Two Heartbeats on One Page

by indecentpause

Summary

Jordan’s in love with two people (who are in love with each other), he hasn’t spoken to his parents in five years, and despite working almost sixty hours a week, he’s still ages away from having enough to pay for the three surgeries he needs to complete his gender confirmation. This would be a problem anywhere, but particularly so in small-town, homophobic Arizona.

He needs a vacation.

Darcey’s been discharged from the Army after knowing nothing else for eight years, he’s unemployed, and, at twenty-seven years old, he has no choice but to move back in with his parents. Since his discharge was dishonorable, he doesn’t even have health insurance to treat his PTSD.

He just needs some time to get back on his feet and reconnect with his family.

Instead, they find each other.
When Jordan takes Darcey home from a party, they mean it to be a one-night stand, but they turn out to be too compatible to want to give each other up. Neither wants a relationship, but a straightforward, no-strings-attached friends-with-benefits setup will keep things nice and neat, right?

Nope. Instead, everything gets messier.

Notes

Hey, everyone! Welcome to the second installment of Holding Our Hearts in Our Hands! This one deals with some things very close to me: BPD and PTSD, not having insurance while mentally ill, being trans in an unaccepting place, being unsure whether something you've gone through is sexual assault or not. The last installment is a mix of serious and fun, and so is this one, but PLEASE read the warnings. If you are unsure about something and want clarification, hit me up on tumblr @indecentpause, and I will be happy to answer your questions. :)}
Jordan and his friends neared the end of the anti-war protest they’d joined over an hour ago, and everyone gathered in a huge throng under the hot mid-day Arizona sun to hear the speeches. His cohort Mandy was up on the makeshift stage with a bullhorn and, truthfully, Jordan couldn't even understand half of what she was saying over the noise, but she was brighter than the sun and it shone from her chest and out her eyes. Even though he couldn’t hear most of it, it was still one of the most heartfelt things he had ever witnessed. It was in everything, in her bright blue eyes, in her movements, in the way her voice cracked when she said something important. Her normally stoic face was bright and bold under the hot beam of the sun. Jordan’s chest swelled. He and Mandy had never been that close or spent much time together outside of protests and events, but he’d never been prouder. Terrence was to his right, hollering and whooping and jumping and then he ran around Jordan and grabbed his arm, spinning around him and pulling him in a circle. Jordan laughed, loud and bright, feet stumbling as he spun faster and faster while he tried to keep up. Their black shirts were ringed with sweat and their pink bandannas were hot around their necks underneath the summer sun, but they were laughing and grinning and when they stopped spinning, they threw their hands up wildly in the air and jumped around like mad animals, full to the brim and vibrating with excitement and joy. The pink and silver sparkles that littered Terrence's shirt from a glitter bomb gone haywire flashed in the bright light and he grinned, baring the crooked teeth that he was normally so self-conscious of with no shame, only pure joy.

Jordan's curly black hair was limp with sweat and his shirt clung to his dark brown skin. The binder around his chest was uncomfortably warm and snug and it would definitely need to be washed when he got home but everything was so beautiful, the hope and the joy and the passion of the thousands of people around him here at the protest, that it only crossed his mind for a moment, unimportant, fleeting. He and his friends were there and they were alive and even if it took them years, they were going to stop the war and it was amazing.

Even after screaming and marching for forty minutes, even with hurting feet and wobbly knees, standing prone seemed impossible and Jordan let out a wordless, excited shout that trailed off into a laugh.

Mandy jumped down from the stage and charged at her friends, leaping on Terrence, who grabbed her and spun her around in a circle. Jordan wiped the sweat from his eyes and turned back to the stage to see who was up next. They were taking everything down. Mandy must have been the last.

When he turned back, he was alone. Terrence and Mandy had gotten lost in the crowd. He wasn't worried. They'd find each other later.

Someone jumped on his back and shouted in his ear, “Feed me!” Mandy. “Dude, I'm fucking starving.” She put her feet back on the ground and slumped against his back. ‘I'm withering away!”

Jordan wiggled out of her grip and turned around. Terrence was behind her and he laughed, a harsh, barking laugh that most people found frightening or intimidating. It sounded mocking and mean, and the way he spoke was harsh and blunt, but although he had the voice and body of a fairy-tale giant, he had a heart as soft and kind as a kitten’s.
Jordan turned back to Mandy and said, “I don't know what to tell you. I got nothin’.”

Mandy threw her hands up in the air. “Well then, what good are you to me!?” She had to shout for her friends to hear her over the noise, but she was laughing. Her blue eyes flashed with mirth and her straw-blonde hair shimmered like strands of gold in the sun.

“Come on,” Terrence said. He pushed his brown hair, sticky with sweat, off his forehead. “Food Not Bombs is here. I'm sure they can take care of you.”

Mandy whirled around and flopped against Terrence's side. Her head barely came up to his torso.

“What, you want me to carry you?” Terrence asked.

“Um, how about fuck you?”

“I'll take that as a ‘yes, but I don't want to ask,’” Terrence said, and he scooped her up and threw her over his shoulder. She laughed brightly as Terrence turned around.

“I'll be your guide to the food,” she said, gesturing for Jordan to follow.

Jordan laughed, and although every inch of his dark brown skin was sticky with sweat and he could barely stay on his feet, he'd never been happier.

They weaved in and out of the crowd, and even when Jordan got separated, Terrence was so tall, he was easy to spot and catch up to again. Although they were near the march's end and the crowd had thinned out, there were still people teeming everywhere, so it took quite some time for them to get back to the park where the Food Not Bombs van had set up. But, eventually, they did, and Terrence plopped Mandy back down on the ground and she weaved in and out the rest of the distance to join the line.

Jordan and Terrence were almost there when Jordan caught sight of a young Black woman, maybe his age, serving out some kind of bean mixture to a woman and her two kids.

“Say thank you,” the mom said. The two kids did, and one held up his hand for a high five. The woman behind the table gently smacked her palm to his. He grinned, and when she smiled back, Jordan fell in love.

He took a step forward, a step back. Her smile was gorgeous. She was gorgeous. Angular and lanky with long, straightened hair, dressed simply in a black t-shirt and jeans and a pair of black and white sneakers. Her face shone in the hot summer light, and suddenly all Jordan had ever wanted in the world was to hold her hand.

Then another woman in a bright purple hijab jumped out of the van and nearly toppled the first woman over. She caught herself on the table and the man now in front of her jumped.

“Jesus, Vi, don’t do that to a person!”

“Sorry, Iffy.”

Iffy? What an cute name! Nickname? Either way, it was adorable.

Vi nipped at Iffy’s cheek and Iffy laughed, gently pushing her away and rubbing the mark with her knuckles.

“My boyfriend is right here. Like, I can literally reach out and touch him.”
Jordan’s heart fell. She put her hand on the side of a gangly, thin man with a shaved head, almost as tall as Terrence. He laughed playfully and pulled her against his side, and did something with his hands in Vi’s direction that Jordan assumed was sign language. His grey eyes were bright and sparkling and his teeth where the most perfect Jordan had ever seen. It seemed he couldn’t speak for some reason, but his laugh was infectious, big and boisterous and beautiful, oh no. No, no, Jordan couldn’t afford to start crushing on both this woman and her boyfriend. Cut it out, heart. Brain? Which part was even in charge of crushes?

It was his turn. He had to find something to say or he might never get another chance.

“What can I get you?”

He looked up at Iffy’s bright brown eyes and mumbled, “Uh, little bit of everything? Like, sample sizes.”

She grinned, and it wasn’t a fake retail grin, it was an honest glad to be here grin. He smiled back.

“How long have you been with Food Not Bombs?” he asked as she served up a plate for him.

“Not very. Only a couple of weeks.”

“What would someone have to do to join?”

She looked up from the garlic toast she’d just plated and frowned thoughtfully. “You know, I don’t really know? My situation was kind of unique because my boyfriend set up the chapter so I just started coming along. You’ll want to talk to him.” She scooped one more spoonful of food onto the paper plate and handed it over, then she gently pinched her boyfriend’s side to get his attention. He looked away from the pot he was refilling and hiked an eyebrow.

“This guy --“ she said, gesturing toward him. She paused.

“Jordan,” he introduced himself.

“Jordan. Is interested in joining our chapter. Can you talk to him about it?”

Her boyfriend saluted and gestured Jordan to follow him around to the side of the van, away from the crowd, as Iffy called Vi over to take his place.

The taller man pulled out a smartphone and punched something in. He turned it toward Jordan. It was an unsent text message.

I’m Nate, by the way.

“I --“ Jordan started. He shrugged, hands up in the air. “I don’t know sign language or anything and my phone is too slow for a face-to-face conversation. I’m so sorry.”

Of course, he had a crush on a guy whose language he didn’t know. Good job, Jordan.

Nate typed something else out and turned the phone around again.

It’s okay. I can hear just fine. I just can’t speak.

“Oh!” Jordan said. “Oh, okay. That’s good. Sorry I assumed.”

Nate waved Jordan’s worries away.

They talked like that for a while, about Nate’s Food Not Bombs chapter, about Jordan’s work
with BashBack, a little bit about Nate’s relationship with Iffy. Jordan did his best to feel out whether they would be into a triad, but he could never find a way to bring it up appropriately. He slowly inched closer toward Nate as they spoke, trying to judge how he felt about personal space without expressly asking, and eventually they ended up side by side, leaning against the van as Jordan looked over Nate’s arm while he typed things into his phone.

Nate was in the middle of typing something out when Terrence appeared from who even knew where and grabbed Jordan’s arm, jerking him away.

“I’ll be right back!” Jordan called over his shoulder, trying to wave Nate’s puzzled expression away.

“What are you doing?” He turned back around toward Terrence and jerked his arm away.

“What are you doing?”

Jordan's throat tightened as if his heart had just crawled into it and set up camp and suddenly he couldn't swallow. The sweat on the back of his neck, sticky and warm and uncomfortable, was suddenly ice cold. His binder, which he usually didn't notice anymore, was now much too constricting and every breath felt like an earthquake.

He looked up at Terrence, wide eyed. Terrence stared at him a moment, then his eyes widened in recognition. He closed them and rubbed at his forehead. When he opened them again, he followed Jordan's line of vision back toward Nate, who was on his phone again, then sighed like an exasperated father who loved his son dearly but didn't understand how his offspring could keep being so stupid all the time. “Jordan, you're doing it again.”

“What?” Jordan looked up and finally swallowed the lump in his throat. Another crawled up to replace it.

“He has a girlfriend,” Terrence said. Jordan's eyes darted from Terrence back toward Iffy at the serving table. Terrence sighed.

“Oh, Christ. It’s both of them, isn’t it?”

Jordan swallowed and nodded, looking down at his feet. Mandy was long gone, most likely curled up under one of the few trees, eating somewhere.

“I forbid you to even try doing anything about it. Those two are clearly dating and probably monogamous.”

“Bro, I know.” Jordan's voice hitched in embarrassment and his face burned. “I’m not an asshole, okay? I can tell they love each other and I highly doubt they’ll be receptive to someone trying to butt in. Especially a different gender couple? He’s probably straight! I know it’s not going to happen. Jesus, Terrence, what kind of douchebag do you think I am?”

Terrence sighed and gave him a smile that wasn't quite condescending. “At least you're an adorable and well-meaning douchebag,” he said.

Jordan shrugged. “I'll take it.”

Terrence laughed and ruffled Jordan's hair. Normally, Jordan would have growled and batted his friend's hands away, but by this point his hair was so messy that nothing could make it much worse.

“Come on,” he said quickly. “I want to catch them and get their phone numbers before they get
too busy to talk.”

“Jordan.”

“Because they're cool people and I might want to get involved with Food Not Bombs. You know I've been interested for a while.” Jordan sighed. “Jesus, Terrence, do we need to have this conversation again? Not an asshole. I won't flirt, I won't try to worm myself in, I won't even say anything. They're cool people and I want to maybe be their friend if that works out. That's all. The end.”

Terrence looked at Jordan skeptically, but finally sighed and rolled his eyes in defeat, gesturing him forward. Jordan gave him a sarcastic mock-bow and walked past. He understood his friend's concern, because he did have a tendency to lose track of his emotions when he got infatuated, and he knew he could get stupid. The part his friends often forgot was the fact that no matter how stupid he did get, he'd always had nothing but respect for other people's boundaries, despite their relationship to him and even despite whether he liked them or not. He knew he was an emotional, occasionally obsessive idiot, but at least he was a respectful one.

Iffy and Vi were talking animatedly to one of the Food Not Bombs volunteers as Jordan approached, a young redhead woman about their age. She was tall and heavyset and holding Vi’s hand. She said something and Iffy laughed, but Vi just stuck her tongue out in response. Jordan swallowed nervously and began moving forward again, plastering a confident smile on his face while begging his mouth to please, please not say anything stupid.

“Hey!” He waved as he approached, calling out a little too loud in his excitement. They didn't answer. “Iffy! Vi!” When he called their names, they turned around in sync, as if their moves were choreographed, and twin grins slid across their faces.

“Jordan!” they called back. Vi grabbed his hand in an enthusiastic greeting and Jordan’s eyes darted back toward Iffy, but before he could say anything, Vi whipped out her cell phone and said, “Hey, give me your number in case we lose you again! Iffy said you wanted to help us out.”

Jordan smiled and typed his information into Vi’s phone. He handed it back with his in the other hand and asked hesitantly, “You too?” She grinned brightly and took both phones, tapping away at Jordan's keypad. When she gave it back, she said, “You’ll have to ask Iffy for hers. She doesn’t like it when people give it out.”

"Understandable.” He pocketed his phone as their Iffy reappeared.

“Hey,” she said. “How did things go with Nate?”

“One of my friends needed to talk to me, but I was just about to go back. It’s good so far! He’s given me some great information.”

“Good!”

The redhead threw her arm around Iffy’s shoulder and pulled her in protectively, though she still smiled and her movements were loose. “The three of us were about to head out to The Tree House, if you want to come.” She held out her hand. “I’m Renee, by the way. Vi’s girlfriend.”

Jordan shook it. “Nice to meet you. I’m Jordan.” He paused, then said, “How about to hell with The Tree House and I take you to CounterCulture? The coffee is way better and there are vegan cookies.”

“Really?” Vi looked up from her cell phone and shoved it in her pocket. “You sure?”
“Positive.” Jordan grinned. He pressed his thumb proudly into his chest. “Made them myself last night.”

Vi and Renee grinned at each other. “Well, guess we're switching coffeehouses, then.”

“I'll be right back,” Iffy said. She wormed out of Renee's grip and squeezed her hand as they parted. “Just going to say bye to Nate. He got a text from Justin earlier; their air conditioner is finally fixed, so he can meet us there later. I’m just going to let him know our location has changed.”

“Ohay.” Renee turned back to Jordan and explained, “Nate's her boyfriend. Justin’s his roommate.”

Jordan nodded. “I know. Well, about Nate, anyway.” Iffy started to make her way around the van. Jordan held up a finger to excuse himself, and he followed.

His first steps were long, so he could catch up with her. She looked up, did a double take, and then smiled.

“I don’t want him to think I abandoned him,” Jordan explained. Iffy laughed.

“That’s probably a good thing. Nate’s pretty good-natured and doesn’t get offended easily, but when you have the choice it’s always better to not be rude.”

Terrence must have passed on the news of his little infatuation, because in the next half hour Jordan got twelve texts from a number of people, all variants of, “Don't do anything stupid.” He knew his friends meant well, but he wasn't stupid and he wasn't an asshole, guys, come on. He knew his advances wouldn't be welcome, so he wasn't going to make any. He'd been honest when he told Terrence all he meant to do was to try to become friends.

It was Mandy's text that made him pause and reconsider his friends' intentions.

Be careful. We both know it can't go anywhere and I don't want you to get hurt.

He swallowed nervously and pocketed his phone without replying. She was right, and he knew that. Maybe I should have just left them alone. He'd just gotten himself into a great group of potential friends, but if something happened and something about his feelings did get out and get back to them? Everyone would have been better off if he'd stayed away and spared Iffy and Nate the guilt of hurting a friend, even though they wouldn't be to blame.

I wouldn't be anyone's fault but yours, just like always, Jordan thought.

He snapped out of his thoughts when Iffy plopped down a plate of hummus and pita bread in the middle of the small, circular table. CounterCulture was always busy this time of day on the weekend, mostly with teenagers and college students hanging out with their friends. Today someone had brought a guitar and was playing quietly in the front room. Jordan and the others were in the back, with the small book collection and the tables and the loveseat in the corner, where it was a little more closed in, and, because of it, a little louder.

Jordan jumped when Nate tapped the table in front of him next to his coffee. He glanced up to see a phone in front of his face.

You okay? it read. You kind of zoned out there for a minute.
Jordan smiled at him apologetically, then turned his gaze around the table. “Sorry.”

“It's okay,” Renee laughed. She waved his worry away with a careless flick of her wrist. “We were just talking about the history behind why we do our brunch on Sundays and I kind of started rambling, anyway. Just to get people in the community together, maybe offer a nice meal to someone who wouldn't otherwise be able to get one. Our feminist collective hosts it every week in our meeting space.”

“Is it women only?” Jordan asked. Renee and Vi side eyed each other and Iffy stiffened a little. Nate frowned and his arm shifted to take Iffy’s hand under the table.

“No,” Renee said slowly. “Anyone can come. Male, female, agender, kid, adult, whatever. The actual meetings, though—”

“It's never come up before,” Vi interrupted. “Like… we don't have a whole lot of safe spaces, as women, so even if you are a feminist, being a guy could be kind of…”

“Threatening?” Renee finished. “I don't know. We'd have to discuss it with everyone else first. Like, Nate’s probably the most feminist guy I know and he doesn't even come. It’s not his place, you know?” She turned to Nate and started, “No off—”

Nate grinned and held up his hand, implying that no offense had been taken.

Jordan held up his hands as if to prove he was unarmed. “Not a problem,” he said. “Your space is your space. I just wanted to be sure I wasn't sticking my head in somewhere I wasn't welcome.” He understood the importance of safe spaces more than most, especially since he didn't have any until he found Terrence and, through him, BashBack.

Everyone relaxed and Iffy nodded.

“Thanks for not being a jerk about it,” she said.

“Sorry I'm an exception and not the rule.” His voice was light, but his eyes were soft and serious, and finally, Iffy smiled. Vi leaned her head against Iffy’s shoulder, and this time, Iffy didn’t push her away. Jordan wasn't quite sure of what had changed, but he was grateful for it. He smiled back.
Darcey was being shipped out to the Middle East and had never been so scared in his life. They were sending him to Iraq, this time. He knew when he enlisted eight years before that if a war started, he would be one of the first sent in. He'd thought he was prepared. That was what training was for, right? So they'd be ready when they went over.

He wasn't. He wasn't prepared when he went to Iraq the first time or Afghanistan three years later. He wasn't ready to go back and he never would be, and he was certain anyone who said otherwise was lying.

The tremor from Afghanistan still ran deep in his hands. Fireworks meant panic attacks. He hadn't slept a full night in months.

The worst part was suffering alone, because he couldn't tell anyone about it. Who would understand?

He was supposed to have been done. He was set to retire in exactly two weeks. But a stop-loss order had been put out and they were shipping him out in twelve days. Like a package or a letter bomb. Special delivery.

His hands trembled as he dialed his parents' home phone number. He was almost thirty, but had never wanted to hug anyone in his life as much as he wanted to hug his family right then. The phone rang twice, and his mother, Jess, picked up.

“Darcey, hi!” She sounded so excited, so happy, because Darcey was coming home soon. But this time, he thought, he might never come back, whether because of someone else's hand or his own.

“Hey, Mom.” Darcey's voice caught and his tongue stuck in his mouth when he spoke.

“Darcey?”

He swallowed hard and closed his hazel-brown eyes in an attempt to calm his nerves, but it was useless.

“They're sending me back in.”

Silence.

“No,” Jess whispered. “No, they're not. You're coming home in two weeks. You've served your time, you –”

“No, Mom. They put out a stop-loss order. They're sending my whole unit back for two more years. Iraq again.”

“Two years?” Darcey's breath caught painfully at the hitch of tears in his mother's voice. “No,” she said. “No. They said two weeks! Darcey, they can't do this to you! They –”

“They can,” he interrupted softly. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't want her to hear the myriad of emotions waiting at the back of his throat. “They can do whatever they want, Mom. They own me.”
“But –”

“Can I talk to Ally?” Darcey asked. “Is she home?”

“Yeah,” Jess said. “Lexi’s at her friend’s house right now. William’s still at work. Do you want me to –”

“No, you don’t have to call him,” Darcey said. “Just… just let me know when he gets home. You can tell him or have me do it, but either way, have him call me, okay? And let Lexi have fun with her friend for now.”

“Oh sweetie,” Jess said. She hadn’t called him by a pet name in over three years, but right then it was exactly what he needed. “I just… I…”

“I know,” he whispered.

“Let me get your sister. Just… be gentle. Remember, she’s only nine.”

“I know, Mom.”

“I love you, Darcey. I love you so, so much.”

“I love you, too, Mom.”

Darcey’s hands shook as he waited in silence. They always shook. He hadn’t been able to still them since his first tour. There were only varying levels of bad and less bad.

“Darcey!” Ally’s high, slightly squeaky voice brought a smile to Darcey’s face for the first time that day, even though it was strained and watery.

“Hey, Allycat.”

“Darcey? What’s wrong?”

“I –” He choked on his tongue, suddenly so heavy and thick. The back of his throat tasted hot and metallic, like blood. “I’m sorry, Ally. I’m not going to be home soon after all.”

“But…” Her voice dropped, tiny and scared. “But you said…”

“I know what I said.” Ally started to cry, muffled slightly through the phone line. “I’m sorry, Ally, but they’re sending me out again. Two more years this ti –”

“No! You have to come home!” Her voice was high-pitched and panicked and her words came out so fast Darcey could barely keep up with them. “They said you could! They can’t do this to you!”

“I know they did, Allycat, I know, and I want to, but this isn’t my decision. I have no choice.”

But Ally didn’t hear him over the sound of her own sobs, harsh and heavy, and all Darcey wanted was to be near her so he could hold her and get her through it, but maybe in the long run that would only have made it harder on everyone.

Darcey gently shushed her as she cried, useless noises of attempted comfort that didn’t fix anything, but he didn’t know what else to do. He ran his hand over the back of his head, his dark brown hair, nervous. Finally, her sobs calmed to sniffles and she hiccupped twice.
“I love you, Darcey,” she said. “I miss you. I'll try to be brave like you.”

But I'm not, he wanted to say. I'm a coward. He was terrified of going back again. It followed him everywhere, into his dreams, where the heat of the explosions still burned his skin. Sometimes, even when he woke up, he was still there, ducking down ground in the dirt while bullets whizzed overhead. Even airplanes made him nervous. He'd been planning to take a bus back to Arizona until they'd put out the stop-loss order.

Sometimes the fear isolated him so much he almost cried, but he could never actually get any tears to fall. He wished he could. Maybe it would help.

Maybe it would make him feel worse.

“You are brave,” he finally said. “You are so brave, Ally. Remember that.”

There was a beat of silence as she nodded. Darcey could almost see her, the phone in both hands, her brown hair falling messily into her face, maybe with a dirt smudge on her cheek. But he hadn't seen her in so long, maybe she didn't look like that at all anymore.

“I've got to go,” he said. “I have some other people to call. I promise I’ll call you again soon though, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Be brave, Ally. I love you. Send me letters, okay?”

“Ohkay. I love you, too.”

Even after Ally hung up, Darcey kept the phone held against his cheek for a few minutes as he tried to compose himself. He took a deep breath and placed it down on his desk, pulling up his chair. He opened his laptop and picked up his phone, about to text his best friend and only cousin, Brett. But he couldn't. Not yet. Exhaustion weighed down his limbs like iron. He'd text later.

Darcey woke up some hours later to a beeping phone and a dark bedroom. His phone had a new text and the repeated tone meant whoever sent it thought it was urgent. He rubbed the sleep sand from his eyes as he walked to his desk, picking up his phone and plopping down in his chair. It was from Brett. Darcey flipped open his phone.

Call me. Remember we love you.

Instead of calling, he sent a quick text back.

You by your computer? Skype would be better.

A few minutes later:

Logging on. See you in a few.

Darcey opened his laptop again, typed in his WiFi password, and logged into Skype. The little icon saying Brett was logged in was next to his screen name.

Darcey connected.

The glare of the indoor light over Brett's face meant it was dark in Phoenix, which meant it was
even later where Darcey was in Louisiana. He turned his light on so Brett didn't have to talk to a shadow. Brett's curly brown hair was a mess and his eyes ringed in dark circles, but he was smiling, though sadly.

“Hey, Darcey.” Brett's voice was quiet.

“I can't hear you, man,” Darcey said. He slipped on his headphones so he wouldn't disturb his roommates. The volume level he needed to hear Brett clearly could easily wake them up. “Turn up your mic?”

“Yeah, sorry,” Brett said. He did. Music played in the background, but Darcey didn't have to ask. Brett turned it off so Darcey could hear better.

“So, I'm –”

“Yeah,” Brett said. Even over the static of the connection, the catch in his voice was clear. “Dad told me. Your stepdad told him.”

“Okay.”

A beat of silence. Brett's eyes darted down the screen and he smiled. “You're wearing the shirt I sent you. It fit okay?”

Darcey smiled back. It was one of his favorite shirts, black with a pixelated heart, sword, and shield, and underneath, it read in an 8-bit style font, “Don't make me go Zelda on you.”

“Yeah,” Darcey said. “It's one of my favorites.”

Brett smiled. “Good. I was a little worried because your shoulders are so broad.”

“Well, excuse me, princess.”

They both laughed brightly, and had they been sitting beside each other instead of half a country away, they would have shared a fist bump. Darcey knew he needed to talk to Brett about everything, but he wasn't willing to completely give up this time, either. He had so little of it left. He was so messed up, but he had to try to hold onto the good things, too. His family and all the families like them were the reason he enlisted. He couldn't forget that.

But he wasn't an idealistic high school kid anymore. He'd seen the reality that was war. He knew now, protecting his family was not the reason he and his platoon were being shipped out.

“Oh,” Brett said. Darcey's focus came back in. “Speaking of gifts, I was at a show with some friends a while ago and there was this really cool band there I thought you'd like, so I picked up their demo for you. It only has five songs, but it's pretty good.” He rummaged around his desk for a moment, then lifted up a CD case so Darcey could see the cover. It was called Noise For Sleeping.

“How many assholes did you have there yelling 'Freebird?'”

Brett laughed and shook his head.

“I don't know how things are done in the South, Darcey, but if someone tried that around here at a punk show they'd get the crap kicked out of them.”

Darcey smiled, a little half-grin.
“I was just going to mail it to you,” Brett said, “but I can rip it and send it over now, if you want.”

“Normally I’d say mail it, but considering the circumstances, it’d probably be better to rip it.”

Their smiles faded.

“Yeah,” Brett said quietly. “You’re right.”

They were both silent while Brett ripped open the package and set up his computer. Darcey’s eyes darted over Brett as he worked in another window. He'd lost a lot of weight since the last time they'd seen each other.

“Are you eating okay?” Darcey asked. Brett had nearly died as a result of anorexia when they were in high school. Darcey had always been protective of his family, but he was especially watchful of his cousin now.

Brett looked back at Darcey again.

“Yeah,” he said. “I've just had a lot going on. School's crazy since I just changed my major so last minute, and some really bad shit just went down with my boyfriend's family, so –”

“Your what?”

They fell silent. The fear in Brett's eyes was sharp, almost panicked, his shoulders tight with worry and all Darcey wanted in that moment was to reassure Brett that he never had to be afraid of him or his opinion, but Darcey couldn't speak because his mind was too busy running in little circles of part fear, part joy, singing, *I'm not the only one I'm not the only one –*

“I mean,” Darcey started again. He licked his lips, a nervous habit he'd had for years. “I just mean, you had a girlfriend in high school, didn't you? Annie? You guys were together for almost three years. Right?”

“Yeah,” Brett whispered. He brought his voice back up when he said, “I'm uh, I'm bisexual.”

“Oh.” Darcey paused, trying to decide where to go next. “While, uh, while we're having his conversation, I am too, actually. Well. Not bi. Gay. I… I *think.*” He swallowed hard, catching the lump in his throat. His hands trembled harder than usual and his voice shook. “I mean, I'm pretty much sure. But I haven't really had anyone to talk to to figure things out for *sure* sure.”

“Well,” Brett said, “if you know, you know. It doesn't really matter what your experiences are.”

“Yeah.” It came out in a thick, heavy breath. “And, you know, it is the Army. I don't really know how most of my guys feel about that kind of thing, but there are a few pretty vocal homophobes and only Doc ever says anything about it.”

“He's a good man,” Brett said. “But then there's Don't Ask, Don't Tell, yeah?”

“Yeah. So the only thing that really matters is what my superiors think.”

“And?”

“They're not okay.”

Brett sighed. “I really, really wish you were here right now.”

“Me, too,” Darcey said. The prickle of tears was sharp in the bottom of his eyes because he was *so isolated* even if he wasn't alone. But now, at least if he died overseas, one person knew who he
really was, still loved him, and knew that he was still exactly the same person as he was before he'd said it.

“I, uh...” Darcey coughed into his hand to try to clear the tears away, as useless as it was. “They're sending me back to Iraq. Camp Justice.”

“Wow, irony,” Brett said.

Darcey frowned.

“No, I mean... I mean that you were supposed to come back and they're sending you there instead? Shit, that was a terrible joke and I'm sorry. I wasn't even thinking about how it might be misconstrued.”

Darcey's face relaxed and he smiled wryly.

“No,” he said. “You're right. I just misunderstood.” His smile faded and his eyes turned down. The rough calluses on his fingers and palm scratched against his skin when he rubbed his neck, another nervous habit. He had a lot of those.

“Darcey?” Brett asked.

“I can't do this anymore,” Darcey blurted. Everything that had been locked up inside for so long because that was the only safe place it keep it suddenly started spilling out of his mouth, spitting up in a big jumble of words all at once. “I can't do this anymore, Brett, I can't watch people die anymore, I can't... I can't kill people anymore —”

“You had no choice, Darcey,” Brett interrupted, but Darcey didn't hear.

“And when I go back it's all going to happen over again. I don't know what to do. I'm so fucked up, Brett. I have been ever since my first tour, and it's just getting worse as time goes on.”

“What... what do you mean, 'fucked up?'” Brett asked. His eyebrows knit close together and his mouth turned down.

“I have these really fucked up nightmares,” Darcey said. “Not normal ones. They follow me when I wake up. They're still there. I looked it up online and apparently they're called night terrors —”

“Darcey.” Brett's interruption was gentle, but serious. “That's a symptom of PTSD.”

“Yeah,” Darcey laughed bitterly.

“No, Darcey, that's really, really serious. You need to see someone about it. That can really mess you up.”

“I know.” Darcey meant for it to come out harsh, but instead, it caught in his throat as a half-swallowed sob.

Both men were silent for a good five minutes before Brett asked, “Is anyone with you?”

“No,” Darcey said. “Everyone else is sleeping or out.”

Brett paused again as he chewed on the corner of his lip. He looked up and locked eyes with Darcey again. “I have an idea,” he said, “but it might be a stupid one. Don't be afraid to tell me to shut up.”
Darcey chuckled wryly. “All right.”

“Okay, so, Don't Ask, Don't Tell, right?” Brett began. “What if... what if you tell?”

Darcey’s neck tightened and he swallowed hard. He'd never considered coming out as an option, but he'd certainly thought about what might happen if he did.

“It’ll be a dishonorable discharge, Brett. I get nothing. No health insurance, no retirement, no GI Bill, nothing. I might not even be able to get work when I get home because it's basically like walking around with a felony on my record. They kick me out on the street without even a bus ticket. All of...” He waved his hands around vaguely, hoping the movement would make his shaking less obvious. “This, for nothing. Wasted. Gone.”

“Okay,” Brett said. “It was just a thought. I don't really know how that stuff works.”

“It's okay,” Darcey said.

They were quiet for some time, and when they started talking again it was about trivial things. Unimportant things. Brett's schooling and Darcey's desk job and movies and music. The whole time, Darcey couldn't shake the thoughts rattling in the back of his skull.

Four days passed. Darcey hadn't been sure, at first, and had been afraid to agree to anything unless he knew he could commit, but now he was packing up a bag for a last minute flight to Arizona. He left later that day.

It hadn’t taken much for Brett to convince him. Darcey would stay with him that night so he could surprise his immediate family the next morning.

He hadn't told anyone what he was thinking. Ever since Brett suggested 'telling', he hadn't been able to shake the idea. Considering the attitudes of everyone but Doc, Darcey wasn't sure whether he would be out on the street the day he came back or miserable for the next few years. If he didn't die before then.

He rolled up the last of his clothes and stuffed them in his bag. His cell phone rang. He stood as he answered.

“Hey, Brett.”

“Hey, Darcey!” They were both still terrified, but were also happy to see each other again after so long, even though it wasn't under the circumstances they’d hoped. “So, I know you'll be on your way to the airport soon, and I just wanted to say it'll be all right. I know how hard flying is for you. I'm sorry we couldn't get you a bus ticket, but we didn't have enough time this last minute. But you've got this, okay?”

Darcey smiled. “Thanks, man.” He meant it more than Brett could know.

“I'll be waiting for you there. Give me a call when you get off the plane and I'll head over to the pickup area then so I don't clog up the street. You get in at...?”

“Just after midnight,” Darcey said.

“All right. I'll see you then.”
“Yeah.”

“Bye!”

From the corner of his eye, Darcey just caught Private Campbell's form leaning against his wall. One of his roommates. One of the virulently homophobic men on his unit. Even though Brett had hung up already, Darcey still said, “Love you, too.” He pretended to end the call and pocketed his phone, looking up at Campbell as if he'd just noticed him.

“Your little sister?” Campbell asked. He was smiling sadly. He had a sister of his own about Lexi's age, although he was a few years younger than Darcey.

Darcey steeled himself.

“My boyfriend,” he said. The understanding look on Campbell's face twisted and distorted. His mouth turned down into a sneer and his eyebrows drew tightly together, a caricature of a mix between anger and disappointment.

“No way,” he said. “You're a faggot?”

“A faggot who saved your life in Iraq, asshole,” Darcey growled back. “Don't fucking forget that.”

Campbell's hand clenched into a fist and the muscle in his wrist flexed when it tightened. Darcey slid his left foot back for better balance. Campbell saw it and recognized it for the defensive maneuver it was, and he knew if he wanted to attack Darcey, Darcey could easily take him.

“Fucking disgusting,” he spat, and he left the room.

It's done. Now Darcey simply had to wait for Campbell to tell everyone else, which he would. Hopefully, things would turn out for the best, whatever 'the best' ended up meaning.

He pulled Campbell out. He took the shrapnel in his arm. He lost the use of his left hand for almost six months. And now none of that mattered and he was garbage because he was gay.

Darcey knew this was exactly what would happen, but he hadn't been prepared for how it would make him feel when it did. An uncomfortable burn pulsed in the back of his neck, something like shame. Sharp and angry.

But it was done. It was what it was, and now he had to simply hurry up and wait. At least he could hurry up and wait with his family.

He shouldered his bag and headed out the door.

Darcey had hated airports for ages. But the airport was better than the apartment, so he was there five hours early, three before the requisite two, playing aimlessly with his phone while he waited. He purposely didn't wear his uniform to avoid being bothered, by both those well-meaning and not, although he still had his Army pack. Most people didn't notice it or thought it was just a fashion statement.

Even inside the air-conditioned airport, the summer Louisiana air was hot and sticky. Phoenix would be hotter, definitely in the triple digits, but at least it would be dry, and at least there would be air-conditioning anywhere he might go.
Hours later, the flight was called for boarding. Darcey's seat was by the window. The first thing he did was pull the shade so he couldn't see the skyline during takeoff. The sun was almost all the way down, but the dark nothingness that would soon be outside was almost worse. He popped a Xanax, knowing he'd need it and *prevention is better than treatment*, his psychiatrist always said. Nobody knew he was seeing her, and even she didn't know much of anything. Just enough to feel comfortable prescribing him medication for sleep and anxiety so he could function at least semi-normally. He didn't know what he was going to do without it when he left. He grabbed the armrests in an attempt to still his shaking hands as the rest of the passengers boarded and found their seats. Unfortunately, it was a full flight, so he couldn't move to the aisle. But he'd manage. He had no choice.

He had a layover in Las Vegas, but at least he wouldn't have to deplane. If he was lucky, he could sleep through the whole thing.

The Xanax, soft and warm, started to creep through Darcey's muscles just as the pilot began going through the safety measures. He breathed in and closed his eyes, and even though he flinched when the engines roared up and his hands shook hard when the plane started to move, the takeoff was easier than it would have been without it.

As soon as the announcement was made that hand-held devices were safe, Darcey pulled his iPod out of his bag and slipped on his noise-canceling headphones. Maybe it was overkill, but he couldn't afford to have an anxiety attack in public.

*A war veteran crying because he has to take an airplane? Pathetic.*

He closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep.

Darcey jerked awake when something tapped against his shoulder, and when his head whirled in the direction it came from and his hand shot up, the middle-aged woman in the seat beside him jumped back a little. He pulled his headphones off and breathed.

“Sorry, ma'am,” he murmured.

She shook her head. “I'm sorry if I startled you!”

Darcey didn't notice the Southern twang he'd picked up until he was here, talking to someone without an accent. “We're about to land and they want everyone to put their computers and things away,” she said. “I just wanted you to know.”

Darcey glanced over to the window, still covered by the shade. The plane was much darker. Almost all of the overhead lights were off, leaving just the harsh glaring spots of the reading lights above some of the seats. He turned off his iPod and wrapped his headphones back up, slipping them back into his bag.

They landed and stayed on the tarmac for thirty minutes or so, then he popped another Xanax and went through takeoff again. But this time, the flight was only going to be forty-five minutes.

He was almost home. Really, really home.

Every muscle in Darcey's body shook as he deplaned. He ran his hand over the back of his neck.
as he stepped into the terminal, then pulled out his phone and turned it back on. Once it came back to life, he shifted his bag on his shoulder and dialed Brett's number. It rang three times before he picked up.

“Hey! You here?”

“Yeah.” Darcey smiled in relief, because he really was, even though it was only for a few days.

“Okay,” Brett said. “Gimme a minute and I'll pull up. You're coming in on four, right?”

“Yeah. I'll be out soon. I just brought the one carry-on so I don't need to hit baggage claim.”

“Awesome.” The grin in Brett's voice was audible. “I, uh, I do have a friend with me, though. I was going to give her a ride home but got kept late at work and ended up having to bring her along to get here in time. I'm going to drop her off on our way back to my place. We just didn't have time on our way here. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, sure.”

The heat outside the safety of the air-conditioned building was dry and heavy and oppressive, but it was familiar, and in that way, comforting. Brett pulled up just as Darcey stepped up to the curb and leaned out to try to spot his car. He threw his things in the trunk before sliding into the backseat. Brett snapped and gestured him forward.

“Nuh uh,” Brett said. “Front seat for you.”

The woman next to Darcey, short and angular, smiled a little nervously and nodded toward the front of the car.

“Really,” she said. “I insist. Brett said he hasn't seen you in ages. I've been with him the past two hours. You get the front seat.” She paused when her phone beeped, and when she pulled it out of her pocket, she frowned, pursing her lips. “Who the hell…?” She flipped her phone open and punched something in as Darcey relocated to the front seat. As soon as he was inside the car, Brett unbuckled himself and grabbed him in a hug, pulling Darcey as close as possible at the strange angle and with all the things in the car in the way. Brett's hands trembled and his voice shook when he whispered,

“Fuck.” He hardly ever swore. “Darcey, you're really here.”

“Yeah,” Darcey whispered back, hugging Brett back as best he could. They stayed tangled together for a moment before separating into their own seats.

“Hey, Brett?” said the woman in the back. Darcey glanced over his shoulder as Brett pulled back into the street. “Oh, sorry,” she said. “My name’s Iffy, by the way.”


“Good to meet you.” She looked back at the back of Brett’s head and repeated his name. He glanced up into the rearview mirror.

“Yeah?”

“Could you drop me off at an apartment on McDowell instead? Its close to where Vi lives.”

“I don’t know where Vi lives,” Brett said. “I’ve never met her. I only know she exists because you talk about her sometimes.”
“Shit, um,” Iffy said. “I can give you directions. I just got a text from one of Jordan’s other friends and apparently he’s in pretty bad shape. And I guess this happens a lot?” She paused for a moment to glance at Darcey before looking back to Brett. “His friend said he’s marathoning romcoms on like, volume level twenty and eating a five pound chocolate bar. So I guess it’s pretty serious.”

Darcey hiked an eyebrow and a small, amused smile tugged at his mouth. He’d missed civilian life. Civilian problems. Problems that chocolate and romcom marathons could solve. But he wasn’t sure he could take them seriously anymore. Problems were always subjective, but after everything Darcey had done and seen, everything else just seemed trivial.

And that’s why you’re a huge asshole.

“What?” Brett asked. He coughed in an attempt to mask his laugh. “Uh, sure, I guess. That’s no problem. You’ll be able to get home from there? Because I can’t come pick you back up.”

“He’s a friend of Renee’s, too,” Iffy said. “I’m sure if I need her to I can talk her into coming to get me. Worse comes to worse, I sleep on his couch and Nate can pick me up there instead of at my place tomorrow.”

Brett’s eyes darted from the road to Darcey and back. “Is it okay if we make a detour?” he asked. “We can stop somewhere on the way back for food if you need to. I’ll pay. I know airplane food is awful. If they even fed you.”

“They didn’t,” Darcey said. “And honestly, I’m grateful.”

Brett laughed, and Darcey did, too. Even Iffy chuckled quietly in the backseat.

Thank god Brett was the one to bring up food. Darcey had been so worried since their last Skype conversation. Brett had never had a relapse, but the possibility had always hovered just behind Darcey’s shoulder, waiting.

Darcey leaned his head against the window, watching the world go by from the corner of his eye, so different but so familiar: the flat topped brown and red buildings, the strip malls, the palo verde trees, the cacti, the palm trees and the gravel and rocks in the planters instead of grass.

Brett tried to involve Darcey in conversation, and Darcey wanted to talk to him, he did, but it seemed inappropriate with Iffy there and he didn’t know how to make small talk anymore. Eventually Brett quieted and backed off, and Darcey knew he understood, that they would talk later. Darcey registered Brett’s and Iffy’s voices, but didn’t hear much of what they were saying, only the rise and fall in tone as they spoke.

A loud bang! Darcey jumped, and for a brief moment he was somewhere else and his hand shot out for his gun but then he remembered, he was here in Phoenix and unarmed, and Brett’s hand was on his elbow as he shouted, “Darcey!” Brett shook Darcey’s arm a little too roughly and shouted his name again, and when Darcey turned toward him, Brett’s face was terrified.

“I’m sorry,” Darcey choked out softly. He covered his face with his right hand, taking in a deep, shaking breath.

“What just happened?” Brett’s voice was shaking.

“I don’t know,” Darcey whispered honestly. He rubbed his face with shaking hands, as if to try to scrub everything away, even though it was useless. “What did…” He took in another shaky breath and tried again. “What happened?”
“I don’t know either,” Brett whispered. His hand was still on Darcey’s arm, squeezing, just hard enough to remind Darcey of where he was and that he wasn’t alone. “Iffy slammed the car door and you just… you jumped up, and I thought it just startled you, but you were just… you started scrambling around like you were looking for something. I tried to talk to you but you didn’t respond until I started yelling.”

“I didn’t even hear you until you started yelling,” Darcey whispered. His eyes still darted wildly around: he was in the dark parking lot of an apartment complex, surrounded by local cars with Arizona license plates. The dull, yellow lights of the building shone behind them and if Darcey turned he knew he would see stairs or a walkway. Inside the car, Brett turned the front overhead light on. The Invader Zim keychain hanging from the rearview mirror, still swaying slightly from the car’s earlier movement. The glove box that didn’t quite close all the way. The shitty tape player he was saving to switch out for a CD system.

Darcey looked back at Brett and Brett’s hand tightened on his arm. His eyebrows were pulled down in worry, his mouth almost opened, like he was going to say something but needed to figure out what, first. The dark circles under his eyes were worse than earlier that week.

Darcey didn’t look any better.

“Where –”

“Baghdad,” Darcey whispered. “I was trying to find my gun. I didn’t have it. It was… I remember when it happened. It was a school. There were kids everywhere. Little kids, Brett, like, Ally’s age. And they just –” He choked on the words in the back of his throat and covered his face with his hands again. The screaming, the dust everywhere, the smell of burning skin still surrounded him. Darcey tensed when Brett wrapped his arms around him, but even so, was so grateful for the hug, for the safe, warm familiarity of the arms of his cousin and best friend.

“We really have to talk about this,” Brett whispered. “You need to see a therapist. Darcey, I think you have PTSD.”

Darcey didn’t respond. Brett kept going.

“Please let me help you find a therapist. I’m really scared, Darcey. I love you, man. I don’t want… I just want you to be okay again.”

“I don’t know if that’s possible.” Darcey’s laugh was broken.

Neither man said anything again for a very long time. Finally, Brett let go of Darcey’s shoulders and squeezed his arm one more time as he pulled away. Darcey offered a small, sad, crooked smile, hoping that it showed that he was trying, even if he wasn’t getting anywhere yet.

“You hungry?” Brett asked as he pulled his seatbelt back on. Darcey’s had never come undone. “From here back to my place we’ve got some fast food drive throughs and a couple of coffee shops. They don’t offer drive through, but they have sandwiches and stuff and you can take them to go.”

“Let’s just do drive through, if it’s all the same,” Darcey murmured. The entire day came crashing down on him at once, burying him in exhaustion.

“Taco Bell okay?” Brett asked. He started the car. “I think that’s the only place that’s vegetarian friendly.”

“Oh, yeah.” Darcey had forgotten about that. It had been a full three years since Brett decided keeping Kosher was too difficult and stopped eating meat altogether. A long time, but Darcey had
been around so little, and they never really talked about food. “Yeah, then,” he said. “Whatever you want is fine.”

But the energy in the car had changed. Darcey’s hands shook and his chest fluttered uncomfortably with his jitters, and Brett’s hands were a little too tight on the steering wheel, on edge, as if expecting Darcey to have another… episode? flashback? at any moment. Finally, Brett said,

“It’s been a really long day. I’m thinking when we get back, maybe we should just go to bed and catch up in the morning? We’re going over to your mom’s to see your family pretty early, after all.”

“Yeah,” Darcey said. What he didn’t say was that he wasn’t sure he should even be allowed to see his family anymore.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who read Push Me, Pull Me, there will not be many chapters with overlap like this here, just ones that are important to building the main characters in this fic. :) Out of forty chapters there are barely a handful.
Chapter 3

Jordan had never felt as alone in his life as he did that quiet Friday in the early, early hours of the morning. Terrence was in the apartment, too, but in the living room. He’d stopped by to hang out and apparently decided that a few romantic comedies and a little bit of chocolate meant he needed to stage an intervention. Jordan had gone through two films already and was on his third, Practical Magic, which was just like his life because everything sucked and he was not allowed to love anybody ever. He was cursed to be alone for the rest of his life so he might as well just stay in his room and drink wine forever. Except, Jordan didn’t drink, because if he combined alcohol with his emotional instability it would only lead to disaster and regret. Instead, he had his chocolate, a five pound bar he was originally breaking pieces off of, but he’d given that up and was now just gnawing on it like a hamster with a chunk of wood and holding it against his body like it was his only friend in the world.

Terrence was on his phone, still in the other room, and Jordan could hear his text message tone – ‘you’ve got mail!’ – sounding over and over and over. He was probably calling Mandy to come intervene, but Mandy wasn’t even their friend. She was just a cohort, so why would he want to get her involved? But he didn’t know who else it could be.

Jordan thought he heard the front door open over the movie. He definitely heard it close. Terrence did call Mandy, the fucker.

“Tell her to go away!” Jordan wailed. He couldn’t be bothered trying to hide how distraught and pathetic he was.

“Fucking rude!” Terrence shouted back. He appeared in the bedroom doorway with Iffy trailing nervously behind him, and suddenly, Jordan felt like the most awful person that ever existed. Oh, he was an idiot. What a great way to talk to someone he was crushing on. Even though it wouldn’t go anywhere, she was still his friend.

“Sorry, Iffy,” Jordan mumbled around his chocolate. “I thought you were someone else.”

“It’s okay,” she said. She was clearly unsure about why she was there, and Jordan felt the same way. He snapped off a piece of chocolate from an untouched corner and offered it to her.

“Want some?” he asked softly. “This part’s not gross. I haven’t chewed on it or anything.”

Iffy took it hesitantly, turning it over in her hands as if to make sure he was telling the truth, then slowly took a very small nibble. She pushed it into the corner of her mouth with her tongue and talked around it while it melted.

“So, hey,” she said gently. She reached out. Her hand hung hesitantly in the air for a moment before she patted his knee twice. “What’s going on?”

Jordan sat silently a few moments, staring at the movie, chewing absently. Iffy waited. Then, as if from out of nowhere, the loneliness and sadness kicked him right in the chest and he sobbed, “I just love everybody so, so much, but nobody ever loves me back!”

Iffy tilted her head and furrowed her eyebrows, obviously confused but also relieved to think it was nothing serious, but she had no idea. It was so serious. It was the most serious fucking thing. Jordan had loved so many people and almost all of them didn’t care or never knew in the first place or took advantage of it and used it as a way to treat him terribly or get things out of him. He had friends, and they were wonderful friends, but it was different. Friends were easy to make and
communicate with. Romance was totally different and it was confusing as hell. And despite knowing he didn’t need romance to make his life complete, Jordan couldn’t help but want it, anyway.

At this point, it wasn’t even about Iffy and Nate anymore. It was about being alone forever.

“I,” Iffy squeaked. She turned to Terrence and they gestured vaguely but wildly at each other a few moments. “I mean,” she started again, turning back to Jordan, “it’s good to love people, right? You’re a really caring, loving person, Jordan. That’s awesome! That really, really is! We need more people like that! All your friends think you’re really awesome, or they wouldn’t be your friends! Terrence obviously cares a lot about you; I mean, he called me over because he thought I could help you feel better. And I came, right? Because I care a lot about you, too.”

She snapped off another small piece of chocolate and slid it into the corner of her mouth again. Jordan finally looked over into her face for the first time. She didn’t seem to understand who, specifically, he had in mind, and he was grateful for that. He sighed heavily and offered a weak smile. He was being ridiculous and dramatic but it was the only way he knew how to deal with things. Maybe it would be healthier to write a angsty poem or something, but he’d tried things like that and they only made him feel worse. But this – the cheesy movies, the junk food, the temporary moping and crying – this was the only thing that helped. Maybe it was childish, but it helped him get everything out and flush his system and reset so he could breathe again and look at everything the next day and say, this is totally something I can manage as long as I do it right.

When he was done being an over-the-top mope-fest tonight, everything would be fine again. Although he was always grateful for her company, Iffy didn’t need to be here at all.

“We care about you,” Iffy said gently. Her grip on his knee was a little firmer, now, and she shook it slightly for emphasis. “Love is definitely awesome, but there are a lot of kinds of love, Jordan. You know that, right? And every single one of them is wonderful. I don’t know if I’m helping. I feel like a greeting card message.”

Jordan’s smile grew a bit bigger, albeit lopsided, and he shook his head.

“It’s true though. Love is a many splendored thing, or whatever that quote was,” she smiled back. “And even if a person you love doesn’t love you too, or love you in the same way, it doesn’t mean your love is bad. It’s never bad to love someone. It’s only bad if you’re an asshole about it and try to make them do or feel something they can’t or don’t want to. Which you wouldn’t, right?”

“Oh of course not.” Jordan scrubbed at his eyes with the heel of his hand and blinked a few times to clear the spots from his vision. “Thanks, Iffy.” He paused. “Is it cool if I hug you?”

She smiled and held out an arm. Jordan placed his chocolate bar on his bedside table and crawled closer, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her into a tight hug. She wrapped her arms back around him, unsurely at first, but after a moment she squeezed back and said, “It’s okay. You’re okay.”

She was warm and soft and smelled like citrus and olive oil, and he could have stayed there in her arms forever.

Jordan tightened his arms for a moment more before he let go and leaned back. But when he saw the unsure expression on her face, his smile fell, and the happy, warm feeling dropped straight through his feet and into the floor.

“What’s wrong?” he asked softly.
“Your –” She paused. “Um, nothing, nothing’s wrong, I just mean, your, um,” she gestured vaguely at her own chest and all the warmth drained from every part of Jordan’s body but the back of his neck. His eyes darted over to Terrence, still fiddling with his phone in the corner with one eye on their conversation. Help me, help me, please and thank god he didn’t have to say it aloud, Terrence could read it on his face and was suddenly one step behind him.

Jordan hadn’t been binding because he hadn’t expected anyone but Terrence, and even though his chest was small enough to be obscured by his oversized t-shirt, when he’d hugged Iffy, she felt it. It was nobody’s fault but his own – he’d even been the one to initiate the hug in the first place – but his stomach twisted, sharp and sick, and a jolt of fear and nausea shot up to the back of his skull. He was going to get rejected again, like always, like everyone else had before her. His hands shook and his shoulders hunched in, subconsciously trying to hide himself as the back of his neck burned in shame. There’s nothing wrong with you, he had to remind himself. You don’t have to be ashamed of anything. He opened his mouth, although he wasn’t sure what he was going to say, but Iffy spoke first.

“Jordan, are… are you transgender?”

He swallowed hard, setting his jaw and clenching his fists. Even though, logically, he knew there wouldn’t be a fight, his body was so primed for it that it was afraid he’d have no choice but to.

“Yes,” he finally said. It stuck in his mouth, like cotton on Velcro. “And if you don’t like it, you can get out.” His voice cracked, because he didn’t want her to leave, but she was going to, just like his family, just like all his crushes and partners before her.

Terrence still stood behind him, silent, not because he didn’t care but because he knew Jordan would want to handle the situation himself. He was just backup, in case things went really wrong.

Iffy’s face went pale and her eyes wide. “Oh, god, no, I’m so sorry, Jordan,” she said quickly. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to imply that there’s something wrong with you! There’s not! I just, it just really surprised me. I wasn’t expecting to feel… oh, fuck, I’m so sorry, that’s probably really offensive. I shouldn’t have even asked in the first place, oh god, shit, I’m so sorry. God, I should just shut up. I. Oh god. No, Jordan, you’re awesome, I don’t care if you’re trans. You just pass 100%, I never would have expected it so it took me off guard and I’m stupid and tactless. Fuck. I’m sorry.”

As she spoke, Jordan’s shoulders relaxed, and when she started rambling, Terrence burst out into his harsh, barking laughter, and Iffy jumped and looked up at him with wide eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Jordan said. His laughter was a little breathless and hysterical, but soft. “Sorry, I just… I’m not good when I have to come out outside of my own terms.”

“I understand,” Iffy smiled. “And, like I said, I shouldn’t have even asked. That’s like… that’s not okay. And I’m sorry. It’s a little different, but I’ve definitely been outed outside my own terms before. I handle it even worse.”

Jordan tilted his head and squinted at her. “How so?” he asked, a little hesitantly, afraid to seem like he was pushing back.

“I have a boyfriend right now,” she started, “so everyone assumes I’m straight. But I’m bi. I’ve also had girlfriends. I’ve also been outed, sometimes even incorrectly, when I’m not even dating or looking and it’s completely irrelevant. It sucks. And I’m sorry I ended up putting you in a situation like that. I swear to god it was an accident. You never have to worry about me telling anyone else. You obviously want to go stealth and I have nothing but respect for that.”
Jordan’s eyes darted over Iffy’s face critically, searching for any trace of dishonesty. There was none. Her face was open and sincere and there was nothing but care and respect written in her soft brown eyes.

“Thank you,” he said softly.

“A real man identifies as a man,” she said firmly. “Just like a real woman identifies as a woman. That’s it. No other qualifiers. You know that. Don’t ever let anybody make you feel like that’s not true, because if they say otherwise, they are full of shit.”

Jordan knew that, and he didn’t put up with people who said otherwise. He’d been binding and dressing like himself for five years, not counting his failed attempts in high school, and on testosterone for three. He’d had to build up a lot of armor. But even so, to hear something like that coming from someone he’d only known a week yet still cared about so much, no matter how good a friend she’d become – it meant the world to him.

“I know,” he murmured. He looked up again through his long black eyelashes with a small, crooked smile that barely showed his teeth. Iffy smiled back. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” She patted his knee again, then used it as a counterbalance to push herself up. Terrence followed, leaving Jordan alone on the bed.

“Let’s put in a movie that doesn’t suck, now,” Terrence said. Jordan narrowed his eyes at him, but Terrence just smiled that weird, lopsided smile that never showed any of his teeth.

“Practical Magic doesn’t suck,” Jordan pouted. Iffy chuckled a little and walked over to the laptop to switch it out with something else. The room went silent except for the whir of the disc drive, and when the screen popped up, the menu was white with red ribbons and Jordan perked up. Terrence looked over to see the title. Love Actually.

“At least now you finally know someone who shares your taste in terrible movies,” he said, but he was smiling.

“Oh, please.” Iffy rolled her eyes. She started the movie, then carefully sat back down beside Jordan again. “It’s not that bad. This one’s pretty cute.”

Terrence sighed again and flopped back on the bed on Jordan’s other side, his long legs hanging off the end. Jordan flopped down on his arm, sprawling over his friend’s stomach. Terrence chuckled and patted Jordan’s head gently, then loosely draped his hand over his shoulder.

Iffy’s back was straight and sharp, but slowly, as the movie played, she relaxed until she was leaning back on her elbows. Jordan felt around over his head for a pillow, and when he found one, he gently poked the back of her head with it. She turned around and he raised his eyebrows, gently gesturing the pillow forward. She smiled.

“Thanks.” She took it and kicked off her shoes, curling up on the bed with her shoulders near Jordan’s waist. She was close enough for him to put his hand on her arm. He didn’t.

Terrence tapped his fingers to whatever beat was going through his head, like always, and Jordan bounced his feet along to keep time. They were bare because socks were only good when it was cold and even though it was past midnight, it was still at least 90 degrees outside, so his “Don’t Panic” tattoo burned out in bright pink from the bridge of his foot. Every now and then Jordan caught Iffy glancing over at it out of the corner of her eye, but she didn’t say anything. But she seemed like she would understand the reference.
Darcey hadn’t seen his immediate family in almost two years, even through Skype. All of his contact had been letters and phone calls. He shouldn’t be nervous, but he couldn’t help it. He was always nervous, about everything and anything that could potentially go wrong, and he hated it. What had happened to him? He’d always been confident, if quiet, but now, everywhere he went, shadows of fear and worry lurked behind, even about good things.

Like seeing his family for the first time in years.

Darcey’s hands shook more than the normal tremors, and Brett offered to drive. They would have had to take his car anyway, but Darcey didn’t say anything snarky. He just nodded and tossed Brett his keys.

The drive took about a half hour, but when they started to wind through the familiar streets to get to the house, Darcey’s chest simultaneously relaxed and tensed and it left him almost shivering with unease.

Brett’s voice was quiet when he spoke, but Darcey still jumped.

“Sorry,” Brett said. Darcey cursed quietly under his breath and wrapped his left hand around his forearm.

“It’s okay,” he replied. “Sorry I’m so…” he trailed off, then made a vague gesture with his right hand. “This.”

“Are you okay?” Brett asked. Darcey looked over to see him trying to watch both him and the road at the same time. “Ever since… last night, you’ve been… not the same.”

“What do you mean?” Darcey asked softly. He did know he’d been acting different, but he didn’t understand it any better than Brett did. Maybe if someone said it out loud it would make more sense.

“You’re really withdrawn,” Brett said. He rolled to a stop at a street corner, looked left, then right. “I mean, you’ve always been kind of quiet, but this is different. It’s like… you’re curled in on yourself, but not physically. Emotionally.”

If anything, Brett’s explanation made it more confusing. When Darcey glanced over, Brett’s hands were tight on the steering wheel, and only then did Darcey realize they’d been sitting at the same four-way stop that entire time. Brett looked over at him, and Darcey wanted to be able to meet his eyes, but he couldn’t. He cast his gaze down.

“I just want you to be okay again,” Brett whispered. “I know you saw some really messed up stuff over there and I know you’re scared. But you have a lot of people who really love you here and we really want to help. Don’t forget that.”

Darcey smiled sadly and breathed out a half-laugh, but it was desperate, scared.

“I know we haven’t talked about the therapist thing yet,” he murmured. “But we will before I go back. I promise. And… I have some other stuff to talk to you about, too. But not yet. When we get back to your place.”

Brett nodded and smiled hopefully before starting the car again.
When they parked in front of Darcey’s old house, Darcey took a deep breath and squared his shoulders to steel his nerves. When he reached for the car door handle, Brett rested his hand on Darcey’s forearm and said, “I know you’re nervous, Darcey. But don’t be. I don’t think you understand how happy they’ll be that you’re here, even if it is only for a few days.”

Darcey smiled gratefully. He nodded once.

“Yeah,” he whispered. He opened the door.

The walk to the front door felt somber as a funeral march. Darcey paused to let Brett catch up with him, but Brett didn’t let him stall any further. He reached around Darcey’s shoulder and rang the doorbell.

“Yes, William, I know, but the field trip is on Monday, and –” Jess stopped mid-sentence when she turned to look out the door for the first time. Her mouth hung open in shock. Darcey smiled nervously.

“Hey, Mom.”

The widest, happiest smile Darcey had ever seen spread across his mother’s face and then she was crying and holding him tight, like she was terrified he’d disappear if she loosened her grip.

It had been two years, after all.

Jess had changed quite a bit since Darcey had seen her last. She was thinner and looked much frailer, but her tight, firm grip said she was still anything but. She’d let her hair go silver and it was a few inches longer, pulled back into a braid. William’s voice and footsteps echoed in the walkway as he came toward the door.

“Jess?” he asked. “Jess, what’s wrong? Who is –” He froze mid-step when he walked into the doorway and saw his stepson standing in front of him, Jess holding him tightly as if he were still a little boy rather than a twenty-seven year old man. His eyes widened in surprise and his mouth worked open and closed once, twice. A grin as big as Jess’s spread across his face and he laughed, the most joyful, honest laugh Darcey had ever heard. William launched himself at Darcey like an excited child and grabbed him in a hug, Jess squished between the two of them, so much shorter and smaller. Now both of them had their arms wrapped around Darcey and all he could manage was, “Mom, Dad,” over and over, not quite sobbing, but close. Eventually their arms loosened and Jess grabbed Darcey’s face, pulling him down to her eye-level as if making sure it was really him, and it was, and it was really her, too, and he was really there and nothing back on base mattered. Jess laughed, a half-sob, and showered kisses over his face.

“Oh, Darcey, Darcey, you’re home, you’re really here, I was so afraid I wouldn’t see you again! Oh, Darcey, I love you so much, we love you so much, oh, thank you God, thank you for bringing my baby back to me safe!”

Darcey laughed as she rambled, but his voice was a little thick and there were tears in his eyes, though they hadn’t started falling yet.

“Girls!” William shouted. “Ally! Lexi! Come downstairs!”

“But Dad, I’m not ready for school yet!” Lexi shouted.

“Put it on hold! This is more important!”

A high-pitched squeal tore through the room and Darcey’s head jerked up, but it was Ally screeching in excitement, and when she bowled into him, he was lost and finally began to cry.
“Darcey!” She babbled his name over and over like a young child just learning a new word, although that was so, so long ago, now. Darcey lifted her easily, even though she was so much bigger than the last time they’d seen each other, but when she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and buried her face in his neck, the extra weight wasn’t a burden at all.

She was much bigger and she’d cut her once long brown hair down to a chin-length bob. There were no more jersey shorts and t-shirts, now a pair of jeans and a pink shirt with frilly sleeves. She was growing up and he was missing it.

“I love you so much, Allycat,” he whispered, leaning his cheek against the back of her head.

“Were you saying Darcey’s name?” Lexi’s voice was panicked and her footsteps thumped rapidly down the stairs. “Is everything –” But her look of fear turned to one of shock, then joy, and she ran at Darcey and jumped against his chest, nearly toppling him backwards. She was at least a foot and a half taller than he’d last seen her and was so much stronger than he remembered.

“Darcey!” she shouted, and then she was crying, too, and Darcey started crying harder but couldn’t be ashamed because he’d missed them so much for so long and now they were here.

Where Ally’s hair was shorter, Lexi’s had gotten longer, pulled back in a half ponytail. She was wearing skinny jeans and a black shirt for a band Darcey was unfamiliar with and makeup, too, lip-gloss. She was also growing up. She was thirteen, now. A teenager. She’d probably want to start dating soon, going to dances, maybe joining sports. She’d always been good at basketball and soccer.

With everyone talking at once, Darcey could only catch bits and pieces of what everyone was saying, but after he put Ally down, Lexi took his hand and started to pull him away into a quiet corner of the living room.

“We have to talk alone for a minute!” she announced. Jess and William waved in acknowledgement and finally turned to greet Brett for the first time. Darcey glanced down at her quizzically and she pressed her finger to her lips, winking conspiratorially. He smiled.

Once they were out of the way in a more private spot – the little nook on the opposite side of the entertainment center, near the far wall – she grabbed his other hand, too, jumping up and down as she squeaked quietly, “I’m so glad you’re home! I want you to meet someone.”

A rush of fear shot down Darcey’s back.

“Are you dating someone?” he asked. She paused, her face going nervous, as if she wasn’t expecting him to figure it out until she told him. He bit his lip. Yes, she was a teenager, but only by one year. She was still too young! She leaned to the side, her small hand on Darcey’s arm to steady herself. Darcey glanced over his shoulder. Everyone else was wrapped up in their own conversation.

“What’s going on, Lexi?” he asked softly. “Did someone hurt you?”

“Oh, no!” she said, leaning back and waving her hand in front of her face. “I just wanted you to meet my… friend.”

“Your… friend.” Darcey repeated, raising a skeptical eyebrow. She shifted her weight between her feet and looked down. Caught.

“You have to promise not to tell Mom and Dad. They don’t know.”
“Are you even allowed to date yet?” Darcey asked. “Lexi, stuff like this can be difficult, and you’re still pretty young –”

“I’m fourteen, Darcey, duh.” Lexi wilted when Darcey frowned.

“Not for another two months, you aren’t,” he said.

“It’s not that,” she murmured.

“So, your friend.” Darcey straightened his back and crossed his arms. “What’s his name?”

She went bright red, then looked down and murmured something he couldn’t hear. He leaned forward.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Jacquelyn,” Lexi whispered. When she looked up, her cheeks were bright red and tears sparkled in her eyes. Her hands shook. Darcey’s heart seized up in his chest and his throat tightened. Never, never had he been so proud of his sister before. She was so young but still taking the risk of coming out to him, of all people, even before their parents.

“C’mere,” he said softly. He knelt down and pulled her into a tight hug. Even on his knees, she was barely taller than him. She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his neck. “It’s okay,” he whispered, giving her another squeeze. She laughed, wetly, but brightly. “I would love to meet your friend, Lexi. And I’m really proud of you. I know that telling people things like that is really, really hard. I won’t say anything until you’re ready to tell Mom and Dad. Even if I can’t be here to hold your hand, you can have me on the phone, okay? I’ll back you up. I’ve got you.”

She nodded.

“Just be careful, okay?” Darcey added. “I want you to be safe.”

Lexi pulled away and rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. “Thanks, Darcey.” She paused to rub her nose. “Some of my friends know, but you’re the first person in the family I’ve told. I’m just afraid of what people will do if they find out. I don’t even hold her hand in public because I’m scared. What if they hate me?”

Darcey gently ran his hand down the side of his sister’s face. “Nobody who matters would hate you,” he said. She chuckled and shook her head, gently pushing his hand away from her face but wrapping hers around it. He smiled. “I’ve got your back. I’ll do everything I can to keep you safe, okay?” She nodded, rubbing the remaining tears away with her fingers. “But I actually have a secret to tell you, too.”

Lexi opened her eyes and furrowed her eyebrows.

“But you can’t tell anyone either, okay?”

She nodded. “I promise.”

“I’m gay, too,” he said. He paused. “Or are you bisexual?”

She chuckled and shook her head. “Gay,” she said. “But thanks for not assuming. Jacquelyn is bi and she gets so mad when people assume.”

“All right,” Darcey said. “But it’s not safe for me where I work for people to know that, so I understand why you’re afraid. We’ll keep each other safe, okay?” Even though she wouldn’t
actually be able to do anything, Darcey hoped that having an agreement, a pact like this, would help her build the confidence she needed to tell safe people and find safe places.

“Really?” Lexi whispered. Darcey nodded. She smiled and nodded back, then grabbed him in a tight hug.

“I love you, Darcey. I won’t tell anyone. When you come home for good, we can make a plan and tell Mom and Dad together. I’ve got your back, too.”

“I love you, too, Navi.”

She giggled at the childhood nickname and Darcey gave her one last squeeze and, as he stood, kissed the top of her head. This time, when she pulled away, she was smiling brightly. She led Darcey back to the rest of the family, who had relocated to the breakfast nook. When they walked in, William looked up from his seat beside Brett at the table and said, “Lexi, I’ve called you and your sister out of school and I’ve called off work.”

Lexi dropped Darcey’s hand and jumped up with a squeal of excitement, clapping her hands.

“Brett says you’re here until Sunday!” Ally shouted. “That means we can do a whole bunch of stuff. Maybe if it’s cool enough we can go to the park. Or we could go by my school and show you what it’s like, even though they’ll be closed tomorrow!”

“Brett says you’re staying with him?” Jess asked. Darcey nodded. “You can stay with us, if you want,” she said. “We still have your room exactly how you left it.”

He clenched the leg of his pants. “Do you mind if I go look at it?”

“Of course not!” she laughed. “Just because you haven’t lived here in a while doesn’t mean it’s not your home anymore!”

Brett placed his hands flat on the table and started to push himself up, but Darcey shook his head. He sat back down and nodded.

Darcey’s feet were heavy as he went up the stairs and took a right, trailing his hand along the wall until he got to his old room. The hallway had been repainted in what he thought was the same color, but the walls were cleaner and crisper looking, now. The door to his old room was cracked. It creaked when he gently pushed it open.

All of his old band and movie posters were still up, his video game paraphernalia still on its same shelf on the unit otherwise full of books. Even his old TV and gaming systems were still there, not relocated to somewhere else in the house. His old acoustic guitar leaned against the far wall in its case. He didn’t really remember how to play anymore, and never regained the feeling in his left hand even when the movement returned, so he wasn’t sure if he even could. The sheets were even his sheets and the bed wasn’t neat, but it was made. When he smoothed it out, his hand hit something soft, but solid. He pulled back the sheets to see what it was.

It was an old stuffed frog of Ally’s. He’d mailed it to her when he was in Korea all those years ago, along with some other toys and candy. What did she say she’d named it? He still had the letter, filed away carefully in the box where he kept correspondence from his family. It had Keroppi stickers all over it and Ally said she was going to make her his little sister. Beside it was her favorite book, Bagels for Benny. It was below her reading level, but Darcey understood the comfort childhood things could bring.

She’d been sleeping in here while he was gone.
Darcey gave the room another once over. Even though it was still, it was well kept. There was no
dust anywhere, not even on the old boom box he got ten years ago, back in ‘96.

They had always waited. They’d never given up, even when he had. They’d always had faith that
he would come home.

Darcey’s chest tightened and his throat was a little too hot, wet and prickly. He picked up the frog
and sat at the edge of the bed, and even though he felt stupid and childish doing it, he pulled the
soft toy into a hug and buried his face in it. He didn’t cry, but he was very, very close.

Darcey had never thought he’d be so glad to come home, and in only three days, he’d have to
leave it behind again.
Sorry for the post being so late in the day. I’m going through some personal struggles that make it hard to keep organized. Be assured that Thursdays are still update days, they just might not necessarily in the morning.

Jordan’s ten-hour shift ended at five a.m., only three hours ago, and yet he and Iffy were still at one of the many cafés in the area of Arizona Mills, which was not close to either of them and took forty minutes to get to by bus. If anyone else had asked, he’d have turned them down and scheduled for another day, but he had such a hard time saying no to her. Even though it hurt to be around her sometimes, he was grateful for her friendship, and while he hadn’t seen Nate much since the day of the protest, he and Iffy had gotten fairly close.

Even though casual shopping wasn’t his thing, casual dining most definitely was, and Arizona Mills was the place to do it. So he’d skipped his usual breakfast of a bagel eaten on the walk home from the coffee shop and was having it a few hours later here, with a friend on an early morning breakfast date.

Maybe it was because he came out to her, however accidentally, and nothing changed. Maybe she felt like she could trust him because he trusted her, and that had made it easier for her to open up. Maybe they just liked the same things and had a lot to talk about other than activism. But whatever the reason, they had grown so much closer in the past week than he’d ever expected their friendship to go. He knew better than to think it would go past that, but she was practical and grounding and down to earth, and he loved that in a person. She kept him focused, at least while she was around. He needed that right now.

They sat across from each other at a small round table, sometimes chatting, sometimes pausing for a while to watch the people outside the window go by. The past week had been rough. Jordan was trying to pick up overtime, not only to fund his surgery, but also for something to keep himself occupied, but there wasn’t any available. Then he’d had his breakdown early Friday morning, and since then, he’d spent too much time alone, and when he was alone, he withdrew. Iffy had noticed. Everyone did, and they’d all gone their own ways until he was ready to sort himself out and come back out of his temporary shell. Except Iffy. Iffy stayed and kept trying.

“So, the brunches are being moved to Sunday mornings now,” she continued. Jordan looked away from the people outside and back to her.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. We crunched some numbers and asked around and it just turns out more people will be able to come if it’s on Sunday instead,” she said. “And the whole point of it is to get as many people together as possible so we can connect and network and just have fun with people in the area. So prep is going to be on Saturdays now. If you can come?”

Jordan took a sip of his latte, eyes rolled up toward the ceiling, exposed wood paneling and high arches. “I’m not sure,” he said. “Friday and Saturday nights are usually really busy since there are so many venues in the area, which means lots of concerts and shows. But I get off between five and six, usually, so if it’s in the morning I could just pop over right after. If it’s mid-day, I don’t
know. I’m usually in bed by noon at the latest so I can function at work later that night.”

Iffy finished the bite of scone in her mouth. “Well, usually we meet mid-day. But if you want to come in earlier, Renee and Vi are usually there by nine, and Nate and I try to get in by ten at the latest if I’m not there opening with them. Any help at all would be great, even just pre-chopping vegetables and stuff. I mean, we don’t take attendance. You can come and go whenever as long as there’s someone there to let you in.”

“So, do you not cook at someone’s house, then?”

She shook her head. “The community center where I work lets us use their kitchen. We do our Food Not Bombs prep there, too.”

Jordan grinned and sat up straighter. “That’s awesome. I’ll bet there’s a lot more room that way.”

“Yeah,” she grinned. “So just send me a text the day before or so when you’re able to make it. We can go in as early as eight. We’ll figure it out.”

“That would be really awesome,” he grinned back, wide and showing his bright white teeth. “Thanks, Iffy.”

She shrugged, as if doing this for him was the most obvious course of action in the world.

“So,” she said.

Jordan raised an eyebrow and leaned back in his chair, wary about the clear fact that there was about to be a subject change. “So?”

She lowered her voice, not just quieter, but softer. “How are you?”

He shrugged. “Okay,” he answered. “I mean… sometimes I have trouble. But mostly I’m okay.”

Iffy raised a disbelieving eyebrow.

“No more romcom meltdowns?” she asked. She took a sip of her coffee.

Jordan shook his head, but didn’t speak. He was still embarrassed that she had been there to witness it.

“Was…” She trailed off, eyes darting hesitantly over his face. “Like, was that all about… was it just an overall thing or is there a certain person you had in mind?”

Jordan’s heart picked up and he glanced nervously out the window, looking for a route of escape.

“Or persons?”

His head whirled back to her. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. She quietly waited for an answer, even though the look on her face made it clear she already knew what it was.

Jordan looked down, hands curled tight around his cup, cold and wet with condensation. “I’m not… I’m sorry. I wasn’t going to say anything about it. I’ll… it’ll pass. And…” The back of his neck was hot and a little damp in stark contrast with the sharp cold on his palms. He pressed one to the side of his throat, hoping it would shock him back into being rational. “I know it’s not okay to feel this way, and I’m planning on keeping it to myself. I’d never… you’re my friends, Iffy,” he tried to explain. “You’re not just people I’d be interested in dating. I really care about you both, even though I don’t know Nate all that well yet. And I’m not stupid. I know that it’ll never go
anywhere. I’m not even going to try. I don’t want to do anything to make you uncomfortable.”

Iffy’s silence only made him feel like he had to explain himself even further.

“I know I can get emotional,” he said quickly. “I mean. You saw it.”

A small smile tugged at the corner of Iffy’s mouth. Jordan’s curled up to match it, and they both chuckled.

“But I’d never do something to hurt someone. Especially someone I care about. You don’t have to worry. Promise.”

Iffy gave him a small half-smile and sighed softly, not exasperated, exactly. Relieved and sad.

“Well…” She paused and looked out the window. Jordan’s gaze followed hers, out to the people in shorts and flip-flops, with ponytails and baseball hats, not too busy yet because it was Sunday morning and a lot of people were at Church around this time. For a while, they sat in comfortable silence.

“Well, I’m sorry it had to happen like this,” she finally said. “We’re monogamous, and Nate is straight.”

“Most people are monogamous,” Jordan said. “I just kind of always assume so unless someone explicitly states otherwise. That’s why I wasn’t going to bring it up unless one of you did, first. Which I wasn’t expecting.”

Iffy chuckled. “Well, if you’re anywhere as perceptive as you seem to be, you can understand why I was concerned.”

“Definitely,” Jordan said. “I mean… when you saw me on Friday I was a mess. And I’m sorry you had to, by the way. Please don’t think I was trying to guilt trip you. I wasn’t even expecting you to come over. That was all Terrence.”

She held up a hand and shook her head. “I hope I’m not being presumptuous when I say this, but I like to think we’re getting to the point that I’d see you like that eventually, anyway.”

Jordan chuckled. “Yeah,” he said. “But like… I could see you being concerned after that disaster. And… and I’m sorry.”

She smiled and the slight tension in her shoulders finally faded. “Thanks, Jordan.”

He nodded.

“So, I don’t know if you like ska, but my cousin is in a band and they have a show coming up soon —”

Iffy’s phone interrupted her, the original 8-bit version of the Tetris theme song. She fished it out of her purse and glanced at the screen. She frowned.

“I have to take this,” she said. “Just a minute.”

“Take your time,” Jordan said quietly, but she was already on the phone. He turned toward the window to give her some privacy.

Even though he wasn’t paying attention, the café was quiet, so Jordan heard everything Iffy said, although he didn’t quite process it.
“Yeah, his sister is in the hospital,” she said, and he snapped back to attention.

“You okay?” he asked softly. She glanced up at him and nodded before turning her head back down to her phone. Heat exhaustion and dehydration, she said. But whoever it was was fine.

Jordan looked back out the window again. There was a young woman sitting on the edge of the fountain reading a book, her ankles crossed, leaning on a young man a year or two older as he played with his phone. His arm was wrapped loosely around her shoulder and occasionally he turned away from his phone to kiss the top of her head. They were probably in high school.

What would it be like to have something like that for himself? Jordan wondered. Even if just for a little while? Even if it didn’t last? Something stable, something loving? Something reciprocated?

“Where are you and what do you need?” Iffy asked. Jordan’s eyes darted back to her again. She held up a finger. He looked back out the window.

A few more minutes passed before Jordan looked back at Iffy as she said her goodbyes.

“Everything okay?” he asked softly. She stuffed her phone back into her purse. She stood. Jordan followed, grabbing his empty cup to throw away and his remaining half bagel to finish as they went.

“I guess,” she said. Her mouth twisted, sad and thoughtful. “My friend Brett is going through some really rough family stuff and Justin –”

“Who?”

“Sorry, Brett’s boyfriend. He’s still at work. He’s pretty close with Nate, too, but his sister’s in the hospital and he isn’t responding to any texts because the reception there is terrible. I’m so sorry we have to cut this short, especially since I dragged you all the way out here, but –”

“I understand,” Jordan interrupted. His palms and the back of his neck were hot as they stepped outside, but not from the sun. He stuffed his cup in the trash as they walked by. “If he needs you, then go. We can get coffee again some other time.”

Iffy smiled, bright and grateful. “Thanks, Jordan. I’ll give you a call or something soon. My friends and I have little get togethers once a week. Maybe you can come to one.”

Jordan nodded. He shoved his hands deep in his pockets, his arms tense, but he kept his face loose. Keep your mouth shut. Even if she could help with his family issues, this wasn’t the time. He couldn’t pile more on top of whatever was already going on with her other friend.

They walked to the bus pickup together. Iffy’s came first, and she got on with one last grateful back pat and a wave. Jordan sent her off with a grin as the bus drove away.

His came fifteen minutes later. There were a few seats, and even though he usually didn’t, this time he grabbed a center seat up front. Someone sat on either side of him, but he was skinny enough to still be comfortable, and he did his best to ignore the way the woman on his left kept staring distastefully at the tattoos on his arms as he fished his earbuds out from his pocket and plugged them into his iPod. He pressed his knees together, crossing his arms over his chest as he let the music drown out the screaming kids in the back.

The air conditioning was on so high he could have comfortably worn a hoodie. He was five stops away from his transfer when a teenager on crutches got on, so he stood up, catching her attention and gesturing her toward the seat he’d just vacated. She smiled shyly, and he couldn’t hear her over his music, but he could read the “Thank you,” on her lips. He just nodded and lifted his hand.
in acknowledgement, turning away. There were no more seats, so he stepped into the little space by the back door.

Right across from him was a small child with his grandma. Jordan swallowed and turned away to look out the opposite window.

His second and last bus was nearly empty, but it always was. There weren’t a lot of businesses on his street, and the ones that were were things that could be found anywhere – convenience stores, fast food restaurants, gas stations with prices that were nothing special – and it was mostly residential, although it was mainly apartment buildings rather than houses. He got off a few stops early and took the long way around back to his apartment. He needed a walk to clear his head.

It had been a long time since Jordan had thought about his parents, his brother, his grandma, even in passing. They’d never supported him and when he left when he was seventeen, his father had said that if Jordan set foot out the door he would no longer be his daughter – not that he ever had been to begin with – and would never speak to him again. Jordan had said that was more than fine with him.

It had been five years and not so much as a text had passed between them, but it was better that way. His mother had followed suit; she’d never been supportive either, but she would never have argued with his father even if she had been.

Jordan didn’t want them back. He’d built a good life for himself, a new family, small but full of good people, friends and coworkers and a few of his cousins. He didn’t need toxic people like his parents in his life. But his steps were heavy when he got off the bus, his shoulders tense, his teeth clenched hard, and he had to work harder than he’d ever worked at anything to hold himself together until he got home where he could safely… do whatever it was he needed to do. He was past the breakdown phase. They were gone. That was that. But apparently the hurt was still raw enough that a reminder of them made him want to scream and punch someone.

He cut through the back streets and alleyways to get back to his apartment. It wasn’t the safest route, but it was the quickest, and it was the middle of the day anyway and right now he just wanted a huge cup of ice water and his bed because behind everything else that had happened that morning, good and bad and completely mundane, ever since Iffy told him about her friend, Jordan had been replaying that conversation with his grandmother from five years ago over and over and it kept coming to the forefront.

And even though his life could have been worse, it could also have definitely been a whole lot better.

Jordan had always been a night person, which was why having the overnight shift at CounterCulture was so great, but recently he could barely sleep in the daytime, either. Today was no different. He’d been home almost three hours and no matter how many times he closed his eyes, they wouldn’t stay that way. Light blocking curtains didn’t help. An eyemask didn’t help. Casio­tone For the Painfully Alone and The Cure turned all the way up didn’t help. Neither did oatmeal or peppermint tea or having his last cup of coffee around midnight instead of four or five a.m., so he quit that and went back to his normal coffee drinking habits. Not even blasting the air conditioner and snuggling under a blanket helped.

Jordan hadn’t been in a good place over the past week, but it hadn’t been bad, either, not until he overheard – accidentally eavesdropped on? – Iffy’s conversation with her friend. Now things didn’t hurt because of the lack of people who had reciprocated his romantic feelings, but it didn’t
help much, because everything hurt for other reasons instead.

It had been five years. It shouldn’t have hurt so much anymore, and until now, it didn’t, really. It was just a slight ache in the back of his chest, a tiny pinprick of a hole, easily overlooked and ignored. But now it was as if that tiny pinprick had been ripped open and left to fester, untreated and raw. He still had some family, three cousins in Puerto Rico, and they were fantastic. They were! But they were so far away and even though he didn’t miss his parents or his brother, his cousins couldn’t replace the hole that was left after the fallout with his grandmother.

His noise-cancelling headphones were warm cupped around his ears as he listened to The Cure’s Bloodflowers, which was his favorite of their two most recent, although he didn’t listen to it often. It had come out less than a year after he left. He knew the album was nearly over when the intro to the final track began to play, and the heavy drumbeat reached directly to his heart.

Jordan wasn’t depressed about the situation. He wasn’t even sad or angry anymore. But when Robert Smith’s voice hit his ears, his throat closed up and his eyes welled a little, because the emotional wounds had been a lot more raw recently than they had in a very long time.

He didn’t know what kinds of problems Iffy’s friend was having, and he wasn’t going to ask, because he didn’t even know this Brett person and it was none of his business. But Jordan hoped it was something fixable, something easy. Not like what he went through. Even if things had worked out, he’d never forget the way he felt up to the day he lost everything. The fear of losing the people he loved was engulfing. It was all he could think about. Sometimes it still was. It wasn’t the kind of thing a person could easily get over. He’d thought it would be.

He was wrong.

After the song ended, Jordan stayed still, quietly lying on the bed and staring at the ceiling, surrounded by silence and the residual echo of the drumbeat in his ears.

When he breathed in, it was slow and shaky. After a few minutes he decided, no, that was enough, nobody could hurt him anymore unless he let them hurt him. He was a grown man and only he could decide how to live his life and how to feel.

He dropped his headphones on his bed beside his iPod, grabbing his laptop off his bedside table and pulling it into his lap. He’d resist the chocolate, at least for now. He opened his laptop and let it wake back up, then logged into Skype. It was likely nobody would be online because it was a weird time to be, but he could try.

He was lucky. His cousin Vince was on.

Jordan opened up a text chat window and sent him a quick, “Online?” in case he was away from his computer. He accepted the responding video request.

The first thing Vince said was, “Shouldn’t you be sleeping? It’s almost two there.”

“Insomnia,” Jordan replied. The Spanish rolling off his tongue was comforting and familiar, like a soft blanket on a cold night. It filled his mouth with the warmth of home.

Vince smiled apologetically. “That sucks. How are you otherwise?”

“I don’t even know.” There was no point in lying. Vince would see right through it. “I’m a little bit of everything right now, really. I think I’m lonely even though I have awesome friends everywhere. I’m surrounded by great people, but I still feel really isolated and… alone.”

“Come to Puerto Rico!” Vince grinned, waving his hand as if beckoning Jordan through the
screen. “Where the men are fine and the women are finer!” He paused and his smile softened a little. “We miss you like hell, Jordan.” Jordan liked the way his cousin pronounced his name. It felt like a warm hug. “Teyo and Sierra have been asking about you. You just kind of disappeared for a while.”

“Sorry,” Jordan said. “Shit’s been crazy.”

“I read about that anti-war protest online a week or so ago. Were you there?”

“Yeah.” Jordan grinned. Vince pumped his fist in victory.

“Knew it,” he said. “Sierra owes me a batch of guava panetela.”

“From scratch?” Jordan asked. “You’re one lucky son of a bitch!”

Vince laughed, bright and loud, and shrugged his shoulders in faux modesty.

Abruptly, Jordan blurted out, “Thanks for always understanding, Vince. Thank you for just... taking me as I am. For never trying to change me.”

Vince’s smile faded, his laugh lines softening as concern crept into his eyes.

“Jordan? Did something happen?”

Jordan shrugged one shoulder, but shook his head. “Nothing recent,” he said softly.

Vince lifted his right hand and pressed his fingertips against the screen, a flash of chipped black nail polish before his nails were hidden again. The woven brown twine and blue and green beads of his ever-present bracelets peeked out from just behind the heel of his hand. There was a flash of dark blue ink on his inner forearm. He’d gotten a tattoo recently that Jordan hadn’t seen yet. He pressed his fingers to Vince’s and took a deep breath. It was something they’d both done since they’d gotten Skype, and it was silly and childish, but it helped.

“Has Mom or Dad mentioned me recently?” His voice shook.

Vince shook his head.

“What about Grandma?”

After a few moments’ hesitation, he said quietly, “Are you sure you want to know?”

Jordan swallowed, silent. His grandmother was the one who’d always taught him that he had to be tough. That he wouldn’t take anything from anyone. That he would always stand up for what was right, even when it was hard.

She was also the one who denounced him the hardest.

“You’re right,” Jordan whispered. “Probably not.”

“Sorry,” Vince said softly. He was nearly twenty-six, but the few times Jordan saw him like this, quiet and sad, Vince looked even younger than he was. The lines of his face softened and he looked almost childlike.

Jordan smiled, shaky and broken, but at least he still could. Vince had such a big heart, so full of love for everyone, and it meant so much that he’d found a place in there that was Jordan’s, too.

“So.” Jordan nodded toward the ink on Vince’s arm. Much of the effect was lost across the screen,
but Vince understood the intent. His smile came back, a mischievous half-grin.

“It was only the first session,” he said as he reached for his webcam to fix the angle. “She said I’ve probably got two more to go, but if I can make the time she’s willing to get it all done in one more. It’s just the outline now. Color’s going to be next time.”

He pushed his collection of bracelets down to his wrist and rolled his sleeve up to his shoulder. The tattoo was much bigger than it had first appeared, about a three-quarter sleeve, from his shoulder down to the middle of his forearm. There were so many fine details that Jordan had difficulty picking things out amidst all the lines, but he was able to see some gears and what looked like a collection of fingerprints. There was a string of characters along the inside of his forearm that Jordan couldn’t quite make out and some sort of diagram of a human form on his upper arm.

“What is all that?” Jordan asked. “A lot of it is hard to make out from here.”

“It’s mostly a bunch of astronomy and mechanics stuff,” Vince said. “Some math equations, some biology diagrams. It’s kind of busy right now because it’s just the lines, but it’ll look better once I’ve got the color done. The artist is really great; I told her what I was looking for and had a few sketches and she helped me put it all together. My next session is a week from Friday. Hopefully I can get it finished then.”

“That’s pretty awesome,” Jordan grinned. Vince had always said he wanted to get some tattoos done. As a dual math/chemistry major, something like this made perfect sense.

For hours the cousins talked about a little bit of everything and a lot of nothing and just enough of everything in between. Jordan talked about his work and friends and Vince about his studies and their cousins. They talked a lot about music and a little about food and Vince invited Jordan back for Halloween because he knew it was Jordan’s favorite holiday, and oh, how he wanted to go, but he was so close to his goal for his surgery fund and a trip like that would put him back months. So he said no, but maybe for New Year’s he could manage it. Vince smiled and said that he hoped so, because he and Teyo and Sierra missed Jordan more than anyone could realize.

Jordan didn’t think that was true. He was sure he missed them just as much.

Even though he was sitting safe and cool inside his apartment, with Vince laughing across the screen, home had never felt so far away.
Chapter 6

Darcey had no idea what to expect now that he had gotten back to base. His footsteps were leaden and every muscle was coiled like a spring pushed all the way down. His nerves snapped, raw and sharp, every part of his body on edge, like he was waiting for an attack. He jumped when someone called his name as he was about to open his door. He looked over his shoulder. It was Doc. His face was twisted in sadness and regret. Darcey’s stomach dropped.

“Doc, what –”

“Walker, I’m so sorry,” Doc interrupted. His green eyes shone with something between sadness and anger. “As soon as they started talking about it, I did everything I could, I even called in favors to have friends pull rank, but nobody would listen. I’m so sorry. I tried. I really did.”

With each word, Darcey’s stomach clenched tighter, his breathing grew shallower, and his head started to spin. He tried to swallow, but his throat was too tight. He choked a little when he asked, “What are you talking about?”

Doc’s brow furrowed. “You didn’t have your phone with you while you were gone? That’s not like you.”

“No, I did. It was with me the whole time. Doc, what happened?”

“They didn’t even call you?” Doc said. He closed his eyes and swore quietly through his teeth. He awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck with one big hand, just at the nape of his short blond hair, then looked back up and met Darcey’s hazel eyes.

“Walker, they know.” His voice was quiet, apologetic. “About your boyfriend. Everyone knows. It got back to the BC and… you were a good soldier, Walker. You were one of the best. It’s bullshit. It’s fucking –”

Darcey interrupted his rambling with a sharp, “What do you mean I was?” The tightness in his stomach turned to a sharp, icy stab. His chest was about to cave in because he couldn’t breathe. He knew this would happen. He thought he’d been prepared.

It still hit like the butt of a gun to the back of his neck.

“They’re getting rid of you,” Doc said softly. “I did everything I could. I brought up that you’re one of the only three in the platoon who even knows Arabic. I reminded them that you’ll be a certified medic as soon as you take the exam. I reminded them about Campbell, about all the translating you’ve done for us. Campbell even put in a word for you but –”

“He what?” For a brief moment, Darcey was so surprised he couldn’t remember what fear felt like.

“Yeah,” Doc said. “He’s a dick, but you saved his life, Walker. You don’t forget something like that.”

Darcey was still for another moment.

“They wouldn’t listen to any of us. I’m so sorry.”
Everything came rushing back and Darcey whispered a quiet ‘fuck’ underneath his breath. His fingers gripped the strap of his bag so tightly that they began to go numb. But there was only one thing he could do from here.

“Thanks, Doc,” he murmured. He turned away, inhaled deeply, squared his shoulders and lifted his head. He let himself into the apartment, strode to the bedroom and dropped his bag on his bed, then turned back around. He didn’t look back when he closed the door behind him. There was nothing left for him here and nothing to do but keep going.

When he arrived at the Lieutenant Colonel’s office, he still waited his turn. He still followed protocol. He was still a soldier, at least for now, and he intended to act like one.

Darcey still saluted when he walked through the door. He followed command when the Colonel told him to stand at ease. It didn’t shake him when his superior raised his voice.

It wasn’t until the Colonel started getting personal that Darcey’s hands clenched behind his back. His jaw tightened, his muscles tensed, but he still didn’t speak out of turn.

“We can’t have people like you here compromising the integrity of The United States Army and putting our men at risk!” he yelled. People like you. Faggots. Queers.

Darcey steeled himself. He was going dishonorably anyway.

“Permission to speak freely, sir?” he asked.

“Shut your mouth,” the Colonel spit.

“With all due respect, Sir,” Darcey didn’t try to keep the disdain out of his voice, “if you’ll remember, back in 2002 I saved Campbell’s life, and indirectly quite a few more when I helped our team translate intercepted messages in 2004.”

The Colonel’s square face was bright red, rigid with fury, and he opened his mouth to say something Darcey was not about to listen to when he said, “And if I can say, that’s pretty much the opposite of what you’ve just accused me of. Sir.”

The older man’s mouth set in a harsh, straight line. He slid some paperwork across the desk. “Sign it and get out of my office and off my base.”

Darcey speed read it before signing it, just to be sure he wasn’t committing himself to something he wasn’t prepared to. General discharge under dishonorable circumstances. He could probably thank Doc and Campbell for that. Psychologically unfit to serve. No severance package. Not even health insurance. Nothing. He didn’t have the equivalent of a felony on his record, but it wasn’t much in the way of compensation. Eight years of dedicating his life to his country, and Darcey was being thrown away.

He filled in Brett’s address as his contact and signed. Even if he tried to appeal, nobody would care. Everyone who would stand up for him had already done so and it hadn’t made a difference, and he’d known very well what coming out meant under Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. This was what he’d wanted, right? To go back to his family like he was promised?

He did. It was his only option and he’d taken it. Now he had to man up and take the consequences, too.

“I want copies of everything before I leave,” Darcey said.

“You’ll be getting some more paperwork in the mail in the next month or so,” the Colonel said.
"I’ll have them mailed with it.” His voice was terse and harsh, but he wasn’t yelling or red-faced anymore. He was calm. Business-like.

It was done.

As soon as Darcey stepped out the door, he pulled out his phone and dialed Brett’s number. It went to his voicemail.

“I’m coming home. I’ll be at the airport soon. I’ll call you again once I’ve got a ticket in my hand and know when I’m coming in.”

He hung up. All of his possessions but his furniture could fit into his pack and a backpack, and he had a bed back home. There was no need to wait around.

Then, Campbell’s voice, along with someone else’s Darcey didn’t recognize, shouting something. He ignored it and continued on to his apartment.

At least, he did until he heard one of them shout, “If you’re not a dyke, why are you so fucking afraid to prove it?”

Darcey paused, glancing around to find their location. They were yelling at a woman at least a foot shorter than both of them, a relatively new soldier just out of boot camp. Her name was Fisher, but everyone called her Boots, though nobody was sure where the nickname came from. She was a tiny half-Chinese woman, tough and hard as iron. She was never afraid to stand up for herself and never backed down. She and her platoon were supposed to be shipped out with them. Her first time seeing combat, but when she and Darcey had talked about it in passing, she had been anything but afraid.

Whatever was happening, all three of them were furious. The man Darcey didn’t recognize was screaming in Boots’s face but she wasn’t backing down, her right foot slid back and fists clenched at her sides, leaning right back up into his face. Ready for a fight. Her brown eyes, usually calm, were raging, and her entire back was a huge ball of held back tension. Campbell stood to the side, egging the other man on.

“I’m not afraid to prove anything, Robinson.” She spit his name like a curse. “I just shouldn’t have to for sexist assholes like you. What, just because a woman’s tough, she has to be gay? You must be homophobic too, you fucking dick. Real fucking prize. I can’t believe the ladies aren’t falling all over you.”

Darcey hesitated. He should just go. Everything was such a mess already and getting involved might make it worse. She could handle herself.

But just because she can doesn’t mean she should have to do it alone.

His fingers curled into his palms, back out again, and he approached.

“What the fuck is going on?” he barked as he stepped up beside her. Robinson’s lip curled into a snarl, but suddenly Campbell was a little unsure.

“Oh, great, another one,” Robinson snapped.

“Whoa,” Campbell said firmly, holding his hand up in front of him. “He’s not involved in this. Leave him alone.”

Boots raised an eyebrow at the comment, but Darcey didn’t respond to the bait.
“How about you fuck off?” he growled. Suddenly he felt like the whole situation could be resolved if he could just punch somebody. He was getting kicked out anyway. How much worse could they do?

“I can take care of myself, Walker,” Boots barked back. She had something to prove, and he knew he should let her, but he couldn’t let Robinson go that easily.

“I know, but that doesn’t mean you’re the only one who thinks his attitude is bullshit.”

“Fuck you, faggot,” Robinson growled. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“Robinson,” Campbell interrupted. “I said leave him the fuck out of it.”

“It concerns me now,” Darcey growled back. Campbell wasn’t even on his radar anymore. “I’ll ask you again: what the fuck is going on?”

“She’s a fucking dyke,” Robinson spat. Boots’s eyes hardened and her mouth pressed into a tight line. “She says she’s not, but she refuses to prove it.”

