

Back to the Start

By Brigantine Westmoor

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Nicholas
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I was driving down a stretch of highway that was just... corn. Corn to my left, corn to my right. For the last twenty miles, it had been fields and fields of nothing but corn. Man, I was *not* used to being in the country anymore. Ever since I graduated high school, I'd bailed on the farm town of Mavis (population: seven hundred and forty-two) for the hustle and bustle and oh-so-shiny lights of Greenwood, which, rather conveniently, was almost two hundred miles away. Sorry, mom and dad, but the city boy in me called strong, and I had to answer it.

Now look at me! Cruising down the highway in a shiny silver convertible, with slick low-profile tires on alloy rims, an engine that could go from zero to sixty in nothing flat, and a swanky black leather interior with real wood trim. And I paid for it myself, with the money I made as a big-shot lawyer. I cackled to myself, wiggling a little in my seat. Driving to my ten-year high-school reunion didn't seem so bad, after all, and I'd get to surprise my parents that I was going to be staying the whole month!

Okay, so I had to take out a huge lease on the new car. And yeah, I was a lawyer, but big-shot was stretching it just a little. It was a pro-bono firm for destitute clients, which was morally rewarding, but it barely paid fifty grand a year. It was more than I'd ever made before, but somehow still never enough. I had dreams of picking up a huge case and taking down one of the many corrupt mega-corporations that poisoned our state's waters and polluted our air. Unfortunately, almost all I'd gotten since I left college five years ago were workman's comp cases. And while I kept telling myself I didn't mind it, I couldn't shake the feeling there had to be more out there.

I had to look good — successful, really — to make the right first impression; after all, I hadn't been back in ten years. Hopefully, the big stink about me being gay had dissipated, since that was old history from back in high school. Knowing the old biddies in the town... well, I wouldn't get my hopes up. I sighed and pulled down the visor to check my hair.

Yup, all still there.

My dark, straight brown hair contrasted with the wavy golden fur that shone in the sunlight pouring in through the open roof, a sign that I was all pure golden lab. The red flannel shirt I wore hugged my lean body closely; if I had to be five-foot six and all of a hundred and twenty-something pounds, I might as well make the most of it. The silver cuff on my right ear glinted as I folded up the visor. Maybe one day I'd have the courage to get an actual piercing, but that was a thought for another time.

Coming up on my right, I spied the road sign: MAVIS - 54 MILES, EXIT 209

Thank God, I'm almost there. Maybe this month off will do me some good. Get my head on straight, remind myself why I don't want to move back home and sob about the unfairness of it all... I wonder if there's even anyone on Grindr to —

My eyes picked up something in the road, headed right for my driver's side tire. "Oh, fu—"

Whu-BAM!

"Shit!" I yelped, as I hit an absolutely *massive* rock that was just sitting there in the middle of the road. The car started pulling to the left, hard, and I knew I'd blown a tire. Ambling the vehicle to the side of the road, I put on my hazards and shut the damn thing off. My phone was my next priority, and I checked out my signal. "No bars. Friggin' figures," I muttered. It had been an hour or so since I saw any other vehicles on the road, too. Banging my head against the steering wheel, I let loose with every swear word I knew. Hell, think I might've made up a few new ones, too. I leaned back in my seat and let out a weary sigh as my eyes started stinging. *Oh, no you do NOT, Nicholas Southwell! This is nothing. You just have to... get out and walk. Yeah. That's it. Get out and walk!*

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"Fuck *me*," I groaned. I'd been walking for what felt like hours, but from the mile markers, I'd only made it a whole five and a quarter miles. It was getting on to noon, and the sun pelted down on me as I wiped sweat out of my eyes. My drenched clothes clung to my body; the dressy button-down and the khakis would at least need a thorough washing, if they were salvageable at all. And some farmers were watering their fields. It was tempting to stand under the spray, but I knew for a fact that the farmers out here used gray water (water reclaimed from sewage that's safe for watering crops and lawns, but not safe for consumption). Farming was in my genes; my mom and dad were both corn farmers, same as everyone else around my hometown. But I just *couldn't* let some backwater hick town tie me down my whole life! What kind of life would that be, anyway? The dating scene alone would be wretched. Not that I'd been doing any of that anyway, but hope springs eternal and all that.

