college. So what? You only ran into him in November. That’s what…not even two months? I think you’re taking this way too seriously. Give it some time and it’ll probably go away on its own.”

“But I don’t want it to…and it’s only gotten worse,” James insisted.

“Worse like how?” his mother asked.

“Worse like I can’t think, I can’t sleep, I can’t eat. I failed my fucking weigh-in last Friday. Duffy lied for me so I wouldn’t get benched. Jesus. I feel like I’m dying.”

It was true. He looked and felt terrible. He had resorted to creatine powder to keep the weight on but it only made him feel like a bloated bag of cement with stomach woes and agonizing muscle cramps. Laura had never known James to let his life get so out of hand, to be this hysterical over
some new love interest. He’d had more than his share of girlfriends from college onward and none of them had bent him out of shape like this. Even when he was a crazed, inexperienced teenager worrying over every word he said to a girl he wasn’t nearly this helpless and desperate. She had to believe that this was serious. Yes, her cousin Myra had a gay son, but that didn’t make it any easier to accept that her own boy might not be on the straight and narrow. She had never cared whose kid was gay, wasn’t one to criticize other people’s private lives, but she could hardly bear the thought of others judging her son in ways that she knew they would. This was all so unfair. What kind of person could cause her boy to veer off course like this?

When she finally met Jean-Louis half a year later over that July Fourth holiday she was taken by surprise. She had seen the few pictures of him on James’s phone but meeting him in person was a different matter. He was stunning in a way that made him seem not quite human, as if he were a marble statue come to life. His surreal appearance would have rattled her except she saw the dread on his face and knew he was for real, knew he was flesh and blood, knew he wanted to be anywhere but standing next to her son. She understood right away his apprehension and loved him for it. By Laura’s reckoning, there was only one kind of person who would enter into a relationship with her son with eagerness: a gold digger. Her son had fame, money, youth, and good looks, but he also had a ferocious temper and an obsessive streak that stood out as much as his massive frame in a crowd. Anyone willing to overlook that was only after one thing and it certainly wasn’t love. It was a shame that Jean-Louis was the wrong gender, although he was more beautiful than any woman she had ever met. It just would have made things so much easier. There would have been no prejudice, no hateful talk, no nasty backlash in the media, no condemnation from ignorant, narrow-minded people. Even so, as bad as she knew things could get, she would still rather endure the whispers and cruel comments than put up with that parasite Krista living off her son.

“What? You didn’t like her? I thought Easter dinner went great that time.” James skipped a few stones on the water, then slapped a mosquito off of his forearm leaving behind a bloody smear.

“She didn’t even know how to cook a ham!”

“Mom, for Christ’s sake.”

“Who doesn’t know how to open a can of Coke? That ham was like leather. Was that the kind of person you wanted cooking for you for the rest of your life?”

“We always ate out. Don’t blame her for that. She really went out of her way to…”

“Whatever. I can tell you this. You never felt about her the way you feel about Jean-Louis. I know what you see in him.”

“What? Tell me. What do I see in him? He drives me completely insane, you realize that don’t you?”

“He’s not like you. He needs love.”

“I need love.”

“Sweetheart, you’ve had love all your life. Probably more than most people.”

“And he hasn’t?”

“Maybe not. Maybe not the kind of love he needs. You met his family. Not everyone is as lucky as you are. You saw what his brother did to him. He endured that for you. And now you threaten him
with the same? Can you blame him if he won’t have anything to do with you?”

She was right. He had behaved abominably. Jean-Louis had taken a vicious beating at the hands of his own brother for James. Those bruises were still there a month-and-a-half later when James saw them with his own eyes. He knew what they would have looked like fresh, he’d sustained those kinds of injuries countless times himself and Jean-Louis had worn them like a badge of honor. It made James love him that much more.

“I just…don’t know how to keep him,” James said.

“Well you’re doing a great job of chasing him away. If I were him, I’d run screaming.”

“Shit.” He showed her the disgusting texts he had sent. “Tell me I haven’t blown it, Mom. Would you forgive me for this?”

“This is what you say to him? Are you sure you love him?” she asked as she handed back his phone. “Because it doesn’t sound like you do.”

“I was pissed off. They’re just words…”

“I’m going to kill you, motherfucker? Look, I know what you’re like with your teammates—you think I don’t see all the stuff that’s on YouTube?—but it’s not okay to be like that with anyone else. Don’t you understand? That’s on you. I can’t believe I raised such an asshole! Where did you get all this hatefulness? Never mind.”

She knew where to put the blame, that old drunk, indulgent father-in-law of hers, it was his fault for getting James hooked on that weight training obsession. Her James used to be such a sweet and gentle soul until he started down that path and who knows what was in all those powdered and pill supplements the trainers had him taking. The aggression it brought out in him had propelled him to success, but what else had he lost along the way?

“You better think of something to make it up to him,” Laura said. “Say you’re sorry and mean it. Otherwise, you let him walk away.”

“You like him, don’t you?”

“I do. I feel sorry for him, too. If someone had sent me those texts…” She looked out onto Lake Michigan, the sky glowing red and orange and yellow as the sun sank below the horizon. She felt her heart sinking along with it. “If he were my son, I wouldn’t let him be with someone like you, not like you are now.”

“Goddamn it, Mom, you’re supposed to be on my side. And he’s not as innocent as you think he is.” He threw a stone as far out into the water as he could. It sailed off into the darkening evening too far to even hear it land. “I won’t always be like this.”

He knew what she meant, his violent temper, his foul moods, his eagerness for a brawl. He thought he had kept it all on the field where it worked towards his own advantage but maybe it had leaked into his life outside of the game. Who was he kidding? As if there were anything outside of the game. His whole life was the game. He had dragged Jean-Louis into a meat grinder.
James apologizes to Jean-Louis with a case of wine and a love letter.

There was a case of wine waiting for Jean-Louis when he arrived back in New York from Washington DC. His full schedule of conference sessions and research in the archives of the Smithsonian’s invertebrate paleobiology collection had kept him distracted after that horrible phone call. He indulged in heavy drinking at the dinners for conference attendees and even had a fling with a doctoral candidate from Harvard giving a paper on Ordovician cephalopods. Jean-Louis’s panel on benthic foraminifera had finished right before and the young man, listed as Wesley Allen Conway on the program notes, had shook his hand enthusiastically and told him he had read all his published work, a rather odd comment since his own area of specialization bore little relation to Jean-Louis’s. At the cocktail hour that evening he was approached again by this Wes fellow and it became clear that he hadn’t read Jean-Louis’s work, no, he was interested in something else altogether. By then, James’s latest text had told him for the millionth time to go fuck himself, so he felt no remorse in seeking a little comfort in the arms of a stranger.

“Came yesterday,” Terrence said, the doorman who worked the day shift in Jean-Louis’s building on the Upper West Side. He pointed to the crate sitting behind his desk. “I’ll have someone bring it up to your apartment. This came with it.” He handed Jean-Louis a sealed FedEx envelope.

“Thank you.”

Jean-Louis was tempted to look at the mailing label on the crate to see if it came from his mother—she would send him cases from the family vineyard if he asked—but those crates always came stamped with the name of their vineyard and this crate did not. The return address on the FedEx envelope told him it was from James. There was no escape. When he opened the door to his apartment he half expected to see it totally trashed with the words “Die motherfucker!” spray painted in red across the walls. But it was exactly as he had left it, no James with an axe jumping out at him from the coat closet ready to decapitate him. Within the half hour one of the maintenance men brought the crate up in a handcart and pried off the lid with a crowbar. Jean-Louis opened the cardboard case inside and started pulling out the bottles, all Rieslings from Black Star Farms, Silver Leaf Vineyard, Circa Estate Winery, Chateau Fontaine, Boathouse Winery, and Brengman Brothers. He lit a joint and opened the FedEx envelope. The note was handwritten and neatly printed in blue ink.

Jean-Louis,

I’m sorry. I’m sorry for every shitty thing I’ve said to you. I don’t know why things come out all wrong, but that’s on me. I can’t begin to explain what you mean to me or why I keep fucking up. Believe me when I say I’m trying to do the right things. They don’t give you a roadmap for this. I’m so lost without you. My heart hurts every time I think about you and I think about you all the time. Please forgive me and be mine again. I love you more than anything in the world. There will never
be anyone for me but you. I swear it.

Don’t drink all the wine in one day (ha ha). Like I told you, there are lots of vineyards here. I hope you’ll come with me here, later, when you’re ready. Then you’ll see what I mean. There’s so much more I want to give to you if you’ll only let me. I love you. I know I said that already.

Yours forever,

James

P.S. Please call me. I miss you so much I could die.

Goddamn him! How could he do that, use that kind of drivel to manipulate him and make him take pity? Why not just send a box of those chalky heart-shaped Valentine’s Day candies inked with the same kinds of sappy platitudes? “Be mine” my ass! But it had worked before and it worked again now. Jean-Louis was in pieces after the third sentence. The joint didn’t make a dent in his misery.

“James?” Jean-Louis couldn’t stop crying.

“I’m here, baby. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t do this to me.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Don’t walk away from this. Please. Don’t hang up.”

They didn’t even talk, just listened to each other sobbing and sniffling over the phone. Jean-Louis had never been so confused in his life. He didn’t love James, of course not, but he couldn’t deny him what he wanted, not when James ripped his own heart out of his chest and handed it over to him like that. He let James fly to New York to spend the last weekend of July with him before returning to Denver for training camp. They didn’t leave the apartment, just fucked themselves into a sweaty heap. They drank the wine that James had sent. Some of it was decent.

“Promise me you’ll Skype,” James said. “I can’t stand not seeing you. I have to see you. Say you’ll do it.”

He kissed him over and over, making him squirm beneath him. They were in bed and gazing at Jean-Louis naked against the white sheets was almost unbearable for James. He would have felt less pain if he had stabbed his own eyes out. It would be an eternity before he could have this again.

“I swear I’m going to fucking die without you. Come with me to Denver.”

“Stop it, James. My work is here.”

“So get a new job, transfer to Denver. You know those people at the museum.”

“It doesn’t work like that.”

“Then don’t worry about it. I have enough for both of us. Come be with me.”

“No!” Jean-Louis turned away from him. Not even twenty-four hours and they were already driving each other up the wall. “Why do you have to ruin things?”

“I’m sorry.” James kissed his bare shoulder, then the back of his neck. “I’m so lonely without
“Then get another lover,” Jean-Louis said.

“What?”

“Get another lover, or as many as you want. I won’t mind. You don’t have to feel lonely on my account.” He was going to pay for that but he couldn’t stop himself.

James was incredulous. “Why would I ever do that? I don’t want anyone but you.” Then it slowly dawned on him. “Have you been cheating on me?” He pinned Jean-Louis flat on his back and stared down at him. “Have you been fucking other people this whole time?”

Jean-Louis said nothing at first, his face expressionless. “Would you kill me if I did?”

“Maybe. Tell me.” He shook him for emphasis, gripping him by his biceps until he could see the skin turn white underneath his fingers. He knew there would be purple welts for days. Good, James thought, let that be a reminder.

“I have a lover, a colleague at work. She’s married but she likes to have a little fun on the side. That’s all. We’re friends and if anyone is cheating, I’m the one cheating on her with you since I met her first. I was with her before you James. She’s the one being cheated on, not you. Are you satisfied?”

God, what a load of bullshit! He hoped James would be dimwitted enough to buy it. Left unmentioned were all the casual trysts with cute young men he’d meet when he went out drinking and clubbing; he was fairly certain James would snap his neck in two if he admitted to those. They were innocent affairs really, just kissing and groping and perhaps a hand job or some fellatio. He had yet to let anyone else have him the way James wanted him. That was a punishment meted out by James and he wasn’t eager to ask for more of it from others. He no longer slept with any women besides Angela. In that respect, he was adamantly faithful to her and far too afraid to let his heart run away with him like he had with Sophie. He trusted Angela to draw the line for him. Angela would never crush his soul like Sophie had.

“You’re fucking a woman?” James asked, surprised, vaguely confused.

“Yes. Are you angry?”

“Yeah, I’m pissed, but I’m not going to kill you.” James released his grip and rolled off to the side, his fury slowly ebbing. He knew Jean-Louis liked women. Heck, he liked them, too. Wanting a woman was only natural. But if it had been another man Jean-Louis was fucking and not a woman, James would have gone ballistic because that would have been a blatant tresspass on his territory —encroachment way over the line of scrimmage—and he would have done God knows what to defend it…terrible things, regrettable things. “If I asked you to stop, would you?”

“No. That’s my choice,” replied Jean-Louis, defiant as ever. “You don’t own me.”

“One day…one day I will. And then I won’t share you with anyone else.”

James pushed him over onto his stomach and took him roughly again just to prove his point. Afterwards, though, he was tender and contrite, caressing him gently and stroking his hair. “I don’t hold it against you if you’re having an affair with this woman. Just don’t fall in love with her. Don’t fall in love with anyone but me.”

Jean-Louis vacationed in Capri with Charlotte and her latest boyfriend for a week over Christmas.
The first night there he met a man from Rome at the bar who gave his name as Paolo, thirtyish, dark hair, very handsome and fit. They sat on the beach and shared a joint, then went back to Jean-Louis’s hotel suite. From the very first Jean-Louis realized this would be different, not at all like being with James. This man could play his body like an instrument, knew exactly how and where to touch him with his hands and mouth, when to stop and start his caresses, his kisses, his thrusts. For the first time he understood what it was to desire to be taken that way, to want it, cry and beg for it. He drove Jean-Louis to the summit, only to pull him back, over and over until the hunger for more was too much to bear, he was in a state of blinding, screaming euphoria. He had never been handled that way, made love to with such skill and deftness that neither fear nor pain could derail the overwhelming pleasure reverberating throughout his entire body, pumping through his veins like a demon drug. It was a revelation. When he returned to New York he found his desire for James dead in the water. How could he go back to him now that he knew better? The thought of James’s coarse hands on him, the way he fondled him with stupidity and ignorance, was enough to make Jean-Louis cringe with regret. He let his calls go to voicemail more and more. It was easy. He had met someone else and fallen deeply in love.
Jean-Louis falls in love. But not with James.

He remembered the exact moment he first set eyes on Guy-Manuel, what he was wearing, the sound of his voice, even the way he held the rolled up floor plan in his fingers as if it were the Magna Carta or some such priceless document. Guy-Manuel was shy and utterly charming, twenty-one-years-old and a senior at Parsons majoring in communication design. Jean-Louis would later learn that his father was of French-Spanish extraction, his mother from Vietnam. The boy was beautiful, inky-black close-cropped hair and almond eyes that were so dark and brilliant Jean-Louis swore he could see the night sky in them, if not the universe stretching into eternity.

“Excuse me,” Guy-Manuel had said, standing at the doorway of Jean-Louis’s office. “Phil sent me down. He said you’d be expecting me?” His ID tag was clipped onto his belt indicating his status as a student intern.

“Yes, come in.” Jean-Louis rose from his desk in the back corner and waved him over to a large worktable in the middle of the room. “Let’s have a look.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Guy-Manuel approached and handed him the 24 x 36 inch sheet with the color-coded layout of the exhibition at quarter inch scale, watched him unroll the paper and weigh it down at each corner with fist-sized limestone fragments of fossilized ammonites. Eyes on the floor plan, Jean-Louis absently pointed to a stool next to a file cabinet and said, “Please sit.”

“Okay.” Guy-Manuel dragged the stool over to the worktable and sat in nervous silence as Jean-Louis looked over the plan and frowned.

“Merde,” Jean-Louis swore softly. “This is all wrong.” He grabbed a red pen and began marking up the sheet, drawing arrows all over the place, circling words, scribbling notations. “Doesn’t anyone know how to spell around here?”

“I’m sorry,” Guy-Manuel said. “I thought I was being careful. I didn’t know most of the words...” His voice trailed off in embarrassment. It was lame to make excuses. He knew he should have double-checked the spelling but hadn’t bothered, he had been too busy working on another file, getting the leading and kerning just right on the banner for the exhibition—The Cambrian Seas Revisited: Legacy of the Burgess Shale. Besides, who the heck would know if he had misspelled words like *Anomalocaris, Aysheaia, Naraoia, Amiskwia,* or *Wiwaxia*? Was that even English?

Jean-Louis threw down his pen in disgust and glanced across the worktable, took his first good look at Guy-Manuel and nearly creamed his pants. Seconds later he realized he had forgotten to breathe and wondered with dread if he had been staring like the town idiot. He hurriedly glued his eyes back to the floor plan and proceeded to re-examine it with tremendous interest and concentration, but really, he was just counting the seconds, willing his boner to subside. He took a seat on a stool opposite Guy-Manuel, Mr. Casual-like, all the while thinking to himself, *Christ, what a walking wet dream!* And then, *Does this make me a pervert?*

“I’m really sorry,” Guy-Manuel repeated. “I can make all the corrections.”
“It’s alright,” Jean-Louis quickly assured, abashed and now struggling to put a red-faced Guy-Manuel at ease. “The names of these things can seem ridiculous unless you know your Greek or Latin, or Native American in this case.” Shit! Now he sounded like some pompous ass, rambling on about scientific nomenclature of all tiresome things. *Say something subtle and disarming, for the love of God!* “Where are you from? I can’t place your accent.” Real subtle.

“My father’s family is from Languedoc and Zaragoza, but we live in Navarra. He and my mother manage a vineyard there.”

“Vraiment?” *Whaaat?* Jean-Louis couldn’t believe his ears—what serendipity!—and went on excitedly, “My family runs a vineyard in Arbois in Bourgogne-Franche-Comté. What does your family produce?”

“Tempranillo and some Verdejo. What about your family?”

“We grow Savagnin, Chardonnay, and some Pinot noir. How funny. You speak French?”

“Bien sûr. And Spanish, Italian, Portuguese.”

“Ah. My Italian and Spanish are excellent. I’m also fluent in German, Dutch, Russian…” Now he was just getting way too braggy, so Jean-Louis demurred, though it wasn’t exactly true, “My Portuguese could be much better.”

“I could help you.”

“I’m sure you could.”

Right. Jean-Louis could think of a whole slew of other things this young man could do for him besides improving his perfectly satisfactory command of Portuguese, things that were both naughty and achingly romantic. Hadn’t Guy-Manuel made the offer without any prompting? And he was adorable beyond words! It had been so long since Jean-Louis had felt this besotted, a drought suffered as a defense against heartache, and now he had stumbled upon someone who literally took his breath away and made him feel like some embarrassingly awkward pubescent bundle of raging hormones. What did it mean? Did Guy-Manuel hold the key to his locked heart? Jean-Louis picked up the pen again and cleared his throat, stared down at the plan but everything had flown out of his head. He couldn’t for the life of him remember what was going where in the different galleries. Did he draw all those arrows? And what did Guy-Manuel look like naked?

“I can’t…make sense of this,” he muttered to himself. “Would you like to get a coffee?” Another classy move! Help!

“Umm…I think Phil is expecting me back upstairs. I have to finish another assignment for him by the end of the day.”

“I see. Can you leave this with me then? I need some more time to make the revisions.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll let Phil know.” Guy-Manuel got up and turned to go.

“What time do you leave today?” Jean-Louis asked.

“Four-thirty.”

“Okay. I’ll try to get this back to you before then.”

The coffee didn’t help. If anything, it made him even more manic and unfocused, he couldn’t get
Guy-Manuel out of his head. He forced himself to eat a plate of pasta in the dining room at lunchtime, hoping a carbohydrate-induced stupor would dampen his nerves. He ate with his colleague Angela, a head curator who supervised a staff of twelve assistant curators in the vertebrate department. She and her crew had just finished installing a large blockbuster exhibition of reptiles from the Mesozoic Era the previous month and the crowds flocking in to see it were another feather in her already peacock-worthy cap. She wore a bright cherry red lipstick color to complement her splendid mood, her strawberry blond hair pulled back into a tight chignon to show off her still beautiful face. She was in her early fifties and rightfully proud of her well-preserved looks. Jean-Louis enjoyed their trysts, normally on a Thursday night once a month when her husband Stuart, a full professor in economics at Fordham, went to his club to play poker. They made love with abandon, sometimes at her place, sometimes at his. Jean-Louis was grateful to be with someone with no hang-ups, who enjoyed the purely physical satisfaction of good old-fashioned fucking. Unlike girls his own age who were insecure and overwhelmingly psychotic, Angela was firmly committed to her husband of thirty years and had no intention of leaving him, even though she was thoroughly fed up with his consistently dismal performance in bed. Now that he was well into middle-age and taking Viagra, sex with him had transitioned from fucking a corpse with a limp cock to fucking a corpse with a hard one, an improvement in theory but not in actual practice sadly. Taking on younger lovers solved the dilemma; she could have great sex and still keep the man she genuinely loved.

“What’s the matter, sweetheart?” After forty years in the States, Angela still retained a hint of an Australian accent, a legacy of her childhood in Canberra. “You look like you just licked a toad.” She picked carefully at her plate of fruit and cheese, pushing the melon aside. She couldn’t stand cantaloupe.

Jean-Louis put his fork down and took a sip of water, then leaned in and asked, “Have you met Phil’s new intern?”

“Which one? He has two this spring. I’ve dealt with the one from SVA...Megan something-or-other. Not too bad, no more obnoxious than the others, but she couldn’t spell her way out of a paper bag. T-r-i-a-s-s-i-c. Just sound it out, right? God help us. We should just have all the signage in Braille and be done with it.”

Jean-Louis had to laugh despite himself. “No, the other one, then. His name is Guy-Manuel, although I don’t think he can spell either.”

“Guy-Manuel? I think I’d remember a name like that. Is he cute?”

“V-e-r-y,” he replied, eyes wide in case she didn’t catch his meaning.

“Ah ha. What is this?” She sat forward in her chair, eager to hear more.

“I met him this morning. Phil has him working on the signage for the Cambrian exhibit. He brought me the floor plan and now I can’t even remember which pieces are going in. I think I’ve lost my mind,” he mumbled, spearing a piece of penne onto each tine of his fork. “Are we still meeting tonight?” It was a Thursday, their Thursday.

“Yes, as far as I know, unless you’d rather be doing something else. Perhaps with your new little friend?” Her green eyes danced as she teased him, a wide smile arching across her glossy lips.

“No, I want to see you. I need to fuck my brains out.”

“Well, thanks for the compliment, Jean-Louis. I’m glad I’m still of use to you.”
“I didn’t mean it like that. I’m sorry. And besides, he might not even like me.”

“Not like you? Since when does anyone not like you?” She reached under the table and playfully squeezed his thigh. “So, my place or yours?”

“Better make it my place,” he said. “I plan on getting totally wasted.”

After lunch he sat down at the worktable with the floor plan, put on his ear buds and started listening to his Placebo playlist but found it too distracting and switched over to some Shostakovich; much better. Now that he was calm, things started making sense again. He worked methodically and with care, spending a good half hour going over his notes before looking at the diagram again and trying to unravel the mess. He couldn’t blame Phil. The exhibition design department was underfunded and understaffed, even at an institution as large as the American Museum of Natural History with its substantial budget, grants, and endowments. Phil relied more and more on part-timers and student interns as his more senior staff retired or left for more lucrative employment, taking with them their experience and increasingly rare skill sets, like proof-reading. Jean-Louis’s own interns had performed erratically, eager for responsibility while shirking their duties. The most surprising was Caleb, a graduate student in Columbia’s museum studies program who seemed perfectly content organizing accession files for the re-cataloguing project. Caleb came in once a week on Mondays and worked in the file room by himself. Once Jean-Louis found him lying on the floor sleeping, but otherwise he seemed like a fairly reliable worker until he stopped coming in altogether. When he contacted the faculty supervisor at Columbia, he learned the reason behind Caleb’s sudden disappearance: he had overdosed on heroin.

It was four-thirty before he knew it. He took the edited floor plan up to Phil’s office, hoping to catch Guy-Manuel before he left.

“Here,” he said, handing the rolled up sheet to Phil. “I’ve made all the corrections.” He looked around the office but Guy-Manuel was nowhere in sight. Phil unrolled the sheet and shook his head with dissatisfaction.

“Give me a break. If that kid actually worked for me I’d fire him.” He got up and put the sheet on a desk in the far corner of the room. “Would you believe he spent five hours on one fucking line of text for the banner?”

“It’s okay, Phil. We have time. So, when do you think I’ll get the revised plan?”

“Not until next week at the earliest. He’s only here on Tuesdays and Thursdays. If you want, I can put Megan on it. She’ll be in tomorrow.”

“No, next week is fine. I won’t have time to look it over tomorrow. Thanks.”

By the time Angela showed up at his apartment at seven he was already halfway through a joint and in good spirits. He kissed her as soon as she was through the door, grinding his hips against her and giddy with excitement.

“I’ve already ordered from Han Dynasty. Should be here by seven-thirty.” He knew what she liked: spring rolls, pork and vegetable dumplings, rice noodles with bok choy, shredded carrots and chicken, salt and pepper shrimp. He had three bottles of Sauvignon in the fridge ready to go. He passed her the joint and hung up her coat in the hallway closet.
“Should we have a glass to start?” he asked.

“Absolutely.” She kicked off her shoes and made herself comfortable on the sofa, taking a long drag. “So, tell me more about this Guy-Manuel.”

“There’s not much to tell,” Jean-Louis said from the kitchen. He brought out a bottle and two glasses and joined her on the sofa. “He won’t be back until next week. We’ll just have to wait and see. Santé.”

“And what about James?” she asked, putting the glass to her lips.

“James? I don’t think there’s much left between us,” he said evasively.

The truth was, James’s ardor hadn’t cooled down a whit. His calls and texts had been flattering at first but were now a royal nuisance. And the Skyping for crying out loud! He just couldn’t stomach any more of it after the eye-opening fling with Paolo in Capri. He had thought it amusing to strip naked for James, masturbate for him on camera so he could watch and get off in the comfort of his home in Denver, the idea of turning him on that way gave him a powerful thrill until he realized he no longer had any feelings for him whatsoever. Then it became a shameful burden. He didn’t want James touching him, not even with his eyes.

“Really? Does he know that?”

Jean-Louis shrugged. “I don’t love him, Angela. I suppose I should tell him, but I don’t want to hurt his feelings. He’s not bad to me. Just not a very good lover.”

“Tell me about it. I’ve had my share of that. Still, there’s more to a man than what he can do with his cock.” She put a hand on Jean-Louis crotch. “Although, there is a lot to be said for a man who does know what to do with it.”

She unzipped his fly, rolled a condom onto his erection, and rode him like a deranged jockey. It took only minutes for them to finish, in time for Jean-Louis to pull up his pants and pay the delivery boy from Han’s. They ate and drank in leisurely fashion, cracking up over episodes of The IT Crowd on Netflix, then went into the bedroom to make love. Angela lay naked on her back, dragging slowly on another joint as Jean-Louis knelt between her legs at the foot of the bed sucking slow kisses along the insides of her thighs, brushing his lips against the soft skin and then across her clitoris, nipping gently at it before stroking across it with his tongue in rhythmic fashion, tracing exquisite, torturous circles, then placing his open mouth over her mound and working her into a frenzy of aching, throbbing release. He gripped her tightly to him as she came, sucking down firmly on her clit and pinning her hips to the mattress so that she couldn’t thrash about, he was saving that for himself.

“Oh for fuck’s sake!” It came out like a throaty shriek. “Get your cock inside me, goddamn it!”

He rose up and kissed her, tongue deep in her mouth so she could taste her own delicious wetness, revel in it with him, the scent of her all over his face. He took the joint out of the ashtray, relit it and inhaled, batting her hand away from his leaking cock, making her wait for him as he rolled on a condom. When he finally settled between her legs, every nerve in her body was quivering and ready for the slightest touch to fire on all cylinders. He entered her in one long push, angling his cock up against her bladder, barely pulling out before snapping his hips hard against her, making sure to slam his pubic bone against her clitoris with each thrust. In moments she was screaming, her hands gripping his buttocks urging him in deeper, her legs wrapped high around his ribs. Wave after orgasmic wave crashed through her, pulsating from her G-spot and clit and exploding right inside her brain.
“Don’t stop! Don’t stop!” she cried out.

He held out as long as he could, it didn’t help that the noise she was making was unbearably sexy. He laid his forehead against her neck and stopped moving for a few moments to bring them both down, bent over her to suck hard on each breast, and then started again, propping himself up high on his hands so he could see her face and angle his cock at just the right spot. A few more quick hard thrusts sent her over the edge again but this time he went with her, he couldn’t stand it anymore. He emptied himself into her with a loud shuddering groan, cock plunged so deep he was banging against the hard nub of her cervix. His mind went void of all thought as he came with her, aware only of wrenching, convulsing, obliterating bliss.

“That was a good one,” Angela panted, patting Jean-Louis tenderly on the back as he lay collapsed over her.

“You’re welcome.” He laughed and kissed her cheek. “If you want me to last longer, you should keep quiet.”

“Keep quiet?”

“Hmm.” He kissed her again, this time on the mouth, taking her lower lip gently in his teeth. “Do you have any idea what you sound like when you’re coming? So fucking sexy. It drives me crazy to hear you like that, makes me want to come.” He rolled off of her so he could caress her breasts.

“I should. Otherwise Stuart will smell you on me. He’s like a bloodhound that way.” She got up to go into the bathroom. “Are you joining me?” She watched him wad up the spent condom in some Kleenex, his cock still half tumescent and leaking a trail of milky fluid onto his thigh. It made her want to take him in her mouth and get him going again.

He smiled up at her and lay back down against the pillows. “No. I want you on me all night. I love the smell of you. Maybe I’ll dream about you, if I’m lucky.” He relit the joint and took another drag and held it out to her.

“You finish it,” she said. “I’ve had my fill already.”

James called as Angela was dressing to leave. Her presence in the room gave Jean-Louis the courage to pick up.

“Hello, James.”

He gave Angela a helpless look but she rolled her eyes at him; he was on his own here. He could hear some sports recap on TV in the background as James talked to him, telling him how much he missed him, how much he wanted to fuck him. Good Lord. What had he gotten himself into with this one?

Angela planted a kiss on his forehead and mouthed, “See you tomorrow,” and left. Thirty minutes later James was still talking although Jean-Louis had stopped listening twenty-eight minutes ago.

“James, I have to go,” he finally interrupted. “I have an early meeting tomorrow and I’m really tired.”

“Oh, okay. Before you go, just help me out here.”

Jean-Louis put on a stellar performance, moaning and gasping into the phone as he flipped through the cable channels looking for a good mystery, faking an epic orgasm, the kind he had experienced
with Paolo. He heard James coming, thankful that it only took seconds.

“I love you, baby,” James panted. “I love you so much.”

“I know. Good night.”

He was starving. He threw on a shirt and went back into the kitchen and ate some cold dumplings, washed it down with the bit of wine left in the third bottle. He didn’t know how much longer he could keep James at bay. It was late January and although the Broncos didn’t make it into the playoffs, James was in the Pro Bowl again. He knew he should feel excited for him, but all he could think about was the fact that once the season officially ended with the Super Bowl in February, there would be no stopping James from coming out to see him in New York. Then what? He would be busy with the show installation for sure, those deadlines were real, but James would expect him to share his evenings and nights with him. He would have to find some way to tell him the truth. He didn’t want him in his life anymore.
Jean-Louis crosses paths with James in Denver.

The staff meeting on Friday morning dragged on for three hours, led by the head curator of invertebrates, the department to which Jean-Louis belonged. Jean-Louis’s graduate work had centered around ancient microfossils, the shelly remains of tiny ocean-dwelling protists like foraminifera, calcareous nanofossils, and palynomorphs. As curator of his sub-area, he managed a staff of one full-time administrative assistant and two part-time research specialists, as well as a varying group of interns and volunteers. Most of the work involved the re-cataloguing and conservation of some seven thousand microfossil specimen slides of foraminifera and ostracoda in their collection, along with the digitization of type specimens, with the long-term goal of linking their resources to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History. Jean-Louis’s doctoral work, however, concentrated on the morphology of trilobite eyes from the Cambrian through the Permian, an interest spurred by his father’s friend Henry Wallace, but he was well versed on arthropods in general. The phylum to which they belonged, Arthropoda, would be extensively represented in the Cambrian show, which would trace the reinterpretation of the Burgess Shale fauna begun by Harry Whittingham in the 1970s and carried forward by others since, a slow and steady revision of Charles Doolittle Walcott’s original and errant observations from the early 1900s. Jean-Louis was just one of six specialists co-curating the show, slated to open to the public in three months. He hadn’t even begun to write his portion of the catalog copy on *Olenoides* and *Naraoia*, two early trilobites from the Middle Cambrian represented in the Burgess Shale.

The project was at turns overwhelming and deeply exciting, although that morning Jean-Louis found himself less than enthused, being unable to shake free of a nagging headache. He swallowed two more aspirins as the meeting finally drew to its conclusion, grateful that he had managed to give his progress report but couldn’t recall what he had said afterwards. When he turned to his assistant Emma and asked if he had made any sense, all he got was an ambivalent shrug. He decided he really needed to sober up for a while as he stood in line in the museum café to get a coffee. Angela was at a table near the back exit, waving him over.

“You look terrible!” she declared as he sat down. Her tone of voice made it sound as if she were paying him a compliment. “Did you drink another bottle after I left?”

“No, don’t even say that,” he groaned, pressing his fingers to his eyes and seeing fireworks. He leaned his throbbing head back against the wall and gazed across the table at her, all fresh-faced and full of energy. She wore a brilliant coral scarf atop a tight black cashmere scoop neck sweater. The woman was all class. “I wish you could kiss me right now and make this headache go away,” he murmured softly. “If you ever divorce Stuart, please promise to marry me instead?”

“Wow. You must really be hurting right now.” She finished her cappuccino and left him alone to stew in his own juices. “Oh, before I forget, how’d it go with James last night?”

“Jesus Christ, Angela. Don’t remind me.”
“What, no phone sex?”

Jean-Louis’s grimace told her everything.

That Sunday he ordered a calzone from Patsy’s and forced himself to watch the Pro Bowl, the NFL’s all-star game. It was little more than a shameless, self-congratulatory media circus cum marketing ploy wedged between the end of the playoffs and the Super Bowl, but he knew James would expect him to compliment him later for his performance, a meager seven-yard reception as it turned out during a low-scoring game, though one would think it was a 49-3 blowout based on all the trash-talking and showboating on display. Jean-Louis distracted himself by folding his laundry and imagining what it would be like to kiss Guy-Manuel. His phone rang before the recap had even begun airing on ESPN.

“Hey, we won! Did you see me, baby?” James shouted over the noise of the locker room echoing in the background.

“Yes, you were amazing! You looked like an Olympian god out there!” Jean-Louis yelled back, emptying the last of the bottle of Bordeaux into his glass. So much for sobering up. He wondered if James would hear the sarcasm in his voice, pick up on what an asshole he was being. He didn’t.

“Oh, baby, I wish you were here. I’d fuck you right into the ground!”

Yeah. No thanks. He could easily picture James surrounded by a cadre of sweating, swearing teammates all thinking he was talking to some buxom brunette wearing a pink midriff-revealing football jersey and matching hip-hugging velveteen shorts. If only! He knew the guys would all be celebrating at some Hooters-type sports bar afterwards, doing shots off the bellies of various willing and able young women, plenty of sex to be had all around for sure. Better them than him. Jean-Louis had once had the misfortune of seeing James after a game in which the Broncos steamrolled over the Jets in Rutherford, New Jersey. Instead of flying back with the team, James had made some lame excuse about visiting a dying relative in New York, all so he could show up at his apartment and pound him to within an inch of his life. James slammed his skull into the headboard repeatedly in his enthusiasm. The games pumped so much adrenalin and testosterone through his veins, it took him days sometimes to come down from it, his addiction to weight training only adding fuel to the fire. Jean-Louis was grateful he was miles away at the moment, but he wouldn’t have too many more weeks of reprieve left to him. He would have to put an end to this nonsense. The man was obsessed with him for reasons unfathomable. What had started as a random and highly uncharacteristic hook-up for both of them had careened ominously out of control like the black car in Grant Wood’s *Death on Ridge Road*. As far as he was concerned, it was beyond ridiculous to carry on a relationship such as theirs, what with James playing in a sport renown for its virulent homophobia and damn proud of it no less. What the hell was he thinking? All his efforts to talk sense into him were only met with mind-bending justifications.

“I’m not gay,” James had explained to him. “I am *not* into other guys! I just want you. That’s a world of difference right there, smarty pants.”

Not prone to hysteria, Jean-Louis could hear his voice straining higher nevertheless. “Are you insane? Do you really think your teammates would accept that? ‘Hi motherfuckers, let me introduce you to my boyfriend.’ Your career would be over in two seconds if anybody knew what you were doing.”

“What *I’m* doing?”
“Yes, what you are doing. I never asked to be a part of this!”

It was the truth, but the look of hurt on James’s face had crushed him like garbage in a compactor. He made him feel like he was being cruel in a low-life scumbag way, like a parent telling a child they aren’t loved and wanted. And he had to admit that the novelty of the affair had initially carried an undeniable thrill. That made him complicit on some level for the whole snafu, but one of them had to be the voice of reason, right? The fact that he wasn’t the poor fool in love made it easier for him to take the high road and leave James choking in the dust.

They had met up by chance a little over a year ago, six years after their brief stint as undergraduate and tutor at the University of Michigan. Jean-Louis had taken his position at the American Museum of Natural History in New York upon completing his doctorate. A few months later he received an invitation from the Denver Museum of Nature and Science to assist their team of paleoecologists from the US Geological Survey in dating the layers of sediments of an ancient lake, a process of stratigraphy requiring the identification of microfossils. This was all part of the ongoing Snowmastodon Project headed up by the Denver museum and Jean-Louis was just one of many scientists invited to participate. The actual excavation site in Snowmass Village was already closed until spring, so for the three weeks before Thanksgiving he spent his days working with his colleagues in the museum’s labs. He was housed with his fellow guest scientists in an extended stay hotel a quarter-mile from the museum. A shuttle van was available to take them to and from the hotel each day, but Jean-Louis preferred to walk the short distance. His next door “neighbor” at the hotel was a paleontologist from the Natural History Museum in London, a large doughy man in his mid-fifties named Edward Fortis, an expert on Pleistocene mega fauna who was brought in to help sort through the thousands of fossilized bones of mastodons, mammoths, giant ground sloths, long-horned bison, and North American camels, part of a serendipitous Ice Age goldmine unearthed when a reservoir for the ski resort was dug a year prior. Edward also turned out to be an enthusiastic fellow walker, a connoisseur of all things alcoholic and a most agreeable after hours companion.

It wasn’t long before they started frequenting a local bar each evening after work, conveniently located on their way back to the hotel. It was a total dive sandwiched between a laundromat and a nail salon and not at all like the sleek modern bars catering to the young moneyed hipsters in trendy downtown Denver. This one had a crumbling red brick façade badly in need of re-pointing and a blinking red neon sign in the window with the outline of a kitten sitting in a teacup. Inside, it was all oiled pine wood floors, walls, and tables, darkened, pitted and stained over seventy odd years of use and abuse. There was a TV hung over each end of the fifteen-foot bar that seemed to have just the news and weather on one set and a sports channel on the other with football games and recaps playing incessantly.

Jean-Louis found the tired atmosphere of the bar very conducive to relaxation and the weed particularly sweet in Denver. Maybe it was the thin air, but he was flying higher than usual one night, even for his jaded system, so when a rowdy group of three gigantic thugs and their entourage came in and sat at the bar he paid them no mind. He was too preoccupied with Edward telling a joke about a father catching his teenage son masturbating.

“So the dad goes into his son’s room and says, ‘Son, if you keep doing that you’ll go blind.’”

Edward was on his third pint and slurring his words. It took all of his concentration for Jean-Louis to follow him. “And the son says, ‘Dad, I’m over here.’”

Seconds later Jean-Louis almost peed his pants, which made him realize that he really did have to pee. He reached down and discreetly touched his crotch under the table to make sure he hadn’t
done so already. Still dry.

“Edward.” Jean-Louis stood up from their corner table, his head abuzz with white noise. “I have to take a piss. Save my seat.”

He walked unsteadily to the men’s room in the back, taking ages seemingly to empty his bladder, then stumbled to the bar to order another glass of wine. He could hear the loud talking trio clearly now and was taken aback by the crude obscenities exiting their mouths like sewage from a pipe. In the time it took for the bartender to pour him a glass of Pinot noir and for payment to be rendered, he heard the words fuck, fucker, fucking, motherfucker, cocksucker, pussy, cunt, shit, and asshole, whole sentences with subject, verb, and object formed just from those words alone. He had never been privy before to adult conversation uttered with such limited vocabulary. What was even more surprising was the group of young women throwing themselves at these idiots. They were attractive by all accounts. Surely they could do better than this sorry lot? Out of the corner of his eye he noticed one of the guys shooting him an intensely predatory look. He knew that look. He had been subjected to it as an adolescent in school, stuck four levels ahead of his own peers, twelve-years-old and having to endure the rabid attentions of sixteen-year-old hormone crazed boys who threatened to rape him with inanimate objects and God knows what else. He didn’t even understand half the things they said to him at the time, nor did he worry himself over it, the weed took care of everything. It always did.

The group was still there by the time Jean-Louis and Edward got up to leave. It was nearly 11:00 pm and they had a ton of material to sort through the next day. Jean-Louis noticed the same guy staring at him as he walked past the bar but he refused to meet his gaze. Why ask for trouble?
Boys to Men

Chapter Summary

James meets a grown-up Jean-Louis.

“James! What are you doing down there? Come to bed! It’s late!”

“Be up in a sec!” he called out.

Krista was waiting for him in bed upstairs. It was a Tuesday night, their usual night for sex and James had been looking forward to it for days, but now that thought was pushed out of his head as he frantically dug through his wicker basket of magazines, health supplement catalogues, and junk mail that he had never gotten around to opening. The wicker basket was Krista’s idea. If it were up to him the stuff would just be tossed into a cardboard box scavenged from Costco, but Krista had added her woman’s touch to the place right from the start. It wasn’t her fault. He was the one who had asked her to help him furnish the house and it was too late to complain about it now. Besides, what’s a wicker basket compared to the tampons and maxi pads now residing under his bathroom sink?

He found it towards the bottom of the pile, the alumni magazine sent out twice a year by his alma mater, once in the fall, once in the spring. This one was the September issue and right smack on the cover was none other than him. It had to be. He stared at the face and knew with a certainty that it had to be the same wasted guy he’d seen at the bar earlier that night, he’d know those eyes and that mouth anywhere. Even the hair was the same, almost shoulder length and layered, the kind of hair you could really get your fingers into when…Jesus! What the hell was that? He recalled the shock of seeing the cover when the magazine had first arrived less than two months ago. He had moved into his house in April and was still receiving mail forwarded from his old apartment. The stuff always arrived bundled up in a thick rubber band and he didn’t even look at the thing for a good week until he finally decided to sort through the accumulating pile over breakfast one morning and nearly choked on a sausage.

His features were all recognizable but they now resided on an adult’s face, the face atop an adult’s body. The child was gone. This was no scrawny, featherweight, fourteen-year-old stoner kid anymore, well, at least the first part held true. On the cover was a photo of Jean-Louis sitting in a lab with a microscope on the counter in front of him, glass specimen slides scattered about and what looked like pieces of rock in his hands. He wore a light blue fitted button down shirt that accentuated a lean hard torso and made his eyes look bluer than ever as he stared straight into the camera, a hint of a smirk on his lips. Yep. That was him alright, even before he checked the photo credit inside the cover James knew that it was his former tutor hamming it up in that irritatingly snarky French way that he had. There was a rather extensive article on him inside tracing his graduate work at U of M and his subsequent doctoral experience at Cambridge, a list of published monographs, and his current appointment at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, where he was a curator of invertebrate microfossils, whatever that was. Leave it to that little shit to snag a position that made no sense and probably shouldn’t even exist. A series of photos graced the article, mostly of Jean-Louis out in the field wearing a cowboy hat to keep the sun off
his face, crouched against some barren stone outcropping in the middle of nowhere with a pick axe in one hand and a loupe dangling from a cord around his neck. One photo showed just a close-up of his face and torso, rolled up sleeves revealing bare forearms covered in sweat and grime as he held out a slab of sedimentary rock with the faintest whisper of a fossil imprint ghosting the surface. It was disturbingly sexy. James had thrown the magazine into the wicker basket and thought no more of it until tonight. What the hell was Jean-Louis doing in Denver?

When he finally went back upstairs Krista was annoyed. She did not like being kept waiting. James made it up to her by lasting longer than his requisite five minutes. Not a problem this time because the sight of Jean-Louis earlier was proving to be a distraction for some strange reason, so much so that Krista began urging him to finish by faking an orgasm. The sound of her moaning like that usually put him right over the top but tonight it wasn’t having any effect on him. It was as if his cock had gone numb. Was he even still hard? He reached down and cupped a feel. Yep, still hard. He had never experienced this kind of disconnect before and he’d only had two beers. Normally the condom he wore was the only thing giving him some relative staying power but right now it seemed to be working like the proverbial raincoat all too well. He couldn’t feel a damn thing. He looked down and saw Krista lying underneath him with a thoroughly bored expression on her sleepy face.

“Jesus, Krista. Did you just yawn?” he asked.

“I’m sorry, hon. I’m really tired. Can you hurry it up?” She patted him on the ass encouragingly, only it had the opposite effect.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!”

He couldn’t stop now, goddamn it. The prospect of aching balls held no appeal whatsoever. With a determined grunt he screwed his eyes shut and reached into his mind for something to get him over the hump. Miss July popped into his head, his all-time favorite from his father’s stash of Playboy magazines when he was a teenager. All it took was her luscious lips parted just so, her size-D cup breasts displayed side and front with a strategic twist of her supple torso, those fuck me stiletto pumps, and no more than thirty seconds on the clock for him to finish before anyone could ask what he was doing in the bathroom with the door locked. If his father ever noticed the markedly crumpled and stained centerfold pages of that issue, he never said a word. Who knows? Maybe Miss July was his favorite, too.