“How, by sleeping with you?” And Darcey knew he shouldn’t say it, but goddamn how he wanted to, and he’d kept himself so tightly controlled for so long that it would feel so good to just let it out. So he did. “I’d refuse to prove it too, asshole.”

Darcey was ready for Robinson’s swing, but the fist never impacted because Boots jumped in front of him and slammed her shoulder into Robinson’s chest, followed by an elbow to the stomach and a steel toed boot to the foot. She was in uniform. He wasn’t. He was only wearing sneakers.

But it wasn’t enough to down him because he caught his breath quickly and launched forward at her, but Campbell grabbed his arm in a grip hard enough to bruise and jerked him back.

“What the hell, Campbell,” he growled, wrenching his arm away.

“Stop,” Campbell barked.

Robinson wasn’t listening. He’d already whirled back to Darcey. “What, faggot, you need a woman to defend you?”

Darcey’s neck burned sharply, but this time, not in shame. In rage. “No, but I’m proud to know I’ve got a soldier willing to watch my back.”

Fists and elbows started flying and Darcey couldn’t stop, all the anger and fear he’d been bottling up for years came bursting out and it felt good. Robinson’s knee hit his stomach hard and he doubled over, wheezing in a coughing breath, but he didn’t stop. As he pulled himself up he swung out and his elbow connected with Robinson’s jaw with a satisfying crack and he pulled his arm back and forced his hand up to block the fist coming straight for his nose. It connected, but not with Darcey, and Doc shouted, “Jesus fucking Christ!” as he roughly shoved Darcey back, hand firmly on his chest. Darcey was still winded from the hit to his stomach and they hadn’t been fighting more than thirty seconds, but suddenly he was still so, so tired.

Boots put her hand on his shoulder and leaned down, checking him for damage, but he pushed her away. She let out a sharp, angry hiss of air, but said nothing. Doc screamed at both of them, his voice ripping at his throat. His hand was firm on Darcey’s shoulder, his other smacking into Robinson’s chest, but Darcey couldn’t process the words.

He looked up at Doc for the first time. Blood matted the very ends of his blond hair and his face
was twisted in anger.

“What the fuck is wrong with you!?” He shouted. He turned to look at Darcey. “*Both of you?*”

“They –”

“Don’t even start with your homophobic bullshit, Robinson!” Doc shouted. Once he was sure Darcey wouldn’t press further, Doc let him go and whirled to face Robinson completely. Doc was thinner, but at four inches above the tallest of them, he towered over the other soldiers, large and intimidating. “You’ve been at this bullshit ever since Walker got outed and I’m sick of it. We’re getting shipped out to Iraq in less than a week and we just lost one of our best soldiers and only translators. We don’t have the time or resources for this shit!”

“Good fucking riddance to the faggot!” Robinson shouted. Darcey’s breath came back. His fists tightened and he was ready to go again.

“I told you to fuck off and leave him out of it!” Campbell shouted.

“Shut up,” Doc said firmly. He turned back to Robinson. “It’s not soldiers like Walker we have to worry about,” he snarled. “It’s purposely divisive assholes like you that really compromise us, and if I had it my way, *you’d* be out, not him.” He glared at him, then over at Boots. “Private Robinson, Private Fisher.” Back at Campbell. “Specialist Campbell. With me. *Now.*” When he turned back to Darcey, his eyes had softened, but he kept his voice hard because he had to.

“Specialist Walker.” His voice was quiet, but firm. “It’s been an honor to serve with you. Take care of yourself out there.”

“Thank you, Corporal. It’s been an honor.” It wasn’t just a formality. Doc was one of the few Darcey would truly miss.

When Darcey turned around, Boots’ eyes burned sharply into the back of his neck, but he didn’t acknowledge it and didn’t look back.

It was only after Darcey was off base and walking toward the nearest bus terminal with his things that panic started to set in. He wasn’t going back into active combat. He was going back to his family. Maybe he would finally be able to get treatment. But the Army had been his life since the day he stepped out of high school. He was almost twenty-eight with nothing else in his recent history.

Now what?

For a very long time after Darcey reached the bus terminal, he sat on the curb, head lowered and hands on the back of his neck. His phone sat on his knee, but Brett hadn’t called back yet. He might have been at work. *I might have to call my parents instead,* he sighed inwardly.

His bus came and went at least ten times in the two hours he sat there, but finally the humidity became too much. The line was a straight shot to the airport, so at least he didn’t need a transfer. He had just enough change for one ride. His last in Louisiana. He didn’t have any reason to come back, now.

His home number was ready on his phone. All he had to do was press send. What would he say? Brett would understand, but what about his mother and stepfather? What about Ally? How would Lexi react, learning that something like this could happen just because he was gay?
He swallowed, about to send the call, but his hands shook so hard he dropped the phone. He cursed quietly and leaned over to grab it, and when he sat back up, something hard smacked the back of his head.

“Fuck!” he muttered, his hand instinctively going towards the injury.

“Oh, shit, I’m so sorry.” Darcey looked up at the familiar voice. It was Boots. It was the corner of her pack. The fire in her eyes softened when she saw his face.

“Walker,” she said softly. “So when the Corporal said that, he meant…”

“Discharge.”

She sat down next to him, her movements rough and heavy. She dropped one of her two bags between her feet.

“Was it—”

“You heard the rumors?”

“Yeah.”

“Guess.”

She turned away and spit with disgust.

“I’m sorry, Walker,” she said. “I know we didn’t really work much together. But I have a lot of respect for you. You’re a good man and a good soldier.”

They paused with only the sounds of the bus terminal around them. She spoke in the present tense. She still felt that way.

“Why are you here?” Darcey asked, even though he knew.

“Discharge. They had it out for me from day one. They didn’t even want to let me in in the first place, but they had to, legally. They’ve been looking for excuses ever since.”

“Because you’re a woman,” he said matter of factly. She nodded curtly.

“Maybe if I’d been California or Illinois or something it’d have been different. But here I was fucked from day one.”

They sat in silence another moment. Her body language was in stark contrast to his: stiff shoulders, clenched fists, jaw set hard. Darcey’s was limp with defeat.

“Is it true?” he asked softly.

Her brown eyes flashed. “What?”

“The rumor Robinson was screaming about. Is it true or is he just full of shit?”

She snorted and shook her head, pulling off her hat and running her fingers over the top of her head. Her black hair was just long enough to pull back into a tight bun at the nape of her neck, although it was coming loose. “He’s full of shit,” she said. “But I wasn’t about to sleep with some douchebag to prove it. Apparently I’m gay because I didn’t want some asshole’s dick.” She dropped her hand to her knee and looked down. “It wasn’t just him. There were a lot of them.
There were a lot of guys like you and Doc, too, but they couldn’t always be around, you know? Maybe it’s better that things turned out this way, before it got worse. Before they all tried to –"

She paused and swallowed, then shook her head. “What’s done is done,” she finally said. “I actually have a boyfriend back home. In Seattle.”

“That where you headed?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Phoenix. That’s where my family is.”

She nodded. “We wanted to join together, but he couldn’t. They wouldn’t let him in.”

Darcey’s eyebrows furrowed and he shifted his weight and leaned forward. “He have epilepsy or diabetes or something?”

“Or something,” Boots said.

“Was he injured before he could enlist?” he asked softly.

Her shoulders tensed again, her fists so tight her knuckles began to turn white. “He’s trans, Walker.” Her voice was soft, but serious and defiant.

He paused. She was clearly expecting a negative reaction, but he didn’t understand what she was talking about, so didn’t know why. “I don’t even know what that means,” he said.

She met his eyes. Her face was calm, her mouth set in a serious, straight line. “He’s transgender. He was mistakenly labeled female as birth and has lived as man all his life. Ever since he was a small child. It just took a lot of time, money, and medical procedure to catch his body up with his identity.”

Darcey didn’t reply right away. His eyes darted over Boots’s face.

“And they wouldn’t let him enlist,” he finally said, “even though he was willing to put his life on the line for his country and his people.”

“Yes,” she said. “Because Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell is bullshit.”

Darcey snorted in derision. He didn’t realize how badly his hands were shaking until he rubbed one across his face, as if trying to clear the bullshit from his eyes.

“It is,” he whispered. “I’m sorry, Boots. That’s fucked up.”

Finally, for the first time all day, somebody smiled at him. Her mouth turned up and her eyes softened. “Let me guess,” she said. “Your rumors are true.”

“Sort of,” he said. “I don’t have a boyfriend. But the gay part’s true.”

“And you signed up even though you knew this could eventually happen.” She laughed softly, more of a huff of air, and shook her head. She knocked her shoulder against Darcey’s and said, “You’re a brave motherfucker, Walker. I would have been proud to have the chance to stand next to you over there.”
It took Darcey almost twelve hours after arriving at the airport to get a hold of a ticket to get him back to Phoenix and it involved two layovers once he did, but it was the cheapest and the quickest out and all he wanted was to get home. Boots had had better luck and was able to board her flight in less than three hours, leaving him alone to wander the airport after going through security.

Finally, about six hours after his first call, Brett called him back, stammering apologies and asking over and over if you were okay, what happened, did you need him to come out there, you weren’t hurt, were you?

Once Darcey assured him he wasn’t dead or dying, Brett calmed down enough to agree to pick him up at the airport. He was unsure about Darcey staying with him overnight, but he’d be getting in at four in the morning and wanted to wait to talk to his parents until his sisters were at school, anyway, so Brett reluctantly gave in.

Darcey was falling asleep on his feet as they walked up the stairs to Brett’s second floor apartment and could have easily crashed on the floor without so much as a sheet underneath him, but Brett tried to get him to take the bed. Eventually, they both argued their way into sharing it, too tired to fight about it for longer than a few minutes. It was a twin, so it was small and cramped, but at least it was safe, and because of that Darcey slept better than he had in a very long time.

“You should go out while I’m at school.”

They both had only gotten about four hours of sleep, but Darcey knew Brett was right. He could stay inside, cooped up and confined, or he could go out until later in the afternoon when Brett was done with class and could let him back in again. He had money and he had time.

“There’s a bookstore down the street,” Brett said. “And my boyfriend works at a really nice coffee shop by the campus. Sprouts is still around. Remember when we used to go and get an entire pound of just the banana Runts?”

Darcey chuckled and smiled halfheartedly. “Yeah,” he said.

They both grabbed their backpacks and, after Brett locked the door behind them, walked through the parking lot and went their separate ways, Brett to his car and Darcey on foot to nowhere in particular. For a very long time, he walked aimlessly, taking turns when they looked good and crossing streets when he felt like it. Even if he did get lost, he could easily find himself and his way back to Brett’s again. But eventually, the heat became too much, and he ducked into a coffee shop near a college campus and a public library. It was small and quiet and almost completely empty, furnished and painted in soft browns and yellows. The cashier looked to still be in middle school, barely older than Lexi, and Darcey wondered in the back of his mind whether they’d changed the state’s legal minimum work age since he’d been gone.

She asked for his ID when he handed her his credit card and he pulled his military ID without thinking. She handed it back with the card without swiping it.

“It’s on me,” she smiled.

“You don’t have to do that,” Darcey said softly. He flicked the credit card between his fingers, gesturing it toward the register.
“You don’t, either,” she said.

She turned away to wash her hands before starting his drink, and Darcey wondered if she’d say the same thing if she knew why he’d come home. Once her back was turned, Darcey slipped a five dollar bill and a handful of change into the tip jar, making sure she didn’t see.

He got his iced coffee and took a seat in the back where it was quiet and dim. There was another teenager a few years older than the cashier in the same uniform at a nearby table reading a book. Darcey’s eyes darted down to catch the title. He couldn’t make it out, but guessed from the cover that it was some kind of crime thriller. He’d have to get a new Arizona ID so he could get a library card. Until he found work, he wouldn’t have much else to do.

First he had to get an address. Brett didn’t have enough space for Darcey to stay with him for much longer. It would be strange living with his parents at this age, but that was his only other option. Even though he had a good amount of savings, he needed to find a job before he could commit himself to anything that would cost a large amount of money. At least he could help his parents with their bills while he looked for work.

He didn’t even have any references. Over the years he’d lost touch with everyone he’d gone to high school with. Maybe Boots would be willing, or Doc, but after he had to break up my fight, he probably won’t want to be associated with me anymore. And he could forget about the rest of his platoon. Even if he had their contact information to give out, they’d probably just tell anyone who might call any terrible thing they could think of, regardless of whether or not it was true.

But Campbell, of all people, had tried to keep him there. Maybe when it came down to it, some of the other men wouldn’t have been as bad as he’d expected, either.

It didn’t matter anymore.

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The sun was hot and bright when Darcey stepped back outside an hour later, just past one in the afternoon. For a long while, he wandered aimlessly, eating when he was hungry and getting a drink when he was thirsty and exploring the city he’d left behind to see how it had changed. It was both the same place and a different one, and neither at the same time. He was both home and not.

Around four, Darcey called Brett to let him know he was on his way back. His cousin didn’t answer, probably on the tail end of his last class, so he left a message.

“I’m on my way back. You don’t have to call me. We’ll meet there.”

About five minutes later, Brett called anyway. He knew how uncomfortable small talk made Darcey, so he skipped the pleasantries and asked, “Have you decided about your parents, yet?”

“Can we talk at your place?” There was nobody else around, but Darcey was right on the sidewalk in the middle of everything, and he was so used to keeping everything so closely under wraps that he couldn’t talk about something like this in such a public place.

“Yeah,” Brett said. “Where are you? I’ll pick you up.”

Darcey glanced around the corner where he stood. “19th and…” He leaned out into the street so he could see the other sign. “Northern.” He glanced around to find a landmark. “There’s a Bookman’s and a Sprouts on one side, and it looks like a Starbucks and an Einstein’s Bagels
across the street.”

“Jesus, Darcey! How’d you get all the way out there?”

“I was just… walking,” he said softly.

Brett’s voice softened, too. “Okay,” he said. “Where do you want to wait? So I know which parking lot to pull into.”

“I’ll just hang out at the Einstein’s.”

“Okay,” Brett replied. “If you get something to eat, make it small. I want to see your parents for dinner somewhere.”

A cold rush of panic shot down Darcey’s spine and he didn’t know why, which was almost more terrifying than the panic itself. “What did —”

“I haven’t called them,” Brett said. “I promised I wouldn’t. But when we get back to my place, you’re going to. They’re not going to care about anything other than the fact that you’re home and you’re safe.”

“They’re going to ask why I’m not getting shipped out.”

Brett fell silent. After a long, long moment, he asked, “What are you going to tell them?”

“For now I’m just going to say it was a paperwork mistake. They put me in the wrong file or something.”

“They’re going to notice when you don’t go back to school. Culinary school was all you talked about in high school. And what about your health insurance?”

“I don’t know,” Darcey murmured. He balled his hand into a fist, as if the muscle tension could help relieve the emotional tension. “I’m working on that part.” When he got to the Einstein’s, he said, “We’ll talk about this more when you pick me up. I don’t really feel comfortable being in public while we discuss this.”

“Yeah, of course,” Brett said. “I’ll see you soon. Maybe about twenty minutes, depending on traffic.”

“All right. You can call me and I’ll come out.”

Darcey hung up and pocketed his phone. The café was busier than he would have expected at 4:00 p.m. He went through the line and bought an iced black coffee, making the bare minimum of conversation required before moving to an empty table in the back. Someone had left a newspaper there, so he picked it up and scanned through it. He paid slightly closer attention to the job listings, but what would he be qualified for, now?

Brett surprised him when he slid into the booth across from him instead of calling. He said goodbye to someone and hung up his phone as he looked up at Darcey. He placed his phone facedown on the table.

“Darcey,” he said gently, “we need to talk. We can do it here or in my car or at my place. I’m not going to make you come out to them but I’m not going to let you start a string of lies, either.”

“Not here.” Darcey almost flinched when his voice broke at the end of the sentence.
Brett smiled, and the worry in his eyes soothed Darcey in a way he felt it shouldn’t. He should have been able to take care of himself. He was six years older. He should have been taking care of Brett.

“Come on,” Brett said gently. “Let’s go.”

It was 10:00 that night when Darcey and Brett returned to Darcey’s parents’ house. Brett was still the one to announce their presence, this time, with a knock. They didn’t want to wake up Ally and Lexi with the doorbell.

William answered. He didn’t say a word, just pulled Darcey into the tightest, safest hug he’d ever had.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m so, so glad you’re home.” William took a step back, his big hands still resting on Darcey’s arms. “It’s for good this time?”

“Yeah, Dad.” Darcey paused. “Bring Mom into the kitchen and we’ll talk about it. I’ll explain.”

“Well then,” William said, “come in.” He let Darcey go and stepped back. “Brett, you can come in, too, if you want.”

Brett gave Darcey a questioning glance. Darcey nodded.

The two of them only waited in the kitchen for two or three minutes, but it still dragged on for what felt like hours, each moment ticking and stretching into another stab of anxiety. If only he’d just gotten it over with when he first realized it back in high school.

It was ridiculous to think, but Darcey felt like he’d been playing the last ten or fifteen years on hard mode, and even though he’d gone through worse, and more dangerous, and more terrifying, all of it was leading up to and preparing him for this moment.

You can do this, Walker.

He wasn’t sure when his mother and stepfather came in, but now they were sitting across from him, looking at him expectantly but fearfully, like they were expecting him to tell them he had some kind of deadly illness.

Darcey meant to tell them, step by step, exactly what had happened and why. He intended to explain everything as it came up without apology. But instead, the words ran out of his mouth in a quick, nervous stream, and he blurted, “I’m gay and they found out and they kicked me out because of the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy. It was a general discharge under dishonorable circumstances. I’m sorry.”

Brett looked the most surprised by Darcey’s outburst. Jess was taken aback, but not angry, and William’s face was calm.

Jess reached across the table, palm up, and gestured for Darcey to take her hand. He did. His mouth was dry as cotton and his heart raced, but it was done.

“Darcey, we love you so much,” she said. “The only regret I have about anything in this whole situation is that I didn’t make you feel safe enough to come out sooner. I’m sorry you had to keep it in for so long. I love you.”
The air caught in Darcey’s throat bubbled out in a relieved half-laugh, half-sob. The worry melted from his shoulders and the tension bled out of his muscles, and William said, “Darcey, I know you’re not my biological son, but I’ve always loved you as if you were. What happened to get you back here doesn’t change all of the amazing and honorable things you’ve done, and I’m proud of you. And I’m so glad that you’re home and that you’re staying here, this time, even though it’s not under the best circumstances.”

“And I know you’re probably not going to date for a while, but when you start, if you find a nice man I expect you to bring him back so we can meet him,” Jess said, wagging her finger at him. Darcey laughed, a little watery, and tears started pricking at his eyes again. But he didn’t care, because for the first time in years, he really felt like everything was going to be okay.
Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: You’re more than welcome to come, Jordan. Nate made it really clear that you wouldn’t be intruding.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: It’s not a date or anything. It’s just a bunch of friends getting together and I happen to be dating the guy whose house it’s at.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: Jordan. Put down the Twizzlers and stop moping and come to this party with me.

AnarchyForSale: It’s Sour Patch Kids thank you very much.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: Oh, gross.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: But irrelevant.

AnarchyForSale: Wow rude.

AnarchyForSale: Also you spelled “delicious” wrong.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: I am going to be there in thirty minutes to pick you up. My friend Justin is driving because he is awesome, and you will thank him for going out of his way, because he also lives at the house where the party is going to be. When I get there, you are getting in the car, even if all you are wearing is pajamas and flip flops.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: Although I do suggest being presentable if possible.

AnarchyForSale: Um excuse me I am always presentable.

AnarchyForSale: But fine I will go to your damn party if I must.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: Yes. You must.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: I’ll see you soon! =)

AnarchyForSale: Don’t you dare smiley face me at a time like this.

User Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen has logged off

AnarchyForSale: Ugh one day all you fuckers will feel my wrath.

Jordan sighed and rolled his eyes, closing the chat window and putting up an away message for anyone else who might want to talk. Iffy had been hassling him to go to this get together for almost a week, and he’d been waffling about it the whole time, sometimes agreeing, sometimes changing his mind back and deciding he’d rather stay in alone. The latter wasn’t good enough for Iffy, and she kept pushing up until the very last minute. Maybe since it would just be a few close friends hanging out and not an obnoxious party with a bunch of people getting drunk, it would be okay.
It wasn’t that Jordan wasn’t interested in meeting her friends. He was grateful that even now, over a week and a half after his mini-meltdown, and then his confession of his feelings, she was still trying to tug him back into being social, not because she wanted him to be but because that was what he needed. Jordan needed to be around people, he thrived on it, and when he locked himself away like this, he started to wither like an under-watered houseplant. But he hadn’t seen both Iffy and Nate at the same time since their conversation at CounterCulture, and he didn’t know what Iffy had told her boyfriend about his conversation with her at the cafe and how he would react to the guy who had a crush on him and his girlfriend showing up at his house. Nate was good-natured enough that as long as Jordan didn’t make an ass of himself, he’d probably be fine, but regardless, what if it was weird?

He didn’t give himself time to fall back into a spiral of feeling sorry for himself. Instead, he got up and got ready, pulling a clean pair of jeans over his boxers as he hopped around awkwardly looking for his binder. Eventually he found it and pulled it over his head, Velcro-ing it tight across his chest over his undershirt so it didn’t scratch the sensitive skin of his chest and sides. He straightened everything out and grabbed the first t-shirt he reached out of his closet, a plain black band t-shirt.

He gave himself a quick onceover in the mirror. His hair was a mess, but he didn’t feel like fighting with it, so a beanie it was. He ran his hand over the little bit of stubble on his chin and pulled a face. His hair was so thick and dark, sometimes he had to shave twice a day, and it was the one thing about the hormone therapy he hated. But it was easy enough to take care of and all the other changes made it worth this one minor annoyance.

A knock came at the door just as he finished and put his razor away. He grabbed his wallet as he headed out, his keys off the hook on the wall, and opened the door. Iffy stood there expectantly. She smiled. Jordan half-smiled back.

“T’llike your hat,” she said, pointing at her own head. “Orange looks good on you.”

“Thanks.”

She gently elbowed him in the side as they walked to the car together. “Come on, Jordan. I know things have been kind of rough for you recently, but you’ll like my friends. They’re nice. Maybe you and Nate can talk a little more about Food Not Bombs while you’re there. There will only be five or six people, depending on if one of the guys can be there. Nothing crazy. And I think only two of them are even legal to drink and neither of them does so you don’t have to worry about that.”

Jordan gave her a friendly nudge back. He didn’t say anything, but when he stuck his hands in his pockets, his smile grew a little bigger.

Iffy took shotgun and Jordan plopped into the backseat. When he looked up and saw the driver’s face in the rearview mirror, he gave Jordan a nod and a smile. His hair was shaggy and messy, the same dark brown as his eyes and close cropped beard. He had the kind of white skin gone tan only athletes did.

“Hey,” he said, catching Jordan’s eyes in the mirror.

“Hey,” Jordan grinned back. “Thanks for picking me up.”

“Thank Iffy for living close to you,” he laughed. “But you’re welcome.”

“So, not that I know many of your friends, but who all is going to be there?”
“Me, Justin.” The driver lifted his hand.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” Jordan said. “I’m Jordan.”

Justin grinned. “No harm, no foul. So, me,” he continued. “My boyfriend, Brett.” He nodded over to Iffy as he started the car. “Iffy and Nate. And Brett’s cousin, probably.”

It took a moment, but then Jordan remembered the names Iffy mentioned the other day – Brett, having family trouble, but his boyfriend Justin was at work so he couldn’t help – but he didn’t mention it. It wasn’t his business, and for all he knew, it had been resolved already.

“So no Vi or Renee?” he asked instead.

“They’re sort of a separate group of friends,” Iffy said, miming picking something up and placing it back down beside something else. “Like, they hang out with me and Nate sometimes, but –”

“I’ve never met them,” Justin said. “Iffy doesn’t love me enough to introduce us.”

“You liar!” Iffy shouted. Justin laughed. “I love you plenty. We just haven’t ever had a reason to all be in the same place at the same time! They do activism and you do clubbing, man, the two don’t overlap very often.”

He laughed again, bright, booming, the kind of laugh that could fill up a whole room. “True enough,” he said.

Jordan didn’t talk much on the drive, instead listening to Iffy and Justin’s playful bickering and joking. If they weren’t so physically different, he’d easily think they were related.

The drive was about a half hour, full of punk music and laughter and playful insults. Jordan didn’t want it to be over when they pulled up in the driveway. He stepped out of the car, about to say something, but then he saw the house they’d stopped in front of and froze.

It was huge, sprawling, beautiful red brick with solid wood doors and gravel and cacti landscaping. The curtains were pulled so Jordan couldn’t see much inside past the occasional silhouette of someone passing the window. Justin and Nate were maybe his age. Maybe younger! How could they afford a place like this?

Although he’d never have asked aloud, the question was written clearly on Jordan’s face, and Justin said, “We bought it when it was broken down and horrible. We even had to rework the wiring. It took about a year to renovate the whole thing, but I’d say it was worth it.”

“I’d say,” Jordan whispered, eyes darting over the building.

“Come inside,” Justin chuckled. He unlocked the door, gesturing the other two in.

The inside was much, much different from the outside, but still nice in its own mismatched way. The furniture was a mix of different types of wood and things that were clearly meant for dorm use, like cube storage up against the walls and brightly colored plastic bins peeking out from the hallway. But if he could have a place like this, Jordan would be more than willing to have unmatched furniture.

There were only three other people there when Jordan walked in, none of whom he looked at very closely. They were in the middle of a conversation and he didn’t want to interrupt. He’d introduce himself during a lull. He stayed back near the wall when Iffy went forward and jumped on Nate in greeting and Justin leaned down to kiss the top of Brett’s head.
Jordan breathed in nervously through his teeth. Iffy meant well, but he was clearly an outsider here, someone brand new among people who had known each other for ages. Two couples and, Jordan assumed, a family member who he couldn’t see well, sitting down beside Brett on the couch.

Iffy and Nate were on the other end of the couch, hunched over a tablet as Nate scribbled messages that she responded to verbally, but Jordan didn’t listen to what she was saying. He looked around the room awkwardly, shifting from foot to foot as he tried to figure out where he should go and what he should say or if he should say anything at all. Nate laughed and Jordan turned back to them as he stood, gently ruffling Iffy’s hair. Iffy walked back over as Nate left the room.

“He needs to text his sister really quick,” she said. “When he gets back, we can talk more about our Food Not Bombs chapter.”

Jordan smiled. Iffy’s mouth turned down and her brow furrowed. “Are you okay?”

He shrugged one shoulder and nodded toward the other three people in the room. “I just feel like a third wheel, I guess. Fifth wheel? I don’t know.”

Then the third person on the couch stood up and Jordan momentarily forgot what words even were.

He was gorgeous. Jordan could only see his profile as he talked to Brett and Justin, the hard line of his jaw, the barest hint of a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. His shirt was so tight but Jordan didn’t see how it couldn’t be with shoulders as broad and arms as big as his, every line of every muscle clear and sharp and he didn’t register the fact that there were still other people in the room with him until Iffy’s sharp elbow nudged his ribs.

“Hey,” she said. “Hey, you.”

Jordan glanced back at her quickly. He didn’t want to pull his gaze away.

“Yeah?” The single word stuck in his dry mouth and the back of his neck was suddenly very, very hot. I should have put more effort into getting ready.

A slow grin spread across Iffy’s face.

“Who is that?” He cleared his throat, as if it could hide the hitch in his voice.

“That’s Darcey. He’s Brett’s cousin.” She sounded much happier about that than she should. “He just got into town last weekend.”

“Please tell me he’s staying.” Jordan said it much too quickly, a little panicked at the prospect of either answer she might give.

“Yeah,” she said. “His family’s here. I don’t know much about him. He’s pretty quiet. Keeps to himself. I know he likes video games.” She gently tapped the knit triforce symbol on Jordan’s hat. He was too distracted to bat her hand away. Her eyes darted between the two men’s faces, and Jordan knew that his was a few shades darker than normal because it was on fire, but in the best way.

“Is he attached?” he whispered nervously. It would just be his luck for it to happen all over again, and –

“Would he punch me if I hit on him?” he asked next. He balled his hands into fists to keep them from trembling.

“No.” Iffy didn’t try to hide the excitement and glee in her voice. “He might even hit back.”

He had to move on from Iffy and Nate, right? That was what everyone wanted. That was what he wanted. Maybe this Darcey guy could be the one to help him do it.

“Do it,” she whispered, gently knocking his arm with a loose fist. “Do it, do it, do it,” she chanted.

“There’s no way he’d be interested in me,” he said softly. He swallowed, hard, to try to get some moisture back in his mouth. “Look at him!”

“You’re underestimating yourself, Jordan,” she said, slowly nudging him out of the corner. “He’s really sweet. So are you. And you’re really attractive, too! Do it.”

Then, they were standing right behind the man as Iffy tapped his arm. He looked over his shoulder and his small smile widened.

“Hey.” He turned around. Even though his voice was soft it was deep and low and warm and now Jordan couldn’t stop imagining what it would sound like if Darcey pushed him against a wall, whispering in his ear –

“Hey!” Iffy smiled. She turned and gestured toward Jordan. “This is my friend, Jordan. Jordan, this is Darcey. He’s new in town.”

Darcey’s hand was warm and callused and wonderful, even if his handshake was quick, firm, and almost businesslike.

A small, confident smile crept across Jordan’s face as he said, “Nice to meet you, Darcey.”

“Nice to meet you,” Darcey smiled. His eyes darted over Jordan, the curly black hair that fell into his brown eyes, ridiculously long, black lashes and bright white teeth peeking through his half smile. When the handshake broke, Darcey pressed a loosely curled fist to his mouth and cleared his throat. *Oh, no.* He was gorgeous. Darcey’s heart beat a little too fast and his palms were a little too warm. He stuck them in his pockets to give them somewhere to be.

The two stood awkwardly for a moment, both madly searching for conversation starters, and Darcey’s eyes caught the triforce symbol on Jordan’s beanie. “I like your hat,” he said. “I’m a little behind on recent games but I was really into the Zelda franchise for a long time.”

“I’m a pretty casual gamer,” Jordan admitted with a laugh. It was just on the deep side of androgynous, bright and warm and too easy for Darcey to want to wrap himself in. “I only really follow the Zelda and Mario games and haven’t played anything in the past year or so. My consoles are embarrassingly dusty. But I’ve been playing them since I got my good old grey brick Gameboy at Goodwill when I was a kid.”

Darcey crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the couch as Jordan shoved his hands in his pockets. Jordan was slightly pigeon-toed, and in his bright red Converse and black skinny jeans it was the most adorable thing Darcey had ever seen on a grown adult.

“No Tetris?” Darcey asked.

“Well, obviously also Tetris,” Jordan laughed. “It was my first game on my first system.”

Another pause, but not so awkward this time. “I love the work on your arms,” Darcey started
again. He gestured toward Jordan’s left arm, hand nearly touching but not quite. Darcey pulled back. Was Jordan’s skin as warm as it looked?

*What are you even thinking Darcey Walker*

This attraction was too sudden, too abrupt for Darcey to know how to deal with. It was sharp, visceral, almost animalistic, and it was simultaneously the most terrifying and most freeing thing he’d experienced in a long time, because now, if he wanted to, he could *do* something about it.

“Thanks,” Jordan grinned. He turned his right inner arm up to show off a split pomegranate with vines growing out, exploding into bright autumn leaves just below the crook of his elbow, bright ink on dark brown skin. “This one was my first. And I think it’s still my favorite.”

“Did you design it?”

“Kind of?” Jordan chuckled. “I drew some sketches. But my artist fixed them up and made them into this.”

“Are you working up into full sleeves, or …?”

Jordan shook his head. “I like my halves.”

“You should.” Darcey nodded. “They’re gorgeous.” His mouth snapped shut and he bit the inside of his lip, but kept his face carefully neutral.

Jordan grinned. Did this mean he was in? Were they flirting now? They *must* have been, with a compliment like that, right?

“Thanks,” he said. “I have a few others around.”

Darcey hiked an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

“Maybe I’ll show you sometime.”

Darcey laughed and rubbed the back of his neck. His ears were pink. Jordan grinned again. *Oh wow that’s adorable.* His laugh was deep and warm, and Jordan wanted to hear it again. Maybe if…?

He quickly looked around Darcey’s shoulder. Nobody was paying attention to them. He quietly waved his hand to catch Darcey’s eyes again, pointing at his hip, and he just barely pulled the hem of his shirt up and the band of his jeans down to show a watercolor style ink of the fox from *The Little Prince* on his left hip.

“I might have been a little drunk,” Jordan admitted. His first and only time, after one of his messiest breakups. “But at least I have an artist I can trust, right?”

“Yeah.” Darcey laughed again. Now his nose was a little pink, too. Jordan dropped his shirt. “So… what other kinds of things do you like to do? Besides get drunk and get tattoos.” There was no malice or judgment in Darcey’s voice. Only amusement.

“It was once,” Jordan laughed. “But I guess I deserved that.”

As the conversation progressed, Darcey and Jordan slowly moved away from the couch and over
toward the corner where Jordan had started the night. Jordan's eyes kept darting over him, always subtle and quick to settle back on his, but they always drifted back, down his neck, over his shoulders. Darcey almost felt like he should have been nervous, because he'd never gotten that kind of attention from another man before. But he wasn't at all. Jordan was so laid-back and quick to smile and it put Darcey completely at ease. He was just barely feminine in all the right ways and places – thick eyelashes, soft lips, immaculate eyebrows – and the muscle definition in his arms left Darcey wondering what the rest of him might look like, what it would be like to taste the salt of his skin and feel the flex of his muscle under his mouth and Jesus Christ Darcey what are you doing. He'd just met Jordan, he shouldn't...

Darcey didn't let himself finish the thought.

The further back into the corner they retreated, the bolder Jordan became. He didn't say anything explicitly, but he kept finding ways to brush his knuckles against Darcey's arm, flirting as subtly as he knew how while still making his intentions clear, because he didn't want to scare the other man off. Darcey was obviously shy. Jordan didn't want to overload him.

Darcey knew exactly what Jordan was doing, but he'd had no experience with these things and didn't know how to flirt back. The closest he'd ever gotten to anything like this was drunken one night stands that progressed past the flirting phase within minutes and never went anywhere past the first twelve hours, all with women, more in an attempt to prove a point to his buddies or maybe himself than out of actual interest or attraction.

Slowly, Jordan moved closer until Darcey was backed against the wall with Jordan's hand pressed against the wall beside Darcey's arm. Darcey was about six inches taller, so Jordan had to tilt his head back to meet his eyes and Darcey could just see the curve of his throat from that angle, soft and dark. He wanted to drag his teeth over it and see what Jordan tasted like. Jordan's arm barely brushed his, so hot, and the closeness should have made him feel cornered but it made his spine tingle and his breath hitch, instead.

Suddenly Darcey had absolutely nowhere to put his hands. They just hung there, uselessly, and he wanted to grab Jordan's hips and pull him flush against him and just kiss him already because the tension was killing him. But he couldn't. Not here. If he got lucky, maybe later.

He slipped his hands into his pockets instead, hooking his thumbs through the belt loops on either side. He leaned back against the wall, putting his weight on his shoulders, and even though Jordan didn't seem to move Darcey could swear that he'd leaned forward with him to close the gap. His skin must have been five degrees hotter anywhere Jordan's was close to him.

His phone went off. A text message.

“Hang on,” Darcey said. He pulled it out of his pocket and flipped it open. It was Brett.

Go for it! I can stay with Justin if you need my place.

He glanced up at Jordan, who had leaned back to give him some space to answer, who was so obviously into him, who was one of the most attractive people he'd met in a very long time. It had been so, so long since he'd felt any sort of physical affection, and it made his brain start to short out, because he texted Brett back to say, Can I borrow your car? I'd rather see if we can go back to his place.

He looked back up at Jordan, watching and waiting expectantly, bouncing a little on his feet, tattooed arms crossed over his chest and hands tucked up under his arms. “Okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Darcey said. He slipped his phone back in his pocket to wait for Brett's reply.
“Do… you have a car?” Jordan asked. “We could… we could go back to my place.”

Darcey didn't answer right away. But he'd had so many one night stands in the past, what was one more? They both wanted it. They were both consenting adults. Where was the problem?

Then Jordan's hand was on his arm, but different this time. Soft. Gentle. Chaste. “It's okay,” he said. “We won't do anything you don't want to. If you want me to back off, I will.”

Darcey only half registered the assurance. His mind was still working. There were enough degrees of separation within their social circles that they could easily avoid each other should something go wrong. And even if Jordan told his friends, his friends were Brett's friends and they wouldn't tolerate anything cruel. And now that Darcey was out to his family, it wouldn't be the end of the world if they somehow found out.

Jordan got twitchier and more nervous with every second of silence that passed. Had he said something too soon? Had he read Darcey's signals wrong? Was this 'let's meet tomorrow for coffee' flirting and not 'do you want to go back to my place?' flirting? He bit his lip, and then Darcey's hand was on his side, big and heavy, but gentle, and Darcey whispered in his ear, “If I'd wanted you to back off, I'd have said so way before now.”

Jordan's knees nearly went limp and his breath caught. Darcey's breath was warm and damp and… and comforting, of all the things it could have been, and Jordan knew he'd be safe. He stood on his toes to bring his mouth closer to Darcey's ear, one hand on the taller man's arm, the other on his chest.

“I really think we should go back to my place.”
Jordan didn’t remember getting back to his apartment, but Darcey was in his bed with his shirt on the floor somewhere and oh, did his skin look amazing against the red sheets. Darcey’s skin was golden, every muscle etched perfectly under his skin, and so soft. He was like a Greek sculpture. Like an Olympian. Jordan wanted to lick every inch of that hot skin, taste the salt of his sweat, feel his fingers digging into his back—

Darcey grabbed Jordan’s forearms, gently, like he was afraid he might break the shorter man. But Darcey was so gentle, so soft-spoken and shy, Jordan wasn’t sure he’d have it in him to, even though he certainly could. Jordan dropped his head to Darcey’s throat, nipping gently, experimentally, at his neck, his jaw. Darcey swallowed and his breath caught underneath Jordan’s mouth, hands tightening on the Jordan’s arms. So Jordan bit again, a little harder, quick nips and bites with hot, open-mouthed kisses in between. Darcey groaned softly and his chest shuddered. When Jordan shifted his knee to make their position more comfortable, Darcey shuddered again and he pressed hard and tight against Jordan’s thigh. A deep, rough, whole body shiver coursed down his back and he groaned, arms wobbling slightly on either side of Darcey’s shoulders.

Darcey’s hands slid from Jordan’s arms to his hips, hesitating, then gently nudged up the bottom of his shirt. Darcey’s shyness was so endearing. He was so sweet. The roughness of his calloused fingers against the sensitive skin of Jordan’s stomach sent a wave of shivering heat coursing straight down between his legs.

Then Darcey’s thumb hooked in the fabric of Jordan’s binder, just shy of the Velcro, and Jordan remembered: shit, he has no idea I’m trans. Darcey was expecting an entirely different body than the one he was about to deliver.

Oh no, oh no no no, this is bad.

Darcey noticed Jordan’s sudden hesitation and moved his hands away from Jordan’s stomach and back to his arms, hands barely hovering above his skin.

“You okay?” he asked.

Jordan hesitated, then looked up to meet Darcey’s eyes. Darcey put his hands, palms down, on the bed. “We can stop,” he said. “Or we can stay where we are and just… not go further.”

But Jordan was frozen in fear, like a squirrel caught in the headlights of a Mac truck. Oh god, say something you idiot—

“Jordan.” Darcey’s voice was calm, soft, soothing. “You’ve got to talk to me. I can’t read your mind.”

“I, uh,” Jordan started stupidly. His voice caught and squeaked. “I…” and suddenly his mouth came out for him in the stupidest, most inaccurate and offensive way possible. “I used to be a woman.”

The silence hung heavy on the air for seconds that passed like hours until Darcey said slowly, “What?”

“I mean.” Jordan leaned back on his knees and covered his face so he could have a moment to gather himself. He dropped his hands and squared his shoulders, looking back up as he said, “I’m trans. I’ve been on testosterone for three years but haven’t had any of the surgeries I need yet. I’m
close to having enough money for my first one, but for now, I bind. So… there are breasts under here.” He gestured vaguely toward his chest. He swallowed hard. He had nothing to be ashamed of, he reminded himself. There was nothing wrong with him. This was his apartment, and if things went wrong, he didn’t have to walk home this time. He was home. And while he was in his home he was going to demand the respect he deserved.

Darcey shifted, eyes darting over Jordan’s face. He opened his mouth to answer, but Jordan kept talking. “I have a vagina and if you even think about touching it your ass will be out on the pavement so fast you won’t have time to find your shirt.” Jordan was talking fast now, much too fast, scared even though he shouldn’t be, he had to be, because fear was what kept him safe.

“Chest is okay as long as you aren’t rough. Anything else is fair game unless I tell you to stop. If you don’t like it, you can get out.”

Darcey’s hands tightened on Jordan’s legs and Jordan’s neck went cold. Oh, god. Yes, he needed to set boundaries, but he didn’t need to be so confrontational about it. This was Iffy’s friend, Iffy. Even if he wouldn’t have been interested in anything sexual because of his body, Darcey wouldn’t hurt him or Iffy wouldn’t have introduced them in the first place.

Jordan shifted his weight to the left, about to crawl off of Darcey and let him up because why would he want to stay after Jordan basically threatened to kick him out? But then, Darcey’s hand was on his side, gently pulling his shirt back down to cover his skin. Jordan stilled and looked back. Darcey gently smoothed Jordan’s shirt down. His touch was light, his face unreadable, but not angry or even annoyed, even though he would have had the right to be.

“Jordan,” he said softly. His voice was low, deep, calm. So comforting. Jordan wanted to weave it into a blanket and wrap it around himself, warm, soothing. Safe. He was safe.

“Calm down,” he continued. Slow. Gentle. “Calm down. We can stop if you want. I’ll get up and leave right now if you want me to. This is your space and you make the rules. But I’m not going to hurt you. I’m not going to touch you in any way or anywhere unless you say it’s okay. It’s your body, Jordan. I’m not about to do anything to it you don’t want me to.” He propped himself up on his elbow to gently run his fingers through Jordan’s hair. The tension slowly bled away from his face and shoulders. “It’s okay,” Darcey whispered. “I won’t hurt you. I won’t let anyone hurt you.” He wasn’t speaking as a potential lover or partner. He was speaking simply as another human being who knew what it was like to hurt.

Jordan’s voice was small, ashamed, when he whispered, “I’m sorry, Darcey.” He shifted his weight back onto his knees and brushed his fingers along Darcey’s jaw. His skin was rough and weather-worn, but even if he didn’t trust Jordan now, Darcey was comfortable enough to lean slightly into his touch, and it helped both of them. I can fix this. Even if sex was out of the question, now, Jordan could still salvage it, and they could still potentially be friends.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered again, a little louder. “I just… I don’t… I don’t really actively think about being transgender anymore. I don’t… mostly I don’t think about my body and… but…” He paused, closing his eyes, a soft huff of frustration bursting from his chest because he didn’t know how to explain it to someone who had never been there.

“But other people do,” Darcey said. Jordan opened his eyes again.

“Yeah.” Kneeling for such a long time was starting to hurt Jordan’s back, so he flopped himself over to lie beside Darcey, instead. This was better. They were equals, now, like they should be. “I’ve gotten into some pretty dangerous shit before,” Jordan blurted. The bed shifted slightly beside his shoulder when Darcey turned to look at him. He looked back. Darcey’s face was warm and calm and comforting, everything Jordan needed just then. “And I got defensive and I got
scared and… and I really fucked up. And I’m sorry. And if you want to call it off, I understand.” They both tilted their heads to better see each other’s expressions.

“Well, that wasn’t the greatest way to lay down boundaries, but I understand, too,” Darcey said. It was a little disconcerting, but Jordan’s straightforwardness was refreshing, too. It was something Darcey understood. While he could have done without Jordan preemptively threatening to kick him out, he was glad Jordan had been completely honest about where they stood.

Jordan paused again. Swallowed.

“I’d really like it if you stayed,” he said. “If you’re okay with that.”

Then, for the first time since Jordan’s outburst, Darcey smiled. It was small, just the barest pull at the corner of his mouth. “I think I can stay for a while.”

Jordan smiled back. “And we’ll just… see what happens?”

“Yeah,” he said.

What happened was this: they talked for a while. They talked about things they talked about at the party and things they hadn’t gotten around to yet. Local music. Restaurants and coffee shops in the area. Video games. Film. Trivial things that neither of them usually talked about, but everything about the situation was so comfortable, from the softness of the bed underneath them to the soothing sounds of each others’ voices. Jordan would have been happy to sit around reciting the alphabet over and over if it meant he could hear Darcey’s bright, bass laugh and watch the way he got a little pink behind his ears when he complimented the bigger man on something, even something stupid like how impressive his Pokémon card collection sounded. Jordan never had been able to get his hands on that Charizard.

Darcey laughed and said, “Tell you what, if I can find it while I’m going through my old stuff, it’s yours. I have… three of them, I think? Or, I did at one point, anyway.”

Jordan grinned. Although it was probably nothing to Darcey, to him, the gesture meant so much.

“Thanks Darcey,” he said. “That’s really sweet.”

Darcey chuckled and shrugged, turning back toward the ceiling again. He still hadn’t put his shirt back on, and even though Jordan mostly focused on the conversation, every now and then he couldn’t help but glance back down at Darcey’s chest, at his arms. Even if it wouldn’t go anywhere, it was still okay to think he was attractive, right?

Darcey broke the quiet when he asked, “So, what’s the story behind the fox tattoo? You can’t just say you were drunk and then leave it at that.”

Jordan smiled and chuckled, nervously. “It, uh…” he started. “It’s kind of depressing. I don’t know if you want to hear it.”

Darcey’s smile faded and he regretted asking. “Sorry,” he said. “If you don’t want to tell me –”

“No, it’s fine,” Jordan said. “I just didn’t want to bring you down.”

Darcey was quiet, waiting for Jordan to speak. Jordan inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly, and began.

“So, it was about two years ago. I’d just turned twenty. I was in a relationship with this guy, and it was pretty unhealthy, looking back.” He chuckled wryly and shook his head. “Pretty much all of my relationships have been, but that’s beside the point,” he mumbled. Then, louder, “Anyway, the
relationship was messy and the breakup was messier and at the time, I was convinced that I loved him, and I didn’t know how else to deal with my emotions so I got smashed.” His hand absently drifted down to his hip, resting over the tattoo beneath his jeans. “You know where the design is from, right?”

“The Little Prince,” Darcey said softly. His eyes were trained closely on Jordan’s upturned face. “Of course.”

“So you know the story,” Jordan said. “When you love someone, it means they’ve begun to tame you. And that was how I felt. And when we broke up I felt like I’d been thrown back into the wild woods, still tamed, not knowing how to do any of the things I’d always been able to before. I didn’t know where I was going or what I was doing. And… and thank god my artist has some sense and knows what I like or I could have ended up with something horrible, like ‘Antonio is a fuckwad’ on my back or something.” He chuckled.

“Shit,” Darcey mumbled. He’d been thinking a party night gone out of control or a young lightweight’s experiment with alcohol. “I’m sorry, Jordan.”

Jordan waved his hand vaguely. “Don’t be. It is what it is. But I learned my lesson and I haven’t touched alcohol since.”

“Yeah,” Darcey said. He watched Jordan a moment longer, then finally turned to look at the ceiling. “I’m pretty sure all of my worst decisions were made when I was drunk. You probably don’t need to abstain completely…”

Jordan held up a hand to interrupt his sentence. “No, I do.” He chuckled dryly. “I don’t know if you’ve gathered, Darcey, but my emotions can get really volatile and I don’t need anything in my system that could lead to them getting out of control.”

Darcey hummed softly in response. For a long while, the two lay in silence, side by side.

Then Jordan curled his arm up, his hand at his shoulder, and hesitantly, questioningly brushed his knuckles against Darcey’s. He turned back again. For a moment, neither of them spoke, and then Darcey’s hand wrapped gently around Jordan’s wrist, his thumb running up and down over the sharp bone, tracing the line of the curling tendrils tattooed up his lower arm. Then he kissed Jordan’s wrist, soft and hot and damp, and suddenly Jordan could barely breathe and he was so dizzy and it was like he was fifteen years old and about to kiss that girl in his third period math class for the first time, fluttery and nervous and excited and a little faint. But it was also different. Something a little deeper. Hotter. More primal. Jordan wanted him, badly, but after what he’d done earlier, he was so afraid to ask.

All he managed was a shaky, breathless, “Darcey?”

“You’re gorgeous, Jordan,” Darcey whispered. Jordan’s fingers spasmed when Darcey dragged his teeth over the soft skin of his wrist, light, tingly, like sparks going off in his veins and fingertips. His breath caught. Darcey still wanted him, even after –

He turned his gaze up to meet Jordan’s eyes, golden fingers on a brightly painted wrist. “You okay?” he murmured. Jordan’s eyes were wide, dilated, his lips slightly parted and his fingers trembling. Darcey loosened his grip, and when his fingertips brushed against the heel of Jordan’s hand, it jerked slightly.

Jordan nodded.

“Do you want to keep going?”
“Oh, god yes.”

“You control the pace,” Darcey whispered. “If you want clothes to come off, you take them off.” His breath was hot and wet against Jordan’s sensitive skin.

“Jesus, Darcey.” Jordan’s breath was thick and heavy in his throat as he rolled back over, kneeling over him and pulling his shirt over his head. His face was hot with hormones and nerves and when he undid his binder, the rip of the Velcro broke the silence. By the time he pulled off his undershirt, he was breathing much too fast. His gaze was locked carefully on Darcey’s jawline, deliberately avoiding his eyes. Jordan jumped when Darcey’s thumb touched his cheek, so gentle, and Darcey guided his head up so their eyes could meet. Jordan was expecting judgment, maybe even disgust, like always. But there was none. Only understanding.

“It’s,” he started, but his voice caught. He paused to breathe, in, out. “It’s been a while. A really, really long while. So, sorry if I’m a little jumpy to start.”

“It’s fine,” Darcey said. The right side of his mouth curled up into a smile. “It’s been a long time for me, too. So I might be a little clumsy. And, it’s, uh, also my first time with a guy, so. Be patient, I guess?” An awkward lilt in his voice turned it into a question.

Jordan smiled. Even like this, even shirtless, Darcey recognized him for who he was. Even as his body lied right in front of him and said he was someone else.

“Are you for real?” Jordan asked softly. Darcey chuckled and sat up, rearranging Jordan on his lap. He leaned in and gently, almost hesitantly, pressed his mouth against Jordan’s, and when their lips touched, Jordan pulled him closer, deepening the kiss, hot and rough. This time, Darcey didn’t hesitate to kiss back.

When Darcey leaned into him, kissing and licking and nipping at his throat, Jordan shuddered, his hands scrambling over Darcey’s back and up the back of his neck. Jordan’s breathing sped up and he sighed softly when Darcey’s hands ran over his stomach again. When his thumb ran just below Jordan’s left breast – he hated even thinking about it like that, but oh, it did feel really, really good – he shuddered again. Thankfully Darcey was holding him up, because even though he wasn’t standing, Jordan was afraid he might fall otherwise.

“It’s okay,” Jordan whispered, trying to soothe Darcey’s hesitance. “As long as you’re really gentle. And don’t squeeze, that really grosses me out.”

Darcey smiled into his neck and nodded, sliding his hand up and when his rough fingers ran over Jordan’s nipple, the smaller man let out a strangled gasp. A shot of heat ran straight down to his toes and back up again. Oh, oh, he’d forgotten how good that felt. His chest had made him so dysphoric for so long he’d forgotten there was this one good thing about it, too.

“Really?” Darcey whispered, but it wasn’t judgmental, it wasn’t mocking, it was almost… wonder, like Darcey couldn’t believe a simple touch like that could melt Jordan’s mind and make him forget what words were.

“Shut up,” Jordan whispered back, but there was laughter in his voice and he was smiling. His words were slurred and breathy. Darcey laughed against his neck and dragged his teeth over Jordan’s throat and oh god it was like sparks along his skin, it was so good. Jordan’s fingers curled into Darcey’s neck. His hair was much too short to grab onto but Jordan tried to soak in every detail with his touch and then his hands spasmed and he almost had to ask, holy shit, what are hands? because suddenly Darcey’s mouth was on his collar bone and sliding down his chest and oh god he was going to –
And when he did, his tongue and lips were so hot, so wet, so absolutely perfect that for that moment, Jordan was totally okay with his body because how could it be wrong when it made him feel so amazing? And when Darcey did... something with his tongue, Jordan didn’t even know what, it sent sparks down his torso and straight between his legs and his feet spasmed and his toes literally curled. He squeaked out a strangled, “Jesus, Darcey.” He wanted to look down to see Darcey kissing him, licking him, touching him, but he didn’t, because he knew he would see his chest and it would remind him. So he kept his eyes closed and titled his head back and somewhere in the fog of pleasure a thought surfaced, fragmented but important –

*Touch him touch him make him yours, even if only for now, make him remember you.*

Jordan shimmied out of Darcey’s grasp and pinned him to the bed. He’d meant to pin Darcey’s hand by the wrist but their fingers curled together instead. It hadn’t been what he’d been planning but oh, there was something so intimate about it. Darcey’s other hand rested on Jordan’s hip, thumb teasing just at the crease between his hip and his thigh, just enough pressure to remind Jordan that he was still there. They were chest to chest, pressed so close, and Darcey seemed to be into biting so Jordan dragged his teeth down the side of his neck and Darcey groaned softly, arching into him, his fingers twitching and oh yes, this was exactly what Jordan had needed, he wanted more of that right now. He trailed his hand down Darcey’s arm as he crawled down the bigger man’s torso, the hard muscle underneath his palm was so hot, the slight flex of Darcey’s muscle when he clenched his hand into a fist was so subtle but so... everything. Jordan needed a way to have all of him at once, to kiss and lick and bite and touch every inch of him right now.

Jordan paused at Darcey’s chest, biting and sucking below the collarbone. Jordan got so lost in the beautiful noises Darcey was making that he nearly started to leave a mark, but he caught himself, sat up, and asked, “Are hickeys okay with you?”

“Yeah.” It came out in a breathless sigh and Jordan ducked his head back down, nipping and biting that same spot again. He might never see Darcey again. Jordan wanted Darcey to remember him, even if just for the next week or so. He wanted Darcey to look in the mirror and see his face. And Darcey’s staggered breathing and moaning told Jordan he had no complaints.

Jordan continued moving down Darcey’s chest, pausing to lick his left nipple, but he just sighed softly, so Jordan moved on. He wanted to find every place that would make Darcey writhe and moan and gasp and oh, god, if he could make Darcey scream. He wanted to find every soft and sensitive spot that would make Darcey think only of him.

And then, suddenly, Darcey’s body twisted and his muscles spasmed and his hand tightened on Jordan’s back when Jordan reached his stomach and oh, he hadn’t even touched anything yet, all he’d done was breathe on him. He smiled into Darcey’s skin, hot and a little damp with sweat, and slowly dragged his tongue across the hard expanse of muscle. Darcey’s soft groans suddenly became strangled gasps; the subtle twitch of his muscle a harsh, jumping spasm; the slight tightening of fingers on his back, a hand gripping tightly to his hair. *Oh god, oh yes, more more more.*

Jordan trailed his mouth over Darcey’s stomach, teeth and tongue and lips, using every trick he’d ever learned. This was why he’d learned them, all leading up to this point, to this man writhing underneath him and when through his desperate, wordless noises, Jordan heard, “Fuck, Jordan, please,” he had to, he scrambled back up Darcey’s body and kissed him hard. Darcey nipped at his bottom lip and slid his tongue against Jordan’s and yes yes yes Jordan may have also liked women, but men were always the best, best kissers. Darcey might have been the best of them all.

Jordan pulled away for only long enough to say, “Pants off, now,” before diving back into him again, breathing his air and tasting his skin and trying to soak and drink all of him in. It was awkward, but Darcey managed to slide out of his jeans without breaking the kiss.
Oh, god, he would be wearing boxer briefs.

Jordan could feel the heat of him even through his jeans. He scrambled back for a moment to kick his own pants off, leaving his boxers on. He crawled back on top of Darcey, kissing his way up the taller man’s stomach and torso as he did. Darcey arched into him again and when he did, his erection pressed into Jordan’s thigh and he saw stars. He didn’t know how they were going to do this, but right then, he didn’t care. He leaned in for Darcey’s neck again, but Darcey pressed his palm into Jordan’s shoulder and gently pushed him back.

“I just want to make sure we’re on the same page,” Darcey said. “What exactly is happening, here?”

Jordan furrowed his eyebrows, not understanding the question. “We’re… about to sleep with each other?” he said, now unsure.

“No, I mean,” Darcey said, “like, how? What kind of sex? I just, I just don’t want to go for one thing and have it end up being something you don’t want. Or vice versa.”

“You are… really, really blunt,” Jordan said, but he was grinning brightly. “Well, let’s see, I have three toys of varying sizes. One of them vibrates. I have a fuck ton of condoms, we don’t even need to worry about that…” He paused, then realized what he didn’t have and his smile dropped.

“Fuck,” he whispered.

“What’s wrong?” Darcey asked. His hands were trembling.

“I don’t have any lube,” Jordan whined, dropping his head to Darcey’s shoulder. But he was laughing, too, because it was ridiculous. “Everything is closed. Nothing even remotely near me sells it, anyway. Fuck. Fuck!”

Darcey laughed, the first time Jordan had heard him really, honestly laugh, and Jordan sat up, mouth twisted, not sure if it was frowning or smiling. The taller man wrapped his arms around Jordan and pulled him in close, laughing into his shoulder.

“Rude,” Jordan hissed, but he wasn’t angry.

“Sorry,” Darcey said. “Sorry. Your face then was just… really hilarious. It’s okay. We’ll just do something else.”

“So, I guess that leaves us with hands and mouths, then?” Jordan said, which was fine with him. Even though he’d wanted to try it, he’d never had any type of penetrative sex before, and the idea was actually really scary, too. Maybe this was better.

“Okay,” Darcey said. When there was laughter in his voice it was the most beautiful thing Jordan had ever heard. “We’ll work with it.”

Jordan sat up again so they could better see each other’s faces and Darcey said, a little hesitantly, “Are you, um, okay with oral?”

Jordan shrugged. He’d done it for women. It couldn’t be that different for a guy. “Sure,” he said. “Doesn’t bother me.” Darcey’s eyebrows furrowed and suddenly Jordan was a little unsure.

“No, I mean, are you okay with me doing it on you?”

Every muscle in Jordan’s body tensed. “I’m… not sure,” he murmured honestly. “I’ve, uh, never
had anyone do that before. I… think it would be all right? As long as you follow the ‘no vagina’ rule.”

Darcey gently rested his hand on top of Jordan’s.

_God, how does a guy like this even exist?_  

“How many partners have you had?” he asked gently.

“Wow.” Jordan pursed his lips. “You’re a really good moment ruiner.”

“Sorry.” Darcey’s smile turned a little embarrassed and he averted his eyes.

“I mean, I guess it’s a legitimate question,” Jordan said softly. “It’s just… not usually one people ask in the middle of sexing each other up.”

They paused. Jordan held up three fingers.

“Three,” he whispered. “So, not many. I just, um, was more on the giving side and less on the getting. I was… basically just a way to get them off, I guess. I never got much back. They were all kind of assholes in that respect.” It sounded so disgusting and awful when he said it like that, but it was true. He’d never been forced into anything, and at the time, he’d been fine with it. While it was happening, he’d never felt like he was being used. But when he thought back on it, that was what it was. And Darcey was just lying there, listening, and Jordan still couldn’t read his face and it made him so angry, not Darcey, but the fact that it happened at all, and he opened his mouth to say he didn’t know what but Darcey cut him off when he said,

“Well, if you’re willing to let me, I really want to change that.”

Jordan didn’t understand how he could go from so angry and scared to so elated in such a short time, even with his volatile emotions. Nobody else had ever been able to do this to him.

A smile split across Jordan’s face and he laughed. He brought the back of his hand to his forehead and said, “Oh, Mr. Darcey, catch me, I’m swooning.” Darcey laughed and wrapped his arms around Jordan’s back, big callused hands just below his shoulders. He spun the both of them so he was on top and Jordan was lying back and oh, this was new. This was new and Jordan really, _really_ liked it. His muscles hummed and vibrated with excitement and nerves as Darcey’s body pressed down on his, the bigger man’s hands holding his wrists down on the bed, the heat of his skin above and the chill of the sheets below. Jordan grinned and Darcey smiled back and when Darcey lowered his head, Jordan tilted his to the side, baring his neck. Even using his teeth, Darcey toed the line between gentle and rough. Jordan arched into him and stretched his arms further over his head, spreading his body out as if to soak Darcey in. He was so warm everywhere Darcey’s skin touched his. When he started to crawl down Jordan’s body, the smaller man’s breath caught. His skin sparked everywhere Darcey’s lips touched as Darcey kissed down, down, lower, lower, over his chest, to his stomach, down to the waistline of his boxers and then Darcey stayed there. Jordan whined in frustration and rolled his hips up because he couldn’t remember words right then and hopefully his body could tell Darcey exactly what he wanted because Jordan wanted him so, _so_ badly right now, he _needed_ him, he was about to lose his mind if he couldn’t have him.

Somewhere in the haze, Jordan remembered what Darcey said; if he wanted his clothes to come off, he had to take them off. So Jordan wormed his arms underneath Darcey to reach his boxers and shove them down his legs. They were at his knees when he froze in terror. This was it, this was where Darcey would say something awful and leave and –
And he didn’t. Instead, he licked the curve of Jordan’s hip and it was so hot and so wet and Jordan’s eyes rolled back and his head fell as his breath caught and suddenly everything was hot and cold at the same time. He was so turned on it was almost painful, a weird, prickling pressure between his legs, and he knew, he knew if only Darcey would touch him it would stop.

Jordan jammed his hands against his mouth when Darcey’s tongue touched him for the first time, completely unprepared for the heat and the wetness and the pressure, trying to muffle the almost scream in his throat. His normally expansive vocabulary left him and all he could think was oh god it feels so good, so, so good. His toes curled and his knees jerked up and he whimpered and whined and didn’t have it in him to be embarrassed by all the noise he was making. It just felt like heat, overwhelming, hot and curling and writhing in his stomach and the back of his thighs.

“God, Darcey,” he managed. “Fuck, I –” And then Darcey did something with his tongue and oh, god, what are words? All Jordan could manage was a deep, guttural moan in the back of his throat and who even cared about being quiet anymore, he needed to touch Darcey, so he stopped trying to muffle himself and grabbed desperately at the back of the other man’s head and shoulders, fingers curling and grasping. Jordan was vaguely aware in the back of his head that he shouldn’t force Darcey down onto him so he tried not to push, tried to keep his hips still, but then suddenly Darcey wasn’t just licking, but sucking, too, and oh god oh god it was a completely different type of pressure but it felt just as good, if not better. Jordan’s hips jerked up and his toes curled in the sheets and he managed to fumble out a strangled, “Shit, I’m sorry,” but Darcey just paused to look up and smile and then licked him again while he was looking into Jordan’s eyes. Oh god oh god that was the hottest thing Jordan had ever seen.

Jordan groaned softly and his head fell back and suddenly a chill, deep and rough and suddenly heat again. He arched into Darcey, hard. His head rolled to the side and his hands scrambled over the sheets trying to find something to hold onto, beside him, over his head, to ground him back down, but he couldn’t and maybe he didn’t even want to.

His feet splayed out and his knees buckled when Darcey paused for breath and god, yes, yes, “There,” he gasped. “Oh, god, Darcey, yes, please, oh, fuck,” and he choked slightly on the air in his throat and even as his eyes closed they rolled back, back, and sparks crackled across his thighs and through his stomach and he didn’t know how he knew but he was close, so close to… something, but he just needed a little more, almost there.

“Harder,” he gasped. It turned into a half whine when Darcey did just as Jordan asked and yes, and then the sparks snapped through his whole body, down his spine, behind his eyes. A bright flash shot through his mind, sending everything blank, no thoughts, no worries, only the pressure of Darcey’s mouth and the bigger man’s hands on his hips.

When Jordan finally thought to open his eyes, his breathing was heavy, his hands were trembling, and Darcey was leaning over him on his elbows looking at him like he was the most perfect thing, and all of it almost made Jordan want to cry. His body spasmed a little when he flexed his feet and he laughed, tapping his fingers and flexing his toes and wrinkling his nose. Each movement sent another tiny shimmer of pleasure and joy fluttering through his muscles. Darcey smiled, wide enough to finally show his teeth, and he laughed a little, too, gently bumping his forehead against Jordan’s and it was so adorable Jordan could barely handle it. He started to lift his hand to touch Darcey’s face but his limbs were so heavy, like liquid gold, so warm and fluid and he managed to bring his hand halfway up before he had to drop it back to the bed again.

“You okay there?” Darcey’s voice was so soft, so gentle. Oh, god, don’t do it, Jordan. Don’t fall in love with him, too.

Maybe just for tonight. Just tonight, it would be okay.
“Yeah,” Jordan murmured. His tongue was so heavy his words came out slurred. He managed to bring his hand to his face and grinned so wide it hurt his cheeks. “Fuck me,” he whispered, because it was the only thing he could think of to say.

“Again?”

Jordan lowered his hand to see a grin on Darcey’s face, one eyebrow raised. He grinned back.

“God, yes,” Jordan sighed, stretching out Darcey, pushing his palms out over his head. Another shimmer sang through his body at the movement. “Over and over. As many times as you want.”

Darcey laughed brightly, deep and warm and wonderful.

Finally, Jordan was able to bring his hand to Darcey’s cheek. It was a little wet. Jordan wrinkled his nose and Darcey took his wrist and pulled it away again.

“Guess I got pretty excited,” Jordan laughed.

“I’m going to go wash my face,” Darcey replied, but there was no annoyance or disgust in his voice, just amusement.

 Damn, he seems pleased with himself.

Jordan wanted to whimper in disappointment when Darcey moved away, but he held it back. As he left the room, Jordan called after him, “Bathroom is just to the left. When you come back, stop in the living room and grab some condoms out of the candy dish.”

If Darcey gave a reply, it wasn’t a verbal one. Jordan closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and held it, stretching every muscle out as tight as he could before letting everything go all at once and sinking back into the sheets. He half-rolled, half-plopped himself over, leaving his arm hanging off the bed as he felt around for his shirt without turning his head to actually look. That was way too much effort. He found his binder, his boxers, Darcey’s pants, everything but his actual shirt, and oh, there it was. He picked it up and rolled onto his back but didn’t sit up to put it on yet. He’d get there.

The bed shifted when Darcey sat down beside him and Jordan pawed out, trying to find the other man with his hand. Turning his head was still too much work. Eventually he found hot skin and sharp bone – Darcey’s knee – and patted twice. “Don’t worry,” he reassured the older man. “I’ve got you. I just need to find my limbs first.”

“Take your time,” Darcey laughed. The bed shifted again and ah, there was the comforting weight of his arms, the warmth of his skin. Jordan could easily get addicted to it. Darcey gently kissed Jordan’s jaw just below his ear and Jordan hummed softly, curling his toes in again to give himself another one of those delicious shimmers.

“God, Darcey,” he murmured, finally opening his eyes and turning his head to look at the older man. “How are you even real?”

Darcey chuckled and looked away. His face flushed and oh god that is so cute! Jordan rolled over, gently pushing him back onto the bed, shirt forgotten. He glanced up at the bedside table to be sure he had condoms at the ready because he didn’t want to have to stop once he’d started.

The mark he’d left on Darcey’s chest had blossomed, dark red and deep purple. Even though he’d said hickeys were okay, Jordan still did it somewhere Darcey could cover it because he was pretty sure the older man wasn’t out yet. But they both knew, and that was good enough. He dipped his head down, running his tongue along the mark and kissing it a few times before trailing back to
Darcey’s stomach again. Jordan was still wobbly on his knees and his hands were still shaky but he didn’t want to wait anymore. He was so, so ready.

“Jordan?” Darcey’s voice caught when the smaller man nipped at his side and he groaned. His muscles tensed beneath Jordan’s mouth.

“Yeah?” Jordan looked up, his cheek pressed against Darcey’s stomach.

“Just, same page thing again,” he said. His breathing was ragged. His hands were shaking again. *Is he afraid of me?* “I thought we weren’t—”

“No,” Jordan said, a little too firmly. “No, we’re not. Hands and mouths. That hasn’t changed.”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” Darcey’s adam’s apple bobbed slightly when he swallowed. He nodded his head toward the night table. “So they’re for…?” He trailed off.

“No,” Jordan said, wagging his finger playfully. “And easier cleanup. And also I don’t really know if it’s possible to get pregnant if I’ve been on hormones this long, but I’m not about to risk having some parasite latched onto my uterus for nine months. Ever.”

Darcey laughed, and Jordan’s shoulders relaxed. He grinned.

“Soon enough I’ll be able to get it taken out, but until then, any time you get off, condoms. No exceptions.” He paused when he realized what he’d said. This was supposed to be a one night stand and he was getting much, much too attached.

But if Darcey noticed the implication of his wording, he didn’t say anything, just reached down to run his fingers through Jordan’s hair. “That’s more than fair,” he said. “Whatever you want.” His fingers shivered in Jordan’s hair and Jordan rested his hand on top of them, his face still pressed into Darcey’s stomach.

“Are you okay?” Jordan asked. “You’re shaking.”

“Yeah,” Darcey said. “It’s not you. It’s just a tremor I’ve had for a really long time.”

Jordan pushed himself up on his elbows, curling his hand around Darcey’s and bringing the bigger man’s palm to his lips. The muscles twitched slightly and Jordan kissed his wrist and paused there to feel Darcey’s pulse under his mouth. Something about that was really, really sexy and intimate and suddenly all Jordan wanted was to kiss him again. He glanced up to see Darcey watching him closely. Darcey’s hazel eyes were almost green in the soft light of the room and the blue shadows from the scarf draped over the lamp softened the hard line of his jaw and the sharpness of his nose. Jordan slowly crawled back up, pressing their chests together as he leaned down to kiss him. Darcey parted his lips and Jordan sank into him, tongues and lips and at one point an accidental knock of teeth but it was okay because Darcey still wound his hands into Jordan’s hair and held him close as they kissed.

*I am so, so stupid,* Jordan thought.

*I don’t care.*

For a long, wonderful while, they stayed like that, soft kisses and touches, almost innocent compared to everything up to that point. But eventually it was Jordan who broke the kiss to nip at Darcey’s ear, down his neck, and the taller man groaned again, but it was different this time, in a way Jordan couldn’t place. His nails were short but Darcey’s breath still caught when Jordan dragged them down his sides and slowly kissed his way down the bigger man’s stomach again. But instead of stopping there, Jordan kept moving down over the waistline of Darcey’s boxer
briefs and pressed his tongue against the crease of his thigh, just holding, breathing there, mostly to catch his breath and steel his nerves but also because Darcey’s hand had tensed in his hair and the other man’s breathing had sped up and he was almost panting and it was because of him. He took a deep breath through his nose and sat back just enough to balance so he could pull off Darcey’s boxers.

*He is fucking unreal. Even his dick is gorgeous.* How was something like this even possible?

Jordan paused a moment, searching Darcey’s body, trying to figure out what exactly he was going to do from there because he wanted it to be good and he wanted it to be right.

*Okay. It’s not rocket science.* He’d just… do what he’d want Darcey to do to him. He’d start with his hands. That would be safe.

Darcey opened his eyes, taking an unsteady breath before asking, “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Jordan whispered. “God, Darcey, you just… you have no idea how gorgeous you are, do you?”

Darcey’s golden brown skin flushed again and he rubbed his knuckles against his chin as he looked away. Jordan smiled. “Seriously. You’re the hottest guy I’ve ever seen. *And,*” he continued, “you are also seriously the best, most generous partner I’ve ever had.”

Darcey smiled, embarrassed.

“Awkward question I should have asked at the beginning time,” Jordan said.

“You okay?” Darcey asked.

“Mm-hm. I just need to know, have you been tested recently?”

“Not recently, but I haven’t slept with anyone since the last time I did, and I’m clean.”

Jordan grinned wolfishly. He started to ease his way back down Darcey’s body, keeping their eyes locked. “Okay. I want you to talk to me, okay? Tell me what you want so I can make it happen.”

Darcey’s breath hitched and he nodded. Jordan smiled, then dropped his eyes back to Darcey’s stomach. He curled his hands in Jordan’s hair, who paused once more to say, “And don’t pull my hair. I’m pretty sure it’d freak me out.”

“Okay,” he said, loosening his fingers. “What about the –”

“Getting there,” Jordan said. “Give it a little time. Don’t worry. I told you. I’ve got you.”

Jordan kneeled between Darcey’s legs, taking in the sight of the older man splayed out underneath him, unashamed and awesome in the original sense of the word. He dragged his hands over Darcey’s chest, down his stomach, occasionally baring nails, sometimes flattening his hands to drag his palms over, sometimes curling them so it was just the tips of his fingers. Down Darcey’s stomach, up and down his thighs. Even though Jordan wanted to jump right in, he knew this was better. He wasn’t going to rush it. He wanted it to last.

When he wrapped his fingers around Darcey, he expected the hardness and the heat. What he didn’t expect was how soft the skin was. Suddenly Darcey’s hands were on Jordan’s sides, fingers tight, awkward because of the angle of his arms. When Jordan brushed his fingers up, down, up again, Darcey moaned, a real, honest moan deep from his chest. His head tilted back, mouth
slightly open, just enough to barely show his teeth and the pink flash of tongue as the need tightened in his muscles. When Jordan gripped a little firmer and slid his hand back up, Darcey’s grip tightened and his chest heaved.

Jordan slid his knees back and leaned down and paused again before hesitantly licking the tip. Darcey bucked up into him. Jordan grabbed his thighs and pinned him back down to the bed and Darcey groaned, his hands scrambling over Jordan’s shoulders, nails scratching and fingers digging and Jordan moaned a little, too. Oh god apparently that was a very good thing to do because Darcey made an amazing sound Jordan couldn’t describe and he wanted to hear it again. He lowered himself a little more and hummed again, deep from his throat. He was a little worried it would taste different, but it just tasted like skin, but so, so much softer than Darcey’s neck or his chest or even his lips.

“Oh, fuck, Jordan,” Darcey groaned. His words were shaky and his hands tight on Jordan’s shoulders. Darcey’s breath came in heavy pants and Jordan could feel the other man’s pulse on his tongue. Jordan wanted all of him but he knew there was no way his throat could take it, so instead he wrapped his left hand around the base and used his right to keep himself balanced.

Jordan swallowed, more out of reflex than for anything else, and when the muscles of his throat clenched and his tongue flexed, Darcey arched into him, his groans getting louder and a little less controlled. Jordan would have smiled if he could, but instead he did it again, again, again, and each time Darcey got a little louder and his hands got a little tighter and his breathing got a little more uneven. Jordan paused.

When he pulled back, Darcey actually whined, thin and high-pitched and frustrated. Jordan carefully nipped at his thigh.

“Just a second,” he said, leaning over him so he could grab one of the condoms. When he did, Darcey grabbed him and pulled him in, crushing their lips together. Jordan squeaked, pulling away a little in panic and he said quickly, “But I was just –”

“Don’t care.” The gasp was almost a growl. Darcey’s hands were tight around his arms and then suddenly their lips were sliding together, a little wet because Jordan didn’t even get the chance to wipe his chin before Darcey grabbed him. Oh, god, that was how good he thought Jordan was. That was how much Darcey liked what he was doing. Him.

Jordan didn’t bother with more foreplay this time. He leaned back on his knees, shaking hands struggling with the package for a moment, but then, yes, there it was, it was open, and with the ease that came from watching too many educational videos to try to make up for a lack of high school sex ed, he slipped the condom on and leaned back to take Darcey into his mouth again and –

Oh, god, he thought this would make it easier, but it was so much more unpleasant. The taste was awful and the texture was weird and Darcey wasn’t as responsive anymore, which meant he probably couldn’t feel as much. This sucked! Jordan paused and sat back up, his eyes darting around the room. What else could he do? How could he fix this? His eyes dropped on the pile of clothes near the foot of the bed. It wasn’t ideal, but –

“I will be right back,” he murmured against Darcey’s ear. He nipped softly and slid just out of the taller man’s reach. Darcey pawed out at him and groaned, “No, Jordan, wait.” Jordan pulled on his boxers, then his jeans. It wasn’t the best, but he was confident enough it would keep him safe. Darcey would be all the way up by his face, anyway. Then Jordan crawled back on top of him, trailing his hand down Darcey’s chest as he said, “Sorry about that. This condom thing is just really shitty but I’ve got to make sure. If you’re clean I guess we don’t really need it for this.”
“Don’t apologize.” Darcey slowly opened his eyes. He licked his bottom lip and Jordan grinned, hand still slowly trailing down, down, and oh, no, Darcey was only half-hard now. *Unacceptable.* Jordan would have to do something about that.

Darcey’s eyes rolled back and closed when Jordan wrapped his hand around him, then quickly pulled the condom off and threw it in the general direction of the trash can to deal with later. When he replaced his hand, Darcey’s chest heaved and shuddered. He was still slick from Jordan’s mouth. His skin burned against the smaller man’s palm. When Jordan slid his hand up, he skimmed his thumb over the head tor the first time and Darcey let out a strangled moan and covered his face with one hand. Jordan had to balance on his knees and use Darcey’s leg for support to do it without stopping, but he managed to take the older man’s hand and move it away. Darcey opened his eyes, heavy lidded and dilated, his face flushed, but not with embarrassment this time.

“Don’t hide,” Jordan whispered. “I want to see you.”

He kept his eyes locked on Darcey’s for as long as possible as he moved back down his body. “Tell me when you’re close,” he said. Darcey nodded and Jordan lowered his head so he could take Darcey back into his mouth, a little further this time. He knew he couldn’t bring him all the way in, but Jordan wanted to try anyway. He used every part of his mouth and throat he could, used his fingers in every way he knew how, tonguing and licking and swallowing and sucking and stroking, following Darcey’s movements, his moans and the hitches of his breath, listening and feeling as closely as he could for even the most subtle cues Darcey might give him.

When Darcey’s hands tangled in his hair, Jordan had a brief moment of almost panic, but Darcey didn’t pull, didn’t try to move him. He left Jordan to continue at his own pace and it was actually really, really nice. Darcey’s hands made Jordan feel safe. They were big and rough and callused but his touch was still so gentle when he wanted it to be. Jordan sighed through his nose, whimpered back in his throat. Darcey groaned again, louder.

Darcey had been fighting to keep his hips in place since the first time he accidentally bucked into Jordan’s mouth. The muscles of his thighs and legs were taut, and Jordan thought, if he were to touch them right now, he could feel them shivering.

Suddenly, through the strangled gasps, Jordan heard shaky words; “Jordan, I’m –” and then he clenched his throat and hummed again and Darcey paused, his air coming in panting breaths as he tried to find words. Yes, yes yes yes yes, god, Jordan loved it when Darcey’s voice was broken and shaky like this and it was because of him, his mouth, his hands. Darcey twitched in his mouth and the bigger man’s hands spasmed. “Jordan, I’m gonna –”

Jordan moved back just long enough to say, “I know. Do it. I want you to come so hard you can’t walk for a week.”

“But –” The rest of Darcey’s sentence disappeared in a strangled half-moan, half-scream when Jordan took him as far back as he could. It was only to the back of his tongue, but with the help of his fingers, soon he was working Darcey’s entire length at once. He just barely got a moment’s warning when Darcey choked out, “Jordan, I’m –” and he stiffened even harder and twitched once, twice, and then suddenly he was coming in Jordan’s mouth hard and oh shit, there’s so much of it!

Jordan tried to swallow but some still pooled in the corner of his mouth. He had *not* been expecting that much, not by a long shot. He felt a little dirty, but in the best way. Mostly, he felt awesome. He sat and leaned back. Darcey’s smile was wide and relaxed and his lips were just parted, arms and legs trembling. When he opened his eyes and they caught the few white lines on Jordan’s face, his expression turned from relaxation to horror.
“Oh, Jesus, Jordan, I’m so sorry, I –”

“I’m not,” Jordan grinned. He crawled up Darcey’s torso to rest his forehead against the taller man’s. His eyes were screwed closed. “Hey,” Jordan said, gently bumping their noses together. Darcey opened his eyes again. Suddenly, Jordan could read every emotion in them; his nervousness and anxiety, the trust Darcey obviously had in him, even if it was only temporary, something else he wasn’t familiar with, heavy and dark. “Don’t apologize,” he murmured. “You didn’t do anything wrong. It was hot as hell.” He pressed his fingers against his face and grimaced when he pulled away and the come and saliva followed them in strings. “I, uh, better wash this off before it dries, though.” He slid off the bed, dropping his jeans on the way. Boxers were enough.

When he got to the bathroom he started some cold water running and scrubbed his face off. He grabbed a box of tissues on his way out. When he sat down on the bed, he glanced around until he caught a small triangle of white under Darcey’s shoulder and he pulled out his shirt, pulling it on as Darcey turned to look at him. Sex was one thing, but Jordan wasn’t about to have his chest hanging out any other time.

“Here,” he said softly, sliding the tissue box over to bump against Darcey’s hand. “So you can clean up.”

Darcey smiled, tired but happy, and turned away for a moment to do just that. He rolled back to Jordan, splaying his arm out and gesturing the smaller man closer.

“Damn,” Jordan said, “Darcey, you’re like a furnace!” With Darcey next to him, Jordan would never need a blanket again. Cuddling with him in the winter would be nothing short of amazing.

Darcey chuckled and carefully brushed Jordan’s hair out of his eyes. He glanced down at Jordan’s body and his smile dropped a little, unsure.

“So, um, we’re doing clothes?”

Jordan laughed. “I’m doing clothes. You don’t have to unless you want to. I’d actually prefer you didn’t.”

Darcey chuckled, gently resting his hand on Jordan’s back. His skin was so soft, so hot, it almost felt like sunburn beneath his fingers.

“I just…” Jordan’s throat tightened. Darcey looked up, concerned at the hesitation in his voice. “My body’s disgusting, Darcey. I don’t want to parade it around.” He sighed heavily and collapsed down beside the taller man, rubbing at his face to try to clear all of his feelings away. His feelings about his body. His feelings about Darcey. No more feelings. Even the good ones were just too exhausting.

Darcey gently slid his hand out from underneath Jordan and took his hand. His fingers trembled but his grip was firm, and his voice was soft and serious when he said, “Jordan.” Jordan was ready for almost anything Darcey might say, but what he wasn’t ready for was, “That’s complete bullshit.”

Jordan paused, taken so off guard he wasn’t sure whether he should take it as a compliment or an insult. He swallowed, hard, as his eyes darted over Darcey’s face. Darcey’s hazel eyes were soft, gentle, more green than brown and absolutely beautiful.

“Jordan, you are fucking gorgeous,” he whispered. He gently kissed Jordan’s palm before letting his hand go and running his knuckles down the side of the shorter man’s face. “Perfect cheekbones. Strong jaw. Beautiful eyes.” He trailed his hand down farther, to Jordan’s arms.
“You have just the right amount of muscle for your body type. And I meant what I said earlier. Your tattoos are incredible.” And he stayed over Jordan’s shirt, but slid his hand over his stomach. “And you can’t tell me you don’t see this awesome muscle definition every time you look in the mirror.”

Jordan’s face was dark and his ears and the back of his neck burned with embarrassment. Nobody had ever told him anything like that before. But they weren’t empty words. Darcey meant it. Jordan got the feeling that Darcey didn’t say things unless he meant them. “I –” he started, but his voice caught and he had to stop so he wouldn’t cry.

“So you’re stuck with a few things you don’t like that men typically don’t have to deal with,” Darcey continued. “That is pretty shitty, but that doesn’t mean for a second that you are wrong or less. That doesn’t make you ugly.” Darcey paused, hesitating. Would kissing his forehead be too intimate? But Jordan’s wide brown eyes were so vulnerable, so lost, and it was the only way Darcey could think of to comfort him. So he pressed his lips to Jordan’s forehead, lingering and taking in the warmth of his skin and the way his wild hair tickled his nose. “How many times have I told you how gorgeous you are tonight?” he asked. Jordan chuckled, squeezing his eyes closed. “It’s true, Jordan. It’s one of the truest things I’ve ever said.”

With every word, Jordan’s chest grew a little tighter, the prickle in the back of his throat grew sharper, the heat at the back of his neck burned hotter and he had to turn away as Darcey finished so he couldn’t see the tears prickling in the bottoms of his eyes. No, you are not going to cry just because some guy said something nice about you. Even if it was the kindest, most sincere compliment he’d ever received, even if he’d never, never had a lover treat him this kindly and like this much of a person before. Even then.

Jordan knew he shouldn’t – this was a one night stand and Darcey was going to leave in the morning – but he needed to, he needed the comfort and the physical closeness and so he rolled over on top of Darcey and buried his face in the taller man’s throat. He steeled himself, ready for Darcey to push him away, but he didn’t. Darcey wrapped his arms tightly around him, instead, pulling him close, one hand close and comforting on his lower back and the other gently running through his hair.

“Hey,” Darcey whispered. No, fuck, now Jordan’s shoulders were shaking and he wasn’t crying, not exactly, but it was still close enough to be absolutely humiliating.

“It’s okay.”

Jordan’s breath came in unsteady, shaky half-gasps, sometimes too shallow and sometimes too deep but with no pattern to help him make sense of it. At least his eyes were still dry.

“It’s okay,” Darcey repeated. “There’s nothing wrong with it if you want to cry. Or if you don’t.”

There was a long stretch of silence as Jordan breathed into Darcey’s neck, his eyes watery and itchy from tears that were welling but wouldn’t fall.

“We just met, like, four hours ago,” Jordan finally said. The words were heavy and sticky in his throat. “I’m not about to let you see me cry.” But he couldn’t help but lean closer when Darcey tightened his arms, and Jordan half laughed, half sobbed when he said,

“We also spent about three of those hours having sex and talking about really personal shit. I think we’re there.”

Jordan took in a heaving, shaky breath, and when Darcey said, “I won’t tell anyone, if that’s what you’re scared of. I’m not one of those assholes who goes around bragging about this kind of
stuff,” Jordan lost it, he couldn’t anymore, and he cried, not the dry sobs he was used to when he was upset, but tears streaming down his cheeks and blurring his vision and nose running and hiccuppings and everything. He couldn’t stop, even though he tried to get himself under control, he couldn’t stop because he was so relieved that he’d finally found someone who understood and because he was going to lose him in the morning, but Darcey didn’t know that and Jordan didn’t want him to. He let Darcey think it was because he was so overwhelmed, which was true, but in a different way.

Jordan was going to lose the love of his life because he was just a one night stand.

Jordan’s cry was hard and messy, but it didn’t last long. Soon, he was calm again, and he dried his face on the bottom of his shirt and sat up, leaning back on Darcey’s upper legs.

“I’m so sorry about that,” he whispered. His gaze was cast down, trained on the curve of Darcey’s neck into his shoulder. He was still a little lightheaded and his vision a little blurry, but he could breathe again, and there were no more tears. Darcey probably thought he was an unstable mess, but if that was the case, the taller man didn’t say anything or try to push him away.

“It’s okay,” Darcey said. “It had been a really long time for both of us and I can… I can imagine that it might be overwhelming for you, considering –”

“Yeah,” Jordan laughed. He scrubbed at his eyes with the heel of his hand. “I mean, it was good,” he added quickly. “Goddamn it was good.”

Darcey smiled, showing just the barest hint of teeth.

“But it’s been over a year and I wasn’t…” Jordan paused and sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Darcey said. “Please don’t feel like you have to apologize to me.”

Although he wouldn’t say so out loud – this was Jordan’s time, and he didn’t need to make it about himself – Darcey was actually jealous that Jordan could be so in-tune with his emotions. He’d needed a good cry for years, but something always blocked it from coming out. Jordan rolled off of him, curling up beside him on the left side of the bed, and whispered, “Do you want to stay the night?”

Darcey rolled over onto his side so he could better see Jordan’s downturned face.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’d like that.”

Jordan’s eyes turned up and he offered a tentative smile.

“We could watch a movie on my laptop?”

Darcey smiled back. “Sure.”

They’d barely gotten ten minutes into the movie before Jordan was fast asleep on Darcey’s chest, exhausted from his rollercoaster of emotions over the night. Darcey pulled him a little closer, and followed him into sleep not long after.
Sorry it's a day late, health issues galore, blah blah blah. From now on just assume if you don't see the new update on Thursday (which I will still try for), it will be up Friday or Saturday. Thank you for your patience and understanding.

Darcey opened his eyes to a dark, unfamiliar room with an unfamiliar weight on his arm and soft music playing. He jerked up and the person beside him groaned softly. His eyes darted around the room as he tried to figure out where he was, and then his eyes fell on the laptop, then Jordan, asleep beside him, and his shoulders relaxed.

He yawned and stretched out his arms. They’d both fallen asleep in their boxers, and Jordan in an undershirt. Jordan was sprawled out on the bed haphazardly, legs in a tangle of blankets. His mouth was slightly open and his breathing slow and even, his hair an absolute mess around his face. Darcey smiled and brushed a stray curl out of his eyes, hooking it back behind his ear.

The blinds were pulled, only the faint yellow light of the streetlamp outside trying to sneak through the spaces. Darcey slid out of the bed and Jordan whined quietly in protest. He reached out to where Darcey had just been sitting, his hand lazily sliding across the sheets. Darcey pulled the blanket around Jordan’s shoulders and he curled into himself, knuckles brushing against slightly parted lips.

He was beautiful. Darcey had been afraid to say so last night because of the word’s feminine connotations, but he was. Jordan was beautiful.

In the past, this was when Darcey would have slipped back into his clothes, quietly headed out the door, and slid the key back underneath and been on his way. He’d never even left a note. But he couldn’t do that, this time. He pulled on his jeans and stood, pulling out his phone to check the time. Just past 4:00 a.m. He intended to leave the room – for what, he wasn’t sure, maybe to get a glass of water or use the washroom – but, instead, he stood there, watching the rise and fall of Jordan’s shoulders. His tattooed wrist just peeked out from underneath the blanket.

Darcey pulled on his undershirt and folded up his t-shirt, slipping it underneath the bedside table. Then he did the same with Jordan’s clothes, placing them beside his so they wouldn’t get stepped on when he woke up. He didn’t know whether binders were expensive, but he didn’t want it to get damaged, just in case.

He quietly left the room, slowly walking around the apartment to get a feel for where everything was. The living room was mostly clean but a little disorganized, lived-in but cared for. The bookshelves were organized Tetris style, books placed by size wherever they fit best. A few vegetarian cooking magazines lay scattered across the coffee table, a few DVDs on top of the TV and shoes left about haphazardly. Darcey made his way to the kitchen.

It was immaculate. It could have been part of a completely different home. Everything was perfectly organized and clean, not a spot anywhere and nothing out of place. Labels on every cabinet and drawer stated what was inside, and the refrigerator and freezer both had whiteboards on them with lists of, presumably, the food they held. Pots and pans hung on hooks, covering the small far wall. It was small, even for an apartment, but Jordan had clearly done everything he
could to maximize the space. He’d said he worked in a coffee shop last night, but had he been a cook at some point, too? This was the kind of thing one learned in a professional kitchen. Darcey had been thinking of making breakfast, but if Jordan was a professional, he didn’t want to fall flat and embarrass himself.

But he was a good cook. He couldn’t imagine Jordan caring if it was pretty as long as it tasted good, and that was something Darcey could do. So he pulled out a griddle pan, cutting board, box grater, and knife and got to work.

He started his prep – grating potatoes and onions, chopping vegetables, cracking eggs – and let his mind wander as the familiar movements happened through his hands.

Darcey didn’t know if he could leave this as just a one-night stand. Before last night, he’d never laughed during sex. It had almost been a chore. But all the time they talked before, falling asleep to the movie after, it had been exactly what he’d needed for so long. Jordan was funny, he was sincere, he was so full of compassion and joy and honesty, and was wholly, unashamedly himself. There was no façade and it was clear the idea of putting up a mask had never crossed his mind, even if it did lead to some briefly uncomfortable moments. He was exactly what Darcey wanted in a… he didn’t like the term ‘boyfriend’. It seemed juvenile. Partner? Darcey didn’t think he wanted anything serious right now, but if he did, Jordan was the kind of person he’d have wanted it with.

It was completely unfair to both of them that they’d met now, when Darcey was at his most damaged, his most fragile, completely unable to even take care of himself much less someone else. He just knew, with more certainty than he’d ever known anything, that he needed Jordan, somehow, to be in his life in some way. He couldn’t just walk away.

“Come on, Walker,” he whispered to himself. The potatoes were done and he scooped them into a piece of cheesecloth to squeeze out the water as the griddle heated. “You can do this. You did two fucking tours of the Middle East and came out to some of the most homophobic men in your unit. You can tell a one night stand you want to see him again.”

He sprayed down the griddle and dropped a small piece of potato on it to check the temperature. It sizzled. He spread the rest of the potato and onion mixture over one half of the griddle, sprinkling it with salt and pepper – Jordan had white pepper! Nice.

While that was working, Darcey got together the things he needed for the eggs. Usually he’d cook an omelet in a nonstick pan but Jordan didn’t seem to have one small enough, just a ten-inch and the nonstick griddle. It would be freeform, then. All that mattered was that it tasted good, and Darcey knew it would.

He nearly dropped the spatula when Jordan stepped up behind him and asked incredulously, “What are you doing?”

Darcey turned around, taking the spatula in his other hand so he could watch Jordan while he continued to cook. “Breakfast?” he asked, a little nervously. “Sorry I just kind of… took over. If you want I can replace everything I used. Or at least pay for it. I just thought –” He paused when he realized he was rambling and a wide, bright smile crossed Jordan’s face. His whole body perked and his eyes lit up, even though he was still rubbing the sleep away with the heel of his hand.

“Thank you,” he said softly. Darcey shrugged.

“No, really, Darcey. Thank you. I was… I was not expecting this. I was…” he paused and his smile turned a little watery. He’d been expecting Darcey to be gone when he woke up. “I wasn’t expecting anything like this. Thank you. Thank you so, so much.”
“You’re welcome.” Darcey’s voice was soft, his neck warm with happy embarrassment. Jordan grinned and picked up the marker on top of the refrigerator white board.

“So, what are you making us?”

“Hash browns,” Darcey started. Jordan’s eyes jumped up to the freezer and his eyes scanned the board. No hash browns on his inventory list. He turned to Darcey.

“From where?”

“From scratch,” he grinned. “So… I used about half of your potatoes and an onion.”

“Wow.” Jordan’s laugh was incredulous, his eyes wide. Hash browns from scratch weren’t hard, but they were time consuming and they were work. And Darcey was doing it for breakfast. He gestured toward the other side of the griddle. “And the eggs?”

“Five of them,” Darcey said. “Omelets.”

“Omelets!” Jordan laughed. He pressed the back of his wrist to his forehead and caught the side of the counter as if he were about to faint. “Someone bring me my fainting couch, I fear I may fall into a swoon!”

Darcey laughed brightly and caught his hip, pulling him back up. Jordan chuckled and knocked his hip against Darcey’s, gently, intimately. Everything about the situation was so domestic. Making breakfast with his lover in their pajamas.

“Mushrooms and spinach, too,” Darcey finished. Jordan wiggled out of his grasp to update his list. “And… and I will pay for this if –”

Jordan waved his concern away. “Don’t even worry about it. You cook me food like this when you come over and you can use whatever ingredients you want.” He loosely wrapped his arm around Darcey’s waist, hooking his thumb in the belt loop at the back of his jeans. The gesture was so familiar and comforting that it was almost second nature when Darcey wrapped his arm back around Jordan’s shoulders.

Dawn slowly crept in through the windows as Jordan and Darcey sat across from each other at the tiny kitchen table with a homemade breakfast and iced coffee. The two sat suspended in a quiet, wonderful bubble that the rest of the world could never penetrate, and Jordan wished it could stay that way forever.

They ate together in comfortable conversation, talking about the same things they had last night, but in more detail. Film, video games, what was happening locally in music and art. Jordan stayed far away from politics, because everything was almost picturesque in its loveliness and he was afraid if he even tried to touch it, it would all fall apart.

Even though they’d just met, the comfortableness they had with each other made him feel like they’d known each other forever.

While they talked, while they ate, both of them skirted around the Well, what now? hanging in the air. When Darcey walked out that door, was he going to go forever? Jordan knew he could track him down through Iffy. That wasn’t the problem. The question was: would Darcey want him to?

Both spent the entire breakfast waiting for the other to bring it up, and finally, Jordan couldn’t take
the tension anymore. The next time an opportune moment of silence came up, he spoke.

“Look.” He put his fork down next to his plate a little harder than he’d meant to. The unexpected force made him jump. Darcey looked up from his plate, his fork still in his mouth from the bite he’d just taken. His eyebrows were raised. “I’m not going to bullshit with you,” Jordan continued. “Last night was...” he gestured vaguely as he tried to find the right word, “fucking... phenomenal. I really, really want to see you again.”

Darcey put his fork down and a small smile tugged at his mouth. He started to speak, but Jordan interrupted.

“And if you don’t want to see me, that sucks, but I knew going into this that it was probably going to be a one night stand.” Darcey opened his mouth to speak, but Jordan’s wouldn’t stop. “Just, don’t fuck with me, okay? If you don’t want to see me again, don’t say you’re going to call. Don’t lead me on. Just tell me you’re going on your way and I’m going on mine and we’ll –”

“Jordan,” Darcey interrupted gently. Jordan’s mouth snapped closed and he turned his eyes down so Darcey wouldn’t see how wide and vulnerable they were.

“Yeah?”

“I really want to see you again, too. I don’t...” He paused, looking down at his hands, tight on the table. He licked his lips. He could do this. “I don’t want to lie to you; I’m not sure if I can deal with a relationship right now. I’m not sure if I even want one. I just came out of a really fucked up situation. But I do know I want to see you again, too.”

Jordan sighed, soft and slow, and Darcey looked up. Jordan was smiling. Darcey’s shoulders relaxed.

“That’s okay,” Jordan said softly. “To be honest, I’m not really relationship material. I’d be a shitty boyfriend.” It hurt to admit it, but he knew it was true. All of his previous partners had been terrible, but he’d been just as bad a partner, too. If Darcey was being honest with him, he deserved the same back. There was a beat of silence, then Jordan continued. “I’ve been told I’m a pretty awesome regular friend, though. So it’s unorthodox, but... maybe we can just stick with that for now.”

Darcey raised an eyebrow, but he was smiling. “Friends with benefits?”

Jordan shrugged. “I prefer ‘friends who fuck occasionally.’ Not a fan of euphemisms. Let’s just be honest.”

Darcey laughed, a deep, honest sound that Jordan could probably fall in love with if he heard it often enough. If he was being honest with himself, he already had.

“I really like your straightforwardness,” Darcey grinned.

“I do my best,” Jordan laughed.

“Really, though.” Darcey’s smile softened and he took a sip of his coffee. “I love that you just say things how they are and don’t fuck around.”