A fly started buzzing around my head, the little cretin. I swatted at it, but of course, there was no way I could've caught it. Nevertheless, I swiped and grasped at the fucker, and finally, I had it in my curled-up paw. I jumped for joy, letting out a whoop of triumph — okay, maybe I had a *touch* of heatstroke. Cackling, I squished the bug, then realized that I had nothing to wipe my hands on but my smelly, sweaty clothes. “Damn.”

As I was wiping my paw on the thigh of my pants, I heard a distant rumble. *Thunder?* I looked around at the horizon, but it was nothing but clear skies. I sighed. *Guess it was too much to hope for a reprieve from this heat — Wait! Is that a car?!*

Sure enough, an enormous, beat-up white truck was driving my way! I could've cried, but I held it together long enough to jump up and down and wave my arms like a lunatic over my head. “Here!” I screamed, yelling at the top of my lungs. “Over here!”

The truck flashed its brights at me a few times, acknowledging my presence. Relieved, I slumped to the ground and rested my head on top of my knees. I let out a single, massive sob of relief. And then exhaustion hit me like a sack of bricks. I couldn't quite muster up the strength to move, not even when I heard the crunch of tires slowing to a stop next to me. But I nearly jumped out of my skin when I heard the door open hastily, and a deep, hesitant, rumbly voice spoke just three words to me.

“Nick? That you?”

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Knox
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I'd been working on old Mrs. Wyrdmott's car all freaking morning. And a good portion of yesterday, too. It didn't matter how many times I told her to bring it around for an oil change, she always ran it till it smoked. Her late husband (bless his soul) was the mechanic who'd handed this shop down to me three years ago; I'd apprenticed under him right up until the day he died. Mr. Wyrdmott had also expressed a similar frustration and had resorted to 'stealing' the car from her when it needed maintenance. Even the promise of a free routine service couldn't convince her to bring it in.

At least she paid me for the trouble.

I groaned as I levered myself up from under the car; a solidly serviceable four-door sedan painted her favorite color (candy apple red) and walked into the employee bathroom to tidy up.

Good thing I did, geez. I had a giant grease stain on my left cheek, causing the white, orange, and black-striped fur to look muddy and dark. Some of the special shampoo we

kept in there took it right off, with some more just to rinse the sweat out of my hair, and I felt like a new tiger. My days as defensive tackle for the Mavis Destroyers in high school gave me the start of a muscular build, and I'd only gotten bigger since then. I twisted my upper body back and forth. All right, so I was ogling myself. Big deal. Everyone should check themselves out sometimes.

Exiting, I went to the waiting room, knocking lightly on the doorframe. I called out, "Hey, Mrs. Wyrd —"

"Clarissa, dear. You're a grown man, too, now, and you're an equal here." Clarissa Wyrdmott was in her late seventies, though she didn't look a day over two hundred. A wizened old white rabbit, with shaky hands, more wrinkles than that fitted sheet you hadn't bothered to fold, and the most perfect smile of pearly whites you ever did see. Seriously, I needed to get the name of her dentist. "Now, what is it, Lennox?"

I rolled my eyes at my full name. "Tell you what, Clarissa. I'll keep calling you by your first name, if you call me by my nickname."

"Oh, but I remember when you were *this* high on me!" she crooned, putting a horizontal paw somewhere down by her calf. "I remember your parents bringing you into church for your baptism, and they announced their baby boy, Lennox, to the whole parish. You always were such a sweet boy. Well, except for that little hullabaloo in high school. You know, I always said it was awful how they treated little Nicky."

I winced, but straightened my spine quickly in the hopes she wouldn't notice. Scuffing a booted foot along the ground, I let out an uneasy chuckle. "Yeah-h-h... Um, so anyway, your car." Thankfully, Clarissa seemed perfectly happy to change gears again, and she nodded. "You need an oil pan cap for your car, but we don't have any at the shop. I checked the online inventory at the auto parts place up on Main, and they don't have any in either, but there are some in Six Trails, just up the road apiece. M'gonna take off and pick some up for the shop, and then I can replace yours too; should be done by this evening. One of the guys can drive you home, so you don't have to wait here."