Miss July, though, decided to abandon him. Maybe he had used up his allotment, worn out his welcome, but she wasn’t doing him any favors tonight. He glanced at the bedside clock and saw that he’d been going at it for a good half hour, surely a record for the ages and something that he should rightly feel proud of, if it were not for the large scab on his left elbow starting to chafe against the sheets. Damn that Jean-Louis! This was all his fault. If he hadn’t appeared like some fucking Ghost of Christmas Past, James would have come twenty-five minutes ago, balls relieved of burden, and be slumbering happily in dreamland at this moment. Instead, here he was sweating up a storm, legs cramping, Krista not even trying to help him out anymore. He stopped moving for a moment and rested his face down on the pillow, groaning miserably to himself. Should he just give up? Give up? When had he ever done such a vile thing? His mind went blank for a few seconds and then he saw him, clear as day, the cloudless blue skies of Denver above them, sun warming James’s naked back, Jean-Louis pinned beneath him, long hair a golden halo around his face, eyes open and smiling, cheeks flushed, mouth opening to form words…

“Fuck me, James…fuck me…”

He unloaded himself in one long violent spasm, the image of Jean-Louis still in front of him, so
tangible he could swear he could reach out with both hands and squeeze the life out of him, or maybe just plant the softest kiss imaginable on his lips.

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“He’s here.”

“Thanks, Joe. I’ll be right down.”

A surge of nervous energy shot down James’s spine and lodged in his gut with a vengeance, twisting around like a fork around strands of spaghetti and making him forget all about the pain from the contusion on his right hip sustained in Sunday afternoon’s game in Kansas City. He was still sore and exhausted despite the ice bath and rubdown in the training room yesterday but, more than anything, he was worn out from days of mental confusion. Sure, he had gone through all the motions of practice, drills, meetings, and workouts leading up to the Sunday matchup with the Chiefs, had managed to run all his routes and even carried a 12-yard reception in for a game-winning touchdown, nothing to indicate the fact that he had suddenly been dropped into some alternate parallel universe where everything was the same only not, and in a bad, bad way.

He had never been afraid like this, never doubted himself to this degree, not even when he had bombed during his freshman year high school football tryouts and was relegated to second string whatever on the junior varsity squad. Okay, so maybe this wasn’t quite the same situation, he knew he wasn’t the most self-aware person, to that he could freely admit, but this was truly alien territory under his feet now, the kind tread upon in nightmares where the ground feels squishy and you just know there’s something beneath the surface ready to reach up and pull you under. He had to know, had to find out what the hell had happened to him that night. Was it some bizarre fluke, a sick-joke aneurysm in his brain?

He was grateful that Krista was out of town for the next two weeks hitting a circuit of home and garden expos in several states for her employer. Her happiness was a matter of pride to him and he couldn’t stomach the idea of facing her in bed and having to clock in another humiliating performance. Besides, two weeks of abstinence should give him plenty of time to get the juices flowing again. Before he left for Kansas City on Friday, he had asked his friend Joe to give him a call the next time Jean-Louis showed up at his bar. James had told him he was looking to touch base with a fellow U of M alum, an innocent enough request. Joe told him that the man in question had been there practically every night for the past week, always with the same older drinking buddy, and that both of them were serious boozehounds. No surprise there. Now was James’s chance to find out what Jean-Louis was doing here and dispel whatever stray thoughts were floating around unwanted in his brain.

It took him less than twenty minutes to get from his house in the foothills to the bar. He parked his Chevy Suburban in one of the reserved parking spots behind the strip of buildings. He was a part owner in some sense, serving as an unpaid spokesperson for a small share in the profits, not that there were any real profits and not that he even cared. He liked the place for sentimental reasons; it reminded him of the bar his grandfather used to patronize, dark, old, and run-down. James still had fond and vivid memories of being ten-years-old and accompanying his father to Schultz’s Bar and Grill on recurrent rescue missions. It was always the same: the phone would ring just before dinnertime on any given day of the week, his father would grunt a “Yep, be down in a jiffy,” they’d hop into the car and make the ten minute drive to and the ten minute drive back, deposit his half comatose grandfather into his chair at the dining table, and then they’d all enjoy a fine meal of tuna casserole topped with a crust of crushed potato chips and a side salad of iceberg lettuce drizzled with thousand island dressing. Good times.
James looked at his watch, quarter to eight. Why did that even matter? And why should he feel so nervous? He wasn’t a child and neither was Jean-Louis anymore. They would handle this like adults. As soon as he walked into the bar, the warm air wrapped around him like a musty old blanket and he immediately broke into a sweat. He hurriedly stripped off his coat and hung it on a post, then took a seat at the bar and began discreetly scanning the room. It was a typically sparse Tuesday night crowd and Joe was manning the counter. He sauntered over and shook James’s hand.

“Good game, my friend.”

“Thanks. Not too much to write home about, though.”

“Hey, a win’s a win, it’s all good. The usual?”

“Yeah, and a burger with a side of fries.” His stomach was turning circles only it didn’t feel like hunger pangs, more like he had swallowed some critter anxious to escape back up his throat.

Joe drew him a Coors from the tap and nodded his head in the direction of a corner table in the back. “He’s over there.” Then he disappeared behind a curtain into the kitchen area.

James slowly looked over his shoulder, trying not to be too obvious. Jean-Louis’s back was to him, his drinking buddy facing into the room. They seemed to be engaged in deep conversation, probably discussing the space-time continuum or string theory or quantum physics. There had been a NOVA science program on PBS at the hotel on Saturday night and James had tried watching it but gave up after fifteen minutes and switched to the pay-per-view porn channel instead. He figured he had earned it. In ten minutes Joe reappeared with his dinner. James picked up his glass of beer and the red plastic basket with his burger and fries and walked nonchalantly over to their table. He could see they were still caught up in a very heated discussion as he neared.

“Sardine and mint jelly!” Edward shouted, slapping his palm on the table for emphasis.

“Lamb and Nutella!” Jean-Louis responded, both fists held victoriously in the air.

This didn’t sound at all like quantum physics, even to a know-nothing like James. Edward noticed James standing there with a puzzled expression and immediately his eyes brightened like shiny pennies glinting in the sun.

“You, sir! How would you like to settle a bet?” You’d think he was some carny ushering fairgoers into the bearded lady exhibit.

“Uh…sure?”

Jean-Louis turned around and smiled up at him but there was no indication of even the slightest recognition. What did James expect?

“Have a seat,” Edward said, a drunken grin plastered across his face, hands rubbing together in excitement.

“Thanks.” James sat down next to Jean-Louis and took a bite of his burger, relieved that he didn’t remember him. He felt the noose around his neck loosening and floating free, his stomach unclenching. There was nothing to worry about after all. “So, what’s the bet?”

Jean-Louis leaned an elbow on the table and spoke very slowly and deliberately, like an attending brain surgeon giving instruction to a group of residents in the operating room. “Think very carefully. Which food pairing is worse: sardine and mint jelly or lamb and Nutella?”
It wasn’t the fact that James had never actually eaten sardines, or mint jelly, or something called Nutella, had tasted lamb only once and didn’t care for it; it was the unblinking intensity of Jean-Louis’s stare that threw him for a loop. Was this really what they had been discussing? It took only seconds to recover from the shock.

“Oh, I can top that,” James snorted with bravado. “One Thanksgiving my mom made baked Brussels sprouts with mini marshmallows. They were out of canned yams at the store, so she used the Brussels sprouts instead, as if we wouldn’t notice.” He chuckled happily, clearly unscathed by the memory, and bit into his burger again. “Even the dog wouldn’t touch it.” The same dog who would avidly dine on deer poop in the woods behind their house.

James took a generous gulp of his beer and noticed that they were both gazing back at him with a mixture of awe and incredulity.

“Come again?” Edward stuttered. “That thing you said…say it again.”

“What? Brussels sprouts and marshmallows?”

“Ah ha! Sulfuraphane and fructose! What a gloriously lethal combination!” Edward turned to Jean-Louis in triumph. “Would you eat that?”

Jean-Louis crossed his arms defensively. “Maybe…with the right amount of weed…”

“Liar! You’d sooner eat your own vomit and you know it! Young man,” Edward held out his hand to James and gave him a congratulatory shake. “You win the bet. Your next drink is on him,” he said gleefully, pointing to Jean-Louis. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I really need to use the loo.”

Edward wandered off to the bathroom, leaving James to scramble for something to say, but before he had a chance to make witty banter Jean-Louis turned to face him and asked point-blank, “Were you the asshole staring at me last week?”

“What? Wait a minute…why are you calling me an asshole?”

“Yes or no?”

There it was, that bored tone of voice laced with just enough snobbery to make James want to punch him in the face, rearrange those perfect features into a cubist portrait by Picasso.

“Listen.” James chewed hard on his burger, trying to buy time and get his thoughts together. He wasn’t expecting him to be so aggressive. Wasn’t pot supposed to mellow you out? “There’s some kind of misunderstanding. I wasn’t staring. It’s just that I thought I recognized you.” He felt his face reddening with embarrassment. Why was it so fucking hot in the room?

“Well?” Jean-Louis prodded.

“Well what?”

“Am I who you think I am?”

As if it would jog James’s memory, Jean-Louis downed his glass of wine, a drop of Shiraz glistening on his lower lip staining it red before he casually wiped it away on the back of his hand. James was speechless, a rare thing for him. The last time he was this mesmerized was when he was eight years old and saw their dog humping the neighbor’s bitch, a giant schnauzer twice the size of their runty springer spaniel: both dogs facing in opposite directions, poor Hal being dragged drooling and panting along the sidewalk behind her, held captive in the most horrific manner.
Three hours later, he found Hal under the table on their back patio gingerly licking himself and smelling awfully ripe.

Jean-Louis didn’t wait for him to answer. “You look…bigger, James.”

James let out an audible sigh of relief. He didn’t want to play this game anymore. “I could say the same for you…you little shit! You knew it was me all along, didn’t you?”

“No, not until tonight. Are you still so proud of your behavior last week? You and your friends really know how to impress. It was like listening to poetry.”

There was an awkward silence as James strained for a comeback and came up empty. Every time he dared to look at him his brain shorted out. And why did he have to be so irritatingly sarcastic and insulting in that low, quiet, silken voice of his? Goddamn him.

Jean-Louis went on, “You know, I was winning before you came over. I had Edward beat in this round. That’s the second time you’ve lost me a bet, Mr. Miller.”

James groaned. “Don’t tell me you’re still mad about that stupid bike.”

Jean-Louis laughed and, for the first time all night, he seemed genuinely pleased. He stood up and reached into his back pocket for his wallet. “What are you drinking?”

“Coors.”

He watched Jean-Louis walk over to the bar and order another beer and glass of wine as he chewed on his food. The cook had really outdone himself tonight. James couldn’t remember the burgers ever tasting so good before.

“So, who is he? Your father?” James asked when Jean-Louis returned with the drinks.

“Who? Edward? No, of course he’s not my father. He’s English. Can’t you tell?”

“Whatever. All you foreigners are the same.”

“You realize, don’t you, that modern America was settled by foreigners?”

“America was settled by Columbus, Dr. Howser. Get your history straight.”

“Pardon me?” He didn’t recall James being quite so obtuse as a student, but then again, his contact with him had been limited to just a brief four week period six years ago. As appalled as he was, Jean-Louis wasn’t in the mood to argue and opted to change the subject. “So you live here in Denver?”

“Yeah, I was drafted by the Broncos straight out of Michigan. Just signed a six-year contract last spring. Life is good.”

That explained a lot. Maybe James wasn’t born abysmally dense. Maybe it was the years of cumulative damage to his brain from playing a contact sport like football.

“What the hell are you doing here?” James asked.

“Work. Edward and I were invited to participate in the Snowmastodon Project. Surely you’ve heard about that?” Jean-Louis glanced furtively towards the back of the bar, but there was still no Edward in sight.
“Oh, yeah, sure.” It was no lie. James had lent his celebrity presence at a fundraising event held at the museum in March. There were enormous posters hung everywhere touting Snowmastodon this, Snowmastodon that. He didn’t see what all the fuss was about over a pile of muddy old bones.

“You guys work over at the museum?”

“Yes, for the most part. They have labs in the basement.”

“Sounds like a load of fun. You know, you could have chosen any line of work, but you had to pick something totally dreary.” James shook his head in pity.

“Dreary? You don’t even know what I do and, by the way, I happen to like what I do.” He looked up and saw Edward approaching. “Finally! What took you so long?”

Edward plopped himself back down in his seat, a sheen of wetness covering his hair and blazer. “Had to go outside for a smoke, that’s all. What is it with these crazy laws in America? Can’t have a civilized smoke anywhere. No. We’re made to stand outside in the pissing cold rain like homeless people. It’s ridiculous!”

“Maybe you should just give up smoking. It’s unhealthy, you know,” offered James.

“Uh, Edward, this is James Miller, an old university acquaintance, sort of. James, this is Dr. Edward Fortis from the Natural History Museum in London.”

They shook hands again, somewhat warily this time.

“And what do you do, James?”

“I play football.”

“Oh!” said Edward, perking up with interest.

“American football,” Jean-Louis clarified.

“Oh.” Edward's enthusiasm quickly faded. “Well, that’s nice. I suppose that accounts for your size…do you have any other interests besides your sport?”

“Uh…working out.”

“Working out?”

“You know, weight training…body building?”

“Oh yes, I see. You certainly look to be very…dedicated.”

“Yeah, well, that’s pretty much my whole life right now.”

“Understandable. Careers in sports are painfully brief, aren’t they? Fortunately, I see myself working up to the moment I drop dead,” mused Edward.

“Why? You love your job that much?” James asked.

“No, because I have alimony payments and my current wife has very expensive tastes. I like to tell everyone, don’t get married unless they hold a gun to your head. If only I had taken my own advice,” Edward sighed. “My young friend here only barely escaped the jaws of matrimony not too long ago, didn’t you Jean-Louis?”
“That’s not how I’d put it,” grumbled Jean-Louis. “I wasn’t the one who backed out.” He didn’t like where the conversation was heading. Even with the numbness in his brain, the wound on his heart still felt open and raw whenever the subject arose.

“You got dumped at the altar?” James gloated, and then immediately regretted his comment when he saw the look of despair flash across Jean-Louis's countenance.

Edward cleared his throat and stood up hoping to salvage the situation. “Jean-Louis, I’m heading back to the hotel. Will you be staying here longer?”

“No.” He didn’t like the idea of Edward walking back alone in the dark and drunk. Even more, he didn’t feel like discussing his epic fail of a love life, not tonight when his mood had already taken a nosedive. He threw back the rest of his wine and put on his coat. “Nice to see you again, James.”

“Yeah. Hey, how long will you be in town?”

“Two more weeks. Then I fly back to New York.”

“Right. Okay. Maybe we can get together before you leave, catch up on things?”

“Sure. See you around.”
By Friday James was ready to claw out of his own skin. They had a home game on Sunday with their AFC rival San Diego Chargers in town, which meant no travel days for the team. That was a good thing. The bad thing was that he had gone through the motions like a zombie all week during practice and drills and it showed.

“What’s wrong with you, man?”

His best friend on the team was Dontrell Wainright, wide receiver, twenty-five-years-old, with a wife, three kids, and a fourth one due any day. He also had an ex-wife who was mother to two more of his kids. Back when kid number three was born to wife number two, James had given Dontrell a golden nugget of advice.

“Just wear a goddamn rubber, Donnie. It’s not rocket science. Works for me like a charm. You don’t see me changing any diapers.”

“Are you shittin’ me? No self-respecting black man would humiliate himself like that. You white boys are so whipped.”

“No, we just don’t like paying child support. You should learn from us.”

“Fuck you, man.”

“Fine. Have fun feeding ten kids by the time you’re thirty. And don’t say I didn’t try to help you.”

On Friday, though, it was Dontrell giving him a piece of his mind.

“You fucked up again today.” Donnie was referring to the morning meeting with the offensive passing game coordinator, who was drilling them on some new plays to counteract the Chargers’ 3-4 defense. “Weren’t you even listening? We’re going to get our asses wiped if we don’t get our shit together.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” James muttered. “My stomach’s been killing me…I think I ate something that was a little off.”

“Oh.” Dontrell had been over to his old apartment, then to his new house, numerous times and seen the sorry state of affairs in his refrigerator. There were things in there that had no business being alive. “Haven’t I told you a million times, write the date on the fucking containers!”

Though he now had a spacious high end kitchen boasting a six-burner Viking stove with a built-in grill and double ovens, a 46-bottle under-counter dual zone thermoelectric wine cooler, and a Miele coffee machine integrated right into the cabinetry, James was still in the habit of going to the local Safeway where he’d load up for the week at the prepared foods counter. The 48-inch stainless steel Sub-Zero refrigerator became his Switzerland, where deposits once made would later prove to be untraceable. Krista was of no help. She stayed over on Tuesday nights and some weekends and on
those days they went out to eat. Besides, she had little interest in cooking and even less interest in cleaning out his fridge. She was an interior decorator, for Christ’s sake, not a maid. She opened the fridge to take out the milk for coffee in the mornings and that was about it. Until she had a ring on her finger, she wasn’t going to play the part of the housekeeper.

The decomposing food in the fridge was not the cause of James’s stomach woes, however. If only it were so simple. A few chewable Tums and the problem would quickly resolve itself. No, this was much worse, like an itch he couldn’t scratch. It was there right under his skin somewhere but he couldn’t find it no matter how hard he tried. There was no relief, no respite from the nagging unease dogging him even though he worked out in his gym each evening after a full day of meetings and practice until he thought his joints would all unhinge of their own accord. It had always worked before. If he were anxious or angry or depressed, two extra hours in the gym would fix it, or at least make him forget whatever it was that was making him anxious, angry, or depressed for those two blissful hours. But this was like trying to escape his own shadow. No quickness of feet would allow him to outrun it.

So he stood in the shower masturbating, not casually as befits a quiet Friday evening alone, but with teeth grinding determination. It was the sixth time that day, the bazillionth time since he last saw Jean-Louis on Tuesday. He couldn’t tell Donnie the real reason for his shamefully bad performance all week, why he couldn’t focus on the task at hand. Every time he thought of that deadly French prick, which seemed to be constantly, he was gripped with the most extraordinary desire to commit what may as well have been acts against humanity. Someone—God, the Devil, Santa Claus—was playing a sick joke on him.

God:    Let’s fuck him up, this James character. What a chump!
Devil:   Hmm…what’s the worst thing we could do to that meathead?
Santa:   I’ll send him that obnoxious Jean-Louis. Joyeux Noël, motherfucker!

The beauty of jerking off in the shower was that there was no need to clean up afterwards. James smiled at the pleasant thought as he towed off, but the happiness was overlaid with anguish. Once again he had climaxed to the image of Jean-Louis mangled between his hands, parts of his body buried inside him in unspeakable ways. Jesus Christ. For the first time in his life James understood why some people might yearn for death. This was torture. There had to be some explanation for why this was happening to him, aside from the God-Devil-Santa trifecta of evil. He was a decent, law-abiding person, was he not? He was a good and obedient son to his parents, Peter and Laura, a loving and supportive big brother to his only sibling Ted, he was kind to strangers, a good teammate, generous to charities, hardworking and honest. He never once tried to cheat on his taxes, never shoplifted or took more than he deserved. What had he done then to warrant this kind of punishment? He reached back as far as his memory allowed, searching for that one mistake, committed in ignorance surely, that had caused this moral collapse. When had he removed the proverbial keystone? And how could he put it back in place?

James had grown up in a leafy, comfortable suburb of Detroit, Michigan, raised by parents who were high school sweethearts and still married after thirty years of conjugal bliss. His father Peter owned and managed an auto body and detailing shop and his mother Laura processed insurance claims for a dental office. They lived in a low-slung, three-bedroom, yellow brick ranch home with
vertical crank-out casement windows and a two-car garage. Every spring swarms of mayflies would descend like some biblical plague over the course of a few weeks and carpet the entire area with their brittle carcasses. Hundreds of them would remain clinging lifelessly to the window screens and have to be swept off with a long-handled broom in a dusty, smelly, postmortem annual ritual. James and his brother Ted used to ride over the things with their bikes, screaming with laughter as their exoskeletons crunched and popped under the tires.

When James was seven his grandfather Martin, his father’s father, was widowed and came to live with them. Martin was the first in his family to go to college. He was a child of German immigrants who arrived in Milwaukee, Wisconsin just prior to World War II to find work in the breweries. Martin eventually attended Wayne State University in Detroit, earned an undergraduate degree in business administration, and went on to a management career at General Motors back when working for the Big Three was akin to being royalty, at least in Detroit. He and his wife Alice raised a son, James’s father Peter, in a sprawling ranch home in Bloomfield Hills. Peter’s fondest memories were of the annual Christmas parties held each year in the mansion of his father’s GM boss: the opulent buffet spread in the dining room, the butlers and maids dressed in black and white and serving champagne in fancy glasses, and the enormous glittering tree in the three-story marble-floored foyer. The children of the employees would all gather in the cherry wood paneled den and ogle the lighted display cases full of scale models of cars produced by GM through the years. It was like going to a miniaturized automotive Disney World.

Martin retired at age fifty-five with a generous pension and began drinking out of boredom. Happy hour, which used to begin at five o’clock in the afternoon, soon started at four, then three, then noon, then mid-morning after breakfast. A habitual chain smoker too, a pack a day turned into three. Cigarettes were cheap; life was good back then. Laura wasn’t too keen on the prospect of a drunken chain-smoking crank living under her roof, but the truth was they owed their house in Grosse Pointe Woods to Martin in the first place. The down payment on it was a wedding present from him and he never let her forget it. Not only that, the sale of Martin’s home in Bloomfield Hills allowed Peter to purchase the empty lot next to his existing garage and expand it into a full-service detailing center with a car wash and several bays for his employees to work on the cars post-wash. Although they lived in a modest ranch, they were surrounded by the stately homes of the truly wealthy; one of the Ford mansions was only a bike ride away along Lake Shore Drive, a house two blocks away had its own miniature ski hill constructed in the backyard each winter, visible behind the six-foot security fence. Their neighbor on the lot behind them was a widow living all alone in a marble-clad Florentine-style villa; James could swear he saw peacocks on her property one summer. People in the community loved their Yacht Club and they loved their American made cars. His father’s business did just well enough for them to live comfortably.

They converted one end of their full basement into a bedroom for Grandpa Martin, and renovated the toilet stall next to the laundry room into a full bathroom. There was still room aplenty downstairs for James to play hockey on roller skates with his younger brother Ted, two years his junior. The cinder block walls of the basement were covered with nearly floor-to-ceiling photo murals depicting the four seasons: a meadow shimmering with golden daffodils and blood-red tulips in the spring, a boulder-strewn stream cutting through a clearing in a verdant forest in summer, a rolling hillsides with maple and oak trees ablaze with color in the fall, a snowy secluded valley with conifers and bare birch trees in winter. Herds of white-tailed deer tramped through each landscape, a black bear with her cubs climbed an embankment by the river, a red fox peeked behind a gnarled stump in the meadow, a cardinal and his mate perched on an ice-sheathed twig. Scattered across the scenic, blue-skied vistas were the dents and scars of errant hockey shots which had ricocheted off the walls, leaving their indelible marks. They also had a ping-pong table and a small workshop in the basement, and a large pantry closet where canned corn and boxes of elbow macaroni were stored and forgotten.
After his grandfather moved in, Saturdays were devoted to fishing on Lake Saint Clair. The routine was always the same: James and his brother would be woken at five-thirty in the morning and forced to eat a bowl of thick goopy oatmeal which his grandfather would make in a beat up old pot and then leave in the sink for his mother to clean up after it had congealed into a cement-like mass. Then they would head out to the lake just as the sun was rising and spend the rest of the morning sitting on the rocks that lined the lake by the boat launch, casting into the water with earthworms threaded on hooks, patiently watching the bobbers for any hint of a nibble. There were many false alarms. James would reel in the line after feeling that telltale tug, only to find a half-eaten worm, drained of color but still writhing pitifully on the hook. His grandfather would man two rods at once and go through a pack of cigarettes by the time the sun was high and they hungrily tore into bologna and cheese sandwiches slathered with ketchup and mustard for lunch. The boys would drink cans of Pepsi and Grandpa Martin would uncap a thermos of coffee laced with whiskey. On a good day, they might catch perch, walleye, blue gills, sunfish, or crappie. If they cast with lures from certain areas, they might luck out with a striped bass, a largemouth or a smallmouth, maybe even a pike. They would bring their catch home, proud and itching with fresh mosquito bites, and then his grandfather would gut and clean the fish on the warped picnic table in the backyard. Flies would descend like a black cloud on the pile of slimy innards and scales. Dinner that night would be pan-fried lake fish with a side of potato casserole and canned mixed vegetables washed down with a glass of milk.
James decides to pursue football and gets his first taste of weight training.

At his grandfather’s insistence, Sundays were set aside for watching pro football on television. This was his excuse for an unapologetic four-hour bender without having to hide in the basement. The game itself was of either major or minor importance, depending on which teams were playing. Living outside of Detroit, the Lions were their team by default. His grandfather, having grown up in Wisconsin, split his allegiance between the Lions and the Packers. Everyone hated the Vikings and the Bears. The ritual of watching the games was part of a larger, more meaningful bout of drinking and socializing for the grown ups. Their neighbors to the right, the Browns, and the ones from across the street, the Vaughns, would join them, bringing their kids and trays of hero sandwiches, potato salad, and iced brownies. James’s mother Laura would make a huge pot of chili served with corn bread and there would be chips, pretzels, pickles and hot dogs for the kids. A Coleman cooler full of beer and soda would be set out in the dining room against the wall. Grandpa Martin would ease himself into the over-stuffed recliner with a glass in his hand and a bottle of Wild Turkey on the floor next to his feet and enjoy the one day a week when no one would blink an eye at him for getting bombed.

Still, when James decided to pursue football in high school instead of hockey, his father was puzzled. After all, he had been skating since he was three years old and was no slouch on the hockey team through grade school. But at thirteen and in the throes of hormonal agony, it dawned on James that the guys on the football team had no trouble getting chicks to like them, especially the quarterback. Even if you weren’t the quarterback, you could still snag a girlfriend just for being on the starting squad. Not too many girls attended the hockey games, no cheerleaders to stroke the male ego, so the chances of catching a girl’s attention were slim at best, and he needed to better the odds in his favor. He was tall for his age, an asset for sure, but thin as a rail, all gangly elbows, knees, and feet, not exactly a winning combination. He did have a thick mop of strawberry blond hair to complement his grey eyes and what he thought was a disarming smile, if only he could get a girl to look at him and appreciate it. Football would be his ticket to the parade.

Like most teenage boys, he had the nose of a bloodhound for sniffing out his father’s stash of *Playboy* magazines, which were kept hidden under some towels in the back of the linen closet in the bathroom. As often as he could without arousing suspicion, he would lock himself in and nervously, carefully turn the pages, eyes like saucers, drool in the corners of his mouth, dick hard in one hand. It was torture to only know these soft curvy creatures from pictures alone rather than experience what he knew would be unimaginable ecstasy with a flesh and blood woman. Thirty intimate seconds with Miss July and a dollop of his mother’s face cream was usually enough to put a temporary stop to his anguish, with the extra perk of smelling especially fragrant down there, but he desperately wanted the real deal. So in his freshman year in high school, he tried out for the football team. He wanted to be quarterback and had practiced all summer before, tossing the ball to his brother in the backyard. He had a strong arm and was accurate, as he proved to the coach during the Saturday tryout. He threw passes downfield for ten, fifteen, and twenty yards, hitting the receiver each time. Then the ground rose up and smacked him in the face when the coach told him to make a short lateral pass to his right, less than two yards downfield. He missed the receiver by a mile.
“Okay,” Coach Rivers said. “Let’s try that one again, this time to the left.”

He missed the receiver by a mile and a half. Ten more passes, five to the right, five to the left, no improvement. He couldn’t hit a billboard on either side to save his life. James was devastated. The savory roast beef sandwich he ate two hours ago was migrating northward from his roiling stomach into his throat.

“I tell you what.” Coach Rivers put a fatherly hand on his shoulder. “Let’s see you run some routes.”

One of the assistant coaches, a guy named Brett, lobbed the ball downfield while James sprinted across the grass trying to snag the passes. Some sailed over his head though they were softly thrown. He made a mental note: run faster, goddamn it! After running the sixth route, he was gagging and gasping for air and ready to vomit. They put him on the junior varsity team as a back up tight end under the condition that he gain weight and build muscle. The truth was he didn’t have the speed and agility to be a wide receiver, cornerback or safety, nor the mass and legs to be a running back, nor the heft and strength to be a tackle, guard or linebacker. If he could bulk up, then they could use his height to his advantage as a blocking and receiving tight end on both pass and rush plays. He trudged home feeling like a whipped dog. No quarterback glory, no girls lining up to get to know him. Nothing more than a laughable JV backup player who would likely see little to no time on the field. He would never get laid at this rate; might as well go to seminary school. He didn’t want them to see him all wimped out and crying like a girl.

In the cool of the basement he collected himself, lying on the couch that now reeked of stale cigarettes and that distinctive odor that could only be ascribed to old people. It was four-thirty in the afternoon and Grandpa Martin was passed out in his bed. James listened to the raspy sound of his breathing, the snores echoing from the back of his throat and exiting through his slack mouth. God, how he loved that old man! As low as he felt at the moment, the presence of this slumbering sot lifted his spirits in some odd way. Things could indeed sink lower; he hadn’t reached rock bottom yet. At dinner that night, he laid out his predicament.

“Coach says I’m too thin. I need to work out and gain weight if he’s going to keep me on the team,” James said. He had gotten over the initial humiliation suffered earlier in the day during tryouts. Never one to give up easily or dwell on defeat, he was ready now to devise a solution. He pushed aside the soggy canned peas and bit into a third fried chicken leg with gusto.

“Vinny’s older brother has a weight room set up in their basement,” Ted piped in. “I’ve seen him bench press two hundred pounds without breaking a sweat. He has arms like this.” He gestured in the air, conjuring the shape of a blimp. “And legs like this.” Outline of a ham hock. Ted was thirteen but still infinitely cheerful for some reason. He had the chestnut brown hair and stockiness of his father. James favored his mother’s lighter hair and complexion, as well as her stubbornness and tenacity.

“How old is his brother?” James asked.

“Nineteen. He’s already starting to go bald!”

James knew who he was. Vinny’s brother Michael worked at the Home Depot in Harper Woods in the paint department and was conspicuous because he always wore a cutoff T-shirt and cargo shorts under his orange apron to show off his biceps and calves. James had to admit they bulged impressively, that and the fact that there always seemed to be masses of pretty young women
picking out paint colors whenever he was on duty. That Michael was definitely doing something right.

“Well, I don’t think we’ll be setting up a weight room in the basement,” Peter said. “The way you are now, you’ll end up killing yourself.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” James asked.

“It means you can hurt yourself if you don’t know what you’re doing. Start with your school’s weight room first. Work with your coaches. If you don’t make any progress, we’ll think of something else.”

“Kid’s gotta get a professional trainer,” Grandpa Martin stated before coughing up a lung. He set his drink down unsteadily and folded his arms across his chest, gave James a nod across the table that said, I’m in your corner. His dinner sat cooling on his plate.

Laura glared at him. She thought Martin a poor influence on the kids but also knew when to stand firm and when to concede a fight. “He’s fifteen-years-old, for Christ’s sake. He’s still just a boy. Professional trainer my ass. And don’t even think about refilling that glass, old man, until you clean your plate.”

That Christmas, though, James received an envelope from his grandfather. Inside was a slip of paper confirming his membership to Top Tier Fitness and Training Studio at gold level, which entitled him to sessions with a personal trainer. The logo at the top of the sheet was an embossed rendering of a headless ripped torso connected to a pair of bulging arms holding a barbell in each clenched fist, all set against a mandala of shooting flames. Wow, that amazing artwork told James everything he needed to know. He was pumped. During the fall he had gotten nowhere trying to gain access to his school’s weight room, which was reserved first for the varsity team starting squad, then the varsity back ups, then the junior varsity starting squad, then the junior varsity back ups. Other times were reserved for the high school wrestling team. After four months, he still had no muscles, no weight gain, and no playing time. Thanks to his grandfather, he would use the winter, spring, and summer to change all that. Top Tier Fitness and Training Studio was less than two miles from his house, well within biking and walking distance. He couldn’t wait to get started.

His father took him to his first session after New Year’s. James was glad of his company. As soon as he walked into the brick and glass building, he was stricken by a weird cocktail of nervousness, excitement and abject terror. He was the youngest person there from what he could tell and instantly intimidated by the grown men five times his size sweating buckets of testosterone, enough to fry a woman’s ovaries. He felt his own testicles shriveling two sizes in fear. They went to the front desk and handed the membership form to the receptionist, a young man in his twenties who looked like he could bench press a truck. His nametag read “Jayson.”

“Great. You’ll be working with Stefan.” He looked at Peter and handed the form back to him with a membership card for his wallet and a smaller version for his keychain.

“Uh, this is actually for my son,” Peter said, patting James on the head.

Jayson looked him over but his frozen face made no indication of what he was really thinking. “Ohhh-kaaay, come with me then.”

They were led to a back office where James was introduced to the man who would change his life. Stefan Bengsten was a former Olympic weight lifter who had made the Swedish team when he was twenty-eight. Now in his mid-fifties with a heavily receded hairline, he had lost none of the muscular heft that had enabled him to effortlessly hold aloft a platform on which three women
from the gymnastics team balanced atop each other like a house of cards. The poster depicting this feat of manly strength hung on the wall of his office giving irrefutable proof in faded sepia and gold tones. James’s mouth hung open in awe. After a bone-crushing handshake, Stefan took him out to a quiet corner of the gym where he told him to get down on the mat and hold a plank position for as long as he could. He lasted less than twenty seconds before his body started twitching of its own accord.

“Okay. Come here. Lift this.” Stefan pointed to a barbell resting on the floor. James couldn’t budge it.

“Maybe I’m not holding it right,” James croaked. He was already sweating and rocking a one hundred percent failure rate after only a minute.

“Nope. Follow me.” Stefan had him lie down and attempt a bench press using just a metal bar with no weights. James managed a handful before his arms transformed into a pair of wet noodles.

“Okay. Done. Come with me.” They went back into his office. Stefan took out a pad of yellow legal sized paper and began scribbling notes. After a few minutes, he looked up and asked James, “So, what do you hope to accomplish?”

“My football coach says I have to bulk up, build muscles, put on weight or I’ll get cut from the team.” Stefan continued looking at him, as if he hadn’t heard a single word and was still waiting for James to speak. James dug deep, searching for the right thing to say. Finally, he blurted out with a newfound passion, “I want to be bigger and better than anyone else. I want to be a machine for destruction! I want to rip someone’s guts out!” What the hell was that? The thought hadn’t even crossed his mind until it passed his lips. Yet the blood rising up into his face setting his hair on fire was like a painfully glorious punch in the mouth that he wanted to experience again and again. It felt vaguely wrong and satisfying at the same time, like when Grandpa Martin let him take swigs of his whiskey and it burned his throat like nobody’s business, then, afterwards, that warm nauseating sensation in his stomach. A smile slowly crept across Stefan’s face. He tore the top sheet off the pad of paper and handed it to James. On it were listed the names of powdered and pill-form supplements and a seven-day meal plan.

“You will consume what I have listed in the amounts I have listed. You will come here to train with me three days a week. I expect full commitment or you are wasting my time. Yes?”

“Yes, sir!”

Thus began a lifelong addiction to weight training that would see James all the way onto the pro football field. At the time, though, the image reflected in the wall-to-wall mirror was pure unadulterated mockery at its cruelest: one skinny pubescent boy amidst a room full of flexing, grunting, sweating men with muscles rippling so violently, they looked like they would burst out of their skins. It wasn’t just the assault on the eyes that was permanently etched into his memory, it was the odors that slid up his nose and lingered there for hours afterwards, the sounds that pounded his eardrums, sounds that could only be described as a massive orgy of pain and pleasure fucking each other. If you pointed a microphone into the room, what you would hear recorded was in essence a cacophony of men coming. The further James got into his weight training regimen, the more he realized that each agonizing rep brought on an orgasmic explosion in his brain. Even masturbating didn’t seem to relieve the unsettled energy coursing through him; only the brutal ache in his bones, joints, and muscles after a workout seemed to give him the euphoria he craved.

Stefan started him on a beginner’s routine split between Program A, which consisted of squats, bench presses, and rows, and Program B, which consisted of deadlifts, pull-ups/pull-downs, and overhead shoulder presses. He could barely limp to the school bus on some days. Every step was
like climbing Mount Everest. He was a one hundred and thirty pound warrior. By May he had gained fifteen pounds and was ravenously hungry despite eating four or five meals a day. Over the summer, he shot up two inches and gained another ten pounds. Sophomore year saw him moved up to starting tight end on the JV squad. He was five foot ten and closing in on one hundred and fifty-five pounds. By his junior year, he was on the varsity team and packed one hundred and seventy pounds of lean muscle on a six-foot frame. Over the summer, he added another fifteen pounds of muscle and two more inches. Stefan had him on a fairly advanced regimen, working each muscle group with merciless precision. James had a girlfriend now, a lovely brunette named Sarah who was on the varsity cheerleading squad, though he had long forgotten the urgency of his original intent. Girls were a nice diversion. Football and weight training, however, were all-consuming and as vital to life as oxygen. Besides, Sarah never let him go all the way and he would end each date with his testicles on the verge of imploding or exploding, it made no difference to him, the frustration was all the same. His right hand and Miss July were an old married couple by now. In his senior year, the University of Michigan sent scouts to watch him in action. He was offered a scholarship and a chance to play for the Wolverines. His parents were thrilled. He wouldn’t let them down.

Two months before he headed out to Ann Arbor for training camp, his grandfather died of emphysema and liver failure. The stubborn old coot had refused to go for his annual physical eight years running, yet it came as a shock to James. He had believed his grandfather to be invincible. His parents were in Las Vegas for their anniversary when he found the old man unresponsive in his bed. By the time his parents flew back home, his grandfather was in a coma and would never reawaken. The day after the funeral, James made one last pilgrimage to Stefan’s gym, worked out for two hours and then broke down sobbing in the showers. Doors were closing. He wasn’t a boy anymore. He could only go forward a man.
Chapter Summary

Back in Denver...James and Jean-Louis share their first kiss.

If he hurried, he might be able to catch him at the bar. It was eight-thirty by the time James got there and the place was crowded, mostly with students from the university who didn’t want to pay for the higher priced drinks at the trendier bars. Four women sat at the corner table with cocktails. He couldn’t see either Jean-Louis or Edward anywhere in the room. Several people stopped him for autographs, he posed for a few photos and made conversation with some of the regulars. He caught Joe’s eye across the room, waved hello. Joe smiled, then shook his head. So...he hadn’t been here tonight. James felt exhausted and let down, another day of unresolved whatever it was. He had to be on his toes tomorrow for practice and Sunday for the game, no excuses. It was time to man up and get the job done like the soldier he knew he could be. The clock on the dashboard read half past nine when he got into his Suburban to head back home, but tonight he took a detour towards the museum, god knows why, maybe just out of curiosity, maybe to delay going back to an empty house and a head full of question marks. Then he saw him on the opposite side of the road walking alone carrying a shiny object in one hand and holding a lit joint in the other. James did a quick U-turn and pulled up alongside him.

He rolled down the window and declared, “You know you can get arrested for that.”

Jean-Louis was momentarily startled, then he narrowed his eyes and said with a smirk, “So arrest me, asshole.”

“Oh, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?” James grinned, proud to have a comeback, lame as it was. “Where are you going?”

“To my hotel.”

“Get in the car. I’ll drive you.”

“I’d rather—”

“Get in the fucking car!”

Jean-Louis rolled his eyes and got in the car, calmly put on the seat belt.

“Where to?”

“There.” Jean-Louis pointed to the sign for the Residence Inn in the near distance. “You see. I could have walked.” He took a drag on his joint and offered it to James.

“No thanks. I don’t smoke.”

“Suit yourself.” He stubbed out the joint between his fingers and carefully put it in a cigarette case for later enjoyment.
“Jesus Christ,” grumbled James, sounding like a disapproving parent. "How do you ever get any work done like that?"

“Are you mad? I don’t do this at work. Ever.”

“That’s not what I remember. You used to show up stoned all the time in college.”

“Oh. Yes. That was different."

Ten seconds later James pulled into the parking lot by the front entrance.

“Well, thanks for the ride,” Jean-Louis said, unbuckling himself. "I don’t think I could’ve made it those last ninety yards.”

“You’re welcome.” James wanted to say something more, anything. “Where’s your friend Edward?” he blurted out. It was the best he could do.

“He’s still at the museum. There was a birthday party for one of the women after work today. I think he has a crush on her.” Jean-Louis held up something wrapped in foil. “Would you like some cake? I have a bottle of Prosecco in my room. It’d be a good combination.”

“Uh…”

He saw the look of hesitancy on James’s face. James had no idea what Prosecco was.

“I promise it won’t be anything like Brussels sprouts and marshmallows,” assured Jean-Louis.

James laughed. “Sure, why not.”

Jean-Louis’s room was in the back and they took a shortcut through a side entrance, then past an atrium with an indoor pool and then down a quiet hallway. His suite opened onto a kitchenette from the entry hall with a small eating area next to a 'living room' with a sofa and two armchairs upholstered in a fabric and pattern designed to mask cum stains (James had learned that trick of the trade from Krista), a coffee table and a TV on a credenza. Large splotchy oil paintings of flowers in vases were hung on the walls. A bedroom and bathroom were off to the side. There were several bound files stacked on the coffee table, a moleskin notebook, a pen, and an ashtray. Other than that, you wouldn’t know anyone was staying there. James figured he kept everything else in the bedroom.

“Are you comfortable here?” James asked.

Jean-Louis shrugged. “It is what it is.”

He put the bundle on the coffee table and unwrapped the foil, revealing what looked like some sort of vanilla cake with strawberry filling and whipped cream frosting. James could make out the letters “thday” written in red icing smeared across the top of the square piece of sheet cake resting on a triple layer of paper plates. Jean-Louis hung up his jacket in the hallway closet and went into the kitchenette, took a bottle out of the fridge, then grabbed a pair of forks and two water glasses. He sat down next to James on the sofa and twisted the bottle, working the cork off with a gentle ‘pop.’ When he poured the wine, James noticed the small bubbles fizzing.

“What is this? Champagne?” James asked as he tossed his coat onto an armchair.

Jean-Louis stifled himself. “No, not Champagne, but a decent alternative for the occasion. Santé.” He relit his joint while James tasted the Prosecco.
“Hmm…not bad.”

Jean-Louis leaned back against the puffy cushions of the sofa and slouched down, throwing one arm over the back of his head, absently twisting a strand of blond hair around his fingers, legs splayed wide and relaxed, oblivious to the view he was presenting and the alarming effect it was having on James.

“Aren’t you going to eat any of this?” James croaked. He tried hard not to let his eyes fall on Jean-Louis’s crotch.

“You go ahead. I already had some earlier.” He took another leisurely drag.

James stuffed a large forkful of cake into his mouth. It would give him a reason not to say anything stupid for a while. Now that he was sitting next to Jean-Louis, he no longer wanted to tear him apart limb from limb. He wanted to do those other things to him, things he couldn’t even bear to name or express in coherent thoughts. Parallel universes. Maybe they were real and he was in one of them right now, the one where it would be a good idea to lean over and kiss him, let him taste the whipped cream in his mouth and hear him say, “Yum…more please…more.”

Jean-Louis’s voice reached out to him like a sweet caress. “Is it good, James?”

“Huh?”

“The cake. Do you like it?”

“Mmm, yeah, it’s really…tasty.” Tasty? Who says that? He was a man, goddamn it! Would a man say ‘tasty’? What had gotten into him? He shoved another forkful into his mouth, but before he could even swallow he imagined himself taking a chunk of cake in his hand and feeding it to Jean-Louis like two fucking newlyweds at their wedding, letting him lick the frosting off each of his fingers. Yeah. Take each of his fingers into his mouth and suck on it like…

“Are you sure you like it?” asked Jean-Louis.

“Umph.” Great. He was reduced to one-syllable grunts, a veritable Quasimodo, thespian that he was.

“Really? You look like you’re going to throw up.”

“Mmm, no.” He washed the cake down with a swig of Prosecco. “I’m good.” Two syllables. Things were looking up. He felt reality settling back into him.

Jean-Louis put out the stub of his joint in the ashtray and switched over to drinking, taking a bite of cake before leaning back with his glass. He drank it like water.

“Listen,” James said, putting down his fork so he wouldn’t be tempted to wave it about like an idiot. “I’m sorry about that thing I said the other day.”

“What thing?”

“That thing about you getting dumped. I didn’t know and I shouldn’t have said that.”

James couldn’t gauge any reaction on Jean-Louis’s face, but then he turned away and James knew he had hit a sore spot. “Do you want to tell me what happened?” Who was he? Dr. Phil? Jesus Christ, somebody duct tape his mouth shut!
“What’s there to say?” Jean-Louis sighed. “When I was thirteen, I fell in love with my sister’s best friend, Sophie. I knew right away I wanted to marry her, have kids with her, you know, the whole thing. Then over this past New Year’s she told me she was in love with some guy she met at university. She told me she’d been seeing him for the last two years, that she had never loved me. I think that was supposed to make me feel better. They got married this summer right before their baby was born. They even invited me to their wedding.”

James was aghast. “Did you go?”

“Yes, my sister made me. She said it would be rude to refuse, that I shouldn’t hold on to resentment. She said it would help me get over it. And she was right. I was so humiliated and depressed by the whole thing, it made me never want to see her again. Anyway, c’est la vie. How about you? Are you married?”