Jordan’s smile faltered, but just for a moment. But Darcey saw the flicker of uncertainty in his eyes, and said, “I mean it. Even last night, when you came out to me. It was a little awkward for a while afterward, but... I just, I like that you’re so honest and say exactly what you expect. A lot of people beat around the bush and then get upset when you don’t know what the hell they’re talking about. I like that you don’t. It’s refreshing.”
Jordan’s smile softened. “Thanks, Darcey,” he whispered. “Not a lot of people feel that way. Most people think I need to tone it down.”

“Fuck those people,” Darcey said. Jordan laughed brightly. By then they had finished eating and he stood with his plate and grabbed Darcey’s too, then took them to the sink along with their silverware and his coffee cup. He started going through the motions of scraping and rinsing. The action was automatic, so he didn’t think much about the fact that Darcey was still there.

Darcey stood back a few steps, leaning against the entryway into the kitchen, watching as Jordan cleaned the plates. The way he moved was so sure that if not for last night, Darcey would have thought Jordan felt nothing but love for and confidence in his body. Jordan hummed softly to himself, bobbing his head to a rhythm Darcey couldn’t hear, lost in his little half-dance and his thoughts.

At least, until Darcey pressed his chest firmly against the Jordan’s back and rested his hands on the shorter man’s hips, nudging them into the sink and pinning him in place. The movement was tentative and his hold easy to break, but Jordan shivered and pressed back into him. He was exactly where he wanted to be.

“You don’t have to do that,” Darcey said, his voice soft against Jordan’s ear, his cheek. Jordan’s knees went weak and his ears and the back of his neck started overheating. Darcey’s voice, oh, god, that deep voice that seeped right through his skin and curled around his muscles, was right in his ear, just a little scratchy, like Darcey’s stubble on his skin.

“I made the mess,” Darcey said. He was at Jordan’s neck, now, his lips dragging across the sensitive skin with each word. “I can clean it up before I go.” Then, a hot kiss with just the barest touch of tongue.

When Darcey’s teeth scraped across the back of his neck, Jordan dropped the plate in the sink and grabbed the counter’s edge to steady himself. His whole body trembled and he struggled to keep his eyes open and there was definitely some kind of vulgar sound building in the back of his throat. When he closed his eyes, images of last night crashed over him in a heavy wave, and he was lost. He was lost and gone and didn’t care.

“Are you okay?” Darcey asked. But there was a laugh in his voice. He knew the answer.

“So okay,” Jordan squeaked. “So okay, you don’t even know.”

He turned in Darcey’s arms, the small of his back just curving over the counter’s edge as Darcey leaned into him, his hands loosely pinning Jordan’s to the countertop. The dishtowel in Jordan’s left hand slipped from his fingers to the floor as they curled over the granite, and he wasn’t sure who leaned in first but suddenly they were kissing each other, gently at first, lips moving slowly, softly. The slight loss of control sang sharply through Jordan’s head in a quick, dizzy wave and oh god, he was insane, because he’d known Darcey less than twenty-four hours and yet still felt so safe, still trusted Darcey to take care of him and respect his boundaries. Even though Jordan met him through someone he trusted, he’d never felt so comfortable with someone so fast before. The desperation burned low over the base of his spine, so slow and so hot and he lurched forward and Darcey pressed closer, curling his hands around Jordan’s face, fingers tangled in his hair. Jordan melted at the touch and he leaned closer, too, trying to kiss Darcey harder, deeper. He just needed Darcey, all of him, and he needed Darcey to need him, too.

Suddenly he realized that they’d skipped a very important part of their earlier conversation.

Jordan pulled back, whispering quickly, “Wait. Wait, wait.”
Darcey jerked his hands away and pulled back like he’d been burned, and it left Jordan’s skin so cold.

“What’s wrong—”

“Nothing,” Jordan said quickly, taking Darcey’s hands in his own. “Nothing’s wrong. I just, I need to ask you something. I need to clear something up.”

The stress melted out of Darcey’s muscles and he nodded, sliding his hands out of Jordan’s to rest on the smaller man’s hips. “Yeah,” he said. “Of course.”

“Are.” Jordan paused and reminded himself to breathe. His head spun and all he wanted was to tackle Darcey back into his bed, or maybe even just the floor, but this was important. “Are we going to be exclusive?”

He’d never wanted anyone to tell him ‘yes’ in his entire life more than he did right then. Darcey had no reason to, and if his answer was no, Jordan would be disappointed, but it was his right. But whether they would be exclusive or open, Jordan needed to know where they stood, here, from the beginning.

It was selfish to want Darcey all to himself. Open relationships had never bothered him before, but the idea of sharing Darcey made him burn with an intensity that almost terrified him. So did the idea of being with anyone else.

“God yes,” Darcey said, and before Jordan’s mouth could turn into a smile, Darcey pulled the smaller man against him, kissing him hard and rough. Their lips working together was all Jordan needed. He didn’t even need air. This was it. This was perfection.

Jordan was almost crawling on Darcey, now, hands scrambling over his shoulders, standing on his toes and pressing his chest against the taller man’s, and Darcey pulled him close, hooking his hands under Jordan’s knees, and no way, he’s big but he couldn’t lift a fully grown man—

But Darcey did and Jordan laughed into his mouth, arms wrapped loosely around Darcey’s neck and hands pressed flat against his shoulder blades.

“Jesus, Darcey,” Jordan laughed. “I figured you were strong, but… goddamn.”

Darcey smiled, just barely showing a hint of teeth as he continued to step backward.

But then Darcey’s foot slid across the floor and Jordan’s stomach dropped and they were falling instead—

Jordan’s eyes screwed closed, bracing for impact, but Darcey took the brunt of the force, leaving Jordan shaken, but unhurt. He opened his eyes. Darcey grimaced, pushing himself up with his right hand—uninjured, there was no pain, thank god—and flexing his left wrist a bit behind Jordan’s back. He couldn’t feel anything, not that he’d expected to, and Jordan crawled off of him so he could sit all the way up.

That wasn’t an accident, Jordan realized. Darcey hit the floor so he wouldn’t have to.

“What—” Jordan began.

“I slipped on something,” Darcey said. They both scooted across the tile to lean against the cabinets under the sink. “Sorry. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” Jordan reassured him. His hands quickly but carefully slid over Darcey’s
chest, his arms and shoulders, making sure everything was in tact. “Are you okay?”

Darcey flexed his left hand again, rolled his wrist, and gently squeezed up and down his wrist and arm, his palm, each of his fingers. No swelling. Nothing moved in a way it shouldn’t. It didn’t seem like anything had torn and nothing had broken. “Yeah,” he finally said. He rolled his left shoulder and stretched out his arm again. “I might end up with a few bruises, but nothing serious.”

“I’m so sorry, Darcey,” Jordan said. Darcey looked up at him, confusion written all over his face.

“Why?”

“I…” Jordan paused. “That you…” He gestured vaguely, a little wildly, trying to figure out a way to say I’m sorry you got hurt for me without sounding so conceited about it.

Darcey’s hands were shakier than usual when he took Jordan’s. “Don’t apologize,” he said. “I knew what I was doing and it wasn’t your fault.”

Jordan’s eyes darted over Darcey’s face for a few moments before a smile finally crossed his, and he relaxed. He squeezed Darcey’s hands once and glanced around to see what caused the slip in the first place and –

It was the dishtowel he’d dropped. He turned back to Darcey with another, sheepish, “I’m sorry.”

“Why now?” A small smile tugged at Darcey’s mouth.

“It was my fault,” Jordan said, stretching out to grab the towel. He pushed himself to his knees and slid it up onto the counter so it wouldn’t happen again.

“Did you put the towel there?”

“A little bit?”

Darcey gave Jordan a Look.

“I mean, I had a really sexy man pinning me to the counter and getting all up in my business and I got a little distracted from doing the dishes, and I dropped it. Accidentally.” He bit his lip when it looked like Darcey was going to frown, but instead he burst into bright, honest laughter, and Jordan couldn’t help but start laughing, too. They leaned into each other, and Darcey pressed his cheek to the top of Jordan’s head, the soft huff of his breath playing against the curls as he laughed.

After a few minutes of laughter, Jordan finally cleared his throat and composed himself. “Come on,” he said as he stood. “I need to finish the dishes.” He held out his hand for Darcey. Darcey wrapped his hand around Jordan’s forearm and Jordan tugged him up as he started to stand, but then, Darcey hissed a quiet, sharp, pained curse and froze. Jordan stilled and his smile faded.

“Darcey?”

“Pretty sure I did something to my tailbone,” he said through gritted teeth. A sharp pain shot up from the base of his spine and into his lower back, clawed tendrils digging in everywhere.

“Nothing’s broken but I must have knocked it up pretty bad.” The first thing they did when teaching hand to hand combat was teach the students how to fall, and Darcey had known what he was doing, but apparently it was hard to do it right when he was holding another fully grown man.

“Here, um,” Jordan said. “Can you get up?”
“Yeah,” Darcey said, and he used the leverage of his hand on the countertop to lurch to his feet. “Oh, fuck,” he groaned.

“Come to the couch with me,” Jordan said gently, curling his arm around Darcey’s back and draping the taller man’s arm over his shoulder. Darcey leaned against him for a moment, then straightened again. Jordan was so much shorter; the strain it put on his lower back to lean that low just made it worse.

“Okay.”

“It’s the softest thing I own,” Jordan said as they shuffled into the living room. “Even softer than the bed.”

Darcey chuckled. “I’m not sure I believe you.”

“You’ll see, doubtful one.”

They finally got to the couch and Jordan eased Darcey down into the cushions. Darcey sank in with a sigh. Jordan had been right. “If I lived here alone, I’d never bother with the bed. I’d just sleep out here.”

“Sometimes I do,” Jordan chuckled. “Do you want your coffee? I can get it for you. Do you need any ibuprofen or anything?”

“Yes and yes,” Darcey said. “Please.” He shifted his weight to the right to ease some of the pressure as Jordan walked back toward the kitchen. There was some clattering and clinking and then a cold cup against the back of Darcey’s hands. He opened his eyes.

“It was getting a little warm so I added some more ice,” Jordan smiled. Darcey smiled back and took the cup as Jordan dropped two pills in his other hand. Darcey swallowed them as Jordan sat down beside him, slowly, careful not to jar the couch too much.

“This coffee is really good, by the way,” Darcey said. It was stupid, but he didn’t like the silence. “You have really good taste.”

Jordan looked up from his knees with a half-grin. “Thanks,” he said. “I am a barista after all. I’ve picked up a few tricks in my two years there.”

Darcey took another sip. It was deep and smooth and dark and even a little rich. “What did you do before that?”

Jordan shrugged. “My work record before that is really spotty. I was in fast food and retail for a while. I had a lot of trouble finding steady work before I ended up at CounterCulture. I was about to lose my apartment when they called me back and hired me on as a baker’s assistant.”

“I thought you said you were a barista?”

“I’m both,” Jordan said. “They put me where they need me. But they take good care of their employees. It’s a good place. I always wanted to work in a kitchen, too, so everything turned up golden.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Jordan smiled. He looked down at his hands, sprawled lazily between his knees. “I can’t think of a better place for me to be, really,” he said. “I’ve always… a lot of people think it’s weird to love food so much, so I don’t talk about it, really. But it just… it’s… it’s just basic. It’s our
physical makeup, or memories, our experiences with our friends. It’s so integral you don’t really notice it until it’s gone. And I love being able to bring that to people every night, especially since so many of them have to spend that time alone.”

“I’ve always wanted to work on the line,” Darcey said. “I know exactly what you mean.”

“So you’re a fire and knives guy,” Jordan chuckled.

“Yeah, I guess.” Darcey’s skin was warm, even though the air conditioner was on fairly high and the coffee in his hands was still cold, but this time, the heat wasn’t so intense. It was just a soft, relaxed warmth that crept from his skin into his muscles, gentle, almost soothing.

“So why don’t you?” Jordan asked. His soft eyes darted over Darcey’s face expectantly. Darcey froze. He looked down.

“I got sidetracked for a while,” he said softly. It wasn’t a lie, but that didn’t help ease the uncomfortable crawl of guilt gnawing at the back of his neck. Jordan wasn’t his partner, but Darcey liked to think that they were friends and he deserved to know. The Army was too big a part of Darcey’s life for too long to erase, and even though things went bad near the end, he didn’t want to. He didn’t have any regrets.

He would tell Jordan. Just not yet. Everything was still too raw. Jordan would understand when he explained, right?

“I want to go to culinary school,” Darcey said. “But I don’t have the money right now.”

“You don’t need school,” Jordan said. He gently nudged Darcey’s knee with the back of his wrist. “Get in as a prep cook and work your way up. Start as a dishwasher, even. You don’t need school to be successful. They just want you to think you do.” He paused. “I could probably put in a good word for you at The Tree House. They’re kind of a similar deal to where I work, another 24-hour coffee shop.” He raised an eyebrow and shot Darcey a playful grin. “I wouldn't even hold it against you, working for my competition, as long as you make out with me enough.”

Darcey’s laugh was quiet, but happy. Jordan leaned into him, resting his head on the bigger man’s shoulder. When he pressed his lips to the curve of Darcey’s neck, it was chaste, soft, and the most comforting thing in the world.

“How’s your back?” Jordan asked, using Darcey’s knee for leverage as he stood up.

“Oh, whatever shall I do?”

“Okay,” he said, giving it a slow, experimental twist. No twinges, no pulling. “But my tailbone still aches like a motherfucker,” he added. He twisted back and flinched when his hip shifted. The pain wasn’t sharp anymore, only a dull throbbing, now. Easier to deal with but still unpleasant to drive on.

“I guess that means you’ll have to hang out here a little longer.” Jordan smiled mischievously. “Oh, whatever shall I do?”

“You’ll figure out something.” A playful half-grin pulled at Darcey’s mouth. “I have faith.”

“Hmm.” Jordan pursed his lips and crossed his arms, looking around the living room as he tapped his foot. Darcey smiled at the Don’t Panic tattoo on his left, in the font of The Hitchhiker’s Guide BBC miniseries he watched with his parents as a child. Darcey was about to ask if he had a copy they could watch, but Jordan spoke first.

“Well, most of my stuff is in storage, but I have my Super Nintendo hooked up and I have a few games. I don’t know if it’s usable, it’s so dusty, but do you want to try?”
“Sure,” Darcey grinned. “What games do you have?”

“I only have, like, four,” Jordan said. He paused, glancing up at the ceiling. “Five. Six?” He laughed a little and shook his head. “Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition,” he chuckled under his breath.

Darcey frowned. “What was that?”

Jordan looked up. “Hm?” Had he said something offensive? Why was Darcey frowning?

“I couldn’t hear you. What did you say?”


Darcey’s smile came back. “Their chief weapon is surprise.”

“And an almost fanatical devotion to the Pope,” Jordan continued. “But, I have six games.” He counted them off on his fingers as he listed them. “Starfox, Mario Kart, Mario 3, Donkey Kong 1 and 2, and one about a duck that is also a ninja that I can’t remember the name of.”

“I remember Donkey Kong!” Darcey laughed. “When it first came out I was so impressed by the graphics. I thought it was so cutting edge. I guess at the time it was.”

"I know, right?" Jordan laughed as he pulled the console out of its storage space below the TV. He held it up at an angle, squinting at it carefully as he said, “And remember Pokémon Stadium? When you could plug in your Gameboy and see all your team in 3D graphics, it was like, holy shit, it’s like they’re really there.”

“And the minigames?" Darcey said. “I loved the sushi one.”

Jordan paused, wiping a smear of dust off the console, ash grey on his black sleeve. “No way, the memory one, for sure. I’m going to have to get my old consoles back. I think I have that game locked up with them.” He placed the console down on the floor and grabbed a large zip bag from behind its storage spot. He pulled another, smaller one out, then the Donkey Kong game from that. Carefully, he looked it over. It looked clean, but he blew out the base to be sure. Darcey flinched.

“Don’t do that,” he said quickly. Jordan looked up as he snapped the cartridge into place.

“What?”

“Don’t blow in it. It can damage it.”

Jordan looked back at the console disbelievingly. “Really?” he murmured. “Huh.” He looked back up at Darcey with a lopsided grin. “That’s how casual a gamer I am. Don’t even know basic care.”

Darcey chuckled and Jordan turned away again. He turned on the TV and fiddled with the channels. “Now, for the moment of truth,” he said, and he Both men held their breath while they waited, like young children turning on a brand new system for the very first time. That same excitement, the slight trepidation, the expectancy danced in their eyes as they watched the blue screen. It wobbled. Darcey’s smile started to fall and Jordan’s shoulders slumped, but then it wobbled again and the menu screen started to boot up. A wide grin spread across Darcey’s face.
“Yes!” Jordan shouted. He jumped up and bounced back to the couch with the controllers. He went through the menu with the Player 1 controller, going through old saved games, but he didn’t start one.

Darcey looked over at Jordan after an extended moment of quiet.

“What do you want to start a new game together?” he asked, almost timidly. “I know I sound like a second grader, but I think it could be fun?”

“Yeah,” Darcey smiled. Jordan hummed softly and pressed his side into the bigger man’s.

Jordan took Donkey and Darcey took Diddy. They’d only gotten halfway through the first level when Jordan died and Darcey took over, taking them through the rest of the first, and the second, and the third, before intentionally getting hit by an alligator so Jordan could have another turn. With each player change they slowly leaned into and over and onto each other until, about halfway through the second world, Jordan’s head was in Darcey’s lap while he played the controller sideways with Darcey’s arm draped over his side and his foot propped up on the coffee table.

The next level started but Jordan didn’t move. He nudged the controller toward Darcey. “You can take mine,” he said softly. He trailed off in a yawn and covered his face with his hand.

“What do you work tonight?” Darcey dropped his voice to match Jordan’s and ran his fingers through Jordan’s soft, thick hair.

“Mm-hm,” Jordan murmured. Darcey glanced around the living room for a clock and caught one on the VCR on top of the TV. Just past 11:00 a.m.

“I can get going if you need me to,” Darcey offered. Jordan rolled closer, burying his face in Darcey’s stomach and wrapping his arm around his back. He murmured something Darcey couldn’t hear, but based on his movements, Darcey was pretty sure it was an invitation to stay.

Brett didn’t need his car back by any specific time, and Darcey didn’t have anything else to do. Even if he did, he’d probably try to find an excuse to push it off so he could stay, anyway. His parents had invited him over for dinner, but Jordan would be awake and Darcey on his way out by then.

Then, Jordan groaned softly. Darcey looked down. Jordan’s face was twisted into an annoyed, frustrated frown.

“You okay?”

Jordan nodded and pushed himself up. “Don’t look,” he said softly. Darcey was about to ask, *look at what?*, but Jordan gestured at the TV and repeated, “TV. Please. Don’t look.”

Darcey did as Jordan asked.

When Jordan was sure Darcey was paying attention to the game and not to him, he pulled his t-shirt up around his neck and undid his binder. The sharp rip of Velcro was deafening over the soft music of the game, but Darcey didn’t budge and didn’t look away from the TV. Jordan let out a soft sigh and took in a deep, deep breath, pushing it out all the way into his lungs and his ribcage and stretching out his chest. Then he pulled his t-shirt back down over his undershirt and draped the binder over the back of the couch. While Jordan didn’t notice his binder much anymore, he did notice the difference the moment he took it off.

Jordan plopped his head back in Darcey’s lap with a whispered, “Thanks,” that Darcey didn’t
hear. Then, louder, “Sorry about that. If I fall asleep with my binder on I won’t be able to breathe when I wake up. Did it before. Never again.”

“It’s okay,” Darcey said.

Jordan’s breathing started to slow and even out and his fingers twitched slightly against Darcey’s back, loosely gripping his shirt. Darcey wasn’t sure what to do, if he should do anything at all. He’d never gotten this far into a …relationship? Not really. He’d never gotten past the sex part of a one night stand before. But while it was a new situation, it was also a very nice once.

He brushed one of the many stray ringlets away from Jordan’s eyes. His lips were just slightly parted, his eyes closed, eyelashes resting against his cheek. Darcey gently ran his knuckles across Jordan’s cheek and Jordan smiled. Darcey was struck by how much he wanted to protect Jordan, to take care of him, to make him happy.

It was unorthodox and a little strange, and it wasn’t a situation he ever thought he’d find himself in. But right now, this relationship was exactly what he wanted and needed.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was ten p.m. and ninety-eight degrees outside, but Jordan was pulling on a thin black hoodie, anyway. He pulled the hood up and cinched the strings tight, testing to see how close around his face it went. The fabric just barely brushed his cheeks. It wasn’t tight, but it was good enough. He pulled it away again, readjusting the black bandanna around his neck, and he stuffed a pair of gloves in his back pocket and pulled on a beanie, also all black. He checked his phone: 10:17 p.m. Iffy and Nate would be there any minute.

He pulled on his boots, non-skid and steel toed, on his way out the door, pulling the laces tight to minimize potential slipping. It had been a year since Jordan had gone dumpster diving and if he thought about it too much he started to dwell on how disgusting it was, but if his body was covered to minimize contact, it was easier to ignore. He used to go with Terrence, back when his friend went diving regularly, though more by necessity than by choice. Like clockwork, every Tuesday night they’d hit the Food City dumpsters one by one. Sometimes there wasn’t much, but sometimes they brought home huge hauls of produce and sometimes even boxed things like macaroni and cheese still in the original shipping packaging. The garbage was disgusting but the thrill of the hunt was phenomenal. It was a small act of defiance and revolution, maybe on such a small scale that it didn’t make a difference in the big picture of things. But it would make a huge difference to the hungry people they would serve it to at Iffy and Nate’s Food Not Bombs meeting on Sunday.

Jordan took the stairs two at a time, a small backpack slung over one shoulder in case he found any treasures, and also with a basic first aid kit. Even though they were only hitting grocery store dumpsters, some weird things could end up in with the food and he wanted to be prepared. Terrence had almost taken a boxcutter blade in the foot once. If it had been only half a centimeter to the left, he could have ended up with a two inch cut right in the sole of his foot.

Although nobody was actually injured, Jordan brought a first aid kit with him every trip since.

He stuffed his hands in his hoodie pockets when he reached the sidewalk, glancing around the parking lot for Nate’s car as he bounced a little on his feet. Iffy had said it was a “crappy old white Toyota,” but when Jordan had said that at least it was a car that ran, she conceded and agreed that yeah, he was pretty lucky, especially in a city with such terrible public transportation.

A once over of the parking lot told Jordan that a lot of other people had “crappy old white Toyotas” too. Iffy didn’t give him a license plate, not that he would have remembered it, and he couldn’t go walking through the parking lot peering into windows. A brown Latino guy dressed all in black eyeing a bunch of cars? Jordan wasn’t stupid. He knew people would take one look at his skin, think he was out on a crime spree, and call the police.

So he stayed on the sidewalk, pulling his phone out to dial Iffy’s number. After a couple of rings, she answered.

"Hey!"

“Hey!” Jordan smiled. “Are you here yet? There are a bunch of cars in the parking lot exactly like the one you described.”

"Yeah.” She pulled the word out into three syllables. “I’m not the best at description. But we’re
here. We’re pulling into the parking lot as we speak.”

Then, the hum of an engine, the beginnings of the reflections of headlights, and a white Toyota pulled into the parking lot. Iffy rolled down the passenger’s back window and waved Jordan over. “Other side,” Iffy said. “We have a surprise in the front seat.”

So Jordan stuffed his phone back in his pocket and jogged around, not looking into the seat behind Iffy until he plopped into the car and heard a warm, familiar voice say, “Hey, Jordan!”

Jordan’s looked up. “Justin?”

Justin was sitting in the driver’s seat, dressed much like he was, but without a bandanna. Every inch of his skin was covered in black cloth and his hair was tucked up underneath a beanie.

“I didn’t know you were going to be here!”

“I wasn’t, originally,” Justin laughed. “Vi was supposed to come but she had to duck out at the last minute, and since this one,” he paused to ruffle Iffy’s hair, “doesn’t know sign language yet, I thought I’d tag along so Nate doesn’t have to mess with his tablet or his phone.”

“Oh, cool,” Jordan said.

“I’m learning!” Iffy batted Justin’s hand away. “It’s just taking more time than I’d like. I have got one thing, though.” She flipped him off. Justin burst into loud, bright laughter.

She and Jordan shared a high five. Nate cleared his throat and Iffy’s face sobered.

"Justin’s working lookout tonight,” she said. “Jordan, you and Nate and I will be in the dumpsters. If someone comes by, a cop or whatever, we want a white guy in the car, not one of us.”

Jordan snorted in derision and looked down.

“I know, but we both know it’s true. They’ll probably thing he’s just waiting for his girlfriend or something. It’s one of us? Possible arrest for existing at night while being brown. If we’re lucky.”

"Yeah,” Jordan said. His mouth twisted, but he said nothing more. There was no point in arguing. She was right.

“We don't really have much of a problem with cops on this route, though,” she said.

“Yeah,” Justin continued. “We've been doing this schedule for ten months and we've only seen cops… once?”

“Twice, if you include the time I was there and you weren’t,” Iffy corrected.

“Twice,” Justin repeated. “Oh, that's right. Once they just paused for a second and then moved on and once they didn't even stop. I remember you telling me about that, now. I guess since it's just food they don't really care, even though technically it's illegal. They probably think we're homeless or something and there's so much crime that some college kids picking through trash is pretty low on their list. You just have to be careful in case of asshole cops. Most of them don’t care one way or another, but it’s better to avoid trouble than to go looking for it and having to dig yourself out of a huge pile of shit.”

Jordan laughed brightly and shot Justin a grin.

“We actually have a couple of law students involved in BashBack.” He glanced at Nate and
turned to Iffy. He shifted in his seat. It was like sitting on lumpy concrete. He shot Iffy a look and she returned it with an exaggerated long suffering sigh and a shrug.

“That’s the problem with not knowing sign language,” she said. “Demoted to the uncomfortable backseat.”

Jordan chuckled and continued. “But, anyway, Terrence – I don’t know if you remember him from the protest?”

Iffy frowned in thought and her eyes rolled up.

“Oh, the tall guy you were with that day?” she asked.

“Yeah, that was him,” Jordan said. “He’s just starting his Master’s now. He still has a while to go, but once he gets there, he wants to work almost exclusively with the activist community.”

“Almost?” Justin asked.

“He’s also looking into prison reform.”

“Like, reforming prisoners?” Iffy asked skeptically. She and Nate shared a concerned glance.

“No, like… the prison system. Being an advocate for prisoners and their rights.”

“Oh, okay,” Iffy said. They relaxed.

“I feel like I missed something,” Jordan said. Nate shot Iffy a questioning glance.

“I have a cousin in prison on a bullshit drug charge that he wasn’t even involved in,” she said. “So I have a lot of feelings about the whole deal.”

“Do you want me to get Terrence’s information for you?” Jordan asked. “Maybe he can help?”

Iffy frowned doubtfully, but said, “I’ve got it from when he texted me that one night.” She didn’t elaborate and Jordan was grateful. He didn’t need Nate to know if he didn’t already, and he was so grateful Iffy hadn’t brought it up since their breakfast that Sunday morning so long ago. Especially since everything had been taken care of. There was no more of that weird, awkward jealousy with them anymore. Now it was just the comfortable closeness of good friends, and he didn’t want to risk jeopardizing it.

The car sped up as Justin pulled onto the main road. Nate tapped Iffy’s shoulder and mimed buckling his seatbelt. She buckled hers.

Jordan caught a soft, warm smile directed at Nate. He hadn’t seen it often. It was just Nate’s. Jordan smiled and bit the inside of his lip. He was glad they had each other.

He was glad he had Darcey. Their relationship setup was unorthodox and a little strange, but it was exactly what they both needed.

He pulled out his phone to send a quick text.

Do you want to come over tonight? Not right now; I’m not at home. Maybe around midnight, if you’re up?

Darcey seemed to have a “wake up early, go to bed late” sort of sleep schedule, so it was worth a try. If nothing else, Darcey would get back to him when he woke up in the morning and they’d get together another day.
get together another day. Was he coming off as clingy or needy? Hopefully not. But Jordan was addicted to Darcey, and he wanted so much for Darcey to feel the same way about him. Sometimes the older man was hard to read through text, but when they were together he’d never hinted that he was anything but into Jordan. But Jordan didn’t want to be one of those people. He had no right to be! He wasn’t even Darcey’s boyfriend.

He put his phone on vibrate to be sure he’d know when Darcey responded and slipped it back into his pocket.

Soon, they pulled into the first of three Food City parking lots, planning to hit two Holsum Bakeries along the trip. Neither locked their dumpsters and Food City even had separate ones for vegetable and animal garbage, so as long as they paid attention he didn’t have to worry about getting a foot full of rotten hamburger. Justin pulled the car around the back and put it in idle as he unbuckled his seatbelt and turned to look at Iffy and Nate and Jordan. Iffy shoved a flashlight into Jordan’s hands.

“You know what you’re doing,” Justin said. Iffy and Jordan both gave a thumbs up. Nate turned to Jordan, hands moving fast.

“You’ve been diving before?”

“Oh, yeah,” Jordan said. “Not in a while, but I know what I’m doing.”

“So you know basic safety and stuff.”

He nodded toward the backpack in the middle seat. “Basic first aid kit.”

Justin grinned and Nate gave him a thumbs up.

“Okay!” Iffy said. “Grab your flashlights and let’s go!”

Jordan grinned and did as she said, stuffing it in his empty hoodie pocket and pulling his gloves out. He slipped them on and flexed his fingers, then pulled his bandanna up around his nose. He and Iffy hopped out of the car and followed Justin to the three dumpsters.

“I’ll call you if we need to go,’ Justin stage-whispered. “If I don’t hear from you in thirty seconds, I’ll honk. Then you need to get back. If Nate sees someone, he’ll whistle.”

Jordan and Iffy saluted and Nate nodded.

They started at the dumpster on the far right, which had a stack of empty boxes leaning perilously against it. Jordan used one as a stepstool, and got just a glance of lettuce on the top before it collapsed under his weight. Promising.

He took a step back and used the force of the extra distance to launch himself up, pulling himself up and swinging his leg over. Something squished when he landed – thank goodness for non-skid boots – and he pulled out his flashlight and turned it on just as Iffy landed to his left.

“I’ll call you if we need to go,’ Justin stage-whispered. “If I don’t hear from you in thirty seconds, I’ll honk. Then you need to get back. If Nate sees someone, he’ll whistle.”

Jordan and Iffy saluted and Nate nodded.

There was food everywhere. Iffy turned on her flashlight to make things easier to see, illuminating the produce that had been thrown away earlier that evening. Onions, celery, lettuce, bananas, cabbage, cucumbers, even watermelons. The first dumpster of the night and they’d already hit the jackpot.

Iffy poked her head out over the top to tell Nate to find a perch somewhere right outside as Jordan started sifting through the food on top and discarding anything bad. Nate was already there,
standing on top of a pile of broken down boxes and waiting. Iffy laughed and said, “You are not going to believe the stuff we found in here.”

Nate grinned and gestured for them to start handing it over.

“Crates first,” Jordan said. He tossed a moldy watermelon out of a box of four and filled up the empty space with onions and carrots.

They went through everything as quickly and closely as they could in the dark with just the beam of two flashlights. A spaghetti squash, some cucumbers, a bag of cherries with only a spot or two of mold that could easily be fished out in addition to what they found on the top. There was even some parsley that was only a little soggy. As Jordan dug, his hand hit something solid, and he fished out a shrink wrapped package of six boxes of macaroni and cheese. He handed that over, too.

There were also some berries and a couple of boxes of fresh herbs, but they were beyond saving so they left them behind. The lettuce they originally saw wasn’t rotten, but it was too soggy to be edible, so they left that, too.

Once they were sure they’d gone through everything, Jordan and Iffy launched themselves back over the dumpster wall to help Nate pack everything up in the trunk of the car. They were quick, precise, packing like they were playing Tetris and going for the high score because wasted time could mean a police run-in, which could mean an arrest.

They packed in the last of it and Nate shut the trunk as quietly as he could. The three of them darted back into the car and Jordan pulled off his gloves, then pulled down his bandana as Justin drove off toward the next stop.

“Damn,” Iffy grinned. “And this is only our first stop! It’s been a while since we’ve gotten this lucky.”

The next stop was a bakery outlet, where they found two full trash bags filled with bread, still pristine in its packaging, and all they had to do was haul it out and make space for it. Three more dumpsters and the little group was almost as lucky at two of them, although one of the Food City ones was a big pile of nothing. Still, between the other four, they made out like bandits. Which they sort of were, Jordan thought.

There was so much food they had to make a total of two trips each when they got back to Nate and Justin’s house. Iffy told Jordan to help himself to anything he wanted because it would be impossible to serve as much food as they’d salvaged.

He took two boxes of macaroni and cheese, for lazy days when he worked long hours, a loaf each of cinnamon raisin and sourdough bread, one of the watermelons, three onions, a bunch of celery, and a bag of carrots. Even taking that much barely made a dent, but Jordan didn’t want to be greedy and he could only eat so much before it went bad, even when Darcey came over and his kitchen was feeding two.

They joked and laughed and sang and danced while they picked through and washed everything. Only a minimal amount had to be thrown away. Jordan had a discerning eye and had done well choosing out in the dumpsters. Once the produce was dry, they loaded everything into the fridge in the space Nate had reserved for it and tried to find places to squirrel away everything that wouldn’t fit or was shelf stable. It took almost forty-five minutes in the small, cramped kitchen, and some of it overflowed into boxes in the dining room, but eventually, they did it.

They all washed their hands and Iffy propped hers on her hips, glancing around with a satisfied
“I think you ended up being our good luck charm, Jordan,” she grinned, gently cuffing his shoulder. “We haven't had a haul this good in a really long time. We'll even have stuff left over for the food pantry when we're done with the serve.”

“Do you want to come over tomorrow and help us cook?” Justin asked. “I can give you a ride if you need one.”

Jordan shook his head. “That would be awesome, but I can't. I have to work tomorrow night and I've been shorting myself on sleep as it is. Maybe next time, though.”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “We do this every week. Well, Iffy and Nate do. Vi’s usually with them. Sometimes I'm here, sometimes not.”

Nate slipped his phone out of his pocket and typed something out. He flipped it around so Jordan could see. But we'd love your help any time you can.

Jordan grinned and gave a quick nod.

Okay, I need to take a shower,” Iffy said. “Sorry to cut out of the conversation. Jordan, if you're gone when I get out, I'll see you later, okay?”

“Of course,” Jordan grinned. She held out a fist and he bumped it with his own.

“You'll forgive me for not hugging you this time, I hope.”

Jordan laughed and nodded, and Iffy grinned, grabbing a backpack from beside the couch as she made her way toward the bathroom.

You going to come over and help us with out Renee and Vi’s brunch any time soon? Nate raised an eyebrow expectantly.

“Hopefully.” Jordan grinned. “Not this week. Maybe next? I'll definitely send one of you a text to let you know, but my schedule only comes out one week at a time and it's never the same.”

Nate nodded and grinned. Just let us know. We'd love to have a professional working with us!

Jordan laughed.

Justin yawned and stretched his arms high above his head. Nate chuckled.

“It's getting pretty late for us,” Justin said. “I know you do nights, but my insomnia's been pretty bad recently and I've got a lot to do tomorrow, so I need to try to get some sleep. I think it's time to take you home.” He turned to Nate and asked, “Is Iffy staying the night or does she need a ride, too?”

Nate signed something and Justin nodded.

“Looks like it’s just you and me,” he said.

“I can probably catch a cab, actually, if you're too tired to –”

“No, it’s fine.” Justin smiled. “I'm giving you a ride. It's the least I can do, especially since it's so late.”

The drive was short. Neither Jordan nor Justin spoke much, but it was a comfortable quiet where
they shared the pride in everything they’d accomplished in the past two hours, and that was
enough. Jordan pulled his phone out of his pocket to see that Darcey hadn’t texted him back yet.
He was probably sleeping. Jordan sent one more for the night.

*You’re probably asleep. Sorry, I always forget I’m the one with the weird schedule! Sleep well,
maybe we can get together tomorrow instead.*

Soon they arrived in the parking lot. Jordan left Justin with a wave and a thank you, and he
shouldered his backpack and made his way up the stairs. His phone beeped as he unlocked the
door.

*No, I'm awake. Was just dozing. Midnight's fine.*

Jordan glanced at the time before responding. Only about eleven. Plenty of time to shower and
make himself presentable.

*Awesome! Can't wait <3*

He typed the heart without thinking about it and only realized what he’d done after he hit the send
button. He bashed at the buttons on his phone, panicked, trying to stop it from going through, but
it was too late. It had been sent. *Oh, man, he probably thinks you’re an idiot.* A grown man
sticking an emoticon heart at the end of a text message.

Well. It was done. If Darcey didn’t like it, that was his problem. Jordan was who he was. Darcey
didn’t care about things that were much more important. A little heart wasn’t going to scare him
away.

Jordan let himself inside his apartment and put all of his newly acquired food away before heading
to the bathroom for a marathon shower, where he was going to scrub every inch of himself down
in the hottest water he could and it was going to be *great.*

Chapter End Notes

The time has come for me to start promo-ing my short stories and stuff down here!

Check em out at indecentpause.tumblr.com/ :D
Darcey glanced at his computer. It was only about 11:00, but Brett had fallen asleep an hour ago and Darcey still hadn’t been able to settle down since. His mind was working too hard on things he couldn’t do anything about, like always. Being kicked out of the Army. The nightmares. Going back to school. Getting health insurance. Finding work. Finding his own place. Getting a car. Fixing each one relied on something else that he didn’t have figured out yet, and it all ran around in a chaotic mess he couldn’t get under control.

Here at Brett’s, Darcey had a decent setup of comforters and extra pillows on the floor. He’d slept in worse places. For the most part, he’d been staying with his parents, but Brett crashed before he could drive him home and his cousin needed the car in the morning. It was too far to walk and the buses didn’t run this late.

He sighed and flicked his finger across the laptop trackpad, back and forth, idly moving the cursor around the screen. The fingers of his left hand tapped against the desk. It had been years, but he’d never gotten used to the feeling of not feeling. Sometimes he could sense slight amounts of pressure in his fingertips or on the back of his wrist, but for the most part, his entire lower arm was a dead weight. At least he still had it and it was functional. He could have lost it completely. That didn’t make it any less strange or disconcerting.

His eyes dropped to his hand, shadowy and dark, illuminated only by the light of the computer screen. He paused, turned his hand. His eyes ran over the scars on his wrist and forearm, so faint now that sometimes he thought he was the only one who could still see them. The scars were the only places he still had feeling, and it was only the barest tingle every now and then. He slowly tapped his thumb against each finger. It took longer than it should have and he slipped a few times. He had to start working on his fine motor skills again or he was going to lose them.

How was Campbell doing? Was Doc okay? Where did Boots ever end up? What happened to Robinson?

He glanced back at the clock in the corner of the screen. 2303. They’d ship out tomorrow, probably in the morning. If they had any sense, they’d be sleeping while they were still guaranteed it.

Darcey’s phone was in his pocket, even though he hadn’t gone anywhere. It was habit. He fished it out and flipped it open. He had a new text he didn’t hear come in, but he’d get to it in a minute.

He still knew Campbell’s number by heart. His text was short.

Thank you for trying. Take care of yourself over there.

He sent it off, then searched his contacts for Doc. His was just as simple.

Thanks for everything. You’d better come home.

He’d never known Robinson, and, frankly, was glad of it. Boots would still have access to her phone tomorrow. He’d call her then.

His phone beeped three times in quick but sporadic succession.
The first was Doc.

*You bet your ass I’ll be coming home. You can’t get rid of me that easy. I’m just sorry I couldn’t do more. Good luck, Walker.*

The second was Campbell.

*I’m sorry. I should have kept my mouth shut. I didn’t mean for all of this to happen. You’re a good man and a good soldier. Good luck.*

Darcey’s hand tightened on the phone. He nearly deleted it, but he hesitated. He locked it in, instead.

He wasn’t sure why. Maybe to remind himself that even when people didn’t like each other, they could still take care of one another. Campbell had been the one to tell everyone about him, but Darcey was the one who planted the seed, and if he was being truthful to himself, he’d manipulated his fellow soldier into doing it. Darcey couldn’t in good conscience hold anything against Campbell, because he’d had done exactly what Darcey had wanted.

The other two texts had added themselves to his inbox while he read over the first. They were both from Jordan. The first was from about an hour ago.

*Do you want to come over tonight? Not now; I’m not home, but maybe about midnight?*

He read the other one before replying.

*You’re probably asleep. Sorry, I always forget I’m the one with the weird schedule! Sleep well then, maybe we can get together tomorrow instead.*

Darcey pressed the reply button to open up a new text, and sent back;

*No, I’m awake. Was just dozing. Midnight’s fine.*

Moments later, Jordan replied.

*Awesome! Can’t wait <3*

*A heart? Really?* The corner of Darcey’s mouth pulled up in a small smile.

It had been over a week since he’d gone for a run. Why not in the middle of the night? It was cooler, and he couldn’t take the car. His parents were too far, but Jordan was only three miles away.

He grabbed his backpack and tossed in a change of clothes, then pulled out his phone and sent Jordan another quick text.

*Can I use your shower when I get there?*

Jordan replied almost immediately.

*Holy shit, yes please! Can I join you?*

Darcey smiled again, bigger.

His copy and Brett’s keyrings hung right next to each other, Darcey’s simple and bare next to Brett’s set; cluttered with various keys and keychains. He let himself out and closed and locked the door behind him with the quietest click. When he reached the corner, he paused to orient
himself. He’d been there by car a few times. Things didn’t look that different from the sidewalk.

He started with a quick walk to warm himself up – it had been over a week, after all – and once his legs loosened up and his lungs stretched out, he picked up the pace to a slow jog, then a quick one. He stayed at that pace a while, breathing steady, the beat of his feet on the pavement and the vague feel of his heartbeat in his chest helping him to keep time.

_Just a little faster._

His left foot pushed off just a little harder and then just a little more, and in about five minutes, the runner’s high hit. There, _there_ it was, the rush down his spine and the tingle in the back of his neck and his breathing came harder now but the biggest, happiest grin graced his face, fists loose and arms and legs pumping him forward. He could go on like this _forever_, not racing the wind but _part_ of it and it was _so open_ and _freeing_ and for the first time since he left the Army, _nobody owned him anymore_. His life was _his_. Nobody ran next to him screaming in his ear to go faster or slower or fall back in line. He could go anywhere from here. It might take time, but he could and he _would_ get shit done.

Darcey wasn’t sure when he left so he didn’t know his time, but he arrived at Jordan’s about a quarter to midnight. His breathing came heavy when he knocked on the door, shoulders heaving with the exertion and he was covered in sweat and probably smelled horrible, but when Jordan opened the door, Darcey gave him the biggest grin and laugh, because he was so much _happier_ and more clearheaded than he’d been in a long time. Jordan’s face was a strange mix of confusion, amusement, and concern.

“Are you okay?” he asked, stepping to the side to let Darcey in.

“Yeah,” Darcey laughed. The air conditioner was on high, as always, and the cold air was _amazing_. He wiped his face with his hands and rubbed them against his jeans to clean them. They’d have to be washed anyway, and he did have clean clothes. “I ran here.”

Jordan’s eyes widened. “You _what_?”


Jordan’s mouth curled into a wide smile. “Are you fucking crazy?”

“I might be,” Darcey laughed. “If you let me use your shower I can give you an answer when I’m done.”

Jordan’s grin widened and he shook his head fondly. He took a few steps closer and pulled Darcey down into a kiss. The skin of Jordan’s neck was cool and damp when Darcey rested his hands at the base of the shorter man’s jaw. Jordan parted his lips when Darcey touched him, standing on his toes to lean closer, and he hummed softly against Darcey’s mouth. A warmth on Darcey’s ears and the back of his neck replaced the chill of the air conditioner and when Jordan ran his tongue against his lip, it was like warm, wet velvet.

Darcey slowly pulled away, leaving a small nip at Jordan’s jaw as he returned to his full height. Jordan’s eyes were soft and he wore a small, almost disbelieving smile on his lips.

“You’re ridiculous,” he said softly. Darcey’s eyebrows furrowed. Had he done something stupid?

“Wha –”

“I just… I still have a hard time believing someone as wonderful as you can be real.”
Darcey’s eyes dropped to Jordan’s shoulder. His face burned so hot he could feel how red his
flush was. “I’m nothing special,” he said softly, “I’m just stumbling my way through life like
everybody else.” But even as he said it, he was smiling.

Jordan smiled like he had a secret, but said nothing.

Jordan thought too highly of him. For some reason the smaller man didn’t see any of the many
awful things about him, and if Darcey thought about it for too long, he started to worry that soon,
Jordan would realize he wasn’t anything special. He wasn’t a bad person, but he wasn’t a great
one, either. He was just... a man. That was it.

He tried not to dwell on it.

Jordan started walking toward the bathroom, gently tugging at Darcey’s pocket as he passed.
“Come on.” His voice lowered to almost a purr. “Let me help you get your shower set up.”

Darcey dropped his backpack on the bathroom tile behind the door, and Jordan gave him a quick
overview of which knob did what and how to switch the water from bath to shower. He pointed
out where the towels were.

He didn’t leave. Darcey didn’t want him to.

Whether they took their clothes off of themselves or each other, they weren’t sure, but they ended
up discarded on the floor where they didn’t matter anymore. What did matter was the contrast of
Jordan’s hot mouth on Darcey’s throat and the cool water running down his shoulders, Jordan’s
hands pressed low in the small of his back, fingers splayed and curled in. Darcey had never
realized his back was so sensitive, but even the slightest change in pressure from Jordan’s hands
sent a shot of heat straight to his stomach. The bigger man’s breathing was heavy and his toes
curled against the slick shower floor, as if looking for stability.

Darcey pressed his left hand to the shower wall to steady himself and leaned closer, gently
untangling himself from Jordan’s mouth to kiss down the side of his neck. Jordan moaned softly at
each touch of Darcey’s tongue, hands gripping a little tighter. Suddenly his thumb hit a nerve that
made Darcey’s knees go weak. Darcey faltered but didn’t stop. He pulled Jordan closer, sliding
his right hand down Jordan’s side, to his hip, his thigh. Jordan’s hands tightened even more and he
gasped. God, the sounds he made were beautiful, soft and needy and wonderful.

Darcey brushed against Jordan with his fingers, but just barely, and Jordan’s breath hitched but
Darcey kept moving his hand back up anyway.

The skin of Jordan’s stomach was slick when Darcey dragged his fingers over it, soft and wet but
the muscle underneath hard. The water made Jordan sensitive, too, because when Darcey brushed
his thumb over the smaller man’s nipple his knees almost gave out and Darcey had to grab him
with his left arm to keep him from falling. Jordan laughed a little as he opened his eyes. Nobody
had ever looked at Darcey the way Jordan did. Like he was precious.

Darcey smiled back.

He tangled his fingers in Jordan’s hair and tilted Jordan’s head to give himself better access to his
left ear. Jordan’s breath hitched. His eyes slid closed and his lips parted just enough to show the
pink of his tongue. His breathing came a little faster now. God, does he even know how gorgeous
he is? He didn’t even seem to try. Darcey didn’t want to look away; he wanted to soak all of
Jordan in – his neck bared, vulnerable and trusting, eyelashes fluttering, the rise and fall of his
chest as he breathed, the water shining on his dark brown skin.
Slowly, Darcey leaned into Jordan, kissing up his neck, and when Jordan whimpered Darcey’s fist tightened a little in his hair and he gasped again. Darcey loosened it. When he reached Jordan’s ear, he murmured, “Are you okay?”

“Mm-hm,” Jordan whispered back. His breath was deep and shuddering now, his hands tight on Darcey’s sides. “I didn’t realize I was into that kind of thing. I thought I’d hate it, but –”

Darcey tugged on Jordan’s hair again, gently, and the smaller man let out a soft, “Oh.”

“You mean that kind of thing?”

Jordan laughed and his hands tightened on Darcey’s ribs. “If you don’t kiss me right now, I don’t know if I can be held responsible for any temper tantrums I may throw,” he laughed, low and husky and more than a little demanding. He slid his hands from Darcey’s sides and over his stomach. Darcey’s breathing faltered. Jordan’s hands were slick and warm and so soft, nothing like Darcey’s own rough, callused ones. He slid his free hand up the curve of Jordan’s spine to rest at the back of his neck. He was all narrow angles and sharp lines with just the barest hint of curve, so subtle it took touch to see.

Jordan arched forward into him, body following the movement of Darcey’s hand. He sighed softly and shook his head, so Darcey let him go. Then Jordan’s hands were on his back, arms wrapped solidly around him as he pushed closer, meeting Darcey’s mouth with his. Their skin was hot under the cool water, getting colder because it had been running for so long. Darcey pulled Jordan even closer, until the lengths of their bodies touched. Jordan backed him against the shower wall with his elbows spread on either side of Darcey’s head, forearms pressed against the wall and Darcey’s feet spread a little too far apart so the faucet hand didn’t jam him in the calf. It was a little awkward and unsteady, but with Jordan kissing him, all soft lips and gentle nips and slight flicks of his tongue, it didn’t matter.

Jordan pulled away, but he was still so close Darcey could feel the movement of his mouth when he said, “I’m prepared this time. House is fully stocked.”

Darcey slowly opened his eyes, about to ask him what he was talking about, but when he saw Jordan’s grin, he knew exactly what he meant. He smiled back.

He pulled Jordan back and kissed him, hard, tongues tangling and hands tight on his hips as Jordan’s scrambled over Darcey’s back. Darcey slid his right hand slowly down Jordan’s hip, his thigh. Jordan’s breathing grew heavier but he didn’t stop kissing Darcey. When Darcey slid his hand between Jordan’s legs, the smaller man let out a soft, strangled moan. He stood on his toes, feet sliding against the slick tile, trying to get closer. Darcey caught him with his other hand, firm on the small of his back. Jordan’s hands tightened when he rocked his hips into Darcey’s hand, but Darcey pulled back, keeping the pressure light. Jordan whined into Darcey’s mouth and pressed closer, closer, hands tight on his shoulders.

*God, he is fucking beautiful.*

He was hot and wet and slick underneath Darcey’s fingers. Suddenly, Jordan broke the kiss, dropping his head to Darcey’s shoulder, breathing thick and heavy. He gently bit Darcey’s shoulder to muffle his moans.

“Don’t hold back,” Darcey whispered. He nipped at Jordan’s soft skin and Jordan moaned again, louder, and his mouth fell open into gasping breaths.
“God, Darcey,” he murmured. His voice hitched, a little squeak in the middle when he said, “Please.”

Jordan whined again when Darcey moved his hand back to his hip, pushing against him. Darcey wanted him so badly and he wanted him right now, screaming and writhing and clinging to him. And he knew Jordan would let him. But up until then, the sex had been fast and rough and even though it was amazing, Darcey wanted it slow this time. He was terrible at expressing himself through words, but action, he was good at. Maybe he could make Jordan feel how much he meant to him. Jordan had wormed his way under Darcey’s skin and into his head and his heart without even trying, and now he couldn’t imagine wanting to be with anyone else.

It had barely been a week. He should feel like he was going crazy, but he’d been toeing the line for a long time. At least this time it was a good kind of crazy.

“Not yet,” Darcey whispered, lips sliding against slick skin. “I want to build you up a little longer.” Jordan’s breath hitched and shuddered, and when Darcey said, “I want us to come together this time,” Jordan’s fingers curled into his skin so tight he could bruise.

He didn’t care. He liked it when Jordan marked him.

Jordan’s voice was thick and husky when he said, “I think we should go back to the bedroom, then.”

He pulled Darcey back into another kiss, his hand on the back of Darcey’s neck holding him close. Darcey’s right hand groped at the wall behind him for the water knobs, quick and clumsy, but he finally found them and quickly turned them off. Jordan broke the kiss for just long enough to push the shower curtain out of the way and step over the edge of the bathtub side, pulling Darcey behind him. He pinned Darcey to the wall, hands loose around Darcey’s wrists, pressed gently into the tile above their heads. Darcey’s breathing picked up with nerves and excitement. The tile in his back was freezing and Jordan’s hand against his chest was burning and the smaller man slowly, slowly slid it down, curling his fingers when he reached Darcey’s stomach. Darcey’s muscles spasmed and his breathing faltered and his eyes slipped closed. Jordan’s short nails scratching against his skin were sharp and sent a shot of heat straight down Darcey’s back and all the way up again. Then Jordan stopped, but didn’t pull away.

A sharp tremor shot down Darcey’s back and he opened his eyes when Jordan whispered against his ear, “Bedroom. Now.”

Darcey moved his wrist out of Jordan’s grasp and grabbed a towel off the rack. Jordan huffed when Darcey dropped it on his head.

“But drying off takes time,” he sighed. But there was laughter in his voice. Darcey ruffled the towel against his hair.

“I don’t want to ruin your mattress.”

Jordan took one end of the towel in each hand and pulled down in frustration, pulling the most ridiculous and adorable face Darcey had ever seen. He leaned down and kissed Jordan’s forehead. He wanted to kiss Jordan’s nose, but he was afraid that might be stupid. Then he did it, anyway. Jordan had never held back or tried to be anyone other than who he was. He deserved for Darcey to do the same.

Jordan wrinkled his nose, but then a huge grin spread across his face. The annoyance melted out of his eyes and was replaced by pure, honest happiness. Jordan adored him, and Darcey could see
it every time the younger man looked at him. He didn’t understand why, but he was so grateful.

“T’ll get another one off the shelf for me,” he said softly, but his whole body beamed in happiness.

Darcey wasn’t sure what he did, but he was glad of it.

Darcey watched as Jordan turned away. He started to dry himself down, but he was slow and distracted. Mostly he watched the angles and curves of Jordan’s body as he moved, slow and subtle and sure, the flex of his shoulders as he reached above his head and the slight tension in his calves as he leaned forward, the barest arch of his back, skin still damp. He was lean and lithe and every inch of him was gorgeous.

Jordan grabbed the corner of a towel and tugged it down, draping it over his shoulders and starting to dry off his hair and neck as he turned around.

He smirked at the expression on Darcey’s face and raised an eyebrow. Darcey smiled back sheepishly, but he didn’t mind being caught.

Jordan grabbed his arm and led him out of the bathroom, slowly walking backward, and when they made it back to the bed, Jordan whirled them around, hand flat on Darey’s chest and pushing him down to the sheets. Jordan crawled over him, towel still draped over his shoulders. Darcey tightened his hands and he groaned softly when Jordan’s thigh pressed against him, hot and still just a little bit damp and oh god how could he be so ready when they’d barely started yet?

“How –” Darcey paused, sucking in a sharp breath when Jordan wrapped his hand around him and nipped at the curve of his neck. “How do you want to do this?” he asked. His words were too quick and desperate but he didn’t care. There had been enough teasing. Darcey wanted Jordan now.

“How –” Darcey paused, sucking in a sharp breath when Jordan wrapped his hand around him and nipped at the curve of his neck. “How do you want to do this?” he asked. His words were too quick and desperate but he didn’t care. There had been enough teasing. Darcey wanted Jordan now.

“Slowly, carefully, and with a condom and lots of lube,” Jordan replied. His voice was thick and his breathing shallow and fast. “Other than that, I really don’t care. I just want you inside me, like, yesterday.”

“God, yes.” Even getting out those two words took too long because Darcey needed to kiss him now, quick and desperate, soft lips and hot tongue and hands everywhere and Jesus, whoever had the idea of only giving humans two hands was an idiot because Darcey needed to touch Jordan everywhere, all at once, now.

One of Jordan’s hands moved away from Darcey’s face as he reached out for something. Darcey didn’t know what. The only thing he knew was that he was not going to stop kissing the other man. He needed Jordan like he needed air.

Jordan pulled away slightly and murmured, “Shit,” as he pushed himself up, and suddenly cold panic shot through Darcey.

“Are you –”

“Yeah,” he said softly, breathlessly, his eyes focused at the side of the bed. Darcey tilted his head to follow his reach. He was fiddling with the drawer on the bedside table but couldn’t get the leverage to pull it open. Darcey let out a long breath and a laugh.

“Jordan, you scared the shit out of me.”

Jordan glanced back and smiled, a little embarrassed. God, it was endearing. “Sorry,” he said bashfully. “No, I’m okay. I just, I was hoping I could be sexy and reach out for everything while I
was still feeling you up, but clearly that’s not working out.”

Darcey laughed again and Jordan’s mouth twisted, but not for long before he started laughing, too. Then he dropped his head to Darcey’s shoulder and Darcey wrapped his arm around him, both of them laughing hysterically, shaking. Jordan rolled to the side to re-situate and get on the bed properly. As he pushed himself up to crawl to the head of the bed so he could get to the drawer, Darcey took his forearm. Jordan turned around, and when he smiled, Darcey’s heart stammered, then picked up double-time, like it could explode from his chest. Jordan leaned back and rested his forehead against Darcey’s, their noses barely touching, and when Darcey tangled his hand in Jordan’s wild black hair he whispered, “You’re gorgeous.”

Jordan said nothing, only looked at Darcey like he was the gorgeous one. He gently touched Darcey’s cheek, then pressed his forehead closer before pulling away and sitting up. Darcey turned to watch him, the curve of his spine in the dim blue-hued light of the room. There was a rustling before he turned around with a bright grin on his face. He wiggled his hands; a bottle of lube in one, a few condoms in the other. Darcey gestured him closer and Jordan started to hand them off, but Darcey shook his head. “No,” he said. “You.”

Jordan smiled and carefully placed them at the head of the bed beside the pillow before crawling back again. Darcey weaved his fingers into Jordan’s hair and pulled him back into another kiss, slow at first, soft and patient and exploratory, but then, slowly, something changed and the kiss grew faster and harder and more and more and more desperate. Darcey slid his hands over Jordan’s legs, around his sides, up his back and Jordan arched into his touch and forward into him, skin on skin and with every shift of their bodies Darcey grew hotter and harder. Jordan nudged the bottle of lube into his hand.

He broke the kiss. “No more teasing,” he said. His arms shook as he held himself over Darcey. “Now. Please, Darcey. Please don’t make me beg.”

Darcey paused, mind working frantically, trying to figure out the best and safest position. The easiest would probably be as it was now, with Jordan on top of him. If that didn’t work, they could move. He wasn’t sure what he was doing, but over the past few nights he’d read enough when he couldn’t sleep to get the general idea of where to go from here.

Jordan’s breathing was heavy, shoulders heaving as he watched Darcey intently. His eyes were so dark they were almost black, locked with Darcey’s, focused, desperate. A slow grin spread across his face when Darcey whispered, “Up. On your knees.”

“Yes.” It was so soft Darcey couldn’t even hear it; he had to read it on Jordan’s lips. Jordan pushed himself up, body held above Darcey’s, taut, shivering, like some kind of big, wild cat, beautiful and powerful.

His elbows rested on either side of Darcey’s head. There wasn’t much space to move, but Darcey wanted him close. The lube was freezing cold on his hand and a little looser than he’d been expecting, so it was messy, but Darcey didn’t care and it was the last thing on Jordan’s mind. Jordan shuddered when Darcey’s hand brushed his stomach. They were so close Darcey could see every detail of Jordan’s face, every slight shift in expression, and Darcey wanted to kiss him so badly but also never wanted to break his gaze away.

Jordan froze and his fists clenched when Darcey started to move down between his legs. Darcey stilled, eyes searching Jordan’s face.

“Are you –”

“Don’t.” Jordan’s voice was tight and scared and challenging and angry all at once, and it was
only then that Darcey realized where his hand had ended up. He jerked it away.

“No,” he said. “Shit, Jordan, no, it was an accident. I’m so sorry. I wouldn’t, I mean, you made it clear you didn’t want that, and unless you’d told me explicitly you’d changed your mind I wouldn’t –”

Jordan relaxed as Darcey rambled. The fear left his face and his smile came back. “Okay,” he said. “Sorry. I…” He paused, swallowed. “I trust you. Sorry. You just… it really scared me and I panicked. You didn’t actually…” He grimaced, hesitating. “You didn’t actually… go inside. But you were just a lot closer than anyone else has ever been and… and people have tried to guilt me or force me into it in the past and… and I panicked. Shit. I’m sorry, Darcey.”

“It’s okay.” Darcey’s left hand was still clean, so he worked it out from where it was pinned to his side and rested it on the back of Jordan’s neck. “Don’t apologize. I’m sorry I scared you. Do you want to –”

“I swear to god, Darcey, if you suggest we stop I will throw the biggest fucking tantrum you have ever seen.” But he smiled as he said it. Darcey smiled back. When Jordan bumped their noses together, everything was okay again.

This time, Darcey traced around Jordan’s inner thigh, keeping distance, then back around. He paused, hesitating, but Jordan’s eyes had slipped closed and his arms were trembling again. When he pushed back against Darcey’s fingers, the bigger man whispered, “Relax, okay?”

Jordan nodded, taking a slow, deep breath and flexing his muscles, then he did. He whimpered softly when Darcey slipped one finger inside of him, his eyebrows drawn tight, teeth hard on his bottom lip. Darcey grasped Jordan’s side in his left hand, trying to help steady him. When he was about halfway in, he stopped.

“Tell me when you’re ready,” he said. Jordan nodded. They were both still for a few moments as Darcey watched Jordan’s face for even the subtest change in expression, and then Jordan whispered a soft, breathless, “Okay.” He slowly, carefully pushed back against Darcey. His eyebrows relaxed and his lips parted in a soft “Oh,” and when Darcey pushed back against him, another one, a little deeper, more desperate, “Oh.”

Slowly, carefully, Darcey worked up to two fingers, then three, and with every whimper and whine and moan and “God, Darcey, yes, please,” Darcey’s heart beat faster and his skin grew hotter and he was so hard it ached. He wanted Jordan so badly, but he had to be patient because Darcey didn’t want to hurt him.

Darcey slid his left hand down to Jordan’s hip to give it a gentle squeeze before letting go to reach above his head to where he left the condoms earlier. He pawed around a few moments, and when he found them, he extracted one from the small pile. He half-remembered reading or hearing somewhere that he wasn’t supposed to open them with his teeth, but he was careful not to damage it when he tore open the package, because he only had one clean hand right then and that wasn’t happening. Somehow, maybe because of a miracle, Darcey was able to get it out of the package and on correctly without incident with just that one hand, but he did need both hands to get more lube ready so he slowly, carefully moved his fingers back out. Jordan whined, high-pitched and needy.

“Darcey, wait.” His fists clenched and his muscles tightened and his shoulders shook.

With his clean hand, Darcey gently touched the back of Jordan’s head and said, “Almost there. Almost there. Relax. You’ve got to relax or I might accidentally hurt you, okay?”
Jordan nodded and slowly, deliberately let the tension out of each muscle, one at a time. He hovered over Darcey as he tried to re-orient himself. Darcey gently stroked the back of his head and neck.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Darcey whispered.

Jordan nodded, breathing heavily. His whole body shook. Darcey’s did, too.

Suddenly, Jordan whispered sharply, “Now.” He pushed himself up to lock eyes with Darcey. He sat up on his knees, hovering. At some point he must have grabbed the lube without Darcey noticing because when the smaller man wrapped his hand around him it was cold and slick and so good. Darcey rested his hands on Jordan’s hips to help steady and guide him, breathing heavy, fingers tight. His hands shook harder than usual when Jordan slowly, carefully lowered himself onto him, and oh god when he slipped inside Jordan he was so hot and so tight and so perfect around him. Jordan moved so, so agonizingly slow, and Darcey tried desperately to keep hold of the thought that he couldn’t move until Jordan said it was okay. They had to go at Jordan’s pace right now. But god, how Darcey wanted to move, to feel the heat and the friction. His brain might be shorting out.

This was nothing like what he’d thought it would be. It was so, so much better.

Then Jordan whimpered slightly and Darcey opened his eyes. The smaller man’s face was tight and he was obviously in pain. Darcey slid his hand from Jordan’s hip, up his side, to touch his face where he gently rubbed his thumb beneath Jordan’s eye. Jordan opened them and they were a little wet and it killed Darcey, it ripped his heart in half, and he was about to call it off, to say the would try something else instead, but a grin spread across Jordan’s face.

“Give me a minute,” he whispered. His voice was tight as he leaned back slightly, hands behind him, fingers digging into Darcey’s thighs.

“Yeah,” Darcey murmured, but it came out strangled, and he knew by the look on Jordan’s face the smaller man could tell how difficult it was for him to keep still. He began to speak, but Darcey interrupted him.

“Don’t apologize.”

Jordan nodded. After another moment, he moved experimentally, pushing himself up and back down with a gentle roll of his hips. Suddenly the air was so thick in Darcey’s throat he couldn’t breathe anymore and Jordan moved again, again, slowly but surely moving a little faster and harder and somehow with each movement he got even harder and even tighter and his fingers pressed so hard into Darcey’s thighs just added to the perfectness of it. A rough, deep moan tore from Darcey’s throat and when Jordan moaned it just fed into his want and desperation.

Darcey’s hips rolled up to meet Jordan’s. It took a few moments to find a rhythm together but when they did white flashes of heat sparked through Darcey’s mind and body, all the way down his spine to his toes and back up again. It started quietly, low and subtle in the small of his back, curling into and over itself, but as it built it grew hotter and deeper, skittering through his muscles, layering into every curve and corner of his brain until all there was was him and Jordan.

Then Jordan’s fingers pressed low on Darcey’s stomach, inching toward himself but hesitating. It took Darcey a moment to realize, this wasn’t enough for Jordan, he needed more, but he was either too nervous or incoherent to ask.

Darcey placed his fingers over Jordan’s and pushed his hand against him. Maybe he felt like he needed permission but now that it was clear Darcey had no problem with it (god, never, he’d do
anything for Jordan, whenever he wanted it), Jordan slid his hand out from beneath Darcey’s and pressed the bigger man’s hand against himself, hot and hard and wet. When Darcey moved against him, Jordan let out a slow, strangled moan and arched back, pushing into him and tensing around him and it was just the barest of movements but it cut Darcey’s brain off from any logical thought. All he could think of was how much he wanted Jordan, all of him, more touches and more moans and more growls and more of his hands gripping and scratching his back and more of everything.

And then Jordan rolled his hips and tensed at the same time and Darcey almost forgot how to use his hands and he did momentarily forget how to talk and what his mind processed as Jordan’s name, over and over, just came out as an incoherent moan. Then Jordan’s hands on his neck, tugging gently but insistently. Darcey carefully pushed himself up on one arm and Jordan leaned down into him in what was supposed to be a kiss, but when the angle changed, Jordan’s body shuddered and his head fell into Darcey’s shoulder. He murmured a long, quick string of almost words, “OhgodohgodohgodDarcey.” His voice hitched and he drew Darcey’s name out, the sound long and low and almost like a prayer. Jordan’s hand tightened around Darcey’s, the other curled around the back of his neck, and his quick, uneven breaths were hot and damp against Darcey’s skin. Darcey buried his face in Jordan’s shoulder as the smaller man rocked into him, over and over, slow at first but then faster and faster. The movements were small and quick and hard and Darcey’s eyes rolled back and slipped closed. The heat in his back started building again, slow and deep but it spread up, around to his chest and down to his stomach, a solid, sharp, hot wave, inching through every part of him. Suddenly a quick jolt, low in his stomach. He was so, so close, and the way Jordan’s hands were trembling and he was moving so frantically and his breathing was so shallow, Darcey knew he was, too.

“Oh, god, Darcey,” he whined. His voice was deep and husky and shaky and perfect, “I’m so, I’m, ah, oh god, please,” and then his voice caught and his whole body locked up, fingers tight on the back of his neck and his hand, legs tense. When he tightened so hard, Darcey’s arm almost gave out from under him as his head rolled back and he came hard, harder than he ever had before, his orgasm crashing through his entire body in waves, one right after another.

Jordan’s entire body shivered over and around Darcey’s and Darcey wrapped an arm around him, careful to keep his fingers away from Jordan’s skin. Both of their breathing was thick and heavy and their hands and arms trembled, even now. Slowly, Darcey’s limbs loosened, heavy and warm, the intensity fading away to a thick, heady calm. His breathing slowly settled out and he could think mostly clearly again. But his hands and arms still shook, and Jordan trembled against him.

“Are you okay?” Darcey whispered. He gently nudged his nose against the smaller man’s neck.

Jordan nodded and took in a slow, deep, shuddering breath. “God, yes,” he murmured. “Fuck, Darcey, that was…” He paused, as if searching for the right word, but he left the sentence hanging.

“Yeah.” Darcey’s voice was a little shaky, too.

After a few more moments, Darcey carefully untangled himself from his partner. Jordan slowly, carefully slid off him and crawled up the bed to lie beside him. His breathing was deep and shaky, his mouth slightly open, his eyes half-lidded and watching Darcey closely.

Darcey kissed him and they stayed curled up in each other for a long time.

He pulled away, just barely, to say, “I’ve got to take care of –”

“Oh, yeah, of course,” Jordan said, a smile pulling at his lips, soft laughter shaking his shoulders.
It was only a quick trip to the bathroom before Darcey was back in bed with him again, one arm draped over him and the other curled around his back so he could tangle his hand in Jordan’s hair.

Darcey’s bag sat, still zipped closed, on the floor at the foot of the bed, beside Jordan’s discarded clothes, ignored. They would get there. For now, they just reveled in each other’s presence, the heat of each other’s skin and the softness of each other’s lips.

Jordan placed his hand on the back of Darcey’s neck, mirroring his movements, and his eyes slowly fluttered and he smiled a soft, tired smile. Darcey smiled back. Slowly, his trembling body calmed and his body grew more still, all but his always shaking hands, and they stayed that way, holding each other.

Finally, Jordan opened his eyes. “Clothes,” he said, more to himself than to Darcey. Darcey pushed himself up and grabbed Jordan’s undershirt and boxers, nudging them against his hand. Jordan wrapped his fingers around the fabric, but didn’t move to get dressed.

Darcey leaned into Jordan and pressed a soft kiss to his warm neck. “I know it makes you feel more comfortable, and that’s fine,” Darcey whispered. “But Jordan, you’re gorgeous, even if your body isn’t where you want it to be right now. You need to know that.” Darcey meant it like he’d never meant anything, but the subtle shake of Jordan’s head and the way he turned his back so he could pull his clothes on made it clear he didn’t believe it.

When Jordan was dressed, Darcey pulled him against his chest. He didn’t shrug away like Darcey had been afraid he would; instead, Jordan sank back into him, wrapping his wiry arms around his. Jordan leaned into Darcey’s chest, breathing in deep and letting it out in a long, happy sigh. Darcey closed his eyes and buried his nose in Jordan’s soft hair, breathing him in.

After a while, the air conditioner started to get to Darcey, so he pulled his own clothes back on, minus jeans, because it was clear they were going to lounge around in bed a while and if he was lucky, he could get some sleep. Jordan might take a nap, but Darcey had learned he couldn’t sleep much longer than an hour at a time because of his schedule.

Jordan loosely, carelessly flopped down on his back with a happy sigh, arms and legs spread. Darcey laid down on his side, arm curled under his head and settled down to watch him. They’d only known each other a week, but Darcey wanted to do all the romantic things he’d thought were stupid before, like buying flowers and going out to dinner and making mix CDs. He wanted to make Jordan breakfast and read the paper with him at the table and see him off when he went to work.

It was crazy and it scared him, but after everything he’d been through, one constant that kept reaffirming itself was that life was short, and it was precious, and it was stupid to push away something that made him happy, even if it didn’t make much sense.

Jordan turned onto his side, curling his arm up underneath his head. He smiled at Darcey, soft and sleepy, and yawned. His eyes slipped closed. Darcey hesitated, then gently brushed his knuckles across Jordan’s cheek. Jordan smiled and turned into it with a soft, happy hum, and Darcey smiled, too.

Chapter End Notes

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Darcey was exhausted, but he couldn’t sleep.

He rolled onto his back, resting the back of his head on his hands, and glanced over at the window. It was still dark outside. He didn’t know what time it was and he knew better than to check. It felt like hours had passed but if he checked the time, it would turn out to only have been minutes. Time ran differently for insomniacs.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, exhaling through his nose.

Gunfire.

It couldn’t be coming from outside, this was a safe area, but it was except it wasn’t because it wasn’t so far away, it was right above him, and Doc slammed Darcey facedown in the dust with his hand hard between Darcey’s shoulder blades, his head just above his, and Campbell was yelling something Darcey couldn’t make out over the hissing and banging in his head. His DCUs were hot on his skin, stiff with dirt and grit and rough on his arms and knees, gravel embedded in his cheek and he pushed Doc off of him and pulled him down to the ground in the same movement. They were screaming, all around him, not just his fellow servicemen but civilians, parents and grandparents and kids and shopkeepers.

Darcey couldn’t hear anything over the fire of machine guns and the screaming. Campbell’s mouth was moving but Darcey couldn’t read his lips. He was still standing and was going to get hit if he didn’t, “Get down!” Darcey screamed, trying to get up to get to him but Doc’s weight landed heavy on his back.

“Walker, stay down!” Even though Doc was right by his ear, Darcey could still barely make out the words and

“Darcey!” It looked like Doc, but couldn’t be, he never used first names, so who –

“Darcey, Darcey, what’s wrong?” The voice was panicked, afraid, and Darcey didn’t blame it in a hellhole like this –

Then, warm, strong hands gripped his face, holding him still, and his eyes slowly came back into focus but not completely because something wet obscured his vision. He was crying.

Jordan’s wide, scared eyes darted over Darcey’s face. Oh, god, what did he do, please, please say he didn’t hurt him. “Jordan,” Darcey choked out. “What –”

“What happened?” Jordan got to the question first. Slowly the room started coming back around Darcey; the carpet under his hands, his arm curled over Jordan’s head. The room was dark and shadowy but even though he’d only been there a handful of times, he knew it. This was Jordan’s room, at his apartment, on the floor. Hadn’t they been on the bed?

Jordan’s hands still rested on his cheeks, warm and firm, but gentle, and Darcey’s breath was too heavy and it made his chest sting.

“I was,” he started, but then choked on his words, because he hadn’t told Jordan anything about it yet. He might have known Darcey had served overseas, but only if Iffy or someone else had told
him, and that wasn’t likely because wouldn’t he have brought it up if that had been the case? Darcey’s arms trembled, suddenly barely able to hold his weight.

“Darcey.” Jordan’s voice was soft, but firm. “Talk to me. Please. What happened?”

“What did I do? Please tell me I didn’t hurt you.”

Jordan shook his head. “No,” he said. “No, no, no. I mean, I bumped my shoulder when we hit the floor, but nothing big. It doesn’t even hurt anymore.” His wide eyes darted over Darcey’s face, echoing the bigger man’s concern, but for completely different reasons. With every moment that Darcey didn’t explain, Jordan slowly started to slide deeper into panic, because if he didn’t know what was wrong he couldn’t help fix it and he needed to, he needed Darcey to be okay. Darcey licked his bottom lip as his fists clenched on the floor.

“You just… from out of nowhere, you jumped on me and pushed us both off the bed. It was like you were trying to protect me from something. Darcey, what happened?”

“Was there some kind of noise beforehand?” Darcey’s voice was tight.

“A car backfiring.”

Darcey could feel the expression on his face change. He took in a shaky breath and closed his eyes, lowering his head.

“We need to talk about something,” he said.

Jordan’s eyes darted over Darcey’s face, and he nodded.

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They’d been sitting on the bed for over ten minutes, and Darcey still hadn’t started to explain. Jordan tried to be patient, because it was clear whatever it was was terrifying, but he needed to know. He needed to know why Darcey’s eyes were so vacant and faraway and why his movements were so twitchy and nervous. He needed to know why Darcey didn’t respond to his touch or his voice until he started yelling.

When Darcey finally spoke, his voice was soft, but not in the usual calm, reserved way Jordan was used to. Darcey wouldn’t look at him, eyes glued to his shaking hands, gripping tightly to his knees.

“There’s something I should have told you from the beginning,” he said quietly. Jordan’s breath caught. “I mean, I know we aren’t dating, but what we have is important, and you deserve to know.”

Jordan placed one hand over Darcey’s, but Darcey didn’t move.

“Darcey, what’s going on?” With every second that passed that Darcey didn’t tell him, fear and anxiety prickled in the back of Jordan’s neck.

“I…” Darcey paused, choking on the words. He clenched his fists tighter in his jeans and started again. “Over the past eight years, I served two tours in the Middle East, in the Army, and —”

And then Jordan’s hand snapped away from his and Darcey flinched as the smaller man pulled away so hard and fast he almost toppled backward.
Oh god, oh god, he served in the military? For eight years? Jordan opened his mouth to say something, but he didn’t know what, so nothing came out. He squeezed his eyes closed and curled his fingers in his hair as he bowed his head, oh god, Darcey was so perfect and wonderful and everything good, and then this? He’d fought for everything Jordan fought against. His breathing was panicked and he could see Darcey’s mouth move as he spoke but couldn’t hear anything over the blood pounding in his ears. His friends were going to kill him. Everyone in his BashBack chapter was going to kill him.

When Jordan finally looked at Darcey again, Darcey was sitting on the edge of the bed, his face turned down. His fists clenched against his knees, shaking, and his shoulders were taut. Jordan could barely see the angles of his eyebrows, and they were drawn tight, but not in anger. Not like Jordan would have deserved.

Darcey was in so much pain, and all you can think about is yourself. He’d treated Jordan with nothing but love and respect. Darcey had been better to him than any partner before, and even better than many of his close friends.

You don’t deserve someone like him.

“I know I should have said something sooner.” Darcey’s voice was breaking, cracked and raw. He’d been expecting surprise, but nothing like this, this… whatever it was. Panic? Anger? Fear? The first person to react that way since he’d come back. Of course it would be Jordan. “I wasn’t hiding it. At least, that’s not what I intended. Everything was so fucked up, Jordan. I’m still trying to put everything back together and I just… I can’t talk about some things yet. And I’m sorry I inadvertently lied while trying to… to…” He trailed off and sighed, burying his face in his hands. His head was low, turned away at an angle, one Jordan recognized.

It was the stature of someone preparing to flinch away from a blow.

Suddenly, Darcey was Jordan at six years old, ten, twelve, and Jordan was his father with his fist raised while he cowered under him, knowing it would impact any moment but not knowing when or where, making it impossible to protect himself.

Jordan’s eyes snapped up. The blue and green valance over the window that Terrence helped him make because he couldn’t find one he liked at the store. The oversized rainbow flag he used as a runner for his dresser. The flyer for the first Troy’s Bucket concert he went to pinned up on the wall. Skalapalooza, September 2004. He’d been twenty, away from his family for three years.

Jordan’s eyes snapped back to Darcey. Darcey was himself, fists gripping tightly to his knees. Jordan was himself, arms curled around his torso.

Reign yourself in. Now. This was not okay. Especially not with someone he loved.

Jordan’s posture changed, the tightness in his muscles loosened, and Darcey began to speak again.

“I couldn’t deal with talking about it yet,” he repeated. He rubbed his face and sat back up, dropping his hands in his lap. “Not to anyone. It wasn’t just you, Jordan. I wasn’t trying to lie.” He knew he was repeating himself, but he didn’t know what else to say. If there even was anything else to say.

Jordan stopped pacing, arms still crossed over his chest as he rubbed them nervously, trying to comfort himself, but not because of what Darcey had told him. Because of how he reacted. He couldn’t say it didn’t matter, but it didn’t change anything. Darcey’s time in the Army might have even shaped him into who he was.
The most generous, selfless person Jordan had ever met. The only person he’d ever truly, honestly been in love with. Felt safe with. Darcey had thought he was in a war zone and the first thing he’d done was throw himself on top of Jordan so he would be safe.

And he was worried about what his friends might think. Jordan, what the fuck is wrong with you?

Darcey still didn’t look at Jordan, but his head wasn’t bowed anymore. His eyes were carefully trained on a spot on the wall somewhere to Jordan’s right. His breathing was slow, even, controlled, and his face was blank, but his hands still shook.

“Maybe I should just go,” he said softly. He started to push himself off the bed, but Jordan darted over to him, gently pushing on his shoulders to keep him in place.

“Don’t.” His voice cracked. “Stay. Please. Please, let’s just talk about this.”

When Jordan was sure Darcey had decided not to stand, he sat down beside him, hands in his lap. He wanted to crawl into Darcey’s arms and curl around him and fix all the damage he’d just done, but he didn’t know how or if it would even be welcome if he did.

“I’m so sorry, Darcey,” he started. “I’m sorry I reacted like that. I’m…” He sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “I’m a huge asshole. There’s no other way to say it.”

Darcey let out a small huff of air, almost a laugh, but not quite.

“No, really,” Jordan said. “I am, and I know, and I’m trying not to be. But I screwed up. I’m sorry.” He carefully placed his hand on Darcey’s knee, and when Darcey didn’t push him away, Jordan’s grip got a little firmer.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. “I just… did you know I was a member of BashBack? I know I told you about Food Not Bombs, but…” He trailed off, unsure of where to go from there. Had he ever told Darcey about BashBack? It hadn’t come up in any of their conversation. Darcey’s head was bowed again.

“Please tell me what that is and that it isn’t what it sounds like,” he whispered.

“No, no, it’s… no,” Jordan said, because he wasn’t sure what he was trying to say. He was trying to reassure Darcey and reassure himself and –

He inhaled deeply and started again. “It’s a radical trans and queer rights anarchist collective. We protest and fuck with those anti-queer church assholes and throw glitter at cops who give us shit. A lot of people really hate us and we’re on the federal government’s watchlist.”

Darcey tensed as Jordan spoke. Jordan’s throat was almost too tight to speak, but he had to, he had to make Darcey understand just like Jordan needed to understand him. “We’re not violent. We’ve never hurt anyone and, at least in my group, we don’t want to. But they think we will. It’s just, when it comes to shit like this, you have to be loud. You have to scream and get in everyone’s face because otherwise nobody will ever listen and nothing will change. And people are afraid of that.” He paused, and his hand was shaking, now, his palm hot and sweaty and he wanted more than anything to take Darcey’s hand in his because he was better at touch then he was at words and maybe if Darcey could feel him, they’d understand each other.

“Anarchist collective?” Darcey asked softly.

“Yeah,” Jordan replied. Darcey turned to look at him. “You know, fuck the man and smash the state and all that.” He weakly shook his fist in the air. “But we’re not violent. We never have been. The worst we do is throw glitter and write on walls and stuff with chalk. It sounds big and
intimidating but it’s all actually pretty tame. At least, our faction is. The radical basically refers to being on the streets in protests rather than signing e-petitions at home.”

Darcey snorted softly. Jordan couldn’t find it in himself to be offended, not after his reaction to Darcey’s military service. The bigger man watched him for a very long moment, and then his face slowly softened, a small, self-depreciating smile tugging at his mouth. He looked back down again. Jordan made it sound like a bunch of kids whose playtime got a little out of control.

“I just…” Jordan said. He sighed. “When you told me you’d been in the Army, they were the first thing I thought of and… and it doesn’t matter what they think. It doesn’t. But for a minute I thought it did, and it was all I cared about and… and it was really, really selfish, and I’m sorry.”

Darcey smiled softly and shook his head. Jordan smiled back, squeezing his knee, and Darcey rested his hand atop the smaller man’s. Jordan intertwined their fingers.

After a long moment of silence, Jordan mustered up the courage to say, “I know this is going to sound crazy, but just let me say it, okay?”

Darcey looked up. Jordan looked down. Their hands tightened.

“I—love you just love everything about you, Darcey. I love your generosity and your selflessness and I love the way you cut right through the bullshit and see things as they are. I love how you’re always calm but still aren’t afraid to get excited about the things you care about. And I want you to know that. You don’t have to tell me anything like that in return. You just… you deserve to know. And I know the way I acted just now was fucked up and inappropriate, but even if it doesn’t seem like it, I still feel that way.”

Jordan’s hand was tight on Darcey’s and his jaw was tense, his eyes scrunched closed because he was afraid to see Darcey’s reaction, if he took it the wrong way, or worse, didn’t take it seriously at all. Jordan opened his eyes when Darcey gently nudged his head against the shorter man’s.

“Thank you,” he said softly. The two quiet words were so sincere, Jordan almost glowed. They both sat in silence for a long while that stretched into forever. But the question had to be asked, and Jordan had to be the one to do it.

“What happened earlier,” he said softly. “Was that a flashback? Is that what you were getting toward before I…” There was no eloquent way to put it, so he finished with, “freaked the fuck out?”

Darcey’s hand shook in Jordan’s gentle hold. His swallow was audible. He didn’t say anything, but he nodded.

“Do you have PTSD?” Jordan kept his voice calm, free of blame. It wasn’t Darcey’s fault and the last thing he needed was to think it was, or that Jordan felt that way.

“I haven’t been diagnosed,” Darcey said softly. His voice was hoarse, as if he’d been crying. “But I’m pretty sure I do.”

Even though their voices were just above a whisper, they were all Jordan could hear in the quiet, early morning.

Jordan looked down at Darcey’s fingers still curled in his. “Have you thought about getting treatment?” he asked. Darcey didn’t respond. Jordan hesitated to suggest it because of his own terrible experiences, but Darcey might get lucky, and he’d be seeing someone for completely different reasons.
Finally, Jordan said, “I could help you find a therapist. I don’t know about medication but I could help you find a psychiatrist, too. They usually have both at the same office.”

Darcey’s fingers twitched. “I don’t have health insurance,” he said. “I’m looking around but so far everyone’s refused me because I take anxiety meds and that means I have a pre-existing condition.”

“I’m a low income queer trans dude who hangs out mostly with poor and unemployed people.” Jordan’s laugh was a little self-depreciating. “I can help you navigate the state programs. I’m really good at it.” He paused. “But shouldn’t you be getting insurance from the government? I thought veterans got benefits after they retire.”

Darcey choked a little on his words when he said, “If you retire. Not if you get kicked out. You retire honorably or you get nothing.”

Jordan’s hand tightened on Darcey’s as his eyes darted over Darcey’s face. The single word came out in a bare, surprised breath. “What?” The second word was a little louder, but choked. “Why?”

“I spent my entire career in the closet,” Darcey said. He ran his hand through his hair, resting it awkwardly on the back of his neck. “My cousin helped me decide to come out. The people in charge of my unit were really homophobic, and it didn’t matter that most of the guys under them, on my level, weren’t. They had the final say and they kicked me out. That’s…” he sighed and dropped his hand into his lap. “That’s an extremely abridged version. But that’s basically what happened.” He couldn’t bring himself to admit why he came out. Maybe he never would. To anyone. Maybe the secret would die with him and Brett.

“But…” Jordan couldn’t process it. It didn’t make sense. Of course, he’d known about Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, but even so, if he’d already done two tours, he was obviously valuable, so –

“I don’t understand,” he said. “What did you do?”

“I was fluent in Arabic. I acted as a translator. I was one exam away from getting my medic license. I served two tours. I saved a man’s life. And I’m gay and wasn’t going to lie about it anymore. So they discharged me.” He sighed. “I can’t say I wanted to stay. I was ready to leave. But…” He couldn’t continue because he didn’t know what he wanted to say.

Jordan’s mind was working faster and harder than he could remember, trying to process so much information at once. He’d always had a certain view of what military workers were like, but Darcey wasn’t any of those things. He was kind and funny and down to earth and… and of everything that Jordan could have expected, this was the one that blew his mind.

“I –” he started, stumbled, then stopped and tried again.

“It might take me a few days to process this,” he said honestly. “It’s just a lot to take in and I wasn’t expecting it and… and to be honest you just totally fucked up my worldview.” Darcey’s fingers twitched and he started to pull away, but Jordan pulled him back, close. “Don’t. Please. I didn’t mean that as a bad thing. It’s good to have preconceptions challenged, yeah?”

Darcey shook his head a little disbeliefingly.

“Please stay,” Jordan finished. He finally looked up at Darcey again, and after a moment, Darcey turned back. Jordan could just make out the lines and angles of his face in the dim light, seeping in through the blinds. “I don’t want this to change anything,” Jordan murmured. Darcey turned away and rubbed his knuckles against his chin. He hissed out a soft, disbelieving laugh.
“I don’t think that’s possible,” he said softly. Jordan’s hand tightened around his and his throat started to close and eyes teared up. A sharp pain stabbed at his chest so hot and hard that suddenly he couldn’t breathe.

“Darcey,” he said softly, desperately, and his voice caught on itself and wavered on the last syllable. “Don’t say that, please don’t, we can make this work—”

And then Darcey’s hands curled around either side of Jordan’s face, just brushing against his jaw, and he pressed his forehead to Jordan’s and said, “No, no, that’s not what I meant.” His words were too fast and too nervous, pouring out in an attempt to patch whatever it was he’d just broken. Jordan closed his eyes and rested his hands on top of Darcey’s and took in a shuddering, hiccupping breath in an attempt to calm himself. “I’m not leaving. That’s not what I meant. I’m not leaving. I just meant—” He paused and Jordan opened his eyes. Darcey’s were locked on his, a little blurred with tears that still hadn’t fallen and maybe never would. “Fuck, I don’t know what I meant, exactly. But not that. I’m not leaving.”

Jordan closed his eyes again and squeezed one of Darcey’s hands, wrapping his other around the back of the taller man’s neck and holding him close, like he was afraid if he let go, Darcey would disappear. Maybe, somewhere deep down, he was.

“Please stay,” Jordan whispered.

“Yeah,” Darcey whispered back.

The relief washed over Jordan like the warmest, cleanest water, and he could breathe again. He squeezed Darcey’s hand tightly and Darcey squeezed back, and this time, Jordan didn’t hesitate. He crawled into Darcey’s lap and wrapped his arms around the taller man, burying his nose in his shoulder. Darcey wrapped his arms back around him and they stayed still for a long, long time.

“While we’re having this conversation,” Darcey said, quietly, “I have to ask.”

Jordan knew he should look at Darcey, but he was afraid to see the bigger man’s expression, so instead he pushed closer and hugged tighter.

“Yeah,” Jordan murmured. It wasn’t a question. He knew where it was going and it scared the hell out of him.

“You kind of seem to…” Darcey trailed off and Jordan wasn’t sure whether he wanted to laugh or cry at his attempt to be tactful, but there was no tactful way to go about it.


“I’m not looking for an apology,” Darcey said softly. “Just… did… something happen?”

Jordan opened his fists, spread his fingers wide, curled them back into his palms again, nails tight on the callused skin. He opened his mouth. Closed it again.

Darcey deserved to know. Jordan couldn’t ask him to give him everything and then keep himself closed off. It wouldn’t be fair and it wouldn’t be healthy. It didn’t matter if they were dating or sleeping together or just platonic, if Jordan didn’t explain, Darcey would never trust him. Rightly so.

“I tried to get therapy,” he finally started, “but I couldn’t afford it and I was just self-diagnosed.”
“As what? Were you uninsured?” Darcey asked.

“Borderline personality disorder.” Jordan paused and shook his head. “Even with insurance, it was $200 a week. Four times a week, four hours a visit. Fifty bucks each. They have a workbook for it so I bought that to try to work through it on my own, but it wasn’t very helpful. It was supposed to be long term. At least a year. It was impossible. Even now, with a better job. I only make about $300 a week. At the end of the month it wouldn’t even leave me enough for rent.”

He didn’t mention the gender therapist he saw one-on-one. He didn’t mention her condescension, her judgment, her weird sexual focus on his body that made him want to throw up just at the thought of going back to see her. And this, this he didn’t know if he would ever tell. He didn’t want anyone to know. This was the one thing that was his, locked away, dark, dirty, shameful.

“I’m trying,” he said abrupt, desperate. “I know I mess up a lot.” He paused and ran his fingers through his hair. For the first time since Darcey asked, Jordan looked up. The taller man’s face was turned down, looking at his knee, so Jordan couldn’t see his eyes.

“I fuck up a lot,” he repeated. “Daily.” Even though Darcey didn’t look up, he chuckled, and Jordan finally smiled. “But I am, Darcey. I’m trying so hard. I’m trying the best I can. And I am a little better than I used to be.” He sighed. Darcey rested his palm on Jordan’s and they wove their fingers together. “I still suck about a lot of things. A lot. But… if I’m better than I was, that means as long as I keep trying, I’ll keep improving, right?”

The question was more for himself than for Darcey.

“And I’m sorry if I freak you out,” he said. “I… like I said that first morning. I’m not boyfriend material. Maybe not even friends-with-benefits material. And if you…”

Want to call it off, I understand. But he couldn’t bring himself to finish the sentence out loud.

Darcey’s hand tightened on Jordan’s, reassuring, comforting. Jordan swallowed.

“But I meant what I said earlier, Darcey,” he continued. “I love everything about you. I love being with you and near you. And you deserve nothing but kindness and if I ever, ever fuck it up and don’t treat you that way I want you to call me on it because I can’t always see what I’m doing while it’s happening and sometimes I need someone to just get in my face and back me down and shut me up for a second and I know that’s not your job, but I just… I’m trying so hard and I’m sorry I keep fucking up and I –”

And Jordan was about to say And I love you but suddenly Darcey’s lips were on his, one hand on his cheek and the other curled loosely around his wrist. When Darcey pulled away, it wasn’t far, and Jordan could still feel the warmth of Darcey’s skin on his when he whispered, “It’s okay. We’ll figure it out.”

Jordan’s voice was small, hopeful, when he said, “Together?”

Darcey smiled, small, but genuine.

“Yeah,” he said. “Together.”

Chapter End Notes
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When they parted ways the next afternoon, both Darcey and Jordan were nothing but smiles and laughter and kisses.

“Give me a call soon, okay?” Darcey said. He pressed a kiss to the top of Jordan’s head.

“Yeah, of course!” Jordan grinned. “You can call me, too, you know.”

“I’ll text you first, to make sure you’re not asleep.”

Jordan’s grin softened into a smile. “That’s really thoughtful. Thank you.”

Darcey grinned and tilted Jordan’s chin up as Jordan stood on his toes to reach him for a kiss.

“We’ll see each other again soon,” Darcey said.

They didn’t talk for almost two days after. After the first twenty-four hours, Darcey sent a text: Is everything okay?

But it was at ten at night, and Jordan didn’t answer. He was probably at work. That was all.

But he didn’t hear back in the morning, or later that afternoon. He tried again that evening just before six.

You all right?

It took over twenty minutes for Jordan to respond, and it was short.

Yeah, sorry, lots of overtime last night. Probably tonight too. Extra shift tomorrow, so we’ll have to wait til my next day off.

“Oh okay,” Darcey breathed. Work was important. Jordan had bills to pay and things to save for. Darcey couldn’t be upset about that.

The next evening, he and Brett sat down with his parents, and after some time, they all decided it would be best for Darcey to move back into their house for a while. Brett was generous with his space, but it was small even for one person, much less two. Brett drove Darcey’s things over and helped him unpack, and after he went home, Darcey didn’t go to sleep. He sent Jordan another text, a simple one: Have a good night at work.

Jordan didn’t respond. Darcey spent most of the night rearranging his old bedroom and shuffling around posters and pictures and furniture. It was disconcerting to think he was back home again. But it was for the best, and he was settling.

Jordan’s phone went off after he’d been at work for an hour, silently vibrating in his pocket, just
once. Just a text. Couldn’t be that important. He’d get to it later, when he was on his break.

But his phone didn’t once come out of his pocket. He ate a sandwich and drank two cups of coffee and went back to the kitchen to start on the breakfast scones. When he got out three hours late, at nine a.m., he fell asleep on his couch still in his clothes and shoes, his phone still tucked in his pocket, Darcey’s text unseen and unanswered. He’d completely forgotten about it when he woke up, and when he saw it that night, he thought it was from when he was sleeping.

_Thanks =) Hope so! You have a good night, too. Next day off is five days! Sundayyyyy!_

It had taken over twenty-four hours for Jordan to respond. Darcey frowned at the message, confused. The tone was the same as it had always been, so why were they talking so infrequently? Jordan was busy, yes, but surely not so busy he couldn’t respond to a simple text message in a reasonable amount of time?

_We should get together, if you can. I miss you._

But Jordan was already on the clock, his phone on silent and ignored in his back pocket. When he got it on his break, he texted back with one hand:

_Not tomorrow. I’d just be sleeping and it would be a waste of time. Sorry. =(_

Darcey was asleep. When he woke up, he went about his morning routine, making coffee, reading the newspaper, brushing his teeth. By the time he got Jordan’s message, the younger man was already asleep, and didn’t see the response.

_I mean on your day off._

Jordan woke up around one p.m. to use the washroom, and when he checked his phone for the time, saw that he had a new message. He frowned. What was Darcey talking about? They texted so rarely anymore that half the time he didn’t know what the other man was responding to. And even though he was busy, he wasn’t busy enough to ignore how much it hurt. He scrolled back through his phone to see if he could find some context. Once he did, he sent a quick reply.

_Definitely! I’d love to see you on my day off. Sunday whoo!!_

Darcey smiled at the text, sending back one of his own.

_Awesome. Let me know a good time for you and I’ll figure out the buses._

And then, nothing.
Their texts got fewer and further apart as the days went on, and suddenly, it was already Friday and they still didn’t have any concrete plans. Although they still talked, there wasn’t as much back and forth before the conversation went dead. Darcey told himself that Jordan was just busy, and he himself had been busy, too, with his family and job search. That was all. And considering how much farther away he was now that he was with his parents, his only way to get there was a forty minute bus ride, and he wasn’t about to go out that far if there was the chance Jordan wouldn’t even be home. Jordan didn’t have a car either. There were a lot of reasons they couldn’t see each other, all of them valid. But considering the last conversation they’d had face to face, Darcey couldn’t help but worry.

He looked up at the knock on his open door. Ally stood there, one hand on the door, shifting her weight between her feet.

“Hey there, Allycat.”

“D’you want to draw with me?” she asked. “I have extra pencils and stuff.”

Darcey smiled. “You know I can’t draw to save my life.”

“I have coloring books, too!” Ally offered.

Darcey looked down at his phone, then placed it facedown on the bed. “I think I can manage that,” he said. “Do you have crayons?”

“Of course!” she grinned. “Mom got me the big box for school.”

Darcey stood, leaving his phone on the bed and following Ally down the stairs.

“Do you have any homework for Monday?” he asked.

“It’s all done,” she said. She pulled out a chair for her brother and said, “I’m gonna go get you a coloring book. Do you want Hello Kitty or My Little Pony?”

Darcey chuckled. “Surprise me.”

He picked up a crayon with his left hand and slowly, clumsily twirled it between his fingers. He dropped it twice. If he didn’t start using his fingers more often, he was going to lose them.

Maybe he and Ally could make coloring after school a regular thing.

Darcey’s phone vibrated on the bed, once, twice, three times, then went to voicemail.

“Hey, Darcey, it’s Jordan. I, um, oh god, I’m so sorry I’ve been so distant this past week. I’m not ignoring you. I swear. I’ve just spent every moment either working or sleeping and just… fuck, I’m so sorry. Please call me back. I want to try to figure out a good time for us Sunday. If you still want to. I do.”

Jordan hung up and sighed, staring at the phone screen for a few moments before dropping his
hands back to the table, phone and all. He threw his head back over the back of the chair and
swallowed hard as he stared at the break room ceiling. If he’d messed this up, he’d never forgive
himself. His jaw tensed and his eyes squeezed closed, the beginnings of tears pricking at his
eyelashes.

No, no, no. He gently tapped the sides of his face a few times. He didn’t know for sure whether
he’d messed it up. Darcey had been busy too, and their schedules just never seemed to line up
right. Darcey still wanted to see him or he wouldn’t keep texting, right? He texted less, now, but
he still did, and if he didn’t want to contact Jordan, he wouldn’t even be doing that.