Clarissa nodded. "That would be wonderful, dear. Thank you so much. An old biddy like me needs all the help she can get!" Then she stood up, grabbing my oversized ear, and pulling me down. In a voice that she probably thought was a whisper, she said, "Try to get Marcus. He's a strapping young thing, isn't he?" Then, with a wicked and dazzling grin, she shuffled back to her seat, plopping down and kicking her tiny legs out like a schoolgirl waiting on her crush to walk by.

Five minutes later, she was Marcus' problem as I tooled down 209 in my beat-up truck. Ol' Marge was my work truck, and she had a pair of toolboxes built into the long ends of the

bed, and a shorter one at the top behind the window. The dents and rust that marred the white paint were her battle scars. But I didn't really care how Marge looked; that pickup had been faithfully serving me for 7 years now, and she had a massively roomy hood that made it easy as pie to work on her. The blue upholstered interior had a few grease stains from my time at the shop, a few rips, and yeah, the glass needed polishing... but that was a problem for future me. I put in a CD of some 80s metal and tried to zone out a little.

It wasn't working.

All I could think about was that day in senior year, right before homecoming. They'd named me captain of the football team that year, and I was the *hottest* shit. Everyone wanted a piece of the tiger; guys wanted to be me, girls wanted to be with me. We'd won state that year, too, so people were coming out of the woodwork, all to see me. I think Ms. Folsom, the school nurse, even had a crush on me. It almost overwhelmed me, the sheer volume of confessions I was getting on the daily, but I just politely turned them all down. Still, I could've had any girl I wanted.

So why did it fuck me up so bad when Nick Southwell confessed to liking me?

We were in one of the spare classrooms after school, and he was tutoring me in science. I don't even remember what we were studying, because all I was thinking about was how *good* he smelled. I never found out what cologne or body spray or whatever he wore, but it was exactly like fresh peaches and cinnamon. And I still don't know why I remember that specific little detail all these years later, but he caught me staring at him.

It just... it got *real* quiet suddenly. I swear it was like I zoomed in on him, because he was all I could see.

Weird shit.

And then he looked away, and I nearly fell out of my chair from leaning so far forward. Caught myself before I bumped into him, though, thank goodness. And then he looked back at me, smiled a crooked smile, and with a soft, breathy laugh, he said, "Hey, so, uh, Knox? I need to tell you something."

His voice was like birds singing. How had I never noticed that before? "Yeah, anything, man."

He took a deep breath. "Knox, I'm... I'm gay." There was a long pause, and then the rest of the words tumbled out in a rush. "I'm gay, and I have a crush on you, and I think you're amazing, and do you maybe wanna go to homecoming with me?"

Time stopped. I didn't know what to think. My face heated, and my stomach twisted around and around itself. Somehow, even though it was wringing itself like an old dishtowel, I had a fluttery feeling in my stomach. And my whole body was tingling, like that time I stuck my finger onto the terminal of one of Grampa's old tube lights he kept in his workshop.

And I *freaked*.

I shoved my books into my backpack as fast as I could go, while Nick begged me to stay, to talk to him, to tell him what was going on, and then finally, pleading with me to forget it. Just forget it. I left that classroom with Nick in tears, and I hadn't said a damn word.

I ran all the way home, a weird clenching feeling in my gut that somehow also found its way to more southerly regions. Feelings of excitement and nervousness flooded me, and my whole body was *still* tingling, and I couldn't figure out *why*. *Was it the crying?* God, I hoped not. That'd be fucked up. I burst through the front door, ditching my sneakers and my backpack in the entryway, then ran to the kitchen for a glass of cold water.

As I chugged it, Mom came into the kitchen and started making something. A sandwich, maybe? I really wasn't paying attention. Eventually, she turned to look at me and said in the sweetest, most motherly voice, "Honey? What's wrong?"

Nick asked me not to tell. Begged me not to tell. Cried over it, even. So what did I do? Opened my mouth and said the first thing that came to mind.

"Nick Southwell is gay, and... I think he asked me to homecoming."

I'd never seen my mom's face go darken so quickly. "And? What did *you* say?"

"I didn't say anything. I just left." *Like a coward*.

"Good man. Excuse me, I need to make a phone call."

And that was it. The next day, everybody in town knew what Nick had done, and basically all the kids in school started picking on him. And the part that killed me the most was that I, the guy he'd confessed to, that he had a crush on, had been the worst of the lot. I couldn't lose my status, my support system, and if I hadn't done anything, then our classmates would've picked on me, too, and thought I was gay. And that wasn't something I could allow, so I just went with the flow.