“Oh, shit, no. I mean, I plan on it, just not now. I’ve got a girlfriend, Krista, she’s an interior decorator. Been seeing her for almost two years. She’s great. Helped me fix up my house really nice. You should come see it. I could show you my gym. It’s amazing. All top of the line professional equipment. Sometimes I wish I could just live down there. It’s in my basement. Anyway, I’ll probably pop the question in a few years if we’re still together. If not her, then someone else I guess. Who knows? I’m in no hurry. Besides, I don’t want anyone telling me what to do with my life right now. You know how women can be…pick up your clothes…put down the toilet seat…come home for dinner…take out the garbage…I already do all those things on my own. I sure as hell don’t need someone nagging me about it.” Where was that duct tape?

“That sounds…very practical.” Jean-Louis laughed. “You make marriage seem as exciting as choosing a car.”

“Who says that’s not exciting? Picking out a car, I mean.”

Jean-Louis shook his head and refilled their glasses. “I don’t think we choose the people we fall in love with.”

“Of course we do.”

“No, I think it just happens and then we are helpless against it. Perhaps it is purely chemical, pheromones dictating which key fits into which lock, which doors will open and which ones remain closed. Just nature doing its own thing, fucking with us at will. I think it’s rather romantic, don’t you?”

“No. Geez. A steak dinner with a baked potato and sour cream, the Stanley Cup Finals on TV, and then banging your woman afterwards…now that’s romantic. Or some hot chick in a wet tank top serving you beer…that’s pretty romantic too. I don’t like your idea of nature fucking with me. I like to be the one doing the fucking, you know what I mean?”

“You think you’re the one in control?”

“Yes. I am the master of my own universe. When I set my mind to do something or get something, I go all-in. I’ll do whatever it takes, sacrifice whatever needs to be sacrificed. How do you think I got to where I am? It ain’t brains, I can tell you that. It’s pure will power and self-discipline. You can’t beat it. If you don’t want to love someone, then just don’t. A person shouldn’t be a slave to emotions.” Wow, that sounded really deep, really original. A slave to emotions. He should be a songwriter, perhaps as a second career after he was done with football. He was certain there was more where that came from.
He noticed that Jean-Louis was silent and staring at his empty glass.

“What’s the matter?” James asked. “Did I say something wrong again?”

“No,” Jean-Louis muttered. He laid his head back and closed his eyes. “I was just thinking about what you said about will power and self-discipline. I don’t think I’ve ever had much of either.”

“Oh yeah? That’s pretty obvious, Sherlock…what with all that pot-smoking and drinking that you do. You must really want to die young.”

Jean-Louis opened his eyes and looked at James in defeat. The man had no clue what he was saying, but all those ignorant, off-the-cuff remarks had a bizarre way of finding a weak spot. He felt like he was five years old again and made to stand against the fence with a metal bucket over his head and old pillows tied to his chest while his brother Paul used him for target practice. The pellets always seemed to hit him in the arms and legs. After his parents noticed the welts all over his limbs, Paul started taking him into the shed for what he called “weekly bouts of endurance” to toughen him up, but all it really amounted to were ridiculously uneven boxing matches. There were two concessions made for the nine-year age difference between him and his oldest brother: no hits to the face, and Jean-Louis was allowed to wear his eider down ski vest. Jean-Louis, on the other hand, was allowed to throw any punches whatsoever. Paul considered himself to be both fair-minded and responsible for his two younger brothers’ physical training. Jean-Louis’s other brother Ernst, seven years his senior, would also participate although he had no interest in pummeling a forty-pound whelp. It really wasn’t much of a contest, and it often devolved quickly into the two older boys wailing on each other, grunting and laughing, while Jean-Louis sat on the floor, his gut aching and his knuckles bruised. Afterwards, his brothers would give him a shot of cognac they kept hidden in the shed and pat him on the back. He couldn’t tell if they hated or loved him.

Now here was this man who operated under the same delusions as his brother Paul, who believed in all this bullshit about control over one’s destiny through sheer will like Nietzsche or Ayn Rand or some invincible comic book superhero, making him feel once more like every loss or sadness or unrequited love was his own doing, a mark of his own personal weakness and a deserved failure. When their father Charles died of cancer at forty-eight, Paul had blamed Jean-Louis for it, told him that their father had wasted all of his love on him and left nothing for anyone else, that it was Jean-Louis’s greed that had cost them their father’s life. He had drained him dry, bled all the love and life out of him, just for himself. It wasn’t true, none of it was. But how could he argue against it when his own heart told him that he had wanted and needed it, even if he never asked for it. Didn’t that make him guilty all the same?

“Hey. Okay, I did it again, didn’t I? I put my foot in my mouth, right? Look, whatever I said, I take it back. I’m sorry. Don’t look at me like that.”

James wanted to believe that Jean-Louis’s teary stare was just a result of him being high and drunk and had nothing to do with James being some murderous asshole, but a small voice in the back of his skull told him that he might have something to do with it in the tiniest way. God, he looked beautiful, like some doomed lamb going peacefully to the slaughter but aware of its own impending death nevertheless. Shit, he really was a murderous asshole, the one holding the knife to Jean-Louis’s alabaster neck. Why did he bring up the notion of death in the first place? That was on him. Jean-Louis continued staring blankly at him, eyes filling to almost overflowing now. If he ever blinked, that would be it, hello Niagara Falls.

Without thinking, James moved in close, put a hand reassuringly on his cheek, leaned down and kissed him. His lips were warm and so very soft. When he pulled back a little, he saw that Jean-Louis was still staring as if in a trance, so he kissed him again, this time he tasted the salt from the
tears that had rolled down his cheeks. He must have blinked, but he didn’t move or struggle to push James away. Keep going, keep going, James thought to himself, melting into his mouth, exploring tentatively with a shallow swipe of his tongue. Beneath the acrid smell of pot was something else, a faint scent exuded by his skin that was indescribable. He knew instantly that he would never forget it. He felt Jean-Louis tense against him now, heard a glass drop onto the carpet at their feet, felt a hand reach out and rest lightly on his shoulder, but he kept his mouth on him, afraid to lose that connection, tongue probing deeper, breath quickening. James slipped his arms around him easily and met no resistance when he hugged him closer, he felt just his heat, the firmness of his slender body, a slight tremble echoing through him, or was that himself quivering with excitement and disbelief? Maybe it was just the earth opening up and swallowing the world around them. The universe could have crumbled into a heap, it wouldn’t have mattered, nothing mattered except this young man in his arms making him feel things that were unimaginable and frightening and worth the destruction of everything he had ever known.

He could hear Jean-Louis making little noises that sounded like a lost puppy caught in a thunderstorm, a soft, strangled whimper that made James want to shield him from everything and everyone else, keep him solely for himself, make him his and no one else’s. It wasn’t like kissing a girl, there were no breasts to squeeze, the smell of floral this or that that flooding his nostrils, the slick wetness between the legs to plunge his cock into. There was none of that, and yet there was so much more that made his senses erupt into a fucking kaleidoscope of ecstasy. He was a goner. Jean-Louis wasn’t the lamb. It was him, and he would go willingly to the altar like some mindless ovine to pour out his life.

James was almost relieved when he felt Jean-Louis put a hand against his chest to nudge him away. What he wanted to do to him scared him. They used to put people in prison for this sort of thing, didn’t they? The look in Jean-Louis’s eyes wasn’t fear, though, nor even confusion. More like surprise, and perhaps grief. James wanted to change that, he wanted to look into his eyes and see something else, desire, hunger, need. He wanted to hear those words he had imagined that night: Fuck me, James, fuck me.

“Are you okay?” James asked. He brushed his hand against his wet cheek.

“Yes, but…” Jean-Louis took James’s hand, held his palm over his mouth and wept. After some moments, he wiped his eyes and said, “I think you better go now. I’ll walk you out.”

When they reached the side entrance James turned and kissed him again. It wasn’t awkward, thank god, and Jean-Louis seemed willing to let James embrace him.

“I’ll see you soon.” That was the only thing James could think of to say at the moment. He hoped it wasn’t too retarded.


Alone in the car, James breathed a sigh of elation. He didn’t even try to think about what he had just done, what it even meant, if anything at all. All he knew was that he was floating, he felt light as a feather and not a single bone in his body ached for once. Even his mind had reached that state of illusory stillness, like a wheel spinning so fast it looks to be frozen in stasis. He didn’t remember the drive home, washing up, getting into bed. He must have slept all the way through the night because he awoke to the alarm at four-thirty having no recollection of dreaming, yet his focus was razor sharp. The fog that had clouded his mind all week had finally lifted. He was going to kill it on the field on Sunday. He knew it. That was his mantra as he went down into the basement for his two-hour morning workout routine, ear buds on, Ludacris on his iPod. He was back on his game.

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God:    Wow. I didn’t see that coming. This is too good to be true.

Devil:   Did you hear him, though? The hypocrisy! ‘A person shouldn’t be a slave to emotions.’ ‘I am the master of my own universe.’ Ugh. Although I have to admit, the moron has some pretty big balls. Taking advantage of some crying boy. A right punishable offense, I’d say.

Santa:   Don’t let that mopey, sad-eyed kid fool you. He’s got a heart blacker than coal. The French do it better than anyone else, pulling all that romantic shit on you while they’re sticking a knife into your heart.

God:    Oh, for Christ’s sake, let’s not confuse our own problems with—

Jesus:   Hey! Who forgot to invite me to the party?

Devil:   Buzz off, ye Son of God. This isn’t about you.

Jesus:   Screw you, asshole. So what’s this all about? Anything I can help out with? I’m kind of between projects, you know, what with my crucifixion and glorious resurrection…well, work has been rather slow since then…

Santa:   Christmas is just around the bend, Jesus. That should keep you entertained for a while. Besides, they’ve been playing carols at Walmart since the Fourth of July.

Jesus:   Those obnoxious ditties aren’t even about me! Jesus F-ing H. Christ!

Devil:   What? You swear on your own name now? And I’m the one who gets tossed for being self-centered and vain. What a crock!

God:    Now boys, no need to dredge up the past. Mistakes were made, that’s just the way it goes. Son, you butt out of this one. We’ve got this well under control.

Jesus:   Fine. I’ll not hang around where I’m not wanted. It’s just that, I could’ve really helped out with the whole torture aspect. And the whole gay thing…come to think of it, I should really pay John a visit…it’s been too, too long.
Like Nectar to a Bee

Chapter Summary

James invites Jean-Louis to a Broncos game and follows it up with a dinner date.

There was an envelope under the door of his hotel room when he got back from the lecture on Saturday. Jean-Louis had been invited to participate in a series of talks aimed at children explaining the real world applications of paleontology outside the generally held view of fossil hunting. Jean-Louis’s twenty-minute presentation focused on the use of microfossils in oil exploration, a subject matter with low kid appeal if it were not for the exquisite beauty of the shelly remains, many comprised of geometric forms anyone young or old would find astounding. After the slide show, Jean-Louis accompanied the museum’s education director into a side room where the kids were given paper and colored pencils and spent an hour creating their own imaginary microfossils. Some of them were surprisingly good.

For tomorrow, the museum had arranged for a shuttle van to take their guests up into the Rockies for a scenic drive and hike. The trails were still clear and Jean-Louis was looking forward to getting out in the open. (Edward planned on going, too; he had some new jokes to tell.) When he opened the envelope, he found two tickets to the Broncos game on Sunday, and an unsigned handwritten note:

Hey. Hope you can come to the game. Bring your friend Edward if you want, or anyone else. I’m the one in orange wearing #87. There should be a shuttle going to the game. Check with the front desk for the schedule.

James was a season ticket holder. Normally, Krista and one of her girlfriends would come to the home games at Sports Authority Field, but since she was away for the week, he figured he’d send over the tickets to Jean-Louis, no sense in letting them go to waste. The seats were decent, located on the second tier behind the home team sidelines around midfield, too far away for James to really make out any faces, but that was a good thing. He didn’t need any distractions on game day. So why invite him? There were plenty of other people who would have been thrilled to go. Maybe he wanted Jean-Louis to see what he did for a living, let him know that he wasn’t just some big dumb jock, that he was actually good at something, and that he was admired for it too. Maybe he wanted to prove that he was worth falling in love with.

Jean-Louis considered offering the tickets to the staff at the front desk, a middle-aged woman named Lisa and a younger man in his thirties named Owen, both of whom seemed to be avid Broncos fans from the snippets of conversation he’d overhear now and then, but what would James think if he found out he had just given the tickets away without any appreciation for the gesture? He could hear his mother Catherine scolding him for being an ingrate. That evening he had dinner with Edward and two other colleagues at a small Indian restaurant located in a strip mall next to the hotel.

“Should I go?” he asked no one in particular.

Leslie was a senior research scientist at Harvard University. “You could always scalp them,” she
suggested helpfully. “The people in Denver are rabid fans of their team. I’m sure you could make a killing.”

“Or put it on Craigslist tonight. You’d have buyers in minutes and you wouldn’t even have to make a trip to the stadium,” said Gretchen, a paleontologist from the University of Chicago. She was a fan of baseball, not football. It was her birthday that they had celebrated the night before.

“I don’t think I’d feel comfortable with that,” Jean-Louis said. “What do I say if he finds out?”

“You could always tell him the truth,” said Leslie. She was in her sixties and quite sensible. “And if he doesn’t like it, well then he doesn’t have to do it again. Right?”

“Yes, right. Edward? He said I should invite you.”

“American football, eh? Well, why the hell not. I like rugby. Shouldn’t be all that bad.”

And it wasn’t, aside from the deafening noise, it was a rather pleasant experience, nicer than the four Wolverine games Jean-Louis had unwittingly attended when he was at U of M. Saturdays on campus were for partying and somehow he had ended up at Michigan Stadium several times with groups of fellow stoners, although he had no recollection of how he got there in the first place. Each time, he would make it back to his graduate residence building in one piece but covered in spilled beer without fail and one time in what looked to be someone’s vomit. Today, though, no one vomited on him and the fans in his section knew how to drink out of plastic cups without too much difficulty. Edward was enjoying some kind of “nacho” snack made with fried tortilla strips topped with a blue cheese sauce and chunks of buffalo-style white meat chicken. It actually went very well with the beer. The temperature was a balmy fifty-five degrees at kick-off with brilliant sunshine and clear skies. The air was filled with the smell of smoke and food and hometown pride. A gigantic flag was unfurled on the field and someone who had competed on American Idol three years ago sang the national anthem.

Jean-Louis looked down on the field and searched around for a number eighty-seven in an orange jersey. He had a decent grasp of the rules of the game. James had explained it to him over that summer session course at Jean-Louis’s urging, when he was struggling to find a way to help James understand the concepts of plate tectonics. Quite frankly, Jean-Louis was surprised that James had not only passed the course, but had earned a solid grade. At times it had been like squeezing water out of a rock, but he needn’t have worried. The man had done well enough for himself regardless of his academic handicaps. In fact, number eighty-seven was on fire that afternoon. The Broncos were really mixing it up today, using James as a run blocker at times to plow a hole through the defensive line for his running back, at other times he would shoot down the field and make mincemeat of the defensive secondaries. At halftime he and Edward took a bathroom break and shared another joint before reloading at the concession stands. This time they got a plate of mixed grilled sausages. Delicious.

“You’ll have to thank your friend for the tickets,” Edward shouted over the noise of the crowd.

The Chargers had just fumbled for the third time in the game to start off the second half, giving the Broncos the ball on their own twenty-five yard line. One play later, number eighty-seven took it in for a touchdown, spiking the ball and doing a ridiculous he-man impression in the end zone. The fans erupted in joy. Jean-Louis was happy for him. He couldn’t wait to get back to New York on Saturday.

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Beth, one of the museum’s staff members, walked over to Jean-Louis and tapped him on the
shoulder.

“Excuse me, Dr. Lamarck. There’s someone waiting for you at the visitor’s desk.”

He looked away from the computer screen. It was almost noontime and Jean-Louis didn’t recall any appointments on Monday, aside from the one o’clock lunch meeting to review the current status of the project. “Really? I wasn’t expecting anyone. Do you know who it is?”

Beth put her cell phone to her ear and asked, “Who is it?” Then her eyes got bigger. “As in the Broncos?” She turned to Jean-Louis and said in a whisper, “It’s James Miller, from the Broncos.” Everyone in Denver knew James. The Denver fans knew all the players on the team, star or no star, and James was a star.

Jean-Louis sighed. He probably wants to hear me tell him how great he was, he thought. “Yes. Okay.” He considered getting Edward, but when he peeked into the room where he was working, he saw that he and another colleague were wrestling a ninety-pound fossilized femur bone from a mastodon onto an examination table, so he headed upstairs by himself and found James signing autographs for a bunch of fifth graders on a museum visit. The two teachers in the group were taking pictures with their cell phones and screaming hysterically at the kids to calm down. Jean-Louis hung back by the stairwell and watched with amusement until James noticed him and smiled. He walked over to Jean-Louis, shaking hands with the teachers and high-fiving with the kids as he broke away from the mob, and stood grinning in front of him with his feet spread and his hands on his hips, Jolly Green Giant-style.

“So, what do you think of me now?” he smirked. “Did you go to the game?”

“Yes, and both Edward and I would like to thank you for a very nice afternoon.”

“You’re welcome. So?”

“So? We had a great time…”

“And?”

“And you were…impressive, I think.”

“You think?”

“I don’t know. Are you like that every time, running around like a maniac, doing that thing you do in the end zone?”

James laughed. “No, actually. I only did that yesterday, just for you.” It came out without any thought and he wanted to die of embarrassment when he realized what he had said. All his bravado drained right out of him in a split second.

Jean-Louis raised an eyebrow, a mocking smile spread slowly across his lips. “Really? Is that your idea of a pick-up line?” He leaned in a little, letting him squirm. “Are you flirting with me, James?” God, he was so easy to torture.

“Uh…” James laughed nervously and was suddenly sweating bullets. “I’m just here to see if you want to grab some lunch…or something.” The memory of their kiss was rolling around in his head now and, standing so close to him, he could smell that intoxicating scent. He heard a roaring sound in his ears and realized it was his heart straining to beat right out of his fucking chest. What was he thinking? That he could walk in here and dominate the situation the same way he could on the field? Jean-Louis had an uncanny way of turning everything upside down. He was like some...
bipolar EMP device. One zap and James was rendered both impotent and voraciously hungry for sex. How could he possibly defend against _that_?

“Lunch?” Jean-Louis said. He was back to being serious. “I’m sorry. I can’t do that. We have a meeting today at lunch. But thank you for the offer.” He glanced at his watch and then asked, “Do you want to see what we’re working on here?”

“Sure.” James felt disappointed and relieved. He figured it would be a good idea to get used to this confused state.

Jean-Louis led him down the stairwell, through a long hallway and into a series of well-lit rooms filled with metal racks stacked with trays and bins holding all manner of fossilized bones, some tagged and wrapped in plastic, others still being sorted and cleaned. Edward saw them and waved. Jean-Louis introduced James to the group of visiting scientists. The museum staff recognized James right away and immediately asked for autographs, which he willingly gave. He really was at his best when schmoozing with the fans, there was none of the awkwardness or uncertainty he displayed when they were alone. It made Jean-Louis feel a little more comfortable to be around him, to see this side of him that was happy, confident, and gregarious in a non-argumentative way. Maybe he wasn’t a total lunatic after all.

Then one of the staff members invited James to the lunch meeting and a look of terror spread over his face. He stammered some excuse about having an appointment to keep, but thanks anyway, maybe next time, really gotta go now. He shot a desperate glance over at Jean-Louis, who merely shrugged.

“You little shit,” James muttered as Jean-Louis walked him back upstairs to the museum foyer. “You were going to let me sit through a fucking meeting about bones? Thanks a lot for bailing me out, asshole.” Happy James was back to being Angry James.

“I wish you could have seen your face,” he laughed. “They probably would have quizzed you afterwards. I would have loved to have heard your—”

“Okay, that’s enough. How about dinner?”

They had an away game in Foxboro against the New England Patriots that coming Sunday, which meant a travel day on Friday and late meetings on Wednesday and Thursday. Tomorrow he and a few of his teammates had a scheduled appearance at the Children’s Hospital to visit with some of their patients as part of a Make-a-Wish foundation initiative, then team meetings to go over video footage of their previous game with the Patriots, so Tuesday was out of the question. That left today, Monday, his last chance to see him and reach some kind of resolution, whatever that might be.

“Tonight?” asked Jean-Louis all surprised.

“No, next year. Yes, _tonight_ Dr. PhD.” Christ, why did he have to be so irritating?

“That’s a bit redundant.”

“What?”

“The whole ‘Dr. PhD’ thing. It’s redundant.”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about. Do you want to have dinner with me or not? Tonight.”
James was beginning to feel like that time when he was seventeen-years-old, the ink on his first driver’s license still wet, and he made a snap decision to floor it when the light turned yellow, only to see the cop waiting at the intersection as he flew by. He knew it was a bad idea even before he hit the gas pedal, but he did it anyway. What could possibly go wrong, right?

“Is this like some kind of date?” asked Jean-Louis.

He was making James mad enough to punch him in the face, he really was asking for it, if only he didn’t look so goddamn sexy, standing there with his thumbs hooked in his back pockets like some adorable waif.

“Well, is it?” Jean-Louis prodded. “Are you going to take me out on the town, show me off to your friends?”

“Oh.” It hadn’t occurred to James how things might play out or look. He had dinner all the time with his male friends, mostly loud mouthed jocks like himself who loved the attention they received when out in public, but for tonight, he didn’t relish the idea of being interrupted constantly by requests for autographs and pictures, or of people staring and whispering and wondering, “Who’s that hottie with him?” Tonight he wanted privacy, something intimate and, dare he think it, candlelit, without the danger of reducing Jean-Louis to road kill in a restaurant or bar. He improvised as only he could. “Well, I was thinking I’d show you my house, order a pizza or something. Just catch up. Have a few drinks.” He threw in that last part with a secret smile. Like nectar to a bee, he thought.

Jean-Louis, though, was no idiot, and no ingénue when it came to matters of sexual attraction. Plenty of people hit on him, men and women alike. This he was used to and it didn’t bother him either way. He had spent his whole life ignoring what people did to him or thought or felt about him, good or bad, mostly out of self-preservation. He really couldn’t bear to feel anything for anyone besides his sister Charlotte and, for many years, his girlfriend Sophie, whom he had loved as a fool loves, with his eyes shut tightly against reality. Love, for him, was such a painfully intense feeling, he could never open his heart up to more than a few at a time. It was like staring into the sun. How long could one endure that? Sex was something else altogether. In that he was almost indifferent, not towards its enjoyment but its meaning, of which it held little save for his bond with Charlotte. With Sophie he had allowed his emotions to intertwine with his physical desire and it had been a disaster. He wouldn’t make that same mistake so easily again.

He knew exactly what James wanted; the man was as transparent as a jellyfish and probably as spineless, too, when it came to desire. All that blather about control and self-discipline was a colossal joke, a mark of someone trying to overcompensate for a lack of insight into his own heart. He knew James wanted to fuck him that first night he caught him staring at him across the bar. He’d seen that look so many times in the eyes of others it no longer frightened him and, occasionally, it amused him even. The only question with James was how long to keep him hanging. It had been a while since Jean-Louis had toyed with someone like this. On Saturday he’d be on a plane back to New York. Angela and her husband Stuart always hosted a large Thanksgiving dinner for his colleagues and students at Fordham and for her friends at the museum. He was looking forward to going and maybe catching a few moments alone with her in a quiet corner. Dinner with James might be a fun diversion in the meantime, something to tide him over until he could get back to his old routine. He decided to play along with it.

“Well, I suppose a few drinks wouldn’t hurt,” Jean-Louis demurred. He smiled shyly at him, making his voice soft and low. “Would you pick me up at the hotel? I’d want to shower and change my clothes first.”
“Yeah, yeah, that sounds great.” James cleared his throat, trying to push aside the image of Jean-Louis naked in the shower. Would he wash up all businesslike, or would he take a moment to pleasure himself with a caress or two? That reminded him: better jerk off before dinner. “What time would be good for you?”

“I can leave here about five-thirty. If you come by around seven, I should be ready.” And comfortably high.

“Okay, see you at seven. Tonight.” James gave his shoulder a quick squeeze and left, wishing he could have laid a nice wet kiss on him. That would have to wait for later, he thought, unable to wipe the grin off his face for the rest of the day.

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God: Can you believe this guy?

Devil: Yeah, he’s eating it up hook, line, and sinker.

Santa: What did I tell you? Those French fucks do it better than anyone else.

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At five-thirty James jumped in the shower. He took his time, making sure to shave carefully, then soaped himself well. He pictured Jean-Louis leaving work, trudging the quarter mile back to his hotel, working up a good sweat, then going into his room at the hotel and peeling of his clothes, throwing them willy-nilly on the bed before going into the bathroom and turning on the shower. He watched him fondle himself as he stood waiting for the water to get hot, then as he climbed into the tub, his body slick and gleaming under the steaming spray. Before he knew it, James was in the tub with him, his body pressed against him from behind, his rigid cock gliding smoothly between the firm cheeks of his buttocks, a soapy hand caressing the hard muscles of Jean-Louis’s abs and chest, a nipple erect between his fingers as he slams into him like a raging bull, a loud moan echoing against the tiles. He hears Jean-Louis call out to him, saying all the clichéd things that every man yearns for, “Oh, James, I’ve never been fucked like this before! You’re too big! I can’t possibly fit all of you inside me! Oh God! I can’t! I can’t! There’s just too much of you!”

James collapsed against the shower stall and let the water wash away this latest evidence of his lust. As he slowly regained his breath, he hoped it would be enough for the next couple of hours. Within minutes, though, he felt it, that relentless desire. He wanted him again already.

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(God, the Devil, and Santa piss their pants laughing.)

God: I need to get out of his head for a while. I swear he’s killing me.

Devil: Agreed. Look at me. Look at these tears.

Santa: This guy’s a keeper. Way more fun than Job, don’t you think?
James gets down and dirty with Jean-Louis.

When he pulled into the hotel parking lot at seven, he saw Jean-Louis sitting on the bench out front reading a book under the lamp post. It was a cold evening in the twenties and James could easily see Jean-Louis’s breath captured in the headlights of his SUV. He wore a knitted ski cap and had one hand tucked into his coat pocket, but otherwise seemed unfazed by the frigid temperature.

James cracked a window. “Get in, it’s cold out.”

Jean-Louis slowly looked up from his book as if awakening from a dream. “Oh. Hi.”

He seemed surprised to see James, but when he got into the car, he leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, then buckled himself in as if nothing were out of the ordinary. James sat confused for a moment.

“Are you high or are you just happy to see me?” he asked.

“Hmm? Oh…both,” he said with a shrug. Jean-Louis held his book in his lap and smiled at him in a way that made James want to hide under a rock.

“What are you reading?”

“The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear. It’s got lots of marvelous pictures and silly rhymes. You’d like it.”

James shook his head in disgust. A typical barbed comment at his expense. “Isn’t that just like you to say something like that,” he muttered as he pulled onto the road and headed north.

Jean-Louis laughed at his annoyance. “Seriously, James. My favorite is a series of illustrations called Nonsense Botany, where Lear made these great drawings of make-believe plants with silly names in what sound like Greek and Latin.” Jean-Louis cracked open the book. “Listen to this: Washtubbia Circularis, Phattfacia Stupenda, Manypeeplia Upsidownia. It’s hilarious!”

“Yeah, I’ll bet. So, are you hungry? I know this place that makes the best pizza.”

“That sounds fine.” A good pizza was one of the few foods that America got right in Jean-Louis’s opinion. His time in New York attested to the glorious culinary heights attainable through a good crust and sauce. “Can we stop by a liquor store? I’d like to pick up some wine.”

“No need. I’ve got plenty at the house.” James saw the skeptical look on Jean-Louis’s face. “Don’t worry. My girlfriend Krista knows all about wine. She keeps me well stocked in that Carlo Rossi shit. You’ll love it.” Jean-Louis didn’t even blink. “Oh, for Christ’s sake, I’m kidding. Don’t be such a fucking snob!”
“I’m sorry, James. But I think you’re quite capable of anything.”

“Yeah? Just you wait and see.”

In twenty minutes they were in the outer suburbs where the lot sizes were measured in double digits and the homes were priced well into the millions. They pulled up a long, wide, semi-circular driveway landscaped with an “island” of imposing boulders and dwarf conifers at the center of the paved horseshoe. One could easily fall down into a crevasse and never be seen again. The brightly lit house looming at the end of the drive was a schizophrenic pastiche combining elements of a rustic cabin à la Thoreau, a Swiss chalet, Stonehenge, and a Viking longship, all on steroids. The green metal roof showcased an acid-induced riot of peaks, valleys, and dormers, more than could be counted on all the digits of both hands and feet. There was a foundation comprised of herculean-sized stones, and a towering three-story glassed entryway bookended by thick, flared, stone-clad columns terminating in an explosion of timber beams supporting an equally massive wooden pediment. It was enough to make Jean-Louis’s eyes bleed.

“Don’t tell me you designed this,” he mumbled.

“Who, me? Nah. I don’t have that kind of talent. No, some tech mogul had this built. Isn’t it amazing? Wait till you see the inside!”

The interior was every bit as impressive as the exterior, if by impressive one means something along the lines of “the gravity at the center of a black hole is impressive.” It was obvious that, at some point, a sawmill and a quarry got busy and spawned this satanic offspring of knotty pine paneling and beams punctuated by accent walls of granite and schist. Every surface—be it floor, wall, or ceiling—was covered in one or the other material, save for the enormous windows lining the back of the house providing an almost panoramic view of the property. Jean-Louis could see another building less than fifty yards away, a dwarf cousin to the main house connected by a winding slate walkway.

He stood in what looked to be the living room, although he couldn’t be sure. The space was dominated by a stone fireplace spanning ten feet in width at the base with a chimney at least five feet wide. A taxidermied moose head hung over the knotty pine wood mantle surrounded by a squadron of stuffed mallards, male and female, forming an oddly charming diorama of wildlife. He half expected a bobcat to jump out at him from behind a potted ficus. Several rugs with Navajo-inspired patterns were scattered on the floor. Two large brown leather sectionals and two oversized brown leather loveseats barely filled the space even though the seating could easily accommodate twenty people. Atop a five foot square coffee table was a stack of arty tomes published by Rizzoli and Taschen gathering dust, and a pair of Maria Martinez knock-off vases. Overhead hung a chandelier made up of a woven mass of deer antlers, probably the only thing that felt familiar to Jean-Louis. The living room walls in his own family home were replete with the racks taken by him and his brothers, his father and his uncle.

“Here, I’ll hang up your jacket.” James’s normally booming voice sounded distant and muted, lost somewhere up in the cathedral ceilings. Jean-Louis must have been sporting the blank white eyes of some bedazzled anime character because James took one look at him and grinned. “Pretty kickass, huh? Here, watch this.”

He grabbed a remote off the coffee table and pushed a button. A large framed print of a Georgia O’Keeffe landscape hanging on a wall silently ascended to reveal a sixty-inch flat panel LCD screen concealed behind it.

“I can watch four shows at once on this.”
Jean-Louis took off his jacket, feeling lightheaded and a little sick to his stomach. This was too much of a bad thing, and the tour of the house had only just begun. That old anxiety that had held him prisoner in his youth was starting to take hold of him once more despite the precautionary joint he had smoked right before James picked him up. He couldn’t even think straight at this point.

“Um…I could really use a drink if you don’t mind.”

They went into the kitchen, another massive room but less disorienting than the living room. James pointed to a double-door glass-front wine cooler built into the polished granite-topped island.

“Take your pick.”

He disappeared into the hallway with his jacket while Jean-Louis scanned the rows of bottles. He selected a Malbec from Argentina with a screw top, desperate enough to start chugging straight from the bottle.

“Now about the pizza. What do you want?” James sat at the island and took out his cell phone, dialed a number.

“Thin crust with mozzarella and fresh basil for me,” Jean-Louis said. He espied some glasses in a cabinet and helped himself while James ordered, one thin crust pizza margherita and one meat lover’s special. When he went to pour James a glass, he stopped him.

“Thanks, but I’m gonna have beer.”

While they waited for the pizza, James took him downstairs to his gym, his pride and joy. Jean-Louis, curious as he was to see what the big deal was all about, decided he should assess it with scientific dispassion. The back wall was comprised of floor-to-ceiling mirrors so that one could observe one’s progress through the nine circles of hell, heavy metal racks holding all manner of weights and torture devices ran along another wall, a series of pulleys, ropes, and metal bars were bolted along a third wall, with a large punching bag suspended from the ceiling. In the center of the room were various benches and machines designed to inflict horrific pain. The room had a heavy industrial grade carpeting, high ceilings with sound deadening tile to muffle screams, fans mounted in each of the corners, and a large dehumidifier to capture all the sweat of agony.

James stood to the side and watched Jean-Louis sipping thoughtfully at his wine. He wore a pair of tan fitted corduroy trousers and a striped blue and orange long sleeve button down shirt over a blue t-shirt. He was barely twenty-one years old but looked to be even younger the way he was gazing about in wonder. James knew the feeling. He too felt like a kid in a candy store every time he went down to his gym.

Jean-Louis tried hard to feign excitement but, truthfully, the cavernous room looked like some sadomasochist’s idea of paradise gone awry. No sensible Frenchman would waste his energy building muscle when he could be burning calories having sex instead. After some minutes searching for the appropriate words, Jean-Louis turned to him and said, “I think I understand you better.”

What he really meant was that it proved everything he had assumed about James, that he was basically a meathead and not much else, but all James heard was, “Wow! You’re amazing! Now it’s your turn to get to know me better.” He was sure he had hit the jackpot.

They returned upstairs just as the doorbell rang. James was in a great mood. He had a beer in him, the pizza was here, and Jean-Louis had essentially given him the nod to take it to another level. They ate at the kitchen island straight out of the pizza boxes. Jean-Louis didn’t seem to mind. Give
him a bottle of alcohol and he’ll stop being obnoxious, James thought with a smile. What would he be willing to do after two bottles?

They talked idly about their families and their day-to-day existence, the lives they had led in the six years since they had last seen each other. Neither was particularly interested in what the other was saying. Jean-Louis was into his second bottle and flying high, James was buzzed on beer, pepperoni and anticipation, talking louder than he should be and laughing at his own jokes. He showed Jean-Louis the rest of the first floor: a sunroom off the kitchen with another huge TV, an ‘office’ with a heavy oak desk and a wall of display cases holding trophies and awards, old jerseys and signed memorabilia, a guest bedroom, two bathrooms, a room with a pool table and a built-in bar, and several other rooms that seemed to serve no purpose. Outside was a wrap-around deck and a large stone patio three steps down with a circular fire pit. Patio furniture was scattered all about in groupings of two, four, and six. Then James took him upstairs where there were five spacious bedrooms, each with its own en suite bathroom. Only one bedroom was fully furnished, the master bedroom in which James slept.

“Krista picked out the furniture,” James explained. “She picked out everything, but she’s still working on the other bedrooms. She can’t decide which one should be the nursery…”

Jean-Louis couldn’t tell if James was happy or sad about her choices. The aesthetics reminded him vaguely of department store displays for some reason, every room had a semblance of a theme, but applied from without rather than arising organically. He could never imagine himself living in a place like this with its out of scale dimensions and meaningless assemblages of knick knacks. The sensorial clutter was already driving him bonkers. He turned to leave but was stopped by James’s arms suddenly around him pulling him back against his chest from behind. Jean-Louis didn’t flinch. He had been expecting James to make a move at some point, perhaps on the living room sectional with the moose head bearing witness. Who knew he’d be so direct as to waylay him in the bedroom? They stood quietly together for what seemed to be ages, eyes closed, just listening to each other breathing, letting their heat and scent mingle. Finally, Jean-Louis turned around to face him, reaching up to drape his arms around James’s shoulders. He wasn’t used to this at all, embracing a body such as his, the firmness and bulk, the sheer size of him, the violent energy coiled like a spring in his taut sinews.

He had let older boys kiss him during his first year at university in Paris, before he had transferred to U of M, when he was living with his grandparents and only fourteen. He had already had sex with Sophie, was lonely being away from her and intent on remaining faithful to her. He didn’t consider it cheating if he had new experiences with boys, not that he had much choice anyway. The university he attended focused on the sciences and the students were predominantly male. If a fellow student supplied him with pot and wanted a kiss in return, he wasn’t averse to a little affection now and then. Sometimes they’d want to fondle him but it never went farther than that. Maybe it was his youth that stopped them. He was still a child in so many ways.

At U of M he had remained largely celibate aside from the occasional blackouts, when he couldn’t remember what he had done with whom at a party. There were plenty of other foreigners among the graduate students in his program, but none were his age and most of them treated him with the care one would show to a nephew. He had little contact with the undergraduate students outside of tutoring members of the various athletic teams, of which there seemed to be too many. Besides, he was deeply in love with Sophie, perhaps more so than ever because of the long periods of separation, even while he was at Cambridge, still convinced that they would marry when he completed his doctorate, have children, make their own happy little family. Their reunions during the Christmas and Easter breaks were intense affairs, when every moment seemed to be condensed into liquid mercury; drop by drop, it would fill his veins with its orphic toxicity and leave him paralyzed with need.
James’s sudden fixation on him was an odd fluke, precipitated by nothing more than a random opening of a door with no rhyme or reason to account for it. It was this lack of meaning to their chance encounter that made Jean-Louis want to know how far James’s infatuation could carry him. Nothing made him more excited than to feel someone else’s passion directed at him, to know that he could incite that kind of fervor though he felt indifferent inside. He was nothing more than a mirror onto which another’s love was reflected but never absorbed. It was the best kind of pleasure, to be filled and then emptied, yet remain unfettered by any desire of his own.

Jean-Louis tilted his face up, brushing his cheek against the hard line of James’s jaw, then he slowly pressed his mouth to his, the very faintest of touches. It sent a delicious jolt of electricity straight to his groin, then another when he drew his tongue along James’s teeth and bit down on his lower lip. James lost it. The next moments were a blur: James’s mouth on him like some ravenous animal, huge hands groping him, pulling at his clothes, pushing him down on the bed. The room was spinning like an alcohol-fueled cyclone and he didn’t care what happened to him. He didn’t care about anything at all. At some point he began laughing—he knew he was bombed out of his mind—and James was pulling his shirt over his head; then he felt his feet relieved of shoes and socks, then his trousers were off and he was lying on the bed naked, the air cool around his exposed skin, the room tilting at odd angles. He noticed the ceiling had small recessed lights that formed a starburst pattern almost, then saw James staring down at him, a modern day Colossus of Rhodes. Like the ancient statue he towered naked over him, his face frozen and imperious. Was he still human, or perhaps he was Helios descended from the heavens.

“What?” he whispered. He felt an element of fear stirring inside him. Was James going to murder him? Was he one of those psychopaths who led an exemplary public life only to keep chopped up body parts in the freezer downstairs? He really didn’t know him at all, did he?

James could see that Jean-Louis had stopped laughing and had grown quiet and withdrawn; he couldn’t take his eyes off him. James was used to nudity, having spent the better part of the last ten years in locker rooms and showers where guys let everything hang out with no shame, and had never once been sexually aroused by the sight of another naked man. Now here he was, twenty-seven-years-old, in a good and decent relationship with a fine and sexy woman, standing in front of his former college tutor with a raging hard-on and drool running down the corners of his mouth like some horny teenager. How could he explain it? He sure as hell wasn’t wearing beer goggles. Jean-Louis was spectacular, built like a thoroughbred race horse, all lean muscle and graceful lines, a refined machine designed for carnal delight, designed to break one’s heart and will. He was uncircumcised, like most European males, an unfamiliar sight in James’s experience, but it made him salivate. He knelt down by the side of the bed and put his hands on Jean-Louis’s chest, ran his flattened palms along the smooth skin, down the hard muscles of his abdomen and thighs. He wrapped one hand around Jean-Louis’s straining cock and put him in his mouth, an act so impetuous he didn’t have time to feel surprise. It was like jumping off a cliff. If he thought about it first, he’d never dare do it.

Krista had blown him many times, as did other girls through the years. He had always liked it, even with the accidental teeth grazing or rough handling, it had a way of making him feel powerful, like he was some god being worshipped. It was even better if the girl swallowed, although he never forced it, having sampled himself early on and deciding that he’d rather drink battery acid than his own cum. If someone had told him that he would one day have a guy’s cock in his mouth, he would have shot himself dead with no regrets. Funny how things change. Not only did he have another guy’s cock in his mouth, he was actually enjoying it. He could hear Jean-Louis moaning in a drunken stupor above him as he worked his tongue up and down the length of his thick shaft and around the head, licking it like a meaty ice cream cone, then sucking down on it hard. He nuzzled his balls, the soft skin at the crease of his thighs, the coarse blond hair at his groin, breathed him in and was struck with amazement. He couldn’t even describe the scent, there were no words for it.
Perhaps a world-class parfumier would have the proper lexicon at his disposal, perhaps he would use words like earthy, smoky, feral; a master chef might speak of it in terms of umami, that mysterious elusive mouth-feel, the holy grail of taste. But it had an effect as real and permanent as a red-hot brand seared onto his brain, an addictive hold as strong as heroin or some other opiate from which there was no escape after just one innocent sampling.

Jean-Louis was yanking on his hair trying to get out from under him. He’d never had a man on him like this before. It was too much, the feeling too intense. A girl’s mouth was soft and small and delicate. James on him was like getting caught in a blender. He was afraid he’d be eaten alive. He sat up somehow and pushed against his shoulders, telling him to stop, please stop. When he looked into his eyes, he saw a madman. In another moment he was flung back onto the bed, James on top of him now blocking his view of the room, his body as big as a mountain ready to pulverize him into dust. He couldn’t breathe, James had his arms pinned above his head and he was truly afraid for his life. Oh God, Jean-Louis thought, this is how I’m going to die, crushed beneath this lunatic. Mama is going to kill me! Somehow, he managed to urge James onto his side, then onto his back so he could climb on top and breathe again. He sat with James’s hips beneath him, their cocks lined up, balls touching, James’s knees pulled up against his back. Jean-Louis was gasping, he wanted to cry or throw up or run screaming from the room, but he had gotten himself into this predicament, he had to finish it. He took some deep breaths, reaching behind him to steady himself against James’s knees, tried to focus on the air vent on the wall and regain some composure.

James reached out to him and grasped his hips, rocking up against him slowly. Jean-Louis was a wild, beautiful mess, that look of panic in his eyes a tremendous turn-on for James who wanted nothing more than to make him lose control, take all that intellectual bullshit in his head and throw it out the window, make him exist and feel on a purely physical level, give him a glimpse into his own world. He gripped both of their cocks in his right hand and, without a word, Jean-Louis placed his own hand over James’s and dropped his head back with a sigh, mouth open, eyes closed, his slender neck exposed. James propped himself forward on one arm, stroking them together as he continued to grind up against him.

“Come with me, baby. Christ, you’re beautiful,” James whispered, watching Jean-Louis’s face as his moans quickened. “Now, baby, come with me now…” He couldn’t wait, but in another second Jean-Louis was with him, crying out almost in shock, chest heaving and flushed pink. The stuff went everywhere, on their chests, stomachs, hands, thighs. They fell apart panting with laughter.

“Double the fun, double the mess,” James observed. He pulled Jean-Louis down for a long deep kiss, smearing the sticky fluid between them like Elmer’s glue. “Wanna try out my Jacuzzi tub? It’s great for sore muscles…and washing away all the naughty bits.”

There was something dreamlike about the rest of the night. They soaked in the tub with its humming jets of water caressing their bodies, mouths pressed together in an endless kiss. Nobody else existed. James said a silent “thank you” to Krista for all those stupid scented candles in the bathroom. To see Jean-Louis aglow in that soft light was like gazing upon perfection caught in amber. He couldn’t get enough of him, the feel of his naked skin, the taste of his soft mouth, the sound of his sighs. He held him in his lap, cocks bumping and rubbing together, his hands tracing along Jean-Louis’s back and the curves of his buttocks and thighs. He thought his heart would burst with happiness.

“Stay here tonight,” James said as he nuzzled behind an ear, then planted soft kisses down his neck. “I want to feel you next to me all night. I can take you back to your hotel in the morning after breakfast. I’m going to dazzle you with my cooking skills.”

Jean-Louis laughed. “Should I be afraid?”
“Only if you say no. And only if you don’t like eggs.” He bent him back and sucked on his chest, leaving a large red mark on his collarbone.

“But I didn’t bring a toothbrush. I can’t possibly go to sleep without brushing my teeth. You should know I’m a little OCD when it comes to dental hygiene.”

“Are you kidding? We have Costco here. I’ve got enough new toothbrushes to last till Armageddon.”

“Armageddon?”

“Yeah, when we get hit by that asteroid.”

So he spent the night snuggled next to James’s warm body in his king-sized bed, memorizing the way he smelled and tasted and felt, the sound of his heartbeat, the cadence of his breathing as he drifted off to sleep. Nothing would be forgotten. When Jean-Louis woke at five in the morning to use the bathroom, James was already gone from the bed, the sheets cold where he had lain. Jean-Louis pulled on his shirt and went downstairs but saw no one in the warren of darkened, cavernous rooms. The SUV was still parked out front, then he remembered the basement. The door was shut but he could see a sliver of light shining through the bottom edge and when he opened it he could hear James grunting and swearing, the clanking of metal. He closed the door again and went back upstairs, crawled under the covers and fell asleep for another hour or so. He awoke again to the sound of the shower running, heard James singing a tune very badly, something about walking on sunshine. It made him laugh into the pillow, then he stretched like a cat, back arched, limbs extended, got up and stepped into the shower with him, letting James see him with his morning erection as he slowly soaped his body under the hot water, watching James respond almost instantly. Jean-Louis lathered up both hands, then gently caressed James’s balls as he stroked his hard cock with a firm grip. He came in seconds.

“Now you,” James panted. “Let me see you.” He leaned against the tile wall and watched Jean-Louis masturbate, doing to himself what he had done to him just moments ago. He couldn’t remember the last time he had been so enthralled by the simple act of jerking off. James moved in close just as Jean-Louis came so he could hear him struggle for breath against his ear, feel his body wracked with pleasure in his arms. Where had he been all his life?