*He’s probably texting less because you never respond on time.*

Jordan swallowed, just barely getting past the tightness in his throat. He glanced at the clock. It
was time to start his shift.

He was on coffee duty tonight and Alice was his cashier, a small, lithe, young blonde woman with
bright blue eyes and freckles. Jordan had often thought if someone put her in a frock she’d look
exactly like Wonderland’s namesake.

Alice was in already, an hour before him, and he tried to put on his best smile and stand up straight, but she could tell immediately something was wrong.

“Are you okay, Jordan?”

He shook his head and held up his hand. She held hers up, as if to prove they were empty.
“Okay,” she said. “You just seemed sad.”

Jordan chuckled ruefully and shrugged.

“Well, if you need anything, let me know?”

He nodded and turned to the espresso machine to pull and time a practice shot. The two stood in
companionable quiet for a few minutes before he said, “So, I’m kind of seeing this guy, and… and
I thought he was really into me, and I *really* like him, but we… we never talk anymore.”

Alice looked up from the magazine she always kept under the register for slow times, peering over
her rounded reading glasses. She’d managed to pull it off by saying that it had articles and reviews
of new café products and she was basically doing research for the company, which was true. But
Jordan was still impressed that she’d managed it.

“Why?”

Jordan started and looked up. “What?”

“Why don’t you talk anymore?”

"We’re both so busy,” he said. “I work nights and he does days and our schedules just never line
up.”

“Hm,” Alice said.

“What?”

“Well… I was in a similar situation with someone I was seeing once. We really liked each other
but… we couldn’t work it out. I need to be able to see my partners on a regular basis and it wasn’t
happening.”
Sometimes Darcey texted first. Now, it was usually about superficial things, because he couldn’t handle putting his feelings on the line anymore. An interview result, updates on where he was with the state insurance program (nowhere), if Trader Joe’s had a new product or something Jordan liked was on sale somewhere.

Sometimes Jordan texted first, though not nearly as often. That was the only reason Darcey still tried. Because if Jordan didn’t want to talk, he wouldn’t take the time to text, as infrequent as they were.

Sometimes Darcey’s texts were short and simple and a little too honest, like the one he’d just sent.

_I miss you._

Darcey never expected an answer right away. Jordan was sleeping while he was out and at work while he was in bed staring at the ceiling. But this time, he responded within minutes.

_I miss you too. I’m so sorry. I’ve just been so busy at work. I put in over 60 hours this week and when I’m not working, I’m sleeping. Tomorrow, though, I promise. You can come over any time at all once I’m home as long as you don’t mind me sleeping for a while if it’s early._

Darcey moved his phone to his left hand. His thumb was slow and clumsy and he made a few typos, but his coloring time with Ally had been helping and his movements were smoother and more accurate.

_I know. Things have been busy for me, too._

Jordan’s reply was much quicker.

_What time do you want to come over tomorrow?_

_What’s good for you?_

A few minutes passed before Jordan replied.

_Let’s assume I get home around nine like I have been? Any time after that, really. Just call me first to be sure you’re not coming over to an empty apartment. Don’t text. I want to wake up if I’m sleeping when you try to contact me._

Darcey smiled, and texted simply,

_Will do._

He snapped his phone closed and slipped it in his pocket. It was getting on seven p.m., so Jordan would be out to work at any time. For a moment, he stayed still on the bed, unsure of what to do next. His day was pretty much over. Then his door creaked open and Lexi poked her head in.
“Knock, Lexi,” Darcey said.

She knocked. Darcey rolled his eyes, but smiled. “What’s up?”

“I was wondering if you want to make some cookies with me and Ally? We were thinking chocolate chip oatmeal.”

Darcey’s smile widened and he pushed himself up. “I’m always up for baking with my sisters. Do you have a recipe?”

“We’re using Mom’s cookie book.”

“The holiday one?”

Lexi nodded.

“Awesome. That’s the best one.”

“I know!” Lexi pushed the door open a little more and stepped inside. She opened her mouth, then her eyes darted over her brother’s face, down to his shoulders, and she grinned.

“So, you fixed things with your boyfriend?”

The question took him so off guard, she may as well have physically pushed him back.

“What are you talking about?” Darcey asked carefully. Lexi sighed and rolled her eyes like he was the most exasperating person to exist. Maybe she’s right and you are.

“Darcey, come on, I’m not stupid. I’ve seen the way you hover around your phone and I’m not the only one who noticed you went from really happy and upbeat to being really sad and stressed all the time.” She grinned and poked her chest with her thumb. “I’m just the only one who figured out why.”

Darcey flexed his fingers nervously. He wasn’t ashamed of Jordan, and if he were Darcey’s partner, he’d be proud to say so. But he wasn’t. So how did Darcey explain a situation like his to his not-even-fourteen year old sister?

“We’re… not dating,” he finally said. “He’s not my boyfriend. We’re just friends.”

The look she gave him said very clearly that she wasn’t buying it.

“Darcey,” she said slowly, as if trying to explain something to a small child. “If it’s okay for me to have a girlfriend, it’s okay for you to have a boyfriend. You don’t have to hide it anymore. Mom and Dad know, Mom told Ally, and even if Brett doesn’t know he won’t care because he’s the nicest person in the world. If you have a boyfriend, I want to meet him!”

Darcey rubbed the back of his neck as he looked down at her. Her arms were crossed tightly over her chest, her lips set in a stern pout.

“Speaking of your girlfriend, have you told Mom and Dad, yet?”

Her posture got a bit unsure and she said, “We’re not talking about me.”

“We are now,” Darcey said. “They’re more than okay with me. They’ll have no issue with you. They’ll just want you to be safe and happy.”

“But –”
“Lexi,” Darcey said sternly. She flinched a bit, but didn’t back down. Darcey softened his voice. “Mom and Dad need to know if you’re dating someone. That way, if something happens, they can help you and make sure you’re okay.”

She raised an eyebrow and gestured toward her brother with an open hand.

He could not believe he was being outsmarted by a thirteen year old.

“My situation’s a little different –”

“So you do admit you’re seeing someone.” She wore the smuggest smile Darcey had ever seen.

“That’s not what I said. I said my situation is different, and that means if I were dating someone and something bad were to happen, I could handle it myself. And you’re a tough kid, I know that, but –”

“Darcey, I am fourteen.”

“Almost fourteen. Not until a few months from now. And stop interrupting me.”

She huffed and muttered, “Same thing.”

“Lexi,” he said, softly, but sternly. “I just want you to be safe. You’ve never had a girlfriend or a boyfriend before, right?”

“Well, no, but –”

“It’s easy to get hurt,” he said. “I’ve seen a lot of people hurt in a lot of different ways over the years and I don’t want you to be one of them. I love you, kiddo. I’m just trying to make sure you’re okay.”

She didn’t speak, but the annoyance faded from her posture and she smiled. He ruffled her hair and she squeaked indignantly.

“If and when I get a boyfriend, you’ll be the first to know, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Now, come on,” Darcey said. “We have some cookies to bake.”

Lexi grinned. “Bet I can beat you down the stairs!” she said quickly, and she took off at a run. Darcey chuckled and followed.

The sun was bright and hot overhead when Jordan finally got out of work at just before ten on Sunday morning. He ruffled his hair and shook his head as he cut through the parking lot and around the back way. His feet were heavy with exhaustion but his steps were quick, although by the time he reached the stairs he almost had to crawl up because he could barely keep his feet moving and his eyes open. He let himself in and collapsed on the couch, kicking off his shoes as he pulled out his phone.

Home and going to sleep. Not leaving the rest of the day so come over whenever. Call when on your way, don’t worry about waking me. I want you to.
He’d barely gotten one sock off before he was fast asleep, his arm hanging off the couch and the phone just barely resting on his fingertips. He didn’t see the message Darcey sent back.

*“I’m so sorry. I can’t make it. Ally fell out of a tree in the backyard and broke her arm this morning. We’re at the hospital now. Depending on how long everything takes I’ll try to be over tonight. I’ll call when I know.”*

Darcey sighed heavily and rubbed at his forehead with the heel of his hand. He didn’t just want to see Jordan, he needed to, because they needed to talk about this and they needed to figure out if this was going to be the normal course of their relationship. But Ally, while she was toughing through it as best she could, was in so much pain and he couldn’t just leave his baby sister behind. Family had to come first. Always.

Jordan would understand that, right?

Darcey wasn’t expecting a response. He slid his phone back in his pocket and left the waiting room to go back to where Ally was waiting for her first x-ray. The casting itself would take less than twenty minutes, but they had to get to that point, first. X-rays, sedation, bone setting. Darcey took a deep breath and relaxed his face.

He didn’t want his little sister to think that any of his problems were her fault.

It took hours. It was late afternoon by the time Darcey, Ally, and Jess were able to leave the hospital. He gently ruffled Aly’s hair as she carefully poked the bright green cast.

“You did a good job back there,” he said. She grinned up at him.

“Thanks.” It was a little slurred and she walked a little slower than usual as the medication wore off.

“Let’s get you home,” Jess said. She carefully wrapped an arm around Ally’s shoulders, hugging her close. She whispered, “Maybe we can stop and get some ice cream.”

Ally grinned. Darcey paused, hanging back.

“You two go ahead to the car,” he said. “I have to make a quick phone call.”

“Oh,” Jess said. “You remember where we parked?”

“Yeah.”

Darcey turned away as his mother and sister headed back to the car. He pressed the six, Jordan’s speed dial number. When Jordan answered, his voice was soft and slurred.

“H’lo?”

“Jordan? It’s Darcey. Did you get my text?”

“What? I… what text?”

“Okay,” Darcey said. “That’s probably for the better. Don’t worry about it when you see it, it’s
“Okay? I’m sorry, you woke me up and I’m not very smart yet.”

Darcey chuckled. “That’s okay. You still up to having me come over later?”

“Yeah!” Jordan said.

Darcey almost regretted it when he said, “Okay. Because we need to talk about some things.”

The line went silent.

“Jordan?”

“I’m here.” Jordan’s voice was clearer, now, obviously awake. “Yeah, I… I guess you’re right. What time?”

“Well, if I leave from where I am now I can be there in about twenty minutes?”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay.”

“Okay. I’ll see you soon.”

Darcey hung up and met Jess and Ally at the car. They were already inside, getting the air conditioner warmed up. Darcey knocked on the driver’s window. Jess rolled it down.

“Something’s come up,” he said. “I’ve got to go see someone. I can take the bus. Go ahead and go home without me.”

“Don’t be silly, Darcey,” Jess laughed. “Get in. I’ll give you a ride.”

Darcey smiled. “Thanks, Mom. It’s just a straight shot down McDowell and then a left down a residential street for a few blocks.” He slid into the passenger’s seat and closed the door behind him.

“Seatbelts, everyone!” Jess said.

Ally snapped hers in place. “Bingo!”

Jess didn’t ask Darcey where he was going or what he was doing or why it was so important, and Darcey was so grateful, although he suspected his mother had an idea of what was going on, anyway. Darcey didn’t speak much, leaving the conversation to Jess and Ally. They talked about Ally’s school and her friends and if she was thinking about trying to get into honors classes for fifth grade next year. What would have been a twenty minute bus ride was barely ten by car, and Darcey kissed his mother’s cheek and opened the back door for Ally so she could take his seat. He ruffled her hair and closed the door behind her, waving them off as they pulled out of the apartment’s parking lot.

He knocked, softly at first, but no answer. Had Jordan fallen back asleep in the past ten minutes?

Darcey slowly pulled his phone out of his pocket. His thumb hovered over the six. After a moment of doubt, he called. He’d come all this way and he wasn’t about to stand around in the heat in front of a locked door.
Darcey’s shoulders relaxed when Jordan answered with a slurred, “H’lo?”

“Hey. I’m here.”

A rustling, then he murmured, “Shit, I’m sorry. I fell back asleep. Give me a second and I’ll come get the door.”

Darcey hung up and put his phone back in his pocket. A few moments later, Jordan opened the door.

He carried himself like his body weighed thousands of pounds and it took monumental effort to move his feet. Dark black and blue circles hung under his eyes, only half-open, squinting in the bright, early afternoon light. He wore only a too-big t-shirt and a pair of boxers so Darcey quickly moved inside, closing the door behind him. Jordan gently collapsed against Darcey as he closed it, wrapping his arms around him loosely, like any more effort was too much work. He rested his head against Darcey’s shoulder as the taller man wrapped his arms back around him and leaned against the door.

“God, I missed you,” Jordan murmured.

"I missed you, too,” Darcey whispered back. “But we have to talk.”

Jordan’s arms tightened briefly, then loosened again. “Yeah,” he whispered. “I know. Come sit on the couch with me?”

“All right.”

Jordan nudged his shoes out of the way with his foot and plopped down on the far end of the couch. Darcey sat on the edge opposite, leaving the middle cushion between them.

“Is everything okay?” Jordan asked meekly.

“I don’t know,” Darcey said. He looked up from his hands into Jordan’s face. “You tell me. I’ve been trying, Jordan, but if you’re not going to –”

“I’ve been trying.” Jordan said. His voice cracked, sharp, because he had been, he’d been trying so hard, but like always, it wasn’t good enough. “And I’m sorry I’ve been so… so fucking AWOL recently. I told you, I’ve been working so much overtime –”

“I know,” Darcey said. “And I’m not blaming you. I’m not saying this is your fault. I’ve had a lot going on, too, and I haven’t been the best at keeping in touch either. But… we need to talk honestly about this. Is this what it’s going to be? All the time?”

Jordan bit the inside of his lip and looked down, wrapping his arms around himself. “I don’t know,” he said honestly. “Sometimes things are like last week and sometimes things are like this week. I can never tell. I never know. My work schedule is kind of unpredictable.”

They both fell silent. Finally, Darcey spoke.

“Maybe, then, for now, we should… we should just call things off.”

Jordan took in a deep, shuddering breath, but didn’t cry.

“You are, Darcey thought. But instead, he said, “No, it’s… I’m not in the place for a relationship.
Especially if it’s going to be like this. I need stability in my life right now. Not…” he trailed off, not wanting to finish the sentence. His throat tightened and his hands shook so much harder than usual. He ran one through his short hair, resting it awkwardly at the back of his neck.

Jordan nodded. “I understand.” He tried to keep his voice steady but couldn’t stop the tearful waver that pushed itself in at the last syllable. Darcey’s brow drew down tight and he looked over at Jordan again, curled up into himself, staring at his feet.

“We can still talk,” Darcey said softly. “We can still hang out. I just think maybe we should…”

“But do anything else,” Jordan finished. “Just be regular friends without any benefits.”

At least Darcey wasn’t cutting him off completely. At least there was that.

But when Darcey said, “I mean, let’s be honest… it wasn’t really a real relationship anyway,” it was like a knife in Jordan’s chest, because it had meant everything in the world to him, but if Darcey could brush it off just like that…

Jordan didn’t notice the tears welling in Darcey’s eyes as he turned away, wiping at each of them with the heel of his hand. Darcey took a deep breath. He cleared his throat.

“I care about you a lot, Jordan,” he said. “I really do. But I just… if it’s going to be like this all the time…”

“I understand,” Jordan sniffed and wiped at his face with the back of his hand. “I… you can say no. But can I have one last hug before you go?”

Darcey took the question as his cue to leave. “Of course.” He stood, awkwardly stuffing his hands in his pockets. “I still want to be friends, Jordan. I do. I just think that neither of us is in a good place for anything else right now.”

“Maybe once our lives settle down, we could…” Jordan left the try again unspoken, because if he didn’t ask the question, he couldn’t be rejected.

Darcey swallowed, his mouth tight, his throat wet. “I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe. We have to see when we get there.”

Jordan looked down and nodded, standing up. The two men stood there, face to face but arms’ length apart, awkwardly looking everywhere but each other.

“I guess I’d better go,” Darcey whispered.

“You don’t have to,” Jordan said.

But Darcey needed to get out of the apartment, he needed to be on his own for a while, because although they’d only known each other two weeks and had only ever physically been together for half of that time, that time had been so wonderful, so happy. Losing that now… he needed some space to deal with it. “I should,” he said.

“Okay,” Jordan whispered. He hesitantly, nervously opened his arms to offer Darcey that one final hug. Darcey’s warm arms wrapped tightly around him, holding him close, not the half-hearted hug Jordan had expected but a full body, all-engulfing hug. Jordan gripped the back of
Darcey’s shirt so hard his nails pricked his palms through the fabric, curling in as close as he could while he still had the chance.

But then, finally, it ended, as all things end, and Darcey pulled away. His hands lingered on Jordan’s shoulders, but not for long before he shoved them back in his pockets.

“I…” Darcey started. Jordan looked up, hopeful. Maybe he changed his mind?

“I’m sorry,” Darcey finished. Jordan’s brow fell and he dropped his head.

“Yeah,” he said. “Me, too.”

Chapter End Notes

Yooo come visit me at indecentpause.tumblr.com!
Darcey had thought the next few days would be a little easier now that he knew exactly where he and Jordan stood, but it was even worse than the second-guessing and worrying and wondering. Finally, on Tuesday, he called Brett to ask for advice.

“Well,” Brett said, “I have one more class that starts in about five minutes. Do you want to meet me somewhere in about an hour or so?”

“Wherever,” Darcey said. “Mom doesn’t need the car today, so I can borrow it.”

“How about the student union at my school, then?” Brett asked. “That’s about halfway from home for both of us.”

“All right.”

The student union was loud and bustling with midday foot traffic. All but two of the tables were claimed, so Darcey grabbed one of the last in the far north corner. He’d wait until Brett got there to hold onto it before he got something from the coffee bar.

Darcey had been so distracted with thoughts of Jordan and second guessing about whether he’d done the right thing and maybe even regrets, so he hadn’t had the head to bring a book in case he got there early. But it was only ten minutes. He’d just play with his phone and people watch until then.

The time passed slowly, but eventually Darcey spotted Brett coming in the side door and waved him over. Brett waved back, adjusting his backpack over his shoulder. He dropped it to the floor as he sat down across from his cousin.

“So, what’s going on?” Brett asked. “You were pretty vague on the phone.”

“Do you remember Jordan?”

“Iffy’s friend, yeah. The guy you went home with. Whatever ended up happening with that? You’ve been pretty tight-lipped.”

Darcey sighed and dropped his head to the table, weaving his fingers behind his neck.

“That’s not good,” Brett whispered.

Darcey shook his head. He inhaled deeply and sat back up, and started to explain from the beginning.

He told Brett about the first week and how perfect it was, how the friends-with-benefits thing with someone he connected with ended up being exactly what he needed. He told Brett about the night of the flashback and the conversation they’d had. Then the week with hardly any contact. Then, the breakup, or whatever it was, over the weekend.
“Are you still friends?” Brett asked.

“I think so,” Darcey said. “We haven’t talked much since then. Just a text every now and then about stupid, unimportant things. We haven’t seen each other.”

Brett bit his lip thoughtfully. “You know… you’re taking this pretty hard considering your relationship. Are you sure that’s all you were? It wasn’t going somewhere more serious?”

Darcey lifted his hands, dropped them back to the table. He’d thought it, he’d known it, but he’d never said it aloud.

“Yeah,” he said. “I think it was.”

“Do you want to try again?”

“I don’t know,” Darcey said. “I don’t know if I can manage that.”

“Fair enough,” Brett said. He paused. Darcey was shifting in his seat, tapping his fingers against the table, glancing about at all the people around them. So Brett said, “Let’s go get some coffee and find somewhere quieter to talk about this.”

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AnarchyForSale: Iffy. Iffy please be online. Iffy I need to talk to you.

AnarchyForSale: Darcey broke up with me. I think. Can you break up with a friend with benefits?

AnarchyForSale: Iffy you’re the only one I can talk to about this please.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: Jesus, Jordan, give a person time to respond!

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: I’m here, are you okay?

AnarchyForSale: I love him, Iffy.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: Oh no.

AnarchyForSale: No not like a hardcore crush like before. I really really love him. And he said he’s not in a place to date right now so I have to respect that and I’m not going to try to pull him back but it still hurts so fucking much.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: Oh fuck. That’s even worse.

AnarchyForSale: Yeah.

Jordan sat, alone in his bedroom, alone on the red sheets that were on his bed the night he met Darcey, in the soft blue light of the room that always softened the hard lines of his face so his appearance matched his gentle inside. Everything reminded Jordan of him, his Super Nintendo, Pokémon, Monty Python, every movie they’d fallen asleep to together, and even hash browns and omelets.
AnarchyForSale: I almost wished you hadn’t introduced us.

AnarchyForSale: But only almost. That first week was the best of my life.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: But only the first?

AnarchyForSale: Well the second was the week from hell. I only left the house to work and when I wasn’t working I was sleeping. I’m pretty sure that’s why Darcey left.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: Are you sure? Because that doesn’t sound like him. There was nothing else?

AnarchyForSale: No? Not on my end. He just said he didn’t think either of us was in the right place for a relationship right now.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: Was it starting to get serious? Is he afraid of commitment?


AnarchyForSale: About the serious part.

AnarchyForSale: Maybe this is my fault. We did kind of do everything backwards. Maybe I shouldn’t have slept with him that first night.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: Maybe, maybe not. But what’s done is done and you have to figure out what you’re going to do next. I think you should both take some time to yourselves to figure your shit out, maybe three or four days or so, and then sit down and talk about it one more time and see where you stand, if he’s willing to do that.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: And if he’s not, you have to be ready to start moving on.

“Yeah,” Jordan whispered. His eyes started welling up again, an almost constant stream of tears muddling his vision, even though he’d managed to get them to stop falling. He rubbed at his eyes with his knuckles and sniffled. He shook his head.

AnarchyForSale: I guess you’re right. Thanks, Iffy. Today is day two so I’ll send him a text tomorrow? Or do you think that’s too soon?

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: I think that should be safe. Have you been talking in the meantime?

AnarchyForSale: Not much. Just dumb stupid pointless texts once or twice a day. But nothing like before.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: Try to have the conversation in person if you can. It’s harder but then you can read facial cues and body language and with stuff like this, that’s really important.

AnarchyForSale: Okay. I have tomorrow off. Hopefully he can do it then. I just need to know what’s going on as soon as I can so I know what I need to do.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: And if he doesn’t give you a concrete answer, tell him that.
AnarchyForSale: Thanks Iffy. This is why I came to you. Everyone else would have just said fuck him. But you give good advice.

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: Yeah, well. I’ve learned from experience what not to do and figured out what to do that way. Just glad you can learn from my mistakes. :)

Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen: Give me a call after you guys talk and let me know how it went.

Jordan sent Darcey a text the next morning, just after eleven, giving him plenty of time to wake up and have breakfast and see his sisters off to school.

*Can we talk about this?*

Darcey’s text back was sharp and succinct, but positive.

*When?*

Jordan almost flinched. Darcey’s tone was always a little sharp in text, even if his intent had been kind, but it seemed even harsher, now.

*Today? Any time. I’m off.*

*My mom has the car today, so I’ll have to take the bus. It’ll be a while.*

*I’ll be here all day.*

No reply. Then, fifteen minutes later, finally, Darcey responded.

*I’m on my way. Will you be awake or should I call you?*

*I’m awake.*

Jordan put his phone down on the table and ran his hands through his hair, then ruffled it, fluffing up his dark curls in aggravation. What was he even going to say? *Please take me back? Give me a chance to fix this?* He hadn’t done anything wrong. Darcey even said he didn’t blame him. It was terrible circumstances at a terrible time and there was nothing either of them could do to fix it right now.

But he had to try. He *had* to. Even if Darcey said no, and it didn’t work out for good, he had to try.

He paced the apartment while he waited. Things had been so much easier when Darcey was living with his cousin. They were so much closer and it was so much more *convenient*. But it was what it was, and as it was, Jordan had to wait.

Darcey’s knock was quiet, almost timid, so unlike his usual sharp rapping that Jordan thought it might be someone else until he opened the door. He took half a step forward to give him a hug, out of reflex, but then he stopped and stepped back.

“Thanks for coming over,” he said. “Come in.”

“Yeah,” Darcey said.
“Sit at the table?” Jordan asked. “I’ll make some coffee.”

He stood by the coffee maker, leaning against the counter while he waited for the coffee to brew, leaving Darcey in the space between the kitchen and living room at the table. Darcey had no idea what to expect, but he’d talked things out long and hard with Brett, and he knew exactly what he wanted. Hopefully Jordan wanted the same thing. Hopefully Jordan would forgive him for ending it.

He looked up when Jordan placed a mug of coffee down in front of him.

“You like it black, yeah?”


“So,” he started. He stopped.

“So.”

“I… fuck, Darcey, I miss you so much.” Jordan had had his entire speech planned out and it was going to be eloquent and beautiful, but now that Darcey was actually sitting across from him, he’d been reduced to a poorly spoken mess. “I know you said you aren’t in a place to date right now. And I respect that. I do. I really do. But… I just… I miss you,” he said again, hoping that would be enough to explain how he felt, because he didn’t know if he could come up with anything else.

“I miss you, too,” Darcey said. Jordan looked up, eyebrows raised hopefully, but not daring to smile, too afraid of getting his hopes up too high.

The silence was heavy and thick in the air. Finally, Jordan cut through it with a soft, meek question. “Can we try again? I’ll be better about communicating. I have weeks like the last one a lot but I’ll… I’ll be better about texting regularly and checking my messages and… and I’m so sorry I made you feel ignored, Darcey, or like I wasn’t safe, or –”

“You’re not the only one at fault,” Darcey said. “I may not have been as bad as you, but I was still pretty awful about keeping in touch regularly.”

Jordan flinched, but he relaxed when he looked up and saw Darcey’s tiny smile.

“There might be times we don’t see each other for a while when that happens again,” Jordan said. “Because it will. I won’t lie to you. But I’ll… I’ll actually check my messages when I’m on my break and stuff so we can still talk.”

“That’s all I ask, Jordan,” Darcey said softly.

“And we can… if you want to open it up, we can. If that would be better for you.” Jordan twirled his coffee mug around once, then looked back up at Darcey. “I mean, I’m poly. So I understand, and I wouldn’t… I understand that being with more than one person doesn’t mean you’d like me any less.”

Darcey’s eyes darted over Jordan’s face, his expression calm. “Is that what you want?”

“No… not really,” Jordan said. “At least not right now. If we…” He swallowed. “We can reassess later. Things change. But I’d be okay with it now if it meant we could be together.”
Darcey reached over the small table and gently took Jordan’s hand from his coffee mug, pulling it to the middle of the table as he straightened. “I’m not going to ask you to do something you don’t want to. That’s not polyamory. That’s me being an asshole.”

Jordan chuckled, wet, but hopeful. He shrugged.

“I want to try this again,” Darcey said. A bright smile spread across Jordan’s face and the wetness in his eyes welled up and blurred his vision, but this time from happiness, finally.

“Me, too,” Jordan said.

“But I think we should… we should start over from the beginning. Not erase everything that’s happened, but like… just date for a while. Exclusively? We did everything out of order the first time.”

Jordan nodded, curling his hand over his mouth. “Yes,” he finally managed. “I am totally okay with that.” He laughed, sniffled, and rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand. “I would love that.”

Darcey brought Jordan’s hand close and kissed his palm, turned it and kissed his knuckles.

“How about I take you on one now?”

Jordan’s smile widened. “I’d love that. Why don’t we go out to lunch? We can go to CounterCulture and you can see where I’ve been living all this time.”

Darcey chuckled. “All right. Lunch sounds great. I’m sure we have a lot to catch up on.”

When they got down the stairs, Jordan wove his fingers in with Darcey’s, but Darcey gently pulled away and slid his hands in his pockets. Jordan looked up with a worried frown. “Darcey?”

“Sorry, I… it’s not you,” he said quickly. “It’s just, I’m not… I’m still working on the coming out thing. I’m not…”

Jordan slipped his hand in his own pocket. “I understand. Sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

“But this is a safe area,” Jordan continued. “For… for when you’re ready.” Coming out was a process, one Darcey had only started a few weeks ago. Jordan had been out his whole life, but he’d heard stories. The longer one was in the closet, the harder it was to break out of it.

“So, this BashBack thing,” Darcey said. “Tell me about it.”

“Well, there was this one time at the Phoenix Pride parade a few years back,” Jordan started. He pulled his hands out of his pocket and threw them wide. “So it’s this huge, long route, and everyone’s happy and laughing and there are rainbows and glitter and shit everywhere, right? But we knew there were going to be protesters because there always are. So, we got ourselves a spot in the parade up near the front, because if politicians and companies can do it, an actual trans rights organization deserves a spot too, right?”

“Of course,” Darcey said. They paused at the stoplight, waiting for the signal to walk.
“So we have these big ten gallon buckets and drumsticks and we start with a drumline we’d rehearsed. Nothing fancy, because very few of us were actually musicians. I wasn’t.” Jordan laughed. “But we’re going along, drumming and chanting ‘Fuck Bush! Fuck Cheney!’ Blah blah blah whatever. Then about halfway along the route, we see them with signs and bullhorns and t-shirts with out of context Bible quotes and shit like ‘Fags burn in hell.’ Just like we knew we would. So we stop. We pull out of the parade and stop right in front of them, drumming as loud and off beat as we can to drown them out while two of our taller members hold this bigass rainbow flag in front of them to block out their signs.”

Darcey laughed and clapped once in approval. “I love it,” he said.

“So, like, that’s the kind of stuff we do. People just think we’re scary because we’re an anarchist organization but we’re really just a bunch of do-gooding nerds.”

“Are you an anarchist?” Darcey asked.

Jordan smiled ruefully. “I can’t afford to be an anarchist,” he said.

Darcey laughed again.

“So, hey, can we talk about something that’s important now?” Jordan asked.

Darcey looked up. Jordan was smiling, a little nervously, a little hopefully. “What’s going on?”

“I was just wondering if you’d had any luck finding a therapist in all this time.”

Darcey’s smile faded and he sighed and looked back ahead. The light changed to green and they crossed. “I only submitted the paperwork a week and a half ago. Government paperwork takes a lot longer to process than that.”

“Was it Medicaid or ValueOptions?”

“Value what?” They paused on the sidewalk at the edge of the parking lot. The streets were empty but for the occasional car driving by.

“It’s specifically for mental health. I was on it for a while before I got health insurance through work. It’s used a lot less so it goes a lot quicker, and since you need it for a therapist, it’s worth a try. Your anxiety medication will actually work in your favor. They’ll speed it along because it’s documented that you need it already.”

“Why were you getting mental health care?” Darcey asked. “I thought you said you couldn’t afford the therapy.”

Jordan’s face softened and he sighed, but he was smiling. Darcey shrugged.

“For gender dysphoria,” he said quietly. He gestured at himself, then threw his hands out wide, the most obvious nonverbal ‘no shit’ Darcey had ever seen. Jordan's smile faded and his shoulders curled in toward his chest. He looked down. His arms and jaw were tight with tension.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” Darcey said, turning away again. He covered his face with his hand. God, Darcey, you are an asshole.

“I don’t… I mean, I don’t know anything about trans issues other than what we’ve discussed, and you don’t really talk about it much. I… I never thought to ask because I thought that would be invasive? But it always struck me as a physical issue rather than a mental one, I guess. I’m sorry.”
“It’s kind of an all-encompassing, everything issue.” Jordan’s voice wasn’t angry or confrontational. Just sad. He choked a little a he spoke, like he was trying not to cry, but his eyes were dry. He sighed and gently patted his cheeks. “I’m sorry, this is a really awesome day. I shouldn’t be bringing it down like this.”

“No,” Darcey said. “It’s important. And I’m the one who brought it up, so.” He took a step closer and started to raise his hand to touch his arm in an attempt at comfort. He dropped it again. “I’m just an idiot. I’m sorry.”

“You’re not,” Jordan scolded gently. “I wish more people were like you, actually. You see it for exactly what it is. My body doesn’t match my head and I’m working on fixing it, the end.” They still stood side by side on the sidewalk, no closer to CounterCulture than they had been when they first crossed the street. Jordan scuffed his shoe against the sidewalk. Darcey smiled.

“I never…” Jordan began. He cleared his throat and looked down, then back up so Darcey could see him mumbling in case he couldn’t hear. “I never told you how much your reaction that first night meant to me, Darcey.” Although his head was tilted up, Jordan gaze didn’t quite meet Darcey’s. “Just the…” Jordan paused, swallowed, then finally met Darcey’s eyes. “Just, you take me exactly as I am and you see and recognize me exactly how I identify, and… not a lot of people do, especially when it comes to anything even remotely sexual. Just… thank you, is what I’m trying to say, I guess.”

Darcey gently, hesitantly wrapped one arm around Jordan’s shoulders and pulled him into a tentative half-hug. It was brief, but when he moved away, the nervousness in Jordan’s body was gone. He smiled.

Darcey didn’t know what to say, so he settled for, “You’re welcome.”

He’d never thought his reaction was anything special, just him being a decent person. Jordan was just… Jordan. Maybe his body didn’t match up with his head, but that didn’t change who he was. But when Darcey thought about Campbell’s reaction when he came out and Robinson’s when he came back, it hit a little closer. Jordan wasn’t like him. It was physical and visible and not something he could hide. He was once a little boy who’d been constantly labeled a little girl and he had to go through female puberty. Darcey didn’t know what Jordan looked like before he started hormone therapy – and he didn’t care – but it was possible he didn’t always pass so clearly as male.

Jordan was probably the bravest person he knew.

Darcey gently ran his knuckles down the back of Jordan’s forearm, and when he leaned a little closer and smiled, as tentative as it was, Darcey was pretty sure Jordan understood what he wanted to say.

They began to walk again. Jordan’s body was still tight. Tense. Almost afraid. Should Darcey ask? Should he drop it and try to bring it up later? He’d never been tactful or good at emotional talks, so his mouth said, “Jordan, did something happen?”

Jordan stopped walking again. Darcey paused beside him. Every muscle in Jordan’s body was tight, his shoulders trembling, his hands shoved deep in his pockets.

“Y –” He choked on the sound and fell silent. Darcey turned to face him.

“Jordan?” he asked softly.

Jordan nodded once, curtly. His eyes were still locked on his feet. He didn’t elaborate.
“Do you want to –”

“Not here.” His voice was ragged, rough. “I can’t. I… I can’t, Darcey, not while –”

“It’s okay.” When Darcey rested his hand on Jordan’s arm, the smaller man deflated, but the line of his jaw was still tense.

“I’m sorry for… whatever it is I –”

“No, no.” Jordan shook his head. He rested his hand on Darcey’s and Darcey tensed reflexively, but forced himself to relax. Although he didn’t know what was going on, Jordan needed him, and he needed to be there. “It’s not you, Darcey. You didn’t do anything. Please don’t apologize.”

“Okay,” Darcey whispered. Both stood still and silent for a few moments, then Darcey broke it with, “Do you just want to call it off and go home for now?”

Jordan looked back up with a little half-smile. “Absolutely not. Let’s just… walk a little slower and not get in line until I have my shit back together.”

Darcey half-smiled back and nodded.

The café was quiet, with only a few lone people with laptops scattered about, students working on papers and writers working on novels and businesspeople working on projects. Jordan could actually hear the music playing overhead, a soft, jazzy tune. Usually there was too much noise to make it out. The TV art piece in the corner was off, the painted woman trying to break out plastered against a black screen instead of the usual static and images. A few new paintings hung on the walls – they must have switched them out this morning after Jordan left.

Alice was working the espresso machine, his manager Jenna, the register.

“What are you doing out here?” Jordan asked. “Don’t you have paperwork and stuff to do?”

“Yes,” Jenna said. “But we had a call off and nobody could cover. We didn’t want to call you because you haven’t had a day off in over two weeks and we weren’t about to ask you to work a double.”


“So what can I get you two?”

They ordered sandwiches and iced lattes and Jenna rang them up while Alice made up their drinks. By the time Jordan had finished signing the credit card receipt, they were up on the bar waiting.

“Thanks, Alice,” Jordan grinned. He grabbed both drinks, handing Darcey’s over. “You’re the best.”

“I know,” Alice laughed, waving him away. “I’ll bring out your sandwiches when they’re ready.”

Jordan didn’t miss her not-so-discreet glance in Darcey’s direction, though Darcey seemed to. The smaller man shot her a look as they turned away that clearly said, Don’t embarrass me. She raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.
They left her at the bar and headed into the tiny back room, grabbing a small table for two near the bookshelf. Jordan took a sip of his coffee, watching Darcey as he looked around almost nervously, taking the room in.

“Are you okay?” Jordan asked gently.

“It’s embarrassing to admit, but… I’ve never actually been on a date before,” Darcey said. “I have no idea what I’m doing.”

Jordan laughed and put his cup down, crossing his arms and leaning on the table. “It’s just hanging out and flirting, basically,” Jordan said.

“I don’t think I even know how to flirt,” Darcey chuckled.

“You were doing all right for yourself at the party.”

Darcey’s ears warmed and turned a bit pink, but he grinned. Jordan stretched his hand out across the table for Darcey, palm up, should he want to take it. He didn’t, but he did move his hand a little closer, their knuckles pressing together, warm and sharp.

“I come bearing sandwiches!” Alice announced, and Darcey pulled his hand away. Jordan’s heart fell, just a bit, but he had to remind himself again that coming out was a process. He couldn’t force Darcey into a situation he was uncomfortable with, only try to reassure him when he was safe.

Alice placed Jordan’s sandwich down in front of him, then Darcey’s, looking between them. She leaned down near Jordan and stage whispered, “So, is this the guy? Does that mean you’ve worked it out?”

“Please shut up,” Jordan said quickly, but Darcey had heard and it was too late to salvage it. “Yes,” he said next. “It is.”

Darcey raised a confused eyebrow, eyes darting between Jordan and Alice. Jordan’s skin was hot and dark and his fingers a little too tight on the edge of the table. He opened his mouth to speak, but Alice did, first. “You didn’t tell me he was gorgeous!”

Jordan sunk a little lower in his chair, but he couldn’t rip his eyes away from Darcey’s face, no matter how embarrassing Alice was being. Darcey smirked. Oh, man, he was never going to live this down.

“Well,” Jordan said firmly, “I know you have stuff to do so you don’t have to hang around.”

She rolled her eyes, but straightened and turned away with one last wave.

“What was that all about?” Darcey asked. His voice was soft, but amused.

“I… might have been talking about you a lot the past few days,” Jordan admitted. “Maybe. Only good things! But Alice kind of acts as a stand-in therapist when I have trouble with relationships, romantic or otherwise.”

“Romantic?” Darcey asked. His eyebrows raised, surprised, but happy.

“Yeah,” Jordan whispered. He leaned forward, resting his forehead in his hand. “I mean. It was pretty hard not to fall for you like, right away. Much faster than I should have.”

“Why didn’t you say anything when we talked the other day?” Darcey asked softly. Jordan looked up. His face was soft, but otherwise unreadable.
“Well… you said you weren’t in a good place for a relationship,” Jordan murmured. “I didn’t… I didn’t want to pressure you into staying if you didn’t want to. I didn’t… I didn’t want to be manipulative or something. I care about you so much, Darcey, and I wanted you to do what you needed to do, even if it wasn’t what I wanted for myself.”

The two sat quietly for a few moments, sandwiches and coffee ignored. Then, Darcey pushed his plate to the side and stretched his left hand out in the middle of the table. Jordan smiled and took it.

“I care about you a lot, too,” Darcey said.

Jordan smiled and his heart glowed.

They lingered over their lunch, then their empty dishes, for hours, until about three in the afternoon when the nearby high school got out and all the kids started coming in. Suddenly the small, cozy room was stifling and loud and much too full, and Jordan asked, “Hey, do you want to go for a walk in the park down the street?”

Darcey smiled, relived. “Yeah.”

Chapter End Notes

uuuugh I'm sorry it's a day late, everyone, but yesterday was Bad. So here you are today!

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The park was close, but Darcey and Jordan took the long way around, through the neighborhood rather than cutting through the alley to the main street, talking as they passed the brown and cream houses and their gravel and cactus yards. Every now and then there was one with grass and trees, but most of them had switched over to gravel during the drought last year and had never switched back. Instead of going in through the parking lot, they entered the park the back way, near the baseball diamond. A team of high school boys had taken it over for a practice session.

They slowly walked around, making inane small talk and jokes. Jordan was in the middle of telling a joke about a nun in a taxi on Halloween when it happened.

Darcey stilled at the sudden crack that echoed through the park before his body caught up with his mind and realized it was just the teenagers playing baseball. His shoulders relaxed and the warmth came back to his breath. For the first time, Darcey turned to look at the field. Jordan paused, gently nudging Darcey’s arm with the back of his hand. Darcey didn’t turn back.

One of the kids lay crumpled like a pile of rags in the dust, the baseball beside him. The pitcher yelled at him to quit screwing around and get back up, but he didn’t move. The game stilled and the boys looked around at each other, suddenly unsure and afraid.

Darcey counted in the back of his head.

At ten seconds, he still wasn’t moving.

Fifteen. Nothing.

Darcey wasn’t going to wait for twenty, even though that was what he was trained to do.

“Jordan.” His voice was hard and the smaller man looked shocked when he glanced over his shoulder. Darcey took off at a jog, calling over his shoulder and gesturing him to follow. “Get your phone out. I might need you to call 911.”

Jordan jogged up beside Darcey, face drawn with worry. “Darcey, what –”

But the other teenagers crowded around the first one now, voices loud and indistinct, so Darcey sped up.

“Move.” The teenagers jumped as he pushed through them, kneeling down bedside the boy on the ground. He was maybe fourteen, fifteen. He lay completely still. Darcey felt for a pulse at his neck, careful not to move his head. Nothing. Nothing at his wrist. Darcey felt down his pockets, pulled out a phone and a wallet. He threw the wallet at Jordan, who fumbled, but didn’t drop it.

“Call 911 and look for a medical card. In that order.”

Darcey didn’t wait for a response. Jordan would take care of it. He already half heard his voice as he started to tell someone on the phone where they were.

He shoved the phone into the hands of the nearest teenager and said, “Look for an emergency contact and call them.” His words snapped, sharp and clipped with no pausing for extraneous syllables that might get in the way.
Darcey couldn’t jostle the boy’s neck; he may have injured it when he fell. Instead, he shook his leg at the knee and shouted, “Hey! Can you hear me?”

No response.

He curled his hand into a fist and dragged his knuckles hard against the boy’s sternum and shouted again, “Can you hear me?”

Still nothing.

He looked to his left and pointed to the boy beside him. “You.” The teenager’s head jerked up. “Is there some kind of community building here?”

The kid’s lips were turning blue. He didn’t have time for this. Darcey started compressions on his chest, quick, hard movements. The boy was so much smaller than him, but he couldn’t afford to be gentle. If he cracked a rib, it would heal. He had to get this boy breathing and get his heart moving normally. He started his count, one through thirty.

“Yeah,” the boy beside him said, his glove hung loosely from his hand and he wrung his hat nervously in his other. “But nobody’s ever there. They’re only open on weekends and –”

“Go there. I need you to see if there’s an AED. It’ll be in a red bag, labeled with white letters with a white lighting bolt. Get it. If there’s glass or a window, break it with a rock. I need it now. Run!”

The boy hesitated.

“If there’s trouble from the damage I’ll take care of it. Go! As fast as you can!”

He scrambled off, kicking up dust behind him.

Jordan was on the phone, pacing, a few steps back but still close enough to give the woman on the other end of the phone as many details about the situation as he understood. He almost had to shout for her to hear him over all the commotion but he didn’t want to step away. What if Darcey needed something?

The teenager with the phone was having a conversation of his own. Darcey was already at twenty-five and he didn’t have his pocket face mask. It was in his bag but he couldn’t pause to get it out.

“Brown hair and glasses with the green shirt?” The boy he was calling for didn’t respond. “One of you!” Nobody answered. Twenty-eight. He didn’t have time to wait for it. Some teenage kid’s germs weren’t going to kill him.

Darcey hit thirty and tilted the teenager’s head back, plugged his nose, breathed into his mouth twice. Out of the corner of his eye, Darcey watched his chest rise and fall, rise and fall again. He pulled back and started compressions back at one.

All his thoughts focused on counting under his breath and he only looked back up when Jordan shouted his name. “He has an insurance card, but there’s no medical information on it. His ID is here.”

“Put them to the side for the paramedics.”

Jordan nodded and turned back to the phone.

“He’s giving him CPR right now… I don’t know? We just saw him get hit in the chest with a ball
“Speakerphone!” Darcey shouted. Jordan shoved through the teenagers and dropped into a crouch, holding the phone as near to Darcey’s face as he could. “He’s about fifteen years old. He’s gone into cardiac arrest as a result of commotio cordis. I’m performing CPR and waiting for an AED but I don’t know if we’ll be able to get one.” He hit twenty-eight again. “Hang on.”

At thirty, two more breaths. Back at one.

“I’m medic trained and trying to keep him stable but I don’t have equipment. He needs to get to a hospital ASAP. ETA?”

“Three minutes,” the operator said. “How long have you been performing CPR?”

“About a minute. I just started my third round of thirty compressions. Still no pulse and he’s not breathing on his own yet.” He stopped talking but not his counting or compressions when he glanced up. No sign of the kid he’d sent off. He looked over at another of the teenagers, an older boy with blond hair. “You!”

The kid jumped.

“See if you can flag down a police car. Tell them where we are, that your friend is in cardiac arrest and receiving CPR, that an ambulance is on the way and that you need an AED. They might have one or be able to call someone nearby who does.”

His foot slid, but he didn’t turn.

“Go!”

He ran off toward the parking lot.

Back at thirty, two more breaths. The teenager still wasn’t moving, but the color was back in his face, so Darcey was keeping him stable, at least. At this point, it was all he could do.

“Keep administering CPR,” the operator said. “Don’t stop until EMS arrives.”

“Yes ma’am.”

One more round, then two, then three, and it was the longest three minutes of Darcey’s life. His arms shook from the effort, his breathing came rough and unsteady, and beads of sweat dripped off his forehead and down the back of his neck under the burning summer sun. He didn’t stop. Still no AED, still no EMS, the operator kept asking questions and Darcey answered as best he could.

Then, finally, sirens. They were faint, but quickly grew louder and closer, and when the sound became stationary in the parking lot, Darcey knew they were finally there.

He was on round seven when they arrived and the teenagers parted to make way. Someone touched his shoulder and another man gently pushed him to the side, taking over where Darcey left off. He could breathe again.

The woman behind him pulled Darcey to the side while the other two workers got started and Darcey shouted, “He fell! Watch his neck!” before turning back to her. Her scrubs were dark blue, the same color as the paramedic uniform. A nurse.

“Did he have an ID on him?” was her first question. Darcey glanced over his shoulder.
“Jordan! The wallet!”

Jordan handed it over, hovering a few steps behind him, just in case they needed him for anything else. Darcey gave it to the nurse. “He has both a medical insurance card and an ID in there,” he said. She shoved it into her pocket and pulled out a pen.

“So what happened, exactly?”

“He was hit in the chest with a baseball,” he said. “He went down hard and didn’t get back up. I’m pretty sure it’s commotio cordis. I’ve never seen it personally until now, but we were taught about it in training.”

“What kind of training do you have?”

“Army, ma’am. EMT-B certified and paramedic trained.”

“But not certified?”

“I was never able to take the final exam to get licensed, ma’am.”

She nodded and looked back down at her clipboard.

“When I got to him he didn’t have a pulse,” he continued. “He was unresponsive and his lips were turning blue. I started CPR. I’d gotten through seven rounds when you arrived. I know you’re ideally supposed to have a pocket face mask but I couldn’t get to mine in time.”

“I hope for your sake he doesn’t have any communicable diseases,” she said. She looked up from her clipboard and continued, “But because of what you did you may have saved his life.”

The paramedics had lifted the boy onto a board and were on their way back to the parking lot. The nurse was about to turn away when Darcey said, “Wait. Let me give you my contact information. Just in case you need anything else.” It was unlikely they would and probably unnecessary, but this way, if they did need it, they would have it.

“Is there more?”

“No, ma’am.”

She paused.

“Well, it would be good to have, just in case. A scene like this can be hectic and you might think of something else.” She flipped to an empty page at the back of her clipboard and took down his information, and with another quick, “Thank you, sir;” she jogged off to meet with the other EMS workers.

He stood there, still, watching them go as the teenagers slowly started to clear out. Then Jordan finally stepped forward, putting his hand on Darcey’s arm.

“You saved that kid’s life,” he whispered.

“Maybe. I kept him stable so they’d have a living kid to treat when they got here.”

Darcey turned and looked at Jordan, really looked, for the first time since he’d stepped toward the baseball diamond. Jordan’s eyes were wide and his hands shaking as he looked around the scene like he couldn’t believe what had just happened.
Darcey’s breathing came thick and heavy and his own hands shook much harder than usual. Jordan bumped the back of his hand against Darcey’s, and at this point, Darcey didn’t care if it outing him. The need to touch Jordan outweighed the reservations Darcey had about being open in public. He turned his hand against Jordan’s and wrapped his around it tightly. If Jordan was surprised, he didn’t show it. He just squeezed back.

“You were really fucking amazing just now,” Jordan said softly. Almost reverently.

The teenagers had all gone their own ways, the game abandoned. The only sign anyone had been there were the footprints left behind in the dust.

After a few minutes of silence, Darcey leaned against Jordan, which was awkward, considering how much taller he was, but the smaller man loosely wrapped an arm around his waist and it was that touch that reminded Darcey, yes, he could relax. He wasn’t there anymore.

He wasn’t there anymore.

Chapter End Notes

As always, I would love for you to visit me at indecentpause.tumblr.com!
Darcey didn’t let go of Jordan’s hand once as they walked back to his apartment. They took the back way through the alley, quieter and more private, where they were less likely to be harassed.

When they got inside, Darcey pushed Jordan up against the door, hands on his hips and his lips on his. Jordan nearly jumped and dropped his keys, he was so taken off guard, but he relaxed into the embrace almost immediately, curling his arms around Darcey’s back, his fingers in the fabric just at Darcey’s shoulder blades. Darcey’s kiss was soft, but sure, and something about the way he held Jordan was almost protective and it made him a little weak in the knees.

The way Darcey’s hands moved over him, slow and sure and methodical, like he was mapping every angle and saving it away for later, it made Jordan feel so special, like he was the most important, precious thing in the world. He pushed closer, pulling Darcey in, and then Darcey pinned him against the door, the entire lengths of their bodies pressed firmly together.

Just as abruptly as the kiss began, it ended, and Darcey pressed his forehead against Jordan’s, inhaling deeply, once, twice. Their noses barely brushed. Darcey’s eyes slipped closed. He was so close that Jordan’s eyes had gone blurry and he could feel the tickle of Darcey’s breath on his lips, hot and a little shallow. Darcey’s elbows rested on either side of Jordan’s head, like he was shielding Jordan from something.

“Darcey?”

Darcey opened his eyes, and even though Jordan’s vision was a little blurred he could still see everything, fear and worry and pain and somewhere in it all, something he thought he recognized as devotion.

“Are you –”

“I’m sorry.”


“For… I’m sorry I split up with you. It was stupid. I thought I was doing the right thing at the time but it was the stupidest thing I’ve ever done. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Jordan shushed him softly, resting his hands on either side of Darcey’s face. “It’s okay. We’re back together now and that’s what matters. You don’t have to apologize. We figured it out, right? It’s okay now.”

Darcey lowered his eyes and nodded.

“Are you still thinking about the park?” Jordan’s voice was just above a whisper in the silent room.

“Yeah.” Darcey’s voice broke. “I just… if we hadn’t been there…”

“But we were,” Jordan said. “And you were amazing.”

Darcey looked up again. “It could have easily been Ally or Lexi or Brett or… or you,” he said.
“Either of us.”

It took Jordan a moment to connect Darcey’s statement to where his head was. It was a mishap at a baseball game, and it was serious, but it wasn’t likely to happen to anyone else any time soon. But Darcey…

Jordan’s eyes met Darcey’s again, and that was when he saw it. That same faraway, vacant, terrified look in his eyes that he’d seen the night of his flashback. He was thinking about what he’d seen in the war. For years, he’d had to see things like this every day. Probably much worse. He had probably seen a lot of people die. Even though it wasn’t likely here and Darcey was in a safe place now, with his family, with Jordan, living in a mindset like that couldn’t be easy to shake.

“It’s okay,” he whispered, pulling Darcey into the gentlest kiss he knew how to give. He ran his hands up Darcey’s back, trying to reassure him, because even though people said Jordan was good with words, he wasn’t, really. He just threw up whatever what in his head without thinking about it and hoped it came out okay. There was a difference between being good with words and being unafraid or just stupid enough to say them.

“It’s okay,” Jordan repeated when Darcey broke the kiss. He moved one hand to the side of Darcey’s face and leaned up to kiss his cheek, his nose, his jaw, anywhere he could reach. “I’m here. You’re here. We’re okay. It’s okay.” He lowered himself back to his normal height and asked, “Do you want to call your family?”

Darcey paused, his hand pressed into the door beside Jordan’s head. Jordan leaned a little closer, the soft black curls tickling the rough skin. “Maybe later,” he finally said. “I think anything I might be able to say now would scare them. They’d think something was wrong.”

“But something is –”

“I mean seriously wrong.”

*But this is serious,* Jordan wanted to say, but he wasn’t sure it would be welcome or if it was even his right. So he dropped it and only said, “Any time you want to pull to the side, then, okay? And if you want to leave early, I understand.”

Darcey nodded. He opened his mouth, then hesitated. Finally, he asked, “Do you think we can relocate to the bedroom?”

Jordan’s eyebrows drew together in confusion. “I thought you said –”

“I mean, not… it’s just smaller. Quieter. It feels more private even though there’s nobody else around.”

Jordan’s expression loosened and he nodded once in recognition. “Okay. Yeah. Yeah, that’s fine.” Jordan wove his fingers with Darcey’s and led him back to the bedroom, where he gently nudged him down to the bed. They sat, silently, side by side for some time, their hands curled together on Darcey’s knee. Eventually they ended up lying down, curled into each other, face to face, Darcey’s arms tight around Jordan’s back, like he was afraid Jordan would slip away if he loosened his grip.

*I won’t.*

For a while, they just laid there, breathing. They didn’t speak or move or even look at each other, eyes closed. But Jordan could feel the rise and fall of Darcey’s shoulder under his right hand and the fabric of his t-shirt against his left, and the bigger man’s arm was heavy but comfortable on his
“Jordan?” Darcey finally whispered.

Jordan opened his eyes. The calm smile dropped from his mouth and his breath caught at the look on Darcey’s face, soft, serious, worried.

“Yes?” Jordan murmured.

“What…” Darcey paused and lowered his eyes. Jordan tensed. It seemed like hours before Darcey met his gaze again. “Earlier, on our way to the coffee shop. What happened? What was that?”

Jordan swallowed and it was sharp, like shards of glass. His face burned in shame and fear. He was glad he was lying down because he was sure he was about to faint. His eyes darted over Darcey’s face. Darcey didn’t push, but now that the question had been asked, Jordan couldn’t leave it hanging, unanswered. If he didn’t explain, Darcey would… he’d think Jordan was unstable or dangerous or crazy and he wasn’t any of those things, he was just so messed up and it was all so much to deal with even though he was trying so hard –

Jordan took in a slow, shuddering breath. At some point, his eyes dropped to Darcey’s chin, but he couldn’t remember when. It felt like hours of silence had passed.

Nothing came out when he opened his mouth. He squeezed his eyes closed, clenched his hands into fists, loosened them again.

“So,” Jordan finally started. “I.” He cleared his throat and tried to remind himself to breathe, but it was so humiliating, so disgusting. Darcey gently ran his fingers through Jordan’s hair, trying to calm him down from… whatever was happening.

“So, you know I’m on hormone therapy,” Jordan finally said.

“Yeah,” Darcey said. “Three years or so, right?”

“Right.” It came out in a sharp, thick huff of air.

Silence. Jordan would have been content to never speak again, but Darcey gently urged him on by squeezing his arm.

“So,” Jordan finally started. “I.” He cleared his throat and tried to remind himself to breathe, but it was so humiliating, so disgusting. Darcey gently ran his fingers through Jordan’s hair, trying to calm him down from… whatever was happening.

“So, you know I’m on hormone therapy,” Jordan finally said.

“Yeah,” Darcey said. “Three years or so, right?”

“Right.” It came out in a sharp, thick huff of air.

Silence. Jordan would have been content to never speak again, but Darcey gently urged him on by squeezing his arm.

“Right,” he repeated softly. “So, in order to get them, I have to go through an endocrinologist. A regular doctor can’t write it. And there aren’t a lot of trans friendly endos in the city, and the ones that are require a note from a therapist. To get that, you have to see a therapist, for, like, at least a year.” He snorted and spat, “You have to fucking prove to a bunch of cis people that you’re trans enough to be worthy, I guess. It’s fucking bullshit.”

Finally, Jordan looked back up again. Darcey’s hazel eyes were soft, but intent as he watched the smaller man closely. Listening. Really listening.

“So, I found a therapist,” Jordan said softly. He didn’t want Darcey to see his face, to see how disgusting he was. But he needed to see Darcey’s eyes. They were comforting and safe. “There weren’t many covered by my insurance and she was the only one I could easily get to.” Jordan swallowed. Darcey’s face was blurry now, and Jordan’s face was dry but his throat still pinhole tight. He inhaled, quick, shallow, sharp. Again. Again. Breathe.

Darcey’s hand was warm and heavy in Jordan’s hair, loose, fingers gentle against his head. “It’s okay now,” he whispered. “You’re not there anymore. You’re here now. It’s okay.”
And Jordan knew that, but it didn’t make it hurt any less. It didn’t make him any less angry or ashamed.

“She never touched me or anything,” he blurted. “Not even casually. And she never… she never made me like, show her anything.”

Darcey’s breath caught quietly in his throat and his eyebrows knit together. His mouth set in a hard line and his hand tightened protectively against Jordan’s head. He knew where this was going and oh god, oh god, Jordan was sure he was going to throw up. But Darcey still didn’t speak, didn’t push, giving him time and space.

“There were a lot of things I had to do,” Jordan said. “Some of it was pretty normal. Answer questions. How long have you felt like this? What kind of stuff did you like as a kid? Shit like that. But.”

He stopped abruptly and screwed his eyes closed, as if that would make it go away. Disappear. It never happened. If he closed his eyes long enough, he could undo it and it would have never happened.

“But?” Darcey prompted, gently. His wide palm pressed tightly against Jordan’s, now, calloused fingers gentle on the back of his hand.

“Like.” Jordan stopped again, and when he spoke, it was halting, choking, only one or two words at a time because anything more than that was too much to handle. “She’d. After the basic stuff, like, she started asking me about my sexual orientation, which is irrelevant, right? Because. Because the two aren’t even related. And, like, I’m pansexual anyway so my gender would be irrelevant. But I answered her stupid questions. I was willing to do anything to. To get that note. Darcey, it was the only place I could go at the time, and I needed that note to get the prescription and nobody else could write it for me and –”

“Breathe,” Darcey whispered. He squeezed Jordan’s hand, not hard, but firm enough to keep him grounded. “Breathe.” Darcey almost didn’t want Jordan to continue. He almost didn’t want to hear what he knew Jordan was about to say. But he needed to, because what if he was wrong? What if Jordan was talking about something else?

Jordan took in a deep, shuddering breath, and when he released it, words started to come out, too, choking, sharp. “She’d make me describe like… she’d…” He pulled away, but not far, covering his face with his hand, fingers tight in the hair at the edge of his scalp. “She’d make me do this… she called it an exercise, but I didn’t see the point. I still don’t. To this day. But she’d make me describe… she’d make me talk about having sex with someone. Whoever. Male, female. Whatever. But she’d make me… like, she’d make me describe it happening with my body as it was assigned, rather than how it was supposed to be. She’d make me refer to myself as ‘she’ and ‘her’ and talk about… about… you know.”

His hand still pressed hard into his face, flattening his nose, palm hot against his upper lip. Jordan prayed Darcey understood his stumbling explanation because he didn’t know if he could go into specifics, not even for him.

“What?” Darcey’s voice was soft, but Jordan had never heard so much anger or disgust in one word before, and he knew it wasn’t him, it was what he’d had to do, but… right? It wasn’t him, right?

And then, finally, the sob he’d been holding at the bottom of his throat bubbled out and his fingers tightened in his hair and he pulled back, curling in on himself, his other hand on the back of his neck in a pitiful attempt at self-comfort.
The worst part is that you went along with it. Jordan had done what she asked because he was so desperate to get that note so he could get his prescription and move on with his transition. He was nineteen years old and on his own and had nobody to answer to but himself. You could have just said “fuck you” and walked out, but you didn’t. He’d stayed, because he didn’t know what else to do.

And then Darcey’s hand was on his hip, heavy and warm even through the fabric of his jeans, the taller man’s other arm curled under his head. Darcey pulled him chest to chest and murmured, “Is that why you were so… harsh when you came out to me?”

Jordan nodded. After a moment, he elaborated; “Partly. And I’m sorry.”

“But –”

But he kept going. “Partly I’ve just gotten really good at not thinking about it and I don’t like being reminded that it’s there.”

“I’m sorry.”

Jordan shook his head.

A pause.

“Were you ever able to do anything about it?”

Jordan laughed, broken, and shook his head. “That’s the really fucked up part. I asked around. I didn’t know any trans people personally at the time, but I was on a few online support groups. Apparently that’s common. And later in BashBack I met a woman who had gone to the same therapist and she’d made her do the same things. So it wasn’t just me.”

“What?” This time, it was almost a growl. Jordan shrank back into himself again. Darcey tightened his arm around Jordan and softened his voice. “It’s okay. It’s okay. I’m sorry.”

“Please don’t make me talk about this anymore,” Jordan whimpered, oh, god, pathetic, you’re a grown fucking man and whimpering like a scared child.

“It’s okay,” Darcey whispered again. Then, the comforting weight of his hand was on Jordan’s cheek and he slipped his fingers apart to peer through to see Darcey’s face. “I’m sorry if I made you feel like you had to talk about it. I just… you scared me earlier. And I wanted to be sure you were okay.”

Finally, Jordan smiled, faint, broken, just barely tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Thank you,” he whispered.

Darcey’s eyebrows knit together, confused and maybe a little concerned. “What?”

Jordan shrugged and lowered his eyes. “For… for caring enough to push, I guess? I don’t even know if that makes sense.”

“Not really.” Darcey leaned closer, resting his forehead against Jordan’s. The exhale of his breath tickled against the back of his hand. “But I think I get what you mean.”

Jordan chuckled softly, but not so broken. A little more composed. His shoulders shook, but at least he could breathe.

“I won’t bring it up again, okay?” Darcey whispered. “We’ll only talk about it if you want to
bring it to me. You can if you want. But you don’t have to, okay?”

Jordan nodded, choking out a soft, wet, “Thank you, Darcey,” because finally, he’d found someone who really understood him, how he functioned, how his mind worked, and didn’t judge him for it. Even though he had amazing friends who cared so much, they didn’t understand like Darcey did.

“Thank you, Darcey,” he whispered again.

And then, silently, he added, I love you.

Chapter End Notes

Come visit me at indecentpause.tumblr.com!
Darcey had only ever held two jobs in his life: one in high school as a cashier at a tea shop and his career in the military. Neither had anything to do with the work he was looking for now, and although his discharge wasn’t fully dishonorable, it was under dishonorable conditions, and anyone who knew what that meant probably wouldn’t want to call him back if they found out. Doc wouldn’t tell them that, would he? He wouldn’t have agreed to be a reference if he didn’t have anything good to say. But would he be legally required to tell them if they asked? If not, it would show in a background check, right?

Darcey sighed, gently tapping the corner of his phone against the table. He cleared the scratching tickle from his throat and checked the time. 2:34. Brett would still be in class for a while.

He flipped open the student course catalogue in front of him and leafed through it, doing quick calculations in his head to see how much a single class would cost based on number of credit hours.

None of them were affordable. He would probably have to go to a community college if he only wanted one or two classes, and with culinary school out of his reach, he didn’t know what his other options were. For so many years, there hadn’t been another option: school at the Culinary Institute of America was it. It was what everything was slowly leading toward. But there was no way he could afford it without his GI Bill, so he had to find something else and move on. He sighed, wiping at his eyes. He’d been so tired these past two weeks, all the time, a bone-deep exhaustion he couldn’t shake no matter how much sleep he got. Was he having nightmares and just forgetting them upon waking? He knew he wasn’t getting enough hours of sleep, but it felt like the few he did manage were useless, anyway.

Ever since that day in the park three weeks ago, it had been like there was an invisible, unspoken deadline looming over him. He didn’t know when it was or what it was for, but he knew this feeling. Like he was running out of time, like he had to do everything he wanted and needed to do now or he might never be able to. He had seconds to pull the trigger and whether he survived depended on how fast he made his decision.

He glanced back down at the catalogue, reading through the language section. Maybe he could take a Korean or Arabic class to keep his skills sharp, if not here, then somewhere else.

The student union was quiet. It was a peak class time, so only a handful of people sat scattered about the tables studying.

Darcey pulled out his phone and idly sent Jordan a text.

*If you were going to take a foreign language class, what would it be?*

He didn’t expect a response. Jordan had worked last night and it was late for him. He got one anyway, though Jordan’s grammar and spelling were sloppier than usual.

*Probably French I already speak Spanish and English so let’s go for the trifecta right?*

Darcey smiled and chuckled, picturing Jordan half asleep with his phone pressed up against his nose as he texted so he could see the letters properly. His phone beeped again with another reply.
Oh Italian would probably be really awesome too. It’s still fancy and sexy sounding but way easier to pronounce than French and I am lazy. Also it’s like Spanish lil sibliling so super easy to learn! And again I am lazy.

Darcey laughed and shook his head, sending back another text.

Go to bed, Jordan. You clearly need sleep.

Just moments later, he replied.

You can’t tell me what to do! But okay you’re right sleep would be awesome right now. Goodnight or morning or whatever you say when you go to sleep in the middle of the day. <3 Is it okay if I call you when I wake up? I work tonight but maybe we can get in a quick cup of coffee or something.

Darcey smiled.

Yeah. I’d like that. Call me any time after 7:00. My family eats dinner at 6:00.

When Jordan didn’t reply, Darcey assumed he’d fallen asleep. He didn’t pocket his phone, just placed it on the table beside his coffee cup and went back to the catalog.

He picked up his phone to check the time again, and when he did, it vibrated in his hand, a caller from a number he didn’t recognize. It was a local area code.

“Darcey Walker speaking.” He closed his eyes and pressed the heel of his hand against his forehead. At least he was using his first name now. But if he was going to be getting calls from potential employers, he needed to start answering the phone with a normal, “Hello.”

“Hello, Mr. Walker.” He opened his eyes. The person on the other end was female and obviously didn’t know him. “My name is Chef Hobfoll from Yellowfin. I’m calling in response to the resume and cover letter you sent us?”

He sat up straight, trying to keep his voice steady. Yellowfin was five star new American cuisine. And they wanted him for an interview?

“Yes?”

“I’d really like you to come in for an interview.”

“Oh, yeah, definitely,” he said. His smile was wide, but he kept his voice steady and professional. “When would be good for you? I can come in as early as tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow would be great,” she said. “How about… is sometime between 10:00 or 11:00 a.m. okay?”

“Sure. Let’s make it 10:00?”

“You like coming in early,” she said. “I like it.”

He grinned.

“All right then,” she said. “I’ll see you tomorrow at ten. Bring in two copies of your resume, and a portfolio, if you have one.”

Darcey’s smile dropped but he kept his voice steady. “Yeah. I’ll see you tomorrow at 10:00, then. Have a good day.”
“You, too.”

She hung up.

He didn’t have a portfolio because he had no experience and no schooling. He’d only applied for a prep cook’s job because he knew he didn’t have the experience to get hired right onto the line. He didn’t realize they would require a portfolio for something so low on the food chain.

He’d just have to go in without one and hope for the best.

Someone touched Darcey’s shoulder and he looked up. It was Brett. He smiled and sat down in the chair across the small table.

His brow furrowed and his smile faded. “You look worried.”

Darcey shook his head. “I got called back for an interview.”

Brett straightened up and his grin came back. “That’s awesome! Where’s this one?”

“Yellowfin.” Darcey’s voice caught on that tickle in the back of his throat again. He coughed softly to clear it.

Brett whistled, low and impressed. “That’s really awesome. They’re really high end! When is it?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“Well, good luck! I’ve got my fingers crossed for you.”

Darcey’s eyes darted over Brett and his smile turned worried. It was the first time Darcey had seen him in two weeks and he’d definitely lost weight. At least ten pounds, visibly. Too much, too fast, especially for someone as thin as he’d been to begin with. He’d lost a lot of muscle and the angles of his bones were sharp in his wrists.

“You should come over to my family’s house for dinner tonight,” Darcey said. “Mom and Dad have been asking about you. You were around all the time for a while, and they were concerned when you disappeared.”

Brett shook his head. “I can’t. Thanks, though,”

“Why?” Darcey kept his voice casual, unaccusing.

“Too much homework. I have a monologue due to be performed Monday and I only have the first half memorized. And I have to rehearse my song for the audition I’m doing next Wednesday.”

But he’d never in his life had trouble memorizing his lines.

With anyone else, Darcey would have immediately called “Bullshit,” but he couldn’t with Brett. He was too emotionally vulnerable and always had been. Especially when he got into this place.

Should I call his dad? Should I talk to my parents? Should I try to track down Justin? He knew he could get in touch through Iffy if he needed to, but could that potentially damage their relationship? He wouldn’t be able to forgive himself if he did, but Brett’s health was the most important thing.

When Brett was in high school, he’d had Annie, and he and his dad had kept it so tightly under wraps that Darcey hadn’t known anything about it until Brett was nearly through the recovery
Maybe I’m overreacting. Maybe it really was just stress. He tried one more time.

“I was going to get something to eat,” he said, nodding his head toward the student union café. “You want something? It’s on me.”

Brett’s hands tensed slightly and his eyes changed, just barely, just for a moment. He was scared. “No thanks,” he said. “I’m good. Maybe a cup of iced tea, though? Just plain, no sugar.”

He’d always had his tea and coffee with sugar.

Fuck.

“We need to talk,” Darcey said gently. Tact had never been his strong point, but he wasn’t going to let this get to the point it did when they were younger. He had to intervene.

This time the fear that crossed Brett’s face was obvious. His hands tensed on the edge of the table and he murmured, “I’m fine, Darcey. I know what you’re thinking. I’m okay. I’m not –”

“Brett,” Darcey interrupted. His voice was quiet, but firm, and it broke a little at the end of his cousin’s name. Brett’s mouth snapped shut and he looked down.

"I’m fine,” he whispered. “Really.”

Darcey cursed inwardly. This had been a huge misstep. This wasn’t the time or place and if Brett felt humiliated, things would only get worse. How could someone not, being confronted in such a public place?

“How’s your health insurance paperwork going?” Brett asked, very suddenly. He was deflecting, but Darcey didn’t call him on it. For now.

“Getting there. Jordan helped me get set up with the paperwork for something called ValueOptions, which I guess is strictly for mental health care. I put in the paperwork last week so we’ll see how that goes. I haven’t heard anything back from Medicaid yet, but that’s not surprising. Hopefully I hear something back soon because I think I’m getting sick.” He cleared his throat again and gently flexed his hand. A faint ache thrummed in his joints.

“Oh, man, that sucks,” Brett said. “Are there any free or discounted clinics you can go to?”

“I haven’t looked yet. I just started feeling like this today. I’m going to try to find something when I get home.” He sighed and rubbed his forehead. “I can’t afford this, Brett. I need to find work and if I get sick, nobody will take me on. Even if they do, if I can’t come in I’ll just get fired right away.”

Brett’s brow furrowed. “You think you need to take a break from your job hunt until this passes?”

“I can’t,” Darcey said. “I’ve been out of work for almost two months now. The longer you’re unemployed the harder it is to find work again.” He cleared his throat again. “Hopefully it’s just a cold.”

Chapter End Notes
Heyyyy friendos, if you are interested about this plot point with Brett and meeting his boyfriend, you can do so in my story "Push Me, Pull Me," which is on my profile and complete!

As always, please come visit me and read some short stories at indecentpause.tumblr.com if you'd like!
Since the incident at the park, Jordan’s work schedule had calmed down considerably. He was back to forty hours a week with an occasional hour or two of overtime on busy nights, which meant he could sleep again, he could spend time with Darcey again, he could talk to his friends again. He’d missed them terribly, especially Terrence, who was busy with his own things. They often didn’t see each other outside of events, keeping in touch through emails and texts.

Jordan was on his computer, catching up on the last few things he’d fallen behind on. He was in the middle of updating the BashBack blog and writing an email to Vince when Terrence logged on. As he started to type a message, one from Terrence popped up, then another, then another, a total of four in quick succession.

SciFiWasabi: so jordan you haven’t called me over for any late night romantic comedies or twizzlers runs lately

SciFiWasabi: i can only assume it means that you are either a) now a well adjusted and productive member of society b) romantically attached to someone you haven’t told me about or c) dead

SciFiWasabi: i really hope you’re not dead jordan

SciFiWasabi: please don’t be dead

Jordan laughed and typed back:

AnarchyForSale: Nope!

SciFiWasabi: that’s a relief

SciFiWasabi: which of the other two options is it then

AnarchyForSale: Both. At first I was pulling 60-70 hour workweeks and also I’m dating someone now!

AnarchyForSale: Also I’m in love with him even though I know I shouldn’t be. Or I mean I totally should be because he’s amazing? But I shouldn’t be because my dumbass feelings are moving so fast and I know from experience how bad that can be.

AnarchyForSale: And it started as a friends with benefits type thing but now we cuddle while we play video games and read the paper while we eat dinner together and he kisses me and tells me to be safe when I leave for work.

SciFiWasabi: i don’t think you understand what friends with benefits means
SciFiWasabi: because it’s not that

AnarchyForSale: Well no we aren’t anymore we’re actually dating now.

SciFiWasabi: what you just described is called ‘being in a relationship’

SciFiWasabi: which is also cool i just don’t want you to be confused

SciFiWasabi: oh okay

SciFiWasabi: he treats you well right

SciFiWasabi: honestly that’s the only thing i care about

AnarchyForSale: He does. He’s the most thoughtful and respectful partner I’ve ever had.

SciFiWasabi: good!

SciFiWasabi: i’m glad he treats you right

SciFiWasabi: not that i think you’d even put up with anyone’s bullshit in the first place but you know what i mean

SciFiWasabi: okay so now i’m going to ask the question you hate the most ever in the world

SciFiWasabi: did things go okay when you came out to him

AnarchyForSale: Yeah actually. It was actually completely fucking amazing. He basically just said “Okay” and when I told him what was on and off limits he pretty much said “Well it’s your body I’m not about to do anything you don’t want me to.”

AnarchyForSale: Like I flipped out a little because we were already starting to get naked when I came out and I panicked but even though he definitely could have just packed up and left he stayed to talk it out.

AnarchyForSale: Which I realize is him just being a decent human being but considering everything that’s happened in the past it was pretty amazing.

AnarchyForSale: There were no invasive questions or offensive remarks or accusations even accidentally.

AnarchyForSale: He just really doesn’t give a shit and it’s perfect.

SciFiWasabi: so you’re marrying this dude right

SciFiWasabi: i mean when it’s legal obviously

SciFiWasabi: actually because of how you’re legally recognized by the state you could probably do it if you do it before your official birth certificate change since you have to have all three surgeries to do that right

AnarchyForSale: Yeah I do. But the first one shouldn’t be too much further away now!!

SciFiWasabi: yeah how are things going there
SciFiWasabi: you still on schedule to get your down payment saved up in time

AnarchyForSale: Yep! Right on track. I don’t have it all yet but it’s due the first week of next month and I’ll definitely have it by then. Then my surgery will be on December 4th.

SciFiWasabi: excellent

SciFiWasabi: so two weeks from now is when it’s due then right

AnarchyForSale: Yep!!

AnarchyForSale: I do have one really important thing I have to say about Darcey though.

SciFiWasabi: is that the name of the guy you’re with right now

AnarchyForSale: Yes.

SciFiWasabi: shit is he actually an alien or something

AnarchyForSale: He’s an Army vet. He served eight years.

SciFiWasabi: what

SciFiWasabi: keep your ass at home i am coming over right now

AnarchyForSale: NO DO NOT COME OVER RIGHT NOW

AnarchyForSale: You can come over to lecture me/kick the shit out me/whatever tomorrow when I get home from work but I’ve got stuff going on right now!!

There was no reply. Was he on his way already? Jordan grabbed his phone when another message popped up.

SciFiWasabi: …

SciFiWasabi: okay i guess

SciFiWasabi: but this is fucking serious and we have to talk about it

AnarchyForSale: I know I know it complicates things a little but he’s not one of THOSE military guys. Honestly I don’t even know if THOSE military guys even exist anymore. Like maybe it’s just a dumb stereotype. We talked about it for a really, really long time and. He’s different Terrence. He’s really kind and down to earth and generous.

AnarchyForSale: I mean three weeks ago when we were at the park a teenager went into cardiac arrest and Darcey saved his life.

SciFiWasabi: we’ll see
When Jordan read those two simple words, his shoulders tensed and his teeth tightened and he clenched his hands into fists. He'd never thought a simple statement could make him so angry. Darcey had his faults, but he was the most amazing person Jordan had ever known and he was not going to let anyone write that off. Not even his best friend.

**AnarchyForSale:** No. Okay I know I don’t have the best track record for this kind of thing and I know exactly what you’re thinking because I used to think the same way about the military.

**AnarchyForSale:** And I still hate the military and everything it stands for but I don’t know if Darcey is an exception to the norm or if we were completely wrong about the people who serve or what.

**AnarchyForSale:** But I really love him Terrence. At first I kept second-guessing myself because haha oh yeah stupid Jordan always falling in love with everybody every other week. But this time it’s different. I am dead serious.

**SciFiWasabi:** well

**SciFiWasabi:** i don’t know what to say jordan

**SciFiWasabi:** i trust your judgment and even though sometimes you can be impulsive i know you’re smart and i know you wouldn’t be with him if he was a dick

**SciFiWasabi:** and i want you to be happy and if he makes you happy then that’s what i want for you

**SciFiWasabi:** but mandy is going to be pissed and she won’t understand

**SciFiWasabi:** and i don’t know if you still want to be involved with BashBack but when they find out a lot of them are not going to be happy

**AnarchyForSale:** Of course I still want to be involved in BashBack. Dude just because I’m dating a vet doesn’t mean I’m changing who I am. What the fuck?

**SciFiWasabi:** sorry i didn’t mean it like that

**SciFiWasabi:** i just don’t want you to get hurt again

**SciFiWasabi:** and i’m afraid that in a situation like this it’s going to be inevitable

**SciFiWasabi:** even if it’s not darcey doing the hurting

**SciFiWasabi:** you’re like my little brother and i just want you to be okay

**AnarchyForSale:** I know. Thank you. But I’m a big kid now and I can take care of myself.

**AnarchyForSale:** I’m really grateful for your support but I know this is something I’ve got to figure out how to deal with on my own.

**AnarchyForSale:** Knowing you’ve got my back makes it a little easier.

**SciFiWasabi:** yeah i always got your back you know that
SciFiWasabi: like a fucking parasite i’ve got my claws all in you and you’re not getting them out
SciFiWasabi: i guess a koala bear would be a more apt simile there
AnarchyForSale: Koalas are marsupials not bears.
SciFiWasabi: like a koala marsupial then
SciFiWasabi: chewing on your hair like a eucalyptus tree
AnarchyForSale: Okay that just got a little weird.
SciFiWasabi: yeah let’s not follow that line of conversation any further

The conversation fell into a lull. Jordan had nothing else to say at the moment, so he minimized the window and went back to his backlogged blog posts. He’d just finished formatting and updating the last backed up post when a knock came at the door. His head shot up in excitement and he grinned. One quick look at the desktop clock said it was just after seven. With all of his work on the computer he’d completely forgotten to call Darcey! But he had to be the one at the door. Nobody else would be there this close to the start of his shift.

He pulled up his conversation with Terrence to send him one last quick message.

AnarchyForSale: Well I’m out. Have a good night.

Jordan logged off, closed his laptop, and went to answer the door.

It was Darcey. Jordan’s grin grew even wider and as soon as he stepped inside Darcey grabbed him in the tightest hug he’d ever had and Jordan laughed brightly when Darcey actually lifted him off the floor and spun him in a circle. When Darcey put him down, Jordan rested his hands on Darcey’s hips and backed up so he could better see his face.

Jordan laughed and asked, “What’s all this about?”
Darcey grinned. “I got called for an interview at Yellowfin tomorrow.”

A matching grin spread across Jordan’s face.

“That’s so awesome, Darcey! Congratulations! I could never afford to eat there but I’ve read good things in the papers.”

Darcey leaned down and tugged Jordan’s hips against his as he gave him a quick kiss.

“You decide where you want to go?” he asked.

“No?” Jordan chuckled. “I got kind of distracted talking to one of my friends. I didn’t really have time to think about it. I think, maybe either CounterCulture or The Tree House? It’s getting on seven and I start work at nine, so we should probably stay in the area so I can get to work easily.”

“CounterCulture is fine,” Darcey said.
“Then we’re already there and we can stay longer,” Jordan added.

“Exactly.”

Jordan grinned. Darcey grinned back, big and almost boyish, and dropped a kiss to the top of Jordan’s head. It was like liquid joy slowly sliding through his body, warm and peaceful.

“Do you want to walk or drive?” he asked.

Normally, Jordan would walk, but since Darcey drove over, that meant he’d have to walk back alone. So he said, “Let’s just drive, I guess?”

“Sure.”

“Give me a minute to change into some work appropriate clothes,” Jordan said as he stood.

“Pajamas are not really acceptable and I’m pretty sure they have me in the front tonight, so I have to look like I know how to dress myself.”

Darcey laughed, big and bright, and Jordan grinned.

Almost everything he owned was black so he didn’t have to worry about matching. Undershirt, binder, t-shirt, all in order, and then everything else.

Darcey was sitting on the couch, looking idly around the room when Jordan came back. Jordan stepped up behind him, wrapping his arms around Darcey’s broad shoulders and resting his chin on the top of his head.

“You ready?” he asked.

“Yep. You’ve got everything you need for the night?”

Jordan kissed the top of Darcey’s head and walked around the couch to grab his wallet. “Now I do,” he said.

“All right.” Darcey stood and said, “Then let’s get going.”

It was still light out when they arrived. It wasn’t too crowded, but there was a line, and when they stepped up for their turn, Alice waved at them from the espresso machine and called, “I thought you weren’t in until nine?”

“I’m not,” Jordan called back. “We just came to grab something to eat. When are you here until?”

“I only got in an hour ago. I get out at two.”

Jordan grinned. “So I’ve got you most of the night?”

She laughed. “You sure do.”

Jordan looked up when Darcey nudged his side. “There’s a line behind us,” he said gently.

“Shit, sorry,” Jordan laughed. He turned back to Emily, on register, and placed his order, fishing out his wallet while Darcey placed his.

The next two hours were slow and languid, spent sipping on coffee and munching on warm pita bread and hummus, but then, although the minutes passed slowly, the hours rushed by, and it was almost nine. Jordan and Darcey didn’t kiss goodbye or even hug, but Darcey gently touched
Jordan’s forearm as Jordan walked by with the dishes to take back on his way to clock in. When Jordan smiled at him and Darcey smiled back, they both knew, and that was enough.

“Call me after your interview tomorrow, okay?” Jordan said as he passed.

“Of course.”

They went their separate ways, and Jordan glowed.

After Jordan clocked in, he made his way through the kitchen to the front end, dropping the dishes by the sink on his way. The first few hours weren’t quick, but they weren’t slow, either, and Jenna popped up in the front every now and then to check on them, like always, and the insomniacs and students came in with their mp3 players and laptops, like always. It was just another night at work, but so much more special because even though, clearly, Jordan’s life was still exactly the same, Darcey Walker was now his boyfriend, too. It had been three weeks since they’d made it official and Jordan was still as excited and happy as he’d been the day they decided, a warmer, calmer, deeper happiness than the one he’d felt when they were just friends with benefits.

Alice and Jenna both noticed something was different. Jordan was sure Jenna knew what, because she sent him a knowing smile every now and then when she came up to make sure they were both doing okay. Alice kept sending him curious glances, but she didn’t get a chance to ask anything for quite a while because even though it wasn’t busy, there was still a steady stream of people until about one a.m.

Once it died down for fifteen minutes or so, she finally asked, sing-song, “So, Jord~an?”

He turned around, one eyebrow raised as he leaned back on the counter. “Yeah?”

The welcome bell rang but he didn’t turn around yet. He had a few seconds before they could get up to the counter.

“Is this good mood you’re always in now because of that Darcey? What happened? You –” She stopped abruptly, face suddenly pale. She dropped the milk pitcher, thankfully empty. It hit the ground with a sharp, tinny bang, loud as a gunshot in the quiet café.

Jordan’s eyebrows knit together and he pushed his weight back onto his feet. “Alice, what –”

“Open the cash register. Now.”

Jordan’s hands spasmed and the back of his neck went cold. Alice’s eyes were wide as dinner plates and her chest heaved, breathing too fast, too sharp.

He turned around to a gun leveled at his forehead.

Jordan’s hands and shoulders shook. His eyes darted over to the man in the corner and he glanced down, quickly, trying to tell him to get under the table, oh god he hoped the man could understand him, shit, shit, okay, the most important thing is keeping everyone safe and –

“Now!” the man barked.

Jordan’s hands shot up, protectively, defensively, and his words bubbled out fast and panicked when he said, “Okay, okay. Just give me a second. It takes a minute. I have to punch in a code and unlock it, okay? Just… just stay calm. You can have whatever you want. But it’ll take me a second.”

As he spoke, his eyes darted over the man’s body. He was a little taller than Jordan, about 5’10”.
His face was covered with a black ski mask, but Jordan could see the flash of wrist between his glove and sleeve and it told him that the intruder was white. His sneakers were red and black.

*Bring a pair of shoes,* Terrence always said. *Cops always check the shoes. They’re the hardest thing to change when they’re chasing you.*

Alice’s shaky breathing was too loud behind him as he lowered his hands. He made like he was fiddling with the lock, but his left hand inched over, finger stretching out to hit the panic button.

It was silent, but was there something in the back that would go off? A light somewhere to let the kitchen know what’s going on? He didn’t remember. They’d told him when he first started, but that was so long ago.

The back of his neck was so cold it burned. His stomach lurched. His hands shook and he put in the code incorrectly a few times. Alice whimpered. *Get your shit together, Jordan, get the money and get him out.* He had to keep her and everyone else safe.

“Sorry,” he choked as he erased and punched in the code for the third time. “Sorry. Give me a second.” His voice shook even harder than his hands. The room spun and the floor titled and *fuck fuck he had to get this guy out of here.*

Finally he got it right, grabbed the key from beside the drawer – he’d always thought it was so stupid to keep it there but now he was so grateful – and he leaned down and the man barked, “What are you doing?”

Jordan’s hands shot up again. “Just getting you a bag. It’s not much. It’s all we have. It’s been a slow night. But just, just give me a second and it’s yours, okay?”

His movements were slow, deliberate, even though he needed to be fast, go go go get him out of here, but what if quick movements freaked him out? Jordan would never forgive himself if someone got shot because of him.

Then, finally, it was in the bag and he shoved it into the man’s hands as the man barked, “Do you have a security camera?”

“No,” Jordan choked. He wished he were lying.

Then, just as quickly as he was there, the man was gone.

For a moment, Jordan stood still. He waited. He leaned forward to try to glance around the corner. Then he launched himself over the counter, leapt down the one stair, moving so fast he nearly slid past the door on the hardwood floor and he locked it, bolted it, chained it, turned around and called out, “Is everyone okay?”

Alice was crying, now, thick, heavy sobs. Jordan ran back toward the counter, jumped up the stair, leaned over the counter and reached out to her, gesturing her toward him.

“Alice, Alice, talk to me. Are you okay?”

She nodded, frantically. “Yeah,” she choked. “I just –”

Jordan didn’t give her time to finish. He whirled around. The man with the laptop was slouched under the table. Jordan dropped down, one hand on the tabletop to steady himself.

“Are you okay?” Jordan asked. His voice was quick, his movements sharp.
“Yeah,” he choked.

“You’re going to have to stay here until the cops come. I’m not letting you go out there until we know it’s going to be safe.”

Jordan jumped back up, launched himself back over the counter, ran and skidded back into the kitchen.

“Are you guys okay?” he shouted. Everyone paused, looking around, confused and concerned. Jenna came out of the office, frowning.

“What’s all the yelling?”

Jordan sped through the kitchen, motioning for her to follow him back into the office. She closed the door behind them.

They turned toward each other at the same time as she started, “Jordan, what—”

“We were just robbed. Nobody was hurt. He’s gone. I locked the door. I hit the panic button so the cops should be on their way. We lost about $300—”

“I don’t care how much we lost,” she said. Her hand gripped tight on his shoulder, pushing him down into a chair. “I don’t give a shit about the money. Is anyone hurt?”

“No,” he choked. He was grateful she forced him down because his knees had gone soft. But Alice, she needed to be with someone, so even though he was shaky and wobbly and weak, he forced himself up.

“Alice is a mess,” he said. “Like, even worse than me. I don’t want her to be alone right now.”

“All right.” Jenna’s voice was soft and serious, her movements quick and sharp. “You said you locked the door?”

Jordan nodded.

“Okay. Do you feel comfortable waiting for the police with me out in the dining room?”

He hesitated.

“You don’t have to.”

“It’s fine,” he said. “I have to go check on Alice.”

“Are there any customers?” she asked.

“Just one. He’s okay. I told him he’s staying here until the police come and we know it’s safe to leave.”

“Good,” she said. She opened the door and both of them headed through the kitchen. “Everyone stop working and stay here!” she said. She had to shout for the staff to hear her over the banging of dishes and clattering of the dishwasher and air conditioner. Everyone stopped, standing around unsurely, glancing at each other. “We’ve had an incident. It’s under control and everybody is safe. I’ll explain in more detail once the police have arrived, but for now, stay back here until I give you the all clear to come out to the front. You will be paid for your time.”

She pushed through the swinging door leading to the front end and Jordan followed. Alice was on the floor, curled into herself in the corner by the espresso machine, her cell phone cradled to her
“It’s okay,” Jenna whispered. She rested her hand on Alice’s shoulder. “You can stay on the phone for now if you need to. But I’m going to need you when the police get here, okay?”

Alice nodded. Her breathing was thick and unsteady, but she wasn’t crying anymore.

Jenna turned to Jordan. “Stay here with her. I’m going to go talk to the customer.”

He nodded as she headed back toward the other swinging door. When he gave Alice a small, tentative smile, she gave an equally unsure one back. He turned away to give her some privacy on the phone, but stayed nearby.

Not long after, a knock came on the door. Jenna was still talking to the man with the laptop and when she glanced over at Jordan, he held up one hand and nodded. “I’ll get it,” he mouthed. This time he went around through the employee door, now that it wasn’t so urgent, but his feet were still quick as he walked to the front. He peeked through the window to see three police officers.

Cops terrified him. But the safety of everyone around him was more important than his personal hangups. He took a deep breath and started to undo the locks as he turned to Alice.

“I need you off the phone,” he called as he opened the door. “The police are –”

And then suddenly he couldn’t breathe and his chest was flat against the opposite wall and there was something hard in his back, an elbow? And a heavy hand between his shoulders and a man screaming at him but he didn’t know what it was saying and he wheezed out a gasping breath oh god what’s happening what’s happening –

“Stop!” Jenna cried. “He works here! He works here! He’s the one who called you!”

Then the pressure was gone and he could breathe, sort of, shaky and wheezy and gasping and fuck, everything was blurry which meant he had tears in his eyes as he crumpled to the floor because everything was too much.

He wasn’t even tossed a fake apology as the three men walked past him toward Jenna, leaving him curled up on the floor with his arms tight around his torso. He could hear them talking, four distinct voices, but he didn’t know what they were saying because his head was pounding like a bass drum.

He jumped when a small hand touched his arm and his head jerked up. Alice. Her eyes were wet, too, and her voice was shaky when she asked, “Are you okay?”

He nodded and looked down as he wiped his face with the back of his arm and took a deep, shaky breath to try to regain his composure.

“Yeah,” he murmured shakily. “I should have had you answer the door. A brown guy covered in tattoos at the scene of a robbery probably looks pretty threatening. A little white blonde woman, not so much.”

“I –” she started unsurely.

He shook his head. “Just thinking out loud.”

“Are you okay to get up?” she asked softly.
“Yeah,” he said, but his voice cracked a little. “Could you give me a hand, though?”

“Yeah.” She stood, a little shakily, and helped him up.

Both of them stood there, quietly, for a few moments, until Jenna called, “Alice? Jordan? Could you please come over here? These officers need you to give them your statements.”

Alice went first, shaky, and halfway through she started crying again. Jordan didn’t blame her. He was close to crying, too. When she was done and they turned to him, he gave them as much information as he could as quickly as he could, because he wanted them to be able to catch the guy but he also wanted them to get out of his space.

After they got a statement from the customer, Jenna asked for their badge numbers. Jordan didn’t know why and didn’t care, he just wanted them to leave.

Soon after, they did. Jenna followed them to the door and locked them out, flipping the “open” sign to “closed” for the first time in over three years. She turned to Jordan as she clicked the last lock closed.

“Are you okay, Jordan?” she asked softly.

“Yeah.” But he couldn’t hide the tremor in his voice.

“Do you want me to call the station and make a complaint about what they did?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said softly. “Cops murder people like me every day and get off with it clean. Nobody’s going to care that they shoved me into a wall.”

She looked uncomfortable, like white people always did when he brought up his race, and he almost felt bad because she only wanted to help. But complaining wouldn’t do anything. It would be a waste of time. He wanted to move on and forget it.

“Okay,” she finally said. “But I have their information if you change your mind.”

He nodded.

“Go sit down,” she said gently. “I’m going to bring everyone out for a meeting.”

He nodded and went into the main dining room, where the customer was talking on his phone and Alice sat at the table adjacent, texting. Jordan sat down across from her. He was about to start a conversation when Jenna came back out again, leading in everyone from the kitchen. There weren’t many people – there never were for overnights – so everyone fit in the main room fairly comfortably, despite how small it was.

“Everyone,” Jenna started. The room quieted. “Not long before I asked you all to stay in the kitchen, we were robbed. Jordan was able to take control of the situation and while we did lose some money, it was a negligible amount, and more importantly, nobody was hurt. But the man who committed the crime got away, and as acting store manager, I’m closing everything down for the rest of the shift. I’ll have to get in touch with the lead manager and the owner to decide what our next course of action will be, but I’m going to suggest we close down for two or three days until we know it will be safe for everyone, both our employees and our customers. That is our priority.

“The door is locked,” she continued. Soft murmuring coursed through the room as everyone turned to each other. “Everyone, please,” she said firmly. The room quieted again. “So we’re going to shut down and clean up the kitchen and call it a night. I’ll be calling every single one of
you by nine a.m. to let you know if we’re going to be closed any longer, and if so, until when.”

As she spoke, Jordan sank lower in his chair, arms wrapped tightly around his stomach, chin tucked against his chest. The floor slowly started slipping out from underneath him and he just wanted to go home. Home was stable and confined and safe.

“Alice and Jordan will stay here while we clean,” Jenna continued. He looked up. Her eyes were on him and when he opened his mouth to protest, she held up her hand to silence him. “We’re all going to leave together. If anybody needs a ride home, we’ll figure it out. I don’t want anyone walking or bussing right now.” She clapped her hands together and pointed to the kitchen. “Let’s go, guys. I’ll be in behind you in a few minutes to help.”

Everyone slowly rose, pushing in chairs as they turned to each other, murmuring. A few of them turned Jordan’s way. He couldn’t even offer a weak smile. He turned away.

He jumped when a hand touched his shoulder. His eyes were wide, his breath erratic, but it was just Jenna.

“Hey,” she said softly. Jordan swallowed, trying to steady his breath, but it was useless. “Hey,” she repeated. She pulled up a chair across from him and leaned forward slightly. “Are you okay?”

He didn’t have the nerve left to lie. “I don’t know,” he whispered.

She gently rested her hand on his knee, and in that moment, she wasn’t his boss, she was his friend, trying to help, trying to offer comfort. He didn’t even think. He put his hand on top of hers. It helped. It grounded him.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m sorry that I wasn’t there to help and take care of you and Alice.”

He finally looked up at her face. Her brow was drawn down tight and her eyes were sad.

“I’m sorry,” she said again. “But it sounds like you really took control of the situation and it was your cool-headedness that got us through this without anyone getting hurt. Or worse.”

His eyes darted over her face, nervously, as she spoke. He licked his lips and tried to swallow the dryness out of his mouth.

“Thank you, Jordan,” she said. “We’ve always had a lot of respect for you and you’ve never given us reason to doubt you in any way. But what you did tonight was above and beyond anything any of us could have asked of you. Thank you.”

Even after searching for a few moments, Jordan couldn’t find words, so he just nodded. She squeezed his hand.

“I’m going to go help them in the kitchen so we can all get out of here. Stay here with Alice and Jon.”

Jordan’s eyebrows knit together in confusion.

“The customer with the laptop,” she explained.

He nodded. He hadn’t thought to ask his name. He glanced over. Alice had moved over to Jon’s table and they were making stilted small talk, but his brain couldn’t handle more than one conversation at a time, so he wasn’t sure what they were saying.

“Do you have someone you want to call?” Jenna asked. Jordan turned back to her. His first
thought was Darcey.

“Yeah,” he murmured. He fumbled for his phone and fished it out of his pocket as she stood.

“I’ll give you a ride home, okay?” she said. “Just stay here and recoup for now.”

He nodded and punched in Darcey’s number. It rang four times, then went to voicemail. He probably had it on silent. It was the middle of the night, after all.

“Hey, Darcey. It’s Jordan. Call me when you get this. Some really fucked up stuff just happened and I need to talk to you. I’m okay. I’ll talk to you soon.”

He hung up. For a while, he stared at the phone cradled in his hands, and then, finally, he looked up. Alice and Jon sat quietly near each other. Jordan stood to move over to their table, but when he did, his head spun, sharp, and his stomach lurched. When Alice turned toward him, he blurted, “I’ll be right back.”

Jordan darted to the bathroom and didn’t pause to lock the door behind him. He dropped to his knees and vomited all the way from his toes until there was nothing left inside him. His throat burned and his tongue sat heavy in his mouth when he rinsed it out in the sink and god he just wanted to go home and brush his teeth and curl into a tiny little ball under his blanket with a pillow on top of his head but he knew Jenna was right, it would be stupid to walk home and it would be stupid to leave alone.

For a while, Jordan stood there, hands tight around either side of the sink, head angled down, eyes trained on the drain and that weird green stain nobody could figure out or get rid of. He took a deep, shuddering breath and raised his head, locking eyes with his reflection. His hair was in chaos after running his fingers through it so much and his eyes were a little wild in a way that scared him.

*I’m a fucking mess.*

But he was a mess who was still in one piece, who had an Alice and a customer apparently named Jon in one piece. That was the important thing.

He took a deep breath. One more. Then he opened the bathroom door and went back to the dining room.

Chapter End Notes

Come visit me and check out my short stories at indecentpause.tumblr.com!
Darcey had been asleep at the time of Jordan’s call, but he was up only a few hours later, at 4:00 a.m., so nervous about his interview he couldn’t get back to sleep despite being even more exhausted than the day before.

He normally wouldn’t be up for at least another hour, so he rolled back over and pulled his sheet over his head. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and lay still for a moment.