The worst part? I never got to tell him how frickin' sorry I was. God, I still have nightmares about the look on his face when I called him a faggot for the first time. I broke his heart, and for good measure, I spread the pieces all around the damn school.

There was the ten-year reunion. A part of me hoped he'd gotten out of this bigoted town and never, ever looked back. A much bigger part hoped that he'd come back to town, and I'd get one more chance at redemption.

Movement on the side of the road jolted me out of my reverie, and I squinted through the heat haze and harsh sun of the summer day. Was that... Oh, shit! It was a person! A very slender, petite someone, with golden fur, and a red flannel shirt with khakis that looked soaked and painted on. "It is way too hot out here for anyone to be walking. Must've run out of gas or something." I flashed my brights a few times, and I watched the figure crumple to the ground, curling up into a ball. "Aw, heck, that ain't good." Pressing on the accelerator, I shifted down to help me speed up. I pulled up on the other side of the highway, and it only took me a few more moments to reach them as I popped open the door, stepped out, and started walking towards them. And like some vision of my dreams, I found out I recognized this little guy. He was sweaty, but I'd recognize that scent anywhere.

Peaches and cinnamon.

"Nick?" I called out, trying to keep my voice gentle. "That you?"

His entire body stiffened, and I watched him look up to glare at me wordlessly. But one look at his face was all I needed to see. "Holy shit, Nick, it is you! Oh my God, you're soaked. You might actually have heatstroke. Let's get you up and into some A/C." I reached out a paw and placed it on his shoulder.

Nick wrenched his body away from me. "Don't *touch* me, asshole!" He hissed. "I'm *fine*. We're not in high school anymore, you know; touching me without my permission comes with actual repercussions now." The look he was giving me could've cut diamonds, but then he looked away from me to stare down the road. I fumbled with my paws for a minute before he sullenly said, "The hell do you want with me, anyway? Didn't you get some fancy football scholarship? It didn't even occur to me you'd be here."

"Whoa, whoa, hey there buddy —"

"We're *not* buddies, jackass!" I reeled back at the retriever's sudden shout. "You made my life a living nightmare for *all* of senior year! And for what? So you and your jock buddies could beat me up behind the bleachers after every game? Fuck you!" Nick tried to stand up, but his legs wobbled and he fell on his ass in the dirt, his whole body trembling.

"Okay, cool. You're still pissed." I sighed. "So look, you're gonna die if we don't get you in the cool air. Don't hit me, or I'm gonna drop you." I scooped the dog up in my arms, earning me an indignant squawk, but he didn't struggle. He was feather light, and his body nestled between my arms made my heart flutter, and I felt like I was in my sophomore and junior

years all over again, when we'd been friends. I'd pick him up and carry him around. He'd always hated that. I could still hear him laughing as he smacked me with whatever was close to paw. *"Knox, come on! You don't have to show off, I'm already impressed."*

No clue what that meant, but I'd deal with it... never. I pulled open the passenger side of my truck, yanking on it a couple times since the door stuck. Placing Nick down as gently as I could manage, I shut the door and trotted to the driver's side to hop in. When I turned to look at Nick, I saw he was panting, desperately trying to cool off. I turned on the truck and cranked the A/C up as high as it would go before reaching into the back bench seat. Rummaging around, I found what I was looking for, and hauled two bottles of water out of the cooler I kept around in the summer. "Here, drink one of these. Slowly, little sips. It'll help."

Nick must've been out of it, because he didn't argue at all. He just grabbed the bottle and twisted the cap before taking a couple of gulps. The labrador sighed and relaxed a little. "S-Sorry," he breathed out. "Didn't mean to blow up at you like that."

My face flushed at the apology. "Hey, man, like... I get it. I've, uh, been waitin' a long time to say this, man, but I'm really —"

"We need to go to my car," he announced, cutting me off. My apology stuck in my throat and hardened into a lump that I tried to swallow down. "I have all my luggage in there. Just be careful, there's a big-ass rock in the road."

I blinked. "Shit, really? Usually, Gus patrols this stretch of road and keeps it clear. Oh, he's a sheriff's deputy now. You remember him? Gus Evanston?"