James had breakfast ready for him by the time he came downstairs still drying his hair with a towel, skin pink and glowing. Jean-Louis ate the worst scrambled eggs ever, rendered hard and tasteless by overcooking and a heavy hand, but the gesture was undeniably sweet and James wouldn’t stop kissing him in between those horrid bites of rubberized egg and salty sausages, it was almost worth offending his palate to be swept up in this blizzard of affection. Jean-Louis knew this feeling, he had gone through it with Sophie, the constant yearning to be with that person, to share intimacy and passion, to melt together, live and die together. Only this time it was a lark, a beau geste, there could be no heartache if the heart were not involved.

At the hotel James insisted on following Jean-Louis back to his room, where he needed to change his clothes before going to work at the museum. Jean-Louis could sense an air of desperation building up in James and was more relieved than ever to be leaving on Saturday. This would be the last time he would see him. Whatever they did together could be filed away in his memory for safekeeping. As soon as they were inside the door, James was on him again like some animal in rut. He pushed him into the bedroom, tossing their jackets on the floor along the way, but when James flipped him onto his stomach on the bed Jean-Louis realized he wasn’t willing to give James what he wanted. He had to wrest control of the situation or he would be going down a path he had no intention of taking. He wriggled free and quickly took him in his mouth to quiet him. It worked
like a charm. As soon as James felt the wet warmth surround his cock, he stopped struggling with him. Now it was Jean-Louis’s turn to kneel by the bed. James sat up and watched Jean-Louis’s head bobbing up and down on him. He ran his fingers through his hair, pulling the loose strands away from his face so he could see his lips around him.

Jean-Louis had never done this before and he couldn’t get much of James into his mouth so he worked the thick shaft with his hands and tried not to put his teeth on him. It was a lot to think about at once, that and the fact that James was pushing down on his head and every time his cock hit the back of his throat he had to fight the impulse to gag. He had a newfound respect for women. James tightened his grip on his hair to the point where it hurt now, then groaned loudly. Jean-Louis thought he was going to crush his skull between his hands when he felt James flood his mouth with something sharp and bitter against his tongue and throat. It burned a little as he forced a quick swallow, grateful that it was over. When James let go of him he felt choked and bruised and on the verge of crying. Was it shame? He couldn’t look James in the face. Maybe this was for the best, Jean-Louis thought. To end it like this, neither one having anything left to say to the other. He got up slowly, his legs shaking, and wordlessly changed into a clean set of clothes while he felt James’s eyes on him the whole time burning a hole into the back of his head.

“I guess this is it,” Jean-Louis said. He sat down next to James on the bed and held out his hand for him to shake, but James hugged him instead, then laid him back down and kissed him over and over.

“Let me have your number,” said James finally. “I’ll give you mine. I want us to stay in touch. Would you be okay with that?” He kissed him with such passion that Jean-Louis couldn’t refuse him. That moment of awkwardness had passed and it felt like he was once again bathing in the warmth of his affection. What harm could be done after all? They would be separated by roughly 1700 miles, enough distance to offer protection to them both surely. But Jean-Louis had underestimated James in every way imaginable.
Only Fools Rush In

Chapter Summary

Angela gives Jean-Louis some sound advice. He ignores it.

Thanksgiving with Angela and Stuart was a welcome distraction. They lived in a lovely duplex on the Upper East Side a few blocks up from the Cooper-Hewitt with views of Central Park. Stuart came from old money and he had inherited the apartment from a spinster aunt who decided he was her favorite nephew because he had the patience to spend hours playing cat’s cradle with her. Most people only knew the first few moves, but Stuart knew how to manipulate the string to form the Manger, Candles, the Cat’s Eye, Diamonds, and more. Jean-Louis felt it strange to meet Stuart in person after having been in his home absent the man and seen the framed photos of him. He knew what he looked like but had no inkling of the personality behind the salt and pepper hair and the easy smile. Stuart greeted him in the living room, already crowded with other guests, mostly Stuart’s colleagues from Fordham and some of his graduate students. Jean-Louis recognized a few of Angela’s staff from the museum and waved to them. Stuart looked to be in his early sixties, trim of build and perhaps five foot eight with the bushy eyebrows of men his age. He had a mouth that could be described as sensuous, and deep lines about his eyes and forehead. He was surprisingly intimidating for a man of his modest size.

“Jean-Louis Lamarck. Dr. Jean-Louis Lamarck,” Stuart said in a slow drawl. He gazed into Jean-Louis’s face with an expression so serious Jean-Louis was certain he had peeled away the layers of his psyche and seen what he had been doing with his wife the past five months, at times in this very room, no less. Christ, was he going to carve him up alongside the turkey? “Angie’s told me so much about you, Dr. Jean-Louis.” Another intense stare followed, their faces mere inches apart as Stuart leaned in closer and closer, eyebrows knitting together like two furry kissing caterpillars. Then he smiled brightly and launched into a long, convoluted joke about some genie in a bottle that ended with a punch line about a guy winning a truck. Jean-Louis blinked, clueless.

“Get it? Get it?” Stuart asked, his eyes twinkling with glee. He clapped a paternal hand on Jean-Louis’s shoulder and squeezed it with typical American familiarity. “Ah, that’s okay. You French love our Jerry Lewis. The man was a fucking genius. Few people in this country appreciated him, but the French! The crazy, fucking, infernal French! How old are you? Twelve? You still in diapers?” He took another sip of his martini, probably his fifth. “Hey, you should meet my newest junior faculty. He’s from...the United Kingdom. Got that? The United Kingdom. I believe that’s the proper term. Didn’t you do your doctoral work at Cambridge? I think that’s what my Angie told me. Oliver! Come over here!” He waved his hand at someone across the room. A tall, thin, dark-haired thirtyish man approached. Jean-Louis took one look at him and decided he was definitely kissable. “Oliver Williams, Jean-Louis Lamarck. Ollie’s a Cambridge fellow. Maybe you two can have a sweet little chat about the good old days, eh, the Norman Conquest, colonial excesses and atrocities, all that Old World fodder?” Stuart patted Jean-Louis on the chest and moved on to some other guests.

Oliver gave Jean-Louis a wild-eyed look of terror and then they both burst out laughing. “I’m up for tenure, so please don’t ask me to comment on what just happened. Stuart is on my
reappointment committee and he’s writing up my review so I’m to be on my best behavior at all times,” Oliver explained.

“What a shame.”

“You misunderstand.” He had expressive grey eyes and a Welsh accent and the kind of insouciant grace exuded by the best runway models. If he were ten years younger he could have easily walked for Versace or Dolce & Gabbana. “I have to be on my best behavior with Stuart,” Oliver clarified. “And how do you know the mad bastard?”

“I don’t. I work with his wife Angela at the museum. I’m a paleontologist. Are you an economist like Stuart?”

“Yes.”

“And what is your specialization?”

“Microeconomics in Southeast Asia. I was in Singapore for several years, but then I did a stint in Hong Kong for HSBC, and now I’m at Fordham for the proverbial cushy teaching post. Don’t believe anything they tell you. There’s nothing cushy about it. Although I gather that museum work is no better.”

“I don’t mind it. I was never interested in grant writing. There’s too much of that if you want to do research in academia.”

“Hmm. Paleontology, you say? You’re awfully young to be interested in old things.” He gave Jean-Louis an unambiguous look. “What are you drinking?”

“Nothing right now.” Jean-Louis held up his empty hands. “Mais, j’ai soif.”

“We can’t have that, can we? I’ll show you where the bar is.”

Instead, it was Jean-Louis who led them to an upstairs bathroom. He locked the door behind them and attacked Oliver with his mouth. He wasn’t sure what had gotten into him or what kind of monster James had unleashed. He had never shamelessly pursued anyone since Sophie but now he saw opportunity everywhere and he wanted it for himself, wanted to feel once more, love, lust, whatever. He had woken up from the nightmare of heartbreak at last. Sophie belonged to another, she was gone from him forever, but he would fill the void with others, as many as it took to chase away the emptiness.

He knelt down and pleasured Oliver with his mouth, felt a twinge of pride as he brought him quickly to orgasm. He tasted nothing like James, nor did he have his scent, the sound of his moans as he came was different. Jean-Louis was filing it away in his mind even as Oliver was pulling him up and unzipping his fly.

“Wow, you fossil hunters really know how to handle boners,” Oliver purred with a smile.

“Are all economists closet comedians?”

“I don’t know. You tell me if this is funny.” He pushed Jean-Louis against the wall and got down on his knees in front of him. Jean-Louis sighed as he felt the wet warmth of Oliver’s mouth around his cock, his tongue lapping smooth circles around the head, a hand working his hard shaft. For a brief moment he thought of James, remembering how it felt to be handled by him, the storm of fear and fervor that seemed to accompany his touch, but when he came seconds later he couldn’t picture his face, couldn’t even say his name.
Later downstairs he gave Angela a warm embrace in the hallway outside the dining room before they all sat down to dinner. It had been over three weeks since he last saw her and he noticed that she was wearing the perfume he had given her after the first time they had made love. The scent aroused him almost instantly.

“Welcome back, sweetheart. You’ll have to tell me all about Denver.” She kissed him on the cheek and whispered, “I’ve missed you.”

“I can’t wait to be with you,” he whispered back, knowing it would be two more weeks before “their” Thursday came around on the calendar. The postponement of consummation would be a delicious, excruciating torture. It felt so good to be alive again.

He told Angela everything. She was utterly discreet when it came to affairs. Jean-Louis was pretty certain that he wasn’t the only one sleeping with her, that there were days during the month devoted to her other lovers. He would see the languid satisfaction in her body and know that someone else had been with her the night before. It made him want to please her that much more, not out of jealousy, but a sense of competition. She never spoke to him about the others and he trusted that she never spoke of him either to them. They had an understanding and mutual respect for each other in such matters. That she was almost the same age as his mother made no difference to him. She was beautiful and so easy to desire and he was able to confess his feelings to her without fear of judgment. Now he told her about his three weeks in Denver and then about his run-in with James, knowing that it would be their secret. They were at her place, Stuart away for three days at a conference in Mexico City. Jean-Louis would be staying overnight for the first time and the thought of falling asleep next to her made his heart ache with happiness. A door in him had opened up and he wanted that empty room filled.

“So he’s been calling you every day…what are you going to do about it?” Angela played with his hair as he sucked on her left nipple. They had already made love and her stomach was starting to grumble. She would let him go at it for a little longer though, his mouth on her felt too good to let her hunger pangs get the better of her.

“Nothing,” he said, latching onto her right nipple. His cock twitched to life again against her thigh. “God, you smell good. You’re wearing my favorite.” He nuzzled his face into her neck and inhaled the scent. It was the perfume he loved best on his sister and it only heightened his excitement when Angela wore it for him.

“Of course I am. Always just for you. So you’re going to do nothing? You’re going to make him suffer?”

“Suffer?” He looked at her with genuine puzzlement. “How so?”

“Well, he’s obviously in love with you.”

Jean-Louis laughed. “No, Angela. You confuse sex with feelings. If you met him you’d understand. He’s no more than an animal.” With that he bit playfully at her neck.

“What a cold little bastard you are,” she chided. “Even animals have feelings. Tread carefully, my sweet darling boy, or you might get what you deserve.” She nipped him back on the lips and pushed him aside. “Now let’s go downstairs and get something to eat. I’m starving!”

They ate cold fried chicken and potato salad washed down with a bottle of Pinot Grigio from Friuli. Angela eyed him thoughtfully as they sat at the kitchen island. He was wearing just his shirt.
and briefs and looked so unguarded. She had met him the very first day that he started at the museum, introduced along with seven other new hires at a general staff meeting in June. After the meeting she had gone up to him and shook his hand and invited him out for drinks that evening. He had smiled and told her that he wouldn’t be twenty-one until August, but that he had plenty of wine at his apartment several blocks away. He said it so innocently that she had to believe he wasn’t tossing her a pick up line and indeed he wasn’t. He really was underage, still twenty in fact, and he had four cases of wine from his mother’s vineyard in his apartment and little else. If the apartment hadn’t come furnished, it would have been empty but for the wine. It seemed to be all that he needed.

“I’m sorry but I just moved in. I only have water glasses.”

They went through three bottles that evening and by the end of it she knew he was a disaster waiting to happen. It wasn’t just the recent heartbreak of seeing his ex-girlfriend walk down the aisle eight months pregnant with another man’s child, or the fact that he had lost a much loved father, or that he had endured a rather trying and unusual childhood. He drank with the reckless abandon of some desperate fool trying to soothe away the pain of the entire universe. It never worked. Angela’s father had died an alcoholic and it saddened her to see this unformed soul drown in the muck of his own misery. She determined to take him under her wing, keep him out of trouble, but instead, she found herself completely charmed by his very open attraction to her. Angela was well used to the attentions of men, but he was by far the youngest lover she had taken on for some time. He made it hard to resist, the fact that he knew his way around a woman’s body, was patient and eager to please where other men were selfish and lazy, and possessed the most-welcome stamina of youth. He needed only fifteen minutes tops to go at it again, and then he could go for hours if they had the time available to them. That he was consummately lovely to look at and had a beautiful cock was an added bonus, the cherry on the whipped cream.

In the months since, she had watched plenty of people hit on him only to be rebuffed with a blank expression or a cursory brush off. She wondered if he was truly unaware of the affect he had on others or whether he was too callous to care. Now this. James didn’t sound like someone who could be so easily dissuaded. Why should he risk inviting some potential stalker into his life?

“I think you should tell him to stop calling you,” she advised. “Nip it in the bud. Those obsessive types can ruin your life.”

He shrugged noncommittally. “He lives out in Denver. He can’t possibly...don’t worry. It’s just for fun. Right now, I rather like the attention. It helps me forget about things.”

By the time he went home to Arbois for Christmas, though, he had only gotten in deeper with James. The physical separation added a layer of emotion to desire that wouldn’t have been there otherwise. James’s phone calls each night were so full of ardor and longing it surprised even Jean-Louis, made him remember what it felt like to be madly in love even though he was merely a voyeur. The calls became a routine he looked forward to, a safely satisfying, orgasmic end to each day, phone in one hand, cock in the other, getting off on the sound of James grunting and groaning miles away, listening to him shouting his name or sometimes just screaming a filthy string of obscenities as he came, it was all quite entertaining and harmless. So it was as much of a shock to Jean-Louis as it was to his family when he revealed his affair with James at Christmas dinner as if the man meant anything to him. His response to his brother’s baiting was fueled by rashness and anger, but the admission had the unforeseen effect of breathing life into a shadow and giving it a new solidity. The subsequent beating in the shed had sealed the deal in his mind. He was going to end up royally fucked.
Chapter Summary

Things come to a head for James.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

For James, the weeks following their hook-up would have been hilarious had it not been so equally torturous. Krista was back and pushing their relationship to DEFCON 1. Her best friend Cindy got engaged during the Thanksgiving dinner held at James’s home and goddamn it if she was going to let James drag his size sixteen feet any longer. Cindy’s boyfriend had gotten down on his knees and proposed with teary eyes in the living room during pre-dinner cocktails in front of all their guests. James was nauseated by the drippy display. The “Isn’t that the most romantic thing you’ve ever seen? Oh, and you’ve really let me down, you shithead” look that Krista shot him completely spoiled his appetite. Why couldn’t that theatrical douchebag have waited to pull that stunt somewhere else? Now he wouldn’t be able to enjoy his turkey and stuffing, not with Krista staring at that gaudy ring on her friend’s finger and everyone asking who would be next, hint fucking hint. Christ, he hated her friends!

The next morning over breakfast she opened up her laptop and showed him the kind of ring she’d like on her own finger: a Tiffany princess cut diamond set in a platinum band, number of carats to be determined, appointment necessary. He was so put off he couldn’t even get it up that night and felt neither remorse nor embarrassment. Let her get him a diamond studded cock ring if she wanted him hard for her. A few nights later she caught him in the bedroom having phone sex. Krista normally didn’t come over on Thursday nights but she was determined to reignite James’s libido with a new lacy outfit complete with cutouts for her breasts and pussy. James normally went nuts for that kind of thing. He didn’t hear her let herself into the house and was too far along to stop himself when she suddenly appeared in the bedroom doorway just as he climaxed.

“Holy fuck!” he shouted when he saw her gaping disapprovingly at him. He abruptly ended the call and wiped himself down with some Kleenex. “What are you doing?”

“What am I doing?” she asked. She had heard his voice quite clearly as she made her way up the stairs and through the hallway to the bedroom. Oh yeah, baby, I’m fucking you so hard, tell me you want it, tell me you’re gonna come for me. At first she had thought there was someone in bed with him. That he was only on the phone was a huge relief, but she was still going to give him a piece of her mind. “Now I know why you can’t get it up for me. You’re too busy beating off to some three hundred pound housewife faking an orgasm in Peoria. Congratulations.”

He instantly regretted giving her a key to his house.

“Don’t you have anything to say for yourself?” she queried when he remained glumly silent.

He couldn’t think of a single excuse to trot out; his mind was still frozen with the image of Jean-Louis on his hands and knees, James pounding into him from behind, Jean-Louis coming and
screaming his name. Bloody fucking hell.

“This is what you’re missing.” Krista held up the outfit for him to see. He had to admit that it was pretty darn sexy. Then he wondered how Jean-Louis would look in something like that, nipples and crotch exposed…so sick…so unbelievably hot.

“Why don’t you put it on for me, babe…make me forget all about that three hundred pound housewife…” James reached out for her and her expression immediately softened.

Thirty minutes later he determined that he didn’t have it in him to get out another orgasm for himself and went down on her instead, using a practiced tongue and three fingers to give her the satisfaction he knew she deserved. He owed her. She had put up with him all this time, endured his seesaw moods, his unwillingness to make her a priority in his life, his staunchly masculine stubbornness, and now this rapidly waning interest in having sex with her. She wasn’t stupid. How long would it be before she found out that the phone sex was only the tip of the iceberg? That he had fallen in love, only it was not with her? There were countless moments of doubt. How could he give up on Krista, so lovely and perfect, to chase after someone who existed mainly in his head as an object of his rapacious lust? Was he really willing to lose a woman he would be proud to call his wife for a smoking hot piece of ass he had only owned in his wildest, horniest fantasies? He hadn’t actually had him, not that way, not everything, and nothing less would do. There was no guarantee that he would ever have him, there was only ravenous desire, the same hunger that drove him to strive for everything he had ever wanted in life. And he wanted him, so very badly.

Physically, James had never felt worse, the stress of his worries weighing like a ton of bricks in his gut and turning the act of eating, one of the few joys he allowed himself, into a chore, something forced and devoid of pleasure. Sleep? Forget it. Sweet oblivion had fled the minute Jean-Louis left for New York with no clear prospect of reunion. What did feel good was mercilessly shredding his muscles in the weight room and then getting on the field and letting the anticipation of further bodily destruction pump through him and carry him aloft. In those moments of bone-shattering, transcendent pain he found freedom at last from the shitstorm in his head. The manic tension pushed James to new levels of insanity on the field, drove him to play like some mega sized lunatic squirrel ducking semis on a five-lane highway and leaving the opposition scrambling to adjust their coverage.

“Give me the fucking ball!” he told his offensive coordinator. “Let them come after me. I will eat those pussy secondaries for dinner!” Did he ever.

When he wasn’t in the weight room, he spent endless hours watching replay videos to keep his mind occupied, showed up early for meetings and practice, gave the media as much time as they wanted at his locker for interviews, all to delay going home. His coaches and teammates were in awe of his dedication to the game and his performance on the field; his stats were going through the roof. He was coming out of this smelling like roses even as he was falling apart on the inside. As much as he tried to fill his time and push himself to exhaustion, it was never enough to keep his anxiety at bay. He was losing weight faster than he could keep it on and, worst of all, asking people to lie for him during the Friday weigh-ins so he could continue playing. He didn’t know who he was anymore, not until he called that number and heard his soft, hushed voice on the other end and everything fell into place. For those few blissful minutes the world stood calm and still, just to hear Jean-Louis sigh and moan was to have everything make sense, though he was so far away, though it broke his heart each time.

“I need you, baby. I miss you so much. Tell me you want me. Say it, baby. Say you want everything…”
“I want everything…James…daddy…”

“Oh fuck!”

After a while, he didn’t even try hiding it from Krista. He couldn’t go a single night without calling Jean-Louis. If Krista was over, he’d just saunter into the bathroom with his phone and shut the door. She could still hear him; he made no effort to keep his voice down. He was talking to that three hundred pound housewife again. It had been weeks since his cock had stood at attention for her and although she appreciated him servicing her in other ways she knew something was definitely not right.

“It’s not just phone sex, is it?” she said. They were in the kitchen drinking coffee and eating breakfast, both of them haggard after another night of awkward, failed intimacy. “You’ve met someone. Who is she? Do I know her?”

James took a bite of toast, chewed slowly, mouth suddenly as dry as the Atacama. This was it, the inevitable shit hitting the fan. “No. It’s no one you know.” He looked her in the eye now, it was the least he could do. “I’m sorry, Krista. I’m really sorry.”

She nodded her head, triumphant rage clouding her delicate doll’s face. “Is she prettier than me?”

Oh crap, not that. Was she going to ask him next whose thighs were fatter? “Of course not. No one’s prettier than you, babe, I swear. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met…and your thighs are way—”

“You are such a fucking asshole, do you know that?”

“Yeah, I know that.” He watched her carefully, readded himself to duck if her coffee mug sailed his way. If she opted to come at him with a knife, he could use the stool to defend himself, yep, the stool would work just fine. Krista stood almost a foot shorter than him and he could easily overpower her even without the stool. “I’m sorry, babe. I really am. I never meant for this to happen. I know you deserve better than me.”

“Shut up, James. Just shut up for a minute.”

Why should she throw this all away? James was still young and awfully good looking and generous with his money. What if this was just a passing infatuation? He had probably hooked up with some cute girl in another city and would tire of her soon. Guys cheated all the time, especially if the opportunities presented themselves so readily, but these types of encounters were usually short lived. She knew from her own experiences as the 'other woman' that these men rarely ever left their wives or steady girlfriends for some one-night stand. He could still be hers if she played her cards right. The phone sex she could deal with. How was that any different from all the porn that he watched? Besides, listening to him through the door was a side-splitting barrel of laughs.

“Oh, I know that,” she said calmly. “Have your fun. I’m not unreasonable. But I won’t let you make a goddamn fool out of me. I’ll give you two months to get it out of your system. Then you have to make up your mind.” That should give him plenty of time to regret his actions, for her rival’s faults to emerge and start irritating the hell out of him, for him to come running back to her begging for her forgiveness. She gathered up her pocketbook to go to work. “Either put a ring on my finger by Valentine’s Day or it’s over. Do you understand me?”

James was flabbergasted. Not that blasted ring again. “Uh, yeah, right, Valentine’s Day… Krista, wait. Don’t you want to punch me or something? I won’t hit you back, you know that. Go ahead. Hit me in the face.”
Krista rolled her eyes at him. She wasn’t the violent type and she sure wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of feeling justly punished. Let him wallow in his own guilt. She was going to spend the next two months getting laid and having a ball. She had at least ten holiday parties lined up between Christmas and New Year’s and a bridesmaids’ trip to Cabo in early February, the timing couldn’t have been more perfect.

The Broncos were eliminated in the divisional playoffs that January. Mitigating the humiliating loss was a prized invitation to the Super Bowl, where James would be one of seven guest commentators spouting inane assessments of players on both sides and making ridiculous predictions about which team was going to win and why and by how much, followed by the prospect of flying out to New York. It was going to be testosterone overload and, fuck it, he was going to ride that sweaty chest-pounding wave all the way to Jean-Louis’s apartment where he planned on molesting the shit out of him, manhandling him into submission until he begged for it, begged and pleaded for James to do all those things they had talked about over the phone in the basest, raunchiest ways. Even as he cleaned out his locker, an annual ritual at season’s end, he couldn’t help but whistle a happy tune.

“What’s wrong with you?” Doretrell asked. His locker was next to James’s and he was still steaming mad, stuffing shoes and articles of clothing into plastic garbage bags. “We fucking lost the game!”

“Yeah, man, we took it up the ass, didn’t we?” James laughed heartily, pain shooting up his arm from the jammed pinky in his left hand and into his neck from his nearly dislocated shoulder. He would be stiff as a corpse by the time he got home, knees popping and crunching with every step up the stairs, lower back screaming in protest, hips and thighs painted purple and green with contusions. As long as he could still pick up the phone and wrap his right hand around his cock later that night, he was good to go. He was going to broach the subject of his visit with Jean-Louis, hoping against hope that he would say yes.

James was laid out in his bed naked under the sheets, throbbing with pain and excitement, coconut scented hand lotion at the ready. He blurted out his intentions with the giddy anticipation of some twelve-year-old girl going to a Justin Bieber concert, and was met with silence.

“Jean-Louis? Are you there? Baby?” He could hear soft breathing on the other end and then what sounded like a whimper. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you want me to come see you?” He heard that whimper again. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Can’t you talk? Is someone there with you?” Shit, it was one-thirty in the morning. He better not be with someone.

“No. I’m alone.”

Actually, Oliver was asleep beside him, but that wasn’t even the issue. The truth was he didn’t want James to come see him, no siree bob. He knew he wouldn’t be able to say no to him if he did, not after that arrogant display at Christmas in front of his entire family, not after what he had said
to piss off his brother, not after the beating in the shed when he had vowed to accept his rightful punishment. He would have to go through with it if James came to New York, have to serve penance for his sins. He might as well try turning away the grim reaper if he were to come knocking on his door. *Can’t you come back another day? What? No*? He decided to play his trump card, his last line of defense, crummy as it was.

“If you come out to see me, what will you tell Krista? She loves you, James. How can you do this to her?”

James’s heart sank. He couldn’t believe that little shit was trying to guilt him into turning tail. No fucking way! He wasn’t afraid of Krista. Her wrath and scorn would be nothing compared to the anguish of losing Jean-Louis.

“Baby, you know how I feel about you. I need to see you. What’s changed?” Hadn’t they been having the hottest phone sex ever? “Don’t you want to…you know…do all those things we’ve been talking about?” He reflexively grabbed his cock and started stroking himself lightly.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! Jean-Louis swallowed the urge to cry. What made him think he was going to get away with it? He had been caught one too many times with his hand in the cookie jar and now he was going to get the spanking of a lifetime. He had done it to himself, this was his own fault and he had to own up to it. It was going to be god awful and he deserved it.

“Yes,” he said finally, his voice barely a whisper so as not to wake Oliver. “I want you to come and…do all those things to me…”

“Oh, fuck, baby.” James’s cock instantly swelled when he heard those words. “Tell me how you want me. Have you been good or bad?”

“Bad. I’ve been so bad.” Wasn’t that the truth!

Chapter End Notes

Hey, we're halfway through the story. Congrats on making it this far!
James was voted into the Pro Bowl for the second time but didn’t play in the game at the end of January. The X-rays revealed that the jammed pinky had actually been broken in two places. He stood on the sidelines with his left hand taped up in a splint cheering on his replacement, a lanky kid recruited as a junior out of Arizona State who was tearing it up. He made James feel like a creaky old man at twenty-seven. In football, men aged in dog years it seemed, and that made him, what, a whopping one hundred eighty-nine? No wonder he was so turned on every time Jean-Louis called him ‘daddy.’ He had only started using that petname on him recently and the unexpected kinkiness of it drove James berserk with the most lecherous thoughts. He didn’t know what had prompted Jean-Louis to start saying it—he had always been impossible to read—but James loved hearing it from the first. It made him feel he could impose his will on him, twist him into a pretzel shape and then chomp into him, piece by delicious piece.

With Krista treating him like a leper, he had the whole house to himself every night. It was rather lonely in the beginning even if she had never really moved in with him. Some of her clothes were still in the closets and drawers, makeup and toothbrush in the bathroom, pictures of her in the living room and bedroom, reminders of her that were both accusatory and comforting. After he got home from the Pro Bowl, though, he had the front door lock changed as a precaution against any surprise visits. By then he knew he would fly out to New York five days after the Super Bowl and had switched over to M/M porn to ‘educate’ himself. The sight of a male body did nothing for him. James was completely jaded when it came to cocks and balls, neither was he squeamish about sex, having been a regular and enthusiastic consumer of porn from his teenage years onward. He found the gay porn to be no different than straight porn in terms of mechanics, basically some cock going into some orifice, then plenty of the ol’ in-out, in-out; same positions, same vigorous thrusting. His favorite indulgence, still, was watching a harem of gorgeous, Victoria’s Secret-type women fucking each other. That was the best. It made his obsession with Jean-Louis all the more confusing to him. He couldn’t for the life of him understand what had happened. Even after more than two months of separation, he couldn’t get him out of his head, wanted him more than ever. Would he still feel the same when he finally saw him, or would he wake up from this strangest of dreams?

It was almost nine o’clock by the time he had checked into his hotel in midtown, showered, and took a cab up to Jean-Louis’s apartment on 81st between Columbus and Amsterdam Avenue. He had hoped Jean-Louis would come to the hotel instead—he had booked two nights at the St. Regis and the rooms were luxurious—but Jean-Louis had refused, saying he had friends from work coming for drinks that Friday evening. It was his turn to host and James was free to join them at his apartment if he wished. James made one last ditch effort to change his mind before he got on the plane in Denver that afternoon.
“But I got us a really nice suite…”

“Maybe tomorrow, but not tonight. Take it or leave it.”

“Sheesh. Okay. Whatever. Hey baby?”

“Yes?”

“I can’t wait to see you.”

Jean-Louis stifled a groan. He knew he shouldn’t be such an insensitive jerk. He planned on getting bombed that night so how bad could it really be? James was so sincere, wearing his heart on his sleeve like some irresistible chibi anime character, he owed him a little something didn’t he? Jean-Louis lowered his voice, speaking softly now so his assistant Emma wouldn’t overhear him in the next office.

“James…don’t touch me in front of my friends. Promise me you’ll wait until everyone leaves… then I’m all yours.”

“Fuck! Yeah…I promise…I promise, baby.” James boarded the plane, balls congested and aching, a three and a half hour flight stretching into eternity.

He gave his name and asked for Jean-Louis in the lobby. Douglas, who worked the night shift, was used to the monthly Friday evening parties in Jean-Louis’s apartment, but he had never seen James here before. Still, he looked oddly familiar.

“Don’t I know you from somewhere?” Douglas asked. He was in his early seventies and had the laconic demeanor of a man who had been through enough ups and downs to fill several lifetimes.

“Haven’t I seen you on ESPN?”

James shrugged. “Maybe. I play for the Broncos. Tight end.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, that’s it. Say, can I get your autograph for my grandsons?”

James obliged, signing his name on some take-out menus before stepping into the elevator. The apartment was on the fifth floor at the end of a long hallway wallpapered with textured grasscloth. That and the blue carpeting muffled the sound of loud chatter and music leaking out into the hallway from behind the door. James knocked firmly, feeling very unsure of himself and nervous of a sudden. It had been so long. What if he had imagined everything? He wiped his sweating palms on his jeans and then the door opened and Jean-Louis was standing in front of him like some Gallic demigod looking even more beautiful than he had remembered him. Lord. Help. Me.

“Hi,” James croaked, his heart thumping wildly in his throat. “I brought some champagne.” He held up the bag with two bottles of Veuve Clicquot.

Jean-Louis’s face was flushed from drink already, his eyes shiny and unfocused. He closed the door behind him and pushed James into the hallway, pressing his body against him until James’s back was against the opposite wall. Without a word he leaned up and kissed him, a quick hard press of the lips before their tongues met and James felt every ounce of his will power sucked out of him. He lowered the bottles onto the floor and then gripped Jean-Louis in his arms, locking him in a tight embrace, never wanting to let him go ever. Jean-Louis tasted of wine and weed but his skin smelled like pure, unadulterated sex, the scent went straight up James’s nose and erupted in his brain like an exploding firecracker.
“I thought you said I wasn’t supposed to touch you until afterwards, you lying son of a bitch.” James clamped his mouth on him again, one fist in his hair, the other gripping an ass cheek and nearly lifting Jean-Louis off the floor.

“What? Oh, right. No touching.” He stared up into his face as he rubbed his crotch against him and let out a moan. “You’re hard for me, daddy.”

“Fuck, yeah. So fucking hard for you, baby. I could come right now for you.” He grabbed Jean-Louis’s hand and pressed it against the rigid swell of his erection.

“Wait.” Jean-Louis squeezed hard, stopping James in his tracks. Then he put his hands on James’s chest and pushed away from him. “Let’s go inside. I’m being rude to my guests.”

Jean-Louis introduced him to his colleagues at work; James couldn’t remember the names or faces, he was too fixated on Jean-Louis, his hard body beneath the untucked blue and white striped button down fitted shirt, his loose and graceful movements as he poured drinks and brought out food from the tiny kitchen. He saw him laughing and sharing a cigarette with an older woman with green eyes and strawberry blond hair, pretty hot for a woman her age, all the parts were in the right places, yeah, she was still rocking it. Half the people there recognized James’s name if not his face, not bad for a bunch of weirdo scientists and stuffy museum staffers.

“So, what’s the Gronk really like? Have you partied with him?” asked someone named Amy who said she worked as a docent in the education department. She was drunk and dribbling Chardonnay down the front of her blouse with each sip. “He seems like a real animal, you know what I mean, a fucking beast.”

“Uh, no, I haven’t partied with him, but yeah, pretty sure he’s a beast,” James said.

“You’ve got really big arms, did you know that? Can I touch them?” She reached out and squeezed his biceps. “Shit. Those are some mighty fine guns. Do you want to go fuck in the bedroom? I’m sure Jean-Louis won’t mind as long as we don’t get the sheets dirty. So…how about it?”

“You know what, you’re real cute and all, but I have a girlfriend and…”

“Where? Is she here?”

“Well, no, but…”

“Then no problem. I won’t tell. C’mon big guy. You look like you need to get laid right this minute.”

“Amy.” Jean-Louis reappeared like some gold-leafed Byzantine angel to save James from being eye-raped by this slightly pudgy, blond, thirty-something-year-old woman. “You’re scaring the shit out of him. He’s not a voracious slut like you.” They burst out laughing, both of them hammered. This was just as bad as the drunken team gatherings at whatever sports bar franchise after Sunday games. James had expected people with advanced degrees to be a little more civilized but he was obviously mistaken. “Come meet my friend Angela, James. She wants to know all about you.”

“Aw…but I was talking to him first,” Amy protested.

“Here.” He handed her an open bottle of wine. “Go molest someone else.”

“How often do you do this?” James asked as he was led away from Amy’s grasp.

“Every Friday. Sometimes we meet at a bar, sometimes we just have drinks at someone’s
apartment. It’s not always the same people.” Jean-Louis waved a hand around the living room with its fifteen or so plastered revelers gathered around in groups of two or three. “Sometimes people bring their girlfriends, or boyfriends, or spouses. It’s all good.” They walked over to the armchair where Angela was sitting. She handed her cigarette to Jean-Louis in a subtly intimate gesture, all the while smiling up at James. Jean-Louis took a long drag and passed the cigarette back to her. “Angela, this is my friend James.” He watched them shake hands, Angela’s small and delicate in James’s huge fist. He wondered if she got the same thrill out of James’s size as he did.

“Angela is one of the senior curators at the museum. She’s very important, so be nice to her,” Jean-Louis told James. Then he went to the door to greet a latecomer, a slender man with brown hair and grey eyes who gave Jean-Louis a far too friendly kiss right on the lips. What the hell was that? James crouched on the floor next to Angela and was still eye level with her. He did his best to swallow the magma of fury welling up inside him.

“So, are you his boss or something?” he asked. Up close she was even more of a knock out. She let out a peel of laughter clear as a bell. “Christ, no. I would hate to be the one to supervise him. That boy’s got a mind all his own. You should know. What was he like as your tutor? Jean-Louis told me you two met at U of M.”

“What was he like? Same as he is now: an arrogant, obnoxious little prick.” He saw the guy follow Jean-Louis into the kitchen, both all smiles, and his blood boiled. “He is so fucking irritating. I don’t know why I bother.”

“There, there. I admit he’s lethal, but you don’t have to drink the poison, do you? Hmm? You’re a big, strong man. Walk away.”

She stared back at him with a devious grin. Did she know about him and Jean-Louis?

“Walk away from what?” James asked. She was inches away from his face and he could smell her perfume, a heady, alluring scent. He could definitely bed her.

“A broken heart, of course. That boy wreaks havoc everywhere he goes.”

“Has he broken your heart?”

“Oh no. My heart’s already taken.” She held up her left hand with its wedding band. “But if you want my advice, set your sights elsewhere or he will doom you to misery.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No? Of course not. You’re just old friends, am I right?”

“I’m not sure if we’re even friends. I don’t know what we are.”

“Poor James.” She laid a soft hand on his cheek; the pity in her eyes was real. “You’re already too far gone.”

He excused himself and went into the kitchen to get a drink and overheard the guy inviting Jean-Louis out to a club later that night. They were huddled against the stove nearly standing on top of each other.

“I can’t,” Jean-Louis said, glancing up at James as he approached them and giving him an easy smile. “I promised my friend James here we’d catch up on things tonight. James, meet my friend Oliver. Oliver is a professor of economics at Fordham University.”
“Pleased to meet you.” Oliver offered his hand and James shook it, making sure to crush it between his fingers. “Ow!”

“Sorry. I get carried away sometimes,” James said. He did little to hide his scowl. “Are you English?”

“Welsh.”

“Never heard of it.” James grabbed a beer out of the fridge and twisted off the cap in one quick angry movement. “Why don’t you—”

“James plays for the Denver Broncos,” Jean-Louis interrupted. He could see it now: James mopping the floor with poor Oliver; Oliver politely objecting in that accent Jean-Louis so enjoyed hearing while his bones were systematically broken and his lovely face smeared across three walls. “That’s football. He’s famous. Aren’t you, James?”

“I don’t know. Do you think I’m famous?” He stood in front of Jean-Louis, wishing that he could make everyone disappear, especially this sleek piece of Euro trash hovering too close to his one and only. Go back to fucking Welshland, you skinny piece of shit. Maybe James had a Mansonesque expression on his face, but Oliver wisely sensed it was time to make an exit.

“Next week then,” he said to Jean-Louis.

Next week what? James thought. Next week I can put my hands all over you? I’ll fucking kill you.

Jean-Louis grabbed Oliver by the arm. “Let me walk you out.”

James stood at the counter facing the wall of cabinets, enough steam in him to power ten turbines. He downed the beer quickly, draining the bottle by the time Jean-Louis reappeared next to him nibbling on a gougère.

“Well?” Jean-Louis said.

“Well what?” James snapped. “This is a real shitty thing to do to me. I didn’t come all this way just to watch some asshole professor pervin’ all over you. What is your problem anyway? Don’t you even care what you’re doing to me?”

“You knew I was having people over.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Fuck. This is not at all what I imagined…”

“What did you imagine?” Jean-Louis whispered. “That I’d greet you at the door naked and ready for you? Let you put your cock inside me right away?”

“Christ, I hate you. I so fucking hate you. Why are you torturing me like this?”

“Don’t worry, James. You’ll get your turn.” He brushed the back of his hand across James’s thick forearm, the barest ghost of a caress across the hairs, and it sent shivers down James’s spine, melting his anger like a blowtorch on a stick of butter. James rested his forehead on the cabinet door in front of him and exhaled a deep sigh of utter defeat.
Be Afraid, Little Rabbit

Chapter Summary

James finally goes all the way with Jean-Louis...TOUCHDOWN! For Jean-Louis...not so enjoyable.

By the time the last guest had gone it was near midnight and James was at the end of his rope. He could swear his balls had swelled to the size of a grapefruit. Jean-Louis had barely turned the deadbolt before James was on him, shoving him up against the door and tearing at his shirt. Buttons went flying, pinging against the floor and scattering onto the area rug.

“That shirt cost me a hundred and fifty dollars!” Jean-Louis complained.

“Shut up, you little bastard.”

James bit into him hard enough to draw blood from Jean-Louis’s bottom lip. He could taste the iron in his own mouth as Jean-Louis struggled against him in protest. James managed to free his hours-long erection when Jean-Louis reached down and grasped it in his hand. The warm touch of his palm against his cruelly tormented cock was the end of him. In seven strokes he was over the top, ejaculating all over Jean-Louis’s chest and shirt.

“Oh, Christ…that was all wrong…so fucking wrong…” James stepped back to assess the damage. “Got some on your chin.” James wiped it away with a corner of Jean-Louis’s torn shirt. “Sorry about that.”

“So are we done here?” Jean-Louis murmured, eyes glassy from too much drink.

“What?”

“You’ve had your fun. Now you can go back home to Denver.”

“No fucking way. I’m not done with you yet.” He dove in for another rough kiss and groped him shamelessly.

“Will you buy me a new shirt then?” asked Jean-Louis.

“Yeah, I’ll buy you a new shirt.” He leaned in and nuzzled his neck, dragged his tongue along a vein and nibbled on an earlobe, desire already building again. “You know I’d do anything for you.”

Jean-Louis removed his torn shirt and wiped his chest and hand on it.

“What the hell happened to you?” James traced his fingers over the patchwork of bruises running across Jean-Louis’s ribs and arms.

“Oh.” It had been over a month and a half since the beating in the shed and he had grown accustomed to the sight of the bruises, now greatly faded but still visible. “Just a ski accident over
“Christmas. Now help me clean up the glasses.”

“Are you serious?”

“Of course I am.”

James shook his head in disgust. That was just like him to be OCD about dirty dishes. He helped him gather up the wine glasses and set them on the counter in the kitchen as Jean-Louis methodically washed them, white wine glasses first, then red wine glasses, then miscellaneous glasses.

“Don’t you have a dishwasher?” asked James. He grabbed a towel and started drying to speed things up.

“Yes. Me.”

“What about that thing?” James pointed to a pint-sized appliance next to the sink. “In America, we call that a dishwasher.”

“It leaves water spots.”

“God forbid. Since when are water spots a danger to humanity? How can you stand yourself?” He opened up the cabinets and started putting away the clean glasses. “How many sets of these things do you have? Jesus.”

“Stop asking so many questions. I’m concentrating.”

“On what?”

“Just be quiet. I don’t want to break anything.” Drunk as he was, he was perfectly capable of breezing through the task at hand if only James would shut up and let him work without distraction. No wonder Krista had never moved in with him. The man could drive a person crazy in two seconds flat with all his pompous, know-it-all blathering. “I think Krista and I would get along very well,” Jean-Louis mused aloud.

“Huh?”

“In fact, I should like to meet her one day, that is, if we haven’t killed each other yet.”

“Are you threatening me? Because if you are, you’ve picked the wrong guy to mess with.”

“Now who’s doing the threatening?”

This was like a bad marriage already, yet it pleased Jean-Louis to behave like a thoroughly vexatious brat. James might be able to dominate him physically, overpower him at will, but he wasn’t going to lie down without a fight. No, he was going to make James pay for every ounce of pleasure with ten pounds of pain, make him swallow the bitterest pill in return for just a single grain of sugar. It occurred to him that he was perhaps using James as a hapless stand-in for his brother Paul who had tormented him all his life with smug self-righteousness. Was it unfair to James? Sure. But he could only spare him a crumb of pity. His own punishment was going to be so much worse.

Another hour had passed by the time they finished in the kitchen. James was more than peeved by the temporary delay, but there was an undeniable upside to it all. Standing next to a shirtless Jean-Louis and taking in all that eye candy without touching him had stoked James’s passion to rock-
melting temperatures. He was raring to go again. When Jean-Louis disappeared into the bathroom James quickly stripped down in the one small bedroom, removing the condom from the back pocket of his jeans and placing it within arm’s reach on the nightstand, one of two on either side of a double bed with a black and white checked duvet tucked in neatly at the corners. He sat naked on the bed and gazed at his surroundings: there was a simple dresser with an attached mirror and a door to a closet along one wall and a thirty-two inch flat panel TV sitting on a small bookcase opposite the bed. The room was painted white and had the look and feel of a monk’s cell. There was little to tell him who resided here except the absence of things, the lack of clutter, the spaces between objects; that void was what was Jean-Louis, the thing that was missing and missed. He was the ache in James’s heart, the bottomless pit of his desire that emptied even as he tried to fill it.

James heard the bathroom door open and then Jean-Louis fussing in the kitchen. Christ, what was he doing now? He returned to the bedroom holding two glasses and an opened bottle of Veuve Clicquot.

“Haven’t you had enough to drink for one night?” asked James.

Jean-Louis’s eyes fell on the condom packet. “No. Not for what you’re going to be doing to me.”

He filled the glasses and put the bottle on the dresser. “Here.” He handed James a glass. “Santé.”

Jean-Louis drank his down like water and went for another refill before peeling off the rest of his clothes. Then he stood in front of James, chugging down his third glassful, a hand absently caressing his hardening cock, letting James ogle him to his heart’s content. He said a silent prayer: *Dear Lord, let this be over with as quickly as possible...a total blackout would be a nice bonus.*

James eyed him warily, visions of vomiting frat boys dancing in his head. “You’re not going to get sick all over me, are you?”

With that James finished his drink and stood up trembling with impatience, grabbing the glass out of Jean-Louis’s hand and slamming it down on the dresser next to the nearly empty bottle. No more playing games. James pressed his body against him and dipped down for a kiss, tongue insistent and searching, the air buzzing with electricity as he felt the feverish heat of Jean-Louis’s skin underneath his palms. He pushed him onto the bed and in an instant all his self-control left him, a wave of lust high and mighty was crashing through him and it was pointless to fight it, he wanted only one thing and nothing was going to stop him now. He grabbed the lubed condom off the nightstand and tore the packet open between his teeth, rolled it onto his erection like the pro that he was, blood roaring in his ears, breaths shallow and quick. A thread of saliva escaped his mouth and dripped onto his own thigh. He was a beast closing in on his kill and, goddamn it, could anything ever feel so fucking good? He swore he could taste it in his mouth, the delicious sweetness of victory right before him. Jean-Louis was staring back at him with gigantic gazelle eyes and lying motionless as if he could avert the jaws of death by keeping stone still. *That’s right, little rabbit. Be afraid. Daddy’s coming to get you.* James grasped Jean-Louis’s hips and pulled him close, pinning his knees back against the mattress with his hands as he lunged forward.