No. He wasn’t getting back to sleep.

He sighed and pushed himself out of bed, pulling on a t-shirt as he headed out the door. Downstairs, he pulled the paper off the doorstep and went back to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. He set up a full carafe so there would be some for his parents when they came down.

For a long time, he quietly sat, sipping his coffee and reading the paper. He pulled out the world events section and folded it up, sliding it to the side for later. When he was done with the comics, he put them aside for Ally and pulled a Walgreens insert for Lexi since she liked to stop by the one near her school with her friends after class.

Fingers of light slowly began to creep through the kitchen window. It was just after six when soft, light footsteps descended the stairs. Darcey smiled when Jess stepped up behind him and wrapped one arm around his shoulders, like she did every morning he was here at home.

“Morning,” he said.

“Good morning.”

“I made coffee if you want some. There’s plenty for both you and Dad.”

“Thanks, hon,” she said, but she didn’t move away. Darcey turned the page and scanned the article titles, then asked, softly, “Hey, Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“Why do you always do that?”

She squeezed him a little tighter and wrapped her other arm around him. Her arms were thin but strong and she smelled like lavender soap, exactly like when he was little. Everyone had gotten older and a lot had changed, but at least he could count on some things being constant.

“When you were younger, you were always up first, too,” she said. “Even on the weekends. You were always awake when I came to get you for school, pressing your ROTC uniform or getting your books together or finishing some last minute homework.” Her voice was soft and a little shaky.

“Mom?” Darcey asked.

“I’m just so glad you’re home,” she said. “I’m sorry if I’ve been clingy since you got back. I’m just so relieved and thankful you’re home safe with us.”
Darcey’s breath caught in the back of his throat and the back of his neck burned with embarrassment and maybe even shame.

“I didn’t exactly come home in the most admirable way, Mom,” he said softly.

“You did, though. And I’m proud of you. I’m so proud of you.”

“Mom,” he said softly, but he was smiling and his face was a little warm.

“Sorry,” she chuckled. She let him go and walked over to the counter to fix herself a cup of coffee. “I know, I’m such a mom.”

Darcey smiled again and went back to the paper. When Jess sat down across from him and said his name, he lowered it and looked up.

“Yeah?”

“You know you can tell me anything, right?”

His eyebrows drew together as small pricks of worry crawled down the back of his neck. “Mom?”

She looked at him a long moment, then sighed and shook her head. She smiled and simply said, “When you’re ready, I’d really like you to bring him over for dinner. We all want to meet him.”

*Apparently everyone around me can read my mind and I just don’t know anything.* Jess saw the thought on Darcey’s face. She chuckled softly and said, “We’ve all noticed the change in you, Darcey. We’re just glad that you’re finally happy after so long.”

For a moment, he was still. Then he gave a small smile and nodded once.

“He’s a vegetarian,” he said.

“That’s not a problem. Maybe all of us can get in the kitchen together.”

“Yes.” Some of the constant tension in Darcey’s shoulders finally started to melt, slowly, like ice warming in the spring. Jess smiled knowingly and sipped her coffee. It was almost white with milk.

“When’s your interview today?” she asked.

“Ten.”

“How long?”

“I’m not sure. I can’t imagine any longer than a half hour. If they’d wanted me to stage they would have asked me to dress for it.”

“Stage?” Jess asked.

“A working interview, basically,” Darcey explained. “You work a shift for free so they can try you out and see if you can do the job, if you’re trainable, if you mesh with the staff, stuff like that.”

“Oh!” she grinned. “What a great idea! I think every business should do that.” She took another sip of her coffee. “Well, I don’t have anything to do today. If you’d like, you can borrow my car. I’m sure that would make it easier. William can take the girls to school on his way to work.”
“He’d be okay with that?” Darcey asked.

Jess smiled. “Oh, he’ll be fine. He’s always complaining that he doesn’t have enough time with them. I’m sure he’d jump at the chance.”

They both sat quietly for a while longer. Finally, Darcey spoke.

“Hey, Mom?”

She looked up with a soft, “Hm?”

“Do you have Uncle Daniel’s number?”

Her mouth turned down in worry and she put down her coffee cup. “Yes. Why?”

Darcey’s hands curled tighter around his own mug. “I’m really worried about Brett. I just want to make sure he’s okay.”

Her eyes widened for a moment before her face calmed again. “Is he eating okay?”

“I don’t know.” Darcey’s voice was soft. “He’s lost a lot of weight and he looks really bad. I know he got over that flu thing not that long ago and he keeps saying he’s just stressed out, but…” He paused. “I really don’t think this is normal stress induced weight loss. I want to see if I can help him take care of it without getting anyone else involved. But I just want to make sure we can call his dad if we need to stage an intervention.”

Jess nodded. “I won’t tell William. Not yet. And the girls don’t need to know, at least right now. I don’t want to scare anyone and I want to make sure we’re respecting his privacy.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Thank you for telling me. Let me know if either of you needs anything.”

Darcey quietly went back to the paper. Jess picked up the comics section and they read in comfortable silence, until, some time later, light, quick footsteps came pounding down the stairs. Then Lexi slid into the kitchen, holding her arms out for balance as she used her socks as makeshift skates. Darcey laughed and handed her the Walgreens insert over his shoulder as she walked behind him to get to the fridge.

“She gets that from you, you know,” Jess said with a small, knowing smile. Darcey chuckled and shook his head. “No, Darcey, really. I don’t think you realize how much she looks up to you.”

Darcey glanced over at his sister, standing up on her toes to try to reach the second shelf in the cabinet above the stove. She huffed in frustration when her fingers glanced against the cereal box but accidentally pushed it farther away. He stood, walking up behind her and pulling it down.

“Thanks,” she said. She took the box and frowned, annoyed. “Ugh, I hate being so short. I’m the shortest one in all my classes at school! It sucks.”

“Language.” Jess’s voice was just sharp enough to serve as a stern reminder.

“Sorry, Mom.” Lexi blew a stray curl out of her eyes.

“You’ll get taller,” he said, gently patting her shoulder. “I didn’t really get my growth spurt until I was almost sixteen. You’ll get there.”

“Yeah, and now you’re a giant!” she laughed, getting some milk from the fridge and a bowl and
spoon to set up a cereal station on the table. She put out an extra setting next to her for Ally.

Eventually William got up, then Ally, and the morning rush started, everyone running in and out of the kitchen and up and down the stairs, Jess and William making sure everyone had eaten and had their school things together and reminding Ally to bring her things for show and tell and Lexi to take in the signed form for wrestling tryouts. The restaurant was only a half hour away from the house and it was barely 7:30, so Darcey waited until his stepfather and sisters were out the door before he went back upstairs to get ready.

He took a bit longer than was necessary ironing and straightening his clothes, because it needed to be right and he had the time, anyway. As he looked himself over in the full body mirror in the bathroom, he smirked at himself. He was going to hate himself later for wearing all black, but when he’d bought his interview clothes he’d thought it would be best if everything matched. Only his tie was a different color, dark blue and green striped. With one last look-over, he adjusted his sleeves to make sure the creases were sharp enough and took a quick tug on his collar to make sure it fell right.

Darcey didn’t have the professional training or the experience, but he had the skills. All he needed was the chance to hone them in the proper place. If he could get a callback for a stage, he could prove he had what they needed, at least to start on the bottom.

He went back into his room to grab the folder with his extra resumes and his phone. He checked it out of habit, not expecting to see anything there, but there was a text, a missed call, and a voicemail. He checked the text first.

*Hey! It’s Iffy. This is my cell. Add me to your contacts! So Jordan said you needed to talk to Justin and for some reason couldn’t ask Brett? I don’t have his number but his IM handle is DominatedLoveSlave. Also mine is Bobette_the_Lizard_Queen. Don’t judge me, I was like 12 when I made it.*

Darcey raised an eyebrow at Justin’s handle. It sounded familiar. Maybe it was from a song? Maybe he’d ask if he got in touch. He wanted to have Justin’s information available if he needed it, but he still wasn’t sure he would. Maybe he’d send an IM in an attempt to get to know him better, but unless the situation got out of control, he wouldn’t do any more. That had to be Brett’s decision and nobody else’s.

*Thanks, Iffy. Mine is SincerelyMe. I’m pretty sure I was 14. I won’t judge you if you don’t judge me.*

Next, he checked his voicemail. It was Jordan, but something was wrong. His words were tight, clipped, breathless.

“Hey, Darcey. It’s Jordan. Call me when you get this. Some really fucked up stuff just happened and I need to talk to you. I’m okay. I’ll talk to you soon.”

Darcey hung up. He’d delete it later. It was just past nine. Jordan would still be awake.

He picked up before the first ring ended.

“Hey.” His voice was soft, shaky.

“What happened?” Darcey asked.

“I was robbed last night.”

“What?” The back of his neck went ice cold, sharp pinpricks of fear sticking into his skin. “Wh –”
“Shit, I mean, at work,” he clarified. “Not my apartment. But. But, oh, fuck, Darcey, it was so fucked up. He had a gun pointed right at my face and Alice was crying and then when the cops came they thought I was the guy and they shoved me into a wall and they were screaming and –”

“Jordan, breathe,” Darcey said. His voice was calm but stern. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he whimpered. “I… I think.”

Darcey understood exactly what he meant. He’d never forget the first time he had a gun pointed at him. Point blank. If he hadn’t pulled the trigger first, he would have died when the other man’s bullet ripped through his brain.

“We’re closing down for a few days until they catch the guy.” Jordan paused and coughed, heavy, thick, barking. “Shit. Fuck, I think I’m getting sick.”

“Are you going to be okay for the next few hours?” Darcey asked. His voice caught on a tickle and he coughed to clear his own throat.

“You are going to your interview, Darcey Walker. Don’t you dare skip it just to come check on me. I’m okay.”

He chuckled a little, softly. “All right.”

A beat of silence. When Jordan spoke again, it was small, scared.

“Darcey, if we’re closed for too long I won’t be able to pull together the last of the money for the down payment for my surgery.”

Darcey tried to swallow the dryness in his mouth. This surgery was so important to Jordan, he’d been working toward it for years, and because of that, it was important to Darcey that he got it. “How short will you be?”

“It depends on how long we’re closed. If it’s too long I might even have to pull out of my savings for my rent and electric. Fuck, Darcey, if I don’t get it on time I’ll lose my slot in December.”

“We’ll figure it out.” Darcey tried to reassuring, but he wasn’t sure if he believed it, either. “I mean… there will be other chances, right?”

“Well, yeah,” Jordan said, but his voice was a little hysterical. It cracked. “But he’s the only guy in the state who can do it and the waiting list is like, minimum a year. I can’t… I can’t live another year like this, Darcey. I don’t –”

“We’ll figure it out,” Darcey repeated, soft, trying to soothe him. “If I get this job I’ll be making minimum nine bucks an hour. I don’t know if I’ll be able to get together what you need in that time, but –”

“Oh, god, Darcey, why are you so fucking amazing?” Jordan laughed, even though it was a little choked. “Thank you. Even if you can’t. Even if you don’t get the job. Just. Thank you, thank you so much for being willing to try.”

“I just… I want you to be happy, Jordan. And I know how important transition is to you. You deserve it. Everyone who needs it does.”

Jordan laughed again, but it turned into another harsh cough. He cleared his throat.

“Do you want me to let you go for now?” Darcey asked.
“Yeah,” Jordan sighed. “I think I am getting sick. Shit. Well, call me after your interview and let me know how it goes, okay?”

“Of course.”

“Be safe. Be safe, okay?”

“I’ll be safe,” he murmured. “Get some rest. Call me if you need me. I won’t be able to answer during the interview but I’ll call you back, okay?”

“Thanks, Darcey.”

He hung up.

Darcey cleared his throat again, experimentally flexing his hand in front of his mouth. It ached so badly to move he could almost hear his joints creaking. For a moment, he held the phone against his ear, silent. And this time, when he whispered *I love you* to someone who couldn’t hear it, he *meant* it.

It didn’t startle him. He’d known it was true for some time, now.

He didn’t turn the volume back on before sticking the phone back in his pocket and his hands shook more than usual when he picked his folder back up. He’d try to go over to Jordan’s after the interview, if he was awake and up to it. Even though Jordan had said he was okay, Darcey needed to see him. Just to be sure.

On his way out of the bedroom, he grabbed his backpack and slung it over his shoulder. He wouldn’t bring it in to the interview, but after what happened in the park, he never went anywhere without it or the first aid kit inside.

Jess stopped him on his way out the door to straighten his collar one last time. She rested her forearms on his shoulders, smiling up at him, and wished him good luck. She was quiet for a moment before she said, “Sometimes I lose track of just how much time has passed. Without having you here everyday, sometimes I still think of you as my brand new high school graduate on his way out into the world. Sometimes I forget you’re not my little boy anymore.”

Darcey smiled and pulled her into a hug. She wrapped her arms back around him, not too tight, careful not to muss up his shirt.

“Good luck, hon,” she said.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“The keys are on the hook by the door. Leave your house keys behind, okay? I might go for a walk later if the weather is all right. If you’re going to be out for a while, just call and let me know. I don’t need the car today, so take your time.”

“All right. I might stop by Jordan’s on my way home.”

“Your partner?” she asked. He nodded. She smiled.

“All right.”

It was only just past nine when he left and the restaurant was about a half hour away, but it was downtown, so if he arrived early, there would have to be a coffee shop or something nearby
where he could kill some time. He just couldn’t afford to be late. He had to do everything he could to make a good impression and get that callback. If he did, the job would be his.

Thanks to some construction on the freeway he had to circle around and get there on local streets, but even though it took an extra fifteen minutes to get into the general area, he was glad. If he’d gone on the freeway he probably would have pulled off at the first exit and gone local the rest of the way anyway. Freeways didn’t scare him, but they made him nervous, and with how much worse his anxiety had gotten over the past eight years he didn’t know how he’d handle it. With the news Jordan just gave him on top of it? He’d be a wreck by the time he got there. The tremor in his hands made him look bad as it was; he didn’t need anything else to make him look worse.

He pulled into the parking lot about fifteen minutes early, where he checked his watch. He bit the corner of his lip in thought. Was fifteen minutes early too early? In this industry if he was on time, he was late, but being too early might look just as bad.

If nothing else, he could say he was hoping to get a look at their kitchen before they sat down to talk.

He inhaled deeply and grabbed the folder with his resumes, straightening his clothes when he got out of the car. He locked the door behind him. During the week, they only did dinner service, so he entered through the front. A young woman sat behind a desk, going through some paperwork.

“Excuse me, ma’am?”

She looked up. “Oh!” she said. “You must be here for the interview. Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Chef told me she was expecting you. She’s back in the kitchen. Go ahead and have a seat at one of the tables and I’ll let her know you’re here.”

“I know I’m a little early,” he said. “So tell her it’s no problem if she needs me to wait.”

She smiled and nodded before walking briskly back through a swinging door.

Darcey hadn’t been quite sure what he was expecting, but the woman who came back through the kitchen door was tiny, just over five foot, not only short but petite, with short cut black hair pulled out of her face and large brown eyes. If Boots had an older sister, she’d look like this woman.

Her voice was so loud and boisterous that it nearly made him jump.

“Darcey Walker?” she asked.

He stood and held out his hand to shake. Her hands were small but strong, her grip firm and her palms and fingers rough with calluses. She had the hands of someone who’d been working her whole life.

“Chef Hobfoll?” Darcey asked.

“Sure am,” she laughed. She gestured back at the table. “Sit down. Let’s talk.”

They’d been talking for about a half hour when she hit him with it.
“Darcey, I really like you. I think you’d be a great fit with our team. I love your enthusiasm and it’s obvious you really care about what you do, but you just don’t have the kind of experience I’m looking for.”

Darcey didn’t let his face betray his disappointment, although his fingers curled into his palms a little where they rested on his knees. Even the slight pressure of his fingertips hurt. He really was getting sick. Maybe it was better this way.

He was about to thank her for her time and for being so straightforward with him, but she continued.

“I think you’d be great as an expeditor, but unfortunately we already have two and don’t need another one. However, my dining room manager is looking for servers, and with your customer service experience at The Tea Shop I feel like you’d be easy to train for it. I know you had your sights set on the back of the house, but if you’d be willing to take a different position, I’d really like to hire you on.”

Darcey didn’t answer immediately. It was a job, and he needed work desperately right now. As a server he’d have to learn the menu and plating and that could be his ticket to a position in the kitchen.

Jordan needed the money for his surgery. Even if he was only here for the two weeks it took and moved onto something else afterward, that was reason enough for him to accept anything. Servers only earned a couple of dollars an hour and he didn’t know how well the people here tipped. But he had to try. He wouldn’t mind staying with his parents another few weeks in the meantime.

“All right,” he said. His smile was small, but enthusiastic and sincere. “I’d love to.”

She smiled and held out her hand. They shook, and she said, “Let’s start you in on Monday night. Get you going on a slow day so you can get settled and learn your way around without too much excess stress.”

He would come back tomorrow morning at 10:00 again so he could get his paperwork and tax forms filled out and discuss pay and tipping protocol. The uniform was simple, black button down with sleeves rolled to three quarters, black slacks and non-skid shoes, black tie. He already owned all those things, but he would need a few more shirts and pairs of slacks in case he couldn’t do laundry every two days.

When he got back the car, he pulled out his phone. There was a text from Jordan.

_I didn’t want to call you and screw up your interview but if you’re not busy, do you want to come over? I got a call from a few friends and they’re going to do some prep cooking for a brunch thing they throw on Sundays and I thought it could be fun._

Darcey smiled and texted back.

_All right. I’m always up for helping out with cooking._

It took a minute, but his phone beeped again with a reply.

_I was hoping you’d say that. They’re meeting at the community center in Deer Valley at 11 but they said we can come over whenever._

_All right. I’ll be back in your area in about fifteen minutes depending on traffic._

Darcey turned the volume back on and dropped his phone in the passenger’s seat, just in case.
Jordan called, and he started the car.

Jordan spent the next fifteen minutes pacing, and when Darcey finally knocked on the door, he nearly jumped out of his skin. He pressed his hand to his chest and forced himself to breathe. It was just Darcey. Nobody here was going to hurt him.

When he opened the door, Darcey pulled him into a tight hug before he had the chance to speak. Jordan squeaked in surprise, but then relaxed and hugged him back.

“You’re sure you’re okay?” Darcey said softly. He pulled away and cupped Jordan’s cheek, as if trying to check for himself.

“Yeah,” Jordan said. “I… I mean, I guess. I’m really jumpy. Can we just go?” With CounterCulture being only a short walk away, Jordan had been afraid all morning that the man who robbed them would come back. An irrational fear, but one he couldn’t shake.

“Yeah,” Darcey said. “Do they need you to bring anything?”

“I don’t think so.” Everything but his keys was already in his pockets. He grabbed them and hustled Darcey out the door. “Let’s go.” I don’t want to be here right now.

But Jordan didn’t need to say it out loud. Darcey could read it in his body, the lines of his face.

“All right,” was all he said, and he led Jordan back to the car.

Darcey had never been to the area, but Jordan was familiar with it because it was where he grew up and sometimes he’d hang out at the same community center when he didn’t want to go to his after school programs because the bullying was so bad. All he ever did was sit out of the way reading or drawing terrible doodles, but everyone had been so nice. Everyone had called him Jordan. They said he was such a kind young man and not to worry, his voice would drop soon and then he’d sound like all the other boys at school. They never questioned it when it didn’t.

After he left his parents’ house, Jordan he never came back to visit because his apartment was so far away. It took about thirty minutes by car.

Did any of the people from his childhood still work there? Would they recognize him? Would they even remember him? He remembered every single one of them. They were the first people to accept him fully, with no questions. They never knew he was transgender. He never told them. But they knew he was a quiet, skinny teenage boy who mostly kept to himself, and that was what mattered.

The drive was mostly quiet except for the radio and Jordan’s spoken directions. His hands were still, but even so, inside, he was vibrating.

“What’s the next turn?” Darcey asked. Jordan leapt out of his seat and the seatbelt slammed hard into his chest. He took a quick, shuddering breath that turned into another cough. It was infrequent and not too rough, but the cough terrified him. If it wasn’t gone by the time CounterCulture opened back up, they might not let him back to work.

Darcey glanced over. “Are you okay?” His voice was softer now, gentle.
“Sorry,” Jordan wheezed. He ran his fingers through his hair again, for maybe the hundredth time since he’d locked the café door the first time. There was no point trying to keep it in place any more.

“Don’t apologize,” Darcey said. He slowed to a stop at a red light. Jordan turned toward him. Darcey’s jaw was tight and his eyebrows knit together. “Don’t ever apologize, okay? It’s not your fault.”

Jordan’s breath still came too fast, too harsh, too shallow, and now he really was shaking. He wrapped his arms around his torso and turned his head down.

“Do you want to go home?” Darcey asked. “We can –”

“No,” Jordan murmured. “I really want to see my friends. It’s Iffy and Nate; I don’t remember if I told you that. So you know them, too. And I need to get out of the house and do something else.”

“All right.” A pause. “You want to pull over and take a minute or keep going?”

“We can keep going.” And the light changed, and they did.

“Any news on when you’ll be reopening?” Darcey asked.

Jordan sighed and leaned his head against the window. The buzzing of the glass against his temple helped keep his thoughts away. “Not yet.”

“Well,” Darcey said, “I’m only going to be making maybe two bucks an hour before tips. A little less, I think.”

“Sucks,” Jordan hissed.

“Yeah. But it’s pretty high end and the checks are huge, so hopefully tips will make up for it. I…” He paused and sighed, frustrated. “I don’t know if I’ll be getting enough. But if I can help you get the money together, I will.”

Jordan turned back to him, the back of his head still pressed against the warm window. Darcey’s hands were tense on the steering wheel.

“Thank you, Darcey,” Jordan whispered. His voice cracked. “Thank you for even wanting to try.”

He’d nearly burst into tears on the phone earlier when Darcey had offered the first time. He wasn’t going to try to talk him out of it. He wasn’t going to skip out and leave. Darcey was with Jordan for the long haul, and after everything that had happened with his family, that meant so much.

“We’ll sit down and figure it out once we have a better idea of what we’re looking at,” Darcey said. He glanced over at Jordan, back at the road. “Do –”

“Left turn at the next light,” Jordan interrupted. Darcey merged into the middle lane.

“Thanks,” he said softly. “Do you want to talk about last night?”

“I…” But Jordan didn’t finish because he didn’t know. He opened his mouth and a quiet, pained squeak came out, and he squeezed his eyes closed and curled his fingers into his hair.

“It’s okay,” Darcey said softly. “We’ll talk about it later. Or not at all. Whatever you want. All right?”
Jordan nodded. Darcey’s hand wrapped around his, gently working his fingers out of his hair and lowering their hands to his knee.

Jordan opened his eyes when the car turned at the light.

“Okay.” It was shaky, but now that Darcey had reassured him he only had to talk about it when and if he wanted to, Jordan felt a little better. Even a little was important.

They’d turned onto a smaller street, not quite residential but not a main road, either. “You’re going to turn right at the third light, straight into the parking lot. I’m pretty sure you can just park wherever.”

Jordan turned the radio off. He knew the kitchen was going to be loud and he needed a minute to compose himself. Nobody but Darcey knew yet, and that included Nate and Iffy. He knew they’d find out if they hadn’t already. It had probably been on the news. He hadn’t checked. He hadn’t turned on his laptop or TV since he’d gotten home. All he wanted was a silent, safe space that was just his. For hours, he’d sat on the edge of his bed, staring at the wall, his eyes drifting around the posters and furniture of his bedroom. Much like they drifted around all the meters here in the car.

The car reached the third light and Darcey turned into the parking lot. He took a space near the entrance and turned the car off. Jordan took another shuddering breath and looked up when the bigger man rested a hand on his knee.

“I don’t know if knowing this will help,” he whispered, “But I understand.”

A small smile broke across Jordan’s face and he laughed, even though it was wet, even though his vision was a little blurry.

“I wish you didn’t,” he said. “I wish nobody did.”

“I know. Me, too.”

For few moments they sat in silence, watching each other, and when Darcey gently curled his fingers into Jordan’s hair and pulled him into a kiss, for the first time since the robbery, Jordan finally relaxed. His chest was still tight and his heart still beat too fast, but at least some of the tension bled out of his shoulders and neck, and it helped.

“It’s going to be okay,” Darcey whispered. His forehead pressed against Jordan’s and his eyelashes barely brushed against the smaller man’s face. “It’ll take a while. For a while even the smallest unexpected sound is going to scare you. You won’t trust anyone you don’t recognize. You’ll stop breathing every time someone reaches into their pocket or purse.” Darcey’s voice hitched and Jordan gently touched his knee. “And it sucks. But it slowly gets easier, and eventually, it’ll be okay again.” His eyes darted over Jordan’s face, and then he said softly, but with conviction, “I promise.”

Jordan wrapped his fingers around Darcey’s and gently slid his hand from his hair to his cheek, where he turned to kiss his palm.

“Thank you, Darcey,” he murmured.

They sat quietly for another few moments, then Jordan took a slow breath, a deep one, finally – and his palm smelled like skin and damp and Darcey and it was so, so comforting – then he squeezed once and let him go.

“Come on,” Jordan said. “I spent a lot of my high school years here. I want to see how much it’s changed.”
Darcey smiled and nodded and they got out of the car.

“So,” Jordan said as he shut the door behind him, “Iffy and Nate are here. I know you know them? And our friend Vi might be coming later.”

“I know them through my cousin,” he said. “I don’t know any of their other friends.”

“Okay.” It was probably a little much to hope he would, but that was what he was expecting. “Well, Vi is friends of Iffy’s. She’s dating Renee, in case she comes along, too. I met them at an anti-war protest a while back and they’re not in BashBack with me, but they’ve expressed interest in it.” His voice softened and his quick stride slowed when Darcey didn’t reply.

“So, I… I don’t know how they are with military stuff,” Jordan continued hesitantly. “I mean, they’re all really nice and not really all that political, comparatively, so I don’t… I don’t see them having a problem with you just because you served. But… I don’t… it’s never come up so I don’t know. I mean, it’s completely irrelevant to why we’re all here so it probably won’t even be something we talk about unless you bring it up first.”

Darcey huffed softly, almost a laugh. “Don’t worry about that. I know Iffy and Nate are fine. They’ve never been anything but supportive, in what little time we’ve talked about it. I mean, it’s not something I announce to people, really. You know that.”

Jordan paused. He gently grabbed Darcey’s hand to still him when he kept walking.

“I’m not ashamed of you, Darcey,” he said. The taller man paused and turned around. “I’m proud of you. You know that, right?”

Darcey didn’t confirm or deny. He just shrugged and looked down.

“Darcey,” Jordan murmured. “You mean a lot to me. And I mean, even though…” He paused, frustrated, because he couldn’t figure out how to phrase what he wanted to express. “I don’t want to be with you despite the fact that you were in the Army,” he finally managed. “I want to be with you because of everything you are. I just… their opinions aren’t going to change that. I just want you to know what we might be getting into.”

Darcey swallowed nervously. So far, the few people he’d told about his time in the Army had been either compassionate or impressed at best, ambivalent at worst. Aside from Jordan’s initial… panic attack? that one night, he hadn’t had a negative reaction. But for some reason, he was still afraid it was coming. It was just a matter of when. If it wasn’t with Jordan’s friends, it would be someone else further down the line.

But Jordan was ready to defend him, teeth and nails bared if need be. Darcey was the world to him. His friends were so important, too, and he prayed he didn’t have to choose. He wanted everyone to get along. Renee and Vi didn’t worry him much, and obviously Iffy and Nate were fine. It was Mandy and some of his other BashBack group that he was afraid of losing, because if it got that bad, BashBack was the one he would give up. He wasn’t letting go of Darcey. Ever.

He’d take it as it came.

“Thank you, Jordan,” Darcey finally murmured.

“Renee and Vi are cool,” Jordan said as they began walking again. “I think you’ll all like each other. If they even come! They might not.” Jordan smiled and nudged Darcey’s elbow with a loosely curled fist. “Today, all anyone cares about is whether we can cook.”
“I can say with complete confidence that cooking is what I was born for,” Darcey grinned. Jordan grinned back.

“Then we’ll be fine.” He opened the door and gestured Darcey in. He laughed and gave Jordan a small mock-bow, which Jordan returned.

The air conditioned cool hit them like the most wonderful brick wall, heavy and thick and chilly, all the way deep into their lungs. Darcey wiped off the sweat that had already begun to collect on his forehead from just the short walk from the car. He hoped his mom was smart enough to not go for that walk.

Jordan glanced around. Everything was exactly how he remembered it. The layout, the tile, the front desk, even the walls were the same. He smiled. It was almost like coming home, because growing up, the community center was more of a home to him than his parents’ house ever was.

He looked up at Darcey with a smile, and when the bigger man’s softened, Jordan knew he could tell exactly what he was feeling. As much as he had to work to keep them in check, he’d never actively tried to hide his emotions, but Darcey could read them like they were written on his face. Sometimes he felt like he shouldn’t like how vulnerable that made him, but he was safe with Darcey, and sometimes, when it got bad, when it was so hard to put his feelings into words, knowing that Darcey could just look at him and know made everything a little less scary, because somebody understood.

“The kitchen is back this way.” Jordan gestured for Darcey to follow him to the back.

The door was propped open with an old milk crate so he let himself in, Darcey right behind him. The kitchen was small but nice, with stainless steel surfaces and a non-skid floor. Iffy and Nate were the only two there, standing side by side. Iffy’s back was to them, while Nate leaned against the counter fiddling with his phone.

“Hey, guys!” Jordan shouted. Nate looked up with a grin and slipped his phone back into his pink apron’s pocket. Iffy glanced over her shoulder.

“Hey!” she grinned. “Nate was just about to text you! Where have you been?”

Jordan thumbed over his shoulder in Darcey’s direction. “Darcey had an interview and I really wanted him to come along. He’s an amazing cook. I’m sure you’ll find a place for him.” He looked up and over his shoulder to see Darcey smiling, a little embarrassed.

Iffy looked him up and down for a second, then said, “Well, Darcey, you’re probably going to want an apron so you don’t mess up your nice clothes? We have a few but all of them are pink and some have lace.”

He laughed. “An apron is an apron. Point me to where they are?”

She grinned and gestured him to the little rack in the corner where the aprons hung. Darcey picked the frilliest, most ridiculous one, with a pocket on the front for utensils in the shape of a bright red heart. He rolled up his sleeves as high as he could so they wouldn’t drag against any food he might handle and he turned back around to see Jordan with a huge grin on his face.

Darcey smiled back. “What?”

Jordan’s smile softened and he shook his head softly. “Just…” He gestured out widely with his arms. “You.”

Nate waved them both over to the counter where Iffy was finishing up her work. “We don’t
actually have the brunch until Sunday,” she began.

“Yes, I was wondering about that. Why are you prepping so early? You said you do most of your work on Saturday.”

“I’m getting there,” she said. Jordan quieted and let her finish. “But they’re hosting an event here on Saturday. Some softball team won a tournament or something. So they need the kitchen. Nate’s kitchen is okay for a four person meal or so, but he doesn’t have the counter space for something like this, and my kitchen is tiny, so we need to get as much done today as we can. Obviously we can’t do things like slice apples and chop potatoes because they’ll brown, but we’re doing other things, like making dry and wet mixes for pancakes and waffles, and chopping vegetables for the tofu omelets. We want to start having scones, but we haven’t really found a recipe we like enough yet.”

“Do you have any oranges?” Jordan asked. “I have an awesome orange scone recipe.”

“On you?” she asked.

Jordan tapped his temple. “Memorized.”

Iffy and Nate grinned at each other and shared a high five. She pushed the last of her strawberries into their container and put the knife down.

“So, we have the pancake and waffle stuff prepped,” she said. Nate was fiddling with his phone again, but had one ear and one eye on the conversation. “We still need to slice the bread for the French toast but I have the wet mix made. We have strawberries. I guess you’re doing scones?” she said, turning to Jordan. He nodded. “Okay, awesome. So we need to slice some mushrooms and onions and go through the spinach and see if we need to pick out any big stems. We need slices of onion for the omelets and dice for the home fries, and some diced green peppers, too.” She looked up at Darcey. “Are you up for that?”

He grinned. “Just put a knife in my hand and point me where I need to go.”

She smacked his forearm happily and laughed. “Awesome! I knew I liked you, Darcey. Knives are over there in the corner —” she gestured toward a large knife block, “— and all the vegetables are over there on the table.” She pointed to the left at a few canvas bags.

As Darcey got started, Iffy gave Jordan a rundown of the kitchen and where to find all the utensils and ingredients he needed while Nate went to work chopping the vegetables Darcey had left behind. It was strange for Jordan to be back in the kitchen – when he was younger, it was the one place he wasn’t allowed – but it was nice at the same time, because now it felt like the whole place was his. He preheated the oven and set up between Darcey and Nate.

The second Darcey’s knife sliced the first onion in half, the change in him was obvious. All the tension left his body, his voice grew louder and more sure, and his smiles and laughs came easier. He came alive. He was sure in his movements and comfortable in his skin when he cooked, and he opened up so wide and welcoming. Jordan couldn’t help noticing the difference. It was such a waste for Yellowfin to put him in the front of house.

When Iffy finished packing up the strawberries, she got started on slicing the bread, and Nate chopped bell peppers while Jordan measured out ingredients. He usually did all of his baking by weight, but they didn’t have a scale, so he kept his phone out by his workstation for quick conversions.

He shrieked when he accidentally spilled flour all over it and Darcey burst out laughing, but his
phone wasn’t damaged and the sound was so bright and booming and wonderful, so he couldn’t stay annoyed for long. Then he was laughing, and Iffy and Nate were laughing, too, and Jordan finally started to remember: he didn’t need a blood family, because the one he’d built for himself was so much better.

Even though they had so much to do, the morning rushed by, hours condensed into minutes and suddenly it was almost two and everything was done and the kitchen, cleaned.

*You know, you guys cut a good two hours or so off of our work.* Nate grinned when Jordan smiled up at him from his phone. The four stood in the middle of the kitchen, aprons returned to their rack and clothes righted.

“I guess that’s it, then,” Iffy said. She turned around to Jordan and Darcey. “Thanks so much for coming in. It was a lot of fun!”

Darcey grinned. “Thanks for having us,” he said.

“Always!” Iffy said. “You guys are always welcome back! We get volunteers sometimes but you’re the first ones who’ve really known what you were doing.”

Jordan laughed brightly and Darcey shook his head. “Well, I guess we’d better head out then, in case they’re going to need the kitchen for anything else.”

“Yeah,” Iffy said. Nate nodded.

They talked for another half hour or so in the parking lot, mostly about the brunch but a little bit about events that were going to be happening in the area soon.

“There’s going to be one at the end of the month, like a sit-in thing in downtown Phoenix,” Iffy said. She glanced over at Darcey, as if trying to gauge his reaction to the conversation so far. “Vets and military families against the war. Our Food Not Bombs group is going to go out and serve. You’re both welcome, if you want.”

Jordan glanced up at Darcey. He wore an expression Jordan couldn’t quite read, somewhere between thankfulness and relief. Jordan looked back at Iffy and Nate.

“I don’t—”

“Maybe,” Darcey said softly. “I just started a new job so I’ll have to see what my schedule looks like then.”


Iffy nodded thoughtfully and gently smacked his forearm. “Well, keep in touch with Jordan and he’ll keep in touch with us, okay?”

“Yeah.”

They finally parted ways, and after he and Jordan got into the car, Darcey pulled his phone out and sent Brett a text, the fifth one that day. He was starting to get worried by the lack of responses, but trying not to be overbearing about it.

*I might be going to an anti-war protest at the end of the month.*

He was expecting a “Really?” or an “Are you serious?” But nothing. He sighed and slipp
phone back into his pocket.

“What’s up?” Jordan asked. His posture was so much looser than it had been this morning. The lines in his face had softened and relaxed and his back and shoulders weren’t so tight.

Darcey had to hold back a groan when he wrapped his hands around the steering wheel. All of his joints ached so badly. “My cousin’s just not replying to any of my texts,” he said. “It’s just annoying.” But it wasn’t annoying, it was worrying.

Where was he? Was he okay?

Chapter End Notes

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Darcey was going to get Brett to talk to him even if it killed him.

With the job offer and the brunch prep and hanging out with Jordan, Darcey had mostly been able to put the bad things in his life out of his mind. But Brett’s lack of response kept his worry simmering on the backburner, and now, with it getting on into evening, it was starting to bubble over.

Part of Darcey was angry that Brett was ignoring him, but the overwhelming majority was frantic to track him down because now he was sure Brett wasn’t eating right. Darcey had no idea how long this had been going on. What if something happened to him? Darcey didn’t know how much Brett restricted calories, whether or not he hydrated, how much physical activity he’d been doing and if his food intake was enough to keep up with it.

Each text slowly got more frantic, less controlled, until he was typing in run-on sentences with terrible punctuation.

_Brett please call me or text me or something you’re really scaring me are you okay?_

It was almost six, and nothing.

He still had a copy of Brett’s apartment key. He’d meant to return it, but kept forgetting.

_Thank god._

He grabbed his backpack and took the stairs down two at a time, despite how much everything hurt.

He grabbed Jess’s car keys on his way out the door. She would know it was him. That morning she’d said he could take the car all day. He didn’t have time to deal with the bus.

As he drove, his jaw was set hard, hands tensed on the steering wheel, eyes quick between the road and mirrors. Every action was quick, precise, no time or movement wasted because even one second could be the difference between everything being all right and everything falling apart.

When he got to Brett’s apartment, he knocked even as he unlocked and opened the door, calling out, “Brett? You home?”

Nothing. He did a quick once over of the single room. The bed was rumpled and there was a blanket on the floor. The computer was on, humming softly even though the screen was dark.

The bathroom door was cracked. Darcey knocked. “Brett?”

Nobody answered. He peered in. It was empty, too.

The full length mirror had a bed sheet tacked over it. A sharp, cold wave of panic crashed through him and he took a step back, his hand shooting to his mouth.

“Fuck.”
He’d been clinging to the hope that he was just overreacting, that it really was just stress like Brett had been insisting. But if it was bad enough for him to need to hide his mirror? He must have been in full relapse.

Where was he? He could be sick somewhere. If this had been going on long enough, he could even faint. What if he fainted while he was driving?

Darcey pulled out his phone as he headed back to Brett's computer. It wasn’t password protected, so he went straight to the IM program, logging Brett out and logging himself in. He scrolled through his phone to find Justin's handle as it booted up, typing him in as soon as it was online.

SincerelyMe: Justin. It’s Darcey. Iffy gave me your contact information. Is Brett with you?

DominatedLoveSlave: He is, yeah. He has been most of the day. Did he tell you what happened?

Darcey swore under his breath and tried to keep his hands steady enough to keep typos to a minimum.

SincerelyMe: What? No, what happened?

DominatedLoveSlave: He didn’t text you?

SincerelyMe: No. I’ve been trying to contact him all day but he’s not responding to anything I send him.

DominatedLoveSlave: Really? That’s weird.

SincerelyMe: Why?

DominatedLoveSlave: Well, he’s always talking about you. You’re like his best friend. And I haven’t heard his phone go off since we’ve been together. It’s weird he’d be ignoring you.

Darcey sighed and dropped his forehead into his hands, leaning his elbows on the desk. He took a moment to breathe before replying. He had to keep his head clear. This was an incredibly delicate situation and he couldn't afford to make any mistakes.

SincerelyMe: Have you seen him recently? In the past week or so?

DominatedLoveSlave: Just once until today.

SincerelyMe: Yeah, what happened?

DominatedLoveSlave: I don’t know what to say. He asked me not to tell you. I assumed because he wanted to tell you himself once everything checked out.
DominatedLoveSlave: I think he might be getting sick again.

SincerelyMe: What do you mean? Sick how?

DominatedLoveSlave: Just really tired. He got this crazy flu thing not long before you came back the first time and never really recovered. He doesn’t eat much and he’s really weak all the time.

Darcey closed his eyes and forced himself to keep breathing. What did he do? What did he say? Should he tell Justin about Brett's eating disorder? What if Justin couldn't handle it and ended up leaving him? It would be his fault. But Brett's dad lived so far away, would he even be able to help? He had to do something. Brett needed help and Darcey couldn't take care of him on his own.

“Fuck,” he whispered.

SincerelyMe: I need your help.

DominatedLoveSlave: ?

SincerelyMe: Brett’s in trouble. He’s really sick.

DominatedLoveSlave: So he is sick? What’s happening? What can I do?

DominatedLoveSlave: Does he have anemia or something?? Is that why he’s so tired all the time now?

Darcey breathed in one more time, flexed his hands into fists, back out again.

SincerelyMe: When he was younger he struggled with anorexia for about two years.

SincerelyMe: I’m pretty sure he’s going into a relapse.

There was no reply for a few minutes. Did he make the right decision? If Justin ended up leaving Brett, Darcey would never forgive himself. Brett probably wouldn't forgive him, either.

Finally there was a familiar ping and a new message popped up.

DominatedLoveSlave: Oh my God. He never told me. Fuck, I can’t believe I didn’t put it together. Oh God I’m so stupid. That makes sense why he fell today.

SincerelyMe: He fell? Did he faint?

DominatedLoveSlave: Yeah.
DominatedLoveSlave: What do I do? Does he have a therapist? Should I get him one? Does he need rehab?

DominatedLoveSlave: I don’t care what it is or how much it costs, I’ll make it happen. I’ll get him whatever he needs.

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DominatedLoveSlave: I don’t care what it is or how much it costs, I’ll make it happen. I’ll get him whatever he needs.

Darcey breathed out a sigh of relief and his hands relaxed. A little of the tension left his shoulders but his muscles were still tight.

SincerelyMe: Last time, from what I understand, he had a long term one-on-one therapist. I think he went to an outpatient group for a while. That was mostly for immediate intervention.

SincerelyMe: I don’t know a lot about it. He keeps it pretty close.

DominatedLoveSlave: Understandably. I don’t blame him. If I were in the same place, I would, too.

DominatedLoveSlave: How long has this been going on?

SincerelyMe: I don’t know. At least a week. It might be longer.

DominatedLoveSlave: Okay. Do you remember how to get to my house?

DominatedLoveSlave: I feel like you being here in person would be better than trying to do phone calls.

SincerelyMe: Yeah, I can get there.

SincerelyMe: On my way.

DominatedLoveSlave: Thank you for telling me, Darcey. I’ll do everything I can to help.

SincerelyMe: I’m glad he found you.

SincerelyMe: Be good to him.

DominatedLoveSlave: Of course. I love him. I’d do anything to keep him happy and safe.

DominatedLoveSlave: I’ll see you soon.

Darcey logged off, grabbed his backpack, and darted back out the door. He'd lost too many people these past eight years. Too many people had died or been injured on his watch, because he wasn't fast enough or observant enough or didn't have the right skills or the right equipment at the time.

It was true he'd saved two lives, but he'd lost dozens more, he'd taken one himself, and that thought ate away at him late at night when the nightmares wouldn't let him sleep.

Brett was not going to be one of them. Darcey didn't care what or how long it took, he would get
his cousin through this, and Brett would be okay again.

The closer Darcey got to Justin's house without hearing anything, the harder it was to ward off his panic. But finally, as he started to recognize the neighborhood, his phone rang from the passenger's seat beside him. It was Brett's number.

“I'm almost there. About five minutes.”

He hung up.

When Justin answered the door, his brown eyes were the darkest and saddest Darcey had ever seen them. Deep creases of worry were etched in his face and the muscles in his arms were coiled up like snakes.

Darcey pushed his way in, not bothering with pleasantries, and when he saw the back of Brett's head, leaning back against the couch in the living room, he could breathe again. He absentmindedly kicked his shoes off by the door and didn't wait for Justin to say anything before approaching.

Brett didn't look up when Darcey sat down beside him. His hands were curled in tight, fingers digging into the fabric of his jeans at the knees. His wrists and arms were hard, his neck tense, his mouth pressed in a thin, angry line. He'd lost even more weight than when Darcey had seen him the day before. The edges of his wrist bones could cut through his skin. His cheekbones were sharp and his face was hollow. The rings under his eyes were so thick and dark, he looked like he'd been in a fight and lost. Every line of every joint in his fingers strained against his skin.

“Why did you tell him,” Brett whispered. It was a demand.

“I'm sorry,” Darcey whispered back. He'd never meant an apology as much as he did this one. “I didn't know what else to do. You just disappeared. I couldn't find you and he was the only person I could think of to contact. I was so worried something had happened and Justin's the only other person I know who sees you on a regular basis.”

“I don't need help.” His voice was soft, but angry. Almost scared. “I'm fine.”

“No you're not,” Darcey argued. He knew better than to mention weight loss or physical appearance, so instead he said, “You're making yourself sick.”

The couch shifted slightly when Justin sat down on Brett's other side. He took one of Brett's hands in his, and Darcey's breath caught painfully in the back of his throat when his cousin started to move away. But then he stopped and curled his hand back around Justin's.

I fucked up. He'd completely spit all over Brett's privacy, and if Brett had done something like this to him, told Jordan some deep secret nobody knew, he'd be absolutely furious. Brett probably hated him, at least for right now.

But Darcey was okay with that as long as it meant Brett got treatment.

Brett stared very pointedly at the floor between his feet. Justin whispered his name, but he didn't respond. His eyes were closed, teeth clenched tight. The sharp line of his jaw flashed bright under the light of the living room.

“Brett,” Justin whispered again. “Talk to me. Please. Let me help you.” He closed his eyes and his fingers tightened around Brett's. His voice broke when he spoke again. “Brett, please. I love you so much. I'll do anything. Just tell me what you need. I'll make it happen. Please.”
Maybe, even though it was terrible for everyone right now, Justin was the one who could fix this. Maybe this was the right decision.

“I don’t need anything,” Brett said. His voice was light but it cracked hard on the last syllable. His voice was thick and sticky with the tears that started to gather on his eyelashes, pressed hard into his cheeks. “There's nothing wrong. I'm fine. I...” but then he trailed off and his body lurched forward slightly, his face relaxed, his arms went limp. His eyes fluttered open once, closed again. Darcey jerked forward, pressing his hand against Brett's chest, pushing him back against the couch and keeping him steady. His breathing was shallow but he jerked slightly when he hit the couch, and his eyes fluttered open again.

Darcey's mind raced, his whole body tensed. His heart pounded painfully in his ears and his mouth and throat were desert dry. What do I do? He ran through everything he'd been taught, but nobody talked about eating disorders in the military. It never came up in any of his medical training because it wasn't relevant then. All he could do was try to get Brett to eat something. That was it.

“What –” Brett's voice was so soft, the other two could barely hear it.

But he was conscious.

Then Justin was in front of him, holding Brett's face in both hands, his eyes darting over his boyfriend's face, his body. “Brett, can you hear me?” His voice was strained. Scared.

Brett mumbled something Darcey couldn't make out and Justin pressed their foreheads together. The older man turned away and went to the kitchen without asking. Daniel had mentioned that Brett had been able to start eating again the first time because of something called safe foods, but Darcey wasn't sure what that meant or what they were. A carrot or an apple or something should be okay, because that was, what, thirty calories? And that shouldn't be too scary, right? Darcey hoped not. If he couldn't get Brett to eat something, there was nothing else he could do. Brett might not have time to find a therapist before he ended up in the hospital.

He found an apple in the fridge and he rinsed and peeled it to make it easier to chew and digest, then cut small pieces into a bowl, removing all the hard parts and seeds. He made tiny half-slices, barely bite sized, and left half of it in the kitchen in a bowl of water so it wasn't too intimidating. He'd be lucky if he even got Brett to eat one or two pieces, but he had to try.

When he stepped back into the living room, he could just barely hear soft, muffled crying. He looked around the corner. Justin had Brett bundled up in his arms on his lap, holding him close. Brett's shoulders were shaking and his skinny hands gripped tightly to the back of Justin's shirt.

Darcey stayed back a few minutes to give them some privacy.

He wished he understood what Brett was going through. He wished he could understand what Brett was thinking.

Suddenly he wanted to see Jordan, just to remind his boyfriend how much he meant to him, but he wouldn't leave Brett and didn't know what he'd say in a text. So he left his phone in his pocket and stood there a few minutes, ducked around the corner, watching the ceiling and being completely useless.

He jumped when his phone rang, but it wasn't a number he recognized, so he ignored it. If it was important, they would leave a voicemail and he could get back to it later. But the ringer was loud, so Justin and Brett would have heard it and known he was on his way back in.
Brett was still curled up in Justin's lap when Darcey sat down beside him. His nose was pressed tight into Justin's shoulder and his breathing was still shuddery, but he wasn't crying anymore.

“Hey,” Darcey murmured. He gently pressed his hand on Brett’s forearm. The bones underneath cut through his skin into Darcey’s palm.

Brett didn’t reply. Finally, he pulled away from Justin and rolled himself back over onto the couch between them. Darcey moved to the side to give him space and gently rested his hand on Brett's knee.

“I brought you something,” he said softly. Brett's whole body tensed.

“What –”

“Just apples,” Darcey continued. He gently nudged his knee against Brett's in encouragement. “Last time your dad said something about safe foods. Apples are good for you so I was hoping they were one of them.”

Brett gave Darcey a look he couldn't quite read, something between anger and fear and gratefulness. He didn't reach for piece, but Darcey hadn't expected it to be that easy. Telling him to eat something because he needed to eat was like telling an insomniac to just go get some sleep. It was useless and insulting. It was a lot more complicated than that in a lot of ways Darcey didn't understand.

“Just a couple?” Darcey asked. He kept his voice soft, unnaccusing. “They’re good. And they’re healthy.” He popped one into his mouth as if to prove it. Brett didn't speak, but his hands curled a little tighter in on themselves, the lines in his neck grew harsher and more tense.

“Brett,” Darcey murmured. He still didn't reply. “I...” he paused. “You had a therapist last time, right?”

Brett nodded, but stayed silent.

“We could call them. I know it's been a while but they're probably still in practice. We don't even have to tell your dad, if you remember their name we could probably track them down online –”

“Shut up, Darcey.” Brett’s voice was soft and it broke in the middle, but it was the harshest he’d spoken to Darcey in years. Even Justin flinched. Darcey’s mouth snapped shut. Brett’s whole body was coiled, like it was ready to explode, and he whirled on Darcey and yelled, “You of all people have no right to tell me I need help! You’ve been completely ignoring all of your problems for years! Who are you to tell me how to deal with mine?”

Every muscle in Darcey’s body tightened. Over the past month, Jordan must have been chipping away at the poker faces he’d always been able to put up, because Brett’s face softened and some of the tension loosened from his muscles. His eyes locked on Darcey’s, eyebrows drawn. The hurt in Darcey’s was clear, because Brett dropped his head to his cousin’s chest and said, “I’m so sorry, Darcey. I… fuck, I’m so sorry.”

Justin’s hand was on Brett’s back between his shoulders and Darcey’s was still barely against his knee.

“–” Darcey’s voice caught painfully in his throat. He turned his head away and coughed against his shoulder. “No, you’re right.” His grip on the bowl was so tight the ceramic could have snapped.

He is right. He was right and Darcey knew it and he always had, but he’d insisted he was fine, he
didn’t need it, a therapist wouldn’t help. He had it under control and could take care of it himself. *Fuck, that’s exactly what Brett’s thinking right now.* Why did it take something like this to get him to listen? Was Brett’s disorder somehow partly his fault, too?

“You’re right,” he said again. His voice was cracking and normally he’d have been ashamed because Justin was right on Brett’s other side and Darcey barely knew him, but recently, he’d had a way of getting himself into situations that brought him closer to people than he’d normally get in months. “You’re right, Brett, and I’m sorry.” He paused for a moment. *This is so f**ked up and manipulative.* But he’d had a way of getting himself into these places a lot, too. “If you agree to see a therapist, the second my paperwork is approved, I’ll set one up, too. No arguments. No excuses. The paperwork comes in and I make the call the same day.”

All three men fell silent.

“Please,” Darcey finally whispered.

Brett didn’t speak for a long time, but when he wrapped his arms around Darcey and nodded his head, they knew that even if it took a long time, eventually he would be okay.

Darcey wrapped his arm back around Brett and hugged him close. When he pulled away, Brett leaned back against Justin’s shoulder. His face was so tired he looked like he’d aged years over the course of just two days.

“All right,” he whispered. He turned toward Justin, slow and tired and resigned. “Can you get your laptop? Her name was Stephanie Lamb. I don’t remember the name of her practice. Hopefully her last name is uncommon enough that we can track her down.”

“Yeah,” Justin whispered. He pressed a soft, lingering kiss to the side of Brett’s head, and when the lines in his face softened and the relaxation started to inch through the back of his neck, Darcey knew he didn’t have to worry anymore. Justin loved him so fiercely. Between the two of them, they could get Brett moving toward recovery.

Chapter End Notes

You can read more about Brett and Justin and their story in *Push Me, Pull Me*, the first part in this series. Be aware it will go into MUCH more detail about Brett’s eating disorder.

Come visit me at indecentpause.tumblr.com and check out my short stories!
For the first time since the robbery two days prior, Jordan turned on his computer and went online. He stayed far away from any news sites, sticking solely to webcomics and stupid cat pictures, with Skype minimized down to his toolbar while hoping someone would log on soon. Jenna still hadn’t called to let him know when CounterCulture would be opening again, only to tell him that they still didn’t know. They hadn’t caught the robber yet. Jordan didn’t know if he lived nearby. He didn’t know what the robber looked like or if the man would recognize him, or what he might do if he did.

He needed to get back to work, but he couldn’t until they opened again. In the meantime, he was terrified of leaving his apartment.

He’d also definitely gotten sick. His cough wasn’t too bad, but his head was so congested and clogged, his vision had gone blurry and his nose was so stuffed up his had to breathe through his mouth. It had gone into his lungs, thick and wheezing.

When the loud ringer of his phone broke the heavy silence he nearly fell off the bed, and when he breathed in sharply it triggered a small coughing fit. He grabbed his phone with one hand and pressed the other to his chest, trying to calm his heartbeat down. How long was he going to be like this?

The caller ID said it was Terrence. Jordan cleared his throat.

“Hey,” he answered.

“Hey,” Terrence said. “So, I’m at CounterCulture, which I’ve heard is open 24/7, 365, but the lights are off and the sign says that you’re closed until further notice, sorry for the inconvenience?”

Jordan swallowed. His voice shook when he said, “I guess you haven’t heard?”

Terrence’s voice went soft and serious. “Jordan?”

“We were robbed two nights ago. They still haven’t caught him and we’re going to be closed for a few days until… until I don’t know what.”

“Christ,” Terrence whispered. “Shit, Jordan, were you on shift?”

Jordan ran a shaky hand through his hair and turned his laptop away. Two things at once was too many right now.

“Yeah,” Jordan murmured. “I was on cash register.”

“Are you fucking serious? Oh, fuck, are you all right?”

“I… I think so.”

“Do you want me to come over? I mean, I’m right down the street now, anyway.”

“Yeah,” Jordan murmured. “I’d like that.”
“Okay,” Terrence said. “Be there shortly.”

He hung up.

Jordan didn’t go back to his laptop. A soft beep told him he had a new message, but he didn’t want to deal with it. Later.

With a soft groan, he scrubbed at his face with his hands, like if he pressed his palms into it hard enough he could fix all of his problems and be okay again. He hated this. He hated being so jumpy all the time, he hated being so nervous in busy places, he hated shying away every time someone passed him on the street who was probably only going about their day, just like him. But what if they aren’t? he kept thinking. Any time he entered a building, now, he looked for every possible exit: doors, windows, even skylights. Everyone was either a threat or potential collateral, even the dad with the baby stroller and the bent over old lady with the cane and the little six year old eating an ice cream cone.

He hated it. And when he talked to Darcey about it and saw the way his posture changed and his eyes darkened, Jordan knew that every day of his life was exactly the same, and he hated that, too.

And he hated how helpless they were to do anything about it.

His computer beeped again, and then someone knocked, sharp, staccato, one, two, three. Terrence.

Jordan closed his laptop as he walked by, hands still shaking at the sudden noise of the knocking in the silent apartment. It would go to sleep and automatically update to away, so whoever it was could get back to him later.

When he opened the door and saw Terrence standing there with a backpack slung over his shoulder, Jordan had to choke back a sob. He didn’t realize how much he wanted someone safe with him until just then.

“Hey,” Terrence said. He let himself in and closed and locked the door behind him. “I was just going to work on some research for an assignment, but it can wait.” His voice was a little gravelly and his face a little stubbly.

“You all right?” Jordan asked. Terrence turned back with a half smile.

“Yeah,” he said. He gently placed his backpack by the door. “Just haven’t gone to bed yet.”

Jordan’s eyebrows hiked. “It’s, like, eleven.”

“Yes,” Terrence chuckled. “I’ve got a huge assignment due and I’m really behind. Again.”

Jordan laughed. “You really haven’t learned yet?”

“Oh, you mean from the last three hundred times I did this to myself?” he laughed. “Nope. Guess not.”

“Well, if you need to crash on my couch for a while before you head back out, you’re welcome to.”

Terrence smiled. “Thanks.” He raised his head and nodded toward the table. “You want to talk, or…?”

Jordan shrugged.
“Okay, I can take a hint,” Terrence said lightly. “What about Darcey? You still have some explaining to do.”

Jordan took a deep breath and held it for a moment, trying to clear his head, then let it out in one big whoosh that left him feeling a little lightheaded but also a little better.

“Yeah,” Jordan said. “Okay. We never really finished that conversation.”

They sat down across from each other. Terrence’s hands laid flat on the table, Jordan’s curled into themselves, bouncing loosely. Something crashed outside, and even though his brain knew it was probably just the dumpster lid dropping or a car door slamming or something else completely innocuous, his body still jumped, his breath stuck in his throat, needles in his palms.

His breathing was too quick and his hands were shaking again when Terrence asked, “Are you okay?”

Jordan nodded. “Having a gun pointed at your face does really fucked up things to your head,” Jordan said.

“Fuck,” Terrence whispered. He curled his hand over his mouth, fingers tight on his cheek. “Is that why nobody’s heard from you these past few days?”

Jordan nodded. “I just want to stay inside where it’s quiet.” And safe, he added silently.

“Have you told anyone what happened?”

“Just you and Darcey.” Jordan’s hands were bouncing again, shoulders and neck tight.

Terrence was silent for a moment. “But, I mean, people are going to hear about it on the news and stuff. You know that, right?”

Jordan nodded.

“So –”

Jordan held up a shaky hand and Terrence quieted. “I know, Terrence,” he murmured. “I know, and I know just letting people find out on their own is probably really fucked up. But I just… I can’t. Not right now. There’s too much shit going on. With the store closed, I can’t work, and I still haven’t hit my surgery goal yet and –”

“What?” Terrence’s voice was soft, almost scared, because he’d known Jordan since before day one of his transition. He’d been there when Jordan transferred the first twenty dollars over into his savings. He knew how long and how hard Jordan had been working toward this, and before Iffy, and then Darcey, he was the one Jordan came to with updates and information and excited shrieking about his progress.

“And if we’re closed much longer I might even have to take some out to make my rent,” Jordan finished.

“Oh, shit. Jordan.”

Jordan nodded. His throat was tight, like he’d taken a bee sting to the jugular.

“I’m not going to make it,” he choked, and he dropped his head, hands curled across the back of his neck. He’d been working so hard, for years, staying in and reading or screwing around online instead of going out with his friends, subsisting on nothing but lentils and rice for weeks at a time.
when things got tight, dropping his internet access multiple times when it was either Skyping with his cousins or his surgery fund, wearing the same old worn-out pair of shoes and patching up the holes with duct tape and replacing the insoles with cardboard when he wore them too thin.

All of it, taken away in less than two minutes by an asshole with a gun for what I make in a single paycheck.

“Fuck,” he whispered. His shoulders were shaking and his voice was thick and his eyes were hot and he was pretty sure he was crying when he sat up and slammed his fists on the table. “Fuck!”

He buried his face in his hands.

“I wish I could help,” Terrence said softly. “Fuck, Jordan, if I had anything I could spare, it would be yours. Right now.”

Jordan shook his head, because that wasn’t what he wanted. He didn’t want pity or donations. He wanted what was rightfully his, what he’d earned, what he deserved.

After coming so close, he didn’t know if he could handle living in his body as it was for the extra year he’d get knocked down to. Maybe even longer. Dr. Shea was the only surgeon in the state who would do it, and a lot of states around him didn’t have anyone. He was probably booked solid for a very long time.

“I won’t know how far behind I am until we open up again,” Jordan whispered. “Darcey said he’d help if he could, but he hasn’t been back long and only just found a job and it pays really low. So.”

He stopped, unsure where to go from there.

“That’s pretty amazing, though,” Terrence said, slowly, searching. “I mean, you haven’t been together that long. A month or so?”

“About, yeah.” Finally, Jordan smiled, and even though his laugh was also part sob, it felt good coming out into the hand over his mouth. “Yeah. That is pretty amazing.”

“And he was in the Army?” Terrence asked, not quite disbelieving, but like he was ready for Jordan to laugh and say he was just messing around.

“Yeah,” Jordan said instead. “Eight years.”

“Huh,” was all Terrence said. But his eyebrows were pulled up, his mouth turned down slightly, a look Jordan knew that clearly said, Well, I’ll be damned.

“So, how did that happen, anyway?” Terrence asked. “I mean, clearly it’s turning out well so far. But what made you decide to take the chance on an ex-military guy in the first place?”

The back of Jordan’s neck warmed and he lowered his eyes, but he was smiling. He sniffled one last time and wiped his face with the back of his arm, not stalling, exactly, but giving himself a minute to get his thoughts together. He wasn’t ashamed of Darcey, and he was so glad he made the decision to bring him home that first night, but it wasn’t easy to explain.

But this was Terrence. Terrence wouldn’t judge him. He’d probably think it was hilarious.

“Well,” Jordan said softly. He chuckled to himself when he realized he had his hand on the back of his neck, like Darcey always did when he was unsure. He flexed his fingers and placed his hand back on the table. “It, uh, actually was just supposed to be a one night stand. I guess almost a
rebound thing, after Iffy and Nate. But we just… clicked. In every way. He stayed the night and cooked breakfast in the morning and we played video games and made out for a while and… I was just… smitten. Like, right away. He just ended up being the sweetest, kindest, most generous and gentle person I’ve ever met, and he gets me.” He paused and looked up at Terrence. “Like, he understands how I function and he’s okay with giving me space when I need it but he also kind of… knows when he needs to push me into dealing with something I might not want to. I know how much you hate it when I say shit like this, but… he’s perfect. Like, not literally, obviously. He’s a little emotionally stunted and has a hard time communicating sometimes. But he’s the perfect person for me.”

Terrence was smiling, a small, crooked smile that just pulled up at the right corner of his mouth. “Well, that’s awesome,” he said. His voice was soft, but sincere. “But that doesn’t answer my question. So were you just like, ‘oh, who cares, it’s just a one night stand anyway?’ Or what?”

Jordan shook his head. “I didn’t know until about a week in.”

Terrence gave him a pointed look. “He lied to you for the first week.”

“No!” Jordan’s hands shot up, like he was trying to defend himself. “No, it wasn’t…” He groaned and dropped his forehead to his hands. “I mean, it’s not like I go around introducing myself with ‘Hi, I’m Jordan, a radical anarchist queer activist, nice to meet you!’ I can’t expect other people to do the same thing. He didn’t know about BashBack, either, but I wasn’t hiding it. There was just no reason to talk about it so we never did.” He paused, and when he spoke again, his voice was almost a whisper. “He went through some really fucked up stuff, Terrence. He said he wasn’t talking to anyone about it, not even his family. I think he still isn’t. Just… yeah, he was in the military, and he served two tours in the Middle East, but he’s… he’s not like everyone else.”

Jordan sat up straight and dropped his hands. “He’s one of the best people I’ve ever known,” he said. “And I’m lucky to have him. I’m proud. And if the rest of the chapter can’t deal with that…” He paused and took a deep breath. He shook his head. “I don’t know. I don’t know what I’ll do. I’ll…” He trailed off and flexed his hands again, once, twice. “I’ll find something else, I guess. Other people to work with who can get the same shit done somewhere else. Maybe I’ll start working full time with Iffy and Nate on their stuff. But I’m not leaving him.”

Terrence was silent as Jordan spoke, watching his friend thoughtfully. When Jordan finished, Terrence uncrossed his arms and sat back in his chair, tilting it back on two legs. His mouth was twisted in thought. Finally, he sighed and said, “Well, losing you would hit us really hard, Jordan. But, I mean… you’re right. Some people are going to freak out. Hopefully we can manage to get around it, but… I don’t know. I really don’t.” He paused and took a slow, thoughtful breath through his nose.

“But what I said the other day still stands. I trust your judgment. You’re my best friend. I’ve got your back. But…” He paused, like he was trying to figure out how to say something difficult. “I think, at least for now, you shouldn’t introduce him to anyone. Maybe send out some feelers before you say anything, and then, when you do, give everyone some time to get used to it. I don’t…” He paused. “I don’t think anyone will want to do anything as drastic as kicking you out, but a lot of people are going to be really wary for a long time. So, once you do say something, don’t bring him around for a while.” He laughed a little before continuing. “Well, you should introduce him to me. Obviously. I’ve got to check him out for you.”

Jordan laughed and rolled his eyes. Terrence’s grin came back, his lips pressed tight together but wide across his face.

He held up one finger and said, “One more question and then I’ll drop it, okay?”
Jordan sighed, but smiled. “Sure.”

“How did he react when you told him about BashBack?”

Jordan opened his mouth, but paused. This was important. He couldn’t just word vomit all over the place and hope it came out okay. He had to phrase this right.

He took a few minutes to formulate his answer before he spoke.

“Well, in the context of the conversation, when I mentioned it, I guess it sounded like some kind of crazy vigilante group or something,” he said. “And the way I had just reacted to him telling me about his time in the Army was really, really fucked up, so that probably freaked him out even more. So he was scared. He thought I was involved in a group that would want to hurt him, or people like him. He didn’t…” He paused. “He didn’t say any of those things. But I could read it in his body. He…” He hesitated again. “You know how you read about these military assholes coming home and they’re pissed off all the time and lashing out and being assholes and being violent? He’s not like that. He like… internalized everything. He doesn’t have anger. He has fear. And he keeps going out and living his life and doing everything that needs to be done anyway.”

Jordan couldn’t read the look on Terrence’s face. But he was so proud of Darcey, he admired his boyfriend so much. He was probably the bravest person Jordan knew. “But then when I explained what we actually do, he relaxed a lot. I tried to explain it the best I could, like, what we actually are, not lofty ideals or media rumors. I think he understands. He asks about stuff we’ve done in the past sometimes. He especially likes the way we keep fucking with those anti-queer church assholes.”

Terrence grinned. “Yeah, that’s my favorite, personally.” He slammed his hand on the table so fast and hard Jordan jumped completely out of his chair. His heart beat painfully hard and sharp in his chest and his hands were shaking again, god, he couldn’t breathe –

“What?” he squeaked, panicked.

“Shit, shit, I’m sorry,” Terrence said quickly, holding up his open hands as if trying to prove he was unarmed. “Sorry. Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Jordan replied, even if it was a little shaky.

“I just, I forgot to tell you,” Terrence continued. “In…” he paused, counting on his fingers, “oh, exactly a week from today, I guess, there’s this high school near where Mandy lives where some students are protesting for their right to form a campus GSA. Apparently the faculty won’t let them do it because it has the word ‘gay’ in it or something.”

“Are you shitting me?” Jordan said. He could have seen that happening when he was in high school, but these days?

“Yeah, I know, bullshit, right?” Terrence says. “But anyway, so these kids are just trying to make their school better, and guess who decides they’re going to show up on the same day and say that God hates them?”

“Well, how about we go tell them we hate God?”

“Mandy is preparing a shitload of glitter bombs as we speak,” Terrence grinned. Jordan grinned back. “I don’t know who all is going to be there. We both are.”

“We, too.” Jordan pressed his thumb into his chest.
“Awesome,” Terrence grinned. “Most of the regulars probably will be. Maybe some others. I don’t know. You know how it goes.”

“Yeah,” Jordan said. He hadn’t even met half of the members of the collective. It was loose and open and people came and went and kept contact through emails under screen names. The only people Jordan saw regularly were Terrence and Mandy, and Mandy less and less since Darcey came into his life. They still texted, but they hadn’t seen each other in all that time.

Jordan told himself it was because he’d been busy, but if he was being honest, it was because he was afraid of what she would say if he brought Darcey up.

His text message tone went off in his room and he made a mental note to check it later. Terrence nodded his head in the direction of the sound and said, “You need to get that, or…?”

“Nah,” Jordan said. “If it was just a text, it can’t be that urgent. I’ll get to it later.”

They talked for an hour more before Terrence started teetering in his chair. It took some insisting, but eventually Jordan convinced him to take a nap on his couch. He was asleep the second he hit the cushions. If he had work today, Jordan knew he would have said something, so he went back to his room to give Terrence some space to rest in quiet and wake up whenever he was ready.

He checked his phone before doing anything else. The earlier text was from Darcey.

*I’ll be making 1.85/hr plus tips, split with bussers and hosts. But the average ticket is min $150 and up to $500 so hopefully that’ll make up for it. All the servers work the same shifts but I’ll try to pick up as many as I can.*

Jordan smiled and ran his hand over his mouth. There were so many things Darcey needed for himself – a car, his own place, a savings fund to go back to school – and he was still putting this first. Jordan didn’t know how he got so lucky.

*Thank you so much, Darcey. I still don’t really know where I am and I won’t until we open back up. But thank you. Really. You’re amazing.* He paused, about to send it, but then added: *Do you want to come over later tonight? I’ve got to be really careful with my money but I do need to go grocery shopping and maybe we can make dinner together?*

It took a few minutes to get a reply, so he used the time to wake his computer back up. It was old and clunky so it took a while, and just as it was almost there, Darcey replied:

*Sure. What time? Are you trying to keep to your sleep schedule or are you just sleeping whenever now?*

Jordan chuckled, gravelly, and it turned into a cough. He huffed in frustration.

*How about 5? I’m just kind of sleeping whenever now. I’m all messed up.*

*All right. See you then.*

He put his phone down and turned back to his computer to check the messages from earlier. There were three, all from Vince.
Hey, video chat?

I guess you’re away. I’ll send you an email. Check it ASAP.

Get back to me as soon as you can. Remember we love you.

Jordan frowned, and suddenly his chest was tight with more than just congestion. He logged into his email. There were a few new messages, but he checked the one from Vince, first.

Hey, Jordan.

I’m really sorry to have to tell you this. I went back and forth trying to decide if I even should or if I should just leave it alone, but in the end, Sierra convinced me that it would be better to tell you.

Grandma is dying. She’s in her nineties, so, we all knew at this point it was just a matter of time. I know you haven’t spoken in a really long time, but I also know that you were really close when we were all younger. I wanted you to hear it from me so you could make the decision about whether or not you wanted to try to see her now, on your own, rather than hearing too late that she’s passed and not being able to make the choice at all.

The doctor says she probably has a couple of weeks. She’s pretty heavily medicated so she’s not in much pain, at least, right now. She’s coherent. But we’re not sure how long that will last.

I know you’re going to ask, rightfully, what she’s been saying about you, if anything. And I know I’ve danced around it when you bring it up for a really long time. But it’s not good. She’s never really “forgiven” you. I know, we both know you haven’t done anything you need to be forgiven for. But that’s how she feels. She talks about you thinking you can just change all of the work God’s put into making you and how sinful it is. I’ve tried saying that she wouldn’t say that about somebody removing a malignant tumor or taking medication for an illness, but she doesn’t listen. I’ve tried so hard, but she won’t budge. And I’m sorry.

I’m not telling you to do or say anything. I’m just telling you the situation so can decide on your own what the best thing for you will be.

I wish that were it, and that I could end this email right now, but there’s one more thing you should know. Your brother’s been asking me how he can get in contact with you. I don’t know if it’s just Grandma or if there’s something else, too. I told him I would pass along the message and let you make the decision. I know he was never really violent when we were younger, but I remember him constantly saying really fucked up stuff to you, which can be just as damaging in its own way.

Get back in touch when you can, however you can. Take care of yourself. I’m here if you need me for whatever you need me for.

Love, Vince

For a long, long time after he read it, Jordan stared at the screen, eyes darting haphazardly, aimlessly over the words, as if maybe there was one he missed somewhere that would fix everything he’d just read. He only realized he wasn’t breathing when he started to get lightheaded and wheezy, and he took in a too-deep, too-fast breath that left him in another coughing fit.
He opened his eyes. His hands were on the keyboard, light and loose, but he hadn’t even opened a reply window. He looked back up at the screen. He swallowed. Finally, he whispered, “Oh my god.”

It was too much to process, so with shaking hands, he closed his laptop again, slowly. He had to get back to Vince as soon as possible, but he needed a minute to think first. An hour. A year. No matter how much time he gave himself, he’d never be ready to make this decision.

Jordan hadn’t seen his grandma in six years. Not since the year before he left his parents’. She hadn’t spoken to him, a single word, even though in the beginning he’d tried to hard to fix it, because while he didn’t care about his parents, he’d loved her. He still did. Right now his last memory of her was when she kicked him out of her house and he had to walk the four miles back to his own because he didn’t own a cell phone at the time. It still haunted him, but would it be any better if that last memory were her, dying, hooked up to IV drugs, cursing him out? Kicking him out again, of her hospital room or the hospice or wherever she was right now?

The last she’d seen him, he was boyish, yes, but he still had his round face, his thin limbs, that horrible curvy waist and the big hips and breasts he had no way of binding because the bandages kept leaving bruises and making it too hard to breathe. Vince said she was coherent, but even so, would she recognize him? And what would he do when she did?

“Why does everything have to happen at once?” he murmured to the silent room. He grabbed his phone and sent Darcey a text.

Can you come over earlier?

The few minutes he waited for a reply, he just stared blankly at the wall. He didn’t even register the message tone. He only knew one had come through because there was a notification when he looked back at the screen.

Sure. I can be over in about an hour?

All right. I have a friend asleep on my couch right now so call me instead of knocking in case he’s still here.

Darcey’s next text was short.

No problem.

And Jordan didn’t know why, but his brain filled in the missing ‘I love you,’ even though he didn’t know if Darcey did or why he would, because he was just a big mess of volatile emotions and impulses that he didn’t know how to control, and for some reason Darcey had decided he wanted to come along for the screwed up ride.

Jordan’s eyes welled up a little and he wiped his mouth with his palm, even though there was nothing there to clean away. Nobody had ever loved him, really, and maybe they were right. Maybe he just didn’t deserve it.

“Shut up, Jordan,” he whispered to himself, harsh, spitting through gritted teeth.

For a long, long time, he sat quietly in his room, trying very hard to not think. But his door was open, so when Terrence woke up, Jordan heard his footsteps, and so pushed himself up and made himself go back into the living room, even though he wanted to be alone. He ducked to the side of the doorframe, cleared his throat, scrubbed his face with his hands. He took a deep breath. He
didn’t want Terrence to worry. There was nothing he could do. And Jordan wasn’t ready to think about his grandma yet, much less talk about her.

“Good morning, starshine,” he said as he walked back out into the living room. Terrence was leaning against the wall as he slipped his shoes back on.

“Hey,” he chuckled. “Sorry to just crash and run, but I’ve got to get going. I really need to get this assignment started and if I stay here I know I’ll spend the whole time talking to you instead of working, so I’m heading out to the library.”

“All right,” Jordan said. “That’s fine. I’ll give you a call and let you know when we’re open again.”

"Yeah.” Terrence pulled his second shoe on and righted himself. “I like working there, better. And, I mean, I know The Tree House is right down the street but that kind of feels like cheating.”

Jordan laughed. It was only slightly fake. “Go wherever you need to,” he said, waving away Terrence’s concerns. Terrence grinned and pulled Jordan into a loose, one-armed hug.

“Call me if you need anything,” he said. “I mean it, Jordan. You don’t have to deal with all this shit alone.”

“Thanks.” Jordan squeezed him back. Terrence dropped his arm and grabbed his backpack.

“I’ll let you know about times when that school protest gets closer. I can pick you up.”

“Awesome,” Jordan grinned.

They shared a bit more small talk, then a quick, hurried goodbye as Jordan shooed Terrence out to get his work done. Terrence was smart, but law school was tough, and they both knew he couldn’t fake his way through like he had with his general studies back when he started college. Jordan glanced at the VCR. Darcey would be there in fifteen minutes, which would give him time to recharge and get his head back together.

He jumped when his phone rang, even though it was in the other room, slightly muffled by the wall. He sighed and cursed quietly to himself, ruffling his hair as he walked back to pick it up. The caller ID said it was Darcey. Was he here already?

“Hello?”

“Hey, Jordan.” Darcey’s voice was exhausted. It was soft and resigned and a little slurred in certain words, but it was definitely sleep slurring. He wasn’t intoxicated.

“Is everything okay?”

Darcey paused, then slowly, softly said, “I think so. There’s been some family issues. I think it’s been resolved, though, or is on its way.”

“What happened?” Jordan asked.

Darcey didn’t answer right away. “I’m sorry, but… I don’t think I should talk about it. I don’t want to violate his privacy, and –”

“I understand.” It was more than Darcey’s right to want to keep family issues within his family. Jordan had been doing exactly the same. Sometimes it was easy to forget because they’d clicked and gotten attached so fast, but they’d only known each other a bit over a month.
“But I was out until almost four a.m. because of it,” Darcey continued. “And I wasn’t able to get any sleep before I had to be back in the city to fill out my paperwork. And I’m sick.”

“Oh, shit, Darcey. Did you catch it from me?”

“No,” Darcey said. “I’ve felt this way for about a week now. It’s only gotten really bad these past couple days.”

“Will you be okay to start work?” Jordan’s voice was small, nervous. Darcey needed this job, not just to help him with his surgery, but for all of the things he needed, too.

A pause. “I guess I have to be,” Darcey finally said.

“Do you still want to come over?”

“That’s why I called. I guess I could have just asked when I got there, but I didn’t want to be in the way if you said no. Is your friend still there? Can I crash on your couch for a few hours when I get there? If not, I really need a nap and I’ll have to come over later.”

Jordan smiled. “No, he left a while ago. You can crash if you need to. Just come over for the day. Sleep as long as you need to and then we can make dinner whenever we feel like it.”

Darcey sighed, soft, relieved. “Thanks, Jordan.”

“And you don’t have to take the couch,” Jordan said. “You’re welcome to share the bed with me. Unless you want to watch TV or something, then you get the couch.”

Darcey laughed, soft and warm. “Sharing the bed sounds awesome right now,” he said. “I just didn’t know if you’d been to bed yet and I didn’t want to be annoying if I toss around while I sleep. Whatever this illness is, it’s hit my muscles hard, and it’s impossible to get comfortable.”

Jordan smiled softly. “I’ll manage.” He’d slept a few hours this morning, and a few more late last evening, but his sleep was all over the place and the smallest noises woke him up. That, combined with the news about his grandma and his brother and the big emotional upheaval when Terrence first came over left him exhausted. Falling asleep next to Darcey sounded awesome.

“All right,” Darcey said. “I’m going to go then. I don’t think I can focus on talking and driving at the same time. I’ll be over in about a half hour.”

Jordan chuckled. “Okay. See you soon.” He waited until the line went dead, and as he lowered the phone, he whispered, “I love you.”

His eyes widened and he slapped his hand over his mouth. His breath caught in the back of his throat as if Darcey were sitting right in front of him. It wasn’t like he could have heard. The phone call was over.

Saying it out loud was a lot different from thinking it quietly inside his head.

It scared him. But at the same time, it was so exhilarating. It was how he imagined skydiving must feel: terrifying and freeing all at once.

It was so different from anything he’d felt for anyone else. It wasn’t like the crushes and infatuations he’d had before. It was nothing like being ‘in love’ with Iffy or anyone before her. It wasn’t so casual or straightforward or easy to explain. It was complex and confusing and consuming but he knew, every time he saw Darcey’s face or heard his voice, he knew with complete certainty.
This was what real, honest to god love felt like.

And it was terrifying, because if Darcey didn’t feel the same way, it was going to crush him. And why would he? Why would anyone?

What should he do? Should he tell Darcey? How did this work? Jordan had never gotten to this point in a relationship before. He knew how deeply Darcey cared for him, but if Darcey didn’t love him and Jordan said something, would it scare him? Darcey was so bad at expressing his emotions. Would he be able to handle Jordan throwing his up all over him?

“Fuck,” he whispered. He plopped down on the bed, both hands tight on the back of his neck. He sat like that for a while before shaking his head and pulling his computer into his lap. His intent was to get back to Vince, but instead he stared blankly at the open reply window, because he had no idea what to say.

But he ended up not having to know, at least, not yet, because there was a knock on the door, sharp and loud. This time, he started, but he didn’t jump, and even though his hands were shaking and his heart beat too fast, it was still improvement. Even if just a little.

When Jordan opened the door to let Darcey in, he smiled and a little bit of the stress melted away. Darcey stood there a moment, like he’d forgotten how to use his feet. He was in all black, slacks and shirt and tie, and it fit like it was made for him, but the only thing Jordan noticed were the big, black and purple rings under his eyes.

“Come in,” he said, wrapping his arms around Darcey’s and tugging him inside. Darcey took one stumbling step, then found his feet and righted himself.

“Sorry,” he whispered. “Fuck, I’m tired.”

“I can tell. Come on, let’s go back to the bed and you can lie down.”

Darcey paused to kick his shoes off by the door and fumbled with his tie as they went back toward the bedroom, but rather than undo it completely, he just loosened it enough to pull it over his head and hang it on the doorknob. He collapsed on the bed, legs still hanging off, then groaned softly at the sharp pain in the joints pressing against the mattress.

“Shit, I can’t sleep in these,” he whispered. “It’s way too uncomfortable.”

Jordan leaned over him and kissed his forehead. Darcey was safe. He was stability. Jordan smiled for the first time since he’d arrived, small and tired.

“It’s okay,” he said. “Just take them off. I’ll get you a blanket.”

Darcey smiled and wrapped his arm around the back of Jordan’s neck, curling his fingers into his hair. He started to open his mouth to thank Jordan, but his eyes slipped closed before it could come out.

Jordan knew his insomnia was bad. He didn’t know what the nightmares were like, but he’d been there for the flashbacks, he’d seen him when he started to withdraw into the trauma, so even though Darcey didn’t talk about it, Jordan could guess.

He had been this sleep deprived before, many times. It was awful and tiring and painful, physically and mentally, and being so sick on top of it? But even so, Jordan would take it all away from Darcey and into himself if he could.
“Come on,” he whispered, carefully undoing the top button of Darcey’s shirt. “Bedtime, okay?”

Darcey nodded and pushed Jordan's hands away, sitting up and undoing the rest of his shirt himself, moving onto his belt, his pants. He folded everything up neatly and placed it under the bedside table where it wouldn’t get stepped on as Jordan pulled a blanket out of his closet. He messily tossed it over Darcey and crawled underneath to join him. “I wish I could offer you some spare clothes, but I don’t have anything that would fit you,” he said. Darcey turned onto his back, his other side, his back again, trying to find a position that didn’t hurt so much. But his joints creaked and his muscles burned and his throat felt like glass every time he swallowed. Was it strep? They’d never allow him to work if they found out. He groaned softly and covered his face with his hand.

“I know you have anxiety medication,” Jordan said. Darcey opened his eyes halfway. “Have you thought about looking into sleeping pills? They might help.”

Darcey’s smile was sad when he said, “I did. I had them at one point, when I was still back South. They helped for the first few days, but then it stopped.”

“What do you mean? Did you build up a tolerance?”

Darcey closed his eyes again and said softly, “The nightmares got worse and I couldn’t wake up from them anymore. So I stopped taking them. I’d rather not sleep at all then get stuck back there again.”

Jordan swallowed the lump in his throat and gently rested his hand on the back of Darcey’s head. When he ran his fingers back and forth over the nape of the bigger man’s neck, his face relaxed.

“We’ll get you a therapist soon,” Jordan whispered. “As soon as the paperwork clears. For ValueOptions it usually only takes about a month for them to get back to you.”

Darcey nodded, barely. Jordan scooted closer and gently pulled him against his chest. Darcey curled into him, his arm loosely wrapped around his back. Something about the close contact helped ease the aches in his body, just a little.

Usually Darcey was the one holding Jordan like this, but it was nice, to know he could make his boyfriend feel as safe as he made him feel. Jordan knew he wasn’t particularly strong or tough, but he would do anything in the world to keep Darcey safe.

Jordan’s eyes grew heavy, and Darcey’s breathing slowed.

Chapter End Notes

So sorry for being late! I don't even have an excuse. Here it is now, and I will try better in the future.

Come visit me at indecentpause.tumblr.com to see my short stories and word of the day fics!
We're going to die if we don’t get out of this mess right fucking now.

There was nothing they could do but make the situation worse, but the higher-ups wouldn’t let them fall back. Gunfire whirred overhead and dust clogged his nose and mouth and he was flat on the ground, trying to see underneath it all. The dirt turned to mud where it settled on his sweating hands. Everyone was screaming. Doc was somewhere nearby, out of eyesight, shouting “Can you hear me? Can you hear me!?” Campbell was crouched over him, hand plastered flat on the dirt against his side, but he saw something because then, despite their orders, he was up and running and “Campbell, get back here!” Darcey screamed, but either he wasn’t listening or couldn’t hear but Darcey would be damned if he was going to let the idiot get killed.

Darcey leapt up, a yard behind Campbell and then he saw what his fellow soldier saw: a little boy and his mom crouched in the corner of a nearby building, trying to find cover. Not for the first time did the thought cross Darcey’s mind that Campbell was one of the craziest, but bravest, men he’d ever met.

Another round. The woman went limp and the boy screamed. Darcey grabbed Campbell and threw him to the ground and out of the way.

“All the fire stopped. Something was wrong.

“We have to get back,” Darcey said. “Now.”

Campbell was back on his feet, unmoving, as Darcey pushed himself up.

Then, the loudest, most terrifying sound Darcey had ever heard, so loud it shook the ground under their feet. The building came down, no, apart, and the world slowed down or maybe he sped up but he was on his feet and somehow almost back where he’d started and Campbell was on the ground underneath him. His skin ripped and burned like angry fire and his left arm started to tear apart –

When Darcey opened his eyes to try to figure out what was happening, everything had changed. He was underneath a blanket, in a soft bed, in a dim room with white walls and a white and grey speckled ceiling. But he could still hear it, he could still feel it. He shot up straight and grabbed his left arm, but it didn’t hurt. It didn’t feel like anything. His hands shot to his face. No scratches, no dirt. Down to his neck, to his chest, his hand curled in on nothing but air and bare skin. No dog tags anymore. No uniform.

His breath came in heavy gasps and sweat dripped from his forehead into his eyes, sharp and stinging. His eyes darted wildly around the room as he tried to reassure himself, he was back, he was safe, he was home. He’d made it. It was okay now.

But it wasn’t okay. It hadn’t been since the first time he got back to the States in 2003. He made it back, but not in one piece.

But it’s better than coming back in a box.
His hands trembled, his muscles shook with tension, and his vision was blurred. His head spun and his heart raced, like during takeoff on an airplane times a thousand.

His Xanax was in his bookbag, out in the living room by the front door.

Darcey turned, and that was when he realized Jordan was still here, asleep beside him. He was quiet when he got out of bed, moving as little as possible so he wouldn’t disturb his sleeping boyfriend.

It took a few minutes of fumbling through his backpack to find his pills. He was slow and careful when he opened the bottle and knocked out a tablet so his shaking hands didn’t drop them all over the floor. He didn’t need them often, but when he did, he needed them badly, and he couldn’t afford to lose them all.

He popped the tablet dry and capped the bottle before making his way back to the kitchen to get a glass of water. As he passed through the room, he ran his hand over any surface he walked by, tactile reminders of where and who he was now.

He drank most of the water and splashed the rest on his face.

When he went back into the bedroom for his cell phone, the room was dark, overcast, and rain pattered faintly against the windows. Darcey walked as lightly as he could, grabbing his phone and leaving quickly. Just because he couldn’t sleep didn’t mean Jordan shouldn’t.

He lit the screen to check the time. 6:30. The little icon in the bottom right corner told him that he had an unchecked voicemail. From yesterday, at Justin’s. He sat down at the kitchen table and dialed his mailbox.

“Hi, I’m calling for Darcey Walker.” It was a woman’s voice Darcey didn’t recognize. “My name is Jane Petersen. You don’t know me, but the teenager you saved in the park was my son. I got your contact information from the EMS workers who brought him into the hospital.”

Darcey’s mouth went dry, suddenly a little dizzy and nervous, but he didn’t understand why.

“I’m calling for two reasons. The first is that my son was tested positive for mono three days after the incident, and the doctors told me that he’d probably had it for a few weeks before the symptoms started showing up. They told me you gave him CPR. If you’ve gotten sick because of it I want to offer to pay any doctor’s bills you might accrue.”

Darcey sighed heavily and dropped his face in his free hand. Mono. If that’s what this illness was, there was no way they would allow him to work anywhere near anybody’s food. It was too contagious. He’d lose the job before he even started.

"I know it’s nothing compared to what you did, but I’d like to meet you for coffee so I can thank you in person. Because of you, my son is still alive, and on Monday we’re going to a baseball game instead of a funeral.” Her voice was teary, now, and it cracked in a few places. When Darcey had helped that teenager, he wasn’t thinking of rewards or thanks. It needed to be done and he was the only one who could do anything. So he did.

Until now, when he thought of it, all Darcey could focus on was how close the kid had come to dying. How it could have easily been Jordan or Brett or Ally or Lexi or anyone he loved the day before or after. How he’d seen dozens of men and women die right next to him. How few of them he’d been able to help. How little he was ever able to do.

Only now did the gravity of the situation truly hit him. A teenager was still alive and with his family, watching baseball games and hanging out with his friends and living his life and growing
up because of his quick action that day.

He realized she was leaving her phone number, so he grabbed a pen and the newspaper still sitting on the table and scribbled it down in the corner. He didn’t know if he’d call back. Should he? If he ended up going to the doctor uninsured, he’d have to.

Darcey started when Jordan’s hand trailed across his shoulders. He glanced up at the shorter man, still ruffled and unkempt from sleep. Jordan cocked his head to the side, eyebrows raised in concern. He nodded his head toward the newspaper.

When Darcey put his phone down, Jordan put his hand next to the paper and asked, “Who’s this?”

Darcey looked up. The worry on his face was clear, and Jordan’s expression turned concerned.

“Darcey?” he asked softly. “Are you okay?”

“Remember that teenager in the park?” Darcey asked. His voice shook.

“Yeah,” Jordan said slowly. “Is… he’s okay, right?”

“Yeah. That was… his mom called me. To say thank you. They’re going to a baseball game on Monday.” He hesitated for a few moments before saying, “She said she wanted to meet me in person.”

“Are you going to?” he asked.

“I…” Darcey paused, turning away and burying his face in one hand. There was too much and he couldn’t think or focus on anything. Even if Jordan asked him something as simple as whether Darcey wanted water or not would have been an impossible decision. His breathing was heavy and uneven and his eyes were damp, and he didn’t know whether he was relieved and grateful that the kid made it through okay or if he was disgusted with and hated himself because he couldn’t do the same thing when he was in Afghanistan or Iraq. It was true he hadn’t gone through any training his first round, but by his second, he had. And he was still useless. It didn’t make any sense that he would come back when so many other people didn’t. Men and women with kids and spouses and promising careers waiting for them back home, and you were the one who came back, you, who are just stumbling around aimlessly and don’t have any idea what the fuck you’re doing.

Jordan’s fingers curled into his shirt, gentle and reassuring.

“Do you want to just stay in tonight?” he asked softly. “I can go grocery shopping another day. I don’t have much but I’m sure we can pull together something.”

All Darcey could manage was an unsure, wobbly, “I—” before his voice cracked and he fell silent again. Jordan’s hand curled in his shirt a little tighter and he leaned over Darcey’s sitting form, wrapping his other arm around him and resting his nose on the top of his head.

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “We can decide later. Let’s just hang out here for right now and go from there, okay?”

Darcey nodded, silent, but mentally thanking him for understanding. He wrapped his free hand around the one Jordan rested on his chest.

“What are you thinking about?” Jordan asked.
Darcey was silent for a few minutes that seemed to stretch into eons, opening his mouth to speak but locking up so many times he lost count. Then, finally, he whispered, “Why did I make it back instead of everyone who didn’t? Why was I one of the ones who made it out alive?”

Jordan’s arms tightened and his chest shuddered once against Darcey’s back. His lips pressed tightly together, then loosened again.

“I don’t know,” he whispered. His voice was shaky and soft. He’d never hidden his feelings or toned down his emotions, but the pure rawness in his voice nearly broke Darcey down. Nearly. “But I’m so grateful you did.” There was a long pause before Jordan spoke again. “I wish I knew what to say. I wish I knew how to help. But if it’s any consolation, I’m not going anywhere. You’re stuck with me.” He leaned down to press a kiss against Darcey’s mouth, but Darcey covered it with his hand. Jordan pulled back, hurt.

"What –"

“Sorry,” Darcey murmured. He dropped his hand. “In the message the kid’s mom left she said he tested positive for mono a few days after we found him in the park. If that’s what this sickness is I know you can’t afford to catch it.”

Jordan hissed through his teeth. “Oh, man, that sucks. Mono?”

“Yeah.”

Jordan kissed Darcey’s forehead instead.

“You have no idea how much you mean to me,” Darcey said. His eyes slipped closed and he leaned closer. It wasn’t as good as ‘I love you,’ but it was the best he could do, and he hoped it was good enough. “Thank you, Jordan.”

“I don’t quit on the people I love, Darcey.”

Darcey opened his eyes. Jordan’s and their soft, warm brown, were a little vulnerable and afraid.

“Ever,” he said.

“Jordan, I –” Darcey started, but he choked on his words, and he didn’t understand why. Darcey knew Jordan loved him. Even though he’d never said it out loud before now, he’d never tried to hide it. He just said he loves you, why can’t you say it back? It would make Jordan so happy, it would make him so happy, why couldn’t he just tell Jordan that he loved him?

Jordan’s eyes darted over Darcey’s face, wide open and suddenly so easy to read. Darcey did love him, he did, and as much as he wanted to hear it out loud, even knowing was more than enough. Jordan smiled, the soft, knowing smile that made Darcey feel like he could see through all his walls and blocks.

“It’s okay,” Jordan whispered. His voice trembled and his eyes were damp. “I know.”

And when Jordan pulled him into a tight hug, holding Darcey’s head against his warm chest, for that brief moment he could pretend there would never be anything bad in the world again.

Chapter End Notes
Come visit me at indecentpause.tumblr.com for short stories and Shakespeare memes!
Darcey spent most of the weekend at Jordan’s, asleep, sometimes on the couch and sometimes in the bed. It came and went quickly, and then suddenly, it was Monday. The day he was supposed to start work.

But when he woke up, he could barely get out of bed. Jordan had to drive him to the free clinic, where they had to wait for hours before he could see anyone. The closer it got to four, when his shift was supposed to start, the more panicked Darcey grew, but since there was nothing he could do to speed up the process, he was stuck in the waiting room, hoping. Uselessly, because even if they were out in time, he was so tired and weak and bleary there was no way he could work. Even if he could, no customer would ever want a server as sick as he was. Rightly so.

Finally, at three, the nurse called him back, where he waited in another room for fifteen minutes. When the doctor arrived, she checked his vitals, his throat, his lymph nodes, his ears and eyes. She prodded around at him a bit and finally said, “I can do a test for you, but I don’t think it’s really necessary. I can tell you’ve caught it just by looking at you.”

“Please do the test anyway?” Darcey asked. “I’m in food service and know I can’t work like this. I want to have proof of why in case I need it.”

“Not a problem.”

It was nearly four when Darcey was finally done. Jordan hovered nearby as they walked back to the car. Darcey looked as if he would topple over at any moment.

“There’s no way you can work like this,” Jordan said. “You’ll hurt yourself.”

“I know,” Darcey sighed. He plopped into the passenger’s seat and fished his cell phone out of his pocket. Jordan sat down beside him and started the car. Darcey scrolled through his contacts for the restaurant’s number. He paused. “They’re going to fucking fire me,” he sighed, and he hit send.

Jordan swallowed and looked down. Darcey had been looking for work for so long, and finally, not only had he found a job, but a job at a place like Yellowfin. It was almost exactly what he’d been hoping for.

He didn’t say anything about his surgery fund. Darcey needed to take care of himself, first. Jordan would have to deal with everything else as it came.

“Hey,” Darcey said. Jordan’s eyes came back into focus. “Can I talk to Greg? He’s the manager tonight, right?”

“Yeah, sure,” the hostess said. “And this is?”

“Darcey. The new server.”

"Sure, just a moment."
The line went silent. Darcey turned to Jordan with a weak smile.

“I –” he started, but then Greg came on the line.

“Darcey, right?”

“Yeah,” Darcey said. “I…” he paused and sighed, then blurted out, “Look, I’m so sorry about this, but I just left the doctor’s office. I’m really sick and it’s really contagious and the doctor said I can’t work until it’s cleared up. Which might not be for a few weeks.”

“What is it?” Greg asked. His voice was harsh with annoyance.

“Mono.”

Greg sighed. “Well, your doctor’s right. You can’t work with something like that. I guess we won’t see you tonight. Keep us updated.”

He hung up.

The car was silent for a few moments, the only noise the idling engine.

“Well?” Jordan asked hesitantly.

“I don’t know,” Darcey said. “He didn’t say I was fired. But he was really angry.” He sighed. “Understandably.”

“We’ll just have to wait and see, then,” Jordan murmured. He put the car in reverse and backed out of their parking space. As they left the parking lot, Darcey’s phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Darcey, it’s Greg.”

“Yeah?”

“We’re going to have to let you go,” Greg said. Darcey closed his eyes and dropped his forehead into his hand. “For absenteeism,” he explained.

“Yeah.” Darcey’s voice was soft, defeated. “I understand.”

Greg hung up again.

“Fuck,” Darcey murmured. And then, “Fuck!” he shouted. His hands paused, hanging in the air above his lap, because he needed something to throw or punch or knock over or something, but there was nothing there, and even if there had been, he was too tired and weak to do anything about it. He dropped his hands to his knees.

“Darcey?”

“They fired me.”

Jordan took one hand off the wheel and rested it on Darcey’s atop his knee. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“I’m sorry,” Darcey sighed. He closed his eyes and dropped his head against the window.

They made the drive back to Darcey's parents’ house in silence.
“Do you need me to help you get in?” Jordan asked. He’d parked near the sidewalk in front of the house. The car was off, but for a while, neither of them moved.

“If you could,” Darcey whispered hoarsely.

“Of course.”

They walked slowly to the front door together, where Darcey let them in. Jess poked her head out of the kitchen.

“You’re back!” she said. “How are you?”

“Terrible,” Darcey groaned.

“The doctor said he has mono,” Jordan explained. “He caught it from the kid he gave CPR to in the park.”

Jess’s hand shot to her mouth and she sighed softly. “Oh, honey, I’m so sorry. You can’t work like this, can you?”

Darcey shook his head. “I had to call off. They fired me.”

“I’m so sorry,” Jess repeated.

“I’m Jordan, by the way.” He nodded in Jess’s direction. “Sorry we couldn’t have met under better circumstances.”

Darcey wobbled, more of his weight leaning over onto Jordan’s shoulder.

“Where’s your room?” Jordan asked.