“I’ve got you now,” James said thickly, his voice a low guttural growl.

He pushed into him without any further warning and felt immediate resistance as Jean-Louis tensed and let out a startled cry. Then he began struggling against him in earnest, pupils widening into saucers, and James knew he had his undivided attention at last. He was going to fuck him into submission and never let him forget it. The thought gave him such satisfaction he actually licked his lips before pressing hard into him again. James had never felt such tight heat around his cock like this before; the sensation of being gripped in a flaming vise inch by inch was almost too much. He arched his body over Jean-Louis so he could grasp both his wrists and hold them prisoner over
his head, cage him in and wreck him completely.

“I’m going to ruin you for anyone else. You’re mine, all mine,” he grunted, bottoming out in one long brutal thrust to the sound of Jean-Louis screaming something in French. James couldn’t understand a word of it—he assumed they were expletives—but it sounded like music to his ears, those desperate cries a confirmation of his complete ownership of him.

Even through the numbing fog of alcohol the pain struck Jean-Louis with stunning force. He knew it wasn’t going to be a walk in the park, but this was like smacking into a brick wall at two hundred miles per hour with no seat belts or air bags to lessen the impact. He cursed himself for not smoking another joint before he subjected himself to this butchering. The thoughtlessness, the sheer *inconsideration* of James’s cruelty caught him off guard, but what did he really expect? Hadn’t he provoked him, wound him up all night? And even if he hadn’t, did he really think James would go slow and easy on him, handle him with kid gloves? Even if he had hung a sign that said “Virgin Territory: Enter with Caution” across his ass, he doubted it would have made a difference. This was a man who pummeled people for a living for crying out loud! And cry out loud, he did. At some point Jean-Louis realized his voice had grown hoarse from screaming. Christ! How long was this going to go on? He was being gutted alive and it was taking forever. His mind started racing. It was bad enough that he was going straight to hell for the things he did with Charlotte, but now this! And of more immediate concern, would he be able to dress himself and take a cab to the emergency room afterwards, all the while preventing his insides from falling out? What could he possibly say to the attending physician? *Help me, doctor! Someone shoved a torpedo inside me and detonated it! Can you sew me back up?*

He heard James’s voice reach out to him through his panic. “Baby, you belong to me.”

Their skin had grown slick with sweat and the scent of their heat filled the room. Jean-Louis was whimpering softly now, eyes shut tightly, biting into his own bicep to quiet himself, his body slowly growing compliant as James continued to pound into him mercilessly. The astonishing sense of power surging through James was more intense than any high he had ever achieved in the weight room, or even on the field of play where the adrenalin enabled him to crush anyone in his path. Dominating Jean-Louis like this was like conquering the whole fucking universe.

“I’m so close, baby. Come with me.” James sat back on his heels and gripped Jean-Louis’s cock firmly in his hand, another hand at his hip pulling him closer. He stroked him roughly in time with his increasingly erratic thrusts, feeling him harden further under his touch.

The initial pain had dissipated at last, replaced by the sensation of being filled to bursting and a deep ache threatening to overwhelm him. “Yes, daddy. Make me come for you…make me…” Jean-Louis pleaded.

“I love you, baby, I love you so much…oh, holy fuck.” James came with a loud groan, emptying himself in a series of violent spasms as Jean-Louis curled forward and cried out, hands reaching to grip James around the neck as he rode out his own orgasm in James’s lap, spurting hot and wet across their chests. Their mouths met in a wordless scream as they panted with heaving breaths into each other, bodies seized with an exhalation of blinding, shuddering release.

After some moments, James slipped out of him and went into the bathroom. Jean-Louis lay frozen in a catatonic daze, legs still splayed apart, afraid to move a muscle. He listened to the toilet flushing, then the water running in the sink and allowed himself a brief cry of shock. He had really done it, cut straight to the front of the line past rapists, adulterers, murderers, tax evaders, and a cadre of US postal workers. *Step aside, fools. Can’t be late for my own damnation!* What would dear old Father Benoît say to him now? He could almost hear his thin, aged voice declaring that
there would be no more delectable eating of the body of Christ and drinking of his blood for a reprehensible sinner like him. No, he’d have to go dine on ashes and Kraft Lunchables at the table reserved for those pathetic weepers and gnashers of teeth and, the lowest of the low, those buzzkill teetotalers responsible for the Prohibition. Why should it be any other way? If he were truly slated for punishment, doomed to bathe eternally in that algae-free lake of fire, then let him be thoroughly blackened, not just warmed over or merely singed around the edges. More simply, why go halvesies when one could go whole hog? His mind wandered to thoughts of a perfectly browned piece of toast when James returned to bed with a damp washcloth.

“Hey, baby.” He sat down next to Jean-Louis and gently wiped down his torso, teasing, “You made a real mess. Were you saving up for me?” He fought the temptation to swipe his tongue across a cum splattered nipple for a taste.

“I was just thinking about toast,” Jean-Louis muttered weakly.

“Toast?” James bent down and kissed him, a slow, deep repossessing of him that filled James with euphoria. All those groaners about floating on cloud nine or meeting one’s soul mate suddenly made good, truthful sense. He was in love like never before, all other past crushes paled and withered in comparison, this was for real, everything else had been but mere shadows on the wall of the cave. “I meant what I said, Jean-Louis. You’re mine now, we belong together, and I will love you until the day I die. No one will ever love you more than I do. You have to believe me.” James put a hand out to caress his face, bowled over by the rapturous sentiments tumbling out of him like some overflowing cornucopia of vomit-inducing clichés. That post-football songwriting career was looking rosier than ever.

“You taste minty,” Jean-Louis observed. “Did you use my toothbrush?”

Cloud nine disappeared in a puff of ADA approved smoke. He should have remembered how fanatical Jean-Louis was about his dental hygiene. Talk about killing the mood though! Whatever schmuck made the claim that the French are a romantic lot was a big fucking liar.

“Oh, yeah, I did. I looked around in your medicine cabinet for a new one but I couldn’t find anything…so I used yours. Do you mind?”

Jean-Louis sat up, his hair an absolute mess. “No. Now get under the covers.”

He took the washcloth from James’s hand and walked gingerly to the bathroom. The idea of James using his toothbrush sent an odd tingle down his spine. It was an act even more intimate than what they had just committed in bed, a sharing of DNA practically, and it had the strange effect of making Jean-Louis want to love him back. He brushed his teeth and then washed himself carefully, relieved when he didn’t find pieces of his liver and spleen falling out of him. He wouldn’t have to go to the emergency room after all, he could do this and not die. Not tonight at least. He found James asleep already when he climbed into bed and nestled against the huge expanse of his chest, his scent and warmth soothingly familiar, the phantom pulse of his cock still beating inside him.
Salted Caramel

Chapter Summary

The morning and day after...then dinner at Peter Luger's.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“My grandmother Claudette used to make this on Sundays when me and my sister were little,” Jean-Louis explained. He scooped another spoonful of the apple popover directly out of the pan and fed it to James. “But my sister’s is better than mine.”

He sat in James’s lap on the narrow cushioned bench against the kitchen wall with its tiny table, the morning sun lighting up the small space through the southeast-facing window. Outside it was a frigid ten degrees, but inside it was a cozy seventy-five. They were both in just t-shirts and briefs and Jean-Louis could feel James’s swollen cock straining beneath the cotton fabric covering his ass. They had already made love of a sort when James had awoken at six-thirty with renewed energy and carnal purpose, his morning erection wedged between Jean-Louis’s thighs only to ejaculate abruptly when Jean-Louis grasped him in his hand. The man seemed to have no limits to his desire. He fondled Jean-Louis even as he ate, even as he kissed him between bites of food and sips of coffee, his hands restless and urgent across his thighs, abs and arms.

“I could fuck you all day, all night, for the rest of my life,” James said. He pressed his nose into Jean-Louis’s neck and inhaled, his mind reeling with the scent of him. How could anyone smell this good? Like a loaf of bread fresh out of the oven, only leavened with sex. “I could eat you alive.”

Late that morning they finally went to the hotel and up to his room, an opulently appointed suite with damask window treatments and gilt fixtures. James bent him over the back of the sofa as soon as they were inside the door but Jean-Louis begged, “Not yet. Please.” They took turns fellating each other in the spacious white marble shower stall instead.

“Let me have all of you,” James ordered as he knelt in front of him in the steamy enclosure. “I want to know what you taste like.”

Jean-Louis nodded and gave himself over to James’s ministrations. It was alarming, the way he bore down on him with such ferocity Jean-Louis feared he would be emasculated. He braced his hands on James’s broad shoulders to steady himself, leaned his head back against the tile and closed his eyes. Why did it always feel like this with him, like he was trapped in the midst of some violent storm? How was this lovemaking and not some attack by a wild animal? He let out a warning cry but James only took him deeper into his throat, wrapping his large hands around Jean-Louis’s thighs and holding him captive as he came with a shuddering moan. James pulled back to suck greedily around the head, silken hot liquid bathing his tongue.

Before Jean-Louis could even switch places, his legs nearly giving out from under him as he lowered himself to his knees, before he could even recover his breath and get his mouth around
him, James suddenly climaxed all over his cheeks and lips, holding Jean-Louis’s head still with one hand tightly gripping his wet hair, the other hand working the thick shaft of his ejaculating cock. Jean-Louis let James take his pleasure, sighing, “Daddy, daddy…” as James decorated his face.

“Salted caramel,” James said above him. He lifted Jean-Louis up into his arms in one easy movement. “Your cum tastes like salted caramel. Did you know that, my perfect, golden angel?” He kissed him, sharing the savory sweetness still lingering on his tongue. “What do I taste like?”

It required no hesitation for Jean-Louis to reply. “Like God and the Devil.”

Jean-Louis stood impatiently at the mirror, the noise from the hair dryer rendering conversation impossible, which was fine by James. He had already had to tell Jean-Louis to be quiet.

“You’re doing it all wrong! There’s a method to—”

“Hold still!” James dragged his fingers roughly through the damp shoulder-length, honey and gold strands, then mussed it up here and there like he would see Krista doing with her own hair in the mornings when she was getting ready for work. It always made her hair nice and full.

“You’re going to make it all frizzy!” Jean-Louis insisted.

“Will you shut your trap?”

In the end, James was apologetic. There was just no denying the silken rat’s nest Jean-Louis was wearing on his head. “Guess I did it all wrong.” James tried patting the mess into submission but it was hopeless. “Go ahead and say it.”

“Je te déteste!” he shouted angrily. I hate you! He grabbed the hair dryer out of James’s hand and smacked him on the chest with it. “Get out!”

While Jean-Louis worked to tame his hair in the bathroom, James ordered up a 'real' breakfast of eggs and thick slabs of bacon, hash browns and sweet rolls. He was starving, a happy return to hunger after months of gastrointestinal turmoil. Jean-Louis picked at a carrot muffin; he had woven his hair into several loose braids to get it under control and was wearing one of the hotel’s white robes.

James looked up from demolishing his plate and commented, “You look like some sexy guru from Planet X.”

“And you better not touch my hair again.”

“Can’t promise that. Where can we go for a good steak?” James asked.

Jean-Louis laughed. “You’re eating your second breakfast and already thinking about dinner?”

“Finally got my appetite back,” said James, eyeing Jean-Louis like a juicy pork chop. He was overjoyed, his stomach told him as much. He knew what he had to do going forward and the certainty of it made his whole body hum with elation. Krista would not be happy with him.

After a quick stop at the Ted Baker store on Fifth Avenue to replace the torn shirt, Jean-Louis took him back uptown to the American Museum of Natural History and showed him around his suite of offices. He wanted to prove to James that he actually did something for a living, that he wasn’t just
masquerading as a responsible adult. They managed to walk through two of the galleries before someone recognized James and then it snowballed into a mob of people asking for autographs and pictures. Jean-Louis had seen it happen in Denver, but this was New York with its own football teams. Must be part of the American obsession with celebrities, he supposed. James seemed to love the attention and they loved him right back, strangers smiling and looking at him with adulation, shaking his hand, taking pictures, waving museum brochures in his face for him to sign, women kissing him on the cheek, squeezing his biceps. Jean-Louis moved off to the side and lowered himself carefully onto a bench, still sore from last night’s storming of the gates, and watched James with something bordering on bemused affection. He couldn’t deny that James held some weird attraction for him, maybe it was his ridiculous size or his hyper-masculinity, his belligerence and flippant callousness mixed with flashes of surprising tenderness, maybe he just liked the way he smelled, even his sweat, an odor that Jean-Louis normally abhorred, even his sweat was a turn-on. James’s declarations of love were puzzling. Only a man extremely brave or extremely stupid would say such things. Jean-Louis was neither brave nor stupid, but perhaps James was both to a degree matching his outsized proportions and would bear the burden for the two of them.

They ate an early dinner at Peter Luger’s in Brooklyn. James was famished once more and consumed the better portion of a porterhouse for two and a side order of baked potato and creamed spinach.

“Enjoying your meat?” asked Jean-Louis as he swallowed a mouthful of Syrah from Languedoc.

“Hmm…very much…but not as much as you’ll be enjoying my meat when we get back to the hotel.”

Jean-Louis abruptly set down his glass, stunned. Then he wanted to hurl it at James’s head as the crude meat reference sank in. “Seriously? Do you talk to Krista that way?”

“Nope. But you’re not Krista and I’ll talk to you the way you need to be talked to.” James sat back and smirked, rubbing a hand across his belly with satisfaction. “C’mon, you know you like it. Someone like you is just asking to be put in his place.”

Jean-Louis couldn’t believe his ears hadn’t fallen off the sides of his head after hearing the garbage coming out of James’s mouth. At the very least, he was sure he had cartoon jets of steam exiting them. “Has anybody ever told you how arrogant you are?” His face was hot with furious indignation.

“Has anybody ever told you?” James boldly shot back. The vast quantities of aged beef, served perfectly charred on the outside and rare on the inside, was enabling James to be the King of Jerks like never before. He leaned across the table and threatened in a low voice, “Listen to me, little boy. Tonight I’m gonna fuck your brains out. No more holding back, so get ready.” Then he dug back into his steak like a grinning, salivating beast.

“You said you loved me,” Jean-Louis mumbled incredulously. It was supposed to be a reprimand of sorts but it came out like a pathetic whimper. He considered going straight back to his apartment and locking the door forever against this foul-mouthed lunatic.

“I do love you,” James declared, “and I’m gonna love you so much you won’t be able to sit for the next week.”

Okay, that was going too far. “Is this your idea of foreplay? Because if it is, it’s offensive.”

“Oh really, it’s offensive now? What about all the filthy things you’ve been saying to me over the phone? Stop being such a hypocrite.”
“That’s different! Besides, we’re in the middle of dinner. Where are your manners?” Jean-Louis suddenly recalled that night at the bar in Denver when he had overheard snippets of disgusting ‘conversation’ between James and his friends and realized that it wasn’t the drink that brought out this coarseness in James. No, this was as good as it got. He could forget about the caress of sweet words used for most exquisite purpose, poetic expressions of yearning spoken with breathless passion and soulful glances, soft touches and gentle kisses that served to heighten and prolong pleasure. Might as well flush all that down the toilet. James had obviously graduated summa cum laude from some Troglodyte School of Courtship.

James saw Jean-Louis’s face falling deep into despair. Oops. “Now don’t get all bent out of shape. I wasn’t trying to insult you.”

“Big fucking fail, asshole.” Jean-Louis took another gulp of wine to console himself, pupils blown wide with rage and disappointment. “I can’t believe I let you…all you want to do is ruin me.” It was too late for regrets but he gave into his self-pity anyway.

“No, no, no. That’s not true. You’ve got it all wrong. Fuck. Okay, I’ve got it all wrong. Look, I don’t know what I’m saying half the time. Just let it go. Please. Don’t have a goddamn fit.” Oh, crap, should have stopped at “please.”

Jean-Louis stabbed his fork into the piece of filet on his plate, seeing only that smug look on James’s face behind the pulsating red glare of his anger. “You think you can do whatever you like to me,” he said bitterly. “You don’t know anything at all about me. Not one fucking thing. Rien.”

“Then let me,” James soothed. He didn’t want a scene, not with more delicious beef left to consumne and possibly dessert; didn’t he see chocolate mousse on the menu? Was it really too much to ask that they spend an hour together without getting into some asinine argument? He went on, laying it on thick, hoping to appease him. “I want to know everything about you. I want to give you everything you need. Okay? Let me do this.”

Jean-Louis refused to meet his gaze and, like some five-year-old Brat of the Year award winner, he spat out, “I hate you.”

Ziiing! Wow, that one hurt. “Don’t say that to me.”

They sat in uneasy silence and watched the fat slowly congeal on the serving platter, the bright red of the juices shimmering beneath the dull grey lard hardening on the surface like a calorie laden sheet of artery clogging ice.

“It wasn’t a ski accident,” Jean-Louis finally said. “The bruises. I didn’t have a ski accident. I told my family about you over Christmas…about us. My brother Paul…he doesn’t approve…none of them do.” What happened over Christmas was his own doing but he wanted to lay some part of the blame at James’s feet anyway just to deflate his king sized ego, run him through with some good old fashioned guilt. It worked. Jean-Louis looked up and saw James’s expression soften and then switch into hero mode and it was all he could do to choke down an evil laugh.

“He did that to you? Oh, baby.” James wanted so badly to reach across the table and reassure him, make him know that he would always stand by him and protect him, take the blows and put his fist through his brother’s face. “I’ll beat the shit out of him. Would that make you happy?”

“You are such an idiot. And I’m an even bigger idiot for ever letting you touch me.”

“Jean-Louis…”
“Tu me fais regretter tout.” You make me regret everything.

“Huh? Look, I said I’m sorry. What more can I do to make things right? Just tell me what you want, and I’ll give it to you.”

Jean-Louis shook his head and stared at the wall next to him. “I don’t know what I want.”

“Then just want me, choose me, and I’ll do the rest. Things don’t have to be so fucking complicated.”

“Everything is complicated, James.”

“Only if you make it that way. Just trust me on this. Don’t be afraid.”

Spoken like a fool, thought Jean-Louis.

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God: Holy moly. This is like Days of Our Lives for morons.

Devil: Can someone please tell me whose side we’re on? I’m confused. Who’s the punisher and who’s the punishee in this claptrap soap opera?

God: Is that a word: punishee?

Devil: I’m pretty sure it is. Are they both going to Hell or…

Santa: Guys, guys, this is supposed to be fun. Why the serious faces?

Devil: I just need to know if I should make room for one or two.

God: Better make room for two. I say it’s always safer to overestimate than underestimate. Remember how unprepared you were when I sent the Flood? Hmm? Didn’t expect me to wipe out all those innocent people along with the guilty, did you? But how else could I be sure, right? And even then, with all the precautions I took, that Noah was a goddamn disappointment. Couldn’t wait to get shitfaced and start flashing his privates, as if anyone wanted to get a load of his shriveled bits. What is wrong with these people?

Santa: That’s your own fault. You had to go nuts at that “Crafting with Clay IV: Advanced Fun with Chordates” session and now the whole planet is overrun with those obnoxious Homo sapiens. Why couldn’t you have just stuck with Cretaceous reptiles?

God: Eh, been there, done that. Asteroid this, iridium that. Not going there again.

Devil: I still say that Ichneumonidae wasp was your masterpiece. If only they’d offer that “Arthropods! Cute Not Creepy” course a few more times. I have ideas.

Santa: Bravo to that. But my little French pest will prove just as lethal. He’s going to eat that hulking piece of USDA Grade A beef on the hoof from the inside out.

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Chapter End Notes
Peter Luger's steakhouse in Brooklyn is indeed famous for its porterhouse for two and creamed spinach. Give it a try if you're in town.
Chapter Summary

James and Jean-Louis get it on, repeatedly.

Upon return to the St. Regis, Jean-Louis made a beeline for the bathroom, locked the door and lit up a joint. James made no move to stop him. Good. Things will be on his terms from now on; no matter how deeply James hurt him, he would stick it to him worse. “Don’t be afraid,” James had said. Hah! He’d make that smug bastard gag on his own words, make him regret he ever laid eyes on him. He sat on the edge of the tub with the window open above him, shivering a little from the cold air and much more so from his anger. He loathed him, thoroughly loathed him, didn’t he? His urge to scream abated, however, as the weed slowly and surely took hold of him and comforted him in its sweet, familiar embrace. He stood up and closed the window, went over to the sink, calmly brushed his teeth, washed his face, and unlocked the door. James was nowhere to be seen. He thought about gathering his things and taking a cab back to his apartment when James reappeared carrying a small bag from Duane Reade. Christ. Jean-Louis stood rooted in place yet wanting to flee, the synapses in his brain firing in slow motion, limbs unresponsive. What to do?

“Come here.” James motioned to the sofa, sat down and patted the cushion next to him. He tossed his coat onto the armchair and took a small pink box out of the plastic bag. “C’mon.”

They hadn’t spoken a single word the entire ride back from Brooklyn. James had reached over and squeezed his hand at one point before Jean-Louis pulled away. He thought his body would explode at James’s touch, spewing bile and God knows what. Now he approached him with wary hesitation, so very thankful that he was buzzed and dulled and not in the moment, just floating at a safe distance, nothing but the sound of his own breathing echoing in his head. He sat next to James and watched him open the cardboard box. It was Valentine’s Day in three days and Jean-Louis saw that James had bought some of that hideous, chalky, heart-shaped candy that was everywhere in the stores.


Jean-Louis stared at the candies all lined up in a neat row. “Please don’t ask me to eat them,” he said.

James shook his head. “You don’t have to eat them.” Then he burst into tears. He sat hunched forward with his elbows on his knees and the palms of his hands pressed against his eyes, chest heaving as he sobbed in misery. “It doesn’t have to be like this,” he choked out. “It doesn’t have to be this awful. I’m sorry I don’t say the right things. But I swear, this is how I feel, it’s what I mean, even when I’m fucking it up.”

Jean-Louis’s brain switched off but the back-up generator that was his heart kicked in. Goddamn it! That sneaky son of a bitch! If it was low of Jean-Louis to use Krista to manipulate James, then this was even more unconscionable. Sentimental, romantic drivel was Jean-Louis’s kryptonite.
How could James have known? Was it just a lucky strike? Jean-Louis’s mouth felt dry and his skin numb to the touch but it was too late. He felt it inside, his resolve caving in on itself like some sinkhole from hell, James dragging him down once more into the depths of his need. God help him. Why couldn’t he just say no, just walk away and never look back? But there it was, the undeniable pain stabbing him in the gut to see James like this, this hulking man reduced to a pile of quivering weakness, those broad shoulders crumpled, collapsed instead of holding up the world, Atlas unmanned by his simple cruelty. What could he possibly say to free them both from this mess?

He didn’t say anything, just crawled into his lap and kissed him, tasted the salt from his tears and sweat and melted into his mouth. He didn’t know what to do except to give in and let James find satisfaction. Hadn’t he always done this, let others take pleasure in him, sate their hunger on his body? What other worth did he hold? He was useless otherwise. James took him right on the Federal style sofa. Jean-Louis realized there was a box of condoms and a tube of K-Y in the Duane Reade bag when James emptied it out onto the coffee table in a hurry and could only imagine the knowing look James must have gotten at the check-out counter. He would never be able to think about those awful candy hearts without remembering James’s hands on his hips pulling him down onto his cock and the wrenching pain that knocked the wind out of him and made him want to vomit. It was over quickly, but James was just getting started. Half an hour later Jean-Louis was pinned up against the bedroom wall, his thighs wrapped tightly around James’s waist, arms thrown over his shoulders and hanging on for dear life as James pounded into him.

“Missed my workout today,” James grinned wolfishly. “Gotta make up for it.” He stilled for a moment to kiss him. Jean-Louis’s mouth was open and soft and yielding and he felt so light in his arms. “I love you, baby. You’re so fucking beautiful.” He thrust into him again and pulled the most disgustingly needy sound from Jean-Louis’s throat. “Such a naughty little boy. Do it again. Let me hear you.” James snapped his hips harder and elicited something between a wail and a cry for mercy. “That’s it. Louder. Let me hear how much you want it.”

“No…no…help…please…”

“Say it. *Tell me.*”

“Fuck me…James…fuck…don’t stop…I want you…” Each word felt punched out of him. He was breathless and out of control, his body completely separated from his head and his head orbiting somewhere in outer space. “I can’t…I can’t do this…make me…”

James could feel Jean-Louis tensing more and more, desperate to catch that final wave, his muscles tightening down around his cock until it was almost unbearable. “That’s it, baby. Let go. Come for me. Let me see you.”

“I can’t,” Jean-Louis gasped, practically in tears. “It’s not enough…I can’t.”

James reached between them and grasped Jean-Louis’s cock, wiped his thumb across the glistening head as he pumped hard on the shaft, and that finally did it. He came immediately with a stuttering cry, thrashing and spilling hot into his hand. James brought his wet fingers to Jean-Louis’s mouth and let him suck on them, then he kissed him, tongue chasing the taste of him. “So good, baby, you’re so beautiful, so fucking gorgeous.” He carried him to the bed and laid him down gently, still impaled on him. “Let me finish, yeah? I’m almost there, I’m so close. Let me come inside you.”

Jean-Louis nodded, too wrecked to do anything except let James turn him over onto his hands and knees. His whole body trembled when James pushed back into him and he collapsed onto his elbows, weak and drained but James held him up against him and fucked him slowly with long,
deliberate strokes. Jean-Louis relaxed into the mattress, too tired to put up any more resistance.

“Oh God,” Jean-Louis groaned, his cheek resting against the gold brocade duvet. “You’re in my throat. Je vais mourir.” I’m going to die. Over his own whimpering cries he heard James grunt loudly and sigh, balls pressed wetly against his own, and then his cock twitching deep inside him with each wrenching spasm of release.

“This is all for you, baby, everything’s for you.” James intoned it like a prayer, on his knees and face tilted to the ceiling, shivering in a drenching sweat as he shuddered through his orgasm. “Jesus. I’ll need a good soak in the tub before we do anything else.”

Jean-Louis’s eyes snapped open in horror. He rolled onto his back, wrung out, and mumbled, “I’ll need another joint if you’re not done.”

“Is it really better if you’re high?” James asked. He lightly scrubbed Jean-Louis’s back with a washcloth. The tub was huge, large enough for James to lay flat without having to curl his legs up. Jean-Louis leaned his elbows against the edge and took another hit of weed.


“You don’t like what I do to you?” James planted kisses on Jean-Louis’s shoulders, then along his spine. He turned him around to face him and kissed the bruises on his ribs, rubbed his thumb across a nipple until it hardened. “You don’t want me inside you?”

“It’s not something I’d choose. You’re the only man I’ve ever let...you know...it’s not exactly...comfortable,” admitted Jean-Louis.

“And I’m going to be the only one ever, right? No one else gets to have you.” He sucked on his neck, leaving behind a red, mouth-shaped welt. “Because you’re it for me. You’re the one and there won’t be anyone else. I swear it.”

Was he nuts? Jean-Louis wondered. Why was he talking about fidelity when all they did was have sex? “You don’t have to make me any promises,” Jean-Louis stated flatly. “I’m not asking you to love me.”

“Don’t you want me to? Isn’t this what people do? Fall in love, take care of each other, grow old together.” He took Jean-Louis’s hand and kissed it tenderly.

“I’ve already tried that and it was the most horrible thing I’ve ever put myself through. I don’t want to do that again.”

“What? So you never want to be in love again? That’s stupid.”

The weed was doing its thing, keeping him calm and detached or else he’d be arguing with him again. He took another long drag before he turned and put his elbows back against the edge of the tub and presented his ass to him.

“Why don’t you just shut up and fuck me before I come to my senses,” Jean-Louis said over his shoulder. He spread his thighs and arched his back shamelessly and smiled, knowing without looking the kind of effect he was having on James.

“God have mercy,” James groaned. He opened a tiny bottle of hotel bath oil and emptied it over his swollen cock. “You’re going to be the death of me.”
Jean-Louis laughed; it was the best thing he had heard all night. When James pressed into him, an image of a Roman battering ram flashed behind the lids of his closed eyes and he laughed once more, then took another hit of his joint.

There was no resistance, just the most velvet soft heat enveloping his oil-slick cock as James rocked his hips into him slowly. It was like drowning in a bath of honey. His balls positively ached; he couldn’t imagine there could be even a single drop left in him, still, still, as he continued grinding into him, James felt that telltale twinge like a plucked string running from the tip of his cock to the base of his spine and he knew. “Talk to me, baby. Tell me how good this feels.”

Jean-Louis was stoned out of his mind and couldn’t even comprehend where his body ended and James’s began. He heard someone moaning and realized it was himself. “Hmm…so good…so big inside me…so hard…oh daddy…will you always fuck me like this?”

“Yeah, baby…fuck, yeah.” James’s slow rhythm went out the window.

“Are you going to come inside me?”

“Yeah, I’m gonna come inside you…oh, shit...” James leaned forward and gripped Jean-Louis’s shoulders and drove his hips into him wildly.

“Now, daddy. I want it.” Jean-Louis reached under and cupped their balls together, pressed a finger firmly against James’s perineum and felt him instantly convulse.

He collapsed backward bringing Jean-Louis down into his lap with him and held him tightly against his chest, his cock twitching and leaking inside him. “I’m never letting you go,” he gasped into the side of his face. “Come here.” He tilted Jean-Louis’s head back and kissed him long and deep. “I’ve never had anyone like you, baby. We’re going to be together forever.”

Jean-Louis could only smile and sigh. His mind was a million miles away, too far away for James’s words to ever reach him.

“Are you always this…active?” asked Jean-Louis later as they lay in bed. He was still pleasantly high and feeling no pain, although he knew to expect a rude awakening the next day. He sprawled limply on top of James, his cheek resting on the pillows of his pectoral muscles, his ear pressed against his sternum listening to the strong and steady thumping of his heart.

“It depends,” James said sleepily. He idly rubbed circles along the small of Jean-Louis’s back with one hand, the other hand in his hair massaging his scalp and making him moan. “I work out a lot and, honestly, it’s like having sex…like getting off, sometimes even better, more intense, like coming with your whole body and not just with your cock, although it’s not better than fucking you.” He hugged him closer to make him know he meant it. “But, yeah, I guess I’ve always been this way since I hit puberty. I remember being thirteen and jerking off in the bathroom, then I’d be ready again in fifteen minutes it seemed. Maybe it just felt that way. I wasn’t exactly getting laid when I was in high school. What’s a horny teenager supposed to do except to beat off twenty times a day, right? In college I did some pretty wild things with my teammates, two or three girls at a time, orgies. Christ, my mom would kill me if she knew half of what I did.”

“Were you ever…I mean, you’ve only been with girls?”

“Yeah.”

“Then why are you with me? What are you doing with me?”
“I have no fucking idea. I just know I love you. I know I want to be with you. I want you to love me and be with me. That’s all.”

“You know that’s impossible. Why are you thinking these things?”

“I’m not thinking them. I just feel it and know it. This isn’t some intellectual, rational thing.”

“That’s right. And you are completely insane.” Jean-Louis sighed and rolled off of him, curled up against James’s side. “I want to sleep.” He couldn’t give him his heart, but he could give him this —his body and whatever physical pleasure James took for himself—and hope that it would be enough.

“I love you, baby,” James whispered into Jean-Louis’s ear. “And nothing’s impossible. You just have to want it bad enough.” He put his arms around him and was gone in two seconds.
Jean-Louis struggles with his feelings for Guy-Manuel and his guilt over James.

“Nothing’s impossible. You just have to want it bad enough.”

That was almost a year ago but he could hear James speaking those words into his ear as if it were yesterday. He stared at his office doorway willing Guy-Manuel to appear, any affection for James put into a file and dragged into the trash and deleted. It was Tuesday, five interminable days since he had first met Guy-Manuel, gazed into his chocolate brown eyes flecked with gold and had his world upended in the most achingly wonderful way. He busied himself with the exhibition planning to pass the morning hours. The curator of arthropods, a woman named Bridget, was out on maternity leave, so he was assigned her task. Others would be working on the cnidarians, annelids, etc. After lunch would be yet another meeting with his co-curators to continue discussion on copy and layout for the catalog and wall signage. Phil and some of his staff would be there and, surely, Guy-Manuel would be there with him. But he wasn’t. Instead, Phil showed up with his other intern, Megan. Jean-Louis was crestfallen. After the meeting he approached Phil.

“Where’s Guy-Manuel?” he asked. “I thought he was supposed to be working on this for you.”

“Yeah, well he’s out for the day. Called in with food poisoning or something. Who knows? He probably went on a bender…kids these days. Anyway, I was thinking of taking him off the show and giving him some brochure updates to work on instead. He’s a bit of a flake. Megan is better with the proofreading at least. You’ll like her.”

Before he could object, Phil had called Megan over to introduce her to him. Jean-Louis shook her hand, disappointment plastered all over his face. She was decked out in an all-black ensemble, hair dyed platinum blond with streaks of magenta, a silver stud in her nose and a small hoop in her lower lip. Heavy eyeliner gave her the appearance of a cantankerous raccoon.

“Hi!” she said. Her voice was soft and girlish and she was surprisingly friendly for all her neo-punk, don’t-fuck-with-me fashion statement. They were practically the same age but might as well have hailed from different planets.

“Nice to meet you, Megan,” Jean-Louis muttered. He sighed heavily and walked out of the conference room back to his office. It wasn’t until he got to the stairwell that he realized she was following him, walking two steps behind him. “Are you stalking me?” he asked.

“No. Just wanted to see where your office is so I’ll know where to bring the stuff. We’ll probably be seeing a lot of each other, you know, working together on the show and all. I’m very responsible. My professors at SVA say I show a lot of initiative and drive.”

“I can see that. Yes.”

“You don’t have to be afraid of me,” she enthused further. “I don’t bite. It’s not like I have rabies
or…STDs.”

“I should hope not,” he murmured and absently rubbed his forehead.

“Do you have a headache? Did you know you can get headaches from dehydration? You should make sure you drink enough water. I always keep a bottle of water with me at all times. Well, not right now, but usually. How come you don’t use the elevator?” Her thick-soled boots clomped loudly against the marble stairs. She sounded like a talking, two-legged Clydesdale.

“I like to walk. Walking is good for you.” He imagined strolling through Central Park with Guy-Manuel at his side, one arm draped casually about his shoulder or resting at his hip, or maybe a hand around the nape of his neck, fingers discreetly caressing behind an ear. He would look into his eyes…and smile, his soul an open book for him, every fiber of his body humming.

Megan’s warbling voice interrupted his reverie. “Did you know in England they say ‘lift’ instead of ‘elevator’? I was just in London last spring on a class trip. Have you ever been there? They have those Pret a Mangers everywhere!”

“That’s because it’s a British chain,” replied Jean-Louis. If only he were a robot and none of this pained him!

“Have you ever been to Stonehenge? I was there, too. Did you know it’s in the middle of fucking nowhere? Have you ever seen Ancient Aliens? It’s the best show ever. Me and my roommates watch it religiously. It is so amazing.”

Jesus. Normally, he’d be happy to debate the marketing advantages of using foreign words in branding or the glorious engineering feats of ancient cultures versus alien technology, but today he was in no mood to be chatty, not after spending the whole weekend daydreaming about Guy-Manuel and shamelessly masturbating to those fantasies—in bed, in the shower, on the sofa, in the kitchen!—only to have this irritating girl following him around like a stray puppy when all he wanted to do was go hide in his office and moan with self-pity. Why did Guy-Manuel have to have food poisoning or be hung over or whatever? Didn’t he know he was dying to see him, dying? And, fuck it all, he’d have to go to confession, the sooner the better. From past experience, Jean-Louis knew he’d be told to recite at least five Our Fathers and ten Hail Mary’s for every lustful transgression…oh, Christ…at this rate he’d never get through them all! Right now, though, he was tempted to ask Megan if she had neglected to take her Ritalin.

“Okay, here we are. This is my office. Over there is Emma, my assistant. You can leave things with her if I’m not here. So, I think we’re done for today.” He held out his hand and she grabbed it and smiled.

“You have really nice fingers. Do you play the piano? What bands are you into?”

Jean-Louis pulled his hand away. “Have a good day, Megan. Now, I really have a lot of work to get through, so, if you don’t mind.” He walked into his office and shut the door gently in her face, wondering absently if she’d still be standing there at day’s end. Kids, indeed.

He had been too dejected on Thursday to ask Phil if Guy-Manuel was back and had resigned himself to sorrow and thwarted love. Maybe it was best this way. After all, did he even have the strength to be near him, to gaze upon his beauty and not fall to pieces? Despite Angela’s own opinion of him as an indifferent bastard, he was as likely to fear and suffer rejection as much as anyone else. He had loved Sophie unreservedly for over seven years before the final flaying.
Angela had only seen him thick with scars and too heartbroken to feel anything for another. She didn’t know what he was capable of, how much pain he could endure if the right person came along and, like a drug, filled his veins with an agony as terrible as it was sweet. He went to confession after work, admitting to thirteen acts of masturbation since his last confession, and then met Oliver for drinks that evening to seek solace in his easy company.

“Why the sad face?” Oliver asked.

They sat at the end of the bar sharing a bottle of Bordeaux and eating spiced pecans.

“I need to get laid,” Jean-Louis sighed. What he really meant was, *I want to be in love.*

He was deeply fond of Oliver, even if their relationship had never moved beyond kissing and blowing each other. Perhaps they were too much alike sexually, maybe even the same person but in two different bodies by some strange quirk of nature, one a reflection of the other, narcissism at its finest. Oliver looked especially handsome sitting next to him right now, tie loosened and hair cut just the way Jean-Louis liked best on him, the dim lights reflecting in his grey eyes and making them sparkle like jewels. He wouldn’t mind sucking on his face and cock tonight, not at all.

“What about that goon of a boyfriend? Isn’t he due for a visit round about now?” Only Oliver and Angela knew about him and James and neither one thought it a good match though they kept their more honest and unsympathetic opinions to themselves.

“Don’t remind me,” Jean-Louis groaned. “Every time he fucks me I want to crawl out of my own skin.” He groaned again, this time out of guilt. “I shouldn’t say things like that. It’s not his fault. I wish I could say no to him.”

“So say no.” Oliver was ten years his senior and had a fairly untroubled revolving door policy when it came to lovers, his angst-free attitude towards sex a result of being orphaned at an early age and subsequent upbringing by a lesbian aunt who spoiled him with an excess of affection since she never had children of her own. If someone didn’t hold his attention, no problem, there was always the next person. It helped that he was good looking, still relatively young, and now a tenured professor with a guaranteed income in the six figures. Oliver made it a point not to date students from his own university, but students from other colleges, well, nothing wrong with that. Unlike Jean-Louis, who he thought was stuck in a rather nonsensical, self-flagellating medieval mindset, Oliver was not prone to moroseness or over-thinking of ethical matters or moral questioning, thanks again to his aunt who was a supremely devout atheist, God bless her. Jean-Louis admired Oliver’s attitude, even as he knew he would never be capable of adopting the same stance. He could never be that free and unencumbered in his heart and head. He didn’t know how.

“I want to, I want to end it, I do, but he’d probably kill me and I’m not ready to die yet. You’ve met him. Would you tell him to get lost?”

“He does have a temper,” Oliver agreed. *It’s also why you like him,* he thought, but said nothing. He was Jean-Louis’s friend, not his psychoanalyst, and he had no desire to go down that rocky road with him. That Jean-Louis couldn’t get past his need for the kind of abuse James meted out was his own addiction to break. Oliver couldn’t do it for him and nothing he said would solve the problem. He was too smart to interfere with the impossible.

“He has this crazy idea that he loves me, that we’re going to be together forever,” Jean-Louis rambled. “He says he doesn’t even fuck anyone else. Can you believe that? The thought of it makes me absolutely sick.”

“Wow. I imagine it must be like conjugal visits for prisoners when he sees you.”
“You have no idea. If it weren’t for the weed, I’d be dead. God help me, I wish I did love him but I don’t, I just can’t, I don’t know why. It would make things so much easier if I did, if I could just give him what he wants.”

“What does he want exactly?”

“He wants to play out his contract. Then he wants for us to be together.”

“You mean live together?”

“Yes, and if that day comes I’ll have to slit my own throat. I don’t love him, Oliver, and now I can’t be rid of him. Angela warned me but I didn’t listen to her. Merde, I should have listened to her. I should have listened to Charlotte.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic.” Oliver waved the bartender over and ordered a second bottle. “How many more years does he have on his contract?”

“Three…I think.”

“Well, he’s bound to lose interest by then.”

“That’s what I thought when we first hooked up and that was a year and a half ago! He’s insane. He won’t let go. I’ve seen how he is. It’s not right.”

“Three more years is a long time to keep up this kind of affair, sweet boy, and he can’t exactly afford to fuck up his career being out in the open about it, right? There’s nothing to worry about. He’ll wake up one day soon and realize how ridiculous this whole thing is and you’ll wonder why you ever tortured yourself about it in the first place. Just put up with him when he visits and carry on like normal when he’s not here. He doesn’t have to know what you do. It’s not like you’ve got a ring on your finger.”

“But he calls me every day! I can’t stand it anymore. And I’ve met this intern at work…I want to be in love again…how can I if James is still in my life?”

Just then his phone pinged, a text from James: See U Feb 14. Luv U.


“Better stock up on the weed,” advised Oliver.

On Friday the next day, Megan was sitting outside his office when he arrived in the morning, bleary-eyed and out of sorts.

“I got you a latte!” She jumped to her feet and presented the paper cup with the Starbucks logo, four packs of sugar balanced atop the lid.

“Oh. Uh, thank you, but that really wasn’t necessary.” He fumbled with his keys and glanced over at Emma, who gave him a helpless shrug of the shoulders. “Let me give you some money,” Jean-Louis muttered as he finally unlocked his office door. He set the cup down on his desk and reached into his wallet and pulled out a ten.

“That’s okay. There’s a Starbucks on my way here. It’s no problem.”

“No, I insist. And you must not do that again.” He pressed the money into her hand, hung up his
coat, and retreated behind his desk. “Now, if you’ll excuse me?”

“Can’t I just hang out here for a little while?”

“No, you may not. I’m sure Phil will be expecting you upstairs. Now, please go.”

“First tell me how old you are.”

“How old am I? I’m twenty-two.” This girl was going to be a royal pain in the ass. He had wanted to tell her that her question was highly inappropriate but figured she would not be deterred that easily. He would have to be brutally direct. “Now, go.” He pointed to the door like he was directing traffic or issuing a command to a contrary pet. In the end he had to push her out the door like a stubborn mule. He’d really have to speak to Phil about this. She was his intern, his responsibility, and she had no right to burden him with her neurotic behavior; it was hard enough to deal with his own problems.

He sat at his desk and rubbed his eyes. The two cups of coffee he’d already downed at his apartment had done little to wake him after a mainly sleepless night. James’s text had unnerved and depressed him even though he knew it was inevitable. Valentine’s Day, another American holiday that he thought silly and would now forever associate with getting his ass pounded far too many times, was beginning to seem like an annual ritual of torture. Goddamn that Saint Valentine. He sipped the latte that Megan had picked up for him and was grateful.

There was a knock on his door. “Dr. Lamarck?”

“Come in, Emma.”

His assistant let herself in. Emma was in her early fifties and newly a grandmother. She was one of those people who left no holiday uncelebrated, be it of her own Irish ethnicity or someone else’s, and insisted on decorating their suite of offices accordingly. Lately, she had taken to including holidays celebrated by vanished cultures, like the Aztecs and Mayans, to unintended bloody effect. In all fairness to the Mesoamericans, the holidays centered on the Catholic saints could be equally horrifying. Right now, however, his door was graced with a decidedly harmless cutout of a Victorian Era cupid with adorable rosy cheeks and armed with a tiny bow and arrow. Jean-Louis could only see an image of himself getting shafted instead, something far more in keeping with what this holiday had in store for him. Emma took the seat opposite his desk to go over the day’s agenda.

“Sorry about the closed door, but Phil’s intern is driving me crazy,” Jean-Louis said.

“I can tell she’s going to be a handful. That other boy seemed real sweet. What happened to him?”

“Phil took him off the show.” He rubbed his eyes again and yawned. “I don’t know. Maybe I can beg to have him put him back on.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but you look like hell warmed over.”

“Thanks. I like the cupid.”
Jean-Louis finally hooks up with Guy-Manuel, then tells James the truth.

When Jean-Louis walked into the lobby of his apartment building on Valentine’s Day after work there was an extravagant arrangement of red roses waiting for him. He lugged it up to his apartment and read the accompanying card with a mixture of guilt and dread:

*See you tonight. All my love forever. J.*

James had arrived in New York the day before but was busy with a taping at NBC studios. He was a guest on their morning show, where he would meet the single mom from Arkansas who had won a ‘dream trip’ to New York for Valentine’s Day: an all-expense-paid two-day visit that included a spa makeover, a Broadway matinee of The Lion King, a shopping spree at Macy’s, a tour of Madame Tussauds in Times Square, and an evening Circle Line dinner cruise date with James, who had volunteered as the celebrity ‘prize’ as part of his community outreach efforts. One of the morning show hosts commented on the marked spike in the number of men entering to win the prize once James was announced as the participating athlete. All James could do was be a good sport and laugh congenially for the studio audience. After the NBC taping, he had an afternoon photo shoot for a Nike ad, and an evening fundraiser for his charity at the Waldorf. The next morning on Valentine’s Day was a radio interview for a local sports talk show, and then an afternoon visit to the children’s ward at Memorial Sloan Kettering with several other athletes to bring candies, balloons, and cards to the patients. Jean-Louis wouldn’t have to go to the St. Regis to meet James until 11:00 pm, when James had concluded his dinner cruise date with the Arkansas mom, which gave Jean-Louis plenty of time to stew over what he was going to do.

The thing that he had wished for the most had happened the day before when he had finally run into Guy-Manuel again and, not only that, he had kissed him. He saw him at the end of the day when they were both standing at the corner of Columbus and 80th and Guy-Manuel had turned around by chance and smiled at him.