“Upstairs,” Jess answered. “And I’m Jess.” She turned to her son and said, “Do you want to go up to your room or lie on the couch for a while?”

“Couch,” Darcey said. “In case I need to get to the kitchen. Then I don’t have to deal with the stairs.”

Jordan looked around, left, then right and into the living room. “Okay,” he said. “This way.”

He sat Darcey down in the middle of the couch and helped him settle in as Jess went upstairs to get a blanket and pillow. Jordan gently ran his knuckles along Darcey’s cheek.

“I’m sorry this had to happen,” he whispered.

Darcey weakly opened his eyes. “Yeah. Me, too.”

Jordan shook his head. “Don’t. You have to take care of yourself.”

“But your –”

“It’s never been your responsibility, Darcey,” Jordan murmured. He kissed the top of his boyfriend’s head, soft, fine hair tickling his nose. “I’m so grateful you wanted to even try. That itself means so much to me. I’ll do my best to figure it out, and if I can’t... I’ll have to postpone
and deal with it a little longer.”

“I do have some savings,” Darcey said. “Not a lot. I don’t know if what I have will cover what you need. But I’ll try to help if I can.”

Jordan smiled, watery and wavery. “Thank you, Darcey,” he whispered. “But don’t worry about that right now. Take care of **yourself**, okay?”

Darcey loosely rested his hand on Jordan’s hip, squeezing gently and letting it drop.

“I brought you two blankets, Darcey, a thin one and a thick one, and you can switch them out as you need them.” Jess had come back down the stairs and entered the living room behind the couch. She leaned over and draped them over Darcey’s feet, then tucked a pillow underneath his head.

“I’ll get you some water, unless you want something else to drink?”

“Water’s fine,” Darcey whispered hoarsely.

“Jordan?”

Jordan turned to Jess, surprised. “What?”

“Can I get you anything?”

“I… oh, no, that’s okay. Thank you.” He turned back to Darcey, then glanced over at Jess again. “I should probably get going so he can get some rest.” He was already half asleep, dozing, one leg hanging off the couch just a little too short for him.

“Do you need a ride?” Jess asked.

*That would be nice,* Jordan almost said, but then he realized Jess was probably the only person at home here with Darcey. What if he needed something? What if he tried to get somewhere and he fell? He shouldn’t be alone.

“No, it’s okay,” Jordan said. “I can take the bus.”

“You’re sure?” Jess asked. “It’s no trouble.”

Jordan smiled. “The bus is no trouble, either. Thank you, Miss Walker. I appreciate it.”

“Just Jess,” she smiled. Her gaze turned back to Darcey and her smile faded.

“Once he’s well, we’d like to have you over for dinner,” she said. “So you can meet the family.”

“Yeah?” Jordan’s shoulders perked. He tried not to seem *too* excited or eager, but he’d never had a partner whose parents had *wanted* him over, much less invited him themselves. “I mean… yeah. I’d like that.”

“And don’t worry,” Jess said. “Darcey told us you’re a vegetarian. We’ll take care of you.”

“Thanks, Miss Walker. Jess. Sorry.” He turned to Darcey again, but he was finally asleep.

“Have him call me when he wakes up?” Jordan whispered. “Just so I can check in and make sure he’s okay?”

“Of course,” Jess smiled. “And you’re welcome to visit whenever you want.”
Hello again, my dears! I'm sorry my updates have been a little erratic these past few weeks; I've been struggling hard with my health issues and often lose track of the days. You will ALWAYS get an update every week, around Thursday, but not necessarily on the day of. I'm sorry, and I hope you understand.

You can visit me at indecentpause.tumblr.com for short stories and shakespeare memes!
Even though Jordan was good at writing budgets, he absolutely hated it. Especially when he ended up behind no matter how he allocated his funds.

As it stood, going back to work on Thursday meant by the time the payment was due at the end of the following week, he’d be about $900 behind. Just over three whole paychecks with nothing taken out for expenses. He had a week to make it appear somehow.

It was Tuesday morning. Jordan had heard from Darcey briefly last night for the ten minutes he was awake between naps, but nothing since. He was probably sleeping. This illness had knocked all the strength and energy out of him. Jordan’s was getting better, seemingly just a 72-hour bug, which meant he could go back to work when CounterCulture opened back up again. It was only 6:00 a.m. Under normal circumstances, Darcey would have been up, but with his illness, Jordan had no idea. So he was waiting for his boyfriend to call him when he woke up, like he’d said he would.

Jordan had pared down to the absolute essentials. Rent. Electric. He was willing to live off of what was in his nearly empty fridge until his payment was taken care of. His bus pass was good for the next two weeks. His internet bill was coming up, but if he had to disconnect it again, he would. His phone was due a week and a half after his down payment, but by then he’d have it taken care of and wouldn’t have to worry.

Even with all of that, he was $900 short. He shuffled things around, attempted to pare down even more, pocket change and dollar bills, but he couldn’t find it anywhere.

*I’m fucked.*

He groaned and dropped his head to the table a little too hard and he hissed through his teeth at the sudden pain. That was why he started to tear up, he told himself. But he was lying.

The phone rang. Jordan’s shoulders stiffened and his breath caught, but this time, finally, he didn’t jump. He didn’t lift his head. He groped out for the phone and brought it to his ear with a quiet, choked, “H’lo?”

“Are you okay?” It was Darcey, but his voice was gravelly, even deeper than usual but with a slight squeak in the middle.


“Are you all right?” Darcey’s voice was tense now, worried. “Was it bad?”

“No, I’m fine,” he said. “Do you feel up to coming over?”

“No. I’m in really bad shape. If you want to come over here, we can hang out for a while, but I’m not up to driving or dealing with the bus.”

“Okay,” Jordan said. “I’d like that, if that’s okay with everyone?”

“You mean my mom?” Darcey chuckled. “She likes you, Jordan. She hasn’t stopped talking about how thoughtful she thinks you are.”
“It looks like I’ve got her fooled, then,” Jordan chuckled.

“Oh, shut up,” Darcey laughed. Jordan grinned. He looked back at the spreadsheet on his laptop, the bills and lists scattered all over the table, and sighed.

“You know, can I come over now? Or is that too early? Do you need some more time to wake up?”

“Well, it takes about forty minutes on the bus, so that should give me plenty of time to get myself together. As best I can.” He laughed and Jordan’s smile softened.

“Okay,” he said. “What’s your actual address? That way maybe I can figure out a quicker bus route.”

He penned it down as Darcey rattled it off, and after a few more minutes of small talk, they hung up. After he figured out his bus route, Jordan dug his backpack out of this closet and slid his laptop and bills inside. Maybe Darcey could put some fresh eyes on it and find something he’d missed.

Darcey had slept all night on the couch and was still there when Jordan arrived. He’d intended to get up and take a shower, but later, and later, and later, and eventually it didn’t happen at all. When the doorbell rang, he forced himself up and shuffled to the door, rubbing the sand of sickness and sleep out of his eyes. Jordan stood there, a smile on his face and his backpack slung over his shoulder.

“Thanks for coming,” Darcey said. They pulled each other into a hesitant half hug before Jordan wrapped his arms tight around him.

“No,” Darcey protested softly, weakly. “You can’t afford to catch it.”

“I’ll be fine as long as I don’t kiss you,” Jordan said. “And you don’t give me CPR.”

Darcey chuckled and rolled his eyes, stepping back to let Jordan in.

“Would you mind calling out to my mom that you’re here?” he said. “I would, but my throat is –”

“Yeah,” Jordan smiled. Then he called out, “Miss Walker? I mean, uh, Jess? It’s me, Jordan! Hi! Just letting you know I’m here?”

Darcey chuckled. Jordan shrugged.

“Come sit down on the couch with me,” Darcey said. “I’m just watching shitty morning TV but you can put on a DVD if you want.”

Just as they sat, soft footsteps sounded on the stairs behind them. Jordan looked over his shoulder.

“Good morning, Jordan!” Jess said. “You’re here early. You just missed William and the girls.”

“Who …?”

“My dad and sisters,” Darcey said. “He just left to take them to school.”

Jordan nodded.
“Would you like some coffee or anything?” Jess asked.
“Oh, man, coffee would be great, thank you,” he said, starting to push himself up to follow her
into the kitchen.
“No, it’s okay. I’ll bring it out.”
Jordan paused. “Thank you,” he said softly.
Jess smiled. “Of course.”

The three sat in the living room together for some time, quietly sipping on coffee and tea and
watching some morning talk show Jordan wasn’t familiar with. It had been a long time since he’d
done anything so… normal. So domestic. Even though the TV chatter was a little inane, it was
nice to sit so comfortably with Darcey and his mom, even if he didn’t know Jess well yet. Finally,
during a commercial break, Jordan turned to Darcey and said, “Are you any good at budgets?”
Darcey hummed softly, then cleared his throat. He put his tea down on the table. “I’m no better
than anyone else,” he said.
“Could you look at mine and see if you can help me find some money I might have lost
somewhere?”
“I can look at it,” Jess said.
Darcey and Jordan turned to her. She gently pushed herself back and forth on her toes in the
rocking chair, sipping at her nearly white coffee. Darcey turned back to Jordan.
“She was a math teacher,” he said.
“It was only high school level, but it was enough to help me write our budgets throughout the
years. May I see it?”
Jordan hesitantly turned to Darcey, back to Jess again. He nodded and pulled his backpack from
underneath the coffee table and slipped everything out. As he opened his spreadsheet, he tapped
the folder with all his papers in it and said, “Things on the left are necessary, things on the right I
can go without. I’m…” he glanced up at Darcey again, trying to silently ask if it was safe to tell
her. He just nodded.
“I have a pretty important medical procedure coming up and I’m short on what I owe,” he said.
“How much?” Jess asked. She put her coffee down and sat beside Jordan, sandwiching him
between herself and Darcey.
“About $900,” he said. Her brow furrowed.
“Ooh,” she said softly.
"Yeah.”
“Well, let me see what I can do. Maybe you’ve lost something in here somewhere and just don’t
realize it.”


Jordan slid the laptop and folder over and Jess went to work.

Jordan tried to give Jess space while she worked. He tried not to glance over her shoulder or watch her furrowed brow or the silent movement of her lips as she went through the numbers. He also tried not to get his hopes up too high, because $900 was a big discrepancy and, while he wasn’t the best at budgets, he wasn’t bad, and he couldn’t imagine losing that kind of money in his work. Eventually Darcey moved to the opposite end of the couch, pulling Jordan close against him and wrapping his arm around his shoulders. Jordan sighed softly, and, after one last glance in his laptop’s direction, he turned back to the TV.

“Well, I have some good news and some not as good news.”

Jess had been working on the budget for about an hour when she made the announcement. Jordan looked up hopefully, nervously.

“The good news is I was able to move some things around and free up about $200. The not as good news is you’re still $700 short.” She looked up at Jordan and slid the laptop and folder back to him across the table. “I did the best I could,” she said.

“Thank you,” Jordan whispered. Darcey’s hand tightened on his shoulder and he looked up, expecting maybe an encouraging smile or a kiss to the forehead. But what he turned into was Darcey frowning thoughtfully at the TV.

“Let me borrow your laptop,” he said.

“Darcey?”

Darcey grabbed it without waiting for an affirmation, opening up a new browser window and typing furiously.

“Darcey, what –”

“I have some savings from when I was in the military,” he said. “I’ve been living off of it since I got home and it’s pretty depleted, and I knew I didn’t have the full $900 so I didn’t say anything because it seemed like it would just be a kick in the head, you know? But I might have the $700. Let me check.”

Jordan’s eyes widened and his breath caught. “Darcey, I can’t ask you to –”

“Then it’s a good thing I’m freely offering, isn’t it?” he said with a smile and a sideways glance. He clicked on something and Jordan looked over his shoulder. It was logging in. The three seconds it took for the page to load stretched like years.

He had $639.58.

Darcey turned to Jordan. “Would you be able to borrow the last hundred from someone else you know?”

“I don’t know,” Jordan said. “Maybe. Let me send some texts.”
So he sent one to Terrence, carbon copied to Iffy, Nate, and Vince. He wasn’t out to Nate, but Jordan would be willing to tell him if he’d be willing to help.

*I’m about $100 short for my surgery. Please god tell me one or some of you can help me. Even ten bucks will get me closer to where I need to go. We’ll write a contract and I’ll pay you back.*

He sent it, and there was silence.

The text messages came avalanching in, one after another.

From Iffy: *Only $100 short?? Oh man that sucks so much. I can throw you $50??*

From Terrence: *I don’t have much but I can maybe give you $20. Don’t worry about paying it back, just buy me lunch sometime when you’re back on your feet. :)*

From Nate: *Why do you need surgery? When do you need the money by? My next paycheck is Friday, maybe I can scavenge a little from there. I’m a little behind on my own bills this month so I can’t promise, but I’ll try.*

From Vince: *Let me talk to Teyo and Sierra and I’ll see what we can do.*

Jordan’s breath caught and he covered his mouth and closed his eyes. As he bowed his head, Jess’s chair creaked and she quietly left the room to give them some privacy.

“Jordan? Are you okay?”

“I have the most amazing friends in the world,” he choked. He breathed in deep, then sent a message to Nate to explain.

*I’m a trans man. I’m scheduled for top surgery and I was all set with my budget until CC closed and fucked me up. I figure if you’re offering to loan me money you deserve to know where it’s going.*

He pressed send. He waited. The text message came back just as fast as the first round.

*Okay, no problem, man. You fucking scared me, I thought it was life threatening! I know this is serious too but I’m glad you aren’t in any danger. Like I said, I have to wait until Friday to see where I am with my paycheck and then I’ll let you know, even if it’s only $20 or so. Keep in touch.*

The sigh that burst from Jordan’s chest was thick and heavy with relief.

“All right,” he said. “I’m at $70 and a few people are going to see what they can do, and I should know in a few days. If I have to I’ll pawn my TV to make the rest of it. It’s probably not worth much because it’s so old, but maybe it’ll be enough.” He paused and a wet, relieved laugh bubbled up through his throat. “Oh my god, Darcey. It’s happening. This is really happening.”

Darcey grinned and pulled Jordan into a tight hug. “I’m really happy for you.”

“Thank you,” Jordan sobbed. “This wouldn’t be happening without you. I’ll pay you back. Thank you. I love you, Darcey.”

And when Darcey whispered back, for the very first time, “I love you, too,” Jordan could have fainted with joy.
It's finally happened! The love confession!

We've still got a bit of a bumpy ride, but it's easier when you have someone supporting you.

:) 

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Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A few more days passed and Darcey was in even worse condition when Jordan returned to work. His first night back was nerve-wracking but ultimately uneventful. Jenna had agreed to let him stay in the back and bake for a few weeks until he felt safe working in the front. Alice was gone.

“She quit,” Jenna said softly. “She said she didn’t feel safe coming back.”

Jordan didn’t blame her. Neither did he.

Although before he would have been asleep by noon at the very latest, Jordan’s sleep schedule was still off kilter from all the time he’d been off, so he was in bed on his laptop until almost three when he finally started to fall asleep. He opened the tab with his email one more time to see what the new message alert was about before shutting everything down.

There was a name there he hadn’t thought of in a very long time.

Jose Delgado.

The message title was simply, *We should talk soon.*

He was wide awake again.

His mouth went dry, the back of his neck prickling with nervousness and unsureness. How did his brother even get his email address? Jordan had always been so careful about who he gave it to and where he made it accessible. He’d changed it shortly after he left his parents’ house. He changed his phone number. His name. *Everything.* Vince said Jose had been asking about him, but he wouldn’t… Vince wouldn’t have said anything, right?

The preview of the message sat in faded font next to Jose’s name, beginnings of the first sentences: *Hey. I’m getting close to graduating high school and all the time you’ve been gone has*

*And then it cut off. If he wanted to see the rest, he’d have to open the message.*

Why was he so afraid to do so?

He hovered the cursor over the email title, fingers hesitating just above the trackpad.

He didn’t open it. With one quick flick of his fingers, he deleted it instead.

*There, it’s done,* he thought, but it wasn’t, because it gnawed at the back of his skull while he put his laptop to sleep.

He swallowed, and it was like trying to force a glass ball down, it stuck halfway and shattered, leaving his throat and lungs cut up and raw. His hands shook and he didn’t understand why.

He woke up his computer, logged back into his email, and went to the trash bin.

He opened the message from his brother.
Hey. I’m getting close to graduating high school and all the time you’ve been gone has given all of us a lot of time to think. Grandma has been really sick for a long time and the doctors are saying that it won’t be much longer. I really want to see you again and I think you should come see Grandma while you can. A lot has changed and I thought, maybe you’ve changed, too. I miss having a big sister.

Jordan’s fists clenched. His breathing came too heavy and his vision blurred, but not from tears, from anger. How dare his brother track his down his email and contact him now just to open old wounds and spit in them. Now, when everything was finally going right. Why was he even writing? What was his point? To rub in the fact that the family thought he was a joke? A freak, a pervert, crazy, what? What was his point? That he wants to talk to me again but only if I’ll be what he wants from me? They both knew their grandma never wanted to speak to Jordan again. Why would Jose want to rub in something so painful? Hadn’t he done enough?

Jordan typed out a quick message back, even though he knew he shouldn’t. It would just make the situation worse. But I can’t just let him say something like that.

Jose,

Contact me again when you’re ready to take me, my identity, and my transition seriously. You’ve had almost your entire life to wrap your head around it. At this point it’s obvious that you aren’t trying and don’t want to. I am not your sister. I am your brother.

If you can’t take me as I am, you don’t get me at all.

And you know as well as I do that Grandma never wants to see me again. She said so herself.

Jordan.

He sent the message and slammed his laptop closed, pushing it away to the center of the table. Then he sat in the silent room, still and alone, and suddenly his parents’ voices were back, his grandmother’s screaming, the insults and the blame, and he couldn’t be alone with it or…

He picked up his phone and called the first person in his phone book. Darcey. He knew his boyfriend wouldn’t be able to come over and there was no way Jordan could handle the bus in this state, but even hearing his voice would –

“Hey.” Darcey’s voice was still gravelly and a little squeaky, but at least he sounded more coherent.

“Hey.” Jordan’s voice cracked.

“What’s wrong?”

“I…” he started, but then he lost it, he had no idea what to say or how to say it, so instead he stammered out an awkward, “I’m sorry.”
“What?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

“I…” he choked on another apology, because he shouldn’t have to apologize for anything. He’d made a lot of mistakes in his life, but leaving his family was one of the few things he’d done right.

“Jordan.” Darcey’s voice was gentle, but firm. “Jordan, talk to me. What’s going on? Why are you sorry?”

“My brother emailed me,” Jordan blurted.

Silence.

“You have a brother?” Darcey finally asked.

“I did once,” Jordan said ruefully. His voice was a little shaky. “This is the first time he’s tried to contact me in five years. I –” He had to pause because suddenly he forgot how to breathe and he hated it, he hated how much power he let his family have over him. It had been five years and they had never been close to begin with. First there had been verbal arguments, then fistfights, then silence, and that was it. Jordan hadn’t lost anything. There had been nothing to lose in the first place.

“I mean, we were never close. We never got along. He was just like my parents. He didn’t take me seriously and all he ever did was insult me and berate me and belittle me. And now suddenly he wants to talk again? About what? The only person in my entire childhood I fucking loved who never wants to speak to me again?” Jordan’s free hand was curled in tight on his pillow, pulled close to his chest because he needed a hug but nobody was there to give him one. He was almost shouting, now, and his voice had a tinge of hysteria in it that scared him, but he couldn’t stop. I should be over this by now. I shouldn’t care anymore. But maybe those wounds had never healed over like he’d thought they had. Maybe he only had a band aid over it and now it had been ripped off and it was raw and open and festering with anger and resentment. “Or, no! About how he wants his fucking sister back! He never had a goddamn sister, he had me, and it’s not me he wants, it’s this imaginary woman he thinks I should have been!”

Why was he screaming? He was being irrational, but he didn’t know how else to react and he’d never said a word about any of this to anyone, not to Terrence, not to Vince, not to the gender therapist he had to see to get his shots, and now that it was coming out it wouldn’t stop.

Darcey was silent on the other edge of the phone, listening. Jordan’s was hot in his hand, burning his face, or maybe that was the anger and embarrassment in his skin.

“These fucking –” He stumbled over a sob in the back of his throat and his eyes burned and his whole body was hot and his stomach stung like there was a knife in it, twisting, slowly, tearing up his insides. “These –” And then he was crying, his shoulders shaking and his face burning hot and nose running and God you are so pathetic –

Jordan buried his face in the pillow as he tried to gain control of himself, trying to pretend it was Darcey’s shoulder instead, but Darcey was forty minutes away on the other end of a phone connection and Jordan had never felt so isolated.

“I’m sorry,” Darcey finally said. “I know that’s stupid and useless and doesn’t change anything but… but I really am. I’m sorry.”
Jordan made a soft, whimpering, noncommittal sound in the back of his throat. After a few more moments of silence, Darcey asked, “What happened?”

It wasn’t until then that Jordan truly realized that Darcey didn’t know anything about his family history. Nobody did. But Darcey needed to, he deserved to, even if Jordan felt like his stomach was getting ripped out while he explained it. So he started with,

“It’s a really long, complicated story.”

“That’s okay,” Darcey said. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Basically, when I was growing up, I –” Jordan stopped again, curling his hand into a fist and burying his nose in the pillow. Why was he so ashamed to talk about it? There was nothing wrong with him. There was nothing to be ashamed of. He had no reason to hide, especially not from Darcey. After his whole coming out fiasco with the Army, who would understand better than him?

Jordan lifted his head again and stammered, “I –”

And then it all spilled out in one big, sobbing mess. Jordan told him how he’d never felt right in his body, how ever since he was old enough to realize there was a difference between boys and girls that he’d been labeled a girl by mistake. He told Darcey about insisting to his parents, no, he was a boy, and he wanted to be called Jordan and have short hair and wear jeans and t-shirts like the other boys at school. How they purposely humiliated him by forcing him to wear dresses and skirts even though they could have easily bought him girls’ pants instead, how his mother would slap him across the face when he corrected her if she called him a girl, how his father would beat him every time he cut his hair short, but he kept doing it anyway because he had to, a need he didn’t understand. Jordan told Darcey about his brother and how he was so hopeful he’d finally gained an ally when he was born but how he’d ended up being one of the worst bullies he had to deal with. About how, when he started high school and tried to present as who he was and go by the name he wanted, he was bullied mercilessly, pushed into lockers and shoved down stairs and multiple times nearly jumped on his way home from school. About how he tried to get help at first, but the teachers turned a blind eye because, well, honestly, what did he expect when he acted the way he did?

And then, finally, he told Darcey about his grandma. How she taught him to bake and sew, not because they were things girls did but because they were things everyone needed to know. How she told him to stand up to the bullies at school, even though it was hard.

How, when, he finally told her, Grandma, I’m not a tomboy, I’m transgender, and one day when I get out of the house I want to get surgery and start hormone therapy, she kicked him out of her house. How she told him not to come back, not to call, not to even try to communicate, because he was dead now. It was one thing to want to be himself. It was another entirely to try to play God and destroy the body He’d given him.

Jordan had managed to mostly keep himself together, his voice relatively steady, his eyes dry. But then he said,

“She was my only support growing up. She was my only friend. And she ended up throwing me in the trash just like everyone else.” That was the final weight crushing down on his back, and he broke. He curled his arms in around his chest, sinking down into the bed and dropping his head to the pillow, his hair in his eyes and the pillowcase half in his mouth. His shoulders shook as he cried, silently, because he never had before. He’d been angry for so long. He’d never gotten to mourn.
He was vaguely aware of Darcey’s tinny voice through his cell phone calling his name, so Jordan turned the speakerphone on so he wouldn’t have to let go of the pillow. His phone hung loose in his left hand.

“I’m sorry,” Darcey whispered. Jordan shook his head, because he shouldn’t be, he didn’t have to be, and being sorry was useless and didn’t fix anything. But he didn’t say any of that. He didn’t say anything. He choked down another sob as he tried to steady his breathing.

“Do you want me to come over?” Darcey said.

Yes, Jordan thought, but instead, he said, “You don’t have to. I know it’s hard for you to drive right now.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’m sure,” Jordan’s chest was still shuddering, but at least he could mostly breathe again, now with only the occasional interrupting hiccup. They sat quietly together on the phone for some time, listening to each other breathe.

“I want to say ‘It’ll be okay,’” Darcey finally said, “but I don’t know if you’ll believe me. I know it’s not that easy and I know it takes a long time. But eventually, it will be okay again, even if it still hurts sometimes.”

Jordan’s hands clenched in tightly on themselves and he shook his head, but all he said was, “I’m sorry about this.”

“Don’t be –” Darcey started.

“Let me finish,” Jordan said softly. Darcey fell silent. “I don’t… I don’t have a lot of friends. I get along with almost everyone but I’m not close to very many people. Including you, I can count them on one hand.” He curled in a finger as he listed each name. “Terrence. Iffy. Vince. Darcey,” until only his thumb was left poking out of his fist.

Darcey still stayed quiet, waiting for Jordan’s affirmation that he was ready for him to speak. Jordan shook his head and looked down at his feet, half tucked under his knees. “I hang out with people, but we’re not close. I’m not sure if it’s my fault. Maybe it is. I can talk to other people about their problems all day but when it comes to mine? I can’t. I deflect and change the subject. I mean, you’ve seen me do it. Like, with the therapist thing, the only reason I told you anything at all was because you kept pushing.”

“I’m sor –”

“No, no, that’s not what I mean,” Jordan interrupted. “I needed you to. I needed to get it out. And I’m glad you know. But what I’m saying is, I have a lot of obvious feelings but I don’t volunteer why I’m having them. You’re the first person I’ve told any of this. Ever.”

They fell quiet again for a very long time, until Darcey took the silence as permission to speak. “I understand.”

Jordan’s hands curled around the hard plastic of the phone.

"Believe me, Jordan. I understand.”

“Thank you.”
Thank you for your day of patience! I will get to your comments individually soon, hopefully, today, but if not, then tomorrow! You are all wonderful. :)

Come visit me at indecentpause.tumblr.com for word of the day fics and other short stories!
When Darcey woke up on Saturday it was already early afternoon. He groaned at the bright light streaming through the window blinds and covered his face with a pillow. Every time he swallowed it felt like glass shards stabbed him in the throat and every muscle and bone ached. He was running a low fever. Had he gotten strep, too? It was common with mono. He sighed heavily. He didn’t want to have to go back to that clinic. He didn’t feel well enough to sit in those uncomfortable chairs all day.

He grabbed his phone to check the time. There was a text from Brett from late last night.

*Your paperwork for ValueOptions came in. You’ve been approved. I know you’re really sick so I’ll bring it over for you tomorrow, but as soon as you’re well enough, I expect you to keep your promise.*

Darcey swallowed and squeezed his eyes closed. The idea of therapy was terrifying. But he had promised, and if nothing else, he could at least say he always kept his word. He sent Brett a quick text back.

*I just woke up. Thanks. I’ll start looking around at offices once you bring the paperwork over.*

He sent it and sighed heavily, sinking back into his bed. He didn’t want to move, but he was so dehydrated just from the night’s sleep. A knock came at his door.

“Yeah?” he croaked.

But when the door opened, it wasn’t one of his sisters standing there as he’d expected. It was Brett. He was still so thin, and his posture so exhausted, his body all sharp bones and bruised eyes. But at least he hadn’t lost any more weight. It wasn’t progress, but at least he wasn’t continuing to slip.

Brett dropped an open envelope on Darcey’s nightstand. “Here you go,” he said.

“Thanks, Brett,” Darcey murmured. “How long have you been here?”

“About an hour. I was just playing video games with Lexi and Ally downstairs while I waited for you to wake up. I wanted to see you. How are you doing?”

“Terrible.” Even speaking was painful and his tongue kept sticking in his mouth. “But I don’t think I’m getting any worse.”

“At least there’s that,” Brett smiled. Darcey pushed himself up into a sit. The blanket bunched down around his hips and he leaned back against the wall.

“So, since we’re kind of on the subject, have you been able to set an appointment with your therapist?”

Brett’s eyes flashed with fear, but he was smiling, although weakly. “Yeah. This coming Thursday.” He chuckled nervously. “I’m terrified, Darcey. Like, I know it’s ridiculous but I’m afraid she’ll be disappointed in me for slipping. Or something. I don’t know.”
“If she’s as good as your dad said she is, she’ll just be relieved you went back before it got even worse,” Darcey said.

Brett’s eyes shot open wide and his neck and shoulders tensed. “You talked to –”

“No, no,” Darcey interrupted. “I just meant when he finally told us the first time.”

Brett’s muscles relaxed and he nodded. “Oh. Okay.” He shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other for a moment, then Darcey said, “Come down into the kitchen with me? I need to get something to drink.”

Brett smiled. “Sure.”

Lexi and Jess were sitting at the kitchen table reading the newspaper comics when they went down, but with a quick glance at his mother, Darcey was able to hint that they needed some privacy. Jess shuffled Lexi back into the living room to play a game of cards with her and Ally and said, “You’re both welcome to join us whenever you want.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Thanks.”

Darcey drained half his cup of water in just a few gulps, then refilled it and sat down across the small table from Brett. The cold eased the burn in his throat and helped remove some of the stickiness from his mouth.

“Do you want me to go with you?” Darcey asked.

Brett looked up from the newspaper he wasn’t reading. “Justin’s going with me.”

“So, is that a ‘no,’ or …?”

“You don’t have to,” Brett shrugged. “You’d just be hanging out in the waiting room with Justin for an hour.”

“I can think of worse things.” Darcey smirked. It softened. “If you think it’ll help, I’ll be there. If you don’t want me to, that’s okay, too. But don’t worry about inconveniencing me. You are never an inconvenience, Brett.”

Brett bit his lip. When he finally loosened his teeth, he said, “Only if you’re feeling up to it. I don’t want you to strain yourself. I know this thing has hit you really hard.”

Darcey nodded. “That’s fair.”

Darcey wasn’t feeling up to it when he woke up Thursday morning, but he didn’t cancel, hoping he would start to feel a little better as he woke up. He changed out of his pajamas and as when he put his belt on he had to pull the latch two holes tighter. His t-shirt fell loose over his shoulders, and when he went into the bathroom to brush his teeth and looked closely at himself, he noticed that his face was getting thinner, too. He hadn’t been able to do much of anything this past two weeks, and that included his normal upkeep workout routine. He sighed heavily and turned on the faucet.

The hours passed slowly and he wasted time watching TV he didn’t care about and reading books
until about noon. Brett’s appointment would be in an hour. Brett and Justin would be over to get him in about twenty minutes. If he was going to cancel, he had to do it now.

He wasn’t feeling any better, but this was so important for Brett, and if he needed the support, Darcey wanted to be there. So he didn’t cancel. Instead he put a water bottle in the freezer so it would chill faster and waited for them to arrive.

The drive to the office was quiet. Brett was still too weak for any of them to feel comfortable with him driving, so Justin had been taking him most places when his work schedule allowed, and today was no different.

The office was clinical and sterile, white and blue and chrome, like a doctor’s office rather than a therapist’s. The chairs were hard and uncomfortable and both Darcey and Brett shifted around painfully as they waited for Brett to be called back. Finally, he was. Justin kissed his cheek.

“You can do this,” he whispered.

Darcey nodded and offered a tired, but encouraging, smile.

“Thanks, guys,” Brett whispered, and he disappeared behind the door with the woman who had called him.

Darcey and Justin sat in awkward silence for some time, Darcey drifting in and out of sleep while Justin played around with his cell phone. Then, finally, Darcey asked,

“So, how long have you and Brett known each other?”

Justin looked up. “About two years,” he said. “And we’ve been together since May, so… about four months now. Is that all?” he muttered to himself. “It seems like longer than that.”

Darcey raised an eyebrow.

“In a good way,” Justin chuckled.

Darcey smiled. “Thank you,” he said.

“What?”

“For taking care of him. For being so understanding about the whole situation. For being so supportive of him. He needs it in his life so much right now and you’ve done nothing but deliver.”

Justin chuckled awkwardly and scratched his chin. “Well, uh. You’re welcome? I mean, I love him, Darcey. I’ve loved him for a long time. We’re together for the long haul, and that includes the hard stuff, you know?”


Although he still felt horrible, Darcey finally started to feel a bit better about a week later, and, like
he’d promised, he made the call to schedule his therapist’s appointment. By the time the phone intake was over a half hour later, his throat was raw and his mouth was dry, but he knew if he put it off any longer he might not be able to hold himself accountable. His appointment would be the following Monday, four days later.

Darcey’s hands shook, tight on his knees, as he sat in the therapist’s office staring at the clock. He did not want to be here. He still wasn’t ready to start talking about things and nobody seemed to understand that, but he’d promised Brett, and he refused to break that promise.

Jordan sat beside him, his arms loosely wrapped around himself as protection from the chill of the air conditioner. It was early enough in the morning that Darcey would be able to get Jordan back home in time for him to get to bed for work that night. They’d borrowed Jess’s car. The office was too far away to bus.

Darcey had assured Jordan that his coming wouldn’t become a regular thing, but… he was terrified. And he was afraid if someone didn’t come with him to keep him accountable, he’d skip out at the last moment. Brett had school, and he wasn’t about to ask his mother.

The two sat quietly, side by side, but when Jordan bumped his knee against Darcey’s, it lingered, a quiet, unobtrusive reminder: I’m here.

Darcey’s eyes darted around the room. It was small, with off white walls and pictures of flowers, dark pink chairs that squeaked when they shifted. There were stacks of magazines, mostly for kids, but with some sports and fashion titles. Dark blue carpet, hard under their feet and torn up in one corner by a bored child. The front desk where he checked in had a sliding glass door that made him more uncomfortable than it should, but overall it was much more welcoming than Brett’s office had been.

Jordan’s knee shifted against Darcey’s as he bounced the ball of his foot. When Darcey had asked him to come, he hadn’t hesitated to say ‘yes,’ but he hated therapists, he hated their books, he hated their offices and everything that reminded him of them. Over and over he tried to remind himself, there are good ones, too, but it was too late. The profession had been tainted. He just had to try to keep his concerns to himself so he didn’t scare Darcey even more.

Darcey gently pressed his knee against Jordan’s, trying to thank him for coming even though it made him nervous. He could have said ‘no’ and Darcey would have understood. “Thank you,” he finally whispered.

Jordan turned and gave him a small smile. “Yeah,” he said. Darcey smiled back, softly, nervously. But at least it was a smile.

He glanced back at the clock. Four more minutes.

Darcey shifted in the chair again, trying to find a comfortable position. The muscle pains weren’t as bad as they had been in the beginning, but they were still terrible and it still hurt to sit on anything harder than a soft couch. The cold of the air conditioner was sharp on his joints. At least the sore throat had started to clear up without medication, which meant it hadn’t been strep.

His hands shook harder than usual and he had to force his breathing to stay steady, but he couldn’t calm the sharp lump in his throat or the tightness in his chest, completely unrelated to the sickness. 10:00 came and went and nobody came to call him back. She probably had to finish up some paperwork between clients, or maybe her earlier appointment ran over. But it still unnerved him
more than it should have.

It was 10:02 when the door to the back office opened. A woman stepped out, slim and angular, with blonde hair and chunky black framed glasses, no older than Darcey. She glanced down at the clipboard in her hand, back up to the room.

“Darcey?”

Darcey hesitated, but Jordan nudged his elbow and he stood. He gently gripped the back of Darcey’s calf as he stepped away. Darcey turned back and said, “I guess it’s supposed to be about an hour.”

“I’ll be here,” Jordan said. He was smiling, soft and supportive and grateful. As he turned away he pulled his earbuds and iPod out of his pocket.

Darcey turned back to the woman and nodded. She smiled and motioned him over. She closed the door, and as she turned, she spoke, but Darcey only caught the first two words: “my office.”

“What?” he asked. She glanced over her shoulder.

“Hm?”

“My hearing isn’t very good,” Darcey explained. “If you’re not looking at me while you talk, you have to speak up or I can’t hear you.”

She stopped and turned around.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “My office is just right this way, in the back corner.”

Darcey nodded and she began walking again.

Her office was small, with a couple of potted ferns and some kind of yellow flower. Monet prints in simple brown frames hung on two of the walls and a CD player sat in the corner. A shelf to his right was full of books on things like Borderline Personality Disorder and schizophrenia and chronic depression.

There were two chairs. She sat in the one in front of the desk. Darcey stood unsurely for a moment, then dropped his backpack to the floor and sat in the other. His hands gripped hard on his knees, his muscles tight with nerves. This chair was much softer than the one out in the waiting room, so at least, physically, he’d mostly be comfortable.

“My name is Alicia, but Lee is fine, too, if you prefer,” she said. Darcey looked up at her. She was smiling, trying to be reassuring. Why was he so afraid? She couldn’t tell anybody what they talked about. The laws were too strict.

“Darcey,” he said softly.

“All right.” She opened a file on her desk, different colored tabs and papers everywhere, but she flipped to what she needed without hesitation or searching. “I have your intake papers here,” she said, “but I need to ask you some more specific questions. Is that okay?”

Darcey swallowed. “Yeah.” He flinched when his voice broke. “Yeah,” he repeated.

Lee paused, putting her pen down on the desk. She crossed her hands over the file in her lap and leaned forward. “You don’t have to be nervous,” she said gently. “It’s okay if you are, of course. But this is a safe place. I’m here to help, okay? I do patient driven therapy here, which means you
take the lead. You decide what we talk about and when. It goes at your pace. I’m just here to help
direct it and help you find solutions to your problems.”

“Yeah,” Darcey repeated. “I just…” He paused, breathed for a moment. His voice was shaking
now and it made him sick, letting a total stranger see him like this, even if she was going to be his
therapist. He was silent for a long time, until Lee said, “You just…?”

“I haven’t really talked about… anything,” he said. “Ever. Little things, sometimes. But every time
I try to talk to anyone, no matter how close we are, I just… I lock up. Something stops me and I
just can’t. It’s like there’s some kind of physical lockdown that prevents it from happening.”

“Sometimes it takes time,” Lee said gently. “Some people are more guarded than others or have
more trouble talking. That’s okay. We can do short term or long term treatment. Whatever you end
up deciding you need. Is it okay if I ask you a few questions? It will help me figure out what kind
of treatment plan to put together.”

Darcey nodded.

The questions were basic and mostly rephrasings of the things the intake worker asked over the
phone. Family history of mental illness. Whether he’d sought treatment before and what kind.
What his support system was like.

He knew the question was coming and he tried to steel himself for it, but it still gripped tightly
around his throat when she asked, “Why are you seeking treatment here with me?”

“I…” Darcey’s voice was strangled. “Until about two months ago, I served in the Army. I was
there for eight years and did two tours of the Middle East and I was right in the middle of the
conflict a lot of the time. Ever since, I’ve had this… tremor in my hands, and I can’t sleep and
when I do I have night terrors. Sometimes I get flashbacks and once I nearly injured my…” He
choked on the word partner and he hated himself for it because he loved Jordan so much, he
wasn’t ashamed of their relationship and he was so happy with him, but being so deeply closeted
for so long had done things to his head that he didn’t understand.

“My partner,” he finally whispered. “I get these really bad anxiety attacks whenever I’m too close
to a situation that reminds me of it. I can’t fly anymore without panicking.”

She didn’t say anything about his stumble, and for that he was so grateful.

“You said you served until about two months ago. Have you retired?”

“Discharge.”

“Were you diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?”

“No,” Darcey said softly. “I didn’t talk about it then. Nobody knew.”

“Why were you discharged?” Her voice was gentle, free of judgment, but Darcey was still
ashamed to say it out loud. Even now, nobody knew what had actually happened but Brett.
Nobody else knew the details, about why he’d done what he’d done. He hadn’t come out because
it was the brave thing to do. He’d come out because he was afraid and it was the only way out.

“I’m not brave. I’m a coward.”

“I came out,” he whispered. He looked up from his knees, but still didn’t meet her eyes. “As. I
told one of my coworkers that I’m gay and it got back to the people in charge.” He paused,
sighing heavily in frustration. One hand was hot on the back of his neck, the other curled into a
fist against his knee. Both of them were shaking. “I was set to retire. My eight year contract was up and I was supposed to go home. But they stop-lossed me. They set me up to go back to Iraq three days before I was supposed to retire and…”

He paused, rubbing his hands hard against his face to try to keep himself focused. “I couldn’t do it. I was already in pieces from the first two tours. I couldn’t…” He swallowed and dropped his hands back to his knees. “It was the only thing I could think of to get myself out. It wasn’t a lie or anything,” he explained. “It’s true. And I didn’t know if it was a sure thing, but with Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell…” His hand was on the back of his neck again, sweaty and rough, so uncomfortable it almost hurt. “Even though a lot of the people on my unit wouldn’t have cared, the people in charge did, and they make those decisions. I.” His shoulders were coiled tight and his neck ached with how strained the muscles were. “I don’t know if I did the right thing, but it was the decision I made. I don’t think I regret it. But…” His voice was shaking, now. “My family thinks I’m this honorable, brave person who made this noble decision not to hide anymore. But I was just using it to run away.”

When Darcey finally looked back at Lee again, she was writing something in her file. The only sounds in the room were her pen scratching against the paper and the low hum of the air conditioner. When she looked up, she asked, “The man who was sitting with you, is he your partner?”

“Yeah.” This time, Darcey didn’t lower his eyes.

“Is he supportive of you?”

Darcey’s smile was small, but genuine. “Yeah. He’s never been anything but. He actually helped me set up this meeting with you. But there’s only so much he can do because I don’t… I don’t talk about these things. He knows I served two tours, he knows I have flashbacks and nightmares, but that’s it.” He looked down and his voice dropped. “It’s my own fault. It’s not that I don’t trust him. I just… every time I try to talk about these things, like I said, I shut down.”

Darcey’s upset was obvious and getting worse, so Lee changed the subject to something easy, asking if he took any medication or had ever seen a psychiatrist. His muscles started to relax. He told her about the Generalized Anxiety Disorder diagnosis, that he took sleeping pills at one point but stopped because he couldn’t wake up when the nightmares came back. That he had the Xanax but didn’t take it often because until he’d gotten approved through the state, he’d been uninsured and had no access to a new prescription when he ran out.

“We have psychiatrists here if you need one,” Lee offered. Darcey nodded in acknowledgement, but didn’t commit.

Eventually she managed to get him to talk about his family a little bit. How he’d never met Ally outside of infancy until she was almost five, and the only reason she’d recognized him was from seeing him across a computer screen. How the letters from his sisters had been the only thing to keep him going at times, and how remembering his family gave him the courage to get up every morning. He told her that he thought he’d been prepared for everything after basic, but nobody could ever be prepared to see their friends drop dead beside them from a bullet to the head or the chest. All training did was teach him to take orders and work equipment and keep his emotions in check so when it happened, he didn’t break down. Because it happened. It always did.

“I decided to ask for further training as a medic so I could keep it from happening, but it was useless,” Darcey murmured. “A lot of the time all I could do was keep them comfortable while they died, which then made it partly my fault, too.”

“You feel a lot of guilt about a lot of things, don’t you?” Lee asked gently.
Darcey chuckled, soft, sad, self-depreciating. It caught in his throat as a half-sob that, thankfully, didn’t come out. “Yeah,” he said softly. He needed something, anything to keep his hands busy, even just a piece of paper to fold and unfold or a pen to click. But he slowly flexed them in and out of fists instead. “I didn’t... I mean, I always knew it was there. But for a long time I could mostly ignore it. But then, a few weeks ago, Jordan and I—”

“Jordan?”

“My partner,” Darcey explained. “The man waiting outside for me.”

“All right,” Lee said. “Sorry. Continue?”

He took in a shallow, nervous breath.

Then he told her about what had happened in the park. How he just jumped in because it was what needed to be done and he could do it, so he did. How all he’d been thinking about was keeping that kid stable until EMS arrived.

How, once the kid had been taken into the ambulance and he and Jordan were left in the park alone, his mind started wandering into territory he couldn’t handle, the wracking emotional pain of his survivor’s guilt and the terror of his helplessness against the inevitability of watching everyone he loved die. How he managed to section it off and push it away in a corner of his mind he never went to, until the teenager’s mom called and the dam broke.

About how, even casually hanging out with Jordan, helping Ally and Lexi with their schoolwork, working on making sure Brett got the help he needed – how, even through all of that, it followed him, clinging to the back of his neck and biting and clawing until it consumed him, until he couldn’t focus on anything else and was just going through the movements he had to to get through the day to He told her that, multiple times, it was almost him who died. He told her about the first time he had a gun at his head point-blank, and that the only reason he didn’t come home a corpse was because his gun was faster.

But he didn’t tell her how it felt. He’d never told anyone. He was supposed to feel guilt, sadness, maybe anger at himself. He’d killed people, but instead of feeling bad about it, he felt bad about how powerful it felt to finally be the one making the decision. And maybe... maybe he didn’t even feel bad about that. Maybe he just thought he should.

Lee was quiet as she thought and processed everything he’d said.

“All right,” she finally said. “I think you should call this boy’s mom back and agree to meet with her. It might be difficult, but I think it could provide you with a lot of closure for at least some of these issues. It’s clear there are a lot of things you need to work on, and we’ll draw up a treatment plan to make sure everything is addressed, but I think that would be a good place to start. You may feel like it’s not enough to make up for everything else you’ve been through, but you saved that boy’s life, Darcey, and you probably saved everyone in his family, too. At least let his mother thank you. I think seeing her will help you come to terms, at least with this situation, and sometimes you just have to take one thing at a time.” She paused, then opened a drawer in her desk and pulled out a business card. She handed it to him. There were three names on it, with phone numbers beside each.

“I’d like you to make an appointment with one of our psychiatrists when we’re done here. They each handle their own schedules rather than the front desk. I’d suggest calling Dr. Palmer first. I think she could really help you and I think medication has the potential to be a big help, too. It won’t fix everything, but hopefully you can find something to make your symptoms more manageable on a day to day basis while we work on things here.”
Darcey pulled his wallet out of his pocket and slid the card in. He nodded, but, again, didn’t verbally commit. He probably would make an appointment, because no matter how carefully he rationed it, eventually he would run out of his anxiety medication. For that reason alone he would need to see someone.

Then, suddenly, it was almost eleven. Darcey wasn’t sure how it happened. But when he stood and shook Lee’s hand, more out of habit than anything, he did feel a little better. Everything still weighed heavily on his shoulders, but a little less so, now, and although he was still afraid to go to sleep that night, the fear was a little less sharp and the future didn’t seem quite so hopeless and terrifying.

“You can make an appointment for next week at the front desk,” Lee said. Darcey nodded. She smiled and opened the door to let him out of the office. He kept his voice low as he made his next appointment. There was no copay. The insurance had taken ages to go through, but at least, for now, it covered everything he needed completely.

Darcey smiled when he turned around and saw Jordan for the first time, tucked back in a corner. His legs were stretched out, crossed at the ankles, and he was slumped low in the chair, head lollled against his shoulder. Asleep.

Darcey took his headphones out before gently shaking Jordan’s shoulder and whispering, “Hey. Wake up. It’s done.”

Jordan’s head jerked up and his eyelids fluttered a few times before he opened his eyes. He smiled when he saw Darcey.

“Guess I fell asleep,” he chuckled.

“Guess so,” Darcey smiled back.

“How’d it go?”

Darcey hesitated, standing back up straight. “I’ll tell you in the car.”

Jordan nodded and stood, wrapping his headphones around his hand and stretching out his arms. He shoved his hands in his pockets and gestured toward the door with a nod of his head. “Let’s get out of here, then. I’ve still got an hour or so before I need to crash, if you want to stop by my place and have something to eat? I still haven’t gotten to the grocery store, but I think I can manage pancakes. And I know I have oatmeal.”

Darcey opened the door and followed him out. “You’ll be okay? If you need to get to bed I can come over later this week, maybe. I’m still not feeling great but I’m okay to drive again, as long as I can line it up with my mom’s schedule. I could come over… probably Thursday morning? She usually stays in then.”

“That’s probably better,” Jordan said. “I don’t have to work that night, so we don’t have to worry so much about rushing.”

When they got to the stairs, Darcey took them slowly, but Jordan jumped down two at a time, like always. He got down to the courtyard first and paused, turning back around to look up at Darcey. When he got down to the bottom, Jordan took a step toward him, then paused awkwardly before saying, “Thank you. For doing this.”

Darcey glanced around. The courtyard was empty. Most of the businesses were either closed for the time or had their blinds drawn for privacy. It took every ounce of courage he had, but Darcey
gently took Jordan’s chin in his hand and tilted his head up to give him a quick kiss. When he pulled away, Jordan’s eyes were so happy, so grateful, and Darcey smiled a little nervously. It killed him every time he jerked away when Jordan got too close in public, when he almost flinched when Jordan tried to take his hand or kiss him while other people were around. It killed Darcey and it killed Jordan, too, but he was trying, and he was so glad that Jordan recognized that and gave him the time to do so.

Jordan smiled softly, and he didn’t speak, but his face said everything Darcey needed to hear.

“I’m coming back next week at the same time,” he said softly.

“Do you want me to come?” Jordan asked.

“You don’t have to.”

Jordan raised an eyebrow and smiled, shaking his head. “I know. But that’s not what I asked. Do you want me to come?”

Darcey shrugged one shoulder, looking down and sticking his right hand in his pocket.

“That’s a yes,” Jordan said, gently bumping the back of his wrist against Darcey’s leg. “I know therapy can be terrifying,” he said softly. “And I want you to remember you’re not alone.”

“I won’t be dragging you out here for the long term,” Darcey explained, maybe too quickly. He wasn’t sure whether he was reassuring Jordan or himself.

“It’s okay,” Jordan said. “Really. If you’re up early next Monday you can come over before, as early as six if you want. We can make breakfast. Dinner. I don’t even know what that meal is anymore. Half the time I eat pasta or burritos and the other half I eat cereal and pancakes.” He glanced up from the corner of his eye and smiled when he saw Darcey smiling, too.

“I’ll make a quiche,” Darcey said. “That’s pretty all-encompassing, right?”

Jordan laughed and bumped his hip against his boyfriend’s as they finally started walking back to the car. “That sounds awesome. If it’s anything like your omelets I’ll bet it’s fucking delicious. I can’t believe they wouldn’t let you stage for their kitchen at that place. You would have blown them away.”

Darcey shrugged. “Either way, I would have been fired. It would be even worse working back in the kitchen with mono than being a server.”

Jordan sighed and looked back ahead. “Yeah,” he said softly. He gently nudged Darcey with his elbow. “You’ll find something once you get better. I have faith. You work so hard and you’re so dedicated. Eventually someone will finally see that.”

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Please skip to the end notes for trigger warnings!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jordan was ready to *fuck some shit up.*

It was the day of the student sit-in at the school near Mandy’s house. Normally he’d have just let
the kids to it without any interference, but when Terrence told him that those church protesters
were going to be there, he was having *none* of it. These were *teenagers,* some as young as
thirteen, and they didn’t need the excess stress of those people screaming bigoted trash at them on
top of the lack of support from the adults at their school.

Maybe yelling and throwing glitter wouldn’t do much in the big picture of things, but at least on
this base level, he could help give some kids the confidence they needed to make their school a
little better, and that was just as important.

He hung back, halfway up a tree at the edge of the parking lot. The teenagers were out on the
front lawn, sitting peacefully, some with signs that said things like “Gay is not a swear word” and
“It’s okay to be gay.” They weren’t making a fuss. Most of them were quiet. A couple started
small chants every now and then that they kept up for a minute or two before trailing off.

But one of the church members had a bullhorn and was screaming at the kids that they were going
to hell, that they were sinners, that they were disgusting, and it hit Jordan far too close for him to
be able to stay out of it. They had their normal signs, “Fags burn in Hell” and “God rejoices for
dead soldiers.” He sighed. He had yet another reason to hate them now to pile on top of all the
others.

Terrence and Mandy were both nearby somewhere. There were at least three others scattered
around, too. The collective was loose and didn’t always collaborate. They told people where to go
and when to be there, and they came, and they left. Sometimes he didn’t even learn their names.
Sometimes he didn’t even see them in the first place.

Jordan was the first to shoot when the one with the megaphone started yelling quotes from
Leviticus. He pulled the slingshot back tight, holding it for a moment to set his aim.

The man stumbled forward when the glitter bomb exploded between his shoulders, covering him
in pink sparkles. Jordan always used pink, specifically because he knew how much people like
that hated being associated with anything feminine. There were some hearts in there for good
measure. The man stopped, dropped his hand, and whirled around, but Jordan was well hidden
and the homophobe didn’t know what he was looking for. Jordan grinned and shot another one
right into the man’s chest. He was careful to avoid causing any physical injury, because he knew
their so called church was mostly funded by lawsuits. But he *was* going to injure their pride in any
way he could.

The look on his face was *perfect.*

Jordan’s glitter bombs gave the teenagers a little extra initiative and two of them jumped up,
holding a sign between them above their heads. It read, “If gays are bad, why are we so cute?”

He grinned. Two girls right after his own heart.

Then he saw that they were holding hands and it hit him a little closer. He was not going to let these girls and their friends go through what he had to. Even if all he could do was throw glitter, then dammit, that’s what I’m going to do.

His two shots inspired the rest of the collective, because glitter started to explode everywhere. Some of the bombs missed their marks and hit the pavement by their feet, but most of them hit, arms and chests and backs. The church members started sputtering, milling around in confusion, yelling at each other instead of the kids. Jordan shot off two more, both at the woman with the dead soldiers sign, getting one in her hair and the other on her shoulder. Fucker. The rest he could mostly brush off after being surrounded by it for so long, but that he took personally.

“God will punish the wicked who try to deny His Word!” the woman screamed, but it was angry, desperate, and Jordan wanted to laugh at how pathetic it was. Instead, he pulled his bandanna away from his mouth for just long enough to shout, “God sucks!”

It was juvenile, but he loved seeing them angry.

Something in his actions sparked one of the girls, because now the one with the long, brown hair had given the other their sign and was marching up to the church members.

“My God loves me!” she shouted. Clearly, to her this was about much more than forming a GSA at her school. Jordan wasn’t sure what, but her tone was dead serious. “My God loves me and my gay Army brother and He accepts us, and if your God doesn’t, I don’t want Him! Your God can go to Hell!” Her fists clenched tightly by her sides. Jordan couldn’t see her face well from his tree, but he wished he could. He laughed, not in mockery, but in pure joy. The girl marched over to the woman with the dead soldiers sign and went off.

“And you!” she screamed, pointing at her. “You think you’re so tough with your stupid sign, well you wouldn’t last a day in basics, you wouldn’t last a second in the Middle East, and you think you’re so brave trying to bully a bunch of teenagers a third your age but I bet if you had to go through what our soldiers do you’d curl into a little ball and cry for your mom!”

Oh, man, this kid is a badass. Jordan hoped her family was proud of her, because if she were his sister or daughter, he definitely would be.

The woman stood silent for a moment, stunned, but then started to yell back. Nope. She got another glitter bomb between her shoulders, courtesy of Jordan and his gay veteran boyfriend.

In the distance, two security guards came out from the front entrance of the school. Jordan’s hand tensed on his slingshot, his eyes locked on the girl, because in his experience it was always the protestors who got hurt, never the instigator. He knew interfering could be dangerous and could lead to arrest, but he wasn’t going to let this kid get hurt for standing up for herself and what was right. They approached and one put a hand on her shoulder. She turned around. Jordan couldn’t hear what they were saying, but she was gesturing wildly, pointing at the church members. The tension in her shoulders and neck was obvious, even from Jordan’s distance. His teeth clenched and his jaw tightened.

Why were they telling her to back down but not doing anything about the church members? When Jordan was in school, they wouldn’t even let parents on campus during school hours without a pass. What was this? Had the rules changed that much in four years?
She stood down anyway, and Jordan was glad. He didn’t want any of the kids hurt and he didn’t want to get arrested for jumping in.

Well, at least I can make protesting as annoying for these dicks as possible.

For a while, everything was quiet. Every time one of them raised a bullhorn or started to shout, Jordan hit them with a glitter bomb, and occasionally they got another one or two from a different direction. Eventually they quit and quieted, and a few of them gave up and left.

Jordan’s tree was hot and stifling, especially with his black clothes, but he kicked back and lingered and watched for a while to be sure everything stayed under control.

Only when some more adults came out from the school did the church members start to fall back. The last one out, a woman in yellow and black, walked directly up to them and began to speak to the one with the bullhorn. Jordan sighed and rolled his eyes. They could have come out and taken care of this a lot sooner. A few other teachers rounded the teenagers up and most of them went without a fuss, though two of them had to be pulled up by security guards. But they couldn’t be violent for risk of a lawsuit, so at least they were safe, and at least the police weren’t called.

Jordan stayed in his tree until everyone had cleared out, then stuck his slingshot handle in his back pocket, slung the bag of remaining glitter bombs over his shoulder, and shimmied down. He ducked back, quick and quiet, trying not to be seen, just in case.

He took the long way around the block to where Terrence and Mandy parked. They were all on their way back, too, taking different routes. It wasn’t necessary this time, since there were no police involved, but it never hurt to take precautions. Terrence was already there with a man Jordan didn’t recognize, probably a few years younger, with blue hair in a swoop over his face. It was mostly covered in a black beanie. The two of them were talking and laughing and the blue haired guy said something and Terrence doubled over with laughter and smacked him on the back, his big hand knocking the shorter man forward a few steps.

Jordan cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, “Terrence!” Terrence stood back up and looked over in his direction with a grin and a wave. He slapped Jordan on the back when he was close enough, and he stumbled forward a few steps, too.

“Did you see that kid back there?” the blue haired man grinned. He paused, backtracked, and held out his hand for Jordan. “Sorry,” he said. “I’m Steven.”

Jordan grinned and took his hand, shaking once. When Steven took his hand back he thumbed over his shoulder back toward the school. “She couldn’t have been any older than, like, twelve or thirteen, and she got right up in their faces!”

“I know!” Jordan laughed. “What a badass kid! If I ever have kids I hope they end up like her.”

“I know,” Terrence grinned. “I saw the pink explosion when the woman with the soldiers sign tried to get in their face.” Jordan glanced up with a small half-grin. “You’re always the pink ones. I know it was you.”

Jordan shrugged, hands out, noncommittal. “I hate bullies,” he said simply.

Terrence gave him a knowing look, but said nothing. Jordan didn’t know if he knew Steven from somewhere or if the other man just saw their blog and showed up, but clearly he thought this was not a person to mention Darcey to. But he wasn’t relevant to the conversation, anyway.

“Shit like that really pisses me off,” Steven spit. “I mean, to celebrate someone dying? The military as an institution is bullshit, yeah, but come on, soldiers are human beings. That’s so fucked up.”
Someone jumped on Jordan’s shoulders and he yelped, pulling away and whirling around. It was Mandy. She threw her head back with a laugh and slapped his arm.

“Sorry I scared you,” she grinned. He smiled back, gently shoving her a few steps away. She laughed and grabbed him in a hug much tighter than should have been possible for someone so small.

“I’ve missed you, Jordan,” she said. She squeezed once more and he squeezed her back before she stepped away, her hand lingering on his arm. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Sorry.” His smile was small, apologetic. “I just…” He trailed off, unsure of how to finish. Finally, he gestured widely and settled on one word: “Life.”

“Yeah, well,” she said. “I’ve been pretty shit at keeping in touch, too. It’s not just your fault.”

He grinned and nudged her shoulder with his elbow. He wasn’t as close to her as he was Terrence, but at least he knew that no matter how long they were away from her, things would always pick up exactly where they left off.

“You made good use of those glitter bombs I made, Jordan,” she said. “I saw a lot of pink over there.”

“I just really hate those guys. A lot,” Jordan said. “People like those assholes made me miserable all through high school and I don’t want those kids to go through the same shit I did.”

“Did you know that kid back there?” Mandy asked. “You were throwing lots of glitter around when she was up there yelling.”

He shook his head and shrugged his left shoulder. “Never seen her before. I just thought it was pretty fucking brave for someone her size and age to stand up to people like that and I wanted her to know she had backup so she wouldn’t get scared and lose her nerve. I mean, there were like, ten of them. You can’t tell me that what she did wasn’t awesome.”

Mandy smiled, a little lopsided, showing her teeth. “Yeah, that was pretty sick. She reminded me a lot of how I was at that age. Not the military apologetics, but the rest of it was pretty cool.”

Jordan swallowed, but if his expression changed, nobody noticed. His heart skipped a few times, nervous. He was about to walk blind into a minefield of a conversation, and he’d never exactly been sure-footed.

“Well, she said her brother was in the Army,” Jordan said. “He might have served overseas. I can see how she’d take that personally.”

Mandy’s smile faded and she gave Jordan a wary look. “Why do you even care?” she asked slowly.

Jordan shrugged one shoulder, glancing over at Terrence, trying to ask for help, backup, a subject change, anything.

“I’m just saying,” he said, “I mean, when someone you care about is being attacked, like, it’s easy to lose your shit. It’s easy to take things personally.” The dryness in his mouth was stifling and his shoulders tensed but then Terrence came to his rescue, Jordan’s knight in a black t-shirt and pink bandanna.

“Like, if someone was saying shit about bipolar people, you’d lose it because of your brother.”
She shot him a dangerous look, but he continued. “That’s all he’s saying.”

Mandy glared at Terrence and said lowly, “That’s not even remotely the same thing. My brother didn’t choose to be bipolar.”

“I didn’t say he did,” Terrence said tersely.

“I mean,” Jordan said, “soldiers are just people like anyone else. There are assholes and there are nice people and idiots and geniuses, just like us. They just happen to wear a uniform, right?”

Mandy’s glare snapped toward Jordan and Terrence bit his lip and closed his eyes.

“What?”

“Mandy –”

“No, no,” she said, holding up a hand in Terrence’s direction. “Apparently Jordan’s the expert now. So I want to hear what he has to say.”

“I mean…” Jordan’s eyes darted up to Terrence, over to Steven, back at Mandy. “Like, it’s… the military isn’t anything to be glorified or demonized. Or like, maybe the military, but not soldiers themselves? There are thousands of jobs besides combat and all sorts of people do them and that’s… that’s… there are good people and bad people just like in any other profession and that’s…”

“I can’t believe you would say that when you know what they did to my cousin.”

Jordan had boxed himself in. Conversational landmines surrounded him in all directions. There was no step he could take that wouldn’t lead to an explosion.

“I know,” he said gently, “and it was so fucked up, and I’m so sorry. I really am. But that was one guy, one *horrible* guy, and you can’t judge such a big group based on –”

But then Mandy’s hands hit hard against his chest and he stumbled back.

“Fuck you,” she spat, and she stormed off.

The sting from the impact of her palms was nothing compared to the burn in Jordan’s neck. He wasn’t even *angry*. If he’d just kept his mouth shut –

“Jordan?” When he looked up at Terrence, his friend was a little blurry, and that was when he realized he was tearing up.

“I’m sorry,” he choked, even though Mandy was long gone and couldn’t hear it.

“Give her time,” Terrence said gently.

Jordan wrapped his arms around his torso and looked down at his feet. “If she reacted like that and she doesn’t even know –”

“Give her time,” Terrence repeated.

“What just happened?” Steven whispered.

Terrence nodded in the direction Mandy stormed away. “Her cousin was raped by a soldier on leave,” he said softly.
“Fuck,” Steven murmured.

“Yeah.”

“And I’m dating an Army vet,” Jordan whispered.

“Oh, man. I…I’m sorry, guys, I shouldn’t have asked. It’s not my business, I –”

Jordan shook his head and waved his hand at him. “Whatever.” He looked up at Terrence. “Can you take me home?”

“Yeah,” Terrence whispered. He wrapped his arm around Jordan’s shoulders in a half-hug. “Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter contains brief discussion of a past rape done to a character that is not shown in the story otherwise and done by a person who is also not in the story otherwise. It is not graphic whatsoever. It is just stated that it happened and is portrayed as the fucked up, terribly negative thing it is.

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Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The café was quiet and small and not too far from where Brett went to school. The clinking of glassware and the hiss of the espresso machine and the soft hum of conversation were quiet enough to register only as unobtrusive white noise, but Darcey still couldn’t concentrate on his book.

He was going to meet that teenager’s mom in a few minutes. Jane, did she say her name was?

Darcey had been in therapy for three weeks now, and even though he was hesitant, eventually Lee and Jordan were able to convince him to meet her. Lee said it would offer closure. Jordan said it would give a human face to the people he’d helped. Both were convinced it would be good for him in some way, so even though he was scared, he’d called her back. Darcey thought she might not even remember him – it had been almost a month and a half – but she did. Nearly losing a loved one wasn’t something someone forgot. Why had he been expecting anything else?

Every time the bell on the front door jingled, Darcey looked up. He didn’t know what she looked like, only that she’d be wearing a red scarf. He’d told her he’d be wearing a green t-shirt.

The door opened again and he glanced up. It was a woman with a red scarf and a baby stroller. Probably coincidence.

His hands tensed around the book and he slowly looked up at her when she said, “Darcey Walker?”

She had another kid, too? She had a baby?

“Ms. Petersen?” he asked. His voice was small, like a child meeting an intimidating adult by himself for the first time. A bright smile crossed her face. She was tall and willowy with long blonde hair pulled back into a braid. She reminded Darcey of what his mother looked like when she was younger, and that made it both a little easier and a little harder.

“Call me Jane,” she said. She pulled out the chair across from him and parked the stroller beside the table. The baby was silent and asleep.

They both sat in an uncomfortable, awkward silence for a moment, then finally Darcey broke it by asking, “How’s your son doing?”

“Good,” she smiled. “He’s still taking it easy, but his mono’s cleared up and his heart is doing better and he’s back to baseball and school again. He was born with a weak heart and the doctor said the ball hit him in the chest right when it was at its most vulnerable.” Her voice was soft and a little shaky. There were tears in her eyes. “If you hadn’t been there, he would have died before the paramedics arrived. You saved my son’s life, Mr. Walker, and there’s nothing I can do or say that will ever thank you enough.”

Darcey closed his book, but his hands were still tight around the spine. “I just…” he started. He trailed off. “He needed help and I was able to do it. So I did. I would hope that anyone who could would do the same if they were needed.”

Something in Jane’s face changed slightly.
“Where did you get your training, if I can ask?”

“Army Strong, ma’am,” he said. It was still hard to talk about the trauma, but thanks to Lee, the rest of it was getting easier. “EMT-B certified and paramedic trained.”

A smile crossed her face. “Are you stationed here?”

“No, ma’am. I was stationed in Louisiana. I was also in Korea for a year at one point.” He didn’t mention his active duty and she didn’t ask, and for that, he was grateful.

“My husband is a Lieutenant Colonel in the Army,” she said. “He’s stationed here, down south.” She paused, peeked into the stroller, and rearranged a blanket. She looked back at Darcey again. “When did you retire?”

The question threw him so much, he actually stuttered when he asked, “I - I’m sorry, ma’am?”

“You said you were stationed. Are you no longer serving or did I misunderstand?”

He paused. His eyes darted over her face. All he could think about was Campbell’s reaction when he came out. Even though he’d backtracked, even though he’d apologized, his initial reaction still stung, sharp and tight, and Darcey wasn’t sure he could go through that again.

But what else could he say? He saved her son’s life. She wasn’t… she wouldn’t react that way, would she?

But you saved Campbell’s life, too, his brain reminded him.

The silence was thick and heavy, even though they were still surrounded by the soft noises of the café.

“I was discharged about two and a half months ago,” he said simply.

Jane nodded once. “I’m sorry,” she said. He thought that was going to be it and they could move on with the conversation, but then she added, “Were you injured?”

Darcey was silent for a moment. Then he sat a little straighter, squared his shoulders, and brought his chin up. He said softly, almost defiantly, “I was discharged under the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy, ma’am.”

Jane’s hand flew to her chest as she jerked back and Darcey was about to stand up and leave because clearly, the conversation was going bad fast. But then she said, “I’m so sorry, Mr. Walker.”

He hesitated a moment before he murmured, “It happens.”

Her hands were on the table, small and thin and curled into fists. She leaned in closer again and while her voice was soft, it was firm. “But it shouldn’t,” she said. She sat back and grabbed her purse from the bottom carriage of the baby stroller, pulling out a pen and a notepad.

Darcey’s brows drew together in confusion and he murmured, “Ma’am, what –”

“I’d like your full name, rank, and number, if that’s okay?”

The hair on the back of his neck shot straight up and his muscles tensed. Even though he told himself that they couldn’t do anything to him, there was a little panicked voice at the back of his head that said, but what if they can? He wasn’t completely done with the discharge process yet.
He was still waiting on one more wave of paperwork to come in the mail.

“Ma’am, what —”

Jane saw the panic on Darcey’s face and her own softened. “I know that soldiers discharged under DADT are done so dishonorably and that they aren’t given any benefits. And frankly, Mr. Walker, that’s disgusting, and you deserve to get everything you worked for. I don’t know if I can do anything, but my husband may be able to pull some strings. I can’t promise anything will come of it, but I want to try.”

Darcey’s eyes darted over her face, down to her notepad, back up at her again, as his mind rushed to comprehend what was happening. He didn’t know what he’d expected when he came to meet her, but it wasn’t this.

He could get his GI Bill. His health insurance. It was unlikely, but the fact that it was suddenly possible?

Finally, slowly, he said, “Specialist Darcey Alan Walker.”

“And your number?”

He dropped his voice so nobody could hear when he answered. Jane scribbled everything down, repeated it back to double check that the information was correct and his name was spelled right. She took down his parents’ address because that was where everything was going for now, even though it was hopefully only temporary.

He was so afraid to hope for anything because it was so unlikely he’d even hear back from her again. But he couldn’t help but hope.

Darcey sat quietly as she typed something into her smartphone, then she slid it back into her purse and looked up at him again. “I do have one more question,” she said. “Did my son get you sick? Do you have any doctor’s bills you need help with?”

“No,” Darcey said. “I mean, yes, I did get sick, but I don’t have any bills. I was able to get to the free clinic.”

Jane’s purse vibrated and she pulled her phone back out, typing in something more. When she put it down on the table, she said, “I’ll talk to my husband tonight and see if anything can be done.”

Darcey smiled unsurely and nodded. Then he said, almost as an afterthought, “Well, thank you. For trying. Not a lot of people would.”

She looked at him almost sadly and said softly, “I’m sorry about what you’ve been through, Mr. Walker, and obviously I don’t know your situation. But there are a lot more people out there who would support you than you might think. You all do so much for us and our country, you give and sacrifice everything. And on top of that, you saved my son’s life. I owe it to you to at least try.”

Darcey’s mouth was tight, his hands clenched into themselves hard, his eyes locked on the table, damp.

“Thank you,” he finally whispered. His voice was a little wet, but the dampness in his eyes didn’t fall. He brought one hand to his forehead before running it over his neck and dropping it again. “Thank you,” he repeated, a little louder, looking into her eyes, now. And in her face, Darcey saw the faces of his family, of his old platoon, of everyone he worked with and everyone he never got the chance to, of Boots and Campbell and Doc. He saw Jordan. He saw the child that Campbell tried to save and the mother he couldn’t. He saw the dozens of friends and fellow servicemen he’d
lost over the past eight years. He saw the few he was able to save.

He saw everyone he fought for, everyone he would have given anything to protect, and he had to bite the inside of his cheek and gouge his nails into his palms to keep his composure. The look on Jane’s face made it clear she knew what he was thinking. Even if she hadn’t been before, by now she was well aware he’d served in active combat, and Darcey prayed so hard to the God whose existence he’d grown to doubt that she didn’t ask any questions. He wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he broke down in front of a complete stranger.

Eventually, Jane asked, “Do you still have my phone number?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She smiled and stood, placing her purse back on the bottom compartment of the stroller. “Please call me any time if you want to check up on how things are going with your benefits or even if you just want to talk.” She pushed her chair in and rested one hand on the stroller handle. “I have to go; my daughter’s class is leaving for a field trip soon and I’m one of the chaperones, so I have to be there when the bus leaves. But please take care of yourself, Mr. Walker.”

Darcey stood and pushed in his own chair, holding out his hand. She shook. Her grip was soft and her wrist was gentle.

“Darcey,” he said softly.

She nodded. “Darcey. Thank you.”

“Thank you,” he said. Then he hesitated for an awkward moment, not sure where to go or what to do, but then Jane gave him one last smile and turned back toward the door. Darcey followed, holding it open for the stroller, and they went opposite ways across the small parking lot to their cars. His hands hadn’t shaken this hard since he was last in active combat and he didn’t trust himself to drive, so he sat quietly behind the steering wheel for a few minutes, hands gripping tight to his knees as he tried to keep himself breathing. What was his head doing? It was sharp and painful and tight but also almost like relief, like he’d been burning for longer than he could remember but now, a cold wave had crashed over him and put out the flames and he could breathe real air again instead of trying to get oxygen out of nothing but smoke and shrapnel.

*This should be good. I should feel better.* In some ways, he did, but in others it was almost worse. Maybe not worse. Different. It was a different kind of pain, deep and heavy and sharp, like loss.

*Is this what closure feels like?*

Darcey covered his face with his hands, hiding his eyes from the bright light of the sun reflecting off the pavement. For a while, he sat there and breathed, trying to swallow down the sharp tightness in his throat.

He was going to have a lot to talk to his therapist about tomorrow morning.

Chapter End Notes

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Jordan was about to meet Darcey’s family for the first time, and he was terrified. He knew Darcey’s mom already, but the rest of them, he didn’t. If Darcey’s dad was anything like Jess, he didn’t have anything to worry about there, but what about his sisters? He’d never been good with kids. What if they hated him?

They’d been dating for long enough for it to be reasonable to go to Darcey’s family’s for dinner, but it still felt too soon.

They knew Jordan was a vegetarian and Darcey would be checking in on the kitchen every now and then, but since his cousin was, too, they knew what they were doing. His family kept Kosher, so there were certain rules, but “You don’t have to worry about following them because you’re not, and you don’t eat meat anyway.” It was the first time Darcey had ever mentioned religion in relation to himself or his family.

“What about you?” Jordan asked.

Darcey glanced over from the driver’s seat for a moment before training his eyes back on the road. “What about me, what?”

“I mean, do you keep Kosher, like your family? I don’t really know the rules but I’m, like, ninety-nine percent sure pigs are off limits and I know I’ve seen you eat bacon.”

Darcey’s face was soft and thoughtful when he said, “I don’t, no. I don’t really practice any more.”

“Because of…” Jordan trailed off, but Darcey knew what he was getting at.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “I don’t know if I can believe in God anymore. I still believe in the core teachings of what I grew up with, but the God part?” He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Jordan dropped it, but he gently rested his hand on Darcey’s knee and squeezed once. Darcey glanced over to give him a small, grateful smile.

“Try really, really hard to watch your mouth,” Darcey continued. “You know my mom hates swearing, but she especially hates it around the kids. If you slip up, it happens, just apologize. But try to keep the swearing to a minimum.”

Jordan laughed. “Yeah, sure.”

Darcey pulled into the right lane and switched on his turn signal as he approached the next intersection. “That’s all, really. My family’s pretty laid back. My mom’s the most uptight of all of us and she isn’t even, really.”

The house he eventually pulled up to was a small two story with white walls and a brown roof. The garage was small and the door was closed. Darcey didn’t open it, parking on the street instead.

“So,” Jordan said as they both got out of the car, “I’m supposed to swear all the time, every sentence, right?”
Darcey laughed and rolled his eyes. A small breeze picked up and Jordan sighed softly. The weather was finally getting beautiful again, perfect for hanging out outside after dark.

Darcey led him up to the front door, and, without thinking, Jordan leaned forward and knocked. Darcey looked at him with a little half-grin and unlocked the door.

“Darcey!” Jordan jumped at the high-pitched squeal and took a step back when a little girl, maybe eight or nine, bowled into Darcey. He laughed and lifted her up onto his shoulder. He was mostly recovered, now, and although he was still working on gaining back the muscle mass, he’d mostly gotten back the strength that the mono had sucked out of him.

“Hey, Ally, what’s all this? I was just here earlier this morning!”

“I know, but some really cool stuff happened in class that I want to tell you about! We were talking about water filtering!” She curled around him, wrapping her arms around his neck, and he ducked down as he walked inside so he wouldn’t smack her head on the lintel. Jordan followed and closed the door behind him. He didn’t know who was where, so he left the bolt and chain alone. Ally was babbling about how they put some maggots in dirty water and he smiled to himself, because he knew where this story was going. His teacher had done it when he was in grade school, too.

“And they were swimming around!” she says. “And then when they stopped the teacher said it was safe to drink even though it looked dirty, and then he drank the whole thing, even the maggots!” She squealed in disgust, then laughed and said, “But then he said they weren’t really maggots, they were big raisins, and they only looked like they were swimming because of the air moving in and out of the pores because it was soda! Isn’t that cool, Darcey?”

“That is pretty cool,” Darcey grinned, untangling her limbs from his shoulders and planting her on the ground. Jordan took a step forward now that she was done with her story. He glanced over at Darcey, who gestured him closer, gently putting his hand on Ally’s shoulder and pulling her back in. Darcey looked down at her and said, “Ally, this is Jordan. He’s –”

“Your boyfriend!” Ally grinned. “Lexi told me.” She looked Jordan up and down, then came a little closer, walking around him, examining him like a dog at a prize show.

“Yeah,” he said, turning and looking over his shoulder as he tried to keep track of where she was. “It’s, uh, nice to meet you, Ally.”

When she stopped in front of him, she planted her hands on her hips, looking up at him seriously. “It’s nice to meet you too, Jordan. You’re going to treat Darcey right, right?”

Jordan smiled and glanced up at his boyfriend. He was grinning.

“Hey, I’m talking to you!” Ally said, and Jordan looked back down. He crouched down slightly so he could get on her eye level.

“Yes,” he said. “I’ll treat Darcey right.”

“And you’ll listen to him and take care of him and …” She trailed off now that she was looking directly into his face, and her voice went quiet. She said, “Be good to my big brother, okay? And promise you won’t take him away. Because…” She paused. “Because I love him, too. Not just you. So you have to share.”

Jordan’s eyes and smile softened. She’s afraid of abandonment. That was one fear that hit him far too close. He gently nudged her shoulder with a loose fist and said, “You got it, kiddo. I’ll make
sure he’s okay and I’ll make sure he stays around. And once he moves out and has his own place
set up, I’ll keep on him about coming back to see you. But,” he said, holding up one finger. She
looked at him doubtfully. “You’ve got to do one thing for me too, okay? You’ve got to take care
of him for me while he’s still here with you.”

The doubt faded and her face broke out in a wide smile. She nodded once and turned around,
crawling back up to Darcey’s shoulder. He laughed, hooking a hand under her knee to help push
her up. She ended up on his shoulders, chin rested on top of his head.

“He’s good,” she stage whispered. “You can keep him.”

He laughed again, his smile so bright and big and happy, and Jordan glowed.

“You can meet Bubbe!” Ally shouted, clapping her hands and grinning.

Darcey’s face lit up, so excited, so happy, and when he said, “Bubbe’s here?” it was in the voice
of an excited little kid on his birthday.

“She’s in the living room with Lexi!” she said. “Mom and Dad are in the kitchen.”

“Let’s go say hi to Mom and Dad, first,” Darcey said. He put his right hand on Ally’s knee for
support and held his left out for Jordan. It was warm and reassuring and oh god he was so nervous
what if Darcey’s dad hated him what if things were different with his mom now that Darcey
wasn’t sick what if

And then he was standing in the kitchen doorway with Jess’s soft, wrinkled hands curled around
his own, her bright brown eyes looking up into his.

“Jordan!” she smiled. “I’m so glad to see you again. And under much better circumstances, this
time. Were you able to get your medical bills paid?”

“Yes!” he grinned. She didn’t ask what they were for or why. “I was able to borrow some
money from a few friends. Once I’m caught back up I’m going to start paying everyone back.” He
looked up at Darcey. “Including you.”

“You don’t have to –”

“Yes, I do,” Jordan said softly, but firmly. Darcey smiled.

“Well, good, I’m so glad you got it taken care of,” Jess sighed. She pressed a hand to her chest,
relieved. “Well! We decided that keeping meat on the menu would be too complicated with our
rules and your rules so the whole dinner is vegetarian.”

Jordan’s smile came back, but calmer. “Thank you,” he said softly, a little disbelieving. “You
didn’t have to do all that.” His own family had never even done that for him. They just made what
they wanted and let him pick out the bits that wouldn’t make him sick.

Jess smiled and patted his cheek. “It’s no trouble. You’re our guest! We’re not about to make a
dinner you can’t share with us.”

“No, Miss Walk -- Jess. Really. Thank you.” Her smile changed, a little sad, now, knowing, and it
unnerved him because he didn’t know what Darcey had told them about him. It couldn’t have
been much since he was so tight-lipped about everything, and Darcey would respect his privacy
and not tell anyone about his family issues.

But even though it was unnerving, it was also comforting. It made Jordan feel safe.
Jess turned away and grabbed an onion from the island on her way over to the counter. “William!” she called. “Darcey and his partner are here!”

A man popped his head out of a walk-in pantry, older, maybe in his mid-fifties, with dark salt and pepper hair and bright blue eyes. He walked with the confidence of someone who had always owned the room.

He shook Jordan’s hand, firm and enthusiastic, and Jordan smiled. “Hey,” he said. “I’m Jordan.”

“William,” he said. He wiped his free hand across his apron and left a smear of flour behind. “I’m Darcey’s stepdad.”

Jordan turned to Darcey, one eyebrow raised. Darcey never mentioned him. He only talked about his dad. “Step –?”

“He’s my dad in every way but blood,” Darcey interrupted, popping Ally back down on the floor. “I never even met my biological father. But William’s been here since I was three. He’s my dad. He’s earned the title.”

William beamed and Jess wrapped an arm around his side.

There wasn’t a single question or doubt anywhere in his voice. Jordan smiled and nodded once. “All right,” he said.

“Come into the living room,” Darcey said, waving him back over. “Meet my other sister and my grandma.”

The living room was small and cozy, decorated in soft browns, yellows, and reds. A tiny old lady sat on the couch next to a girl who was even smaller. She looked familiar. Jordan furrowed his brow as he tried to place her.

The girl jumped up and rushed them, grabbing Darcey in a hug. Their family was so affectionate with each other. It was sweet, but also a little painful to watch, because Jordan couldn’t help but compare it to where he’d come from.

She looked up at Darcey with a bright but mischievous grin and said, “Bubbe wants to talk to you.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, a line of defense.

“What about?” he asked softly. He glanced over the girl’s head at his grandma, still sitting in front of the TV, which was turned all the way up. If she could hear them, she made no indication of it.

The girl glanced over at Jordan, nodding in his direction. Darcey’s eyebrows drew back, his lips parted like he was about to say something, but then he changed his mind. The barest flash of the front of his teeth showed when he bit his lip. “Has anybody said anything?” he asked. She smiled and pressed her thumb against her chest.

“I got her primed up for you,” she grinned. “You’ll be okay.”

His face was still nervous, but he smiled, ruffling her hair. She squeaked and batted his hand away. Jordan chuckled, sliding a little closer. He nudged Darcey’s side with his elbow.

“So, what’s happening here?” he asked softly.

Darcey looked back at him and said, “I haven’t come out to my bubbe yet. She’s one of the only
two people left who don’t know.”

Jordan’s eyes widened, his nervousness clear on his face.

“It’s okay,” Darcey said. “I don’t know exactly what’s about to happen, but I don’t think it’ll be anything bad. She might be surprised, but I don’t think she’ll be angry or anything. I.” He paused and sighed softly, then said, “I’m going to go sit and talk to her for a minute.” His hand brushed the small of Jordan’s back as he turned to his sister. “This is Lexi,” he said. “My oldest sister.” He turned to her and said, “This is Jordan. Would you mind showing him around for a minute?”

She grinned and leaned forward with an overdramatic, flourishing bow. “I would love to,” she said.

Jordan’s eyes widened in recognition and he pointed at her, bouncing his hand a few times before he said, “If being gay is bad, why are we so cute?”

She froze, eyes wide. She glanced over at Darcey. He had one eyebrow raised in Jordan’s direction.

“What?” she whispered. Then he realized, nobody saw him there and he probably sounded like a terrifying stalker, so he explained, “I was with the glitter army. Mine were the pink ones.”

All the nervousness left her face and she grinned brightly, bouncing on her feet.

“That was so cool!” She whirled around to look at Darcey. “You didn’t tell me your boyfriend was cool!”

Jordan laughed brightly. Darcey’s face was a mix of amusement and concern when he said, “And you didn’t tell me there was a protest at your school.” He looked up at Jordan, about to continue, but Jordan threw his hands up and said, “I had no idea your sister is a student there. I’m innocent.”

She looked over her shoulder and hissed, “Wow, rude! Way to throw me under the bus.” She turned back to Darcey and said, “I was just scared if Mom and Dad knew they wouldn’t let me go. I was going to apologize if I got in trouble!”

Darcey gave her a Look and Jordan stifled a snicker behind his hand. Darcey frowned a little and grumbled, “You’re way too much like I was in high school.

She smiled and leaned against his side and said, “That’s why I’m so great, right?”

All the annoyance left his body and he laughed.

Jordan smiled, then looked back up to meet Darcey’s eyes. “You should be really proud of her.”

“I am,” he said, gently patting her shoulder.

“No, I mean, she stood up to ten of those anti-queer a –” He caught himself and rephrased. “Jerks. She stood up to ten of them alone. She ripped them apart. It was pretty amazing.”

Lexi turned bright pink and hid behind her hands. She took a partial step behind Darcey, hiding a little, but beaming at the compliment.

For a few moments the only sound was an infomercial on the TV, but then a loud, slightly wavery voice shouted, “Darcey Walker, are you going to come say hello to your poor old bubbe or are you going to stand there all night ignoring me?”
They turned toward each other. Her eyes smiled brightly even though her mouth was stern. Darcey knew that face. He wasn’t in trouble, but he was in for a lecture.

Lexi took Jordan’s wrist and slowly started to pull him away. He took a step back, but leaned down to whisper, “No, I want to see this.” She grinned and snickered, giving him a nod.

“Darcey Walker, I know you were away with those military men for eight years but before that you were with me for eighteen, and I raised you with better manners than this! You’ve been back in town for almost four months, but not a single phone call or visit for your poor old bubbe!”

Darcey’s apology was low and embarrassed. “I’ve had a lot going on,” he said.

“Oh, I know,” she said, and finally she smiled. She put her hand on his arm, small and wrinkled and thin. “I’m glad you’re back, Darcey. Come down here and give your bubbe a hug.”

He laughed and leaned down, wrapping his arms around her. “Oh, come on now,” she laughed. “What’s with these weak arms? You can do better than that!”

He laughed again and pulled her into a tight hug. As he stood, she gently rested her hand on his cheek and said softly, “Your parents have kept me updated on everything. I was worried before, when you left, but Darcey, now I know you can conquer the world.”

He smiled, all the way down through his shoulders and into his back. She gently patted his face twice and picked up the cane resting against the couch to make her way over to Jordan. He met her halfway, holding out his hand. She looked him over once before taking it and shaking.

“I’m Jordan,” he said. “Nice to meet you.”

“My name is Camille,” she said. “Although I guess if Darcey brought you over it means you’re close enough to call me Bubbe or Cam, like everyone else.”

Jordan paused, his hand still hanging unsurely in the air as she took hers back, both resting on the cane.

But Darcey said he hadn’t come out to her yet? Lexi said she’d talked to her about something. Had she told their grandma what was going on?

“I…” He paused, confused but hopeful. “I’m sorry, what?”

He looked over at Darcey. The expression on his face matched the way Jordan felt.

“Bubbe?” he asked.

She laughed, a huge belly laugh that shouldn’t have been able to come out of such a small person, and she slapped Jordan’s arm. She turned to Darcey and said, “Oh, please. I raised you all to be so much smarter than this, including your mother! I don’t understand how I’m the only one who suspected all this time.” She adjusted her glasses and smiled. “Darcey Alan Walker, you were one of the most handsome young men at your high school, and I’m not just saying that because I’m your bubbe and I have to.”

Darcey laughed, scratching the back of his neck.

“You’re handsome, kind, and I know you must have had girls crawling all over you, but never a girlfriend, never a Saturday night date, never a girl to take to Homecoming or Prom. Not even casually. I knew there was the possibility you were just focused too hard on school, but even so, I couldn’t help but suspect.”
Jordan glanced up at Darcey for reassurance. His face was flushed, but he was smiling. Jordan gently pressed his arm against his boyfriend’s, hoping it was enough to be reassuring but nothing that would make anyone uncomfortable. He smiled when Darcey didn’t pull away.

Cam used her cane to point at his sister. “Lexi here was a surprise, but it’s okay. I love you both and all that matters is that you go out there into the world and do the best you can. The best thing you can do is be okay with yourself, and if those other fuckers can’t deal with it, that’s their problem, not yours.”

Jordan laughed and Lexi covered her mouth to hide her own, like she knew she wasn’t supposed to find it funny. He liked this woman. A lot.

Ally bounced into the room and wormed her way between Jordan and Darcey and said, “It’s almost time for dinner, okay?”

Cam pointed at her with her cane. “What about you? What do you like?”

Ally paused, confused, looking up at Darcey, over at Lexi. They were both stifling back laughter. Jordan bit his lip to do the same.

“I like drawing?” she said, unsure. Darcey was able to swallow his laughter down, but Jordan and Lexi were not so composed. Ally looked confused and a little hurt until Darcey patted her shoulder and said, “Good answer.”

Jordan gently, unsurely patted her head once and said, “Then that’s what you should focus on right now.” She looked up at him with a smile, her slightly too-big teeth showing, her eyes the same brownish hazel as her brother’s.

“You’re weird,” she said. Jordan raised his eyebrow, about to protest when she took his hand and said, “But I like you. I know you’re Darcey’s boyfriend, but can we be friends, too?”

He looked up at Darcey, who smiled at the expression on his face. Jordan could feel it, his eyes were bright and he was smiling wide. This little kid basically just held out her hands and offered him the world.

“Of course, kiddo,” he said. He ruffled her hair and she squealed with laughter, pushing his hand away and grabbing hold of his wrist. Jordan grinned and laughed and Ally pushed his arm away, but she was still smiling brightly.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your patience this week! I haven’t been doing very well so I’ve pretty much either been in bed or at an appointment. I hope the chapter is not a disappointment!
“It’s okay,” Jordan said softly. He gently gripped Darcey’s hand and shook it once, back and forth. “This is a really, really good thing.”

The two men sat side by side in the waiting room of the outpatient clinic where Jordan would be getting his surgery done in just a few short weeks, waiting to see his surgeon for the consultation. Jordan let go of Darcey’s hand for just long enough to push the sleeves of his hoodie up.

“I know,” Darcey murmured. He looked up from the magazine he wasn’t paying attention to and smiled.

“Okay,” Jordan said. He smiled back. “You’re just acting even more nervous than I am.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. This is going to be a big change for you, too. I understand that.” He squeezed Darcey’s hand once more. “But it’ll be okay.” He slid his hand away and picked up the pen from the clipboard in his lap and went to filling out the paperwork the desk clerk had given him.

The room was small and quiet, some chairs, a table with some magazines, like any other office waiting room. A middle aged woman sat over in the corner reading a book, but other than her, Jordan and Darcey were alone.

Jordan went through the paperwork quickly, his handwriting all sharp lines and triangles instead of curves and loops. It was all standard medical information: medical history, medication allergies, past surgeries he may have had. Then he got to a few pages of reading that had to be signed, and he scanned through. His eyebrows drew back and his lips parted halfway through. He cursed softly through his teeth.

“What’s wrong?” Darcey asked softly. Jordan’s eyes were nervous when he looked up. He shouldn’t be nervous. He had everything set up. Was he missing something? If he couldn’t get this surgery done it would kill him.

“I don’t qualify for the peri procedure,” Jordan said, as if Darcey knew what that meant.

Darcey waited for Jordan to elaborate, but he didn’t. “You’ve got to help me out here, Jordan. I don’t know what any of the terminology is for anything.”

Jordan dropped his voice so Darcey could barely hear it, but kept his face turned toward him so he could read Jordan's lips. “There are a few options available for top surgery,” he said. His words were clipped, quick, breathless with nerves. “I’m just a B-cup so I thought I’d be okay for the peri. I may have called it a keyhole before? I’m not sure. But,” his fingers were tight on the clipboard now, “basically you make a small cut,” he quickly dragged his finger over the left side of his chest, just under where the nipple would be, “and suck out the fat, trim the skin if necessary, sew it up, bam, done. Some surgeons will do it for my size, but I guess this guy won’t.” He looked down. His shoulders tensed. His breathing staggered and his voice was a little wet. “And there’s no way I can get out of state for another surgeon. Fuck. Fuck.”

Darcey’s shoulders tensed, his breathing a little shallow, too. Jordan had wanted this for so long, he needed it, and he was so close, but, “You said there were a few options available, though?”
“Well, yeah,” Jordan said softly. His voice was shaky. “There’s the double incision. That’s my only option, I guess. It’s just… there’s a lot more stitching and scarring and it takes a lot longer to heal up. I don’t know if I can get that much time off work, and even if I can, I don’t know if I can save up enough to pay all my bills in that time. And I could lose a lot of feeling. And I might have to come back once or twice for more work.” He paused and flipped back a few pages, speed read down to the bottom. He pointed to a sentence and relaxed a little. “Revision is covered by surgery cost,” he said softly, more to himself than to Darcey. “Okay. Okay. Good.”

Darcey rested his hand on Jordan’s knee. The smaller man curled his fingers around it. They were shaking.

“So, what are you going to do?” Darcey asked.

Jordan took a deep breath and looked up again. “The best I can,” he said. “I can’t back out now. I need this, Darcey, and I know there will be chances in the future but I’ll be kicking myself until then if I don’t do this. Regardless of whether I wait or not, this is my only option, and I’m going to take it.”

Darcey smiled, trying to be reassuring, and Jordan’s hands and breathing calmed.

“All right,” Darcey said. He squeezed Jordan’s knee and leaned a little closer. “Besides, scars are sexy. They’re marks of someone who’s lived a full and most likely reckless life. I have my fair share. Now we’ll match.”

Jordan smiled and chuckled, and when he looked up at Darcey, his eyes were relieved. “I love you, Darcey,” he whispered.

“I love you,” Darcey whispered back. He gently bumped his nose against Jordan’s and Jordan chuckled again. “And you’re gorgeous. And having a few scars won’t make that any less true.”

Darcey grinned. Jordan laughed and turned back to his paperwork, his back set in a firm, determined line, the confidence back in his shoulders. The line of his jaw just peeked through the soft curls falling over his face. He was almost there. He was doing it. After over three years of saving, he was getting his top surgery.

Three more pages. When he got to the bottom of the last one, he signed, dated, slammed the pen down on the clipboard, and nodded.

“It’s done,” he murmured. He stood, the clipboard balanced against his narrow hip, and took the paperwork back to the desk, where he talked to the woman in the window for a few minutes with a lot of gesturing and nodding.

The woman smiled and nodded, picking up a phone as Jordan turned away. He was grinning brightly and gave Darcey a thumbs up. The woman said, “Sir, he’s ready to see you now.”

Jordan looked over his shoulder, nodded, and turned back to Darcey. He took Darcey’s hand as he passed.

“Let’s go,” he said. “He’s ready to see us.”

Us, he’d said. Even compared to all everything they’d done and seen together over these few short months, that was the most intimate thing Jordan had ever said to him. It was dangerous for Jordan to let people in, it was terrifying, and even though he was open and honest and sincere, he still had a lot of walls. In that simple sentence, he’d let Darcey past all of them.
He squeezed Jordan’s hand when Jordan twisted his arm behind his back so Darcey could walk directly behind him through the door. There were three more doors beyond it. Jordan knocked a few times on the one on the left.

A middle-aged man opened the door, and out of reflex, Darcey started to pull away, but Jordan’s hand tightened and Darcey stilled. It’s okay, Darcey reminded himself. This was a safe place. They’d probably seen hundreds of couples like them before.

He squeezed back.

The man smiled and took a step back to clear the door. “You must be Mr. Delgado,” he said. “I’m Dr. Shea. Come in.” He glanced over at Darcey, who offered a small smile and a nod. “And you are…?” he asked.

“This is my partner, Darcey,” Jordan answered, looking over his shoulder as he pulled him in. “Is it okay if he sits in?”

“Of course,” Dr. Shea said, closing the door behind them. He took a seat behind his desk as he gestured to the one in the corner. “Pull up the extra chair and have a seat, both of you.” Jordan finally loosened his fingers so Darcey could get over to the corner, and when he walked past Jordan to get it and caught a glance at the side of his face, he realized, Jordan was terrified. His smile was easy and his eyes were calm but his back and shoulders were coiled up tight and his fingers were curled into his palms.

Jordan swallowed. Even though he was in perfect health and perfect shape, what if they found something was wrong during the physical? He didn’t know what it would be. But what if it was bad enough to lead to the surgery being cancelled?

He looked up when Darcey sat down beside him, gently pressing his knee into his leg. Jordan pushed back, staying close, and Darcey rested his hand on his knee, curling his fingers in tight, reassuring. Jordan’s hands were curled together as he leaned forward, elbows on his knees. He paused and reconsidered, then sat back up and leaned back in the chair, putting his hands where his elbows had been.

“So,” he finally said, slapping his hands against his knees. “What exactly happens at a consultation like this? This is going to be my first surgery of an eventual total of three so I’m new at this part.”

“It’s pretty quick and simple,” Dr. Shea says. “I’m just going to give you a quick look-over to make sure we have you matched to the right type of surgery to get you the best results, and we’ll do a physical and get some blood drawn to run some tests. We’ll obviously go over to an examination room for that, so don’t worry. Most people are just more comfortable talking in the office, so we start here.”

Jordan grimaced when he mentioned the physical. He knew it was going to have to happen but that didn’t change the fact that he didn’t want it to. He didn’t even like Darcey seeing him topless outside of sex. A total stranger? Even if he was a professional, it was still humiliating.

Darcey gently squeezed his knee.

“Can he come in with me?” Jordan asked quietly, pointing over at Darcey. “I… sorry, I just hate…” He paused, sighed through his teeth. “Just, obviously my dysphoria is really bad if I’m here with the intention of getting surgery. I don’t like people… touching, or even seeing, it just…” He trailed off.
He folded his arms over his chest and leaned in on himself defensively. Darcey leaned down and whispered, “It’s okay.” Jordan’s eyes darted over to him and he offered a brief, uneasy smile.

“I understand completely,” Dr. Shea said. “And of course you can bring Darcey in with you.”

Jordan bit his lip and looked over at Darcey, unsure. His eyebrows were drawn and he was curled in on himself now, like a small, cornered animal.

“It’s okay,” Darcey murmured. “It’s safe. This is what he does. He’s going to help you fix it, remember?”

Jordan finally looked up at the doctor again and asked, “You said I’d need to do a physical. What does that involve, exactly?”

“It’s very basic,” he said. “Blood pressure, pulse, we’ll listen to your lungs, check out your eyes and ears. Do you often do self breast exams?”

The horrified look on Jordan’s face was answer enough. Shit. The potential for breast cancer had never even crossed his mind as a possibility.

“No,” he said softly. “Not since…” he paused. “Since ever, honestly. I don’t think I’ve ever done one. I just try to pretend they don’t exist.”