“Where have you been?” Jean-Louis blurted out. “I’ve missed you.” He was so happy to see him he didn’t even care that he must have sounded like a fool, that he had dared say something so bold as *I’ve missed you* to someone he had only met once before and who might not even remember him. But Guy-Manuel did remember him.

“I’ve been sick,” he said. “I had a stomach flu last week, but I’m better now.”

“Can you eat again?” Jean-Louis asked. “Will you let me make you dinner?”

Guy-Manuel laughed, his face alit with surprise and then shy interest. “Dinner? Tonight?”

“Pourquoi pas?” Why not? “I’m a good cook. And you can try some wine from my mother’s vineyard. I only live a few blocks away. If you’re not busy…say yes.”

Jean-Louis made a simple omelet with chives, mushrooms, and goat cheese atop a salad of arugula and tomatoes. He opened a bottle of his mother’s Pinot and they ate and talked with the kind of ease that usually comes from a lifetime of companionship. They chatted at length about their families, their childhoods, their likes and dislikes.

“Are you seeing anyone right now?” asked Jean-Louis. At this point, he had a few glasses in him and was beyond feeling any embarrassment. He knew he wanted Guy-Manuel with absolute certainty, knew he was already in love and wanting to drown in it. He didn’t care if Guy-Manuel turned him down, he didn’t want to waste one second wondering. If anything, he wanted Guy-Manuel to know exactly how he felt, crazy as it was, he could sooner stop himself from breathing as he could hold back from making his feelings known.

“I have a girlfriend back home, Amelia,” Guy-Manuel demurred. “But we agreed we could see other people while we’re apart. Not that I am. That is, I’m not seeing anyone seriously at the moment.”

“Oh.” Jean-Louis wasn’t quite expecting that response. It still pained him deeply to think of Sophie and the longing he felt all the times they were separated, and he didn’t want to be the asshole who came between Guy-Manuel and his girl Amelia.

“If you asked me…” Guy-Manuel said quietly, “I wouldn’t say no.”

“If I asked you?” Jean-Louis couldn’t believe what he was hearing, couldn’t believe his good luck. He stared at Guy-Manuel, his eyes the color and softness of sable, sitting next to him on the narrow bench in the kitchen, and was speechless for a while. “May I kiss you?”

“Pourquoi pas.” It was a statement, not a question, it was permission, it was yes.

When Jean-Louis pressed his lips to Guy-Manuel’s, it seemed like the most natural thing to do; there was no awkwardness, no doubt, just a gentle brush of the lips before he licked fervently into his mouth and was gone. Guy-Manuel leaned into him and looped his arms around his waist, the slick slide of their tongues sending shivers down both their spines. When they broke apart moaning, Jean-Louis felt dizzy with desire.

“Have you had boyfriends before?” he asked.

“Do you mean if I’ve had sex with a guy?” Guy-Manuel countered. “Yes, more than once. Does that bother you?”

“No, not at all. I would think someone as beautiful as you would have had many lovers, girls and boys.”

“What about you? Have you had many lovers?” Guy-Manuel casually went back to eating and it brought Jean-Louis a surge of happiness to see that.

“I’ve been with a few. I was in love once with a girl for many years. She broke my heart. I don’t know if I could ever let myself fall in love with a girl again. But to be in love is a good thing. I miss it.”

Guy-Manuel didn’t stay long after dinner. He had homework assignments due the next day and needed to get back to his apartment off Union Square, which he shared with two other roommates, fellow students at Parsons.
“May I see you again?” asked Jean-Louis as he walked him to the elevator.

“Outside the museum?”

“Outside, inside, everywhere.” He kissed him again. “Please say yes.”

Guy-Manuel kissed him back, long and deep, and Jean-Louis swore he had never felt a mouth so soft and sweet, not since he had kissed Sophie that first time so long ago and was overwhelmed by the depth of his own need.

“Yes,” Guy-Manuel said.

Yes. That night Jean-Louis replayed that word over and over as he lay in bed unable to sleep. Yes to love, yes to life, yes to his heart. He knew now that he would have to say no to James in a way that James could understand. He would have to tell him the truth, that he didn’t love him, didn’t want him, that it was over. He would have to be as cruel as Sophie was to him, cut him to the bone and bleed all hope out of him until none remained. It was the only way to sever the tie. He had served his penance with James and had been rewarded with Guy-Manuel. There was no turning back.

The door opened before he even knocked. James pulled him inside and slammed the door shut behind him and caught him in a rib-crushing embrace. Then James’s mouth was on him like always, hot and hungry, and he was lost in the violent storm of his boundless passion. James picked him up like he weighed nothing, carried him into the bedroom, and tossed him onto the bed.

“What are you doing?” Jean-Louis cried out in shock, the wind almost knocked out of him. “I’m not one of your footballs!”

James laughed and launched himself on top of him. “No, you’re not. You’re my sweet, beautiful, sexy angel and I cannot wait to fuck you, and fuck you again, and again, and again, and make you scream and moan and come.” He was biting Jean-Louis and tearing his clothes off of him.

“James, wait…” Jean-Louis protested. He could hear the sound of fabric ripping. “I didn’t bring a change of clothes. I didn’t bring anything with me.” He had not intended on staying. No, he was going to speak the truth to James and then leave.

“Not to worry. We can have anything you need sent up.” He continued biting and kissing him as he finished stripping him naked. Then he removed his own shirt with the Broncos logo on it and pushed his jeans past his hips.

The sight of his naked torso, more muscular and defined than ever, and his thick engorged cock hanging long and heavy in front of his eyes instantly fried the circuits in Jean-Louis’s brain. All the excuses and explanations he had rehearsed repeatedly on his way over to the St. Regis evaporated and all he could say, mouth salivating, was, “Want you…daddy…” God, he was such a slut for him!

He crawled on his knees and grasped James’s cock and brushed his cheek reverently against the length of it, feeling its burning heat and weight against his skin. He took the head of it in his mouth and tasted the bitter saltiness of James; he was leaking already and it made Jean-Louis tremble knowing that it wouldn’t take long. There was no time for finesse, but he wanted the scent of him, needed it filling his nostrils and making him ache for him. Jean-Louis dragged his lips across the thick hairs at the base of James’s cock, mouthing him there, nuzzled up against his balls and
inhaled the heady odor of his skin at the crease of his thighs, sucked and nipped at him there and heard James groan loudly.

“Oh fuck…hurry,” James grunted. “I’m not gonna last.”

Jean-Louis took him back into his mouth and stroked the shaft in his fist, using his lips and tongue to work the head and first few inches. He was out of practice with James and kept gagging himself too roughly in his impatience but, Christ, he wanted this, letting James make him feel and know his need and desire. James had both of his hands in Jean-Louis’s hair, tugging and pulling with his long fingers and it hurt Jean-Louis just enough to heighten his excitement. He looked up and saw James staring back down at him, then felt James move one hand to trace his fingers around the shaft of his cock as it met his straining lips, and then his mouth was flooded with the first spurt of hot fluid. He barely had time to swallow before another spurt hit his tongue, then another, and another until he thought he would choke.

“Oh, God, baby, here it is. Fuck, fuck, fuck…” James groaned and shuddered and fought against the overwhelming urge to pump his cock into Jean-Louis’s mouth and down his throat. When he finally pulled away from him Jean-Louis was gasping for air and retching a little. “I’m sorry, baby, I’m sorry I was too rough.” He kissed his bruised lips and tasted himself. “You swallowed. You know I love it when you do that for me.” He hugged him and reached for Jean-Louis’s cock but Jean-Louis pushed his hand away.

“No, don’t. I don’t want that.” He lay down and breathed deeply.

“I just need a few minutes,” James panted as he kicked off his jeans and propped himself onto an elbow beside him, slowly stroking a hand down Jean-Louis’s chest and flat belly. “Then I’ll give you everything you want.”

“No, I just want to talk to you.”

Jean-Louis’s hair was wild about his face and James couldn’t help but run his fingers through those silken strands. “I have something for you.”

“James, please…”

But he had already disappeared into the other room. A moment later he came back holding a small jewel box. “Happy Valentine’s Day,” he said, handing Jean-Louis the black velvet package. “Open it.”

It was Jean-Louis’s worst nightmare. Inside was a platinum ring, a simple band with no ornamentation. He took it out of the case and read the inscription running along the inside of the ring: Yours forever, J.

“I know we can’t be together yet,” James said softly. “But I want you to wear this for me, so you’ll know I’m always thinking of you and missing you. Here.” James took the band from him and slipped it onto the ring finger of his right hand. “One day, you’ll wear it on your other hand.”

“How did you know what size?” There were a million other things going through Jean-Louis’s head, but this was the least terrifying thought.

“That was easy. Last year I slipped a piece of string around your finger when you were sleeping and marked it. When you’re out, you’re out. Did you know that?”

“James, I can’t wear this.”
“Why not?”

“You know why not.” He began sobbing, he couldn’t help it. “I don’t love you. I thought I could but I don’t and I’m sorry. I don’t want to hurt you anymore. I never wanted to hurt you. You need to be with someone who can give you what you want. Please. Please let me go before everything’s ruined.”

James was oddly calm. “I know you think you don’t love me. It’s okay. I have enough for the both of us. I have enough love, enough money, enough everything. I can carry us both. You don’t have to be afraid, baby. You don’t have to give me anything except yourself.”

“No, you don’t understand. I’ve been with other people and I won’t stop. I want to be with other people.”

James’s first desire was to choke him until he lay limp and lifeless in his hands. He sat up and tried to tamp down the inferno threatening to erupt, tried to think rationally. Jean-Louis was only twenty-two. It was a lot to ask of a young man to be faithful at his age, to commit to one person. Shit. He had slept around like crazy in the past himself, fucked whomever he wanted and made no excuses. How could he expect anything different from someone else when he knew that he would never have let anyone tell him to be monogamous? As much as it filled him with rage and jealousy, he knew he would lose Jean-Louis completely if he tried to keep him caged up.

“I get it,” he said finally, trying to sound, goddamn it, trying to be reasonable, though it felt like a million stabbing wounds as he spoke, the words hateful and traitorous in his own ears. “You’re young. Christ…you’re so beautiful and perfect…in every way. I’m not stupid enough to think that people don’t look at you and want you as much as I do. I know you’re not ready…you still want to be with other people. It’s just that, I love you. I know I love you more than anyone else could, anyone you could ever meet. I know that’s got to be worth something. Baby, I’ll wait for you. Just don’t fall in love. That’s all I ask. I’ve told you before, don’t fall in love with anyone but me.” He knew he sounded desperate and wanted to kick himself.

“Or else what?”

He saw Jean-Louis’s eyes ice over. The bastard was pouncing all over his weakness. The more James made threats out of fear, the more Jean-Louis retreated behind a thicker wall. James figured it was high time he tried a different tactic. He lowered his voice, let the alpha dog in him stand front and center, let Jean-Louis know he would dominate him just the way he needed it. “Or else I will hunt you down, tie you up, and torture you with every inch of my love until you go hoarse screaming for it.” He kissed him very softly on the lips, reeling him in.

Jean-Louis considered this for a long moment, the low rumble of James’s voice like a soothing caress. He had told James the truth, that he didn’t love him, that he intended to continue seeing other people, and James hadn’t beaten the crap out of him. Maybe he could make this work after all, take Oliver’s advice and have a complete and fulfilling life apart from James and still satisfy him in some capacity. He didn’t have to lie to James, feel like he was sneaking around behind his back fearful of discovery. He felt a heavy weight lift from him, his heart unclenching, his muscles relaxing. He looked at the ring on his finger and kissed it, gazed back at James and saw tears in his eyes, a smile on his lips.

“James. You might not have my heart, but you have my body. Does that make you happy?”

“Yeah, for now, it’ll have to be enough.” James leaned down and kissed him, his cock already hard against Jean-Louis’s thigh.
“Can we have something to drink first? I’m thirsty,” Jean-Louis said.

“How about some champagne, for Valentine’s Day?”

As James ordered a bottle to be sent to the room, it dawned on Jean-Louis that this was the same suite James had booked the year before.

“You really are a creature of habit,” Jean-Louis said.

“Aren’t we all?”

“Still, I’m guessing you didn’t do the exact same thing last year.”

“Nope. Last Valentine’s Day I was sitting in a restaurant with Krista and *not* giving her a ring.”

“You don’t look sad.”

“It was the right thing to do. What would have been wrong would be to string her along, keep her hanging. Did I tell you she’s engaged to some guy who owns one of the resort hotels in Aspen? The guy’s loaded. I’m happy for her. She deserves to be happy. She even invited me to her wedding. That’s just like her, to forgive and forget.”

“I’d always wanted to meet her.”

“You can be my date then.”

“Very funny.”

“I’m not kidding.”

“Well, you shouldn’t talk like that. Don’t do anything to ruin your career, James. If you ruined it over me I would never speak to you again.”

“You see? You *do* love me.”

“I care about you, and I want only happiness for you, even if I make you miserable.”

They drank the champagne, which came with a dozen strawberries dipped in dark and white chocolate.

“This is ridiculous,” Jean-Louis said as he picked one up from the tray. “You Americans and your holidays. I can’t believe adults do this sort of thing and think it’s romantic.” He ate a few anyway. The joint he was smoking made him hungry and open to the silliness of it all. “Why did you send me roses?”

“I dunno. I always did it for Krista. Shit, she’d have my balls if I didn’t. Anyway, I thought you’d appreciate the gesture but, obviously, you do not, so I will never do that for you again. Happy? What the hell do you French celebrate anyway? National Guillotine Day?”

“You know what a guillotine is?”

“Of course I do. It’s that thing they use to chop off people’s heads. We use humane ways of killing in America, not like you sick foreigners.”

“Oh? Like lethal injection? Electrocution? First of all, it’s much quicker and kinder to use a guillotine than it is to kill someone through lethal injection or electrocution. Secondly, the last time
the guillotine was used was back in 1977 and, lastly, the death penalty was abolished in France in 1981. “And how was your date with Miss Arkansas?”

“Uh, she was no Miss Arkansas. Let’s see, single mom, nearly two hundred pounds, but a sweetheart. Works at Walmart, first time ever outside of her hometown of Fayetteville. Got pregnant when she was fifteen, then when she was seventeen, then when she was twenty, all different guys. I told her she should get her tubes tied.”

“You had no right to say that!”

“Hey, it’s good advice. How the hell is she supposed to raise all those kids on a Walmart salary? It’s crazy.”

“Good thing you can’t make me pregnant or else I’d be telling you to get your tubes tied.”

James shot him a funny look.

“What?” Jean-Louis said. He was fairly stoned and in danger of laughing and not being able to stop. “You wouldn’t do that for me if I asked you to? I thought you said you’d do anything for me.”

“I’m not getting my fucking tubes tied.” James draped an arm around Jean-Louis’s shoulders as they sat on the sofa wearing the hotel’s bathrobes. The thought of the deeds that took place on the furniture, including their own deeds, made it seem wise to put a layer of cloth between their bodies and what must be cum stains from countless others. “We should have kids,” James stated.

“Have you lost your mind?”

“I don’t mean right this second. Later, when things settle down. We could adopt or find a surrogate.” James nonchalantly popped a strawberry into his mouth. “It would be fun.”

Jean-Louis’s head was cracking apart. “I’m not even going to comment on that. You are too amazingly incomprehensible to me right now.”

“Just saying. Look, you said you had wanted kids with Sophie. Well I want kids, too. There’s no reason we couldn’t have a family together. If Doogie Howser can do it…”

“Stop before you make my head explode! I cannot, will not, listen to this nonsense. You talk as if having children is as simple as getting a dog.”

“Why are you so resistant to everything I say? Everything is no with you.”

“What kind of imaginary world do you live in?”

“Hey, I live in the real world. You’re the one spending your life bombed out of your head half the time.”

Jean-Louis couldn’t argue against that. “I have difficulties,” he conceded.

“Yeah, well, that’s why you should do things my way. One of us needs to be sober and we sure as hell can’t count on you,” James chided as he refilled their glasses.

Now Jean-Louis was miffed. “I can’t even be seen in public with you and you want to have kids! How does that make any sense?”
“Not can’t. Won’t. You’re the one refusing to be seen with me. I’m not the one with the problem.”

“That’s because one of us needs to be sane! And that obviously isn’t you!”

“Okay, calm down, little boy.”

“Don’t call me that!”

“Jesus, how can someone so gorgeous be such a fucking pain in the ass?” James grabbed him by the front of his robe. “How did your parents ever put up with a brat like you? Huh? You must’ve gotten spanked an awful lot when you were a kid. Am I right?” He stared into his eyes. “Maybe you still need to be spanked.”

Jean-Louis started laughing despite himself. The idea of it was equal parts hilarious and titillating and he blamed the weed for the naughty smile that was creeping across his face of its own accord. He gulped down the last of the champagne and crawled into James’s lap, felt James’s half-hard cock jump to attention against his thigh. Jean-Louis leaned in and brushed his cheek against the short trimmed beard that James had grown over the winter months. The hair was coming in reddish on his face and Jean-Louis liked it.

“Maybe?” Jean-Louis queried as he drew his fingers along James’s jaw and ground his own cock against his hard abs. He ran his tongue along James’s ear and smiled again as he felt James instantly tense up all over.

“Fuck.” James picked him up and carried him back to bed. This time he laid him down gently and opened up the front of his robe and just stared down at him as he knelt between his legs, James’s erection poking eagerly out from the folds of his robe as he began caressing Jean-Louis’s thighs. “All I think about when you’re not with me is fucking your brains out,” he confessed.

“Your idea of romance is seriously lacking, James.” Jean-Louis sat up and untied James’s robe, pushed it off his shoulders so he could touch his naked skin. He reminded Jean-Louis of the bronze statue of Zeus in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens with its broad and deep chest and muscular arms and legs, idealized in every way but here he was in the flesh kneeling before him and aching with desire. Those fifth century BC Greeks really weren’t kidding around. And like the god Zeus, James was equally coarse in his lovemaking.

“Turn around,” James ordered.

“What?”

James flipped Jean-Louis over onto his lap and pulled his robe up over his waist, exposing his bare buttocks. “Can’t follow simple instructions, little boy? Maybe this’ll make you pay attention.” He slapped a cheek hard with the flat of his palm, leaving a distinct handprint behind. Jean-Louis let out a high-pitched yelp. “Did that hurt? Hmm? Are you going to do as you’re told from now on?”

“Fuck you!”

James slapped the other cheek, eliciting another cry that utterly delighted him. “I can keep this up all night if I have to. What do you say? Are you going to be a good boy and listen to your daddy?”

“Go choke on your own cock, you asshole!”

“Oh ho! What a filthy little mouth you’ve got on you.” He slapped him repeatedly until Jean-Louis stopped squirming and lay still in his lap whimpering into the mattress. “What was that? What did you say?”
Jean-Louis turned his head, tears stinging his eyes. “I’ll be good, daddy. I’ll be good.”

James looked down and saw that Jean-Louis’s buttocks were flaming red and figured he may have gone a little too far in his enthusiasm. His own hand was tender. “That’s more like it,” he soothed. When he turned him onto his back he was shocked to see that Jean-Louis’s belly was smeared with white fluid, his own thighs were sticky with it. “You came?” James asked incredulously. “Holy shit, you came while I was spanking you?” He grinned down at him, a surge of desire sparking through his whole body and making him break out in a shaking sweat. “You are a disgustingly bad boy.” James walked over to his suitcase and pulled out a condom, rolled it on and came back to the bed smiling as he squirted some lube onto his sheathed cock.

“Daddy’s gonna have to teach you another lesson. Now get on your knees.” This time, Jean-Louis immediately complied and James had to chuckle. He brushed his slick fingers at his entrance and then lined up his cock. “Ready?” He didn’t wait for Jean-Louis to say yes or no, the sight of his reddened buttocks was too much of a tease and he pushed the whole length of him inside him without the slightest mercy.

Jean-Louis felt like he had been punched in the gut. God knows, if he had been standing, he would have been on the floor right now. He couldn’t even scream at first; that would have required some air in his lungs to do so. When he could finally breathe again he couldn’t even form words, what James was doing to him was beyond comprehension. It had been months since he had been with James, and Paolo had treated him with care and tenderness, prepared him thoroughly to receive pleasure, not like this, no, this was something else altogether, this was getting murdered, even worse than the first time.

“Christ, you’re tight,” he heard James grunting as he continued slamming into him.

Jean-Louis finally found his voice. “What did you expect?” At this point it was too late to tell him to stop or slow down, better to have him finish as soon as possible. He imagined it to be like an amputation; once they start sawing through the limb, it’s best to forge ahead to the end. Yes, forge ahead even though the pain is killing you. “Ça fait mal!” he cried out. It hurts! “Ça fait mal…ça fait mal…”

James lost his rhythm at the sound of Jean-Louis’s moans, gave two, three more pumps of his hips and felt every muscle in his body exploding, coming harder and longer than he could ever recall. “Oh fuck, baby. I can’t believe…fuck, you’re amazing.” He pulled out of him, his whole body trembling and weak, and collapsed onto the bed on his back. “That was fucking incredible.” He lay gasping with satisfaction.

“I’m not letting you near me anymore,” Jean-Louis said angrily, punching him hard on the shoulder. James didn’t even wince. “You fuck like a goddamn animal!” He got up and stomped into the bathroom to wash himself. “I’m not just a hole for you to stick your cock into!” he yelled from the sink. “I have feelings, you fucking cretin!”

James was confused. “Are you really pissed or are you trying to turn me on?”

“Fuck you, James!”

Yeah, he was pissed. The slew of f-bombs told him so. “Oh for Christ’s sake. What did I do?” He peeled off the condom and tossed it into the little receptacle by the bed and went into the bathroom to towel off. “What’s wrong now? Was I too rough?” He rubbed himself down with a wet washcloth under a pair of glaring eyes. “It’s not like you’re a virgin.”

“You have no idea what a shitty lover you are.”
“Shitty lover? Hey, I gave you an orgasm without even touching your cock! I’d say that’s pretty damn fantastic,” he smirked, pointing a finger in Jean-Louis’s face. Jean-Louis batted his hand away and went back into the bedroom, started pulling on his clothes. “Where do you think you’re going?” asked James.

“Back to my apartment.”

“Will you just…just stop. What do you want me to say? I’m sorry? Okay. I’m sorry! C’mon, don’t be like this.” James grabbed Jean-Louis’s trousers from off the floor and held them behind his back, out of his reach.

“You really want me to go out in the cold in my fucking underwear?” Jean-Louis screamed, his face red and furious. He fingered the heavy brass table lamp next to him and relished the idea of smashing it over James’s skull. “Give me my pants. I want to go home and sleep in my own bed and not in the cave of a fucking wild bear!” But even as he shouted he could feel all his conviction draining out of him. He was nothing more than a child throwing a fit and needing to be comforted. They were both ridiculous.

James held out his arms in exasperation. “Look, I said I’m sorry. Now calm the fuck down and get into bed. I’m tired, you’re tired, let’s just go to sleep, okay? Or I can order up another bottle. Would that make you feel better?” He walked over to Jean-Louis and hugged him, stroked his back and hair, kissed his forehead. “I’m sorry if I went too far. Don’t be mad at me, baby.” He lifted his chin and kissed him tenderly on the mouth. “I love you so much. You know that, don’t you? Let’s just go to bed. No more fighting, okay?”

Jean-Louis nodded. He was exhausted and the thought of going out into the cold at two in the morning was less appealing than swallowing his anger and James’s arms around him felt too damn good at the moment. He peeled off his shirt and briefs and crawled under the sheets into James’s waiting embrace, thinking of the Old Testament story of Daniel in the Lion’s Den, and was asleep before his head hit the pillow.
Now It Begins

Chapter Summary

Jean-Louis and Guy-Manuel go on their first date.

He awoke to the sound of James in the shower. It was eight-thirty in the morning and Jean-Louis sat up in a panic, not remembering where he was and thinking he would be late for work. But it was a Saturday, and his heart slowed as he realized he was in the St. Regis, his tender buttocks a reminder of what had taken place the night before. Goddamn it. He would be happy to spend the rest of the morning in bed but his full bladder had other plans for him. With a reluctant groan, he stumbled into the bathroom and took an enjoyable piss, then got into the spacious shower stall with James.

“Back from the gym?” asked Jean-Louis as he moved under the showerhead.

“Yep. Feeling mighty good.” James soaped Jean-Louis’s back and chest, then stroked his cock with a soapy hand, pulling an appreciative moan out of him, but when he moved his hand to his backside, Jean-Louis flinched. “Still sore?” asked James.

“You shouldn’t have spanked me so hard.” He turned around and draped his arms over James’s shoulders. “You really hurt me.” He leaned his face up and kissed him, James’s tongue aggressively sweeping through his mouth, his teeth scraping against his own. “Why do you always do that?” Jean-Louis whispered, tilting his head back so James could have at his neck. “Why do you always hurt me? Why do you make me think you want to kill me?”

“That’s on you,” James growled, sucking on his shoulder, wanting to leave marks that would remind Jean-Louis of him the next time he was even tempted to look at another. He pushed him against the wall and held his arms above him, bit into the pale skin at each bicep. He dropped his hands to his slender waist and pulled Jean-Louis up against his erection. “I can’t stand what you do to me. Want you so bad…wish I could have every single piece of you. Christ. Let me have you. I’ll go slow, I promise. Baby, don’t make me wait.”

James pulled him down and turned him so that Jean-Louis’s back was pressed against his chest. He slicked his cock with soap and guided Jean-Louis into his lap, Jean-Louis’s legs splayed across James’s thighs as James rested on his heels with his back against the tile wall.

“Oh God,” Jean-Louis moaned as he felt James enter him, James’s hands gripping his ribs to keep him from falling forward.

“I’ve got you,” James said. He eased him down another inch and then stopped when he felt Jean-Louis tense up. “It’s okay, baby.”

“Let me, let me do it,” Jean-Louis choked out. He was shivering in a panic, not wanting a repeat of last night’s brutal manhandling. He reached back and gripped James’s arms to steady himself and then sank slowly onto James’s cock. His thighs were shaking even as James held him up, the only thing keeping him from collapsing onto the floor. No matter how many times they made love, it
was always a struggle to take all of him and not fear the pain. He could never get used to it. “Oh,”
Jean-Louis sighed and reached for himself.

James watched over Jean-Louis’s shoulder as he stroked himself, impaled fully on his cock and
writhing. “Fuck, you’re so beautiful. You’re gonna come so hard for me, aren’t you? I want to hear
you scream. Will you do that for me?”

“Yes, yes, daddy. I want to do that for you.” Then words stopped and wails altogether primal
sounded as he shook apart in James’s arms, his cock erupting into the hot spray of the shower.

Jean-Louis’s body clenched tight as a fist around James’s cock as he bucked wildly in his lap,
pushing James right to the precipice. He gripped Jean-Louis’s legs under his knees now, giving
James the leverage to lift him and then drop him back down onto his cock while keeping his own
hips still. The muscles in James’s legs were numb, but he still had plenty of strength left in his
arms. He bounced him too hard, though.

“No more…no more!” he heard Jean-Louis cry out.

He knew Jean-Louis was too sensitive at this point and wouldn’t be able to endure any more
stimulation.

“I know, baby, I’m there.” James stilled his body and let the white hot bolt of lightning course
down his spine and out his cock, just breathed through his orgasm as he held onto Jean-Louis,
owning him deep and sure, filling him with everything he could possibly hold in his heart. “Fuck.
This never gets old.” He lifted Jean-Louis off of him and pulled him upright, his own legs weak
under him, and clutched him against his chest. “How could we not be meant for each other?” asked
James as he kissed him. “One day you’ll know it’s true.”

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The next week Jean-Louis’s sore ass cheeks and bite marks were the only reminders of James’s
visit. Guy-Manuel had stopped by to say hello in the morning before heading up to Phil’s office
and they had agreed on a time to meet for lunch in the dining room. That was all Jean-Louis
needed to float up into the stratosphere, all memory of the weekend-long fuck-fest with James
pushed out of his mind. He had taken off the ring as soon as he got back to his apartment, tucked it
back into its little box and stuffed it at the back of his underwear drawer. He didn’t need it around
his finger to tell him that James was missing him; all his phone calls and texts made that plenty
clear.

At one-thirty he met Guy-Manuel outside the dining room. It took all of Jean-Louis’s self-control
not to lean in and kiss him on the back of his neck as he stood in front of him in the check-out line.
His skin looked so pale and smooth against the darkness of his close cropped hair and he could
smell the clean scent of his soap and shampoo. They sat themselves in a corner table at the far end
of the room and exchanged phone numbers, smiling nervously at each other across the table like
two people who had just won the lottery and were desperate to keep their good fortune a secret.
Angela walked by, saw who Jean-Louis was sitting with, and gave him a sly wink before joining
one of her staff five tables away.

“What’s Phil got you working on?” asked Jean-Louis, trying not to seem too eager. He glanced
down at his sandwich and wondered why he had bothered. He was too excited to eat and took a sip
of his coffee instead.

“Ugh, a redesign of the calendar for the education department. I had no idea they had so many
programs for kids. Phil must hate me. I miss one week and he takes me off the show. Is it because
I fucked up on the spelling?”

Jean-Louis laughed. “Believe me, no one regrets that more than I do. Now I have to deal with Megan.”

It was Guy-Manuel’s turn to laugh. “She has a huge crush on you.”

“Oh? How do you know that?” Jean-Louis was vaguely flattered and utterly terrified.

“She told me last week when I got back. We work the same hours on Tuesday, remember? Anyway, you should hear the way she talks about you. She’s obsessed with your hair…and your hands, for some reason. So, are you interested in her?” Guy-Manuel finished his first slice of pizza and started on his second with a wicked glimmer in his eyes.

“Are you kidding me? I’d rather do it with a six hundred pound gorilla.”

Guy-Manuel almost choked on his lunch. “Really?”

“On second thought, I’d rather not,” Jean-Louis muttered, James suddenly popping into his mind. “I think I’m still decent enough to draw the line at sex with animals.” He looked glumly at his sandwich: two uneven slabs of honey-roasted turkey, a wilted leaf of romaine, and a bland, pale slice of tomato between a cold croissant.

They ate quietly for a moment before Guy-Manuel nonchalantly asked, “So, um, did you do anything for Valentine’s Day?”

“No, nothing special.” Jean-Louis could feel his face reddening. He couldn’t believe he was lying about himself already. Had he not served his penance? Was this James reaching out to him across the miles and wagging his finger at him, punishment for taking off the ring he had given him to prove his devotion, the ring Jean-Louis had kissed as if he had one sincere bone in his body? He sighed and made a lame effort to be honest in a truth-is-so-slippery way. “Someone I knew from university came to visit and we hung out together. I’d rather have been doing something else. What about you? Did you have a hot date?”

“My roommates and I went to a party, got trashed. Everyone had to go dressed in diapers. You know, the whole cupid thing.”

“Uh huh, very kinky.” Jean-Louis imagined Guy-Manuel carousing in a pair of puffy Depends underwear. Ravishing. “No hook-up with a cute girl or boy?”

“I didn’t meet anyone who looked like you, that’s for sure.” Guy-Manuel chewed on a crust, and then murmured, “I think you’ve already ruined me.”

Jean-Louis’s stomach lurched. “Non, c’est vous qui me ont ruiné.” No, it is you who have ruined me.

Hearing that put a blush on Guy-Manuel’s cheeks that spread down his neck. He laughed shyly and shifted in his chair. “Are you saying you like me?”

“Like doesn’t even begin to describe what I feel about you,” Jean-Louis blurted out. Wow. He hadn’t been this reckless with words since he was thirteen and fumbling around in the dark with Sophie and slavishly humiliating himself at her feet, yet he had no desire other than to lay himself bare now. “You must think I’m insane.”

Guy-Manuel merely gave him a smile that sent all his defenses tumbling down like the walls of
Jericho. Jean-Louis pictured Joshua from the Old Testament, sandal-clad feet kicking up loads of dust as he obediently marched around the ancient city, ignorant of the devastating effect he would have through God’s grace. He wondered if Joshua had been as lovely upon the eyes as Guy-Manuel, Guy-Manuel who was going to be his salvation and the one to unlock his heart once more.

That Saturday they went on their first real date, a visit to the Museum of Modern Art for a paper assignment on the Swiss International Style that Guy-Manuel needed to complete for school. They stood in the third floor design gallery in front of an iconic Josef Müller-Brockmann poster—the words “weniger Lärm” in red Helvetica stamped diagonally across the black and white image of a dramatically distraught woman covering her ears with her hands. Jean-Louis titled it “Lady with Migraine” but the poster was all about the equally mundane scourge of noise pollution. Jean-Louis much preferred Müller-Brockmann’s other poster hanging at the Cooper-Hewitt, the one with the boy in suspenders about to be flattened by an oncoming motorcycle, very ominous indeed, this time with the words “schützt das Kind!” in white Helvetica marching across the top. He assumed there must have been a spate of child-centered hit-and-runs back in 1955, or maybe those Swiss parents should have just told their kids to stop playing in the street. Guy-Manuel jotted down notes in a sketchbook while Jean-Louis gazed over at the poster to the left of the aurally assaulted woman, this one by architect and designer Peter Behrens extolling the wonders of the latest technological gizmo—the electric light bulb—shown casting an almost spiritual glow amidst a pattern of dots forming a circle, square, triangle, and rectangles, the rigid geometry of the piece a rather stark departure from the Art Nouveau that came just prior.

Later, they walked through the permanent collections on the other floors and played a game that Jean-Louis had always enjoyed on his occasional Sunday morning museum excursions with Oliver. Oliver’s lesbian aunt/adoptive mother had taught art history at the University of Wales, Bangor until 2004 and Jean-Louis himself was no slouch when it came to aesthetic awareness, having visited almost all the major art museums in Europe with his family during their yearly vacations when he was a child.

“Okay, which one would you steal if you could: Matisse’s View of Notre Dame or The Piano Lesson?” asked Jean-Louis. That was a tough one since both paintings were so compositionally strong. Jean-Louis decided privately that he had to go with The Piano Lesson for its more interesting use of color.

“The Piano Lesson,” Guy-Manuel said after a long moment of contemplation.


Among the Russian artists, it was a three-way smackdown between Rodchenko, Malevich, and Lissitzky. In the end, it really was a no-brainer: Lissitzky’s poster design with the majestically ghoulish two-headed conjoined twins proved unbeatable. For that, Guy-Manuel garnered an enthusiastic hug from Jean-Louis.

“I could kiss you for that,” Jean-Louis whispered as he pulled Guy-Manuel against his chest. “Although I wouldn’t want to take this home with me. It would give me nightmares.”

They disagreed in the Post-Impressionist gallery: Jean-Louis preferred Gauguin’s Still Life with Three Puppies while Guy-Manuel leaned towards Cezanne’s Still Life with Apples.

“Let’s take both, then,” Guy-Manuel said. “If we’re already robbing the place…”

Mon amour, mon couer, je t’aime, je t’adore. My love, my heart, I love you, I adore you. The words will be so easy to say later, Jean-Louis thought. They were already so easy to say now.
Jean-Louis’s favorite piece in the entire collection, though, was in the room dedicated to the Dadaists. There hung Duchamp’s *Network of Stoppages*, a painting that mesmerized Jean-Louis with its seemingly endless and vacillating layers of meaning. It was about everything and nothing at all. Depending upon his frame of mind, the piece could look like an aerial view of a landscape, or a map showing various train routes with the stations marked in red, or the skeletal remains of some creature, or some ancient sponge undulating in a Devonian sea. Underlying all the various iterations was what he considered to be Duchamp’s injection of randomness, the idea that chance is the force behind creation and sets a future path over which one is helpless to alter; once the strings are cast, one can only accept what emerges from that simple, undirected toss of fate.

“Tell me, my love. What do you think of this?” Jean-Louis asked Guy-Manuel as they both gazed at the painting. Jean-Louis stood behind him with his hands resting on Guy-Manuel’s shoulders.

Some minutes passed before Guy-Manuel spoke. “It’s about life’s journey,” he said thoughtfully.

In that moment, Jean-Louis’s heart was set, as concretely as that instance when the strings that Duchamp had thrown down onto the canvas had settled. “Yes, now it begins,” Jean-Louis thought. Another door had opened.

He took Guy-Manuel to a tapas bar on Spring Street for a late lunch. They ate small plates of grilled sardines and octopus, marinated chickpeas and herbs, lamb meatballs and eggplant, all washed down with a bottle of Rioja. They sat at a corner table next to each other holding hands under the table like old lovers, huddled together and basking in their own intimacy. Afterwards, Jean-Louis accompanied Guy-Manuel back to his apartment on 16th Street. His roommates were out so they locked themselves in Guy-Manuel’s small bedroom and lay on the twin bed fully clothed and kissed, a slow and sweet unraveling of twine that would be rewoven into a rope able to withstand the most violent storm; how could it be less than that? Jean-Louis loved him so already, loved the taste of him, the soapy, clean scent of his skin, the way his short-cropped, jet-black hair tickled against his cheeks when he pressed his face against him.

“My love, my love, you are my everything.” Jean-Louis whispered as he kissed Guy-Manuel’s hands. *My love, my love, you are my everything.* And he was.
A comfortable routine unfolded with blissful ease. They met for lunch on Tuesdays and Thursdays when Guy-Manuel was interning at the museum and usually snuck in a quick bout of sex in Jean-Louis’s office while Emma was on break. Five to ten minutes was all it took, not particularly satisfying but the thrill of it made up for the brevity and it was just enough to tide them over to Friday night, when Guy-Manuel could finally show up at his door in the evening with his laptop and not have to leave his arms until Sunday afternoon. The pub crawls with his co-workers were so much nicer now that he had Guy-Manuel at his side. That he was fraternizing with an intern was not a problem. He was not his supervisor in any respect and even Megan had toned down her stalking after she saw them kissing in the hallway, an unforeseen boon. Guy-Manuel was warm and gregarious and both Angela and Oliver thought he was a real catch. Saturdays were for clubbing and concerts and making glorious love, hours and hours of the sweetest ecstasy. Sunday mornings were for sleeping in late and more lovemaking, a leisurely breakfast and a walk in Central Park if it wasn’t too cold and windy. In the afternoon, he would leave Guy-Manuel at the apartment to complete homework assignments while he attended the one o’clock Mass in French at St. Gregory the Great Church on West 90th. Jean-Louis always enjoyed looking at the mural on the wall behind the altar showing a procession of saints tramping against a field of gold, or the stained glass windows on the east and west walls showing The Last Supper and The Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes, quaint images that usually lulled him into a peaceful trance while he half-listened to the service given in his native tongue. Lately he liked letting his mind drift to Guy-Manuel and what they had done the night before or earlier that morning, replaying their acts of love over and over as he stared into the face of a haloed saint.

Their lovemaking had come easy and with no awkwardness. It helped that Guy-Manuel was no virgin and knew what to expect, was fearless and openly affectionate. His skin was pale and flawless, his body lean and delicate but equally masculine, his uncut cock long and straight. He fit into and against Jean-Louis effortlessly. Jean-Louis recalled Paolo’s expert handling and hoped to do him proud with every ardent kiss and heated caress. The first time they made love, Jean-Louis teased Guy-Manuel until he squirmed and begged for Jean-Louis to take him, bringing him almost to orgasm with his fingers alone hitting that sweet spot inside him. When Jean-Louis finally entered him, it was like kneeling at the altar and seeing the face of God, pleasure and awe and wholeness all rolled into one prolonged spasm of joy thundering through him. Guy-Manuel had writhed and cried out in Jean-Louis’s lap as he came, painting them both and sending Jean-Louis over the edge. For a moment Jean-Louis lost all awareness of himself, floated outside his own body, mind completely devoid of thought. When he came back to his senses, he saw Guy-Manuel with his head still dropped back against a shoulder, eyes closed and lips parted like Saint Teresa in Bernini’s baroque masterpiece, and knew he had died and been given a glimpse of heaven.

He took Guy-Manuel home to Arbois for Easter in early April, not caring a whit if he met with
disapproval because he was willing to give up his life for him, but by then his family seemed resigned to Jean-Louis’s antics and even his brother Paul was little moved to anger by Guy-Manuel’s presence. Perhaps it was Guy-Manuel’s sweet nature and non-American heritage, or his fluency in French and European manners, that engendered a stony-faced tolerance from Paul, but there was no beating in the shed this time or open hostility, and his mother actually spoke warmly and at length with Guy-Manuel about his family’s vineyard, inquired about his parents, and let them stay in the main house in Jean-Louis’s old bedroom. Ernst, who managed the marketing end of the family business, was thrilled when Guy-Manuel pointed out ways to improve the website and even sketched up a nice redesign for one of their wine labels. Easter dinner was a pleasant affair, all conversation in French instead of mangled English, as had been the case during the fiasco with James, and afterwards Charlotte pulled Jean-Louis aside in the pantry and kissed him enthusiastically.

“He’s perfect,” she said. “He’s beautiful. And you are so in love. Didn’t I tell you? I knew you’d find the right person.”

“You like him?” Jean-Louis asked, beaming with happiness. Her opinion was everything to him, even in matters of love, though her own track record was questionable having already had one child out of wedlock and an endless stream of boyfriends.

“I adore him. He’s not at all like that moron James.” She saw the look of discomfort that flashed unbidden across his face and slapped his chest with the flat of her palms, knocking him into a shelf full of dried beans. “I thought you gave up that idiot. You said you’d end it.”

“I know. I will.”

“You better, or I’ll end it for you. I told you right from the start, that man is poison and he’ll ruin everything for you if you let him.”

“You make him sound like a monster.”

“Isn’t he?”

“No…no, he’s just…confused.”

“You’re the one who’s confused, little brother. If you don’t want to fuck things up with Guy-Manuel, you’ll listen to me. When have I ever steered you wrong?”

“Never,” Jean-Louis said. “You’ve always looked out for me.” He kissed her back now, slow and deep, and sighed with happiness. “When I’m with you, everything is right with the world.” He held her tightly against him, suddenly aware of how much he missed her and how other men could hold and kiss her when he could not, should not. He didn’t deserve her. “Don’t be angry with me.”

“Promise me you’ll do what I say.”

Jean-Louis nodded, but said nothing. He couldn’t lie to her, not in words when he knew he would do so in deeds. As much as he wanted James out of his life, a part of him had grown equally to need him, if only to shine a light on his own faults and weaknesses, to make his heart pump with fear and dread. After all, how could he know goodness without sin, joy without misery, desire without threat of loss? The looming specter of James’s retribution made his love for Guy-Manuel that much more intense and meaningful; he didn’t want to know what pallor would descend upon his world without James to color it black and blue and red.
“Baby? Are you there?” All James heard was the sound of traffic on the other end and what he thought was a dog being strangled. He rubbed his eyes and looked at his phone again and saw the number. “Jean-Louis? Hello? Can you hear me?” It was four in the morning, almost time for him to get up anyway for his workout. Still, Jean-Louis was never one to rise before seven-thirty and even with the time difference between New York and Denver…he jolted fully awake as it dawned on him. Jean-Louis would never call him, rare enough as that was, so early in the morning.

“What is it, baby? What’s going on?”

For the next several minutes he listened to Jean-Louis sobbing. “Christ, what the hell have you done to yourself? Are you bombed out of your head again? Stop crying and tell me what’s going on.” James imagined he’d been out clubbing all night and gotten himself into shit he shouldn’t have. Typical. He got up and went into the bathroom to take a piss. The crying went on even as he flushed the toilet, and then the call went dead. “Oh, for fuck’s sake.” James redialed and it went to voicemail. “Hey, what’s the matter with you? Call me back.” He washed his face and put on his workout clothes and gradually his worry started outpacing his annoyance. This really wasn’t like Jean-Louis at all, though he could get irritatingly maudlin and moody, he had never pulled a stunt like this. James dialed again as he went downstairs and this time Jean-Louis picked up.

“What the fuck is going on? Where are you?” James asked.

“Barcelona.”

“Barcelona? Since when?”

“James…everything is…ruined.” Then more pathetic moaning.

“Oh, for crying out loud! Will you get a hold of yourself and tell me what the hell you’re doing in Barcelona?”

“Come get me…come get me…” Then the call went dead again.

Once more, James redialed and once more the call went to voicemail. This time he shouted, “This is ridiculous! Call me back when you’ve got your goddamn head on straight!” Then he thought better of it, and added, “You know what? Why don’t you call that cocksucker, Professor What’s-His-Name, and have him fix whatever the fuck is wrong with you now!”
Shit! He didn’t need this, not after all the crap Jean-Louis had put him through the last few months with his infidelities, his arrogant lack of remorse, the disastrous hook-up with Charlotte, to do this now, whatever this was, send him a fucking SOS from Spain of all places and ask him to bail him out of whatever mess he had gotten himself into. Serves him right, goddamn it. Come get me.

Maybe he was in jail or something for peddling his ass or carrying illegal substances. Well, he could rot in there for a few days, might do him some good. Normally, James would have relished the opportunity to swoop in like some armor-wearing, steed-riding storybook hero and rescue his golden slut of a cheating, whoring, heart-trampling lover. But not this time when his own guilt and confusion over fucking Jean-Louis’s sister was still fresh on his mind and turning his stomach inside out. And that wasn’t even the worst part.

James went into the basement and enjoyed a particularly vigorous workout as he turned recent events over in his head for the millionth time. He had flown out to New York on three occasions over the course of the offseason, not counting Valentine’s Day when he had given Jean-Louis the ring, a token of his love and devotion, only to have Jean-Louis throw it back in his face in the most humiliating ways. He had gone back in mid-April to attend the opening of the exhibition Jean-Louis had co-curated and discovered that the unfaithful bastard couldn’t stop mooning over some raven-haired, china doll of a boy. It was disgusting. How could he possibly be interested in that when he had him, all man, all muscle, non-stop sex on a stick? The boy, some foreigner, was admittedly pretty, okay, maybe a shitload prettier than pretty, but come on! When James confronted him later at the hotel, Jean-Louis had merely shrugged and flashed that obnoxiously arrogant smile and goddamn it if James didn’t wipe that smirk off his face with his fist, literally, as quick and easy as shaking an Etch-a-Sketch to clear the screen. He couldn’t believe Jean-Louis had the nerve to get up off the floor and laugh.