Dr. Shea smiled, and when he spoke, his voice was gentle, reassuring. “A lot of transgender men do,” he said. “But it’s not something to be ashamed of. It’s really important we do one before you go into surgery to be sure there won’t be any complications. It’s nothing to be embarrassed by. It’s a very important health issue. I know it’s uncomfortable, but it really needs to be done. I promise, it will be quick.”

Jordan’s hands were shaking, now. Darcey reached over, untangling them from each other and weaving their fingers together. Jordan bit his lip, hard, eyes screwed closed, brows furrowed. He sat that way a moment, quiet. Eventually he took a deep breath, sat up straight, and said slowly, shakily, but surely, “Let’s go and get it done, then.”

“All right,” Dr. Shea said. “Before that, do you have any questions?”

Jordan’s hand was still tight around Darcey’s, damp with sweat. “Well, I’m a small B-cup, which I guess means I have to go for the bilateral incision? I was hoping I’d be okay for the peri, though?”

“Generally, we’d only do the peri procedure for someone with an A-cup,” Dr. Shea said. “I have done a few for small B-cups, but honestly, you’d most likely have better results with the bilateral incision. I assume you’re concerned about scarring?”

Jordan nodded. “And losing sensation.”

“Well, the way the tissue is cut leads to the scars going along the line of the natural contour of the male chest,” Dr. Shea started. “So while there is more scarring, it’s generally not very noticeable once it heals unless there’s some kind of complication.”

Jordan’s shoulders relaxed, but his grip on Darcey’s hand stayed tight.

"As for losing sensation, is it the nipples you’re concerned about, or the chest itself?"

“Both?” Jordan said unsurely. He glanced over at Darcey, nervous. Darcey’s hand tightened around his in silent reassurance. It’s okay. We’ll find other things.
“Well, it is more likely that you’ll lose some feeling than with the peri procedure. When it does happen, some of it sometimes comes back over time.”

Jordan nodded as he chewed on his thumbnail, thoughtful, nervous. Finally, he slowly said, “Okay.” He nodded once. “Okay,” he repeated. He looked back up at Dr. Shea and said, “All the other risks and stuff are going to be in the paperwork the woman’s going to give me on my way out, right?” He’d researched for years before getting any surgery was even a distant possibility, so he was well aware of what he was getting into. But a little extra reading never hurt.

“Yes.”

“Those are my only questions, then. Let’s get this physical taken care of.”

“All right.” Dr. Shea stood. “I know you’re uncomfortable with doing this and I understand. I can bring in a female doctor, if that would make it easier?”

Jordan shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said.

“Follow me, then.” Dr. Shea led them out of the room and down the hall. “The examination room is this way.”

He led them into a small, white room, barely big enough for the three of them, and pulled out two gowns and a blanket before leaving for a few minutes to give Jordan time to change. The moment the door was closed, Darcey took Jordan’s face in his hands, looked him directly in the eyes, and said gently, but firmly, “I’m not going anywhere, okay? I know this is huge, and I’m sure it’s scary even though you’re excited, and I know a lot of things are going to change. But one thing you don’t have to worry about is me. I’m not going anywhere, Jordan. I love you.”

As Darcey spoke, Jordan’s wide eyes softened, his shoulders loosened, and he wrapped his hands around his boyfriend’s. He smiled, and when Darcey finished, he nodded once.

“Okay,” he said softly. His voice caught. “Okay,” he said again, a little louder, a little firmer. He dropped his hands, letting them rest on Darcey’s hips, and they stood like that for a few moments before Jordan pulled away.

Darcey pointed over his shoulder to the wall as he glanced down at the gowns hanging from Jordan’s hands. “Do you want me to –?”

Jordan nodded. “Yeah. Thank you.”

So Darcey turned around. As Jordan shuffled around behind him, he looked over the papers and flyers on the wall beside the door. There were the standard doctors’ office ones, like advice to help quit smoking, cancer screening locations, HIV testing. But there were also flyers for transgender support groups, surgery follow-up therapy, information on who to ask for someone interested in starting hormones. There were lots of mentions of trans men and some of trans women, and words like genderfluid and genderqueer and some other terminology Darcey didn’t understand. But it was still refreshing to see health posters aimed at people other than binary, cisgender men and women.

There was a lot of reference to the LGBT community. Darcey never thought seeing himself reflected in something like that would be so affirming. Much of the time he felt like people either thought he and Jordan were disgusting or that they simply didn’t exist. He wasn’t sure how much of it was just internalized from his fear over the years, but it was nice to be reminded that it wasn’t
He glanced back over his shoulder when Jordan said, “It’s okay, now.”

Darcey smiled. Jordan was struggling with the tie over his shoulder and the gowns were a little off center, his neck bent at an awkward angle as he tried to fix it. Darcey chuckled. Jordan did, too, as Darcey took the tie from him and straightened the gowns out. Jordan smiled up at him as he hopped onto the table.

He looked nervously around the room. There was a chair in the corner, but Darcey stayed standing beside him, leaning his hip against the examination table.

“I might cry,” Jordan said quickly, abruptly.

Darcey rested his hand on his boyfriend’s. Jordan turned his up. “It’s okay,” Darcey said. “How can I help?”

Jordan slid his hand up Darcey’s arm, wrapping around it and leaning into him. His eyes were on the floor. The anxiousness and fear and shame was sharp in his body, burning not just at his neck, but everywhere.

He could tell Darcey he was scared, but had no way of really knowing what he was feeling, and Darcey knew that. He couldn’t wrap his mind around how terrifying it must have been to have to show a body he hated to someone he didn’t know to poke and prod at.

Darcey leaned down and kissed the top of Jordan’s head, but didn’t pull back right away. He kept his nose pressed into Jordan’s hair as his boyfriend clung to him, and then Jordan finally said, “Just stay with me, all right?”

"Of course,” Darcey said.

They stayed that way until a quick knock came at the door and Darcey pulled away slightly as Dr. Shea walked back in. Jordan kept his hand wrapped around Darcey’s arm.

“Let’s just do the breast exam first and get it over with,” Jordan said quickly. He had to force it out fast or he wouldn’t say it at all.

“Of course, whatever you prefer,” the doctor said. “Would you like me to explain what I’m doing as I do it or would you rather I didn’t?”

Jordan looked up at Darcey unsurely, as if his boyfriend could give him an answer, but they both knew he couldn’t. “Whatever you’re comfortable with,” Darcey said gently. “Don’t worry about me right now.”

Jordan hesitated, then said, “I guess, uh…” He paused again, biting the corner of his lip. He shook his head once and looked back at the doctor again. “Just do it. As quick as possible. Just get it done.”

“All right,” Dr. Shea said. “Then I need you to undo one side of the gown and lie back with your arm over your head, please? We’ll just go one side at a time so you can have as much of yourself covered as possible.”

Jordan’s eyebrows drew down as he leaned back, and he looked up at Darcey again, this time for reassurance. “It’s okay,” Darcey said. Jordan nodded, but his breathing was shallow, scared, as he untied the left side. Darcey was on his right, so for now, he stayed there. He took Jordan’s hand.
As the doctor did his work, Jordan stared at the ceiling, first blank, trying to stay unemotional. But even though the exam was quick, professional, and clinical, eventually his fear and discomfort crept back into his eyes. He trained them on the mottled ceiling, darting back and forth between two of its tiles. Dr. Shea was brief and his hands only came in contact with skin when absolutely necessary, but even so, Jordan’s stomach still lurched at every poke and prod. Darcey squeezed his hand and Jordan squeezed back.

“It’s okay,” Darcey repeated. “You’ve got this.”

A small, unsure smile flashed across Jordan’s lips, but it faded quickly. Then the doctor was done. The right side was easier, now that Jordan knew what to expect, but his eyes were still a little glossy when it was done.

After Dr. Shea put the gown back over Jordan’s chest and shoulder and took a few steps back, Darcey squeezed his hand again and said, “You’re done. It’s over.”

Jordan’s chest was still a little shuddery, and he swallowed and nodded his head as he pushed himself back up. “Thanks, Darcey,” he whispered. Darcey ran his fingers over the nape of Jordan’s neck and he breathed in, slow and deep, then again, eyes trained on the floor for a minute before he looked back up.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s move on to the rest of it.”

The rest of the exam was quick and easy, a basic physical and a blood draw. As long as the blood work came back okay, Jordan would be cleared, but, said the doctor, “Unfortunately the peri won’t be an option.”

Jordan’s shoulders slumped slightly and he sighed, but when the doctor left so he could change back into his clothes, he said, “I know it sucks and I know it’s not exactly what I wanted, but honestly, I’m just so grateful I’ve even gotten to this point. A lot of trans people aren’t able to afford surgery this young.” He rested his hand on Darcey’s arm, and the taller man turned around. He was dressed and ready to go. “A lot of trans people don’t have such supportive partners, either.”

Darcey smiled and gently touched Jordan’s cheek. Jordan smiled back.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said. “I hate doctor’s offices.”

Chapter End Notes

Now, my surgeon didn't make me do a cancer exam, but I've read from others who have gotten top surgery that it's pretty common in the less progressive areas. She did have to poke around at my chest during the examination, but I think that's necessary regardless.

Thank you for your patience with my spotty updating. Yet more health issues have arisen, as they will. I won't go into boring detail, but I am not in danger! Just kind of flaky and sometimes I forget to update if I have appointments (which I did this Thursday). Thank you so much for understanding. You are all the best!
Now that Darcey was well again, he was back to his job hunt in earnest, although it had been about as successful so far as it was the first time around. He wasn’t being selective this time: now that he’d exhausted his savings, he couldn’t afford to be picky, even if that meant working in fast food or retail. But even they hadn’t called him back.

He was taking a break from searching online ads by checking his email. He’d been trying to get in touch with Boots, but with no luck, although he actually wasn’t expecting to hear anything back. They’d barely known each other, and he hadn’t heard from her since they parted ways at the airport in Louisiana. Sometimes he wondered what she’d gotten up to. Maybe he would never know. He emailed Doc sometimes, and when his inbox loaded, he saw that Doc had emailed him back.

_Hey, Walker!

I guess I’m doing as well as can be expected, considering the circumstances. We were attacked two days ago, but it was small and poorly organized so nobody was hurt and there was minimal damage to our equipment.

Don’t take this the wrong way, because I miss you like hell, but maybe it’s better that you’re not here. Not for us; we’re really hurting right now, and you could have been a huge help. But for you. I’m starting to get some really fucked up nightmares and I don’t really know how to handle it, so I haven’t been getting much sleep.

I’m trying to learn Arabic but I’m not doing so well. I mostly sound like I’m trying to cough up a hairball.

In better news, maybe? There’s a woman named Madeline with one of the groups we’re stationed with, and holy shit, she is gorgeous. I know that doesn’t mean much to you, but just imagine the hottest, toughest guy you can and that’s kind of how she makes me feel. A little dizzy and weak in the knees. Everyone calls her Cupcake. I guess she likes to bake? But damn, despite the cutesy nickname, she’s badass, if a little hotheaded. This isn’t the right time or place to try to say anything though. Maybe when we get home.

I miss you like hell, Walker. I hope things continue to go well for you and your boyfriend, and I hope you get a little luckier on the job hunt soon. You’ve always got me as a reference. Feel free to give them my email since they can’t really call me, just make sure they know I might take a few days to get back to them.

And since you asked, Campbell’s okay. He was noncommittal but not offensive when I mentioned that you’re in a relationship. He asks about you sometimes. I think he’s afraid of contacting you after what happened. He thinks you hate him. He seems a little lost without you here. We worked together for years, after all. I like to think we were like brothers.

-Doc
Darcey missed him. He even missed Campbell, sometimes. Doc was right, he and Campbell had been like brothers, because despite the fact that they rarely saw eye to eye on anything, they were always there, just one step away from each other, ready to defend the other if necessary. Most of it, he didn’t miss – the fear of making sure he constantly made the right steps and comments so he didn’t accidentally out himself, the orders that made no sense half the time, the combat. But he did miss the camaraderie. He missed the knowledge that no matter how bad things got, someone always had his back.

But Jordan did, now, and Brett and the rest of his family always had. It wasn’t the same, but it was good. He was good.

He glanced at the time on his laptop. 930. The mail would be here. He stood, closing his laptop and slipping on a hoodie, then went downstairs to check the mail.

He sorted through it as he walked back into the house. Some bills, some ads, some coupons. He sorted it into three piles: save for later, shred, and trash.

The second to last letter belonged nowhere.

When Darcey saw the seal, his breath caught and his eyes widened. He dropped the last of the mail without looking at it, flipping the envelope over in his hand and back again.

It was the final paperwork from the Army. Finally. He could never accuse the government of getting paperwork out in a timely manner.

He opened the envelope quickly, but carefully, and started to look through it as he grabbed the pen they always kept beside the house phone. He sat. He swallowed, took a deep breath, and started.

He read over it slowly, filling in the information they asked for, although he was mostly just finalizing what had already been done.

The sharp burn of shame curled in the back of his neck every time he read it: “Psychologically unfit to serve.” Like he was some kind of disease. Like he was a bomb waiting to go off.

He got to the last page. Signed. Dated. Put the pen down and folded the paper up, placed it to the side where it wouldn’t get lost until he could buy stamps later.

That was it. He was done. He was no longer a serviceman in the United States Army. He was no longer Specialist Darcey Alan Walker. He was just Darcey the son, the brother, the cousin, the boyfriend.

Suddenly his shoulders were so much lighter, like there was an elephant sitting on his back that he hadn’t noticed until it finally stepped off. He wasn’t a label anymore. He wasn’t a rank. He was a human being again, and it was amazing.

Darcey took a deep breath, pushing it all the way to his stomach, all the way back out. Then he laughed, softly, relieved.

Maybe he didn’t get health insurance. Maybe he couldn’t afford to go to his dream school. Maybe he didn’t have a retirement fund anymore. And it was true he’d been wandering around relatively aimlessly since he’d gotten home. But those were all things he could work around. He could still be happy. He was happy, mostly. Even despite the nightmares.

He glanced over at the clock on the microwave. 10:00. He had therapy in an hour, and if he was going to pick Jordan up, he needed to start getting ready.
On his way out the door, he slipped the paperwork into an envelope and addressed it so he could drop it off after he bought stamps while he was out.

Darcey had been to Jordan’s so many times in so many ways that he could drive there asleep. He was running late, so rather than going up to Jordan’s apartment, he called and asked him to come down to meet him.

“Sure thing!” Jordan said. “I’ll be right there.”

A few minutes later, he slid into the passenger’s seat and snapped his seatbelt into place. His eyes caught the envelope on the dashboard, and he reached out, asking, “What’s this?”


“I’m sorry,” Jordan said softly. “I didn’t mean –”

“No,” Darcey said. “I’m sorry. I just… that’s my final paperwork. For my discharge.”

Jordan’s eyebrows furrowed for a moment, then shot up as recognition crossed his face. “Oh,” he said. “Sorry, I didn’t know –”

“I know,” Darcey said. “And I was… I’m sorry. I want to be the one to tell you. I don’t want you to find out what happened by reading some paperwork.”

Jordan leaned back in his seat. Darcey still hadn’t started the car. His voice was tight, his hands gripping hard to the steering wheel. Not in anger. In stress. Nerves. Fear.

“General discharge under dishonorable circumstances,” he said softly. “Psychologically unfit to serve. No benefits of any kind. All stuff we knew already.”

“Psychologically unfit to serve?” Jordan repeated.

This time, Darcey sobbed, although it was shallow and dry. It shouldn’t hurt anymore, but hearing that never got easier. He didn’t trust himself to speak. He nodded.

“Because you came out?”

Darcey nodded again. Jordan’s hand was on his arm, now, warm and soft and reassuring.

“That’s the biggest load of bullshit I’ve ever heard.”

Darcey laughed, finally, though it was a little broken. He nodded again, stilling when Jordan rested his hand on the back of his neck. “I’m sorry, Darcey. But if you served in the Army anything like the way you’ve lived your life since I’ve met you, you’ve done a lot to be proud of. You’re probably the bravest man I’ve met. The bravest person I’ve met. And I’m sorry you got fucked over like this. You didn’t deserve it.”

Darcey placed his hand on Jordan’s knee. “Thank you,” he whispered.

His parents had said it, Brett had said it, Lee had said it, and it all meant so much. But Darcey didn’t realize how much he needed to hear it from Jordan until he said it aloud.

“We have to get going,” he whispered.

The drive was quiet and Jordan talked a little but mostly contented himself with being the car’s DJ
and flipping out CDs to make his own personal playlist, song by song, as they drove.

They both idly considered going to brunch afterward, but realistically, they didn’t have the money and Darcey said, “I’d rather go home with you, if it’s all the same.”

Jordan smiled. “Are you using me as a sleeping pill?”

Darcey smiled back sheepishly and shrugged one shoulder. “You calm me down,” he said. “You make me feel secure.”

Jordan smiled and gently rested his hand on Darcey’s knee. “Yeah,” he said. “You can come back home with me.”

After they parked in the lot and shut off the car, Darcey started to step out when Jordan said, “Hey, Darcey?”

Darcey glanced at his phone. He still had ten minutes. He sat back down and closed the door. “Yeah?”

Jordan’s hands were curled up tight in the pockets of his hoodie, stretched tight, all the way to his knees. His breathing was slow as he steeled himself.

“Jordan?” Darcey asked softly. Did this have something to do with his paperwork? Oh, god, is he breaking up with me? “Jordan, what’s wrong?” His voice was a little tight, now, knuckles white on the steering wheel. Jordan’s head shot up and he said, “No, no no no, no, oh, god, Darcey, I’m sorry, no, nothing’s wrong. It’s nothing bad. I’m just.”

Darcey sighed and some of the tension in his neck and shoulders faded. Jordan slid one hand out of his pocket and ran it through his hair. “I’m just. I’m bad at these things. I always think everything’s going to blow up in my face, and. Shit. I’m rambling. Sorry. I. I just.” He sighed, took a deep breath, and turned to look at Darcey. “I just. I don’t have it now, so I can’t give it to you, because I wasn’t thinking when you came to pick me up. But I…” He looked down, coughed into his hand, looked back up. “I had, um, I had a spare key made. And I was going to give it to you if you, if… if you wanted it.”

His eyes were soft and vulnerable as he gnawed on the corner of his lip. Darcey smiled and a slow, soft, relieved laugh bubbled out of his chest and he leaned over and grabbed Jordan in a hug, as best he could over the seat. Jordan laughed, softly, a little wet, and buried his nose in Darcey’s shoulder.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you,” Darcey whispered back. “Why were you so afraid to tell me that?”

“I don’t…” Jordan paused, burying himself closer into the bigger man. “I just know how important having your own space and privacy is to you and I was afraid you’d think I was trying to take it away? Or you’d think I was asking you to move in and you’d freak out? I don’t. I just. I don’t know. I’m dumb. I’m overemotional and dumb.”

“You’re perfect,” Darcey whispered with a soft, gentle laugh. Jordan hugged him a little tighter and Darcey pressed a kiss to the top of his head. “‘Come on,’” he said. “‘We’ve got to get into the office.”

They walked in the door just as Lee walked into the waiting room to call Darcey back. She smiled and waved him over. “Just in time!” she said. He glanced around the room. It was empty other than the three of them. He gave Jordan a quick kiss and said, “Be back in about an hour.”
Jordan smiled at him, so brightly. “Yeah.” He nodded, plopping down in a chair and picking up a magazine from the table beside it.

Darcey and Lee walked back to her office in silence. He sat as she closed the door behind them and when she sat down, the first thing she said was, “I thought you weren’t comfortable with being affectionate in public?”

“I’m getting better.” Darcey said softly. “When there aren’t many people around or I know it’s a safe place. I’d never be able to do something like that in, say, a mall or a movie theatre or something. But it means a lot to him even though he’d never push anything. So I’m trying.”

She nodded and smiled. “Are you comfortable with it?”

“Mostly.” Darcey rubbed at his legs with the palms of his hands, something he never did until he started therapy. But it helped keep the anxiety in check. “I mean, I don’t do anything if I think it’ll put us in a bad situation. This isn’t the safest city to be openly gay in. But it’s nice to be able to be close to him without worrying so much about… I don’t know what, exactly. Being in the closet for so long does weird things to your head and I think I’m finally starting to undo some of it.”

“That’s great,” Lee said. “So, Darcey, what have you been up to this week?”

“I haven’t been sleeping much,” he admitted. “An hour here, an hour there. Not enough. I can still function okay, I’ve had to function for days without sleep before. But it’s still fucking miserable.” At first he’d been afraid to swear in front of her. He’d called her ma’am. But she’d quickly put him at ease, and now he was able to talk like he would with everyone else. “Being with Jordan helps, but our schedules don’t really line up since he works overnights.”

“Why have you had such a hard time sleeping?” she asked. “Have the night terrors started again?”

“Not exactly,” he answered softly. “But when I’m about to fall asleep, sometimes I can feel them coming. So I force myself to stay awake.”

“Have you tried any of the methods we came up with to help with your anxiety?”

Darcey shrugged. “Yeah, but they don’t help much. It’s not the same thing.”

She didn’t answer right away, thinking.

They spent the next forty minutes going through potential coping mechanisms: guided meditations, focused breathing, relaxing music. They did internet searches and looked through her books, but nothing seemed useful or helpful. Eventually, about five minutes before his time was up, Lee got it out of him that it started getting worse when Jess started volunteering, leaving him alone for most of the day.

“Well, there it is, Darcey,” she said. “Obviously there’s some kind of link there. I wish we had more time, but unfortunately my next block is full. But I want you to think about that until our next meeting. If we can figure out why it’s so hard for you to be alone, maybe we can make it easier. The solitude might be a trigger for you somehow.” She paused and put her notebook back on the desk before looking back at Darcey. “In the meantime, I know you’ve had trouble finding work, but maybe you could do some volunteering somewhere, too, until you find a job. It would be a good way to get you out of the house and meeting people, and you might even find someone who can lead you into a job there or somewhere else.”

Jordan looked up when Darcey came back out of the office and smiled. He smiled back, then turned to make his next appointment. As they walked back to the car, down the stairs and to the
elevator, he said, “I think I’m going to start volunteering somewhere.”

“Yeah?” Jordan asked. Darcey nodded. “I know Iffy and Nate are always looking for help with their Food Not Bombs chapter.”

“Maybe,” Darcey said. “But I was thinking something I could do instead of a full time job. Obviously I wouldn’t be paid, but putting in an equivalent amount of hours.”

“Hm,” Jordan said. He rolled his eyes back and looked up as he thought. “Well, I know the cat shelter downtown is always looking for help. Are you allergic to cats?”

Darcey shook his head. “I love cats. Maybe I’ll try that.”

They got back to the apartment without incident. Darcey stumbled once on the stairs but caught himself on the handrail, and he paused, pushing his hair back. It was longer, now, enough to just peek out from underneath the brim of a hat. Jordan put his hand on his lower back.

“Are you okay?”

Darcey nodded. “I haven’t been sleeping well.”

“Come inside,” Jordan said. He unlocked the door and pushed it open. “You can sleep here for a while before you go home.”

Darcey nodded again and followed him to the bedroom.

The second he hit the sheets, he was asleep, shoes still on and all.

Jess needed the car the next day, so Darcey took the bus downtown to the cat shelter, where he would fill out some forms and, hopefully, if the director had time, have an interview. The bus took ages, but Darcey had a book this time, and when he got to his stop he bookmarked it and stuffed it in his backpack. He paused on the corner, looking around to orient himself. He needed to go east. To his left.

It was a short walk from the bus stop and Darcey arrived soon after. The door led into an open, high-ceilinged room with a glass door in the back that led to a small yard. There was a young woman outside with a few of the cats, watching them as they played and got some sunshine. He watched for a few moments, then turned back to the front desk and the young man behind it.

“Hi,” he said. “My name’s Darcey. I’m looking to do some volunteer work for you guys?”

The young man’s face brightened. “Awesome! Well, welcome, Darcey. I’m Jason. Nice to meet you.” He shuffled around under the desk for a moment and pulled out a clipboard, then a small packet of paperwork. “Just start by filling this out here. Make sure you put down references or they won’t call you back. You know, we have to be sure the people here will be good with the animals.” He handed Darcey a pen and said, “Feel free to set up at the far end of the desk if that’s easier, okay?”

Darcey nodded and offered a smile, then did just that. It was mostly a basic job application form but with an emphasis on previous volunteer work and animal care. When he got to the three spaces for the references, he penned in Doc and his email address, Jordan and his phone number, and he paused. Who else was there outside of his family? Walker wasn’t an uncommon last name, but of course they would assume Brett was family. He put down Justin and his phone number,
instead. He scanned over the last page, entirely text. Did he agree to a background check? Did he agree to let them call his past employers and references? And so on and so on, legal statements to cover them. He signed and handed the clipboard back to Jason.

“Cool, thanks,” he said. “Let me just run this back to the director’s office. She’s here, so she might even be able to talk to you now.”

“That would be great,” Darcey smiled.

Jason ducked back into a small hallway and Darcey fished out his phone, fiddling around idly to keep his hands busy while he waited. When Jason came back he slipped it back in his pocket, and the younger man said, “Good news, she’s not busy so she can see you in just a few minutes, after she finishes up some paperwork. If you don’t mind waiting?”

“That’s fine.”

The interview was quick. The director was a small, chubby, pleasant middle-aged woman named Macy, with a big smile and an even bigger laugh. She flipped through Darcey’s application as they spoke, and asked,

“So, what brings you to us? This is a pretty big jump from military work.”

“Well,” Darcey started. His hands tightened on his knees. “As you can see, my career ended a few months ago, and to be honest, it’s been kind of difficult readjusting to being back home. I love animals and I thought being around them and other people who love them too might help. And I know you’re always looking for extra hands.”

“We definitely are,” Macy laughed. She flipped the page and scanned down the rest of Darcey’s information. She moved straight on with no questions about why his career ended, or how.

“Well…” she started. She tapped her pen against her lips. “A few of our paid employees left recently. Are you looking for a job? All of our volunteer work is part time, two to three days a week, but we are also looking for a few full time workers. Would you be interested in that?”

Darcey’s shoulders perked and he sat up a little straighter. “Definitely,” he said. A cat shelter was the last place he would have expected to end up, but he could think of worse.

“It’s a lot more responsibility,” Macy said. “You would be cleaning up after the cats and playing with them like everyone else, but you would also be helping with paperwork and working up at the front desk, showing people the animals when they come in, filing adoption paperwork, performing background checks on potential adopters. You’d be involved with caring for cats that people bring in that may be injured or sick. Obviously we have vets on call, but if they need medication or anything administered, you’d be doing that. Is that something you’d be willing to do?”

“Yeah, I can do that. I worked a desk job my last few months in the Army, so paperwork is something I can do. And as long as someone can train me I can do anything you need for the cats.”

“Of course, of course,” Macy said. “Well, we start at minimum wage. I wish we could afford more, because our people deserve it, but we’re a non-profit so it’s difficult to pay much more. I have to call your references to be sure you check out, and then I’ll call you back and let you know, okay?”
“Okay,” Darcey grinned. “Just so you know, Doc is stationed overseas right now, so it might take him a day or two to get back to you.”

Macy raised an eyebrow. “Doc?”

Darcey shook his head. “Sorry. I mean Shaun. We always called him Doc on the unit.”


Darcey flipped up his hood when he went outside and stuffed his hands in his hoodie pockets, squinting in the bright morning sun. But he was smiling, because things were finally starting to turn back in his favor.

Chapter End Notes

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Jordan knocked on the office door, even though it was cracked. He was at the end of his shift and figured having this conversation would be best done off the clock.

His surgery was scheduled for a little over a week from then. He already had two weeks off, but it wasn’t going to be enough. He should have requested the time off earlier this month, as soon as he’d found out about the surgery, but there was so much going on and every time he remembered, there was nobody on shift for him to talk to about it. Until now.

“Come in!” Jenna called. Jordan pushed the door open and she smiled, gesturing him in. “I’m glad you’re here. I was hoping I could catch you before you left for the day.”

“Yeah, uh, I have to talk to you about my upcoming time off?” he said as he entered. She gestured for him to sit.

“Of course,” she said. She closed the notebook she was working in and looked up at him. “What’s up?”

“Well,” he started. His hands were a little shaky, but at least his voice wasn’t. “I know you gave me the two weeks in the beginning of December, but the surgeon said the recovery time will take a little longer.” He paused. “A… a lot longer. I’d need to be out of work at least a month, and if I were able to come back after that I’d have to be on light duty for another month or so. I’d have to stay in the front of house.” He swallowed nervously, because even though it had been months since the robbery, he wasn’t sure if he was ready to do that, yet.

Jenna’s face was serious, but other than that, unreadable.

“I’m sorry,” Jordan said quickly. “I didn’t realize it would take this long. But it’s really invasive. I can get the paperwork from my doctor, I’ll use my sick leave, my PTO, my vacation. I’ll keep in touch and let you know if I can get back sooner. But if I try to force myself back too soon I could cause serious damage and have to go straight back into surgery again.”

“Well,” she said. Her eyebrows were furrowed, not angry, exactly, not annoyed. Jordan wasn’t sure what. “I’m sorry to hear that, Jordan. But at least it will give us plenty of time to train your replacement.”

Jordan choked. His chest tightened and he couldn’t breathe, oh god, she was firing him? No, he needed this job, he loved this job, if he lost it, he had no idea what he’d do.

“You’re firing me?” he finally whispered.

Jenna’s eyes went wide and suddenly she seemed to realize what she’d just said.

“Oh, no!” she said quickly. “Jordan, no, no, we’re not firing you! We love you! Oh shit, I’m so sorry for scaring you like that.”

Jordan laughed a little when she swore. She only ever did so when she got flustered. He relaxed a little, but was still twitchy with nervous energy. “So, what…?”

She sighed and rolled her eyes. “I’m sorry, Jordan. Nobody ever talks to anybody in this place, I
guess. A few days ago we had a meeting and decided that we wanted to offer you a promotion to kitchen manager. I thought you’d already been told since I was out these past two nights. I just meant that if you’re going to be out for a while, it would give us plenty of time to train someone new for the baker’s position.”

Jordan’s hand curled into his shirt over his chest. Was he going to start hyperventilating? He was.

“You want me to what?” Management? Him?

“We’d like you on as the night shift kitchen manager. Your shift would stay about the same, but extended an hour, a half hour earlier and a half hour later. So you’d be doing about nine hours per shift, starting at 8:30 instead of 9:00 so you have time for a meeting with the day manager, can go over paperwork, things like that. If you agree, we’d like to get you mostly trained in the next week, before you have to go on leave so you can start straight in when you get back. We’ll find a way to work around your restrictions until you’re fully healed.”

Jordan didn’t reply right away, staring at her, wide-eyed. “I —” His voice caught and he started again. “What would my job be, exactly?”

“You’d keep the kitchen on schedule and on track, help around with anyone who needs it, handle paperwork and product ordering. Eventually we’d like you to help us with the schedule and training program, but not right away. You’d be assisting with the budget. If we do any menu expansions at any point, you’d be consulted.”

She sensed his hesitance and said, “You’re a natural leader, Jordan. You already take control of the kitchen whenever you need to and everyone listens, because you’re fair, you’re great at time management, and you delegate tasks well. You’d basically just be doing more of that and actually getting paid for it.”

“So I’d be getting a raise, too?” he asked. Him? Management? He knew he was good at his job, he knew he was a people person, but he’d have never expected this. Lead baker, maybe, someday. But kitchen manager?

“You’d be going up to $12 an hour. It’s the starting wage for the position.”

He had to choke back a ‘holy shit’ because that was over $4 an hour more than what he was already making. Almost six more than what he was paid when he first started. He’d be able to pay his friends back. He’d be able to pay Darcey back. He’d be able to start saving for his hysterectomy already.

“Oh my god,” he said, a little breathlessly. “Yes. Jenna, thank you. I —” He laughed and ran his hand through his hair, shaking his head. “Yeah. I’ll take it. Oh my god. Jenna, thank you.”

She grinned brightly and said, “Thank you.”

Jordan jumped up, almost knocking the chair over and whirling around to steady it. He laughed a little, embarrassed, and turned back around. She extended her hand and he shook it.

“Thank you,” he said again. “So, I have about a week until I have to take leave; is that enough time to do the training?”

“I’d think so,” Jenna said. She grinned up at him. “You have tonight off, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then we’ll start Wednesday.”
Jordan grinned. “Sounds good.”

He pulled on his hoodie as he headed out the door, popping up his hood to block his neck off from the early morning wind. The weather was beautiful, just right for long sleeves and jeans, and the trees were still bright green. The family on the corner by the light already had Christmas lights up, even though it was only just past Thanksgiving. The multicolored fairy lights reminded him of his room as a child, which was bittersweet because things weren’t easier back then, just different. But the bright colors beaming through the room sized blanked forts he’d make by pinning up sheets to the walls and windows were always a sign of safety. The holidays reminded him too much of painful memories with his family for Jordan to truly enjoy them, but the lights were nice, at least.

He took the long way home, through the residential streets. Today was shot day, but not for another two and a half hours, so he had plenty of time to putter around. The only thing he had to do was check his email, since he hadn’t done so in about four days.

The dim yellow lights of the complex’s parking lot appeared just around the corner, and he cut through the grass like always, bounding up the stairs to the second floor and quietly letting himself in. Since Jordan gave him a copy of his key, sometimes Darcey would come over while he was at work and fall asleep on the couch. Jordan gave the room a quick once over and quietly padded to his room to peek in. Empty.

Hopefully Darcey was sleeping okay.

Jordan sent him a quick text.

_Text me when you’re up? I’d like to see you a little later if you can._

Now that Jordan knew it was just him, he flipped the lights on and settled in. He left his phone beside him on his bed as he booted up his laptop, going straight to his email.

_Holy shit. Seventeen new messages in four days?_ He clicked on his inbox. Three of them were from his brother. One was from Vince.

The rest were all from his mother.

_What the fuck why is my mother writing me did Jose give her my email address I will kill him_

The beginnings of each email showed in the preview line beside the titles. His mother’s were all along the same lines.

_Your brother told me you intend to get surgery_

_Write me back right away_

_You need to stop this and grow up_

_Your grandmother is dying and this is all you can think of_

_You’re being selfish_

_You’re ruining your life._

Jordan didn’t open any of them. Replying would just make the situation worse. He couldn’t reason with her. He selected them all and deleted them with a single click, then went straight to his trash bin to delete them from there so he couldn’t second guess himself.
He blocked her email and her name. He didn’t want to change his email address again unless he had to.

He logged onto his IM, letting it load while he skimmed the emails from his brother. He saved Vince for last. Reading it would make him feel better.

Jose’s emails all said the same thing. *You’re being selfish. You’re being stupid. You’re tearing this family apart.*

But he wasn’t. He’d done everything right. *They* were the ones ruining everything. He’d tried over and over to explain, to be patient, to educate them, to do everything everyone expected him to even though if they actually cared they’d educate themselves, like Vince did, because it wasn’t Jordan’s responsibility to hold their hands and baby them because they were too closed-minded to handle him.

Jordan didn’t reply to him, either. They all got deleted. He got blocked. This would damage their relationship even more, and now he’d never get to see his grandmother, but even though he’d told himself he hadn’t made a decision, deep down, he knew. She never wanted to see him again. It would only hurt him more, because then his last memory of her would be her dying while telling him how disgusting he was.

He was about to open Vince’s email when an IM window popped up.

**SciFiWasabi:** jordaaaaaan

**SciFiWasabi:** dude one week away that's pretty exciting

**AnarchyForSale:** I know!!

**AnarchyForSale:** I was able to get all the time off, too.

**AnarchyForSale:** And they gave me a promotion to kitchen manager!

**SciFiWasabi:** oh shit does that mean you're the man now

**AnarchyForSale:** Oh shut up.

**AnarchyForSale:** <3

**SciFiWasabi:** you get a raise

**AnarchyForSale:** I'm at $12/hr now.

**SciFiWasabi:** holy shit

**AnarchyForSale:** I know that's what I said!

**SciFiWasabi:** so sorry i've been awol recently but school is kicking my ass

**SciFiWasabi:** i have like zero time for anything other than research and papers and shit

**SciFiWasabi:** but i'm trying to get ahead so i can have some time to come visit you while you recover
SciFiWasabi: i know you've got darcey but he probably can't be over all the time right

AnarchyForSale: Yeah. Thank you.

SciFiWasabi: whoa what's up why the sudden punctuation change

SciFiWasabi: where did your exclamation points go

SciFiWasabi: spill it jordan what's wrong

SciFiWasabi: are you having second thoughts

Jordan sighed and pushed his hair out of his eyes. He couldn’t believe Terrence knew him well enough to sense a shift in mood because of a punctuation change. Even Darcey wouldn’t be able to tell something like that just through text.

AnarchyForSale: No no not at all.

AnarchyForSale: You have no idea how fucking excited I am about this.

SciFiWasabi: so what's up then

AnarchyForSale: My brother somehow got my email address. He gave it to my mom.

SciFiWasabi: oh fuck

AnarchyForSale: Yeah.

SciFiWasabi: so i can assume from your lack of enthusiasm he's still being a raging asshole about the whole situation

AnarchyForSale: They both think I'm ruining my life basically.

AnarchyForSale: Sixteen fucking messages that basically boil down to YOU'RE TEARING THIS FAMILY APART

SciFiWasabi: bullshit you haven't been a family since you walked out five years ago

AnarchyForSale Yeah I know right? I haven't even spoken to these dicks for five years and only now the family is being torn apart?

SciFiWasabi: so now they're getting in your business because you're about to get surgery

SciFiWasabi: how did they even find out

SciFiWasabi: i know you didn't tell them

AnarchyForSale: My guess is that they got to Teyo and guilited him into telling them. He's only 12 he'd be really easy to manipulate. Vince said they’d contacted him so.
AnarchyForSale: It's not far-fetched to think they'd try to talk to Teyo and Sierra too.

AnarchyForSale: My grandmother is dying and might only have a few days at this point so that was why my brother was supposedly contacting me in the first place but I don't know because I can't see her now. If I show up and they're there it will be a fucking disaster. Not that she ever wants to speak to me again anyway. I don't even know why they think that wouldn't be the case.

AnarchyForSale: Give me a minute actually I'm going to send all three of them an email to tell them to just not talk to anyone about me ever so this doesn't get worse.

He pulled open a new email composition, addressing it to Vince and carbon copying it to Teyo and Sierra. It was short and simple because he was too frustrated to be eloquent.

Hey guys,

Somehow my brother got my email address and he ended up giving it to my mom. I'm not casting blame and I'm not angry, but I know that one of you had to have been the one to tell him how to contact me. I don't know what happened, but from now on, please do not give anybody any of my contact information without contacting me first. Both of them have been sending me really awful emails that basically accuse me of destroying the family and ruining my life. So please, from now on, just don't give my info to anyone. That includes phone number, address, email, and any blogs I work on.

Thanks

Jordan

He sent it out, not expecting any replies right away, because it was only 6:00 a.m. where he was, which would only make it an hour or two later there. Teyo and Sierra would be getting ready for school and Vince probably wasn’t even awake.

While he had his email open, he read the message from Vince. Hopefully it would be good news.

Hey, Jordan!

I know your surgery is coming up soon! That's really exciting! Congratulations and good luck!

I really wish I didn't have to tell you this with such good things coming your way, but you need to know. Your brother has been contacting us again and trying to get your address. Teyo slipped up and gave him your email before I was able to tell him not to. Jose kept saying he wanted to help you and talk to you about grandma but didn't know how to get in touch.

I've told both Teyo and Sierra to keep your information on lockdown, but I don't know what information you have available online or how easy it is to track things like that in Arizona. Be careful.

Love, Vince
Jordan ran his fingers through his hair and bowed his head, glancing at the clock in the corner of the screen. About 6:30. Still an hour and a half left before his shot. It didn’t have to be at the same time as long as it was on the same day, but Jordan liked the security of this one thing, this one constant he knew would always be there.

He ran his hand over his face, pausing at his chin. Stubble already? He sighed and rolled his eyes, getting up and heading to the bathroom. It had been about twenty-four hours since his last shave.

He watched himself in the mirror as he went through the motions. His skin was clear and smooth, now, so much different from when he first started hormone therapy. The first change had been horrible acne, of course. He chuckled at the memory of it, rinsing the razor and washing his face. His body had come a long way from the thin, curvy thing it used to be, the narrow shoulders and cinched in waist and rounded face. Now he was all angles, sharp lines and planes, and he’d filled out quite a bit. Sometimes he still noticed little changes, even these three years later. Would his brother even recognize him if he were able to track him down? Jordan hoped not. Hopefully if Jose were to walk past him on the street, he wouldn’t give him a second glance.

His phone went off as he went back into the bedroom. It was a text. He flipped open his phone to read it. It was Darcey.

I’d like to see you, too. I’m about to go on a run, though. Maybe we can get together afterward? About 8? That’ll give me time to shower and change when I get back.

Jordan smiled and texted back.

9 okay? My shot’s at 8. Your place or mine?

He replied before Jordan could put the phone down.

Sounds good. My place okay? My mom’s been asking about you and she’d like to see you again. I can come pick you up.

Jordan grinned and chuckled to himself. Darcey’s mom had explicitly asked about him? If that wasn’t a good sign, he didn’t know what else to look for.

Yeah. That’s fine. See you then.

Chapter End Notes

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The days passed slowly but the week passed quickly, and then, Jordan’s time off began and the day of his surgery arrived.

He was sitting on a wheeled bed, dressed in a gown and bouncing and grinning while he and Darcey waited in the small room for the nurse to come take him back to surgery.

“Oh my god oh my god it’s here it’s here, Darcey, it’s finally here, oh god I think I might throw up I’m so excited!” Jordan’s words came out quick and slurred together in one long string of syllables. Darcey smiled, but he couldn’t quell the fluttering in his stomach, the kind of slight dizziness that only nerves could cause. Jordan’s stomach was light and airy in excitement, his hands trembling with the adrenaline that came with the knowledge that his day was finally here.

A nurse knocked on the half-open door and pushed it in the rest of the way.

“Mr. Delgado? Are you ready to go back?”

“Yes!” Jordan squeaked. He gripped Darcey’s hand and the taller man pressed a kiss to it.

“I love you, okay?” he said. The nurse unlocked the bed and began to wheel him down the hallway. Darcey followed.

“I love you, too!” Jordan grinned.

“I love you,” Darcey repeated. Jordan gave him a thumbs up, and they disappeared through a double door.

The room was bright and Jordan had to squint to properly see anything, but it didn’t matter, since the anesthesia would kick in shortly. His breath caught in excitement when the nurse slipped the mask over his face.

“Count back from one hundred,” Dr. Shea said.

“Ninety-nine,” Jordan started. “Ninety-eight.”

He’d barely reached ninety-five when everything went silent and dark.

Darcey could not stop pacing.

Jordan was so calm going back, and with good reason: this was a huge day with nothing but positives. There was no tumor or cancer or damaged organ. It was his top surgery, something he’d been saving for for five years and looking forward to for even longer.

Darcey was probably more nervous than Jordan was.

This was a good thing. An amazing thing. Dr. Shea was a professional who had been working with transgender patients for many, many years. He knew what he was doing. Jordan would be safe.
Although Darcey brought a book, every time he opened it, he barely got two sentences in before putting it back down and getting up and pacing again. After he’d read the two opening lines seven times, he slammed the book down on the chair beside him in frustration. He sighed and scratched the back of his neck, glad that nobody had seen his stupid tantrum.

If he just had someone to talk to, the wait wouldn’t be so taxing, but he didn’t know who to call. Brett didn’t know that Jordan was transgender, and while Darcey knew his cousin wouldn’t care, whether or not anyone knew was not his decision to make. Jordan wasn’t out to Justin, either. Was he out to Iffy? Darcey didn’t remember whether Jordan had specified one way or the other.

If only he were still in contact with Boots, he thought. She’d implied that her boyfriend had been through at least one surgery and if he could just get her to pick up the phone, she’d potentially be a great reassurance. But she hadn’t replied to any of his messages.

He tried her number again anyway, even though it had been so long it may not have even been hers anymore.

*Boots, it's Walker. This still your number?*

He slipped his phone back in his pocket and glanced up at the clock on the wall. Only ten minutes had passed.

The procedure was supposed to take *hours*. Darcey was going to lose his mind by then.

He dropped down in one of the chairs and buried his face in his hands. He took a deep breath. “He's going to be okay,” he murmured to himself. Complications for this kind of surgery were rare and Jordan was in top physical condition. The doctor had no worry that anything would go wrong.

Darcey jumped when his phone went off in his pocket. It was Boots’s number.

*sry wrong number dont know anyone named boots*

He sighed and pocketed his phone again. Maybe she’d forgotten to tell him she changed her number. Maybe she hadn't. Maybe she just wanted to cut anyone she knew from the Army out of her life, and he got axed in the process. She didn't have the same level of investment as he did. With no way to get in contact, he would never know.

His phone went off again and he pulled it back out of his pocket.

*Hey Darcey, it's Iffy. How are you and Jordan doing? Is he in surgery yet? He's not answering his phone.*

So she *did* know. Darcey breathed a sigh of relief as he texted a reply.

*He went in about fifteen minutes ago. Now it's just waiting.*

She texted back too quickly to have been on a phone. She must have been on a computer.

*Are you doing okay? I know we're not really close, but I don't know who Jordan is and isn't out to outside our mutual friends and I thought you might like someone to talk to.*

Darcey’s smile was small, but relieved.

*Thanks, Iffy. I'm doing okay. Scared shitless. But okay.*
Well, I don’t know if Jordan told you, but once you start work after the first week Terrence and I will be checking in on him as often as we can. I'm sure you'll be visiting all the time, too, but you should know he'll be taken care of.

Darcey didn't know Terrence, but Jordan talked about him so much that sometimes he felt like he did. They were in BashBack together? At least, he knew they had been once. He didn't know whether Jordan was still involved. He hadn't spoken of it since the protest at Lexi's school.

Thanks, Iffy, he texted back.

You're welcome. Call me if either of you needs anything.

He didn't want the conversation to end. He wanted to keep talking about something. Anything. Anything to pass the time and keep him calm and focused on anything but the million things that might go wrong.

But he didn't know what to say, so he didn't say anything.

He paced up and down the hall a few times, around the corner to the vending machine where he didn't buy anything. He played a game of Tetris on his phone. He tried to start his book again. He failed. He glanced at the clock again, and again, and again. His hands shook so badly that when he opened up another game of Tetris he couldn't handle the buttons on his phone properly.

It was the silence of the empty hall that was the worst. If he'd just brought his iPod, his laptop, something. Both were back at the hotel room they’d booked for the next few days so they could stay nearby, but Darcey wasn't about to leave, just in case something did go wrong.

It won't. It won't.

He picked up his phone and dialed Brett's number, then deleted it again without pressing send. What would he say? That Jordan was going in for surgery? Brett would ask why and Darcey wouldn't be able to give him an answer. Jordan had made it clear he didn't want people to know he was transgender and wanted everyone to see him as just another guy. Darcey would never take that away from him.

Darcey dialed Brett's number again. He stared at it for a short while, then finally pressed send. He didn't have to talk about himself or Jordan at all. Brett always had auditions coming up and could talk about his work for days. But the call went to Brett's voicemail, and Darcey sighed heavily at the familiar message.

“Hey, Brett,” he said. “It's Darcey. Just calling to check up and see how things are going. Call me back when you get the chance.”

The minutes passed by like hours, the hours like days. Sometimes the clock seemed to go backwards.

Finally, what felt like years later, one of the nurses stepped out of the door. Darcey stared at her, silent, waiting. She smiled and said, “Mr. Walker, Jordan is still asleep, but you're welcome to come back and wait for him to wake up as long as you're quiet.”

“Of course, “ Darcey said. He grabbed his things and followed her back into the recovery room.

There were only three other people there, but Darcey would have recognized Jordan even amidst a thousand, and headed straight for him. The first thing Darcey did when he sat down beside Jordan was take his hand and press it against his cheek. Darcey breathed him in, slowly. He smelled like hand sanitizer and laundry soap, but he was warm and he was safe and was healthy.
His lips were slightly parted, the way he always slept, and he had a blanket draped over his lap and legs. Tubes snaked out of either side of his chest for draining excess blood and fluid. As long as all went well, they could be removed in about a week.

A white bandage barely peeked out under Jordan's arm through the wide hospital gown sleeve. His chest gently rose and fell with shallow, slightly staggered breathing, and any time he took a breath too deep, he grimaced, and Darcey held his hand a little tighter. When he kissed Jordan's forehead, the younger man smiled in his half-sleep.

The murmur of the staff in the background was comforting, all good news. No complications. Minimal blood loss. All of the breast tissue was successfully removed. No adverse reaction to the anesthesia. Darcey sighed, but this time in relief.

Jordan groaned softly and Darcey's eyes came back into focus. Jordan's eyes fluttered, once, twice, then they opened, glazed and unfocused. They darted around the room and when they landed on Darcey, Jordan smiled and Darcey could finally breathe again.

“Hey,” Darcey whispered.

“Hey.” Jordan's voice was soft and tight. His chest hurt like no pain he'd felt before, sharp and deep and burning, but he still smiled. A heavy wave of nausea crashed over him and the blood drained from his face.

“Shit, shit, I think I need to throw up,” he said softly. He slapped his hand over his mouth as Darcey's head darted around the room. He pulled up a small trash can at the foot of the bed and stood. Jordan whimpered as Darcey helped him sit up, his breathing quick and spasmodic as he grit his teeth and scrunched his eyes closed, as if it would help with the pain.

“Breathe slowly,” Darcey whispered. “Breathe as deep as you can. Try to keep it even.”

“You make it sound so easy,” Jordan groaned.

A nurse approached on Jordan's other side, resting her hand on the bed.

“What's wrong?” she asked gently. “What do you need?”

Jordan opened his mouth but snapped it shut again when another wave of nausea swam over him, hot in his stomach and cold in his neck. He inhaled, slow and shuddering, and covered his mouth again. It was starting to water as the bile rose, sharp and bitter, in the back of his throat. The nurse pulled an alcohol wipe out of her pocket and ripped it open.

“Here.” She gave it to Jordan. “Hold this under your nose. Breathe it in. It will help.”

Jordan took it and smiled weakly. “Thanks.” He took in a deep breath. It was like flipping a switch. His mouth dried out and the bile sunk back down.

The nurse lifted the head of the bed, and when Jordan leaned back and took the strain off his muscles, it was a little easier to breathe. Darcey still held on tightly to Jordan's hand. Neither were going to let go for a long, long time.

“You can't leave just yet,” the nurse said. “But the doctor will come to see you and give you your instructions and then we can get you on your way, okay?”

Jordan nodded, but didn't speak. His eyes were closed, but not so forcefully this time, and his breathing, while easier to come, was still slow and unsteady. So Darcey said, “Thank you, ma'am.”
She smiled. “Amy is fine. Just wave me down if you need anything else.”

As she walked away, Jordan turned to Darcey and murmured, “Is it okay if I just sleep for the next two months? This really fucking hurts.”

“I believe it,” Darcey whispered. He leaned closer and kissed Jordan's forehead. Jordan sighed softly and leaned into him, whimpering a little when he pulled away. Having Darcey close was almost like a mild pain-killer. His presence was so soothing and made everything else so much easier to deal with. “But we'll get you through it,” Darcey continued. “You've got this. I know you do.”

Jordan grinned weakly and gave Darcey a loosely curled thumbs up. “Fuck yeah, I do.”

Darcey laughed softly, but brightly, and kissed the back of Jordan's other hand. He ran his fingers through Jordan's hair, trailed them down his neck, gently scratched at the back of his head, just physically reminding himself that Jordan was still there and safe. Jordan hummed happily, sleepily, and murmured, “Just do that. That's really nice.”

Darcey smiled, glad to oblige.

“I'm thinking we extend our reservation at the motel a few more days,” Jordan finally whispered. “I don't think I'll be able to handle stairs two days from now.”

“Whatever you need,” Darcey said. “I don’t start at the shelter until next week, so that’ll be fine.”

Jordan weakly shook his head. “Nah, I don't think we'll have to stay that long. I just think maybe four days instead of two.” He opened his eyes halfway, and when he turned, Darcey was nearly overwhelmed by all the emotion in them. Pain, yes, but also joy and relief and gratefulness. “Thanks, Darcey.” The corner of Jordan’s mouth turned up in a tired smile. “For everything. I love you.” For supporting me, for staying with me, for helping me make it happen. Thank you.

Darcey rested his forehead against Jordan's. “I love you,” he said. “How are you feeling?”

Jordan wasn't good with words like people thought he was. He just didn't know how to shut up, so he was more open about some things than most. But now, here, for this, he didn't have a single one in either language he knew that could accurately express everything he was feeling. Overjoyed, ecstatic, elated, even words like these weren't strong enough to express the pure, unadulterated joy swimming through his veins. He was here, in recovery. It was done. His top surgery was finally done, after five years of saving and five more of needing it. There were a lot of steps he'd already taken and a lot more that he wanted to, but this felt like the biggest, even bigger than the hormone therapy. And that was gigantic. His body was slowly starting to align with his vision of it, and it was amazing.

But despite all the thoughts swimming around in his still drug-muddled head, he said, “Well, physically I feel like shit.” Both of them chuckled and Jordan flinched and groaned at the sharp pain that shot through his abdomen. Darcey scratched the back of his head a bit more, and Jordan relaxed again. “Fuck, that hurts,” Jordan whispered.

Darcey rested his other hand on the back of Jordan's neck again. “You okay?”

Jordan leaned back into it and sighed softly. “I will be.” His eyebrows knit together tightly in pain and tears glistened in the corners of his eyes, his teeth grit tightly together as he tried to work through it.

feel?"

“Good.” It was gasped and breathless, but Jordan was grinning brighter than the fluorescent lights of the recovery ward. “Like, really good. Once I get these tubes out of my chest, I'll finally be free.”

_Free_. That was the word he'd been looking for. He was free. Even through the grimace of pain, Jordan's joy radiated from his face, bright as the moon.

“Out of all three, this one's always been the biggest deal to me. It sucks, but I can work around not having a dick, clearly, and you're the only one who has any way of knowing about it anyway.” Jordan chuckled and grinned. Darcey laughed and kissed his temple. “And nobody can see my uterus, so who gives a fuck. That’s more for convenience than anything else. The top surgery was the big one for me. And it's done.” He squeezed Darcey’s hand, gripping onto it tightly. “Thank you so much for helping me pay for it. Thanks for sticking with me. I know it can't be easy.”

Darcey shook his head and gently tilted Jordan’s head into a kiss, careful not to jostle him too much and make him sick again. “You're amazing, Jordan,” he whispered. “It's not always easy, but you're always worth it.”

As the minutes passed, Jordan's eyes brightened and he became more alert, looking around at his surroundings and glancing behind Darcey's shoulder to look at the medical staff. As the anesthesia continued to wear off and his head cleared and his limbs lightened, his voice got stronger and he started to move around a bit more.

It wasn't until then that Darcey realized that part of his fear during the wait was that things were going to change afterward. But when Jordan smiled at him, so bright and happy, every one of Darcey's worries faded. Of course things changed. That was life. But the most important things stayed the same.

Dr. Shea cleared his throat as he approached Jordan's bed and the two men looked up. He grinned brightly and clapped his hands together once. “So, Jordan, you're here!” he said. “How does it feel?”

“Painful but also awesome,” Jordan laughed. He was careful to keep it light this time so it didn’t hurt so much.

“Well, unfortunately you're going to have pain for quite a while, but I’ll write you a script for some medication for it,” Dr. Shea smiled. “For your first week, try to rest and stay in bed as much as possible. You can get up and walk around a little, to get to the bathroom and so on, but for the most part, I want you on bedrest. A week from now you can come back in to get the tubes removed. We'll schedule a time on your way out and before you go I'll have a nurse show you how to change out the waste bags.” Jordan nodded and started to look over at Darcey for confirmation: _will you help me?_ Darcey nodded. Jordan smiled.

“After that, try to get up and move around at least once every half hour, even if it's only a few minutes at a time in the beginning. For at least the first month, do not raise your arms over your head or do any heavy lifting. Nothing over five pounds. Be careful with bending and twisting and move slowly when you do so. You said you work in a kitchen, correct?”

“Yeah,” Jordan said. “I was able to get two months off. It won't take longer than that, will it?”

“By then you'll be able to do most things again,” Dr. Shea said. “But if you need me to we can get a note for your manager with some medical restrictions. You still shouldn't be doing a lot of heavy lifting at that point, but you'll be able to do more by then. If it's possible to work a desk job or as a
cashier for another two or three weeks, that would probably be ideal if you have to go back to work at that point.”

Jordan nodded. “I should be able to work that out.”

“It's just very important that you take it slow and don't push yourself to do more than you can,” Dr. Shea said. “It can get frustrating, but right now, your recovery is the most important thing, and if you push yourself too fast you can cause severe injury and you'll have to come right back in.”

Dr. Shea paused and waited. Jordan nodded.

“I don't think you're going to need any further work done,” Dr. Shea continued, “but of course, it is your body and if you aren't happy with something and want to do a revision, that will be possible.”

Jordan nodded again. “Well, hopefully I don't have to. I'd really rather not go through this again.” The chuckle in his voice was quiet, but it could light a whole room. Darcey smiled.

He’s beautiful.

“So, how are you feeling?” Dr. Shea asked. “If you have a hand, do you think you can get into a wheelchair?” He gestured over their heads to the nurse by the door. Jordan glanced over Darcey’s shoulder to see her coming over with one.

“Yeah,” Jordan said. His voice was a little strained as he started to sit up further, and Darcey gently curled his hand around his arm to keep him steady, careful not to pull or push.

“What do you need?” he asked. Jordan turned, grabbing his arm. He was still for a moment.

“I got it,” he said. “I just need you to help make sure I don’t fall.”

“Okay,” Darcey said. “Turn your hips and push out your legs first. It’ll be easier. Less pull on your chest and stomach.”

Jordan nodded, but he wasn’t looking at Darcey. He was looking down at himself, head tilted, trying to figure out the best way to move. Eventually he did it all in one go, twisting his hips and sliding his legs over to drop his knees over the side of the bed. Darcey rested his hand on Jordan’s lower back as the nurse approached, moving to the side so she could get the wheelchair into position. Once Jordan was standing, the pain subsided, just a bit, and he took a few moments to breathe. But when he started to lower himself into the chair, he froze at the sharp pull in his mid-chest, eyes suddenly going wide. Darcey was at his side again, one arm curled around his back under his arms, the other on his hip.

“I’ve got you,” he said. Jordan looked up at him, eyes wide and wet. Darcey’s brows drew down and Jordan started to curl his arm around his neck, but Darcey shook his head and Jordan jumped when he gave him a sharp, “No.”

“Sorry,” he said, much softer, as he helped lower him into the chair. “Sorry. Your arm would have ended up over your head once you were sitting. I don’t want you to tear anything.”

Understanding crossed Jordan’s face as he settled into the chair and leaned against the backrest. “Sorry,” he said. “You’re right. That was stupid.” He took a slow, deep breath, wincing at the twinge in his chest, and said, “Yeah, stairs aren’t going to happen for a while.” But when he looked up at Darcey, he was smiling.

Once he was up and ready, the nurse showed them how to change the waste bags for the tubes in
his chest. Jordan groaned softly when she said he wouldn’t be able to get in the shower until they came out, but he nodded, and he smiled when Darcey said he’d take care of him. Dr. Shea handed Jordan a prescription, which he promptly passed on to Darcey, “Because there’s no way I’ll be able to get down to the pharmacy to do it myself,” he said.

“There’s one on the way back,” Darcey said. “We’ll stop there if you’ll be okay in the car for fifteen minutes? Or I can just take you back and go back out later.”

“I pick option two,” Jordan said. His voice was getting softer again, his words a little slurred. “Sitting sucks.”

Before they headed out, Dr. Shea gave them some basic instructions. Jordan’s eyes fluttered and his head started to loll to the side as he tried to stay awake and listen. Darcey paid close attention for him, filing everything away, short-term verses long-term care, when it was appropriate to call the outpatient center and under what circumstances to call the ER. This kind of thing was far out of the range of his training and he wasn’t going to risk Jordan’s health by assuming he knew anything.

He made the appointment for Jordan’s tube removal, since it was his schedule that needed to be worked around now that Jordan was on medical leave. A week from then. The day he would start working. He knew he wouldn’t be able to get the day off, so he’d have to make sure Jordan had a ride with someone else. It would probably be Terrence.

Despite falling asleep sitting up, Jordan insisted to be the one to wheel himself out to the car, but about halfway to the parking lot he slowed down and started breathing heavy, so Darcey took over and pushed him the rest of the way while he pouted.

“This sucks,” he muttered. “So I’m going to be completely helpless for a week?”

“At least,” Darcey said. He leaned down to kiss the top of Jordan’s head. “But in the meantime, I’ve got you.” He parked Jordan at the sidewalk and left him to bring back the car, parked at the far end of the lot. While Jordan waited, Darcey jumped out of the car and around and into the passenger’s seat, where he leaned the backrest back as far as it would go, which wasn’t very. It was a small car. But it would be easier on Jordan than sitting up straight.

“Uh, Darcey, no,” he said. “Do you really think I can drive like this?”

Darcey stepped back out.

“Do you think I would let you drive like this?” he asked. Jordan rolled his eyes and Darcey chuckled. The smaller man smiled. “Okay,” Darcey said. “How do you want to do this?”

“It’s the getting up and down that’s the hard part,” Jordan said. He scooted himself forward in the chair. Darcey locked it. “Walking and standing are easy enough.”

It took a few minutes to find a position that didn’t involve Jordan’s arms lifting above his shoulders, but eventually, they got there, and once he was up he was able to move on his own. His steps were small and shuffling, but that was more from the residuals of the drugs than the pain. Getting him back down was easier; Jordan only weighed about 180 at most and Darcey had lifted much heavier than that, so he scooped Jordan up and tucked him into the seat easily. Jordan laughed, shallow and soft, despite the grimace on his face.

“You’re such a showoff,” he chuckled.

Darcey’s mouth twisted and his eyebrows furrowed, half-offended.
“Jordan, I was just…” He paused when Jordan looked up at him and his eyes softened, a small, tired smile on this face. He reached out and rested a hand on Darcey’s leg. “Thanks, Darcey.”

Darcey smiled and brushed Jordan’s hair out of his eyes before closing the door and walking around to the driver’s seat.

As Darcey started the car, Jordan turned to him and grinned, exhausted, hurting, but still so bright and happy. When he said, “So, once I’m healed up, sex is going to be like five hundred times easier now, am I right?” Darcey burst out laughing, but nodded.

“Yeah,” he said. “I guess it is.”

Chapter End Notes

The healing process of a double masectomy is much shorter these days, down to two weeks to a month, depending on who you go to and what work you get done!

Please remember this story takes place in 2006. Things were different then.

Please feel free to visit me at indecentpause.tumblr.com for short stories, shakespeare memes, and writing humor and advice!
Jordan was on day three of his recovery. The binder he'd had to wear had come off a few times, now, so Darcey could help clean him up and so it could be washed and the bandages changed, but Jordan had never actually seen himself without it.

Not until now.

Darcey stepped out for a few minutes to pick up food and Jordan needed to use the bathroom. He wanted to see himself, his new body.

It was hideous. He was disgusting. The most disgusting creature that ever lived.

The stitches were thick and black and ugly, like spiders' legs sewn into his skin, the tubes coming out of either side stained with off-yellow fluid and blood. The lines where the cuts were made were bright red underneath the black.

And he'd thought he was ugly before? *Now you're a fucking monster.*

He couldn't stop looking at himself, even though with every passing moment he felt worse and worse and more and more like he was going to throw up.

Vaguely, in the back of his head, he heard the hotel room door open and close. The door to the tiny bathroom was cracked, but Darcey knocked anyway. “Jordan? You okay?”

Jordan meant to say “Yeah” or “I think so” or maybe even “I don't know,” but all that came out was a half sob that burned when it hit his lungs and pushed out against his chest. The pain of it knocked him forward and he had to grab the bathroom counter to steady himself.

And then Darcey was behind him, one hand on Jordan's hip and the other on his chin, gently tilting his head up to look at him.

“Hey, hey, what's wrong?” he asked gently. Jordan looked at him, scared, desperate, then back at the mirror, then sobbed again, because he had no words to describe himself. Darcey looked at Jordan's reflection, down at him again. His face was completely baffled and clearly he had no idea what was happening and Jordan loved him so much for it, for not seeing how ugly and disgusting he was.

“Jordan, what's wrong?” he repeated. His hand was tight on Jordan's hip as he tried to get him to turn around, but Jordan couldn't rip his eyes away from his reflection. “Did you rip a stitch? What's going on? Are you okay?”

Jordan lifted his hands, and somewhere in the back of his head something screamed *not too high,* *not too high,* but even if he wanted to throw them above his head, he couldn't. It hurt so much to barely lift them to shoulder level. His eyes darted over his reflection again, up at Darcey's, and his hands dropped back to the counter and he lowered his head. He sprang back too hard when he leaned his weight against his arms because oh god the stretching against his chest and sides hurt, and he stumbled backward into Darcey. When he lost his footing Darcey was finally able to turn him around and get him to look away from his reflection for the first time.

“Jordan, talk to me.” Darcey had to fight to keep his voice calm, but it was still too high pitched
and his words came too fast. Jordan knew he needed to explain but he couldn't. His voice was stuck. He opened his mouth to at least try but all that came out was a wheezing sob. Darcey's hand tightened on his shoulder and the other gently nudged Jordan's chin up so he could look at his face.

“What's going on?” he asked again, firmer this time. His eyes darted over Jordan's face, down to his chest, checking for any damage, any problems, but he didn't see it. How didn't he see it?

Finally, Jordan brought his hand to his face, covering his eyes, and murmured, so softly that Darcey barely heard him, “I'm disgusting.” He took in a deep, shuddering breath and continued a little louder, “I thought I was ugly before, but just, look at me, Darcey.”

“I don't understand,” he said softly. He gently tugged Jordan's hand away from his eyes, curling his fingers around it. “What don't you like? Is there something wrong with the sculpting? I don't… I think you look great. Do you want to go back and get a revision once you've healed up? Because that's covered in the initial cost, remember?”

Jordan shook his head violently, jerking his hands away from Darcey's and curling them around the back of his neck, head down, so ashamed, so ugly. He'd wanted this so badly for so long, and this was what it made him? He didn't want his old body back. That wasn't the problem. Good fucking riddance to the ugly thing. But this wasn't what he wanted in its place.

“No, no no no,” he said, over and over, useless, stupid. “No, you don't understand, it's the...” He choked on his words and fell quiet, afraid that if he continued, he'd start to cry. Then Darcey's hands were on his shoulders, curled around him protectively. Jordan could almost feel the understanding in his touch.

“It's the stitches and tubing, isn't it?” he asked softly.

Jordan nodded.

“Jordan,” he whispered. “It's okay. In less than a week you'll get the tubing out and just a few days after that you'll probably be able to get the stitches removed. You'll feel a lot better after that. Everything looks awful just coming out of surgery.” Jordan shook his head, dropping his hands to rest on Darcey's hips, leaning forward against his shoulder. He started to panic when Darcey gently pushed away, but then he rolled up the left sleeve of his worn black hoodie and put his forearm in front of Jordan's face.

“Look at this,” he said gently. Jordan looked up, his eyebrows drawn.

“What –?”

“Just look at it for a minute.”

Jordan dropped his eyes back down, to the scars on Darcey's inner arm, the largest one over his damaged tendon. Thin, pale, white, only barely noticeable against his golden skin. Jordan glanced back up at him again.

“Darcey, I don't –”

“...You know this arm got fucked up when I was overseas,” he said softly. His eyes were locked on Jordan's, gentle, understanding. “Honestly, I was lucky I didn't lose it. I couldn't use it for months after the explosion. You should have seen me straight out of surgery. I looked like an extra in a fucking zombie movie.”

A hot stab of guilt prickled down Jordan's back. Darcey saw it on his face and said, “No. Stop
that. Jordan, I'm not trying to make you feel bad. Please don't think that. I just...” He paused, twisting his arm in front of him one way, then the other. “I'm just trying to show you how much difference proper healing time makes. Give it time to heal up. You've wanted this forever. You still do, right?”

Jordan nodded. “Yeah, I just –”

“Just, the stitches and tubing are ugly. But you're not. And when you get all that shit removed, you'll feel so much better, and you'll be able to look at it for what it is. Your second step in getting your body on track. Right?”

Jordan paused, eyes darting over Darcey’s face. Slowly, a tiny smile spread across Jordan's. “Right,” he whispered. For some reason he didn't think that Darcey had realized that the hormone shots were the first step. Maybe because he’d been on them so long already when they met? Because they only talked about it casually, or when Darcey had a specific question, which wasn't often? Jordan didn't understand why that meant so much, but it did, just that little mention of acknowledgement. Sometimes he felt so isolated from other people because he didn't know anybody else who had gone through the same things as him.

But he wasn't alone, and as long as he had Darcey by his side, he wouldn't be.

“How are you so fucking perfect?” Jordan asked softly, a small, disbelieving laugh in his voice. Darcey turned a little pink and his eyes turned down. He rubbed a little awkwardly at his chin, but he was smiling.

He wrapped his arms around Jordan’s shoulders and drew him into a gentle hug. Jordan wished he could push himself closer, bury himself in his boyfriend, but it would hurt too much and might jostle the tubing. Darcey gently ran his hands up and down Jordan's arms, slowly, and the light touch of his rough hands sent little, happy shivers through the Jordan's body. It was so calming, so relaxing, and Jordan’s breathing eventually slowed and calmed, because Darcey was right. Jordan didn't know if it was the pain or the lack of sleep or the painkillers, but Darcey was right. Once he got everything out of his chest, he'd feel better. What had he been expecting, to look gorgeous straight out of surgery? No, surgery didn't work like that. He should know that. He'd seen the pictures during his research.

Dr. Shea was a good surgeon. Jordan did like the shape of his new chest, he liked the placement of everything, the contouring. He'd feel better once he was cleaned up.

“I'm sorry I'm so insane right now,” he chuckled weakly.

Darcey tightened his arms around him. “It's okay.” he said. He pressed a soft kiss to Jordan's head, and the Jordan sighed and smiled. “I went through something pretty similar the first time I saw my arm after surgery. I understand. Come on.” He gently pulled away, dropping his hands to Jordan's. “Food's out in the room. Come eat before it gets cold and soggy.”

“What did you get?” Jordan asked, following him out into the room. His steps were small and shuffling. The painkillers were wearing off and the pain in his chest was sharp, like knives.

“I found a little Middle Eastern place and got you a falafel wrap,” Darcey said, digging the paper wrapped pita out of the bag he'd brought in. Jordan's eyes lit up and he perked when he sat down and Darcey handed it to him.

“Is there –”

“Yeah, I had them put hummus on it.” He looked out of the corner of his eye and smiled as he got
his own food out. “There's also some couscous in here,” he said. “I don't know if you like it, but I can always eat it if you don't.”

Jordan wrinkled his nose and shook his head. “Not a big fan,” he said. He took a bite of his wrap and his face relaxed again. “Don't like the texture.”

Darcey sat down beside him, about to unwrap his own pita, when he said, “Do you want me to bandage you back up first or do you want a little air?”

“Oh man, air, please,” Jordan chuckled. He winced. Even laughing hurt so much. “My chest has been wrapped up for so long by so many things,” he continued. “It's nice to just breathe for a change.”

Darcey leaned forward, looking Jordan up and down, then nodded before sitting back and getting into his own food. “Yeah, you look like you'll be okay without bandages for a while.” He paused to take a bite before he continued. “How does the binder feel? Is it still okay?”

Jordan nodded. “It's okay,” he said. He shrugged one shoulder and grimaced at the tug on his chest. He'd never realized how many muscles were connected to his chest until he could barely use any of them. “It's tight but not uncomfortable. When I wear it to bed I can still breathe when I wake up and it doesn't hurt to lie down like my old one.” He looked down at his chest. His mouth pulled down into a frown at the stitches, the redness, the tubing, the slight bruising around the entry points. “But then, I'm not flattening down B-cups anymore, either.” He said it more to himself than to Darcey, but hearing it out loud helped, and when he looked back up, he was smiling again, even though it was small. Darcey smiled back and leaned over to give him a soft kiss. When he started to pull away, Jordan curled his fingers around his hand, and Darcey paused, eyebrows raised in question.

“I love you,” Jordan whispered. He leaned forward and kissed him again, slow, lingering. “Thanks for staying the week with me. I'm sure it's boring as hell but I really, really appreciate it.”

Darcey smiled and nudged his nose against Jordan's. Jordan's smile widened and he lowered his eyes. It had been months, but that tiny movement still made him feel so important, so special, so loved.

“Of course,” Darcey said softly. “I'm not just here when it's fun and exciting, Jordan. I'm here when it's shitty and boring, too. I'm not going anywhere.”

Darcey gently rested his hand on Jordan's shoulder and Jordan leaned a little closer, but there was something bad about the angle because suddenly it hurt so much he couldn't breathe, sharp and tight, so he leaned back, teeth gritted, eyes screwed shut as he tried to breathe himself out of it but it wouldn't work, he couldn't.

“What do you need?” Darcey asked, quick, sudden, serious.

“I –” Jordan started, but he said it too fast and the breath he sucked in stretched and pulled and his eyes shot open, his hand tight around Darcey's. “It's happening again,” he whispered, forcing himself to keep his breathing even and normal, even though it hurt, because if he breathed too shallow he might hyperventilate and that would be even worse.

“Are the painkillers wearing off?” Darcey asked. He squeezed Jordan's hand. The bed shifted when he stood and Jordan lifted his head to watch as Darcey walked over to the nightstand and opened the drawer. “What time did you take them this morning?”

“About four a.m.”
“It was about noon when I got back. You’re fine for your next dose if you need it?”

Jordan opened his mouth to say ‘yes’ but all that came out was a pain-filed squeak. He nodded, curled in on himself, trying to find a position that didn't hurt or that at least hurt less. Even less pain would be fine.

Darcey walked past him again, toward the bathroom, gently resting his hand on the back of Jordan's head as he passed. Jordan sat quietly, trying to breathe, trying to force it not to hurt even though he knew he couldn't. Then, the soft rush of the tap turning on and off, and Darcey was beside him again, taking his food and handing him a cup of water.

“Half or full dose?” he asked.

“Full.” Jordan's voice was soft and strained. Tears pricked at his eyes, sharp, but he couldn't start crying. The uneven heaving of his breath had hurt so much the last time he did.

The rattle of the pill bottle as Darcey shook them out into his hand. He dropped two pills into Jordan’s palm, and he popped them back as Darcey wrapped the food back up and put it back in the bag.

“I’ll just put this in the fridge for now,” he said as he stood. It was only moments before he was back with his hand on Jordan's shoulder, pressing their foreheads together. “Let me wrap you back up and you can lie down for a while. You can finish eating when the painkillers start to kick in, okay?”

Jordan nodded, so grateful that Darcey was there to take control of the situation, because he'd thought he'd known what pain felt like, he'd thought he could handle anything, but this, this took all the air out of him and wrenched his stomach with nausea and dropped his feet from under him, leaving him dizzy and fuzzy, a mess of misery wracking his entire body even though only his chest got cut up.

He opened his eyes halfway at the brush of hands and the bandages slick with antibacterial cream. Darcey was so gentle, barely touching, as he taped the gauze squares to Jordan’s chest. But despite that, and even though Jordan tried to stay quiet, he couldn't stop the occasional whimper that fell from his mouth.

“I'm sorry.” Darcey whispered. His voice was tight. “I know. I'm trying.”

Jordan nodded. “I know,” he whispered back. Darcey slowed down when he reached Jordan's sides, moving carefully around the tubing. The one time he jostled them the pain had nearly knocked Jordan unconscious.

He started to remind Darcey anyway. “Be careful of the –”

“Be careful of the –”

Finally the bandage was taped, and Darcey helped Jordan adjust himself so he could lie down. Darcey gave Jordan an extra pillow so he could prop himself up, since he had difficulty breathing on his back. Darcey sat beside him once he was situated, leaning against the backboard, and gently hooked a curl behind Jordan's ear. Jordan smiled softly, thankfully, glad that Darcey could always understand, because he didn't know if he could even say 'thank you' right now. It was amazing how much energy the pain took out of him. He sighed softly in disappointment.

“What?” Darcey asked. He was still stroking Jordan's hair, fingernails gently scratching above his ear.
“I just realized I'm going to be stuck at home for at least a month. It's going to suck.”

“I'll come over as much as I can so you won't be alone,” Darcey said. “And Terrence and Iffy are going to come over to hang out with you when you get sick of me.”

Jordan turned his head to admonish him, but Darcey was smiling. Jordan smiled back.

The medication hit him, then, thick and fuzzy in his head, like bees covered in cotton.

“Do you want me to put on one of the DVDs we brought?” Darcey asked.

“If you want,” Jordan whispered. His words were slurred, his tongue heavy. In about ten minutes it would feel like he didn't even have a chest anymore.

Darcey gently rearranged Jordan so he could stand without jostling him too much. There was the rustling of his bookbag, the snap of his laptop case. The click of a plug and the whir of the computer starting up. The bed sank when Darcey sat back down, his leg pressed against Jordan's, and Jordan leaned into him, his head heavy on Darcey's shoulder. Then, a few minutes later, the opening song for the second season of Black Adder drifted softly through the room, and he smiled and opened his eyes.

“This is one of my favorites,” he whispered. His words were slow and sticky, like his mouth was filled with honey.

“I figured,” Darcey said. “Whenever I go over I never see it on the shelf with your other DVDs. It's always out on top of the TV or on the coffee table or on your desk. I figured you probably watch it a lot.”

Jordan gently patted Darcey's knee. It took all of his energy just to lift his wrist. “This is why you're the best boyfriend,” he murmured. “Because you notice all the things.”

“All of them?” Darcey asked. The laugh in his voice made Jordan smile. Darcey’s laughter was such a beautiful sound.

“All of them,” Jordan whispered, slow, slurred together like one word. Darcey laughed again and gently kissed Jordan’s temple, pressing closer, and Jordan smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Come hang out with me at indecentpause.tumblr.com and find short stories, word of the day fics, memes, and general writing bullshittery!
Darcey loved Jordan. He did. But his boyfriend was driving him insane.

Jordan was bored and lonely and Darcey knew that, and he knew that they were alike in that they both needed things to do, to accomplish, things with visible results, and lying around in bed was probably making Jordan as crazy as his constant texts were making Darcey. But… Darcey needed a break. He had no problem going over to Jordan's every day; he wanted to check up on him and make sure he was doing okay. But when he was out doing things he couldn't stop to check his phone every two minutes, especially when he was at work. Breaks were fine, but Macy frowned very strongly upon cell phone use on the clock.

But he was so terrible with words, he was afraid to ask Jordan to stop because he'd probably say it wrong and hurt his feelings. Jordan wasn't being needy or clingy. He just… texted him, all the time, any time anything happened, ever.

It was late December and Jordan's recovery was going along fine. Darcey had been so worried in the beginning, afraid Jordan would end up with an infection or a tear, but the tubes and stitches had come out and he was slowly getting on his way. The bright red where the incisions were made had faded to a soft pink, and while it was still obvious against Jordan's dark skin, in time, it would get better.

And he looked really, really good.

He was gorgeous.

Jordan had been shying away from Darcey’s gaze whenever the healing incisions were visible, but Darcey didn't even notice them. He didn't think Jordan believed him when he said it, but… damn. He was much too busy looking at other things to notice any potential scarring.

He tended to catch himself thinking about it a little too much when he didn't have anything going on, during slow patches at work or long bus rides. At first he felt bad about it. Then, when Jordan got so upset the first time he caught Darcey staring, thinking he was looking at the incisions, and Darcey said God, no, you are just… fucking glorious, Jordan was so taken aback he was silent for at least a solid minute.

But then, when he'd finally smiled, big and bright and showing all his teeth, it made Darcey's heart melt, and he didn't feel bad at all for appreciating his boyfriend's body anymore.

It was about 7:30 on a Wednesday morning and Darcey was on his way out to work. He finally opened his phone to check the five new texts from Jordan he'd been avoiding, the last one from about a half hour previous. Four of them were along the same vein of I know you're busy getting ready for work but I just thought of this thing I wanted to tell you. The most recent simply said;

Sorry if I'm being annoying. I'm just so bored! Do you think you'll be able to come over after work?

Darcey rolled his eyes, but smiled. He closed and locked the door behind him as he texted back.

Sure. Out at five, like always. Taking the bus today so it'll be a while until I can get there.
He paused at the mailbox, and as he opened it to make sure someone had brought in yesterday’s mail, another text came through.

Awesome. Thank you so much for putting up with me and my bullshit. I love you. :)

A smile pulled at the corner of his mouth. Thankfully it seemed like he wouldn't have to bring it up at all.

Don't worry about it. I understand. I love you.

Darcey stood by the mailbox at the end of the walkway as he shuffled through the mail. Credit card offers, something about an auto loan that was probably a scam, and –

He froze. It was more of his paperwork.

He stuffed the other mail back into the box and ripped open the envelope. It was only one page, barely a paragraph.

It was done. The paperwork had gone through. He'd been officially discharged.

It didn't hit him as hard as he'd thought it would. He must have gotten out all of the emotional upheaval when he was filling out the paperwork last month. He'd known this was what the result would be and that appealing would be useless, so he didn't try. He didn’t even want to.

Maybe he'd been holding out in the hopes that Mrs. Petersen would be able to get something done, but he hadn't been expecting anything else. Both of them had known it was just a matter of when, and as far as his parents knew, it had already been done.

His workday was like any other, adoptions and cleaning and paperwork, but around 2:30, a young woman came in with a soaking wet cat in terrible shape. She was missing an eye and an ear and was much too skinny, shaking from the cold. Darcey dried her off and paged Macy to call the vet to see what needed to be done to patch up her injuries, and when he left her in a kennel to wait for the vet, she jumped at the door as he walked away, screaming, like if he would only come back, everything would be better.

The vet came in not long after and Darcey took her back to the kennel, but when he opened the door, the little cat jumped on his leg, trying to climb up his pants, but she couldn't get a grip because she had been declawed. She had once been someone's pet. She'd been abandoned. The vet scooped her up to take her back to the examination room, and the little cat cried all the way there.

Darcey couldn't get the one-eyed cat out of his mind the rest of the afternoon. At 4:30, he'd decided: he was taking her home. It was so unlikely anyone else would, and even though it was a no-kill shelter, the idea of any cat having to stay in such a tiny area for such a long time killed him. They were meant as a holding place, not a home. He sent a quick text to Jess underneath the desk when the main room was empty: I'm bringing one of the cats home. Can you pick me up from work so I don't have to take her on the bus?

sure honey! i can't wait to meet the kitty! i'll get some things for her on my way! love you!

Darcey smiled and rolled his eyes at the familiar overuse of exclamation points and called Macy, back in her office, from the desk phone.
“Macy here.”

“Hey, Macy, it's Darcey up at the front desk. I want to adopt the cat that was brought in earlier, the one-eyed one?”

“Of course! At about ten 'til we'll run up the paperwork.”

“Thanks.”

Darcey could have recited the paperwork from memory at this point, so filling it out took no time at all, and he was soon the new owner of a tiny cat. When he went back with Macy to pick her up, she looked a bit better than she had when she came in: her eye socket was stitched up and her ear stump was clean, and she was dry. Her fur was orange and white and puffy and everywhere and made up at least half of her size. Darcey scooped her up and gently tucked her in the cardboard transport box, and when he closed the lid, her meows drowned out all the other ones nearby. Darcey gently shushed her and Macy laughed.

“It looks more like she's adopted you!” she said.

“I guess,” Darcey chuckled.

Jess was waiting for him outside, and even though she insisted on seeing the cat right away, Darcey refused to let her out until they got back home in case she started running around.

She didn't. When they got home and he let her out, she rubbed up against his leg, purring like a lawnmower, and she got even louder when Darcey picked her up.

“You need a name,” he said. “We didn't get a chance to give you one back at the shelter.”

Jess smiled as she watched her son with the tiny cat in his big hands and big arms. He gently bopped her nose and she meowed, and he laughed and scratched the nape of her neck.

“How about Puff?” he asked. He looked up at Jess. “You should have seen her when –” He trailed off when he saw the gentle smile on her face. “What?” he chuckled softly.

“I haven't seen you smile like that since you and Jordan started dating,” she said. “I know you've been having a hard time, Darcey. I'm just glad there are still things that can make you this happy. I know you wanted to work in a restaurant, but I think for now, the cat shelter's been a good place for you.”

Darcey smiled. “Yeah, I really lucked out. They're all good people there. And there's no such thing as a bad cat.” He looked back at Puff again and asked, “Right?” She meowed and curled into the crook of his arm, her back legs hanging off in the air. “Hey,” he said, looking back at Jess again, “Can I borrow your car for the evening? It'd make it a lot easier to visit Jordan.”

“Sure,” she said. “I'm done for the day. How is he?”

“Getting better,” Darcey said. “The surgery took a lot out of him, but he's recovering. He's still tired a lot and in a lot of pain, but we've pretty much passed the threshold where it would be easy to create a major injury, at least. He won't be better to come over for Hanukkah, though.”

Jess nodded, then opened her mouth, but hesitated. Finally she said, “What was it for?”

Darcey's arm tightened a little on Puff, but she just started purring louder. “I… he asked me not to talk to people about it. He's really private about this kind of thing.”
Jess looked at Darcey carefully, then said, “Well, just tell me this, then: he's safe, right?”

“Yeah,” Darcey said. “He's safe.”

Jess smiled. “Good.”

When Darcey got to Jordan's apartment, he shuffled through the keys on his ring to find the one he needed to let himself in. He smiled at its bare weight in his hand, the warmth of the metal from the car heater. Sometimes he thought about asking his parents about giving Jordan a key to their house, but he hadn't. He was afraid to. Phoenix was his home again and he'd settled in, but he was so used to having to pack up and move at a moment's notice that it felt like tempting fate to put down too many roots.

He shook the thought out of his head as he let himself in, knocking on the door to announce his presence.

“Hey, Jordan, I got –”

He cut himself off when he saw a man in the kitchen, taken so off guard that, for a moment, he couldn't react.

“Who the hell are you?” he finally managed to ask. The man turned around, a mug in his hand, half to his mouth. He was tall, taller than Darcey, with a messy mop of brown hair and dark brown eyes. Husky.

“Uh, rude,” he said, but his mouth was pulled up in a tight-lipped smile. “I was Jordan's babysitter for the past twenty four hours or so. You should be thanking me for giving you some downtime so you can sleep or work or something.”

Realization dawned and the back of Darcey's neck burned with embarrassment. “Sorry,” he said. “Tact isn't my strong point.”

The man laughed and started walking toward Darcey as he closed and locked the door behind him.

“You must be Darcey,” he said. “I can't think of anyone else Jordan would be willing to give a key to.” He held out his hand. Darcey shook it. “Terrence,” he finally introduced himself. He nodded back toward the bedroom and said, “He and Iffy are back watching one of their shitty romantic comedies. I actually think he just dozed off, but if you want to go back and check on him, go for it.”

Darcey nodded and thanked him. Terrence followed him back to the bedroom and as Darcey was about to walk in the door, he said, “You don't talk much, do you?”

Darcey shrugged. “I guess not.”

Terrence grinned. “I, on the other hand, never shut up, so by the end of the day we'll either be best friends or want to kill each other.”

Darcey chuckled. “I guess we'll see.” He turned back to the bedroom, peering in the door. Jordan was asleep, propped up on a bunch of pillows, arms on his stomach and head rolled back. Iffy was next to him, curled up around a pillow. Her normally straight hair was pulled back in a tight, puffy ponytail. She peered up at him when he cleared his throat.
“Hey,” she said softly. “Come in.”

Darcey stepped in, sitting down on Jordan's other side, lifting his hand to his lips to kiss his palm. When Darcey jostled him, he opened his eyes, turning his head toward the movement. His face lit up, the brightest smile Darcey had seen on him in weeks.

“Darcey,” Jordan said. His voice was still soft with sleep, but the joy and excitement in it was clear. “I'm so glad you're here. Now it's a party with all of my favorite people!”

Darcey smiled, and it took him a moment to do so, but he leaned down to press a gentle kiss to Jordan's forehead, then his lips. Knowing that there were other people so close was a little uncomfortable, but these were Jordan's best friends. Jordan smiled. He pointed over at Terrence.

“That's Terrence,” he said softly. Darcey glanced over his shoulder to see him nodding.

“We've met,” Terrence said.

“Oh, good,” Jordan grinned. His words were slow, deliberate, like he had to think very hard to say them.

“Did you have to take your painkillers earlier?” Darcey asked. Jordan's mouth turned down in a frown.

“Yeah,” he said. He dragged the word out, slowly. “It was a really bad night.” He reached out to his other side, and when he finally found Iffy's knee, he patted it twice. “Iffy was my knight in shining armor and gave me pills.” She chuckled and shook her head as he pointed over at Terrence again. “And Terrence fed me food so the pills wouldn't destroy my stomach. It was a group effort.”

Darcey smiled and nodded his thanks to the both of them. He looked back at Jordan, who saw the residual stress on his face from that morning's letter. His smile faded and he said, “Darcey, what's wrong?”

Darcey paused, then looked over at Iffy, over his shoulder at Terrence. “Could you give us a few minutes?” he asked softly. Terrence glanced down at Darcey's hands, up at his face, then over at Iffy. The tremor had gotten worse again. Why was he so nervous?

“Come on,” Terrence said. Iffy glanced over at Darcey, then Jordan. She stood and paused the movie. They left the room and Terrence closed the door behind them.

“Darcey?” Jordan asked again. He tried to push himself up so he could sit and Darcey helped him readjust the pillows so he could lean back against the wall at the head of the bed.

“The paperwork came in,” he said softly. He shifted the last pillow and looked up at Jordan again. “Everything's been finalized.”

Suddenly, he was afraid Jordan was going to be disappointed in him. Angry. Upset. He didn't know what. But Jordan's face said none of those things. He was just… sad.

“I'm sorry,” he said softly. He slowly lifted his arm to rest his hand on Darcey's.

“Careful,” Darcey said quickly.

“I'm okay,” Jordan said. “I can't lift them over my head yet, but this is fine. I'm getting more of my range back.” He slowly leaned toward Darcey, who closed the distance to give Jordan a kiss.
“Are you okay?” Jordan asked.

“I…” Darcey paused, trying to figure out what the answer to that question was. “I am, yeah,” he said softly, even disbeliefing. “I know it really messed me up, but… it was better this way.” He lowered his eyes, taking Jordan's hand, watching their fingers twine together. “If I hadn't been kicked out, I would be in Iraq right now instead of here with you, with my family. If I were even still alive.”

“You what?” Jordan asked. Darcey looked up. There was something in Jordan’s eyes he couldn't quite read.

“Yeah,” Darcey whispered. “I was slated to go on my third tour. They stop-lossed me. I was supposed to retire three days after the date they scheduled me to ship out.”

Jordan's eyes darted over Darcey's face. “You never told me,” he whispered.

“Not a lot of people know,” Darcey whispered back. He dropped his head, the back of his neck bright with the sharp burn of shame. Now Jordan knew. He wasn't some honorable, brave soldier. He was just a coward who wanted to come home.

But then Jordan's hand was on the side of his face and he looked up, and where he was afraid of seeing judgment, there was only understanding. Jordan smiled softly and said, “I know it's fucked up, but I'm glad it happened this way. I know it's selfish. But I'm glad you're here.” He licked his lips, the slight flash of pink tongue. “I'm really proud of you, Darcey. You've come a long way.”

The confusion was clear on Darcey's face.

“You're talking about it, now,” Jordan said. “You never did before. Like your arm when I first came out of surgery? That was the first time you told me anything in detail.”

Darcey looked away, the back of his neck uncomfortably hot. “That was just –”

“I know,” Jordan said. “I know why you did it. It's the fact that you did it at all. Even if it only seems like little pieces of detail to you, it's huge, Darcey.”

Darcey chuckled. “Yeah, well, I still have a long way to go.”

“That’s okay,” Jordan said. “I still have a long way to go with all of my personal bullshit, too.” His hand was still on Darcey’s cheek, warm and soft. “What about good things?” he asked softly. “You have to have at least one funny or positive memory.”

Darcey’s mind snapped back to basic training, forward to Korea, back to Louisiana and then forward again to the same base, different apartment.

“I did see a lot of really awesome shit when I was over in Korea for a year,” he finally said. “And I made a lot of money eating things Campbell and Doc bet me I wouldn’t.”

A bright smile spread across Jordan’s face. “That’s the first time you’ve told me anybody’s name. Who were they? Friends?”

“Doc was,” Darcey said. “He had this really complicated last name nobody could pronounce, so we nicknamed him. He got Doc because he was a medic. During basic I was Cupcake because my name is typically feminine, but apparently there’s a new Cupcake now.” Jordan snorted a little and covered his mouth to stifle a laugh. “Campbell was… sort of a friend. He was more like a brother in that we cared about each other a lot but didn’t necessarily like each other all the time.”
Jordan chuckled. “I know the bad times were really fucked up,” he said, “and I know you can’t erase them. I don’t even know if we should try to erase the bad things. But you’re working on it. And you’re getting there. And that’s what matters.”

Darcey gently rested his hand against the side of Jordan’s neck, his thumb grazing the smaller man’s jaw. Jordan leaned into it with a soft sigh.

“Thanks, Jordan,” Darcey whispered.

“I haven’t done anything.”

“You’ve done a lot more than you realize.”

Jordan smiled.

Darcey slowly pulled his hand away and stood. “Let’s bring your friends back in so you can spend some time with them before you fall asleep again.”

Jordan laughed softly, wincing only a little bit, now. “They can wait,” he said, but he nodded toward the door anyway.

Darcey opened the door and stepped out, looking toward the kitchen, which was empty, then around the corner to the living room and the tiny TV Jordan had downgraded to to pull together the last of the money for the surgery, where Iffy and Terrence were playing a mini-game on Pokémon Stadium. “Hey, guys,” he said. They paused the game and turned around. “We’re done talking. Thanks for giving us the time.”

They both stood, leaving the game paused and the controllers on the couch. “Everything okay?” Iffy’s expression was worried.


Terrence whacked his shoulder as he walked by. His hands were huge and heavy and he knocked Darcey forward a half-step. “Good,” he laughed. “I’d hate to have to kill you, especially when Jordan likes you so much.”

Before Darcey could respond, Iffy punched him in the side and said, “Dude, not okay! Darcey is, like, the sweetest guy I know, and I will not have you giving him death threats!”

Terrence looked over his shoulder at Darcey. “Sorry,” he said. “I’m just really protective of him. He’s like my little brother.”

“I understand,” Darcey said. He’d do anything to protect Jordan, too, and wasn’t surprised his boyfriend would have the same effect on other people.

Terrence looked down at Iffy and nodded back toward Darcey. “He always this quiet?”

“Usually,” Iffy said. Darcey rolled his eyes, but a ghost of a smile pulled at his lips.

They all piled back into the bedroom, where Jordan was waiting with a mischievous grin. “He’s only quiet until he gets comfortable with you.” Darcey gave him a half grin and cleared his throat. His nose was warm. Hopefully he wasn’t blushing. But Iffy and Terrence weren’t stupid and would know exactly what Jordan was insinuating. Iffy glanced up at him, then did a double take. Her eyes went wide and a huge grin spread across her face.

“Oh my god, Darcey, I had no idea you were so adorable!” she said. Darcey’s shoulders hunched
in a little and he looked down.

“Iffy, no,” he mumbled. But he was still smiling. It was strange being noticed by anyone other than Jordan. He’d gotten adept at blending in with everyone around him and becoming invisible.

Terrence glanced back over at Darcey and took a sip of his coffee before looking back at Jordan again.

“Yeah. You can keep him,” he said. Darcey’s eyes snapped over, back to Jordan. He was flipping Terrence off with both hands.

“No shit, I’m keeping him,” he said. He lowered his hands and gestured Darcey over. “Come sit with me and get away from my asshole friends.”

“Excuse you!” Iffy cried. Darcey glanced over and chuckled at the scandalized look on her face.

“Friend,” Jordan corrected. Iffy nodded curtly and smiled, starting the movie back up and sitting down on the bed.

“So, what is this?” Darcey asked, pointing at the screen.

“My Best Friend’s Wedding,” Iffy answered cheerfully. She looked over at Jordan and gently leaned her head against his shoulder. “I like coming over here because my roommate hates romantic comedies, but Jordan will watch them with me.”

“I like it when she comes over so I don’t have to watch them with him,” Terrence grinned.

Jordan gave him a Look. Darcey laughed. He looked back at the screen again, but even though he loved Jordan and they had the same taste in almost everything, it was clear there were some things they didn’t agree on, because he didn’t see how anyone could watch a full two hours of this. Terrence saw it on his face and offered an exit.

“Want a cup of coffee?” he asked. “We still have some. You’ll have to put it together yourself, though, because I only know how to make it how I like it. I’m not a fancy barista like Jordan.”

“Thank you.” Darcey kissed Jordan as he stood. Jordan smiled and hummed happily, gently grasping Darcey’s hand as he moved away.

“Help yourself to anything,” he called after them. “But don’t touch the chocolate bar in the freezer. Anything else is yours!”

Terrence followed Darcey out into the kitchen, and he had the sudden realization that this wasn’t just an out from the movie. Terrence wanted him alone, to check him out, to make sure he would treat Jordan well.

“I know Jordan can do varying strengths and stuff, but mine is just the normal way. I’m not a cook like him. Or you, apparently?”

“I guess.” The words were casual, but Darcey was on edge, now. He knew that Jordan knew Terrence through BashBack, but he didn’t know what they knew about him. Jordan had been secretive about it.

Darcey poured himself a cup of coffee, then checked Jordan’s fridge for milk. It was looking bare. He’d have to have Jordan make him a list and go out shopping for him. There was a small amount of half and half from the last quiche he’d made, so he used that.
“You ever think of doing it professionally?” Terrence asked.

“I'd love to,” Darcey said. “But I have no experience so nobody is willing to hire me so I can get some. Right now I work at a cat shelter.”

“The one downtown?” Terrence asked. He poured himself another cup of coffee, dousing it in sugar.

Darcey nodded and took a sip of his own coffee. Terrence grinned. “That's where my roommate got her cat.”

“So what do you do?” Darcey asked, more to get Terrence talking about himself and to get the focus off of him than anything.

“I'm in law school full time,” he said. “I live with a couple friends out in Glendale because they're cool with me only working part-time and they give me a break on rent since I sleep on the couch instead of a room.” He glanced up at Darcey. “You in school?”

Darcey shook his head and didn't elaborate.

“Yeah, I guess it'd be hard to adjust to something like that after being in the Army so long. Finals and papers would probably just seem like a load of bullshit.”

Darcey paused, watching Terrence carefully, trying to judge exactly where the conversation was going. Terrence clearly wasn't baiting him. What was he trying to do? To get him to admit it, like it was some terrible secret?

“Yeah,” he said simply. “Civilian life is a lot different.”

They both stood there quietly, watching each other. Sizing each other up.

“You know, you don't act like a military serviceman,” Terrence finally said. He put his cup down, leaning his hip against the counter, casual. Darcey's shoulders relaxed a little.

“What's that supposed to mean?” he asked. His voice was harsher than he'd meant it to be. He cringed.

Terrence didn't flinch. “You're just really chill,” he said. “Laid back. And respectful.”

Darcey took another sip of his coffee to buy himself some time while he gathered his thoughts.