“Is that the best you can do, motherfucker?” he had shouted, stealing a line straight out of James’s own playbook, eyes wild and smirk still intact on his bloodied mouth.

James had pushed him down onto the bed and taken him with unbridled violence, made him scream at the top of his lungs, but he wouldn’t beg for mercy no matter how many times James demanded it, Jean-Louis wouldn’t give in, wouldn’t say he was sorry.

In early May, James flew back for a photo shoot for a Men’s Health feature article. He showed up at Jean-Louis’s apartment afterwards hoping to make amends. Jean-Louis had refused to respond to any texts or calls and James knew of no other way to reach him except to come crawling back with his tail between his legs. He must have banged on the door for a good fifteen minutes before Jean-Louis appeared shirtless and buttoning his jeans, his hair disheveled and the place reeking of pot. James had pushed his way in just in time to see Guy-Manuel walk naked from the bedroom and pause startled in the doorway staring back at him, a lit joint dangling between his fingers.

“So this is what you’re doing behind my back?” asked James, hands already clenched into fists.

“Who says I’m doing anything behind your back? This is my apartment, my life and I didn’t invite you.” Jean-Louis had turned to Guy-Manuel and said something in French, at which Guy-Manuel went back into the bedroom and closed the door. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“I’m here to say I’m sorry, but now I’m pretty sure I’m not sorry in the least.”

“Fine, you’re not sorry. I don’t care. Go back to Denver and leave me alone!”

“You selfish little shit.” James had grabbed him and held his head tightly between his hands and stared into his glassy eyes, hoping to see some hint of affection or loyalty, something that showed there had been meaning and worth to what they had shared.
“I love Guy-Manuel,” Jean-Louis declared, sneering, triumph in his voice, “more than anything in the world. I’d give him my heart a thousand times over. But never once…to you.”

Something inside James collapsed in on itself when he heard this. It wasn’t just the simple truth of it—he had known all along Jean-Louis didn’t love him—it was the unadorned cruelty of his words crushing all hope, piercing him through like a needle-sharp dagger in his jugular, draining him of blood so that his veins could refill with rage instead. Jean-Louis had given the love James wanted so badly for himself to another, freely and utterly. It was too much to swallow, not after he had told him not to do this, warned him not to cross that line. What he did next was as close to an out-of-body experience as he’d ever come to until the day he was irrevocably injured on the field. He dragged Jean-Louis into the bedroom and took him in front of Guy-Manuel.

“Don’t you fucking look away!” he had screamed at Guy-Manuel. He had his hand at Jean-Louis’s throat and was choking him hard, feeling his body go limp on the bed. “You watch or I swear I will kill you both!”

Guy-Manuel was sobbing and screaming like a mortally wounded animal and it filled James with mind-blowing pleasure to see the fear and hysteria marring his delicate porcelain face. Jean-Louis reached out one hand to Guy-Manuel and gripped him tightly to calm him, but he made no sound whatsoever from start to finish, his perfectly dead eyes fixed blindly upon James through the whole ordeal.

Then in late June, he was in town again for a fundraiser. Despite his apprehension, he called Jean-Louis hoping to smooth things over and was surprised to get a response to his voice message. Jean-Louis didn’t sound angry or hurt, was in good spirits even, it was as if nothing had happened. James went to his apartment that night and was shocked to be greeted by Charlotte. She was visiting New York for a few days apparently, though Jean-Louis had made no mention of this over the phone, the sneaky bastard. James had met Charlotte only once before during that disastrous Easter in Arbois and he had little recollection of her other than the fact that she had been awfully unfriendly towards him. That night, though, she was warm and charming as she welcomed him into the apartment, her long blond hair falling over her shoulders in waves and, Jesus, had she been this incredibly sexy all along? James was startled by how much she looked like Jean-Louis, they had the same eyes and mouth and he had obviously been too nervous and out of his element during their last meeting to notice. But he saw it now and he wanted nothing more than to kiss her.

“Where’s your brother?” James asked.

“He’s out.” Charlotte sat back on the sofa and poured a second glass of wine and offered it to James.

“Where?”

“A club in Brooklyn…with a friend.”

“What friend?” He sat down next to her and took the glass. He could smell her perfume; he couldn’t put his finger on it but he could swear he had smelled it once before.

“Someone named Oliver. I doubt you would know him.” She lit a cigarette and smiled innocently at him.

Fuck, he knew him alright. How could he forget the way that slime ball had drooled all over his boy. The thought of Jean-Louis out with that piece of shit…he gulped down the wine to keep from swearing a blue streak in front of her. “So what are you doing here all by yourself tonight? Didn’t you want to go out with them?”
Charlotte gave a nonchalant shrug and refilled her glass. “I have no one to dance with.”

“No? A gorgeous girl like you? I find that hard to believe.” He glanced down at her tits and wondered what they would feel like in his hands, wondered if her mouth tasted like Jean-Louis’s.

“Would you want to go with me?” she asked eagerly. She got up on her knees on the sofa and put her hands on his shoulders. “I know where they are. I could take us there.”

When he looked into her eyes he saw possibility and lust and his own consuming jealousy reflected back at him. “Yeah, let’s go.”

The club was in a converted warehouse in the Red Hook district boasting a massive sound system playing techno and attracting a very young crowd of twinks and their admirers of both sexes, not exactly James’s scene but, what the hell, Charlotte was obviously turned on and he was turned on by her. They got drinks at the bar and then Charlotte yelled in excitement over the thumping bass, “Look! There they are!”

Holy shit. He saw Jean-Louis up on a caged platform, shirtless and clad in a pair of barely-there faux-denim briefs, wearing a cowboy hat and bolo tie around his neck, dancing with some heavily tattooed, muscle-bound freak in a neon-yellow jockstrap and Doc Martens. Oliver was there, too, in an equally revealing all-white ensemble showing off his flat midriff and dry-humping Jean-Louis from behind.

“Where the fuck are his pants?” James shouted in disgust. This couldn’t be happening. Leave him alone for one second and this is what he does. Christ. Where were the topless girls in go-go boots? Where was common decency?

“C’mon,” Charlotte laughed as she dragged James into the seething, pulsing crowd of bodies. She didn’t seem to mind that her brother was up there exposing himself for everyone to see, so why should he, right? Why indeed. It was obscene and undeniably arousing and all James could think about was how much he wanted and hated and loved him and how badly he needed to get laid. So he threw himself into it, bumping and grinding with Charlotte on the dance floor and getting progressively drunker as the hours passed. He wanted to run away from the sight of Jean-Louis up there with that asshole Oliver and Mr. Tattoo and please, good God, don’t let that exotic Geisha Boy show up, especially not him because James wouldn’t be able to face him without committing murder in the first degree. He thought all these things as he put his hands on Charlotte and squeezed her breasts and then they were kissing with wild, drunken abandon and James felt freer than he had in years.

“Let’s go back to your hotel,” Charlotte shouted into his ear. “For privacy.”

They were both drenched with sweat and James’s balls were aching from the way she had been moving against him all night. He looked up at the platform but Jean-Louis had disappeared, probably getting fucked in some toilet stall, James figured, or maybe he was back at his apartment doing a private lap dance for Oliver. “Sure,” he said, jealous rage spiking in his chest. “Why not.”

He lost count of how many times they had sex, it could have been once, twice or ten times, the night was a hazed out blur though he was fairly certain he had enjoyed himself based on how completely drained he felt and the fact that his nuts no longer throbbed. Charlotte was already gone from his hotel room when he awoke with an excruciating hangover; he had no idea when she had left and lay for some time regretting all the vodka shots he had done. He washed down a handful of aspirins with two bottles of water and stumbled into the shower, forced himself to think in sentences. It was like getting back on a bike, he reasoned, having a woman in his arms once more and fucking her brains out. That was a great thing. Was this a sign that things were looking up for
him, that he was finally over his fixation and could move on with his life and regain some semblance of normalcy? He certainly wanted to believe it, but then why did he feel like such a lowlife? He shouldn’t. After all, Jean-Louis cheated on him all the time and this was James’s first infidelity, and it probably shouldn’t even count since the monogamy thing was James’s idea in the first place. If he made the rules, he could unmake them. Didn’t he have every right to exorcise his own demons? If only she hadn’t been Jean-Louis’s sister...if only James hadn’t seen his face when he had looked into her eyes and imagined him saying, “Don’t let me go.”

When he got out of the shower he saw that Jean-Louis had texted him: Call me.

There was no greeting on the other end when James rang him up, just, “You fucked my sister, you fucking creep! Don’t you ever call me again! Don’t you ever come near me, do you understand? You are the most disgusting, horrible, despicable piece of shit that ever walked this planet and I fucking hate you!”

That Jean-Louis deemed his sister blameless in all this was just made abundantly clear, but there was no way in hell James was going to take sole responsibility. “Now hold on a second. You weren’t at the apartment when I came by and she’s the one who wanted to—”

“Go fuck yourself, James!”

“She’s the one who wanted to go out and...look...we were both drunk and...I don’t know...one thing led to another, so, okay...it happened and I don’t think I should have to apologize to a cheating—”

“What part of ‘go fuck yourself’ do you not understand?” Jean-Louis interrupted.

This wasn’t fair. Why should James feel like he had committed some act of betrayal when all he did was the same thing Jean-Louis had been doing all along, merely fucking whomever he wanted? So what if it had been his sister? Charlotte had a slew of lovers from what Jean-Louis had told him. Why was this any different? But he didn’t have the courage to continue arguing his case. The truth was he did feel like he had betrayed him, probably himself as well, and was ashamed in spite of every reason not to be.

“Would it help if I said I’m sorry?” James pleaded, but his heart wasn’t in it. He had lost him, hadn’t he? The call went dead, all his fears confirmed.

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Later that morning he had a guest appearance at a Denver television station to compete in a cook-off with a celebrity chef and a former model. James thought his chances of winning were pretty slim, but it was all to promote the local food pantry so it really didn’t matter if he lost, the food pantry would benefit regardless. He was fed up with Jean-Louis’s dropped phone calls hours earlier and so glad for the day’s distraction that he actually had a jolly good time chopping onions and peppers in front of a studio audience full of housewives and retirees and engaging in silly banter with the host of the show. It wasn’t until he got back home in the late afternoon that he checked his phone and found zero texts or missed calls from him. Fine. Fuck him. Stay stuck in Barcelona, if that’s where he really was in the first place. Training camp was starting the next week and he needed to focus his energy on the one thing that he was good at. He had to concede total failure in his relationship with Jean-Louis, but he could still play football, still succeed and be admired and loved for it. Maybe he would finally go back to dating. His unfortunate tryst with Charlotte was proof enough that he liked having sex with women as much as ever. Krista’s wedding was in Aspen that weekend and his buddy Dontrell had hooked him up with one of his wife’s single girlfriends. Yeah. It was time to get his life back on track.
Aftermath

Chapter Summary

Guy-Manuel goes back to Amelia.

He didn’t know why he called James, the one person who would be least sympathetic to his plight. He could have called anyone else and gotten a better response, but no one else had done more to thoroughly destroy him than James, so maybe that was the reason. Motives are hard to fathom when the ground has crumbled away beneath one’s feet. Jean-Louis sat in the shadow of La Sagrada Familia after meeting Guy-Manuel for coffee and what he hoped to be reconciliation. James’s actions two months ago had devastated Guy-Manuel, but Jean-Louis had assured him that all would be fine, there was nothing James could do to him that could ever hold meaning. The rape was, well, almost indistinguishable from their usual lovemaking as far as Jean-Louis was concerned, the blatant lack of consent being the only minor difference, and even that was of no importance to him. He was well accustomed to James’s rough handling and, besides, whatever physical damage James inflicted would only be temporary; Jean-Louis’s heart was still intact, beating with ardor for Guy-Manuel more than ever.

Guy-Manuel was not so calloused. He cried for hours, inconsolable, as if he were the one who had been held down and violated, and suffered nightmares for days on end. That Jean-Louis seemed unfazed by what had been done to him filled Guy-Manuel with even deeper panic and remorse. He was the reason it had happened, he was the object of James’s jealous rage, and Jean-Louis had borne the brunt of it while he had watched helplessly. How could he forgive himself? Jean-Louis had first told him about James during a long and memorable meal at a tapas bar on Spring Street, when he had confessed that James was the ‘friend’ who had visited him on Valentine’s Day. Guy-Manuel couldn’t claim ignorance of James’s temper and possessiveness and still he had gone ahead and fallen deeply in love because it was all too good—the phenomenal sex, the comfort and closeness, the sheer joy of being with him—Jean-Louis gave him everything and more than he could even imagine, it was all so perfect except for that one thing. When he saw Jean-Louis two days after the exhibition opening with a nasty bruise on his cheek, he knew he should have ended it right then before things got way out of hand. But he didn’t, he couldn’t, Jean-Louis was never more attentive and affectionate and so very happy until James’s next visit and the bottom dropped out.

During the following weeks Guy-Manuel escaped into work. He threw himself into completing his final project and then there was graduation and a return home to Navarra to spend time with his family. He saw little of Jean-Louis before he left for Spain though he regularly received the most tender and heartbreaking texts from him, brief outpourings that reminded him of the poetry Jean-Louis would recite to him at night when things had been so good between them, when he had lain in his arms and everything seemed possible, when each moment had been filled with indescribable happiness. He couldn’t bear the guilt of returning to Jean-Louis’s apartment, so before he left for Navarra they had talked about moving into a different apartment together in New York later that fall. But as it happened, Guy-Manuel found a position at a small design studio based in Barcelona and moved there instead in July rather than going back to New York. There was one other hitch: Guy-Manuel had rekindled his relationship with his girlfriend Amelia and she was with him now in Barcelona in the apartment they shared as a couple. This was revealed over coffee that morning,
and Jean-Louis listened without speaking, hearing the words but not comprehending until moments later. He had come to Barcelona prepared to give up his job in New York so they could be together. That prospect alone had made their separation bearable, but where there had once been hope for a new start was now a great void, a complete erasure of his future.

“You’re angry,” Guy-Manuel said. “I don’t blame you. You came all this way…I should have told you sooner, but I wasn’t sure how things would go with Amelia.”

“You love her,” Jean-Louis commented flatly.

“Yes. She wants to get married. Soon.”

“Do you want that, too?” Jean-Louis forced himself to look at Guy-Manuel. He had let his hair grow out a little and was sporting a goatee. It made him seem more mature and so terribly attractive.

Guy-Manuel nodded. “Yes. I want it, too. I want to have kids, we both do.”

“Bien sûr.” Of course. What else was there? Hadn’t Jean-Louis wanted the same thing? Everything was slipping away like sand through his fingers, his entire life washing out with the tide, what he had endured with Sophie repeating itself in glorious, merciless detail. Only this time it was even worse. He had never imagined this would befall him again, the luck of finding perfection—holding it, nurturing it safe within himself—only to have it torn straight out of his chest.

“You’re free now,” said Guy-Manuel, like it was a benediction.

“Free of what? Of you?” Jean-Louis asked, bewildered, and then, the weight of rejection upon him, crushing him, “No, my love, you are free of me. You are rid of me!”

Guy-Manuel put his head down and whispered, in tears, “I know you must hate me.”

For some moments, Jean-Louis was silent. His throat had closed up and it was all he could do to breathe without choking. How was he even still alive? How was his shattered heart still beating? Finally, he reached over and took Guy-Manuel’s hand in his, gently caressed his knuckles, the skin smooth, unblemished. “How could I ever hate you? To hate what is beautiful is to deny God his due.”

In the end he had no choice but to give Guy-Manuel his blessing and mean every painful word. Jean-Louis shook his hand like he would a stranger though he had memorized every precious part of him and would now only have him in his mind’s eye. He left the café and walked aimlessly, the grand beauty of the old city lost to him, until he was limp from the heat and bleary-eyed. He sat down on a bench, absently wiping at his face and gulping air, panting like a beaten dog. In front of him was Gaudí’s masterpiece shielding him from the sun and looming like a sandcastle straight out of a fantastical dream. How fucking perfect: God towering above him and laughing at his self-inflicted wounds.

He called James just to make his misery complete. He had lost his adoration, too, an apt punishment for agreeing to Charlotte’s brilliant ploy at seducing James right out of Jean-Louis’s life once and for all. They had both keeled over with laughter after Jean-Louis’s indignant rant on the phone, after they had compared notes on James’s performance in bed and mocked his lack of skill. Now he was getting what he deserved; he had played his hand with too much arrogance and lost. Jean-Louis went back to his hotel and wept until his throat was parched and he felt emptied of his organs, free of everything inside his body. Letting Guy-Manuel go was the right thing to do he told himself as he lay on the bed, eyes raw and staring blindly at the ceiling. Guy-Manuel stood to
have a happy, fulfilling life. Who was he to obstruct his path to paradise when his own led straight to hell? Jean-Louis went back to New York having no purpose and on the verge of turning twenty-three, fairly certain that his life was over.

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Devil: What’s happening here? I thought we were messing with that meathead…not the other one…(sniffles)…

God: Yeah, who’s screwing with the script?

Santa: Not me! That French twink is the sharpest blade I’ve got. If someone’s been using him to pick their teeth…

Jesus: Shazam! I’ve been teaching that Prodigal Son of yours a much deserved lesson in humility. Hah! Take that!

Devil: You devious little shit.

God: Didn’t I already tell you to stay out of this, Son?

Jesus: But, Daaaaaad. You never take my side, and I’m the firstborn! I’m the one who’s supposed to wear the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.

Devil: You’ve got your stories all mixed up, you imbecile. I knew you slept through Rabbi Rechnitz’s sermons. If you cracked open the Midrash once in a while you might learn a thing or two.

Santa: I’ll wring your neck if you’ve ruined my boy. That’s my perogative!

God: Everyone, calm down! Okay, first of all, hands off Santa’s elf. I’m talking to you, Prince of Peace. Start living up to your name. Second of all…er…secondly, is that right? Ahem, second, let’s get back on track, alright?

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He couldn’t do it. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t get it up when it actually counted. Christ. The girl was a knock out, even if her tits weren’t real, she was still gorgeous. What was her name? Mikela. Beautiful. Long lashes and great ass and soft, full lips. His right hand worked furiously but no amount of flogging was going to convince his soldier to stand at attention, not when he couldn’t let himself fantasize about him, still too mortified and guilt-ridden over what he had done recently to conjure up an image of his beloved, hateful Jean-Louis.

“Ah, jeez. Sorry about that.” James rolled off of her and onto his back, his clammy skin sticking uncomfortably to the hotel bedspread which, he pondered regrettable, was probably chock full of cum stains. He was sweating like a pig from all the alcohol he had consumed earlier and disgusted by his own scent, what could only be the ripe odor of desperation and failure wafting up his nose.

“Too much to drink,” he muttered by way of explanation. If only.

He cradled his limp cock in his hand as he silently ticked off a litany of profanities. What was wrong with him? He was ready to move on, why couldn’t he do this? He had been turned on all night, dick hard for hours and throbbing like the worst headache as he pressed against her hip on the dance floor. Krista’s wedding reception was the perfect antidote to his remorse and depression —plenty of free-flowing booze, a nice big slab of chateaubriand with mushroom sauce, a totally hot woman eager for him—just what he needed to rid himself of all the bad decisions that had
plagued him ever since that unfortunate day...fucking hell...who was he kidding? He would never be done with that son of a bitch. James wanted so badly to hold him again, taste his mouth and shove his tongue down his throat, feel the heat and thick hardness of his cock beneath his palm, hear him moan as he came. He should have gone to him. *Come get me.* What a mistake. He shouldn’t have abandoned him the one time he had reached out to him. He had let him down when he had needed him most and now it was probably too late to fix. It was always too late when it came to Jean-Louis. James could never do right by him. He called him after he sent Mikela to her own room with promises of another attempt, all he needed was a shower and a nap and then he’d be good to go, yep, see you in a while, sweetheart.

“Baby, it’s me. Did I wake you?” James kept his voice low, though it wasn’t as if anyone was listening through the walls. Still, he felt like he was somehow sneaking around and thus the whispering.

“Yes. It’s late...it’s three in the morning here.”

He listened to Jean-Louis breathing softly, half asleep, an intimate sound that made his heart break apart. His chest ached. “Are you home?” James asked.

“Yes. Where else would I be?”

“I don’t know. Barcelona? Are you okay now?”

There was a choked sigh and a pause. “I’m so...you killed me, James. You got your way.”

“Don’t say that!” But it was more plea than demand. “Don’t make me feel worse than I already do. Fuck. I still love you. I still want you.”

“Whatever. I’m tired. Goodbye.”

Jean-Louis hung up and rolled over in bed, grateful that Oliver had decided to stay with him after their night out. He didn’t want to be alone, couldn’t bear it, and moved closer to him for comfort. He dozed off again quickly, but dreamt of Guy-Manuel and cried in his sleep. Oliver told him so the next morning as they sat in the kitchen drinking coffee and eating toast and scrambled eggs.

“I can’t believe he called you, after everything that’s happened. You should have given me the phone. I’d have told him to fuck off.” Oliver was in a bad mood. He didn’t like to have his sleep interrupted, especially if it meant watching Jean-Louis weeping into his pillow. Oliver leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, ran a hand through his mussed up hair. “I’m not afraid of that bastard.”

“I didn’t come all this way just to watch some asshole professor pervin’ all over you,” Jean-Louis recollected with perfect clarity. He smiled back at Oliver. “That’s what he said to me the first time he met you.”

Oliver’s eyes widened at the insult. “What? Since when have I ever ‘perved’ all over you? Bloody hell. If anyone’s a pervert, it’s him, waving his prick all over the place, bludgeoning you with it. Christ, Jean-Louis.” Oliver shook his head in disappointment. “How could you have let that horrible excuse for a human being ever put his hands on you? I really have to question your judgment sometimes.”


“My sweet puppy,” Oliver murmured and hugged him close. “You’re young. There’s still time for
you to figure things out.”

“What for? So I can fall in love again and ruin someone else’s life? Guy-Manuel despises me and why shouldn’t he? I let James come between us…I did that.” He felt like crying again; it had only been a few days since he had flown back from Barcelona and he had not even begun to mourn his loss. “I’m so tired of being an object of my own derision.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Oliver stared into Jean-Louis’s wounded face. “You hate yourself. Is that it? You’re addicted to self-loathing and all that Catholic bullshit you love so much…you cling to that nonsense like a fucking barnacle. What are you afraid of, that something good might actually come your way? That maybe God won’t punish you? It doesn’t always have to end up a gigantic snafu.”

“You don’t know the things I’ve done, the things I’ve let happen.”

“Then take control of your life, create your own destiny.”

“Mon dieu, you sound like James.”

“Oh, what flattery! In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not him, and as much as I detest him, you’re the one who keeps opening the door to that fool and then crying ‘woe is me’ and feeling sorry for yourself. Just stop it, stop sabotaging your own life and wallowing in grief. It’s unseemly and beneath you and bloody tiresome.” After a pause, Oliver accused, “You enjoy it, don’t you, all that suffering, like some beautiful martyr for Christ, a swooning Saint Sebastian stuck full of arrows wearing nothing but a loincloth? I know it’s all very morbid and sexy, but guess what? Your real father isn’t coming back to save you, no matter how many times you cry wolf.”

Jean-Louis was silent with shame. Oliver was always brutally honest with him when it mattered most and at times he was his only link to sanity and good sense, but this was too much to hear. “How can you say that to me?” He knew he sounded like a spoiled child, indignant and defensive, heels dug in, even when caught in a lie. “I don’t even know what you mean…my father was…I never asked him to save me. I never asked for that!”

“That’s enough,” Oliver ordered, impatient. “I told myself I wasn’t going to go down this road with you. I wasn’t going to parse your behavior but if you won’t see yourself honestly and take responsibility, then there’s nothing else for me to say.” He sighed, and then said with tender resignation, “I love and adore you, Jean-Louis, I do. I can be your friend, your brother, your lover, but I can’t help you. There aren’t enough hours in the day for that.” Oliver ate a forkful of scrambled eggs and marveled at how perfectly Jean-Louis had cooked them. “Christ, you are truly amazing. Making bad choices isn’t your only talent.”
Chapter Summary

Things suck for Jean-Louis, then suck some more. James finds out he’s going to be a father.

He pared his life down to the bare necessities and a simple routine: get up, shower, go to work, come home, open a bottle, light up a joint. No more pub-crawling on Fridays with his colleagues, no more clubbing and handjobs with strangers in back rooms on Saturdays. His once-a-month hook-ups with Angela, into which he would pour all his energy and need, and attendance at the one o’clock Mass on Sundays at St. Gregory, where he would daydream about Guy-Manuel, were his only indulgences. James had stopped calling him regularly, too busy with setting team records and celebrating at Hooters, at least Jean-Louis assumed as much, and why not? He watched the Broncos games if he could get them in New York, just to torture himself. Staring at number eighty-seven scrambling all over the field on Monday Night Football was no different than self-flagellation, only Jean-Louis was no penitent and there was no absolution for him. It was obvious that James was not only on his game, he was having the best year of his career, and all without Jean-Louis cheering him on, telling him he was a god, a titan on the field. The photos James posted on his Facebook page were of him out with a different girl every week it seemed. Did James no longer love him? Had he finally driven him away? He went back home for Christmas and felt utterly lost, even Charlotte couldn’t point him in the right direction. She had yet another new lover and was six months pregnant with twins, God knows who the real father was, it was anyone’s guess, although she had a hunch. She and her previous lover had agreed to a prenatal paternity test after the New Year. She would decide then what to do. The whole thing depressed Jean-Louis beyond words. At midnight Mass he said a prayer for himself.

“Almighty Father in heaven, please kill me.”

He could hear Oliver telling him to stop being such a martyr, but even Oliver was gone from him; he had left at the end of the fall term to go to the University of Edinburgh as part of a two-semester faculty exchange. Oliver’s absence was bitterly painful. He had been a good friend and mentor through thick and thin, his favorite drinking and clubbing buddy, and the warm body that had kept loneliness at bay. Jean-Louis saw no point in finding a replacement, the idea of being with someone new held no appeal and, honestly, all he wanted to do was crawl under a rock and go to sleep. When things had fallen apart with Guy-Manuel, his desire for romance seemed to have disappeared with him; yet another door had closed.

“Give it time. It’ll come back,” Oliver had told him.

“Easy for you to say. You never have trouble being with people.” Jean-Louis sat on Oliver’s bed watching him pack before they parted ways. Oliver would be swapping apartments with his faculty counterpart in Edinburgh and was in the middle of deciding which clothes to bring. The idea of some stranger occupying Oliver’s space made Jean-Louis even more morose.

“That’s because I actually like people. Which one?” Oliver held up two identical paisley ties.
“The blue one. I like people.”

“No you don’t.” Oliver packed one and threw the other one on the pile of rejects. “You can’t tolerate anyone, except yourself.”

“I like you.”

“That’s because I must remind you of you in some very sick, twisted way…I should hope it’s only because we’re both Leos.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You, my young friend, are a quintessential narcissist and self-loather.”

“Not true!”

“Okay, then you’re merely obstinate and arrogant and a glutton for punishment?”

“That…sounds more like it…”

“Same difference.”

Despite Oliver’s assurances that his desire would return, it didn’t. Nearly six months had gone by since the breakup with Guy-Manuel and he could muster no sexual interest in anyone besides Angela, lovely Angela who would never be his anyway. Now even she started pushing him out the door. With Oliver in Edinburgh, Jean-Louis was sleeping only with her, far too little sex for anyone to be having without some legitimate excuse, like death.

“Don’t you think you’re using me as a crutch?” she asked him during one of their trysts. They were naked in his bed and he was dreading the moment when she would get up to leave and go back to her husband. “I mean, you didn’t even want to come out with us last Friday and there were so many cute girls and boys at that bar. If you gave someone else a chance to know you…” She sighed and stroked his face. “You can’t hide forever, you know. Sooner or later you’ll have to get out there again and just start all over. We’re all in the same boat, it’s the same for everyone.”

“It’s not the same for you,” he protested. “You have Stuart, he’ll never leave you.”

“Good lord, he could croak tomorrow, drop dead of a heart attack or whatever.”

“And you’d just go get someone new if that happened?”

“Well, sure. I’d still be alive and God knows I’m not dead yet down there.” She reached over and caressed his cock. “And you aren’t either. You’ve got a long way to go before you run out of steam, so get out there and live again.” He rolled away from her but she pulled him back. “Listen to me. I know Guy-Manuel meant the world to you. Christ, he was so adorable! We all loved him. But you were right to let him go find his own happiness, as much as you wanted it to be with you. Even if James hadn’t interfered, who knows how things would have played out? Would it have been better, easier if James hadn’t ruined things, if it had been someone else who made him leave? We don’t own anyone but ourselves, my sweet, sad boy. Remember that.”

What she said was even harder to hear than the truth Oliver had hammered into him before. What if he had kept James in his life to serve as an easy target for blame when he needed one to hide behind? What if Guy-Manuel would have left eventually because of him, not James, what if they were all destined to leave him, from his father and Sophie onwards, just an endless line of people he adored slipping away from his grasp? People thought him cold but, really, it was the opposite:
he loved too deeply.

Charlotte called him in late January. The paternity test taken by her former lover showed that the twins she was carrying were not his. Then came the bombshell. The only other man she had slept with near the time of conception was James. It would have been a stretch—she hadn’t been due to ovulate for another week—but perhaps his sperm were as stubbornly tenacious as the man. Would he mind asking James to take a prenatal paternity test on her behalf? All James would need to do was swipe a sterile swab along the inside of his mouth and send the sample to such-and-such lab. Jean-Louis was so stunned he didn’t even bother to think about it. He simply called James and repeated Charlotte’s request verbatim.

James hit the roof, went on a fifteen-minute rant, and then asked as an afterthought, “Is it too late for an abortion?”

“Um, yes.”

“Well, why the fuck didn’t she do it earlier?”

“She thought they were her lover’s and, besides, you know we’re Catholic.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? She must’ve used birth control before or else she’d have fifty kids by now.”

“I mean she can’t have an abortion. The church would never allow it and she wouldn’t have agreed to it either.”

“Yeah, good Catholic girl that she is…fuck! How do I know that she’s not completely lying through her teeth?”

“Well, let’s see, you fucked her in late June, and now it’s the end of January and she’s seven months pregnant. Do the math.”

“Goddamn it! My team is going to the Super Bowl in another week and now she lays this humungous pile of bullshit on me?”

“All you have to do is swab the inside of your mouth. It’s not a big deal.”

“Not a big deal? What if they’re mine? Then what?”

“I don’t know. You can talk to her about it.”

“No fucking way! I am not having anything to do with that whore!”

Jean-Louis swallowed that comment. Of course James was upset, even he could understand why, so instead of telling him to shove it, he spoke calmly now. “She just needs to know who the father is, that’s all. If they’re yours, she’ll put them up for adoption. She wouldn’t keep them if they were yours. It won’t be a problem, James, you’ll see.”

There was a brief silence, and then James was screaming again. “What? So, if they were some fucking French dude’s babies, she’d keep them. But if they’re my kids...I don’t fucking believe what I’m hearing! Jesus Christ! What kind of sick people are you? This shouldn’t be like taking unwanted dogs to the pound!”
“You just asked her to *abort* them you asshole and now you’re pissed off just because she’ll give them away? Make up your mind!”

“No, no, no, no, fuck no! This is…I need to think…shit…fucking mother of God…”

“What’s there to think about? Don’t make this complicated. Just take the test. You’ll never have to see them.”

And then it struck James, the reality of the situation. If they really were his, then he wanted to know it for his own peace of mind. He had been there after all; no one had held a gun to his head and made him fuck her. He had downed a shitload of vodka shots that night and was too trashed to wear a condom. That tremendous lapse of judgment was on him. He had to take responsibility for this. Money was not an issue, he could afford child support. He just needed to stay rational.

“She better not be doing this thinking I’m gonna fucking marry her,” James muttered.

“Get your head out of your ass, James. She’d kill herself before she’d ever do that.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, the feeling’s mutual.”

James agreed to the paternity test. The Broncos were rolled over by the Seahawks in the Super Bowl. He got the call from Jean-Louis as he cleaned out his locker for the season: he was going to be the father of a boy and a girl.

“Wassup, man? Somebody die?” Dontrell was seated next to him with his requisite Hefty bags. He had just been picked up by the Eagles as his contract with the Broncos expired and was happy to be returning to his hometown of Philadelphia.

“I’m going to be a father,” James mumbled in shock. He felt like crying, then vomiting, or maybe it was the other way around.

Dontrell jumped up whooping with laughter. “Wear a goddamn rubber! That’s what you always told me. *It's not fucking rocket science.* Oh, man, sweet, sweet revenge!”

In mid-February, he flew Charlotte into Denver to discuss options. She planned a ten-day stay in the States with a return home well ahead of her due date in April. James had spent the last few weeks talking things over with his family and they all agreed that he had to face her in person and work something out. Going to Arbois to see her was out of the question; her two older brothers would have castrated him on the spot.

“Fine,” Charlotte said. “Fly me first class and I’ll come.”

Once he got past his anger, the ambivalence took over. He had always planned on having children and, though he couldn’t imagine carrying on any kind of physical relationship with Charlotte that didn’t entail the wringing of her neck, the thought of giving his own kids up to strangers was a heavy thing to accept. Maybe he could convince Charlotte to raise them herself, he could certainly provide for their upbringing in financial terms. Of more doubt was her competency as a mother. Still, she already had one son, Étienne, by yet another former lover and the kid had survived over three years under her care, so perhaps she wasn’t a total disaster.

“No, absolutely not,” she said adamantly. They sat in the living room of James’s house and it wasn’t even fifteen minutes into her arrival that they were already at odds. “There is no way I will raise them for you. I don’t want them. I only need your consent to place them for adoption when
they are born. In fact, I have the paperwork with me. If you sign now, then I can have my lawyer begin the process.”

“What papers? What are they for?”

“It’s your agreement to give up any paternal rights.”

“This makes no sense! First you make me take a paternity test to prove I’m the father. And now you want me to sign papers saying I’m not the father. What the fuck are you trying to do to me?”

“You really are a dumbass. I’m giving you a simple way out: give up your paternal rights and you’ll be free of the children.”

“How can you not have any feelings for them?” James scolded.

“What a hypocrite you are! You didn’t even want to take the paternity test.”

“Who would? But I did it anyway; I took the test because I’m a decent person, not like you, you would give your own kids away!”

“They’re your kids, too. You are equally responsible for them.”

“Yes, I am, and that’s why I’m willing to pay child support, which is probably way more than most guys would do under these circumstances.”

“And what circumstances are these? Hmm? We had sex, you made me pregnant. How am I more at fault than you? You’re the one who didn’t use protection. I’m Catholic. I’m not allowed to use birth control, but you can. So, whose fault is it really?”

“Right, yeah, it’s all my fault you’re pregnant. You had nothing to do with it. Fine. Whatever. I’m offering you a generous deal. Just take the money and do your job as a mother.”

“You Americans,” Charlotte sneered. “You think your stupid money can buy you anything.” She looked around the room and her expression of disgust deepened further. “I don’t want your money. You can be buried in it for all I care! All the money in the world wouldn’t make me keep any children of yours.”

James dropped his head into his hands and groaned. “I swear, you are ten times worse than your brother.” He suddenly missed Jean-Louis more than ever. If only James hadn’t cheated on him, this wouldn’t be happening, he wouldn’t be discussing child support and adoption and listening to Charlotte blaming him for what he did on that drunken night and treating his unborn twins as if they were demon spawn. He had been such a fool and now this blonde wisp of a girl was trampling him under her dainty feet. It was beyond humiliating. “I’m not signing any papers,” he muttered.

“Fine. I won’t name you as the father then. I can still give them away. We are done here.”

“Wait. Just wait.” James felt like punching a wall. They were his, a boy and a girl, and this cold-hearted slut, beautiful as she was, was going to toss them away as soon as they were born, like they were garbage. Fuck! Why wouldn’t she listen to reason? He had never felt so lost and confused. “Give me a minute.”

James went upstairs and called Jean-Louis. “What the hell am I supposed to do?” he shouted. “She wants to give them away!”

“Yes. I already told you that. Sign the papers.”
“No, I’m not signing the papers. This is your sister. Talk some sense into her!”

“You know I agree with her, don’t you?”

“Is everyone in your family completely nuts? Goddamn it, I am so fucked!”

“You! You had sex with her! Do you have any idea—”

“Just help me, please, please help me. I don’t want them going to strangers.” And then he got off-track. Maybe it was hearing Jean-Louis’s voice with that rare hint of jealousy that put James right back at square one. He moaned pathetically, “Come back to me, baby, please, I’m begging you. I’ve missed you so much. I haven’t gotten laid since—”

“Fucking liar. I’ve seen your Facebook page. A new girl every week?”

“That’s bullshit. That’s just my media handler’s idea. None of it’s real. I don’t even know these girls. I swear. You should know by now…you’re the only one for me.”

“Yes, I’m the only one. And my sister? What was she to you?”

“A big fucking mistake.”

“Wrong answer.”

Jean-Louis hung up on him. Shit! James hadn’t thought that it would be a bad idea to let Derek, his slick PR rep, post all those photos of him hanging out with super sexy chicks in bars. At the time, it just seemed like harmless fun and Derek had told him that it had boosted his number of followers, not that James cared about that. What mattered was that the endorsement requests kept coming in: he now had deals lined up with a national sports bar franchise, a brand of tequila, and a maker of men’s health supplements. All that money would be going into child support now, if he could only convince Charlotte to keep the children. He went back downstairs and found her asleep on the sofa looking like an angel who had swallowed a basketball. It was hard to hate her then. For a brief moment he considered the idea of marrying her. Once the kids were born, maybe they could find a way to get along, or maybe he could marry her and they could live separate lives, it would be in name only, or…

Charlotte opened her eyes and caught James staring at her. “You disgusting creep.”

Okay, no marriage. He drove her to her hotel. He had offered her the use of the guesthouse but she had flatly refused, telling him that she’d sooner stay in a prison. He couldn’t believe this was the same warm, fun-loving girl he had danced with and fucked that night. Who had that been? Then he remembered the steely-eyed bitch at Easter dinner and realized that the girl he had slept with was the anomaly.

“You know, I’m not the enemy,” he told her.

“No, you’re just the idiot who’s ruined my brother’s life. That’s all.”

“What is it with you and him? You are both absolutely insane!”

“You don’t know anything about us,” she smirked. It was the same tone of voice Jean-Louis had often used during their endless disagreements and it had always irritated the hell out of James. Now he had to hear it from Charlotte, who had to get in a final dig. “My brother deserves much better than you…you’re not good enough to kiss the ground he walks on.”
James pulled over and slammed on the brakes. “That’s enough, you stuck up little cunt! If you weren’t carrying my kids, I swear I’d throw you out of this car!” He gripped the steering wheel to keep from punching her; that would be bad, really bad. “And you don’t know a goddamn thing about me and your brother. For your information, I do kiss the ground he walks on, whether he deserves it or not. And one more thing, I may not be good enough for him, but I’m way too good for you! Now if you want to get to your hotel in one piece, I suggest you keep your fucking mouth shut!”

During the twenty-minute silent drive to her hotel, he sorely regretted losing his temper with her, especially the part where he called her a cunt. She was the mother of his unborn children and that wasn’t exactly a nice thing to say. His own mother would be appalled if she had been privy to his behavior. He could hear Charlotte sniffing and, even though he refused to look over at her, he knew what those tears were like rolling down her face, he had seen it often enough before, those same blue eyes filled with hurt and anger. He jumped out of his Suburban in the hotel parking lot and opened the passenger door for her, helped her down with care.

“Listen. I’m sorry I lost it back there. I didn’t mean what I said. You call me if you need anything, okay?” He patted her gently on the shoulder, her hair soft and familiar under his palm. She wiped defiantly at her cheeks and nodded and James’s heart crumbled. She was so like her brother, her attitude and temperament, the set of her mouth when she was furious, the way she tilted her head a little to the left when looking up at him. He bent down and hugged her to him, kissed the top of her head and realized how small and young she was. “I’m sorry, Charlotte. I promise I’ll make everything right. I’ll take care of everything.”
"I'm sorry, Charlotte. I promise I'll make everything right. I'll take care of everything."

Two days later, James ate his words. He had gone to the hotel that morning to take her to the airport for her flight to New York. She planned on visiting with Jean-Louis for a week before returning to Arbois. When he arrived at the hotel she wasn’t waiting for him in the lobby, so he called her again.

“Where are you? I’m by the front desk. Did I get the time wrong?”

“No. Something’s not right.”

He went to her room and found her sitting half-naked on a pile of blood-soaked bath towels.

“Holy shit! I’m calling 911.” He had never had so much trouble hitting three numbers in his entire life. “Help! Fuck! We have a fucking emergency!” He knew he had a more extensive vocabulary at his disposal but for some reason his command of the English language decided to leave him at this most critical moment. Charlotte grabbed the phone from him and calmly described her situation and then handed the phone back to James, saying, “Just tell them where we are.” Even that was a struggle. They could have been marooned on Jupiter for all he knew.

He followed the ambulance to Presbyterian/St. Luke’s Medical Center. Once inside the building, he found himself shouting “I’m the father!” to the hospital staff without thinking twice. Yeah, he was in a complete panic, but the words didn’t get stuck in his mouth; the statement came out like it was the most natural, obvious thing in the world and not like someone was putting a hatchet to his throat to induce the truth. It surprised him because he didn’t want this, no, he wasn’t prepared for any of this, and then he looked at Charlotte lying on the gurney in pain and trying to answer questions while he fell apart like a sissy. The attending physician appeared and explained they needed to do a quick ultrasound to determine the cause of the bleeding. They wheeled her into a darkened room and slathered lubricant onto her distended belly. James had no idea what he was seeing on the screen, but the next thing he knew, the doctor was telling them both to get ready to be parents.

They were moved into yet another room on a different floor. A hospital liaison showed up to explain the pages of consent forms and insurance forms and other forms that had to be filled out and signed as nurses worked around them in a flurry of activity. Then another doctor appeared and shook James’s hand.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Nussbaum. I’ll be delivering your twins. Tough loss, yeah?”

“Huh?”

“The Super Bowl?”
“Oh, yeah.” James didn’t know whether he should flatten the guy. “So what’s going on here?”

It was all explained, something about the placenta starting to detach from the wall of the uterus, that was the cause of the bleeding, plus her water had broke and she was in active labor, was already dilated at six centimeters, don’t worry, stay calm, they could handle this, but they had to deliver now, at around thirty-four weeks the babies were definitely premature but would stand a good chance of survival and normal development, the operating room was right across the hall should they need to perform a cesarean and/or hysterectomy to save the lives of the mother and babies.

“Just breathe,” Dr. Nussbaum said congenially.

Then James realized he was talking to him, not Charlotte. No, Charlotte was as cool as a cucumber, he was the one who was sweating and hyperventilating. “This is all just…nuts…” James mumbled. He looked at Charlotte propped up in the bed and hooked up to an IV and the whole morning just seemed like an impossibly bad dream that wouldn’t end and why was he shaking so badly?

“Would you mind calling the airline for me?” Charlotte asked him. “And call my brother, too. I don’t think I’ll be flying out to New York after all. I need to call my mother.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay.” James took a deep breath and squeezed her hand. “You’re being really brave.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I’ve done this before.”

James went out into the hallway and called Southwest Airlines and explained the situation. Then he called Jean-Louis at work. “Hey, the babies are coming.”

“What? Right now?”

“Yeah, we’re at the hospital. She won’t be flying into LaGuardia today.”

“Christ. They’re early.”

“Yeah, I went to her hotel to take her to the airport. She was bleeding. The doctor said the placenta was starting to detach, whatever that means, they have to deliver the babies now.” James rubbed his burning eyes and sighed. “I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing.”

“You’ll be fine. Charlotte’s the one going through labor.”

“I know, I know, I just…I wish you were here.”

“I don’t know if that would help, James. This is something you need to work out with her, and my being there might not be a good thing.”

“Why? Why not? She would listen to you.”

“No, not in this. Charlotte has her own mind. My being there would only make her more resistant to anything you want. You do understand that she hates you…because of me?”

“Yeah, she hates me. Do you still hate me?”

“It doesn’t matter how I feel about you. This isn’t about us. I think you should focus on what’s going on there right now. Did you sign the papers for her?”

“No. I won’t. I told you that.”
“Are you listed as the father on the papers you signed at the hospital?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you’ve made a mess of things. Merde. There’s still the form for the birth certificate after the babies are delivered. She doesn’t have to name a father on those. She could still take the babies back home and—”

“If they’re born here, then they have American citizenship. Could she really just take them out of the country without my consent? I am the father even if she doesn’t put my name on the birth certificate. I have the fucking paternity test results to prove it. I could sue her if I wanted to!”

“Is that what you really want to do?”

“No, of course not! I don’t know what I want. Jesus, how is this happening?”

“Okay, just go be with her. You’re going to be a father, James. Do it right.”

“I’m trying.”

“And don’t panic when you see the blood.”

“Blood?”

“Yes, blood, lots and lots of blood.”

“Thanks for the heads up.”

“You’re welcome.”

A mere five hours later, he was father to a boy weighing 4 lbs 8 oz and a girl weighing 3 lbs 14 oz. Jean-Louis hadn’t been kidding. The actual delivery was a frightful bloodbath. James had seen all sorts of gruesome injuries on the field and had firsthand experience of some, but nothing could have prepared him for the sight of something way too big coming out of something way too small and the torrent of blood and tissue and that hideous thing they call the placenta. He would be having nightmares for months, he was sure, the brain damage probably permanent. The babies emerged looking like bizarre alien creatures, wrinkled and covered in a grey slime with oversized ET heads and boneless, shriveled bodies. When asked if he wanted to sever the umbilical cords, he nodded dully and swallowed down the vomit in his throat, did his manly duty without puking all over the floor. He could swear that Charlotte was actually taking some kind of sick pleasure in his discomfort.

“You look worse than me,” she gloated after they had whisked the babies away to the NICU. She was in a private recovery room and was sucking on ice chips.

“At least I didn’t pass out,” James muttered.