“We're not all a bunch of raging asshole alpha-males, Terrence,” he finally said, softly, seriously. “Some are, yeah. That's how I ended up here. But the majority of us are good people just trying to do the right thing.”

“Yeah, well, I could say some things about that,” Terrence said, picking up his coffee. “But I won't.”

Darcey didn't push. He didn't want to have this conversation right now. Or ever. He didn't know how well he could defend a lot of his past actions if he had to, and he'd come so far in his treatment. It had been an entire week since he'd had a flashback or nightmare. He tried not to think of his time in active duty outside of therapy. It was getting easier to separate himself from it, and he didn't want to jeopardize that.

“Well, thanks for keeping it to yourself,” he said. He'd gotten halfway through his coffee now, thankfully, because his hands were shaking so hard he'd spill it everywhere otherwise. He put it
down on the counter and slipped his hands in his hoodie pockets, trying to hide them.

Terrence gestured at them and said, “You okay? What's with your hands?”

“It's a tremor,” Darcey said quietly, firmly. He didn't elaborate. Not everyone was understanding like Jordan, and Terrence, while not being antagonistic, clearly wasn't interested in hearing his side of anything. “No big deal. I've had it for years. I manage.”

Terrence didn't push. Instead, he said, “Be good to him, okay?”

The suddenness of the subject change threw Darcey off guard. He was quiet for a moment, but then, he nodded. “Yeah,” he said. It probably wasn't what Terrence was looking for, but emotional talks weren't his thing. He could do it with Jordan, sort of. But with someone who was practically a stranger? There was too much potential for vulnerability.

“He really loves you,” Terrence continued.

“I know.” Darcey was finally smiling, for the first time in the conversation.

“No,” Terrence said. He locked eyes with Darcey and said firmly, “He really, really loves you. He's completely devoted to you. He was willing to give up BashBack for you if he had to. That's fucking huge, Darcey.

The surprise was clear on Darcey's face. He shook his head in disbelief. “I never asked him to –”

“I know,” Terrence interrupted. “But some… fights, have gone down, and we don't really know what's going to happen next. Nobody's talked about it since it happened. But he never, not for a second, considered leaving you.”

Darcey fell silent. Finally, he murmured, “He didn't tell me.”

Terrence shook his head. “He wouldn't. He would've been afraid you'd feel like he was blaming you when it's really just the bullshit politics our group has going on. A lot of them can't see past the word 'military' to the person behind it, which is so stupid because people do that to us all the time. It still hasn't been resolved, but…” He trailed off and shrugged.

“Look,” Darcey said. His hands were still trembling in his pockets, curled into fists. “I'm not sure what you're trying to get me to say or do. But I love Jordan like hell. He's one of the most important people in the world to me. I'd protect him with my life, and I am dead serious when I say that.”

Terrence smiled, wide enough to show his teeth for the first time – crooked, but bright white. He nodded once and took a sip of his coffee.

“Good,” he said. “Because he doesn't deserve any less.”

“I know.”

Darcey picked up his coffee and smiled into his cup. His hands were calmer now, both wrapped around the mug.

“Sometimes I don't know why he's with me, of all people,” he murmured, more to himself, but Terrence heard it anyway and looked up again.

“Jordan's smart,” he said. “He's impulsive and reckless and emotional, but he's smart, and he knows how to take care of himself and the kinds of people he needs to have around him. If he's
dated you this long, especially despite your time in the military, it's for a damn good reason. He doesn't hold on to broken relationships. If it's clear it's not going to work, he gets himself out.” He paused and put his coffee down, leaning back against the counter and sticking his hands in his pockets. “You must be pretty fucking special for him to hold onto you so tightly despite the trouble it could potentially cause.” He looked over at Darcey again, his face soft and serious. “Take care of him, okay?”

Darcey nodded. “Of course.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to those who have read this far! There are five more chapters coming, but i have to skip next week because I'll be out of town. Thanks for your patience.

As always, you can visit me at indecentpause.tumblr.com for words of the day, short stories, memes, and tons of Shakespeare bs!
In less than an hour, Darcey and Jordan were going up for a two day snow weekend in Flagstaff.

Jordan was scheduled to go back to work next week, and while Darcey needed to be careful with his money, Jordan would be able to start paying him back soon, and he'd managed to save up enough for a small weekend vacation. It had been his first winter without snow in a long time and it was already near the end of February, so time was running out, even up north in the mountains. Their plans had been rushed and last minute, but they were able to find a nice hotel that wasn't too expensive. The rooms were big and nicely decorated with king sized beds and fireplaces. Darcey was pleased with his find.

It was Friday morning and Jess had just brought in the mail after taking Ally and Lexi to school.

"You have a letter," she said. He looked up from his coffee and took the envelope as she continued to go through the rest of the mail. He choked on his coffee when he looked closer at it.

Puff rubbed up against his ankles and jumped into his lap, curling up on his knees as he opened the letter. He skimmed over it. Then he read it again, slowly, because it couldn't have said what he thought it was saying. It was impossible. Mrs. Petersen would have called, right?

His GI Bill and health insurance had been reinstated.

He could go to the Culinary Institute of America.

A disbelieving grin crossed his face. His hands shook as he stared at the letter in front of him, but then, just as suddenly, his smile dropped and a sharp stab of fear hit the back of his neck.

In New York.

He'd have to move away. Would Jordan move with him? Would he be willing to pack up his life and go running across the country for him? Darcey knew how much Jordan loved him and supported his career goals, but he didn't know the answer to that question.

He glanced over at his laptop, pushed to the side while he had his morning coffee. Puff was up against his chest, now, paws on his shirt, meowing softly. He looked down at her and gently petted the back of her neck. She butted against his wrist and licked his thumb. She could sense his anxiety and was trying to help.

"Is something wrong?"

Darcey looked up. Jess stood to his side, still sorting through the remaining mail. But she'd paused, watching him.

"My GI Bill and health insurance have been reinstated," he said softly.

Jess dropped the mail and her hands shot to her mouth. “Oh my goodness! Darcey! That's wonderful!”
“Yeah,” he murmured, but it was distracted. He scooped Puff up in one arm and nuzzled her head near her ear, and with his other hand he pulled the laptop closer. He was getting ahead of himself. He didn't even know if he met the minimum requirements.

*Maybe I shouldn't look,* he told himself, even as he opened the web browser and googled the school's name. Maybe it was just better to keep moving. A lot had changed. Things were different. But if he didn't at least *apply*…

He might not even be accepted. Even if he were, he could turn it down. But he had to know if he had what it took or he'd never stop wondering.

He pulled up their website, skimmed over the front page, clicked on admissions.

As long as they'd accept his time cooking in the Army as real world experience, he *did* meet the minimum requirements. His eyes jumped over the start dates. One in April, one in June. He could apply.

So he did, page by page. It didn't take long.

Once he submitted everything, he sat back, his laptop still open, and stared at the screen for a few minutes. Puff meowed softly, and when he didn't respond, she stepped onto his keyboard and butted her head against his chest, rubbing her cheek against him. He absently started petting her, but he couldn't stop thinking, *But now what do I tell Jordan?*

“Darcey?”

He looked back at Jess again and vocalized it. She paused. Her smile faded.

“So you still want to go to the same school in New York or have you changed your mind?”

“I don’t know,” Darcey said honestly.

He was going to tell Jordan his GI Bill and health insurance were reinstated. But should he tell him he applied? He wasn't planning on going even if he was accepted. Right? But if he *was* accepted… he'd been wanting to go to the CIA since he was in high school. Would he be *able* to turn it down?

He was getting ahead of himself. It could be weeks, even months before he heard back. One day at a time.

“Well,” Jess said. “I think you should figure that out first. If you want to go to a local school or not, or if you even still want to go to school at all. And then work from there.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Thanks, Mom.”

He glanced at the clock on his laptop. 0915.

“I've got to get going,” he said. He stood, hugging his mom and kissing her cheek. “Thanks for letting me borrow the car for the weekend.”

“You're welcome,” she smiled.

When Darcey got to Jordan's apartment and his boyfriend opened the door, his grin was big and
bright and his whole body was in it. He jumped on Darcey, wrapping his arms around his shoulders and pulling his shirt collar down to bring him into a kiss.

“I know I've said thank you, like, ten hundred times,” he said. “But I'm saying it again. Thank you, Darcey. This is so exciting! I've never been on a vacation before, not even a weekend one.”

Darcey grinned, one of his hands still wrapped around Jordan's waist, keeping him close. He glanced over at the hand on his shoulder, then back down at Jordan again, and his smile widened. “You can lift your arms up higher now,” he said.

“I know, right?” Jordan laughed. “It's a little sore but as long as I don't try to lift anything or move too fast I can lift them all the way up!” He slowly raised his hands over his head, arms stretched, palms toward the ceiling. Darcey pulled him into another kiss. Jordan lowered his arms, curling his fingers in Darcey's hair.

“I hope there's snow,” he said. “I've only seen snow once and it melted as soon as it hit the ground.”

“There's supposed to be,” Darcey said. He stepped back and Jordan grabbed his bag, following him out and locking the door behind him.

“I brought a cord to connect my iPod to the radio since it's such a long trip,” he said. “So if you want to bring yours?”

Jordan smiled, that little crooked half-smile that just showed his front teeth, the one that made Darcey want to kiss him all over his gorgeous face. “Packed.”

They headed down the stairs and Jordan threw his bag into the backseat of the car, plopping down in the passenger's seat beside Darcey. He handed Jordan his iPod, already plugged in, and started the car.

“You get to be the DJ again,” he smiled. Jordan grinned back and started shuffling through the music. He paused, then looked up with a smile.

“I didn't know you like Skybox,” he said.

“Brett got me into them,” Darcey said. He looked over his shoulder and started to back out as Jordan started the playlist. “He sent it to me not long before I came back home. We stayed connected through music a lot of the time.”

Darcey went out onto the main street, following it north for as far as he could before he finally had to get on the freeway. His hands tensed a little around the steering wheel, his shoulders and neck tightened, and there was so much tension coiled up in his muscles that he actually jumped when Jordan said, “Are you okay?”

Darcey laughed nervously, trying to shake out his shoulders and calm himself down.

“Yeah,” he said. He glanced over at Jordan, then back at the street. “I just really hate freeways. I haven't been on one since I started having trouble with anxiety, so I'm pretty nervous. That's all.”

He couldn't see Jordan's face, too busy watching the road. But when Jordan rested his hand on his knee, it was comforting, and it helped, and every time Darcey tensed, Jordan gently squeezed back.

As they drew closer to the I-17, Darcey went over two streets where he knew there would be a light to merge on. It took longer, but it was easier on his nerves. Jordan didn't even ask.
Once he was actually on the freeway, it wasn't too bad. It was like driving on a fast street without having to deal with traffic lights. It took a while, but slowly he relaxed back into his normal driving position, leaning back against the seat, hands loose on the wheel instead of hunched over and tensed up.

Slowly, the billboards and buildings faded into cacti and palo verde trees, hills and mountains leaning up in the distance. The dusting of white on the mountains up ahead gave Darcey hope that the forecast was right, that there was snow, at least where they would be staying. And then, slowly again, instead of cacti and palo verde trees, there were pine trees and cabins, and then, once they reached the city, the buildings came back. They would keep going, a little more north. Darcey had specifically picked a hotel he knew would be out of the way, even though it would still have easy access to the city.

He wanted it to be special, especially since Jordan told him he'd never been on a vacation before. He wanted it to be romantic.

He wanted it to show Jordan how important he was to him.

Jordan's nose was plastered against the window, one of his hands up against it. His eyes were wide and excited as they kept going past the city, up the bare incline of the road. The snow was in tiny patches at first, a little in this clump of grass and a little by the trunk of that tree, but slowly more and more of it appeared and a bright smile crossed Darcey's face.

“There is snow!” Jordan laughed. He bounced a little in his seat, then whirled to Darcey with a bright smile on his face. “I'm going to get you with a snowball so good, Darcey,”

Darcey laughed brightly as he followed the twisting road deeper into the forest. “I'm not afraid to whitewash you, Jordan,” he threatened.

“What?” Jordan asked. His eyebrows were furrowed, confused.

“Chicago slang,” Darcey half-explained. “Something Doc taught me. Hit me with a snowball and you'll find out.”

A mischievous grin spread across Jordan's lips and he raised his eyebrows. “Hm,” he said. “We'll see.”

Finally, a little over two hours after leaving Jordan's apartment, they arrived. The hotel was more like a small collection of tiny cabins, which was even better than what Darcey had planned. He found a parking space up near the office. He stepped out of the car and Jordan bounced out behind him.

“You okay to come in?” Darcey asked. Jordan gave him a bright grin.

“I'm fine,” he said. “I can't, like, go run a marathon or go swimming or anything like that, but I'm okay to do simple things.”

Darcey smiled and nodded, and Jordan kissed his shoulder before they went into the office.

The check-in process went smoothly until the very end when the woman behind the desk said, “Mr. Walker, I apologize, but there was a mix-up. For some reason your paperwork in my computer says that you reserved a room with a single king-sized bed, but obviously you'll be needing two beds?” She glanced over at Jordan, then back to Darcey, waiting. Jordan's mouth was tight, his shoulders tense.
“No,” Darcey said softly. “Uh, the, um, the one bed is right. We don't need two.”

“Are you sure?” she pressed. “The change would be no trouble.”

“No,” he repeated, a little firmer this time. “We only need one bed.”

Her eyebrows furrowed and Darcey's hand curled into a nervous fist. The back of his neck burned, sharp, his eyes on the woman's hands and not her face. Jordan's head was up, staring directly at her, unashamed and unafraid. Darcey wished he could say the same for himself.

“But…” she started, and then the realization crossed her face. She turned a little pink and her eyes went wide. Her voice was shaky and nervous when she said, “Oh, okay then. Um, just let me get your keys then, sir. Sirs. Um. Yes, just a second.” She looked down and her hands fumbled under the desk, then she handed Darcey a small envelope with two keycards inside. Jordan smiled and nodded once, and even though he was a little embarrassed, Darcey still managed a smile, too, and offered her a polite, “Thank you, ma'am.”

When they turned around, Jordan's smile faded, and when they were back in the parking lot again, he muttered, “Jesus Christ, you'd think she'd never seen two guys together before.”

“It probably doesn't happen often,” Darcey said softly. He was looking at the keycards in his hand and not at Jordan. “I mean, considering where we are.”

Jordan rolled his eyes as he got back in the car so they could park closer to their room. “Whatever.” When Darcey got in the car, Jordan glanced over at him and his face softened. He rested his hand on Darcey's knee as he started the car back up and said softly, “Thanks, Darcey.”

Darcey glanced at him, then over his shoulder to make sure he was clear to back up. “For?” he asked.

Jordan smiled, quiet. When it was clear Darcey still didn't know what he was talking about, he sighed and chuckled a little and said, “For… you know. For not backing down and letting her mess up our room.”

Darcey shrugged one shoulder, but his hands were shakier than usual, and he knew Jordan could see it. “Of course,” he murmured. He found a spot close to their room and parked the car. Neither man got out right away. “I… I know it's taking a long time,” he said softly. “And… I know it's not exactly where you want to be yet. But I'm working on it.”

Jordan squeezed Darcey's knee and shook his head. “Darcey, you were really deep in the closet for a really long time. I've been out most of my life. I know the later you come out, the harder it is to adjust, and for a long time, it was a safety issue for you. It's okay. I understand.” He paused until Darcey looked up at him, then spoke again. “I love you, Darcey. I love you for who you are. Not some imaginary person I want you to be. I know you love me. It's okay if you don't want me all over you every moment of the day. I know I can be a lot to deal with sometimes.”

He smiled. Darcey laughed. He shook his head and leaned over to kiss Jordan's cheek. “I love you,” he murmured. Jordan grinned and grabbed his face, pulling him into a kiss, a little too hard so their noses and teeth bumped, but it was perfect, because he was Jordan, and he was Darcey’s.

He got out of the car and grabbed both bags. Even though Jordan said he could carry his own, Darcey insisted, and had one slung over each shoulder when they unlocked the door.

The room was painted and furnished with soft, creamy browns with various landscape style paintings scattered over the walls. The bed was huge, with brown, red, and cream striped sheets, and there was a gas fireplace just opposite, a TV screwed into the wall above it. There were a
fridge and a microwave, too, which would make breakfast much easier. Jordan gasped softly, and when Darcey looked down at him as he closed the door, he was staring, mouth open, eyes wide. Darcey carefully dropped the bags to the floor and wrapped his arm around Jordan's waist.

“Okay?” he asked, even though the answer was obvious. Jordan wrapped his arm back around Darcey and leaned his head against his shoulder, turning to nuzzle into his hoodie.

“It's beautiful, Darcey,” he murmured. “Thank you.”

Darcey pulled him into a hug, and Jordan buried his face in the taller man’s chest. He rested his nose against Jordan’s hair. He was so warm, his arms curled up against Darcey’s chest, completely wrapped up in him, and even though Darcey had every angle and plane of his body memorized now, he would never get enough of it, of him. His arms tightened slightly when he remembered what he’d done that morning.

He wouldn’t be able to deal with losing Jordan. His boyfriend was the most important thing in the world to him.

“I hope this wasn’t too expensive,” Jordan murmured. “Especially after all the money you put toward my surgery.”

“It’s fine,” Darcey said. “I’ve been saving specifically for this for a while. It just so happened we got lucky enough that it all added up before the snow was gone.” He pulled away and Jordan looked up at him. Darcey grinned.

“Grab your gloves and put on a warmer jacket and a hat,” he said. Jordan grinned back and his eyebrows shot up. “I believe you said something about snowballs in the car?”

“Hell yes!” Jordan laughed. He popped up on his toes to give Darcey a kiss before grabbing his bag so he could change into some warmer clothes. Darcey quickly did the same. They finished at the same time and Darcey slid their keys into his pocket. They grinned at each other, then each rushed to be the first out the door.

It didn’t take long to find a quiet place amidst some trees where they wouldn’t be bothered. First, Darcey taught Jordan how to make a snowball two ways – how to make one for someone he liked, and one for someone he didn’t. The second involved rocks. Jordan promised to only use the first. His first few fell apart in midair, but after five tries he finally got Darcey right in the back of the neck.

Darcey flinched at the cold. “Jesus!” he hissed through his teeth. Jordan laughed, hands curled around his stomach, as Darcey turned around, brushing the snow off his neck. Darcey half smiled, and, while Jordan was wrapped up in his laughter, snuck around behind him, scooped up an armful of snow, and dropped it directly on Jordan’s head. Jordan shrieked, then Darcey was the one laughing, so hard it hurt his stomach. Jordan whirled around and glared, but all Darcey said was, “That’s what a whitewash is. And I told you I would.”

Jordan’s head and shoulders were covered in snow, the few curls peeking out from the bottom of his hat dusted with it. He even had flakes on his eyelashes, bright white against pitch black. His lips were curled down in a pout and his eyes narrowed, but eventually, as Darcey’s booming laughter calmed, Jordan murmured, “You are so fucking lucky I love you.”

Darcey quieted and his grin softened. “I know.” He wrapped his fingers around Jordan’s chin, tilting his head up. His lips were cold underneath Darcey’s, but soft, and when Jordan curled his hands around the back of his neck, his gloves were damp but the warmth of his hands under the fabric soothed the chill of the residual snow. When he parted his lips, his tongue was so hot
compared to the rest of him, and Darcey leaned closer, pulling Jordan in. Jordan pinned him to a nearby tree, pressing their bodies together tightly. Darcey sighed softly into Jordan’s mouth and the kiss deepened, grew rougher, Jordan’s hands slowly crawling over his body. Darcey’s curled in the smaller man’s hair. Oh, god, it had been so long since Jordan had kissed him like this. He’d missed this so much. Jordan had been healing, so Darcey had been letting him initiate everything to be sure he wouldn’t do more than he could handle.

But maybe today would finally be the day. Oh, he hoped so. Darcey would never push him, but he’d missed being close to his boyfriend like this.

When Jordan pulled away, his eyes were dark, dilated, a little heavy, and when he smiled, Darcey knew he was thinking the exact same thing.

“I think,” Jordan said softly, “we should go back to the room. The snow will still be here later today.”

Darcey smiled and rubbed his nose against Jordan’s. It was freezing cold and he could barely feel the touch, but Jordan’s smile sent a warmth all the way to his toes.

As they walked out of the woods and back to their room, Jordan ruffled his hair to get the snow out, beat out his hat and dusted off his shoulders. Darcey dropped his gloves, hat, and jacket by the door, but the room was cold because they left before thinking about turning the heat on, so they left their hoodies on as it got started. Darcey fiddled around with the fireplace for a few moments, trying to figure out how it worked, but before he could, Jordan said, “Don’t worry about it. Later.”

Darcey looked over his shoulder. Jordan was in the bed, the blanket pulled up to his nose, one hand poking out to gesture him over. Darcey laughed and Jordan lifted the blanket so he could crawl underneath. His cheek was cold when Darcey touched him, but his hands were warm, thawing the chill.

They ended up twisted up in the blankets and in each other, limbs tangled, hands and mouths wandering, blankets scrunched up around ankles and knees. But it was too hard to move and it was getting warmer, so Jordan shoved the blankets off, down to the foot of the bed, and when Darcey propped himself over him and Jordan shifted his knee between his legs, his hands curled in the sheets beside Jordan’s head, eyes heavy but not quite closing.

“Are you sure you’re okay for this?” Darcey asked softly, breathlessly. It had been so long, almost two months, and his whole body ached for Jordan and his hands and his mouth and his everything, but they’d both been so worried that something would pull or tear, a muscle, a scar.

“Yes.” The hitch of desperation in his voice shot straight down Darcey’s spine. When Jordan shifted beneath him he had to bite back a moan, because god, even though Darcey wanted him so much he didn’t want Jordan to do anything just to please him. “Just don’t put a lot of weight on my chest. And go slow. I should be okay.” Jordan curled his arms around Darcey’s back, under his hoodie. The heat of his hands thrummed through the bigger man’s shirt. He tugged Darcey down insistently, who lowered himself to his elbows, keeping himself carefully suspended above Jordan’s chest. When Darcey gently bit his neck, Jordan’s hips rolled up to meet his and when Jordan whined, thin and high-pitched and desperate, it completely knocked the breath out of him.

“Please, Darcey,” Jordan whispered. “I want to at least try. I’ve missed you so much.”

“I’ve missed you, too.” Darcey curled one hand around the back of Jordan’s neck, pulling him closer as he dipped his own head down and kissed him deeply. Jordan’s hands scrambled over his back to curl in his short hair, then the two of them were a tangle of limbs and tongues and teeth
and suddenly everything was so hot, too hot, so Darcey pulled back and pulled off his hoodie, his shirt, and Jordan quickly wiggled out of his, too.

Jordan was completely healed up on the outside, now, and he was the sexiest man Darcey had ever seen. He looked like something out of a classical painting. Darcey didn’t even notice the scars, no longer an angry red, now just a few shades lighter than the brown of Jordan’s skin. He glanced up at Jordan’s face. His eyes were turned down, his teeth sharp on his lip.

"You’re fucking gorgeous," Darcey whispered. Jordan’s nervousness faded into a bright smile. Darcey’s hand hovered nervously over his chest, hesitating. “Is it okay if I –”

“Yeah,” Jordan whispered. “As long as you’re gentle. It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

Darcey lightly, carefully ran his fingertips over Jordan's chest, following the new contour of muscle that had formed underneath the skin. Jordan sighed softly and his eyes slipped closed. His response was no different when Darcey ran his fingers over his nipple. He opened his eyes with a sad, crooked half-smile.

“Nothing?” Darcey asked softly.

Jordan shrugged. “It’s nice,” he said. “But nothing like it was before.”

Darcey smiled back and dragged his hand down to Jordan’s stomach, curling his fingers against the hyper-sensitive skin. Jordan gasped at the touch, hot and sharp, like rumbling static, and half curled in closer, half squirmed away. Even that tiny brush of skin was so overwhelming. It had been so long, too long.

Gently, slowly, Darcey dragged his teeth over Jordan’s earlobe and Jordan groaned softly, fingers curling into Darcey’s shoulders as he arched into the bigger man. As Darcey kissed down his neck, Jordan’s hands slid down between them, unbuttoning his jeans and pulling them down to his hips, but before Darcey could kick them off, Jordan slid one hand down into his boxer-briefs, and suddenly Darcey couldn’t remember what his mouth was doing and his head fell to Jordan’s shoulder. Jordan’s fingers tightened, slowly moving over and around him, his touch feather-light, so soft and so warm and already Darcey’s muscles started to tighten, his heart sped up, the heat crawling up and through his shoulders and down into his lower back.

A soft gasp tumbled from his lips and Jordan pressed his cheek against Darcey’s, whispering, “And you say I’m the sexy one?” He slowly, slowly, pulled his hand away, fingers lingering, and when Darcey moaned softly, Jordan’s breath hitched and he murmured, “Darcey, you’re fucking gorgeous.” He tilted his head up to nip at Darcey’s ear. Darcey’s whole body was trembling, wired, every muscle coiled tight and he was already getting close, but he couldn’t, not yet, they’d only just started.

“Are you okay?” Jordan whispered. His breath was hot and wet against Darcey’s ear.

Darcey nodded, barely managing a soft, shaky, “Yeah.”

Jordan slowly pushed Darcey’s jeans further down, his knuckles brushing against the hot skin of his thighs, and Darcey moaned softly again and buried his face in Jordan’s shoulder, as if that could hide it. Instead, the flex of Jordan’s shoulder when he curled his arm around him turned Darcey on even more. He’d always loved Jordan’s arms, wiry and defined and just strong enough. His boyfriend’s forearm pressed against his shoulder blades with just enough pressure to keep him from pulling away. Not that he wanted to. If he wanted to move anywhere, it was closer, always closer.
The smaller man slid his hand back underneath Darcey’s boxer-briefs again, curling around him, and Darcey’s fists clenched into the sheets beside his head, forearms trembling, and when Jordan moved, Darcey gasped, “Jordan, wait.” He paused, but didn’t move away. Darcey tried to prop himself back up to look at him, but his hands slipped and he caught himself just before his entire weight landed right on top of Jordan’s chest.

“Are you okay?” Jordan asked, half worried, half amused.

Darcey nodded and the worry in Jordan’s eyes faded. His voice was as tight as his body when he said, “I just, you need to slow down.” He almost choked on his tongue when Jordan tightened his hand. Darcey’s shoulders twitched with the tension building in the back of his neck, and a moan fell from his mouth.

“Why?” Jordan asked softly. He slowly trailed his fingers up, brushing against the tip, his thumb, then his palm, and Darcey’s eyes slipped closed, hands spasming in the sheets.

“Because I already feel like I’m going to explode,” he murmured. He buried his face in Jordan’s neck, embarrassed. “I, not so soon, it’s not fair to you –”

“Well, what if I want you to?” Jordan interrupted, softly, playfully. Darcey moaned through his teeth at the sharp, sparkling static that shot down his spine, and then Jordan slowly started working his hand up and down. When Jordan paused, Darcey’s hips arched into him and he chuckled, “I think you like that idea as much as I do.”


Jordan’s fingers were soft and slender and nimble and he knew just how to use them, just when to speed up or slow down or tighten or loosen his grip. Within minutes, Darcey’s face was pressed against his shoulder again, his breathing heavy and hot, shoulders heaving, body trembling. One hand was curled in Jordan’s hair, the other gripping tight to the pillow beneath his head. His arms and shoulders shook as he tried to keep his weight balanced while Jordan touched him with those perfect, amazing fingers. Then Jordan leaned up and kissed him, hot and heavy and deep and his tongue matched the strokes of his hands and Darcey moaned into his mouth, so glad his lips were there to muffle all the noise he would have otherwise made. He was already so, so close, the heat of Jordan’s movements curling and sinking into every crevice of every muscle, coiled up tight and burning hot.

And then, Darcey’s lips went slack, but he kept them pressed against Jordan’s, trying to kiss him but really only able to breathe against the smaller man’s mouth. Jordan tightened his hand and bit Darcey’s bottom lip. Darcey’s eyes slipped closed and his whole body uncoiled at once as he came, and he wasn’t sure whether it was his orgasm or the fact that he was breathing in as Jordan exhaled, but then his mind went fuzzy, blank, like white noise.

Jordan curled his arms around Darcey’s shoulders, his wrist pressed against Darcey’s back. Darcey rolled to his side and when his shoulder hit the mattress, his body… stopped. When he inhaled it was slow and shaky and he only opened his eyes when Jordan’s forehead touched his. Darcey gently rested his hand on Jordan’s hip, but it slipped down to his stomach, and Darcey grimaced when he felt it, hot and slippery.

“Shit, Jordan, I’m sorry,” he whispered. Jordan just laughed softly, like Darcey was the cutest thing he’d ever seen.

“Don’t be,” he said. “We have a shower. I’m fine.”

A lazy smile tugged at Darcey’s mouth and he whispered, “Yeah, you are.”
“Cheesy.” Jordan’s murmur was sing-song and he was smiling. Darcey curled his hand on Jordan’s hip and tugged him closer into a slow, lazy, relaxed kiss. But it wasn’t long before he pulled away and whispered, “Okay, I love you and I love kissing you, but it’s starting to dry and I really need to get it off.”

Darcey chuckled softly and nodded, pushing his jeans and boxer-briefs off his legs and slowly sitting up. Jordan sat beside him and pressed his hand against Darcey’s chest, about to push him back down to the bed, but Darcey stilled his hand.

“I made the mess,” he whispered, leaning into him and kissing just below his ear. “I’ll help you clean it up.”

Jordan hummed softly and arched his neck into Darcey’s lips, curling his hand over the bigger man’s shoulder and, well then, it looked like he’d have to join his boyfriend in the shower now, anyway. He trailed soft kisses down Jordan’s neck and the smaller man shivered, curling closer, and he whispered, “Seriously though, shower.”

“Mm-hm,” Darcey murmured. But Jordan didn’t move away, so Darcey didn’t stop kissing him, slow and languid, sometimes teeth, sometimes tongue, sometimes just lips. He’d missed this, the closeness, the intimacy, the warmth of Jordan’s skin. His smell, musky and spicy and a little sweet. Jordan sighed softly and curled even closer, his chest almost pressed against Darcey’s now, one arm around his shoulders and hand on his hip.

“I love you,” Darcey whispered.

“Are you okay?” Jordan whispered back. Darcey pulled back just enough to see his face, arms still wrapped tightly around him. “You’re being a lot more… affectionate than usual.”

Darcey frowned, brows furrowing. “Am I not usually?”

“No, you are,” Jordan said quickly, sliding his hand from Darcey’s shoulder to his neck. “You are. You’re just… even more than usual today.”

“I missed you,” Darcey said. He knew he’d have to tell Jordan about his GI Bill. About the potential for school. But not now. Right now, everything was perfect, and he didn’t want to ruin it. Later tonight, maybe at dinner. He’d tell Jordan then. “Being able to be close to you, I mean. I’m sorry.”

Jordan smiled and shook his head. “Don’t apologize. It’s awesome.” He gently rested his clean hand on Darcey’s cheek. “I just wanted to be sure everything was okay.”

Darcey smiled, leaning in to kiss him.

And even though, for now, he didn’t have to think about it, eventually, he would.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience while I was away! Now I’m back, and after this we have four chapters to go! :D

Come visit me at indecentpause.tumblr.com for more writing stuff!
When Vince called Jordan at six a.m. his time, internationally, on his cell phone, instead of emailing or waiting for him to log onto Skype, Jordan finally understood how serious his grandmother’s illness had become. She had days, maybe, if she was lucky. They were surprised she’d even lasted these past few months, but she’d always been stubborn. Jordan had never realized stubbornness could apply to this kind of thing.

He was still staring at the blank screen of his cell phone thirty minutes later. He was still on his bed, in the same position he had been when he’d gotten the news.

He swallowed. He had to go see her. He didn’t want this to be the last thing about her that he’d remember, but he’d regret it for the rest of his life if he didn’t go. Even though she hated him, now, he still loved her, and she’d been such an important part of his life for so long.

In his left hand was the scrap of paper with the address of the hospice scribbled on it. His phone hung loose in his right.

Almost an hour had passed and it was about five in the morning. Would Darcey be awake? Jordan sent him a quick text.

_I need to talk to you. I have to see my grandma. She’s dying._

Terrence would be asleep for hours, yet. Iffy wouldn’t be up until eight, and Nate until nine. If Darcey didn’t answer, there was nobody else.

About a half an hour later, Darcey called him.

“Hey,” Jordan murmured.

“How can I help?” Darcey asked. “What can I do?”

Jordan smiled and sobbed at the same time, lurching forward and covering his mouth like he was about to vomit. “I don’t know,” he choked. The tightness in his throat was sharp, like barbed wire. “I don’t… oh, god, Darcey, I haven’t talked to her in six years. But I have to see her. If I don’t at least try, I’ll hate myself forever.”

“Okay,” Darcey said softly. “Do you want me to take you to wherever she is?” His voice was hesitant. “I assume in some kind of assisted care? Are they open on weekends?”

“You don’t have to,” Jordan said, because he didn’t want Darcey to be uncomfortable. But his voice was small and afraid, because, yes, he did want Darcey to go with him, to be there to keep him safe.

“I don’t care what they’ll think of me,” Darcey said. “After what they did to you? Fuck them. I’m just worried about you and how that will affect the way you’re treated there.”

“Then yes,” Jordan said. His voice was wavery and watery. “Please.”

“Okay.” There was a pause and a muffled groan, then Darcey cleared his throat and said, a little clearer, “Well, I’m just waking up right now, so it’ll take me a few minutes. Are there visiting
hours or can you go in whenever?"

"My cousin said whenever."

"I have to see if my mom’s up and ask her about the car," Darcey said. "If I can’t take it, I’ll have to take the bus, and it doesn’t start running until seven. I’ll text you and let you know once I know, okay?"

"Okay." Jordan paused to clear his throat, pressing his hand to his mouth as he tried to force himself to breathe. "I’m going to need at least an hour to get my shit together before I can leave the house, so that’s okay."

"All right. I’m getting close to being able to afford a shitty beater car. Maybe in the next month or so."

"Thank you, Darcey," Jordan said, half a phrase behind in the conversation.

"Of course."

"No," he repeated, softer, but firmer. "Thank you."

Darcey paused. "You’re welcome. I’ll let you know when I can be over, okay? I love you."

"I love you." When the line went dead, Jordan sat still, quietly, for a few minutes, the phone still pressed against his ear as he stared, unfocused, at the wall.

He jumped when his text tone went off, and he checked his screen.

I can borrow the car but I have to have it home by one.

Okay.

When Jordan finally placed the phone down on his bed, the soft jolt of his hand stopping against the sheets triggered something, and his eyes welled and his throat tightened and he dropped his face into his hands and cried. The walls to the apartments in this building were thin, so he tried to be quiet. Despite having lived there for so long, he didn’t know any of his neighbors, but he still didn’t want them to hear him fall apart.

His eyes burned, like someone had ground coarse salt into them, and his air came in short, unsteady, wheezing gasps that didn’t do much but make him dizzy.

Nothing had changed, and Jordan knew that. He’d lost his grandma years ago. But even though it was unrealistic and would never happen, he’d still been hoping, somewhere, that things would change, that she’d come around even if his parents and brother wouldn’t.

And now she was dying, still hating him.

She probably didn’t want to see him. According to Vince, she was still saying terrible things about him and his transition. He didn’t know if she knew he’d been on hormones. She definitely didn’t know about the surgery. She might not even recognize him.

Even if she did, she might kick him out anyway.

But he had to at least say goodbye. Even if she hated him. Even if she cursed him out. He had to at least try.

He managed to get himself back under control and clean himself up to be mostly presentable by
He managed to get himself back under control and clean himself up to be mostly presentable by the time Darcey arrived. He knocked, even as he let himself in, to announce his presence. Jordan was still barefoot and shirtless and he stood as the door closed, meeting Darcey halfway across the room. He pulled Jordan into a tight hug and only whispered, “I’m sorry, Jordan.”

There were no ‘it’s okay’s or ‘we’ll figure it out’s because both of them knew that none of it was true. But Darcey was there, and it eased the pain, even if only a little.

“Have you eaten yet?” he asked. “Do you even want to?”

“Not really,” Jordan murmured. He rubbed the back of his arm across his face and sniffled one more time, then added, “I could really use a cup of tea, though. Do you want some?”

“I’m okay,” Darcey said. “Want me to join you in the kitchen?”

Jordan nodded. Darcey followed.

They were quiet as Jordan filled and put on the kettle, leaning back on opposite counters, feet out and almost close enough to touch. Jordan reached for his gunpowder green, part of a welcome back gift basket from some of his coworkers. It was loose leaf, so he grabbed a spice bag to measure it into, too. He turned his back on Darcey to watch the kettle, even though he’d be able to hear it across the apartment, and he tapped the top of the tin, hollow and metallic in the quiet kitchen. After a few minutes of quiet punctured only by the tap, tap, tapping, Darcey stepped up behind him, placing his hand on Jordan’s hip and pulling him a little closer. But he still gave Jordan his space and Jordan was so grateful for that, because even though he wanted Darcey to wrap him up in his arms and never let go, it would be too much right now, and he would break down again.

“Things were going so well,” he finally whispered, almost a whimper, a whine of protest. “With my promotion and the surgery and everything going so well in my new position. With you finding a job you can really thrive in and finding Puff. Your insurance and everything being reinstated.” He paused and took in a shaky breath. “What happened?”

Darcey didn’t answer and Jordan wasn’t expecting him to. Life had happened. His family had happened.

“How are things going with the school search?” Jordan asked abruptly.

“I –” Darcey stopped as sharply as Jordan had started, and his hand fell away from Jordan’s hip. Jordan looked over his shoulder. Darcey was leaning against the counter, shoulders hunched in and hands stuffed in his pockets. “I haven’t been looking,” he said, and it wasn’t a lie, he promised himself, because he hadn’t been. He hadn’t looked into anything since he applied at the CIA, which he still hadn’t told anyone outside of his parents about. He wasn’t going to go, anyway, even if he was accepted, so why worry everyone? Right?

“Okay,” Jordan said. “I was just wondering.” Darcey always got withdrawn and quiet like this whenever Jordan brought it up, and it didn’t make sense, because culinary school had been so important to him when they first met. Now that the government was giving him a free ride there was no reason to put off applying to the few culinary schools around the state, but the discharge situation as a whole had been messy and painful for him. Maybe he still needed more time to process everything.

Things had been a little weird while Jordan worked on navigating his new job and Darcey learned to navigate Jordan’s new body, but then, transition phases always were, but they were still good, they were still happy, but now... now Jordan didn’t know. He was confused and hurt and scared like a small child who’d fallen and hit his head in an unfamiliar area and couldn’t find anyone to
He ran his hand through his hair, fist curling in tight at the nape of his neck. He took a slow, unsteady breath, tightened it a little more. Supposedly, snapping a rubber band against the wrist would help in situations like these, but it never had. This did. It didn’t hurt, exactly, but it was enough to bring him out of his head so he could try to look at things a little less emotionally.

Jordan dropped his hand back to the counter. Darcey was quiet, watching him. Finally, he spoke.

“Just let me know whenever you’re ready to go, okay?” he said. His voice was quiet, soft. “Like I said, my mom needs the car back at one. So I’d need to leave here around 12:40. But it’s only, what –” He paused and glanced at the clock on the microwave. “Barely six a.m., so we have plenty of time. And if you need me to, I can always take the bus back again, or you can come home with me. My sisters will be there, but we can always take a walk if you need some time alone.”

Jordan shook his head. “You don’t have to come all the way back just so –”

“I know,” Darcey said. “But I can if things get bad and you need me to. I know you can call Terrence or Iffy, too, if you want. But I’m here, okay?”

Jordan smiled weakly and nodded.

“And my mom doesn’t work,” he said. “She just volunteers a few times a week. So she’s around, and if you feel comfortable talking to her, she’s a pretty good listener.”

“Thank you,” Jordan murmured.

Darcey took his hand. The teakettle started to whistle, but he left it for the moment.

Then Darcey’s hand was on the back of Jordan’s neck and Jordan's nose was buried in Darcey’s chest and he was crying, heavy sobs that racked him to the bone.

He didn’t know how much time passed after that. At one point, Darcey turned off the stove, and Jordan’s tea leaves still sat dry in his mug, untouched.

The hospice was about forty-five minutes away, out in the neighborhood where Jordan had grown up, past the community center and past his old house. The first thirty were silent, no speaking, no music, just Jordan’s breathing and Darcey tapping on the steering wheel.

They were passing the park where Jordan’s family used to go for his brother’s birthday parties every spring when Jordan blurted, “I really thought my grandma would be the one I could trust.”

Darcey glanced over, then back at the road. He was silent, waiting for Jordan to continue, but he didn’t. “Yeah?” he finally urged, gently.

“She never said anything about my clothes or my hair or the stuff I liked,” Jordan said. “When my parents wouldn’t step in to help with the bullying at school, she did. I really thought she was the one I’d be safe with.”

His eyes were dry this time as he stared blankly out the windshield. His voice was soft. Resigned.

“But I wasn’t,” he whispered. “My parents were assholes, but at least they still talked to me. She
wouldn’t even give me that.”

Silence, again, for a few minutes. Darcey gave Jordan time to continue, but he didn’t.

“I’m sorry,” Darcey finally said.

“I have no idea what I’m about to walk into,” Jordan said. “Just so you know. I’m not expecting anything good.”

“Do you want me to stay in the car?”

Jordan shook his head. “No,” he said, and it was strained, afraid. “Just… just outside the room? My grandma’s not homophobic. She didn’t care when she thought I was a girl and brought home girlfriends. It was the trans thing she wouldn’t accept. But… it’s not that. I just…” He huffed softly, frustrated, and scrubbed at his face with his hands. “I just… I don’t want you getting dragged into my family bullshit. I don’t…” I don’t want you to see how I let them treat me. But he couldn’t finish it out loud because even that was so shameful.

“Okay,” Darcey said. “I’ll stay in the waiting room, then?”

Jordan nodded.

Darcey put his hand on Jordan’s knee. The rest of the ride was silent.

The hospice smelled like hand sanitizer and bleach. It was too white, too sterile, like an operating room. People were supposed to live out the ends of their lives here. Jordan couldn’t imagine having to stay in a place like this for more than a few hours.

The air conditioner was on much too high for such a cool day. It was early, so nobody else was there and Jordan could walk directly up to the receptionist.

“I –” he started, but he stumbled and cleared his throat. “Which room is Diana Delgado in?”

“How are you related?” she asked, disaffected. She didn’t look up, focused on the cell phone she had hidden beneath the desk.

“I’m her grandson?” he said, and he hated the lilt that turned his statement into a question. “Jordan Delgado.”

Finally, she glanced up at him. “ID please?”

Jordan swallowed and slid his wallet out of his pocket and his driver’s license out of its storage slot. He barely kept his hands from shaking. Maybe she wouldn’t notice.

He handed it over.

Her eyes darted over it. Her brow furrowed and she looked up at him, back down at the card. Jordan stood tall even though he wanted to flinch back, because he wasn’t going to let anyone have that kind of power over him again. Her mouth set in a straight line and she handed it back, and said, very firmly, “Room twelve, ma’am.”

“Thank you.” He managed to keep his voice mostly steady. He didn’t miss her sneer and the roll of her eyes as he turned away.
Darcey just caught the tail end of the conversation as he approached. He dropped his voice, but it was still the angriest Jordan had ever heard it when he growled, “What the fuck was that about?”

“I can’t have the gender marker on my ID changed until I’ve had all three of the major surgeries,” Jordan said. At least when his voice shook, it wasn’t in fear or unsurety. He was furious. “So I fucking out myself every time I show ID.”

“What do you want me to say something?”

“Like what?” Jordan snapped. “Nobody gives a shit, Darcey. Not here. Maybe if we lived in a state where I was recognized as a person, it would do some good. But not here. Nobody gives a shit about people like me. Not on an institutional level.”

He paused, holding out his hands, as if trying to catch his balance. Breathe. “I’m sorry, Darcey,” he whispered. “I know you’re just trying to help.”

His face was so pained, like he thought it was somehow his fault. Jordan wrapped his hand around the back of Darcey’s neck and rested his head against the taller man’s shoulder, then gave him a quick kiss. He knew the room number now. What could they do? Darcey rested one hand on Jordan’s hip and ran the other one through his hair. “I’ll be right here, okay?”

“Thank you,” Jordan whispered.

“I love you,” he said firmly.

Jordan nodded and only choked a little when he said, “I love you. I won’t be long.”

“Take all the time you need.”

He squeezed Jordan’s hip. Jordan turned away and walked down the narrow hall.

Room twelve wasn’t far. The door was cracked, the hallway so silent he could hear the beeping of the monitors on the other side. Jordan knocked softly, twice. No answer. Twice more, louder. Nothing. She was asleep.

Maybe that will make this easier.

He cracked the door, and suddenly he was six years old again when he whispered, “Grandma?”

She didn’t respond. Her chest rose and fell as she breathed, slowly, shallowly. Jordan pushed the door open and quietly stepped in.

She was so thin. The shape of her bones burned through her arms from beneath her skin, one the same deep brown as Jordan’s but now pale and ashen. Her hair was thinned out and grey, her face sunken. Jordan’s hand curled over his mouth and he took a quick, jerking breath to steady himself. When he spoke, his voice was shaky and his eyes were wet, but at least he wasn’t crying.

“I don’t know if you can hear me while you’re sleeping,” he started. “You probably don’t recognize my voice. It’s me, Jordan. Remember? I…” His shoulders heaved and he had to pause to catch his breath. “I’m sorry I waited so long to try to make things right with you again. I’m sorry I waited until it was too late to try to see you. I love you so much, Grandma, and –” This time he sobbed, heavily. He squeezed his eyes closed and tried to focus on breathing. “I wish things hadn’t happened the way they did,” he whispered. He opened his eyes. She was still asleep.

“I wish… I wish we had been able to fix it somehow. But I had to do this. I had to transition for myself. I wasn’t going to give that up for anyone. Not even you, even though I always loved you so much. I don’t know if you ever knew, but you were my best friend when I was younger, and
He sobbed again, again, and he was crying when he finished. “And even though things went bad at the end, I’ll never forget everything you did for me. And I still love you. Okay? I love you.”

Her fingers stirred and her breathing changed as she started to wake. Jordan didn’t wait. He bolted like a skittish cat in a thunderstorm.

If she saw him leaving, she didn’t call him back. He didn’t stop, nearly jogging back out to the waiting room, one hand tight in his hair as he tried to force himself to breathe and keep the remaining tears in until he was safe in the closed car with Darcey. His eyes were closed, but he could still sense the change in the light, the brightness of the waiting room, and he started to say, “We have to go. I’m sorry I dragged you all the –”

And he opened his eyes and all the blood drained from his body, straight out of his feet and to the floor.

Darcey was talking to someone, quietly, and Jordan could only see his back, but he knew him. The thin arms, the terrible slouch in his shoulders, the curly, close-cropped hair.

“Jose?” Jordan’s voice cracked like hot glass under cold water. Darcey quieted and turned back to him, brows furrowed, but when he saw Jordan’s face, he made the connection. His head whirled back to Jose, back to Jordan again, and he stood, taking a quick, stumbling step back as Jose stood and turned around. He opened his mouth, then froze. Jose’s eyes darted over him, his arms, his chest, his face, and Jordan could almost see his brother’s brain flickering out for a moment before he recognized him.

“Maris –”

“Jordan,” he barked. He didn’t let anyone call him by that name anymore.

“What…” Jose trailed off and they stared at each other: Jose, shocked; Jordan, afraid.

Then Darcey was one step behind Jordan, his hand on his hip, protective.

“What happened to you?” Jose finally choked. His nose wrinkled in disgust, his lip pulled up in a sneer.

It stabbed straight through Jordan’s chest like he was twelve again.

“Life happened.” He growled so Jose couldn’t hear his voice shaking. “I always told you I was going to start hormones and get surgery. If you didn’t believe me, that’s your issue, not mine.” Darcey put his other hand on Jordan’s shoulder, reminding him where he was. He was in public, he was an adult now, and he needed to keep himself together. His fist clenched, reminding him to breathe.

Jose’s eyes darted over to Darcey and he said, “So, your friend you brought here –”

“He’s my boyfriend,” Darcey said firmly. Almost challenging.

“But… you seemed so normal,” Jose said. Jordan snorted angrily. If his brother were close enough for it to impact, he’d punch him right now. Darcey’s hand twitched, but he stayed silent. Jordan started to speak, but Jose kept going. “If you were going to date guys anyway, why didn’t you just stay a girl and be normal?”

Jordan shook Darcey’s hands off and stepped closer, dropping his voice, a low, dangerous growl he’d never heard come from his own mouth before. “Fuck you. Firstly, there’s nothing not normal
about being pansexual or transgender, and secondly, it’s none of your fucking business. You lost the right to have an opinion a long time ago.”

“Jordan,” Darcey’s voice was low, soothing, his hand loosely curled around Jordan’s upper arm. *Keep it together,* Jordan reminded himself. The receptionist already hated him. *If you get the cops called on you, you’re fucked.* He had to get out of here because he knew if he kept going he was going to do something he regretted.

“Marisa –”

*Jordan!*

“Whatever,” Jose said. “You’re my sister.” He started to walk around the chairs in Jordan’s direction and Jordan slowly backed toward the door. “Why can’t you just accept that and come back? Just… just stop, just stop this and apologize to everyone and it’ll be okay again and –”

“Stop emailing me,” Jordan snapped. He took another step back and locked eyes with his younger brother, pointing at his face to drive the seriousness of his statement home. “Stop trying to contact me. Stop asking Vince about me. You didn’t want anything to do with me until Grandma got sick and I know it’s going to be the same the second she dies. Once you decide to respect me and my life and start referring to me properly, we can talk. But as long as you keep calling me your sister, I don’t want anything to do with you. I’m a man, Jose. Not a woman. A trans man. And that is never going to change, whether you like it or not.”

“How do you always have to be so selfish?” The last word was a shout and Jose closed the distance between them and then his hand was tight on Jordan’s shoulder and Jordan’s was cocked back in a fist, ready to punch if he had to, but then Jose slammed into the wall beside him with a loud crash and the receptionist was screaming for security. Jordan turned to his left. Darcey had Jose pinned to the wall, one arm bent tight into the small of his back and the other hand on the back of his head.

“If you touch him again, I will rip your fucking arms off,” he growled.

*No, no, no.* This wasn’t supposed to happen. Darcey wasn’t supposed to get involved in his family problems, no, Jordan had wanted to keep him safe from this.

“Darcey, stop, please,” Jordan said. His voice was so small because he’d never seen his boyfriend like this before, he’d never wanted to, but when Darcey looked over at him and his eyes softened as he stepped back, warily, Jordan knew it would never be directed at him. Jose pulled away, his eyes darting between the two other men, and he growled, “You’re fucking insane.” It could have been directed at either of them or both, Jordan didn’t know. Jose darted away from them and down the hall, back toward their grandma’s room.

“Let’s go,” Jordan said, a little too sharp. “Before security kicks us out.”

He pushed out the front door, walking fast, and didn’t stop until he reached the car where Darcey gently rested his hand on the small of his back and whispered, “I’m sorry, Jordan, I… I was… I was just trying –”

Jordan turned around and gently put his hand over Darcey’s mouth, not to silence him, just to get him to pause. “I’m not mad at you,” he said softly, firmly. Their eyes locked. Darcey’s were ashamed, almost afraid. “I’m not. I promise. I… I’m really glad you intervened, actually, because I was about to punch him right in his snide fucking face.”

Jordan dropped his hand to let Darcey continue. “I’m sorry,” he whispered again. “I thought he
was going to try to hurt you.”

Jordan snorted and shook his head. “I did too, honestly.”

Darcey gently rested his hand on Jordan’s shoulder and nudged their foreheads together.

“Let’s get in the car,” he murmured. Jordan nodded.

Once they were safe inside, Jordan whispered, “Why did this have to happen? Things were fine. Things were awesome.”

Darcey’s hands were loose on the keys, car still turned off. “And they still will be.” He moved his hand to Jordan’s knee and they turned toward each other. “I know nothing can fix what’s happening with your grandma. But… your brother… he’s an asshole. I could see that in the five minutes we spent with him. Being related to someone doesn’t give you an obligation to keep them in your life.”

Jordan nodded and leaned back against the window, running his hand through his hair. He gripped tight at the back of his neck. He’d been doing this a lot recently. He needed to find a better coping mechanism, because this was going to start giving him headaches.

They were both quiet a few minutes. Darcey’s eyes darted over Jordan’s face, over his head and out the window, back to him again. Finally, he said, a little hesitantly, “Do you want me to stay with you for a few days? I know this can’t be easy. I… if you don’t want me to, that’s okay. But I…” he paused to clear the nerves from his throat. “But I know it can be really hard to be alone when you have a lot of shit going on.”

Jordan glanced up, a half-smile tugging at his lips. “Really?” he asked softly. Darcey was offering to open up his personal space? Not permanently, but still. “That would be okay?”

Darcey smiled back. “I wouldn’t have offered if it weren’t,” he replied. Jordan smiled, and then his eyes were a little wet, not in sadness, but not in happiness either. He was so overwhelmed, and Darcey’s offer tipped him over. But he didn’t cry.

“Thank you,” Jordan whispered. “I’d like that.”

“All right,” Darcey said. “Let’s go back to my place so I can get some clothes and stuff. It’s still early, but I want to get it done before my mom needs the car back so we don’t have to deal with the bus.”

“Thank you,” Jordan whispered again, because even though he usually had his life in order, there were days he felt like it would fall apart if he didn’t have Darcey in it.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this week’s chapter is so late! I had a bunch of appointments this week and was so tired and stressed until now. Thank you so much for your patience!
Darcey settled into Jordan’s home almost too easily. A couple of days turned into a couple of weeks and then, suddenly, it was almost April. One bookbag of clothes in the corner became a whole drawer in Jordan’s dresser, Darcey’s shampoo sat next to Jordan’s in the shower, his Xanax on the top shelf of the medicine cabinet by Jordan’s testosterone and syringes.

Certain things got to Darcey at first that had never bothered him before: Jordan never put his shoes away and he never made the bed if he was the last one up. But they were only minor annoyances, and he got used to them quickly.

He’d been nervous when Jordan had given him a spare key, much less at the idea of living with him, but now it was hard and a little painful to imagine life being any other way. When Jordan finally felt safe on his own and Darcey went back to his parents, things were going to be really, really lonely.

It was 9:00 a.m. on a Friday and Jordan was sleeping. Darcey grabbed the mail key to see if there was anything from yesterday. Some bills, some ads, a postcard Ally made at school addressed to both Darcey and Jordan.

And a letter from the Culinary Institute of America, forwarded from his parents’ address. He didn’t wait to get back upstairs. He ripped it open right in front of the mailboxes.

His breath caught and his hands tightened on the letter. He’d been accepted. He could start in mid-April or the beginning of June.

Darcey didn’t know whether he was ecstatic or devastated. He could go to the school he’d been dreaming of since he was fourteen. But he might have to leave Jordan to do it.

What should he do? Should he accept? Should he ask Jordan to move with him and make a decision based on his answer? Should he throw away the letter and pretend it never happened?

But he had to go. If he stayed, he’d regret it for the rest of his life. If he turned it down, he’d be fine at first, but eventually, he would start to wonder, but what if I had gone?

He pulled out his phone and dialed Brett’s number as he went back upstairs for his wallet. Brett answered just before it went to voicemail.

“Hey, Darcey!” he said.

“I need to talk to you.” Darcey didn’t have a head for pleasantries.

“What’s wrong?”

“I was accepted to the CIA. I can start as early as mid-April, if I want.”

Brett was silent for a moment. “Oh my god,” he finally said. “Darcey, that’s…” he paused. “But what about Jordan?”

“Exactly,” Darcey said. His voice caught, high and painful in his throat.
“Can you get to my school from his place?”

“Yeah, that wouldn’t be a problem.”

“All right. Meet me in the Student Union,” Brett said. “I have one more class that’s just about to start. I’ll be done in an hour. We’ll talk then and figure it out, okay?”

Darcey nodded, and, when he remembered Brett couldn’t see him, he said, “Thanks, Brett.”

The Student Union was busy and Brett was only average height, so Darcey couldn’t pick his cousin out. But then, he saw the familiar head of curly auburn hair and he breathed a sigh of relief. The first thing Brett did was squeeze Darcey’s shoulder. He sat down across the table and said gently, “So what’s going on?”

Darcey took a sip of his coffee, hot, black, and it was good, but not as good as what Jordan made. “So, you know I got my GI Bill reinstated.”

“And your health insurance,” Brett said. “Because of that teenager’s mom, right?”

Darcey nodded. “So, when I got the letter, I applied for the CIA. I didn’t tell anyone. Not Jordan, not Mom. Obviously not you. I was…” He paused and let out a frustrated breath. “At the time I just wanted to see if I was good enough to get in. I wasn’t planning on following through with it. I wasn’t even really expecting to be accepted.” He paused again and dropped his forehead into his hand. “Well, I was. And… Brett, I’ve wanted to do this since we were teenagers. I can’t… if I turn it down I’m going to hate myself forever.”

“I know,” Brett said softly. “I take it you haven’t told Jordan yet? That you were accepted?”

Darcey shook his head and dropped his hand. Brett’s hazel eyes were soft, sad.

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.” Darcey’s voice caught, harsh and painful. His throat was tight, sharp, and a lifetime’s worth of tension curled up in his shoulders. “I want to ask him to move with me. But what if he won’t? He has an amazing job here. All of his friends are here. His health care. His activism. Everything. What if he doesn’t want to pack up and move with me? What if he wants to stay?”

“What if he does?” Brett asked softly.

Darcey dropped his head, his hands curled around his neck, cold and sweaty. “Right now I’d want to come back. But two years is a long time and a lot can happen. I want to stay with Jordan, Brett. I love him. But what if something does happen? What if I change my mind and want to stay? Then what? It would crush him. It would crush both of us. I… I don’t…” He sighed heavily and screwed his eyes shut, trying to think, trying to come up with something, anything that would get everyone what they wanted and needed, a way everyone would be happy, but he couldn’t. There was nothing. No matter what he did, someone would get hurt.

“What would you do?” Darcey asked, looking up at his cousin. “If you got accepted to some school in another state? Or an offer to perform on Broadway? What would you and Justin do?”

Brett’s brow furrowed and he bit his lip. “It’s a little different for us,” he said. “Justin has said a number of times he wants to get out of Arizona. He’s said the only things keeping him here are me
and his best friend. He doesn’t have much reason to stay. He’d pack up and move with me in a second.”

Darcey’s tongue darted out to wet his bottom lip, nervous. “What do I do?” he asked softly.

“I don’t know,” Brett whispered. “I can’t give you an answer. This is all you, Darcey. I wish I could give you a solution, but I can’t.”

“Even just…” Darcey started. He closed his eyes, shook his head to clear it, but it just got fuzzier and more confused. “Even just the idea of…” He sighed, frustrated, trying to put the words together right. “You know I’ve been staying with him a month or so. Even just the idea of going back to Mom and Dad hurts, and that’s only a fifteen, twenty minute drive away. It’s right there and it still would feel too far after this. But New York? The only way I could get farther away is if I moved out of the country. I could do a long distance relationship if I had to. I could make it work. It would be really shitty, but I would do it for him.” He looked up. “But what if he wouldn’t?”

Brett bit the corner of his lip. His eyebrows were tight, his shoulders hunched in. And even though he kept asking and asking, Darcey knew there was nothing his cousin could do.

“I don’t know,” Brett said. “I don’t really know Jordan very well. I know him enough to know he really, really loves you. I think he’d be willing to try. But you know him better than I do. You have to talk to him. I can’t fix this, Darcey. I wish I could. I all I can tell you is that you have to talk to him and figure it out. Be honest. Be clear. And you’ll have to go from there.”

Darcey took a deep breath and swallowed down the sharp lump in his throat.

He nodded.

He closed his eyes.

Either decision he could make would be both the right and wrong one, and no matter which way he went, he knew he would regret it.

Jordan looked up when the door opened, closed, and he stood, but then Darcey was in the bedroom in front of him and Jordan didn’t know how to work his feet.

His nerves were frayed from waiting for over an hour for Darcey to ‘talk about something’, and now that he was home, his stomach jumped into his throat and he couldn’t breathe. Darcey looked so pained, so sad. “What’s going on?” Jordan asked.

Darcey swallowed and licked his lip. “Sit down?” His voice caught a little. Jordan did, back on his bed, but it was their bed, now. Wasn’t it? This was right, this was where they belonged together. But now they might not, anymore. Darcey hadn’t been distant; he’d actually been more affectionate. Why? Did it have something to do with this?

Darcey sat down beside him, pressing his side close to Jordan’s. They sat in a painful, terrifying silence for much too long before Darcey finally spoke.

“You know how much I love you, right, Jordan?” he finally whispered.

Jordan looked up. Darcey’s eyes were locked on his hands. “Yeah,” he whispered. “I love you, too. You know that, right? No matter what?”
Darcey nodded. His hands were shaking harder than Jordan had ever seen them.

“I…” he paused, and when he spoke again, Darcey could barely hear his own voice. “I should have told you this sooner, and I’m sorry. I should have told you the day I put in the paperwork. But I applied to the Culinary Institute of America back in February.”

Jordan’s fists clenched tightly in his jeans and suddenly it was a struggle to breathe. “In New York?” he asked. Darcey nodded.

“Originally I just wanted to see if I could get in. I wasn’t planning on going. But if I don’t…” There was a long, painful pause. “I’ve been accepted. I can start as early as mid-April.”

His words were soft, sad, a little scared, and they brought Jordan’s world crashing down around his shoulders. “That’s two weeks from now,” Jordan whispered. He was still looking at Darcey, wide-eyed, while Darcey looked at his hands.

“Yeah,” he said.

No. No. Jordan couldn’t breathe, his voice caught heavy in his throat, eyes wide and wet and panicked. No, no, no, he couldn’t lose Darcey. Darcey wasn’t just his boyfriend or his lover. He was his best friend. His soulmate.

“Are you going to go?” Jordan finally asked, even though he knew what the answer was. Darcey would never scare him like this if he didn’t intend on leaving. Darcey wove his fingers together with Jordan’s, almost afraid he would slip away if he didn’t hold on.

“I want you to come with me,” Darcey said. “If… if you would.” He took a slow, shuddering breath, and when he looked up, his eyes were wet, too. “I love you so much, Jordan. You’re the most important person in the world to me. But I have to go. I’ve wanted to do this my whole life. And if I stay, I’ll… I’ll hate myself for it. And I’m afraid I’ll end up resenting you, too.”

“I…” Jordan paused, lost, his eyes darting around Darcey’s face. Move to New York in less than a month? But – “My whole life is here, Darcey,” he said softly. His voice broke so hard it hurt. “My job, my friends, my clinic. I… I have roots here, and whether or not I like where they came from, I… I can’t,” he finally finished. “I don’t have anything else anywhere.”

He didn’t have much in Phoenix, but he’d have nothing but Darcey anywhere else, and he couldn’t let himself be defined by his relationship with another person like that. He couldn’t let himself be consumed like that, not by anyone. Not even Darcey.

Darcey’s hand tightened on his and Jordan squeezed back hard, terrified to let go, terrified to lose him, but that was exactly what was happening. He was losing the man he loved more than anything in the world.

When Jordan breathed again, it was shallow, stuttering, and his voice shook when he said, “I’m not going to try to make you stay.” And then it broke, he broke, and the tears started falling, hot and sharp. “I love you so, so much Darcey, and I know how important this is to you. And if you have to leave so you can be happy, then that’s what you have to do.”

And then Darcey’s arms were wrapped around him, tight and warm and safe, and in less than a month that would be gone, he would be gone. But Jordan couldn’t make him stay. He’d be miserable. Jordan couldn’t do that to him.

“I love you,” Jordan whispered back, and for a while, that was all there was, the two of them just holding each other, ‘I love you’s and ‘I’m sorry’s whispered in broken voices over and over.

“How long will you be gone?” Jordan finally whispered. The tears still fell, but quietly, and even though his shoulders and voice were shaking, he could breathe, at least, for now.

“Two years,” Darcey said. Jordan swallowed hard. “For the associate’s degree.”

“Are you coming back?”

“I want to.”

Jordan’s whole body shook, all the way to his bones, when he said, “I’ll wait for you. I know it’s a long time, but I love you so much. I want to be with you, even if it’s long distance in another state. Even if we can only talk online and on the phone, it’s better than not having you at all.” He was practically begging, but couldn’t bring himself to care how desperate he sounded. He could live without Darcey in his life, but everything would be so much emptier, so much lonelier, without him in it. “I’m sorry I can’t go with you. But I can do long distance if you can.”

Darcey pulled him closer, hugged him tighter, and whispered, “I’ll wait for you, too. I love you so much, Jordan. I mean, all of my relationships were long distance for a while. It’s hard, but I can do it again. I’ll do whatever I have to to make it work.”

Jordan nodded and buried his face in Darcey’s shoulder, breathing him in, hands tight in the back of his shirt. He tried to commit everything about Darcey to memory: the smell and warmth and softness of his skin, the cut of his muscle, the smell of laundry soap in his clothes and the calluses on his fingers against the back of his neck. It was already the second of April, and now that Jordan knew he was counting down, he had to make every moment with Darcey count.

For a long time, they held each other quietly. Darcey was the first to pull away. He walked to the dresser and pulled open the bottom drawer, opening a small metal box and pulling out two chains, wrapping them around his knuckles. He sat back down beside Jordan again and said, “I want you to have these.” The chains were cold pressed against Jordan’s palm. Darcey’s dog tags. Jordan looked up at him, wide-eyed.

“Darcey, but –”

“I know you might not be able to wear them if you go back to BashBack,” Darcey said, “but I want you to keep them. I’m yours, Jordan, and I still will be, even on the other side of the country. I want you to keep my tags to remind you of that when things get hard.”

Jordan stared at them as Darcey spoke, his name, his number, his religion, stamped into the metal. One said Jewish, one Atheist. He looked up, brows furrowed, and Darcey explained,

“It was a safety precaution. So if I ended up stuck in a bad spot where my religion would put me in danger I could switch them out.”

Darcey swallowed as Jordan looked back down. The tags clinked softly when he turned them in his hand. To him, these represented ownership, power over him, something he’d never wanted to give to anybody after leaving the military. It was why he locked them in that tiny box when he first came home. But it seemed right that Jordan have them, now.

Jordan looped both chains over his neck. He didn’t tuck them behind his shirt. He let them hang, loose, for everyone to see.

“I love you, Darcey,” he whispered. “And I’m not ashamed of that. I’m proud. And I’m proud of
you and everything you’ve done. And I’m sorry I hid you away for so long. But anyone who
can’t deal with it can go to hell. Part of being an activist is doing the right thing, even when it’s
hard and the odds are against you. And I’m going to start fucking living that way like I should
have years ago.” He paused, and repeated, “I love you. The next two years will be hard, but if you
come back to me, I’d wait two hundred. I have Skype and AIM and we both have long distance
on our phones. Now that I’m in management, eventually I’ll get more paid vacation and a bigger
paycheck and I can use that to come visit you on your breaks. Or bring you out to visit me.”

Darcey smiled, soft and sad, loving and grateful. “I don’t know if I’ll be working right away,” he
said, “but my school will be paid for so I just have to worry about living expenses. Since I’ve been
living with my parents, I have enough savings to cover me for a while. And I’ll need someone to
watch Puff until I come home.”

Until he came home. This was his home. And Jordan was part of it. And even though it was
painful and terrifying, hearing Darcey say it helped.

He looked back up at Jordan again. “I know your landlord is weird about pets. She can stay with
my family, but… I’d rather Puff stay with you while I’m gone, if she can. I don’t know if I’ll have
the space for her and I just want to know she’s taken care of.”

Jordan smiled, a little shaky, and nodded. “I’ll work it out.” Darcey loved that cat like she was his
own child. If he was leaving her with Jordan, it was as good as a promise to come back. “Ally’s
going to be mad, though.”

“She’ll manage,” Darcey chuckled.

Jordan chuckled back, then a choking sob followed, and he threw himself against Darcey, arms
wrapped tightly around him, nose buried in the curve of his shoulder, knocking him back down on
the bed. Darcey hugged him back. His breathing was shallow and uneven.

“I love you so much, Darcey Walker,” Jordan whispered. “And even though long distance
relationships arelonely and painful, I don’t care. You’re worth it and I’ll make it work.”

have to do this. I wish you could come with me.”

“I know. I wish a lot of things.”

“Yeah.”

They were both silent for a few minutes, curled up tightly in each other, before Darcey asked
tentatively, “Do… we’ll stay together. But do you want to open up the relationship? I know how
important physical contact is to you, and —”

“I don’t want to see anyone else,” Jordan said. “I don’t even want to look. But if you want to open
up on your end, that’s okay.”

Darcey pushed Jordan back just far enough to look in his eyes. “Are you just saying that because
you think it’s what I want, or are you really okay with that?”

“I’m really okay with that,” Jordan whispered. “I love you. And I trust you. And if you say you’re
coming home to me, I know you will. Just… don’t tell me about it if you do.”

Darcey kissed Jordan gently and whispered against his mouth, “Okay. You’re allowed to change
your mind whenever you want. Talk to me. Be open about it, okay? I want to know where you
stand, always.”
Jordan nodded, his nose bumping Darcey’s, and they both chuckled sadly. “Sometimes I don’t think you realize what an amazing person you are,” Darcey murmured. He gently cupped Jordan’s face and ran his thumb along his cheek. “I think sometimes you just need someone to remind you.”

Jordan laughed softly, wet. “Well, you’d better keep reminding me when your out in New York,” he said. His voice was a little broken, but not so scared or hopeless anymore. Darcey loved him, and although he’d hidden very personal things, he’d never lied once. He wouldn’t say he wanted to stay together if that wasn’t his intent.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you, too.”

And Darcey kissed him, soft and gentle and loving, and even though the next two years would be the hardest of his life, for Darcey, Jordan knew he could make it.

Chapter End Notes

Oh man we're almost there, two chapters left!!!!!

Come visit me at indecentpause.tumblr.com for short stories and moodboards and such! :D
Darcey’s life was simultaneously coming together and falling apart.

His class schedule was made. He had a school email account. He’d put in his two weeks, which Macy was understanding enough to cut down to one so he’d have time to get everything together and move by the time he would start in mid-April.

Jordan had been nothing but supportive, but Darcey could still see the sadness in his eyes, the waver in his smile, and sometimes, when Jordan thought he wasn’t looking, Darcey caught him scrubbing at his eyes with his knuckles. Every day, sometimes every hour, Darcey told Jordan how much he loved him. He found subtle ways to reassure him that even though he was leaving physically, he was still Jordan’s emotionally and mentally, and he still wanted Jordan to be his.

It didn’t stop him from crying silently sometimes in the late morning while Jordan laid next to him, asleep.

Darcey wasn’t getting enough sleep. Jordan hadn’t been keeping up with his friends, spending all his time with Darcey. They were both trying to hard to be strong for each other, they didn’t have time for themselves anymore. Darcey had done a lot of difficult things, but purposely leaving Jordan was one of the hardest.

It was the little things he would miss the most. Kissing each other goodbye and wishing each other a good day at work. Jordan sleeping in bed next to him while he messed around on his laptop. Curling into each other on the couch and watching old school British comedy series. Cooking meals together and goofing off in the kitchen.

This was the right decision. He thought it was. He hoped. And even though Jordan understood, that didn’t make it any less hard, because every day counted up to his move and his dream was also one day counted down from being really, truly happy.

When Jordan woke, Darcey was at work. Puff was curled up by his elbow, breathing softly. Jordan smiled weakly and gently pet her neck, little touches and scratches. Her eyes opened and she yawned, standing up and stretching before moving closer and cuddling underneath his arm. Jordan pulled her close and nuzzled the top of her head.

"I guess it’s going to be just you and me for a while, huh, Puff?” he asked shakily. She meowed again and crawled onto his chest as he rolled onto his back. “We’ll be okay, right? We’ll take care of each other until he comes back.” He sniffled a little, but laughed wetly when she nudged her head against his chin. “Because he is coming back. He promised. And he’d never make a promise if he didn’t intend to keep it. Don’t worry.”

It didn’t matter whether she could understand him. He was saying it just as much for himself.

He let her out of his grip and rolled back on his side, and Puff crawled back under his arm again, placing her paw on Jordan’s nose with a soft mewl. Jordan smiled softly and closed his eyes. Finally, for the first time since Darcey broke the news, he was sure everything was going to be okay, even if it took a while to get there.
There were a lot of things about his old life that Darcey didn’t want to leave behind, even as he was about to move on to his new one.

But he knew he couldn’t have everything.

The U-Haul was packed, his map and directions printed. The room he’d be renting was ready for him to arrive. He had money to stop for food and motels and snacks and simple shelf-stable meals for when they chose not to or couldn’t. Jordan was next to him for the last time in a long while.

When he started the truck, he closed his eyes and almost changed his mind.

He opened them, hit the gas, and drove.

The entire trip, they carefully avoided any mention of their destination. There was a lot of terrible singing to the even more terrible music on the radio. There was a lot of eating at crappy diners because none of the fast food joints they passed had any vegetarian options.

Jordan ate a lot of hash browns and grilled cheese sandwiches and got very adept at making meals out of side dishes. Darcey subsisted on hamburgers and fries and by Wednesday all he wanted was a high quality salad, but he wasn’t going to get anything other than limp iceberg and some shaved carrots anywhere they ended up.

There was also a lot of fast, rough, almost possessive sex in shitty motel rooms.

After the first night, both of them were covered in hickeys and bruises.

After the second, Jordan walked with a slight limp.

The third, so did Darcey.

The entire time, Darcey’s dog tags stayed around Jordan’s neck, and the shock of cold metal against his dark brown skin was one of the most beautiful things Darcey ever seen, because it meant Jordan still wanted to be together.

For a while, they could almost pretend they were just going on a road trip. That Darcey wasn’t leaving. That Jordan wouldn’t be turning around and going back to Arizona the day they got there. Without him.

On Thursday, when they crossed the state line from Pennsylvania to New York, everything changed. They still talked. They still sang to the terrible songs on the radio. Jordan still read the map so Darcey could focus on handling the huge truck in the heavy traffic. Darcey still put his hand on Jordan’s knee at traffic light stops. But everything was different. Slowly but surely, reality set in, heavy, stifling. This was the last day they were going to see each other in a long time. Probably months. In less than three hours they were going to hit a wi-fi hotspot and buy Jordan his ticket home.

Darcey’s dog tags, still hanging loose in the center of Jordan’s chest, clinked softly when he moved, glinting brightly when the sun hit them at the right angle. Darcey didn’t know which of them Jordan was wearing them for. He hoped it was both of them. He hoped Jordan didn’t take them off when he got back home. Even though Darcey would understand, it still hurt to think about losing that connection.
Before they reached the city, Darcey pulled into a coffee shop to use their wi-fi and hopefully get a cup of coffee that hadn’t been sitting on a burner all day.

His shoulders slumped and his feet shuffled heavily with exhaustion. The cashier was young, probably just out of high school, with a bright smile and a cheerful, slightly nasal voice. She waited patiently, making small talk with the barista, when Darcey couldn’t decide what he wanted, even though Jordan ordered his right away. But Darcey was exhausted and he wanted one of everything. He offhandedly said so, hoping to keep her annoyance at bay, and she giggled.


“Everything but the first one,” Darcey said. His voice was soft and it was hard to smile, but he tried. She smiled back. It was clear she could see things were rough for them.

“Well, my barista today makes a mean cappuccino, if you’d like?”

“Sounds good,” Darcey said. “Bone dry. The biggest you’ve got. Two extra shots.”

She nodded and punched it into the register. “For here or to go?”

“Here.” Darcey and Jordan said it at the same time. They looked at each other, matching sad smiles.

After Darcey paid, the cashier said, “Go ahead and sit anywhere. Joey will bring it out to you.”

“Thanks,” Darcey said softly. Jordan had barely spoken. He usually talked to everyone. He was always making friends. It was unnerving.

They took a small, two person table in the very back where they could get some privacy. This time, it was Darcey who stretched his hand across the table for Jordan to take. He did, without hesitation, curling his fingers around Darcey’s.

“This is it, isn’t it?” Darcey murmured.

“Yeah,” Jordan whispered back. His hand tightened and his voice caught. Darcey’s throat was tight, and for once, he couldn’t bring himself to hide how much this hurt him, too.

“I wish it didn’t have to be like this,” Darcey said.

“Me, too. But we’ll be okay.” Jordan paused, his voice a little shaky and unsure when he said, “Right?”

“Yeah,” Darcey reassured him, even though he wasn’t sure if that was true. You’re the shittiest person in the world for doubting him. But for every long distance relationship Darcey had seen succeed, he’d seen three fall apart.

What if he and Jordan were one of those three?

“I love you,” Darcey whispered. “It’ll be hard, but we can do this.”

Jordan nodded. “I’d like to say I’ve been through worse,” he said, a little hoarse. He sniffled. Tears shimmered in his eyes. “Because I’ve been through some pretty rough shit. But honestly, I don’t know if that’s true.”

“I’m sorry.” Darcey had been through worse, much worse, but that didn’t negate how painful it was.
For a long time, they sat there, holding hands. The barista came with their drinks and went again. They talked, but not much, and never about what was going to happen next. Finally, Darcey pulled out his laptop out so he could buy Jordan’s ticket home, and that was when it happened.

Jordan started to cry, softly, silently, face in his hands and elbows on the table. Darcey pushed his laptop to the side and reached over to him, trying to wrap his arms around the smaller man, touch his face, anything, anything he could do to offer some comfort, but it was useless. The only thing that would fix it was turning around and going back home, and he couldn’t do that. Now that he’d gotten so close, if he gave it up, he’d resent both himself and Jordan for the rest of his life. And he couldn’t do that, either.

Jordan leaned into Darcey’s hand, curled gently in his hair at the temple. His shoulders shook and his throat was tight and he was trying so hard to quell the tears, because he didn’t want to make a scene and he didn’t want to be embarrassing and he didn’t want Darcey to feel guilty for following his dream and –

And he was sure his chest was collapsing in on itself because he couldn’t breathe. It was like half his heart was being torn from his chest.

They ducked out of the café not long after. Darcey quickly bought the ticket and they went, because while Jordan didn’t care, Darcey couldn’t deal with the idea of strangers seeing him cry.

For a while, they sat quietly in the truck, curled into each other as best they could be in the awkward, cramped space.

“Please don’t take me to the house with you,” Jordan finally whispered. His voice was cracky and hoarse and sharp, like needles beneath his fingernails. “I can’t do it. I know you need help unpacking, but I just… I can’t. I’m sorry, Darcey. I love you, but I can’t.”

“I understand,” Darcey whispered. “One of the two landlords will probably be able to help me. They’re nice. I think you’ll like them when you come to meet them. Whenever that is.”

“I won’t be able to get more than a day or two off at once until at least two or three months from now,” Jordan said. “I’ve taken so much time off this year, with this trip and my surgery and everything, and –”

“And I understand that, too,” Darcey said. “Since my school is year round we only have breaks a week long, two for winter. I know we might visit while the other is working or in school. And it’s okay. As long as I can see you.”

“Of course,” Jordan said. “Of course.”

A long, drawn pause.

“How are you?” Darcey asked.

“I won’t lie to you, Darcey,” Jordan whispered. “I’m really upset. I’m sad. I’m a little angry. Not at you. Just at the situation. That it can’t be how I want.” His voice caught and when he swallowed, it was like forcing down a softball. When he spoke again, his words were shaky. “I’m probably going to cry the whole flight home and everyone will think I’m stupid because I’m a grown fucking man, but I don’t care, because they don’t understand how much it hurts.” He looked up, eyebrows drawn, but he was smiling softly. “But I’m also really happy for you,” he murmured. “I know how much this means to you and I know how upset you were when you thought you’d never be able to go. I’m glad you got in and I’m glad you can get it paid for. I just –” His voice caught and he pressed his other hand to his mouth, curled into a loose fist. “I’m just going to miss
you so much. More than you can even imagine.”

“I think I can,” Darcey murmured. They were quiet for another few minutes, then Darcey whispered, “I wish you could stay here with me.”

“Me, too,” Jordan whispered. “But I can’t. I’m sorry. Maybe sometime in the future we could move here together, once I’ve had more time to sort things out, but right now, I just… everything I have is in Phoenix, and I know it’s not much, but it’s mine, and I worked so hard to build it, and I’m afraid if I dropped it all to move with you I’d end up holding it against you. I love you so much, Darcey. I never want to think anything but good about you.”

“I know,” Darcey said softly. “I understand. I really do. That’s why I couldn’t stay and go to one of the culinary schools in Scottsdale, instead. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Jordan whispered. “Please stop apologizing, okay? I don’t want you to feel guilty about this. I know how important this is for you. And I’m so happy for you. I am.”

Jordan’s flight didn’t leave until later that evening, so they stopped for lunch, for another cup of coffee, for something small to snack on. But, eventually, they had to make their way to the airport. Jordan only had one carryon, a backpack that had his things for the trip. It wasn’t a shot week so he didn’t have to worry about getting his testosterone through security. But when they got inside, the security line was long, and he only had two hours, so there wasn’t much time to linger.

For a few minutes, they stood, watching each other. Jordan bit his lip. Darcey fought to keep from tearing up.

He didn’t want to say it. He didn’t want to give Jordan any ideas. They’d discussed opening the relationship and their boundaries had been set, and that should have been enough. He didn’t want Jordan to think he didn’t care, but that was why he was saying it to begin with.

“I’ll understand if you change your mind,” Darcey said softly. His voice cracked and broke as tears started to form in the back of his eyes. “If –” He choked on the word like it was a physical object in his throat. “If you don’t want to wait. If you meet someone else.”

Jordan nearly took a step back. His eyes widened and he was suddenly winded, like he’d been punched in the stomach. “I thought you were coming back when you finish?” he whispered. His voice was small, lost, afraid, because if Darcey wasn’t coming home –

Darcey took Jordan’s hands, and for the first time in his life, he didn’t care who might see.

“I am,” he said quickly. “I am. But, I mean, a lot can change in two years, Jordan. And if I decide to stay longer for my bachelor’s… a lot more can change in four.”

Jordan shook his head, his eyebrows drawn painfully tight, lips parted, and then, despite himself, he started crying softly, whimpering like a scared child, “No, no, don’t say that, don’t, Darcey –”

And Darcey would wait. He would wait forever. But he was the one leaving, and it wasn’t fair to expect Jordan to do the same. Jordan wanted to wait now. But would he still feel the same way a year from now? Two years was more than enough time for Jordan to fall out of love with him.

“I’m not breaking up with you.” Darcey could barely see through the blur of tears. “I want to stay together. I mean that. I want this to work more than I’ve ever wanted anything. I just… I just want you to know that, if…” He choked again and fell quiet. “I love you, Jordan. I love you so much. I just –”
“I love you, too,” Jordan interrupted. “And if I want to wait for you, you can’t stop me. And you won’t. And even if we open the relationship on my end, and even if I do meet someone, you are always going to come first. And I’m going to wait, you stubborn jerk.” Jordan’s eyes were just as teary as Darcey’s, and it was wavery and watery, but he was smiling. Darcey choked a single, broken laugh and nodded. Jordan laughed, too, dropping his head to Darcey’s shoulder. They wrapped their arms around each other and stood like that for a long while, but the problem with moments like that was eventually, they had to end.

Jordan pulled away. Darcey kissed him, soft, gentle, but desperate, because it could be months before they could touch each other again. Every time one pulled away, the other pulled him back in. Even though there was the occasional whisper or mutter, neither of them cared, because this was more important.

When Jordan started to let go of Darcey’s hands, Darcey knew he was pulling away for the last time. He started backward toward the security line and Darcey took a step after him, as if he could go, too, as if he could keep Jordan with him, as if he could fix it, but he couldn’t.

“I love you, Darcey Walker,” Jordan whispered, soft, but firm.

“I love you. Call me when you get in so I know you’re okay.”

Jordan nodded. Took one more step back. Hesitated.

“I love you,” he repeated.

He turned around and began to walk away. Darcey stood, silently, watching. The way he moved his feet. The tension in his shoulders. The slight slouch low in his back. The wild mop of curly black hair, a little longer now than when they’d first met.

The chain of Darcey’s dog tags glinted in the bright fluorescent light between the neckline of his shirt and his skin.

And when Jordan finally left his line of sight, Darcey covered his eyes and silently cried, right there in the middle of the crowded airport.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so I know I only have one chapter left after this but PLEASE TRUST ME

I'll see you all for the ending next week! :)


Time passed, as it always would, but slowly. The hours dragged, the days lasted forever, and the weeks could have each been a year of their own. But even so, August was coming, and Darcey and Jordan’s first year anniversary was on its way.

“I have school that week,” Darcey had said when he realized it was approaching. “I can’t get out there.”

“I’ll come out to you, then,” Jordan said. “I’ll come in Thursday, and we’ll have Friday and the weekend together. Then I’ll head home Monday. It’s okay if we can’t celebrate on the actual day. Just make sure we can Skype for a while.”

Darcey grinned. “Can do.”

He smiled so much more, now. Darcey had never been a dour person, he’d never had a negative attitude, even with all of the problems he’d had to wade through in Phoenix. But New York and the CIA were doing wonders for him. His smiles were easier, brighter, and so much more frequent. He laughed easier.

It wasn’t easy being in a long distance relationship. But it was worth it.

August came. Jordan’s first visit was humid and rainy, but warm. They crammed more into that three day visit than Jordan could have imagined doing in weeks, they went to New York City and Times Square and saw all the beautiful places and things, and Darcey showed him all the hidden gems of restaurants in his town, like where to get the best pizza and which vendor had the best falafel. For those three days, everything was just like it had always been, and everything was perfect.

It was December. Darcey and Jordan still talked daily, but neither were going to be able to get together the money or time for another visit until at least February of the next year. The days grew shorter and cooler and the hours of darkness grew ever longer. Darcey occasionally texted snapshots he’d taken of drifts and snowed in cars and buildings. Jordan’s moods hadn’t been quite as stable as they had been when Darcey was still there, but it wasn’t until winter truly hit that they got worse. His outbursts became more frequent, more emotional, harder to quell, and it was terrifying. He isolated himself from his friends, everyone except for Iffy and Terrence, who understood, who had seen it and knew what to expect and what to do, even if they couldn’t help.

“Vince, I don’t know what to do.”

Jordan and Vince had been talking for hours, going around in circles and always ending up back in the same place: Jordan needed therapy. He clearly couldn’t manage his problems on his own anymore. But he still couldn’t afford the two days a week of specialized therapy everyone had suggested, and he was not going back to anybody one-on-one.
“I don’t know, Jordan. I wish I had an answer. But if you can’t afford the specialized therapy, one-on-one is your only other option.”

“Maybe I could find a group or something.” Jordan’s eyes darted over Vince’s, a computer screen and a country apart. “Not specialized to my problems, but just, like, coping and shit in general. Because I sure as hell can’t keep going like this. I…” His voice caught and he slammed his hand down on his desk in frustration, curling it into a fist and bringing it to his forehead. “Shit, I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Jordan. I mean… do you know anyone who’s gone to therapy who could recommend someone to you? That seems like the best place to start.”

Jordan bit his lip and lowered his hand.

“I know one guy.”

The time passed, slowly and quickly and slowly again, and finally, in mid-January, Jordan asked Darcey, “Hey, what was the name of your old therapist?”


Jordan’s hand curled over the back of his neck. “I just… my mood swings are getting worse. Like, a lot worse. I can’t handle it by myself anymore.” His voice cracked, embarrassed. Darcey’s face softened.

“Of course,” he said. “Her name was Alicia. I don’t think I have her phone number anymore, but let me see if I can search her office.” His eyes darted to the right as he pulled up a search window. Jordan pulled his knee up to his chest. This wouldn’t be like the gender therapy, he told himself. Anyone worth anything as a therapist could handle this. If he ended up with someone bad, he could find someone else.

“I just emailed you the link,” Darcey said. Jordan looked up from the keyboard again.

“Thanks.”

“She’s really good, Jordan. And you can trust her. She’s very strict about patient privacy. I won’t know anything you don’t tell me yourself, and your brother won’t be able to find out.”

Jordan didn’t do anything with the information at first. Just knowing he had it actually helped a little, and now that the days were getting longer again, things weren’t so bad. He went out with Nate and Iffy and sometimes Vi and sometimes Justin almost every week to help them dumpster dive, and as often as he could to their brunches and Food Not Bombs serves. The first night they came to pick him up, Iffy asked about the dog tags.

“They’re Darcey’s,” Jordan had said. “He asked me to hold onto them while he was gone.”

“That’s actually really sweet,” Vi had said, and that was when he knew that at least with them and their friends, he would be okay no matter what.

He hadn’t been to a BashBack event since the fight with Mandy. He hadn’t spoken to her since
then, either. But at least he was still doing something, even if he wasn’t quite where he would have preferred to be.

But then, one night during a dive, Jordan’s hand ended up in a pile of unidentifiable something, and his arm broke out in hives. The ensuing panic attack and crying fit was finally enough to convince him: he needed to see a therapist.

He called on April 13th, the anniversary of the day Darcey had left for New York.

“It’s Jordan, right?”

Jordan looked up from his feet, pigeon-toed red sneakers. He nodded. He wasn’t sure if Alicia remembered him from when he’d come in with Darcey, but if she did, she made no indication of it.

“And why are you here to seek treatment today?”

Jordan scratched the side of his neck and looked down again. “It’s complicated,” he whispered.

Alicia smiled. “We have an hour. Take your time.”

Jordan swallowed.

“Well, I saw a therapist once, about four, five years ago,” he started.

Alicia opened his chart and began to write.

Darcey’s first year of school was relatively uneventful. He joined some clubs and went to some volunteer events and tried his best to break out of his shell and meet some people. His sisters went over to Jordan’s once a week to talk with him, at first, until Lexi finally got fed up and downloaded Skype on the family computer so she could talk to him more often. He was talking to her and Ally now, while William was at work and Jess was in the living room.

“So are you a super famous chef, yet?” Ally asked.

Darcey laughed. “Not yet, Allycat. Going to school doesn’t make me a chef. It just gives me the skills I need to go out into the world and work my way up to it.”

“Well, I still tell my friends you’re a chef, because it’s easier,” Ally said.

Lexi snorted. “Do you have any new scars?” she asked. Darcey chuckled and pulled his arm sock off his right forearm. What looked like a knife wound sliced from his wrist to nearly his elbow.

“Oh my god!” Lexi cried. “Were you in a knife fight!”

“No,” Darcey laughed. “The salamander fell on my arm.”

Lexi and Ally shared a confused look. “The… what?”

“The broiler.”
“Oh. Oh!” Lexi’s hands shot to her mouth and her eyes went wide as Ally shook her arms out like a puppy trying to dry itself off.

“Oh my god!” she shouted.

“Lexi!” Jess shouted from the other room.

“Sorry, Mom!” Lexi turned back to the computer again. “Did you have to go to the hospital?”

“I did,” Darcey said. “But it’s fine now. It only happened a month ago, so it’ll need some more time to heal. But I’ll be fine.”

“Hey, Darcey! Some of our classmates are going out for drinks and they wanted to invite us.”

Darcey looked up from pulling on his jacket. It was Charlee, the five-foot nothing, firey as hell woman he’d been partnered with for the entirety of the curriculum. At first she hadn’t liked him much, but it didn’t take long before they found ways to work together, and now they were so inseparable that for many months, everyone had thought they were dating.

Darcey glanced down at his watch. Nearly 4:00. For half a second, he thought his watch must have been twelve hours behind. He chuckled. It had been over a year, and he still wasn’t used to normal civilian time. “What time?”

“We were thinking about seven,” she said.

“I can’t,” Darcey said. “I have a… a thing.” That thing was one of Darcey’s weekly Skype chats with Jordan, which were getting fewer and fewer recently now that school had gotten into the advanced courses. He often stayed late or came in early or on off days to practice. He especially needed to work on his plating. If anything, that was his weak point.

Charlee raised an eyebrow. “A date thing?”

“Not exactly,” he said. “I… my long distance boyfriend and I have a Skype talk scheduled around then. Depending on how long it lasts, I might meet up with you later.”

Charlee smirked.

“What?”

“Oh, man, I fucking called it.”


“Everyone said there was no way you could be gay, but I knew they were wrong.”

“Were you taking bets!?”

“No!”

“But you were talking about it behind my back.”

Charlee opened her mouth, then paused. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Well, yeah, you did call it, and since I only get to actually see my boyfriend once every few months and I see you guys almost every day, whenever I get the opportunity to spend time with him, he comes first.”

“No problem.”

“And Charlee?”

“Hm?”

“Don’t… don’t tell people, okay? I don’t want people to make a big thing about it in a situation when it doesn’t matter.”

She mock-saluted. “Done!”

Another year passed. Darcey and Jordan were able to visit once every six months or so, New York in the warm seasons, Arizona in the cold. It was never easy being so far apart, but it slowly got less hard. Even now, they still talked on Skype almost daily and texted frequently throughout the day.

Jordan had never said so aloud to anyone but his therapist, but there were times he doubted his decision. Not to stay with Darcey, but to stay in Phoenix. Maybe he should have gone to New York with him. But he’d never hold Darcey’s decision against him. He was so successful. He was at the top of his class and he’d placed in a number of competitions, and even won two of them. He’d have never had opportunities like that here.

He sat in the living room on his laptop, working on a relatively new blog. A food one. Sometimes it was restaurant reviews, sometimes it was recipes he’d formulated. Darcey sometimes made guest posts with things he’d learned at school that could be useful for home cooks, or write ups of food festivals he’d gone to. Jordan took a lot of pictures. Not just for his blog. Of everything. That was one of the few things he regretted. He didn’t have any pictures of him and Darcey from before.

Puff was curled up next to his knee, purring softly while he typed.

He didn’t pick up his phone immediately when it beeped. He finished his paragraph first, then opened it and slid it to the keypad. It was Darcey.

Are you home right now?

Yeah. Skype? Jordan texted back.

I’m not at my computer right now, unfortunately, but I sent you something and I wanted to check and see if it’s at your place yet.

I don’t think so. I’ve been home all day and nobody’s knocked or anything.

Moments after he sent the text, someone knocked on the door. Jordan’s heart jumped into his chest. It was probably just a coincidence. It was probably just Terrence. Jordan was expecting him over sometime tonight. Darcey had never made any indication that he was coming back yet. Why would he? He’d said he wanted to, but sometimes Jordan doubted it, because he had so many more opportunities in a state like New York than one like Arizona.
But as he stood, bare feet padding across the carpet, he couldn’t help but think, *But what if he has?*

His head pounded with his pulse when he put his hand on the doorknob, almost afraid to open it, because it was just going to be Terrence and then he’d break down because he got his hopes up over a stupid coincidence.

He undid the lock and opened the door.

Jordan’s knees almost gave out under him and suddenly he couldn’t breathe. Darcey was standing there.

“Hey,” he whispered.

“Hey,” Jordan whispered back. He wanted to leap into his arms, kiss him all over his perfect, stupid face, pull him inside and push him against the wall and kiss him until neither of them could breathe, but instead all he did was stand there, staring.

The lines of Darcey’s face were softer now. His forearms had been branded with kitchen scars, mostly burns – Jordan remembered every story, the grin on Darcey’s face as he told him about the stupid mistakes and accidental triumphs. The scar from the salamander peeked out from underneath his ever-present black arm sock, “So people don’t assume things,” he’d said.

His posture was more sure. He held his body easier. He was confident and relaxed in his stance, but still kept his back straight and feet just apart, like he always had.

“Hey,” he said again, trying to prompt Jordan out of his silence. He was just surprised, right? He wasn’t angry, was he?

Jordan’s breathing was shallow, one hand clutching his shirt, like it was the only thing keeping him grounded.

“Darcey,” he finally whispered. “You’re back.”

“Yeah.” He smiled. “Of course.”

“For… good?” Jordan asked hesitantly.

“For good.” His eyes caught the side of Jordan’s neck, followed it down to his shirt collar, back up to his face.

“You’re still wearing them,” he said softly, almost disbelievingly. His smile was small, a little lopsided, his eyebrows raised in surprise. Jordan pulled the tags from underneath his shirt and wrapped his fingers around them. They were warm from being against his skin so long.

“Yeah,” he whispered. “I only take them off to shower.”

Darcey reached for something in his pocket. “The, um,” he said softly. His ears and nose flushed. He glanced down, back up at Jordan again. “The thing I sent you. It…” His wrist flexed a little when he closed his hand around something, but he didn’t pull it out. “It was a little too important to rely on the postal service to handle. So. I…” His eyes were locked on Jordan’s chin. The shorter man leaned down, trying to catch his eyes.

“Darcey?” Jordan’s voice was soft. His eyebrows drew together as he looked over Darcey’s face. Why was he so nervous? What was going on? His heart almost stopped in a brief moment of panic, even though Darcey said he was home for good, but no, no, please god, no, he’s not
staying. He couldn’t lose Darcey again. It took almost six months for him to put himself back together the first time.

“So sorry,” he said. “I guess I still suck at emotions.”

Jordan smiled and laughed softly. He then realized that they were both still standing at the door. He took a step back to invite Darcey in when he blurted out,

“I want you to have this.” And in one quick movement, he pulled a small… something out of his pocket. It was red and white and when he loosened his fingers, Jordan saw that it was a plastic Pokéball. When he hit the button on the front and it flipped open, the Charizard card they talked about that first night was inside. In front of it was a simple, unadorned silver band. Jordan’s head started spinning and his knees nearly gave out. He had to lean his weight against the doorframe to keep steady.

Jordan looked back up into his eyes. “Are you…?”

Darcey bit the corner of his lip. “Yeah,” he said softly, “Sorry I’m so bad at being romantic. But I just… I love you, Jordan. While I was gone, every day, all I could think about was you. How I wanted to tell you this or show you that or take you to see this show or movie or how much you’d love that restaurant or…” He paused, breathed in deeply. His hands shook a little, but his tremors were so much better than Jordan remembered.

“I love you,” Darcey said. The air stuck in Jordan’s throat and his hand curled tighter against the doorframe and everything had gone blurry because he was crying, but he was still smiling so hard his teeth hurt. Darcey continued. “And I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

And then, Jordan was laughing and crying at the same time, pure joy permeated his entire being, warm and soft and gentle and all-consuming and perfect, like a sunrise straight from the center of his soul.

“Atch,” he whispered. “Oh god, Darcey. I missed you so much. I love you.” And then he realized he hadn’t answered. Darcey still stood there, unsure, but Jordan was still babbling too much to say oh god, yes yes yes and instead he nodded frantically, hands cupped over his mouth as he said, over and over, “I’m so glad you’re back. I’m so glad you’re back.”

Darcey’s shoulders relaxed and he exhaled a thick huff of air, the brightest, happiest smile Jordan had ever seen spreading across his face. Darcey dropped his oversized bookbag and grabbed Jordan in an embrace so tight he nearly lifted Jordan off the floor.

And when Darcey wrapped his arms around Jordan, for the first time in his life, he felt like he’d finally come home.

The End

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for sticking with me through such a long fic, an original one, no less! I know most people come to Ao3 for fandom so it means the world to me.
Next week I will post up the remaining story in the trilogy in full, The Succession of Us!

In the meantime, come see me at indecentpause.tumblr.com for short stories, recs, Shakespeare jokes, and moodboards. :) 

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!