A nurse came in and changed the bloody pad underneath her. “Looks clean,” she commented cheerfully as she examined it. “A nice bright red, good clotting, no foul smell.”

James leapt up from his chair like his pants were on fire and ran into the bathroom. This time he did throw up, barely making it to the toilet before he started heaving. He heard Charlotte and the nurse sharing a laugh over him. Damn them, this wasn’t funny. He went back to the hotel to pick up Charlotte’s luggage. They had been considerate enough to hold it for them at the front desk; in the rush to the hospital, it had been left behind in her room. Charlotte would be released in two
days if there were no signs of infection and she was healing smoothly, but the babies would be kept
for another month or so, it would all depend on their ability to feed and gain weight. They were
allowed to view them briefly in the NICU that evening, where the twins were kept in open
Plexiglas trays fitted with an overhead warming element to regulate their body temperature. They
wore little caps and their eyes were covered with tiny blindfolds. James could see their hearts
beating a mile a minute beneath their thin skin, rib cages straining mightily with each breath,
skinny limbs splayed out as they lay on their backs connected to feeding and oxygen tubes. There
were other sensors attached to their bodies and monitors indicating their vitals. It was horrible to
see; they didn’t look human, they weren’t plump and screaming like they should be in James’s
mind. Were they even going to live? Charlotte didn’t seem the least bit distressed.

“What shall we name them?” she asked as he wheeled her back to her room.

He picked her up from the wheelchair and laid her back in the bed. “I have no fucking idea. Hang
on.” At this point, he couldn’t even remember his own name, much less think of names for their
mutant children. Someone had left a 10,000 Names for Your Baby paperback on one of the chairs
lining the hallway and he went to retrieve it. When he came back, they had brought Charlotte her
dinner and she was looking suspiciously at a plate of meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and a mix of peas
and carrots. There was a cup of black coffee, a small container of apple juice, and a dish of Jell-O
on the tray also.

“You better eat,” he said. “You’ve had a long day.”

“What about you?” she asked. “Should I have them bring you something?”

“No, I’ll eat later.” Frankly, his stomach had been in knots all day and he was still queasy with
exhaustion and fear. “Here. Do you want to have a look at this?” He handed her the book and
opened a bottle of water sitting on the side table and took a swig. A good amount dribbled down
his chin. What was next in store for him, having to use a goddamn sippy cup?

“Why don’t you go home, James? We can decide on names tomorrow.”

He looked at his watch. It was almost eight o’clock and he badly needed a shower. “Okay,” he
mumbled. “Tomorrow.” He kissed her on the cheek but couldn’t think of a single thing to say that
could even begin to express how dejected and overwhelmed he felt.

He went home and washed up, then ate three helpings of leftover lasagna with a few glasses of
Cabernet. He was a father now, but there was no celebratory high-fiving with the guys and the
smoking of cigars. Charlotte was going to give his, okay, their kids up for adoption, which meant
that he was nothing more than an accidental and unwanted sperm donor. How could he bear to give
them names? It would have been better if he had never known them at all; too late for that. If he
fought her it would only make her hate him more and the outcome would still be the same. He
would never get to see those freakish looking critters grow up, they’d never know their real father
was some hot shot pro baller in America living in a big ass mansion with twenty foot high cathedral
ceilings and driving an SUV that got 15 mpg and eating twenty-eight ounce porterhouse steaks
while they grew up in a hillside cave raised by some chain-smoking, beret-wearing French lunatics.
Look how deranged Jean-Louis was after being subjected to that horrible family of his, and he
wasn’t even adopted! How could James let that happen to his own children?

After a fitful night he arose earlier than usual and pounded out extra reps in the weight room,
worked the punching bag until his arms felt like wet noodles, then took a long cold shower. The
thought of dealing with Charlotte and the babies all over again was unbearable, and this was just
the beginning of the ordeal. He put his face into the icy spray and let himself cry. He didn’t know
why he felt so angry and depressed. Plenty of his teammates had kids out of wedlock, some didn’t
even pay child support or acknowledge their paternity. It didn’t seem to bother them one bit. Why should this matter to him then? Nobody even needed to know about what had happened, it was just a mistake, move on from it, right? Right. His five-minute pity party was over. He went downstairs and made himself an enormous breakfast sandwich of Taylor ham, egg, and cheese and felt a whole lot better afterwards. He was even cheerful by the time he arrived at Charlotte’s room and found her sitting up in bed being milked like a human cow, a breast pump attached to each tit. She had the book of baby names in her hands and was flipping through the pages.

“I was thinking Benjamin for the boy and Chloe for the girl,” she said over the hum of the pumps, making no move to cover up.

James didn’t know where to rest his eyes. He’d already seen her naked in both the best and worst circumstances, but her total lack of shame right now was disconcerting. He was used to male nudity in the locker room, and female nudity in porn, but this kind of casual nudity in broad daylight with someone he barely knew seemed really out of place.

“That sounds great,” he said. He grabbed her robe off a chair and went to place it over her bare chest.

“What are you doing?” She closed the book and looked up at him.

“I thought you might be a little cold.”

Two small receptacles were attached to each pump and they were filling steadily with an off-white liquid. M-i-l-k. He was having a shitload of trouble wrapping his head around what he was seeing even as he stared. He couldn’t believe that stuff was actually coming out of her. Well, it was way better than what was exiting her nether regions yesterday, that’s for sure. A nurse came in and greeted James with the news that he was just in time for the twins’ first feeding. Hurray! The fun never seemed to end. She turned off the pumps and removed each suction cup and receptacle, placing everything onto a rolling cart. James got a good look at Charlotte before she pulled her gown back up around her shoulders and was shocked at how swollen her breasts were; the skin was pulled taut and was so translucent he could see all the blood vessels radiating from each erect nipple. He didn’t remember them looking like that before. It made him feel vaguely sick and disgustingly aroused.

“We’ll see you folks in the NICU in fifteen minutes,” the nurse said as she rolled the cart out the door.

They eyed each other warily and then James asked, “So, how are you feeling?”

“Good, sore, but good. They want to keep me here one more night, but I should be able to leave tomorrow morning.”

“Yeah, well, you should really stay at my house, not some hotel. I can take you, uh, us to see the babies each day if you want. You know they said it might take a while before they’re released and it would just make things easier, don’t you think?”

Charlotte stared back at him in silence, her face giving nothing away. He had no idea what wild and crazy thoughts she could be entertaining in that thick skull of hers, so he took the initiative and said, “You know you can’t just get on a plane tomorrow and leave, right? You have to wait until they release the babies and who knows when that’ll be. I have plenty of room at my house, you won’t even have to see me if you don’t want. You can use the guesthouse and have total privacy. It’s up to you.”
“I’ll think about it,” she said finally.

Feeding the twins was a surreal experience. They had been moved into what looked like plastic shoeboxes now, another kind of incubator to keep them warm, and their feeding and oxygen tubes had been removed, at least for the time being. They looked even weirder than the day before for some reason. Up close he could see that they were covered in what appeared to be a fine coat of fur, as if they were week-old baby rats! Was this some kind of joke? They looked better encrusted in that slimy grey goop. The nurse handed him Benjamin, the larger of the two babies. He fit neatly in the palm of James’s hand, a bulbous head attached to a puny body clad in a little white T-shirt and an oversized diaper. James pinched a doll-sized bottle containing Charlotte’s breast milk between his thumb and forefinger and offered it to the floppy head, brushing the rubber nipple against the boy’s lips. To James’s surprise, Benjamin opened his mouth wide and started suckling.

“Holy shit, look at him go!” James laughed with glee. “One day old and the little bastard’s eating like a fiend. I’ll be damned. This kid is going to grow up to be a nose tackle.” The surge of pride shooting through him caught him by surprise. Who would have thought that he could ever get excited by the sight of some runty four pound blob sucking on a miniature baby bottle? James had landed perch bigger than his son. He looked up and saw Charlotte struggling to coax Chloe to feed. “You’re tipping the bottle too much,” he instructed smugly. Charlotte gave him a look that would have burnt any mortal man to ashes, but right now James was feeling invincible. Her withering stare wasn’t going to work on him today.

“I don’t need you to tell me how to feed a baby,” Charlotte declared. “I’ve done this before.” At that, Chloe mewed loudly and spit out a mouthful of foamy saliva, punched the air angrily with her tiny clenched fists. She was her mother’s daughter if there ever was one.

“Do you wanna switch?” asked James, knowing full well that he was courting Charlotte’s wrath and enjoying every second of her mounting displeasure. Two could play this game and he was sick and tired of taking a beating from this woman. “I think I’ve really got the hang of this.” James tickled Benjamin’s cheek and when the infant opened his eyes to stare up at him…kapow! Like the Grinch in Dr. Seuss’s classic tale, James’s heart grew three sizes in that moment and he realized there was only one course of action open to him now.
What is Owed

Chapter Summary

James makes a big decision. Jean-Louis visits Charlotte in Denver.

Charlotte agreed to use one of the spare bedrooms in his house, the one furthest down the hall from his room. She spent most of her time at the hospital feeding the babies on demand, first in the NICU, and then in the step-down nursery when the babies had grown large enough to maintain their body temperature and were breathing with no difficulty. James’s parents flew out to Denver two weeks after the kids were born and they were happy to make use of the guesthouse. Laura and Peter seemed like nice enough people, perhaps a little too friendly for Charlotte’s comfort, and they were ecstatic to meet the mother of their new grandchildren. James’s brother Ted and his wife Meredith wanted to wait another year before starting a family, so the twins were a big deal as far as James’s parents were concerned. Jean-Louis had already told Charlotte about them so she was prepared for their overly enthusiastic welcome.

What strange people, she thought.

It took a little under four weeks for Benjamin to reach five pounds and a little over five weeks for Chloe to do the same. They were both feeding easily now and, much to James’s relief, they had shed their covering of ‘fur’ and looked like human babies; the hospital would be releasing them within a week or two. Charlotte was anxious to get back home to Arbois and away from James and the twins. She was in no danger of becoming emotionally attached to the children. James’s daily presence was enough to make her want to escape as quickly as possible and he had given her a way out a few days after his parents had arrived: he had offered to take them.

“You?” It took a lot to shock her, but she was clearly floored by the absurdity of his idea. “You’re going to adopt them? You?” She looked at him like he had three heads with a combined IQ of zero.

“How am I adopting them? They’re my own goddamn kids! You are so fucking insulting!”

“James, calm down, sweetheart.” Laura smiled at Charlotte and tried to explain without all the shouting and swearing. “Charlotte, honey, you don’t have to give your kids away to strangers. If you feel it would be an imposition to take care of them yourself, then James can raise them here with our help and you can see them anytime you want. You’ll always be the mother, no one will ask you to give up your parental rights. Do you understand? You don’t have to sign or do anything. The children will be loved and cared for, I promise you.”

This was the last thing Charlotte had expected and it threw her for a loop. As much as she didn’t want the kids, the thought of James keeping them was frightening. It would be like feeding the children to a wild animal, an American! Could she live with herself if she consented to this? Then she remembered: those babies came from him, they had his blood, his DNA. That was enough to convince her to give them over to him. She couldn’t knowingly inflict his offspring upon her own unsuspecting countrymen, infect them with his plague; that would have been unforgivable.

“You won’t expect anything of me then?” Charlotte wanted absolute clarity on the matter. “I can
leave and never come back and you won’t try to maintain contact?”

“Whatever you want, Charlotte,” said James. “I’ll raise them. You can see them if you want. If you
don’t want to see them, that’s fine, too. I’ll tell them whatever you want me to tell them.”

It was like walking on eggshells. James wasn’t quite sure how fickle and spiteful Charlotte could
be and was fearful of saying anything that might trigger a knee-jerk response from her. He still
couldn’t truly grasp that he was asking to take on the responsibility of raising them, without their
mother no less, but he had gone home the day after that first feeding in the NICU and realized that
he couldn’t let them go. They were his—Benjamin and Chloe, he thought of them by their names
now—and he wanted them in his life, and each subsequent day of holding and feeding them only
made him know that he had actually fallen in love with them. He wanted to see them grow up, he
wanted to do all the things a father does with his children: teach them to ride bikes, play sports,
take them to Traverse City each summer for vacation, guide and protect them, give them
everything he had enjoyed himself growing up as a proud American. His parents had offered their
support; they would stay in Denver and help him with the kids until he could sort things out
permanently. His brother Ted was managing the auto detailing shop for his father by now anyway,
and his mother had retired from the dental office the previous year. They had full use of the
guesthouse, which was larger than their family home in Michigan, and would not lack for any
comfort. James wanted to do this; he knew he was making the right choice because his depression
had lifted as soon as he had accepted the challenge.

And there was one more thing, a thought in the back of James’s mind that he dared not even
acknowledge openly, but it was there, nevertheless, a faint glimmer of hope. His relationship with
Jean-Louis had grown so tenuous and strained over the last few months, practically nonexistent if
he were to be honest, but this latest turn of events had opened up a channel of communication, an
opportunity for conversation, however limited and unpleasant; it was better than the bleak periods
of no contact at all. Maybe the kids would give James a way to keep Jean-Louis tied to him. The
twins were Jean-Louis’s niece and nephew and, whether Jean-Louis liked it or not, James was now
a part of his family in the most technical sense, although James doubted they would ever accept
that fact.

“I’d like to talk to my mother first,” Charlotte said.

James gulped. “Yeah, of course. Take your time.” If Charlotte decided against his proposal, then
he had no idea what he’d do. Kill her? He really hoped it wouldn’t come to that because he was
pretty sure his parents wouldn’t be too thrilled with him.

Charlotte excused herself and went upstairs to talk in private. She called her mother first. Even
before Charlotte finished recounting James’s offer Catherine told her, “Agree to it and come back
home. Wash your hands of this whole sordid affair. You’re lucky he’s stupid enough to do this for
you.”

“You’re not worried he’ll try something later?” asked Charlotte.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know…like expecting me to take the kids after he’s grown tired of them? I don’t want him
showing up on our doorstep with them in a year.”

Catherine let out a derisive laugh. “Just you let him try. Your brothers will blow his brains out if he
dares to set foot on our property.”

“And what about Jean-Louis? Do you think he’ll be alright with this?”
“Why shouldn’t he be? This isn’t his decision anyway. If you’re so worried about his feelings, ask him yourself.” Catherine sighed deeply. “He needs to come home. He’s been away too long. I worry about him living in that country. It’s not right. He was in such a bad way over Christmas, don’t you think?”

“Yes, he’s gotten worse.” Charlotte readily agreed. He had seemed so lost when she last saw him over the holiday; the light had gone out of his eyes and it was as if he had no will to live. Jean-Louis belonged back home with them in Arbois, or back in France at least. God knows, anywhere in Europe was better than America. As long as he remained in the States he would be vulnerable to James’s influence, his abuse. She knew that James had come between her brother and Guy-Manuel and that it had destroyed Jean-Louis. The breakup had gutted him in the worst way and now this. Although she and Jean-Louis never spoke about the accidental pregnancy, Charlotte knew that she had erred badly, had maybe even inadvertently hurt him with what amounted to betrayal, even if Jean-Louis would never think of it as such, would never blame her for her actions. She needed to make it up to him, regardless, show him that she would always be there to protect and love him, especially now that he was so broken. “Do you want me to talk to him about coming home, Mama? He might listen to me.”

“Yes, talk to him, Charlotte. He’s always loved you best.” The truth of her words struck Catherine after the fact and made her pause. Still, she would rather accept that than leave her son at the mercy of that man. The regret was a painful burden. “I never expected him to stay away so long.” Her boy had left home so early. He was still a child when she let him fly off to America. It had pleased her when he had continued his studies at Cambridge. At least that was only a train ride away. Ever since he had returned to work in the States, though, he had gotten into nothing but trouble in Catherine’s view. It was time to put a stop to that.

When Charlotte called Jean-Louis next, she decided it was best to just rip the bandage off quickly. “James is keeping the kids,” she stated plainly and hoped that the even tone of her voice would lessen the shock of the news. There was dead silence on the other end. “Jean-Louis? Are you there still?”

“Please tell me you’re joking.” He felt the ground had dropped out beneath him. This was a nightmare, the prospect of James keeping his sister’s children. Okay, so James had unwittingly fathered them, but the babies were supposed to go to a good home in France, a nice clean separation that would protect all of them from any future entanglements. The idea of Charlotte’s offspring being raised by James, father or not, was too much to bear. It meant that there would be no escape ever for him; James would be a part of his life in some way no matter what. Did Charlotte realize this? Did she know that this meant life imprisonment for him?

“No, my love, I’m not joking. It’s true. James promised that he would take care of everything. I wouldn’t have to do anything beyond this point. I can leave when the babies are discharged and never have to see him or them ever again. I would be free, completely free of this. Do you know him to be a liar?”

Jean-Louis was too shocked to cry. His office door was open and he could see Emma staring at him from the next room with a puzzled look on her face. One of his interns, a biology major from NYU named Alyssa, was sorting specimen slides at a work table not eight feet away from him. Luckily for him, she had her back to him and was wearing earbuds and listening to music on her iPhone. He smiled wanly back at Emma and turned to face the wall so she wouldn’t have to see his fallen countenance. “No,” Jean-Louis said quietly. “He’s not a liar. If he says he’ll do it, then he’ll do it.” And there will be no stopping him, he thought to himself.

“So I can trust him to keep his word then?”
“Yes. I have no doubt.” He could literally feel his heart constricting in his chest. Charlotte shouldn’t have to pay for his own mistakes nor bear his punishment. If it weren’t for his own stupidity, she would have never hooked up with James in the first place. She had seduced James that night as a favor to him, to save Jean-Louis the misery of seeing him, and he had gone along with it wholeheartedly, not even considering how it might all backfire. His poor sister had suffered through a pregnancy and frightening childbirth because of his selfishness. How could he ask her now to consider his feelings when the whole mess was his fault to begin with? “If this is what you want to do, you know I’ll stand by you.”

“Fine, then. I’ll leave the kids with him. I won’t have to think about this anymore.” Charlotte was elated. That was one hurdle cleared, one more to go. “Jean-Louis…since I didn’t get a chance to see you in New York and I’ll be flying home as soon as possible, maybe you should come out here to see me before I leave? Wouldn’t that be nice?” She knew she stood a much better chance of bending him to her will in person, when her hold over him was strongest. When Jean-Louis said nothing, she pushed a little harder. “I miss you, my love. It would really help me get through this ordeal if I had you here with me. I don’t like being alone here with James, and now his parents, too. I could use your support. What if they try to stop me from leaving when the time comes, or pull some other trick? I know you said I could trust their word, but you know them better than I do. Will you help me?”

The idea of going back to Denver, back to that house and James, scared the bejeesus out of Jean-Louis, yet Charlotte was there all by herself and defenseless, stranded on a rock in the ocean and surrounded by sharks. She wanted him to rescue her, walk her past a gauntlet of enemies and see her safely on a plane back home. How could he deny her that? He couldn’t let his fear cause her any more suffering. She had sacrificed her own body for him and now he owed her at least as much.

“What would you have me do?” Jean-Louis asked. “When would you want me to come?”

Charlotte was caught a little off-guard. She hadn’t expected him to acquiesce so easily but perhaps this was a sign that he was willing to comply with other wishes. She would have to work quickly to take advantage of his more pliable mood, not give him a chance to close himself off again. “Well, the babies should be released in a week or two. I should be able to leave as soon as they…” As soon as they go home to James. She couldn’t bring herself to say the words and didn’t. Jean-Louis could figure it out for himself. “So, see what flights you can get in that time frame.”

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“Should I book a hotel for us, too?” asked Jean-Louis.

“That’s a good question,” Charlotte said. As much as she would have preferred that, she didn’t want to antagonize James any further, not when escape was just around the corner. The man was so quick to anger but had been weirdly generous towards her so far; he was apt to consider it an insult if she left to stay in a hotel now after weeks of accepting his hospitality. She would have to handle this delicately. James had been taking her to the hospital each day and helping her with both the morning and afternoon feedings, and would pick her up again in the evenings to go back to his house for the night. It was tedious to be trapped there all day and the food in the cafeteria was barely palatable, but it saved her from being in his presence beyond the feedings. At least at the hospital she had the freedom to walk around and talk to other people and flirt with cute staff members. Now that James’s parents were in Denver, too, it made her feel even more reluctant to be around him. With Jean-Louis for company, her remaining hours at the hospital might even prove enjoyable and her stay at the house less awkward. He would be her buffer against James and his parents. And it would give her opportunity to convince him to come home to France, come home to her. “Do you want me to talk to him about it or do you want to do it?” she asked.
“What am I supposed to tell him?”

“I don’t know,” Charlotte said with frustration. “He’s your lover.” She regretted the accusatory words as soon as she said it, but it was Jean-Louis who apologized.

“I’m sorry, Charlotte. I know this is my fault. I’ll take care of it.”

Just then there was a knock on the bedroom door. “Is everything okay?” she heard James ask. He must have come up to see what was taking her so long. She opened the door and handed James her phone and said, “My brother wants to talk to you.”

James stood startled for a moment and then walked down to his bedroom at the opposite end of the hallway and closed the door. “Hey, it’s me. What’s going on?”

“Oh god,” Jean-Louis sighed. “I’m at work and I can’t really talk but…” He sighed again, not knowing what to say. “Listen, James, my sister wants me to visit with her before the babies are released, before she goes home. If you don’t want to see me, I understand—”

“Why wouldn’t I want to see you?” James interrupted. “How could you ever think that? No, baby, you should come and see the twins. They’re amazing. Did Charlotte tell you? I’m going to take them. My parents are here. They’re gonna help with the kids until I can figure something out… it’s…I don’t know…it’s gonna be great.” James could feel his excitement spiraling out of control. He had never thought in a million years that Charlotte would hand him this gift. Jean-Louis. Here. With him. “Baby, nothing would make me happier than for you to come out here.” He stopped himself from saying more, afraid to chase Jean-Louis away with his eagerness.

“I was thinking it would be a good idea for me to stay in a hotel…”

“No, why? Don’t be ridiculous. Charlotte’s staying at my house, why shouldn’t you? Baby, if you’re worried about…shit…if you want your own room, that’s fine, you can have your own room. I promise I won’t force you to…you know what I mean.” In truth, James didn’t know if it would be possible for him to keep his hands off of him, but he wasn’t going to admit to that. “So, you’ll come?”

He had to do it. Charlotte had asked him to and he couldn’t say no to her. “Yes, I’ll come.”
Looking Into the Fires of Hell

Chapter Summary

James learns the truth about Jean-Louis and Charlotte.

“Hi, sweetheart. It’s so good to see you again.” That was Laura embracing and kissing him in the driveway, then Peter was shaking his hand and hugging him, too. They both wore brightly colored ski jackets as cheery as their welcome. Americans.

“Yes, it’s been awhile,” said Jean-Louis. He gave them both a discreet kiss on each cheek and wondered if they still considered him to be their son’s lover. The memory had never ceased to embarrass him—that squeaky mattress and bed frame in James’s childhood room, what Peter and Laura probably heard through the wall those two nights, the headboard knocking against the drywall and, God knows, so much worse. Though he was normally soft spoken in conversation, Jean-Louis had enough self-awareness to know that he was by no means quiet during sex. Mortifying. But they gave no indication that they were disgusted with him as they led him toward the main house. Jean-Louis had insisted on taking a cab from the airport. James was so recognizable in Denver, he was certain there would have been a mob scene at the terminal if he had allowed James to pick him up.

“Almost two years, young man,” Laura reminded him. “Much too long. You need to come to Traverse City with us in July.”

He didn’t have time to panic about that because the front door to the house flew open and there was James looming larger than life. Jean-Louis wasn’t sure what to feel. Everything had gone so horribly wrong and James was at the center of all that wrongness, the loose nut that kept caroming and ricocheting off the gears in his heart and making a complete mess of things. Or had Jean-Louis managed that feat all by himself? It was late winter but James was wearing his usual thin sports attire and oblivious to the cold. He strode out and swept Jean-Louis up in his arms, squeezed him so tight the breath went out of him.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” James said, his voice cracking with a mixture of joy and desperation. He held Jean-Louis at arms’ length and looked at him and already his mind rushed ahead to the moment when he would lose his golden boy again. “Come inside.”

Charlotte was waiting at the top of the second floor landing. She put a hand to her mouth when she saw him, unable to contain her emotions, and uttered under her breath, “Mon petit chéri.” My little darling.

Slowly she came down the stairs into his embrace and wept with relief, high-pitched, gasped sobs that shook her whole body. She kept her face buried in his neck as he whispered into her ear, “Ne pleure pas, ma soeur, ma moitié. Je suis vraiment désolé. Pardonne-moi s’il te plait.” Don’t cry, my sister, my half. I’m so sorry. Please forgive me.

The intimate moment stretched into minutes it seemed and James finally cleared his throat loudly to rouse them. “We’ll need to get going soon.” James said and caught Charlotte’s eye. “The
afternoon feeding’s coming up.”

She nodded and turned back to Jean-Louis. “We have to go to the hospital to feed the babies.”

James grabbed Jean-Louis’s bag and headed up the stairs. “C’mon. I’ll show you to your room.”

They both followed behind him but when James went to put Jean-Louis’s carry-on in the spare room next to the master bedroom, Charlotte objected. “No, he can stay with me. Right, Jean-Louis?”

“Yes.” He took the bag from James. “It’ll be fine, James. There’s no need to dirty another room.”

“But…” James watched helplessly as Charlotte led Jean-Louis down the far end of the hallway to the room she had been using. That little cockblocker! James thought angrily. “It’s no trouble…I’ve already put down the sheets…” he called after them but they weren’t even listening. He might as well have been the butler. James had hoped to keep Jean-Louis close by in the off chance that a midnight tryst could be finagled. Now that would be impossible with that she-devil watching over him. Goddamn it! And what the hell were they thinking anyway? What grown siblings sleep together? Well, okay, he and his brother Ted could easily share a hotel room, even a bed, if necessary. But they were brothers and that made it totally different. No way in hell could there be anything even remotely sexual in those circumstances, not when they were too busy engaged in belching and farting contests. Charlotte, royal pain in the ass that she was, was beautiful and sexy and, at nearly six weeks postpartum, was pretty much healed all the way, done bleeding and had her figure back already it seemed. James couldn’t imagine anyone sleeping next to her and not getting aroused. Maybe he was being paranoid, maybe he was just sick in the head to even imagine something that grotesque.

He sighed and went down the hall to their room and found them embracing again, Jean-Louis kissing Charlotte’s cheek. Oh God. “C’mon. We really have to go now.”

They piled into the Suburban, Peter up front with James while Jean-Louis sat sandwiched between Charlotte and Laura in the back. Charlotte shot her brother a look that said, “You see what I’ve been dealing with?” Jean-Louis could only give her an apologetic smile. This was all he needed, an hour off the plane and set to be emotionally battered between some gorgeous tag team version of Scylla and Charybdis. Charlotte squeezed his hand tightly out of possession and anxiety; Laura, meanwhile, was patting his other hand like he was the underfed orphan she had rescued from the bottom of a dry well. They were going to rip him to shreds with their feminine ways as surely as some peasant being quartered for the amusement of the queen. Though James could kill him with his bare hands, these women were capable of causing far worse damage. He saw James cast him a glance in the rear view mirror and realized he had no one in his corner. It was all too clear that his fixation on Jean-Louis had not abated—even after the unforgiveable deeds committed against Guy-Manuel and Charlotte, which should have been more than enough to drive away any man from sheer shame—James had not wavered. Those photos on his Facebook page really were a sham. James still wanted him as much as ever for some mystifying reason. Jean-Louis kept his eyes peeled for a liquor store on the way or, better yet, a pot dispensary. Dare he ask James to make a quick stop? James should understand by now his inability to cope with stress in a sober state but, no, they were already there and Jean-Louis had no way out of it.

Once at the hospital’s newborn ward, James waited with his parents out in the hallway while Charlotte led Jean-Louis into the nursery. They watched through the large window as one of the nurses brought Chloe and Benjamin to the feeding area—a cozy space located off to the side with groups of seats and tables that could be closed off with curtains for privacy if necessary—and handed Jean-Louis the swaddled infants. He put the twins to his face and kissed their cheeks,
inhaled that distinct baby smell that makes a person’s mind go completely irrational with love. He hugged them closer still and then Charlotte put her hand on Jean-Louis’s back, gently stroking him as his shoulders trembled. Even with his face turned away from them, they knew he had fallen apart, and not in a good way.

“Oh dear,” Laura murmured. “Why don’t we all go get some coffee?”

“You guys go ahead,” James said grimly. “I better wait here in case they need something.” He continued staring into the room as his parents left for the cafeteria several floors below. He saw Charlotte talking to Jean-Louis and then she came back out into the hallway.

“I need to use the machine now,” she told James calmly. The ward had a private room with breast pumps for mothers to use. It was not uncommon for preemies who started on the bottle to refuse to breastfeed later on. Charlotte actually preferred using the bottle. It meant others could feed the babies for her and she was more than happy to turn those duties over to James and his parents; at this point she was just a glorified cow. It would take around fifteen to twenty minutes for Charlotte to extract enough breast milk for the twins’ afternoon meal. “You should go in and keep an eye on him. He’s being ridiculous,” she said before disappearing into the room next to the nursery.

Jean-Louis had sat down in one of the chairs and was peering at the babies nestled in the crook of each arm. James could see that his face was flushed and wet.

“Here,” James said. “Let me have Benjamin.” He reached out and lifted the boy out of his lap, took a seat next to him and then asked, “What’s wrong?” Jean-Louis kept his head down and, apart from the occasional sniffle, he remained silent, wouldn’t even look up. James couldn’t read him at all.

“Why are you so upset?” asked James. “I thought you’d be happy about me keeping the babies. You’re the one who told me I should do right as a father. Well…I’m doing the right thing, aren’t I? I’m being responsible. So…what…you’re still pissed at me?”

What in the world could Jean-Louis even say in answer? That every step he had ever taken in life, every action, decision, thought, word, and desire had led to this unacceptable and preposterous outcome? That everything he had ever wanted—to fall in love, marry the girl of his dreams, have a happy family—had turned into a hellish, twisted farce, Dorian Gray’s portrait come off the canvas and made into horrifying reality? It was all a cruel, mocking joke, wasn’t it? He had in front of him the children of his own sister, whom he loved beyond reason and righteousness, and of the man who mistreated him with a passion that he couldn’t resist, carnal ties that Jean-Louis had welcomed though they were abominations of biblical proportions, so what could possibly follow except divine retribution, every mistake taking on a life of its own, multiplying like cancerous cells, refusing to die, growing larger and more monstrous through time, ready to engulf him, smother him with regret and sorrow, God’s vengeance writ large. Then he heard Oliver doing that thing that he always did when Jean-Louis groveled too long in one of his maudlin moods, a dismissive exhale of breath and the words spat out with glorious, atheistic venom, “Spare me your God awful Catholic angst before I climb onto the bloody cross and crucify myself so I won’t have to listen to this drivel anymore! No wonder Jesus wanted to die! If your God were my father I’d have myself killed way before my thirty-third birthday.” How he missed Oliver!

At last, with Chloe nestled in his lap and Benjamin staring back at him with curiosity, Jean-Louis looked at James and asked, “Will you love them?” Huge tears rolled down his cheeks as he struggled to put on a brave face.

“Oh of course. Why wouldn’t I?” James reached out and brushed the back of his hand on the soft blond fuzz covering Chloe’s head. “They remind me of you. Every day with them will be a gift...for all the times I’ve wanted you and you didn’t want me back.”
“Oh, James.” Jean-Louis leaned into him and wept onto his shoulder. The hurt was so close to the surface though he had tried to bury it deep within him. “You don’t know what you’ve done to me. There are so many things I wish I could change. We should have never met…but it’s too late…it’s all too late.”

“Don’t say that, baby. It’s never too late.” James wanted to console him but Jean-Louis was beyond comforting. “Whatever it is that…makes you hold back, I’ve told you already, I’ll wait for you. When you’re ready, you just have to say the word.”

Jean-Louis gulped in a stuttering breath. “And what word is that?”

James took Jean-Louis’s chin in his thumb and forefinger. “Yes. All you have to say is yes, and it’s all yours, everything I could ever give you.”

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It was past midnight but James still couldn’t sleep. He was agitated by the events of the day, the anticipation and excitement of Jean-Louis’s arrival followed by the disappointment of seeing him so miserable. Charlotte had seemed oddly unaffected by her brother’s melancholy and not particularly concerned about his emotional state. Perhaps she knew him better than anyone else, better than James certainly, knew Jean-Louis wouldn’t shatter apart completely. James tossed and turned a few more times before he finally got up with an angry huff. Maybe a shot of bourbon would settle his mind. He padded down the stairs and into the bar area, poured himself a shot of Maker’s Mark and downed it in one gulp, then decided that a second shot wouldn’t hurt. Nope. Neither would a third shot. As he walked back upstairs he noticed that the light was still on in Charlotte’s room and he could hear their voices, low indistinct sounds rather than words. It made James even more vexed to know that she was keeping Jean-Louis away from him, probably on purpose, just to spite him. She had hated him from the beginning and this was just her way of rubbing it in. Why else insist that her own brother share a room, a bed, with her?

James climbed back into his own bed but started sweating in minutes. Must be the alcohol. “Fucking hell,” he grumbled to himself. He got up again and stepped out onto the balcony to cool off. The crisp night air felt good hitting his skin, made him think about his childhood winters playing hockey when he didn’t have a care in the world. The second floor balcony ran the entire length of the bedroom wing of the house, five sets of French doors marking each room. The one at the very far end was alit, Charlotte’s room. James had never come out onto the balcony at night when he had houseguests. It came as a bit of a shock that he would be able to see into the rooms if he wanted to do so, the drapes on the window-paned doors were fairly sheer. Now he found himself creeping softly towards the light, like some brainless moth drawn to a flame. He was just going to take a quick peek, no harm in that, then go back to bed and perhaps jerk off so he could finally fall asleep.

He really didn’t need to tiptoe; the balcony was sturdy and constructed of quality materials and didn’t squeak under his weight. It’s just that, well, he knew he was doing a sneaky thing. He stopped when he reached the edge of the door, could already see into the room far more clearly than he had expected. If he could see in, then they might be able to see out, he had to be cautious. They were both in bed and in an obvious embrace. He could see movement under the covers and…what in God’s name…no fucking way could they be…Charlotte suddenly pushed the covers off of her and sat up and straddled Jean-Louis. She was naked and from what James could see, so was Jean-Louis, who lay stretched out under her. James couldn’t discern their faces but he didn’t need to. He could see his own breath in front of him and realized he was gulping air, his heart racing, his body shivering from the cold even though he felt nothing but heat coiling up his spine and out the top of his head. He wanted to turn away, knew he had to right now, but before he did he saw
Charlotte place both of her hands over Jean-Louis’s mouth as she started undulating her hips and James knew it could only mean one thing. It couldn’t be and yet it was. He was seeing it with his own eyes. James backed away, panting and shaking, returned to his room and hid under the covers like a wounded animal gone to ground. The floor seemed to lose its solidity beneath him, whether from the three shots of bourbon or from what he had just witnessed he knew not. That was his Jean-Louis. In there. With her. It explained so much, why nothing was easy, why James could never get through to him, why Jean-Louis would never accept his love. It all made sense at last. James finally understood him and it was like looking into the fires of hell.
The twins come home and Charlotte leaves.

James gave them a wide berth, didn’t try to get between them, still in shock over the discovery. The next day Jean-Louis hardly spoke and when he did, it was only to maintain the most basic niceties, “good morning,” “thank you,” “I’m fine.” He had withdrawn into himself, but it wasn’t the weed, which always made him more open, this was something else and James knew what it was. He knew and was helpless in that knowledge. Charlotte, on the other hand, had lost her sullen mood and acerbic edge and was gregarious, warm and quick to laugh, just like she had been the night James had hooked up with her. She even insisted on making breakfast for everyone before going to the hospital: crêpes sprinkled with fresh lemon juice and dusted with confectioner’s sugar. They were amazingly good.

“Charlotte trained at École Lenôtre and also with Alain Cirelli,” Jean-Louis explained to Peter and Laura, the most words he had said all morning. He smiled at Charlotte, his face a picture of unmitigated adoration and pride, but the look she returned was not the same. She gazed upon him as if he were the rarest of prized possessions. Jean-Louis was hers, she held his heart in the palm of her hand, owned him, took whatever she wanted from him with the knowledge that he would willingly submit. It was impossible for James to know if there was anything left inside Jean-Louis for him to give to someone else—what with Charlotte eating him up like a twenty-layer torte—but James had to try, had to find out for himself, even if it meant fighting to the death for a few crumbs. And didn’t he owe it to Jean-Louis to save him from her? That was his own sister, for fuck’s sake! How long had this been going on?

Later that morning the babies were weighed and Benjamin tipped the scales at a hefty 5 lbs 12 oz with Chloe close behind at 5 lbs 5 oz. There were only a few more milestones to reach before they could be discharged, some kind of “car seat test” that would be administered in the next few days, as well as a hearing test and a blood test. The nurse on duty had little doubt that the twins would pass with flying colors.

“Jesus Christ!” It only occurred to James now. “I don’t even have the room ready!”

James left Charlotte and Jean-Louis at the hospital while he hit the Babies R Us after the feeding with his parents in tow.

“There’s no need to panic, sweetie. Just calm down.” Laura couldn’t stop grinning. Her grandchildren would be leaving the hospital soon and she was thrilled. Once the babies were in her care, she would send Peter home to pack their clothes, close up the house in Michigan, and drive back out to Denver so they could have a car to use at their leisure.

Peter gazed around bewildered inside the store. “Geez, I don’t remember any of this stuff when the boys were born.” He stared at the fifteen types of bouncy seats on display and shook his head in amazement. “What the heck’s a Diaper Genie?”
They filled three large shopping carts full of supplies and clothing, including a large bassinet that could accommodate both babies. James would make another trip for cribs and mattresses at a later date.

“You should use the room next to the master as the nursery,” Laura suggested when they got back to the house. “That way, you can hear them when they cry and you won’t have to go far at night.”

“Yeah,” James agreed even as he silently bemoaned the fact that he had intended for Jean-Louis to stay in that room…that way he wouldn’t have to go far at night. At the rate things were going, James doubted he’d have even one moment alone with him. Fuck! His balls positively ached, his inhumanely deprived cock so long and cruelly denied its heart’s desire that James didn’t even get any real pleasure from masturbating. The months of jerking off alone in the shower amounted to unsatisfying nibbles of McDonald’s Filet-O-Fish when what he really wanted was meaty mouthfuls of filet mignon. He couldn’t believe that these were the things running through his head as he unpackaged the onesies that his mother had picked out. They would have to be laundered first. “I’m so fucked,” he muttered under his breath. “Christ. I need to get laid.Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“What’s that honey?” Laura brought in another bag full of items from the car and dumped the contents onto the dining room table for sorting. Peter was upstairs deciphering the instructions for assembling the stand for the bassinet.

“Nothing, Mom. I’m just a little…overwhelmed.”

Laura went over to him and hugged him tightly. The top of her head came up to his chest and she could barely put her arms all the way around his thick torso. “You’re going to be great. I know it. And your father and I are here to help you, so you have nothing to worry about. You’ll see.” She looked up and smiled into the kiss that James planted on her forehead. “You miss him.”

“Mom…” James half groaned, half sighed. He could never fool her. “I can’t do anything right by him. I know it’s hopeless, but…”

“He means too much to you. I know.” She gathered up the baby bottles to be put in the dishwasher. “Don’t give up on him. I saw the way he looked at those babies. His sister might not love them, but he does.”

“Mom, don’t. I can’t listen to this.”

“Just saying. Call it mother’s intuition. He needs you.”

“No. Believe me, I wish you were right. You usually are…about everything, but you’re wrong about this. I can’t get through to him. You have no idea how fucked up he is.”

James gathered up the packages of Huggies Little Snugglers diapers to bring upstairs while Laura stacked the canisters of Similac Go & Grow InfantFormula on the kitchen counter. They continued sorting through the items in silence and then Laura said, “I’ll talk to him.”

“No, don’t. Mom, please, just leave it alone,” James begged. “He hates being told what to do.”

“Who says I’m going to tell him what to do? Sweetheart, I just want to talk to him, like a mother, that’s all. I promise I won’t say anything that’ll upset him,” she assured.

“Good luck,” snorted James.

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The twins were discharged two days later and that very same evening Charlotte was on a flight from Denver to Paris on Lufthansa with only a brief layover in Frankfurt, Germany. She had lucked out on a seat due to someone’s last minute cancellation and was overjoyed to be going home without any further delay. Jean-Louis wasn’t able to get a Southwest flight back to New York until the following evening. James was left with two infants, a feeding chart, a schedule of vaccinations, a name for a pediatrician, and what he knew would be a mind-boggling hospital bill, but grateful that Charlotte had given him no further grief. She had been in great spirits since Jean-Louis’ arrival even as she continued to distance herself from the babies. She no longer held them and barely looked at them, preferring to go straight to the private room to use the breast pumps and then staying out in the hallway while James or his parents fed them. She kept Jean-Louis close by her side the entire time and discouraged him from interacting with the twins. She especially didn’t want him anywhere near James.

Her last night there before the babies were released, James suggested a dinner out at his favorite Italian restaurant downtown. Jean-Louis declined, as did Charlotte, so it was just James and his parents and patrons shooting them sideways glances. Some interrupted their meal for autographs and pictures. James did what was expected and had to admit to himself that Jean-Louis would have hated the attention and was glad that he had been spared the aggravation. When he got back home, though, Charlotte and Jean-Louis were already up in their room for the night doing who knows what, James couldn’t stand to think about it.

The next morning, he and Charlotte went back to the hospital one final time, car seats at the ready, discharge papers signed, babies in hand. None of it seemed real, though they were both nervous and excited for their own very different reasons, they still felt caught up in a crazy dream and awaiting the moment when their eyes would open and their waking lives would continue again. Afterwards, Jean-Louis rode with Charlotte to the airport in a cab, then took another cab back after he had seen her off. James had offered to drive but of course they had turned him down. They were in their own world and spoke a language he could not understand. He had never felt so far away from Jean-Louis though they were under the same roof.

When Jean-Louis returned from the airport, it was past nine at night and James was in the kitchen mixing the formula for a feeding under Laura’s watchful eye. Peter was in the living room watching a movie on HBO with the twins fussing in his lap.

“Hey, get a move on, son. They’re hungry,” Peter called out.

“Goddamn it, Dad. You just made me lose count,” James complained.

“One more scoop,” Laura told him.

Jean-Louis wasn’t sure what to do, go upstairs or help them with the feeding? Laura made up his mind for him. “Come sit with us,” she said, grabbing his hand and leading him to one of the loveseats. “Did your sister’s flight leave on time?”

“Yes, she texted me before she boarded.” He looked over at the two squirming infants and decided he should have made a run for the stairs when he could have earlier. It wasn’t that he was afraid of babies or children—between his siblings he had six nieces and nephews, eight if he counted Benjamin and Chloe—and he had loved watching them all grow up. Although Paul had advised him not to procreate during his last visit home (“We don’t need any more of you running loose in this world,” Paul had told him), he still wished for children of his own. What hurt was that Charlotte would be deprived of a beautiful boy and girl, all because of him. If it were not for his relationship with James, she would have loved them otherwise, he was sure of it.

“So,” Laura said. “What will you do when you go back to New York?” She kept her arm looped
around his so he couldn’t escape.

“The usual. Go back to work.” He didn’t tell her that Charlotte had been asking him to go home to Arbois for good. That was none of her business.

“You know you could stay here longer if you wanted. There’s no hurry.”

“Laura, you’re very kind, but I need to get back. I came for my sister, you understand that?”

She smiled up at him. “And not for James?”

“You must know that…well, things have been difficult. We’re really not together anymore. Hasn’t James told you? We haven’t been together in quite some time.” This was so fucking awkward. He didn’t even talk to his own mother about such things, so why was he exposing himself to Laura?

“All relationships are difficult, sweetheart. It takes work, and then more work. Right honey?” Peter didn’t look away from the television, engrossed in a scene involving the US military and some alien invaders. “You see what I mean? It takes time to figure out how to be together and none of it comes easy, believe me. But in the end, it’s worth it. A person shouldn’t be alone in life, don’t you think?”

“Yes, of course I don’t want to be alone. I want to be in love, to feel passion and desire and…” He really needed to stuff a sock into his mouth because this conversation was going to go off the cliff in another second. Just then James came over with two bottles of mixed formula and sat down next to Peter.

“Okay, how are we going to do this?” James looked around at his parents and Jean-Louis. Nobody made a move to help him. “Are you kidding me? Hello? I’ve only got one pair of hands.”

“Just feed one at time,” Laura advised. “You might as well get it down now because you’ll need to manage on your own during the night.”

“What? Isn’t this the last feeding until morning?”

“Yes, if you mean one AM. Didn’t you look at the feeding chart the hospital sent home with you? Babies need to eat every few hours.”

“I need to eat every few hours, but that doesn’t mean I get up at one in the morning to raid the fridge,” James protested.

“Fine,” Laura said. “You can lay there and listen to them cry until you decide it’s time for them to be fed.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Hey, I had to get up every two to three hours for weeks and weeks after you were born. You never heard me complain about it.”

James turned to Peter hoping for some paternal support. “Dad?”

“Don’t look at me. I didn’t know anything about it. I must’ve slept through the whole thing.”

Out of pity, Jean-Louis finally went over and sat on the other side of Peter. “Let me have one of them.” Peter handed him Benjamin. The kid was already drooling up a storm in anticipation of a meal. Jean-Louis wiped his chin with a cloth and asked James for a bottle. “Haven’t you been doing this for weeks now?” Jean-Louis asked him.

“Well, yeah, but, the nurse was always there to help me out…or your sister was there…I never had to do it on my own.”
Chloe started screaming. She could see her brother sucking avidly on his bottle and hers was still nowhere near her mouth and she wasn’t going to put up with that. It took James minutes to calm her down enough for her to accept the nipple.

“That’s what you get for making her wait,” Laura told him.

“Thanks, Mom. Real help.”

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