Nick laughed bitterly. "Yeah. He was defensive tackle too, right? He used to trip me in the lunchroom so that I'd spill my food. Truly one of the best and brightest; the force couldn't ask for a more... *adequate* deputy."

I flinched at his venomous tone. *Damn, I just keep stepping in it, don't I?* "Um, well, let's go get your stuff. You up the road here?"

"Just a piece — er, a bit! I was only walking for a touch more than an hour."

I smiled to myself, happy to hear his twang coming back. *Seems there's still a country boy in there, after all.* I put the truck in gear and headed up the highway.

Nick may be prickly now, I thought, but I'll win him over. I know I hurt him, but I'll show him I've changed! And then we can...

We can... what, exactly?

After all this time, what do I even want?

—
Nicholas
—

As I sipped the ice-cold bottle of water and luxuriated in the A/C, I slowly started feeling more like a real person. I turned my head slightly to look at Knox. He was almost like I remembered him, with the biceps that strained the cuffs of his rolled-up sleeves, which also highlighted his glossy black-and-orange striped fur. Some grease marks muddled the fur, but it really didn't detract at all from his overall looks; in fact, I thought it added to it, those little imperfections. His chest still bulged against his shirt, just as it had back when we were sixteen, although his belly now stuck out further than it had back then. He'd definitely put on some weight, but that just made me want to snuggle up and —

Damn it, how are you HOTTER than in high school? You're a walking red flag, and I just need to keep telling myself that. You're no good for me, you... sleazebag! So, stop being nice to me. It's, frankly, creepy as hell —

"Do I got somethin' on my face?" Shit, Knox caught me staring at him. The tiger rubbed a meaty paw over his cheek, scrubbing at it. "Sorry. Working at the auto shop is kinda messy."

"Nope! I, uh, nope, you got it! All good." I babbled, praying to whatever god could hear me, that Knox didn't notice that I'd been drooling over him. I turned to face forward again, and a silver shape caught my eye. "Oh! That's me!"

Knox peered out at the convertible, nodding silently as we drove up. Once we got there, he made a surprisingly nimble u-turn and parked behind my poor car, and let out a low whistle. "Damn, Nick. You must be doin' all right for yourself, yeah? Sweet ride."

I felt my face flush. In Mavis, you were either into cars or going to the salon. It was the only trope I'd fallen into, and it thrilled me that my car impressed the great and mighty Knox, master of all things mechanical. "Uh, yeah. It's pretty... pretty great." I paused for a minute, not sure how to continue. The silence lingered like the smell of a dumpster the day before pickup, and when I couldn't stand it anymore, I blurted out, "You still fixing up that classic car?"

The tiger winced, grimacing. "I done did. Had to give it to Katie in the divorce."

A divorce? He'd been married and divorced already in the ten years since graduation? Damn. And he loved that car, was practically all he talked about back then. I couldn't imagine how it would feel to lose something that precious to you, and I told him as much.

Knox gave a rueful chuckle. "It's all water under the bridge now. Been a couple years. I tell you what, though, I'd have just given her the car if I'd known she wanted it that bad. Maybe then she wouldn't have left me..." The tiger stared out the windshield into the distance for a few moments, then shook himself. "You, um, wanna unlock your car?"

"Oh!" I cried, suddenly remembering that, *of course*, I had the keys. I fumbled for them in my pocket and sidled toward the door, getting ready to hop out.

Knox, apparently, was having none of that. He snatched the keys from me, then pointed at the in-dash thermometer. "Nick, it's a hundred and three out there right now. You just got done having a literal meltdown. Park your ass, and let me grab your shit. In the trunk, or in the backseat?"

I grumbled, but did as I was told. I shot him a sour look to show my displeasure at being treated like I was fragile, but through my petulance, I said, "Both. There's a duffel in the backseat, and a suitcase in the trunk."

He nodded and hopped out of the truck, cursing a little as the boiling heat hit him. The first thing he did was to run up and inspect the wheel with the popped tire. I could see he was talking to himself, but obviously I couldn't hear what he said, and try as I might, I couldn't read his lips. Then he grabbed my belongings, placing them in the bed of his truck with surprising softness. When he jumped back up into the truck, the first thing he did was grab another pair of water bottles, handing one to me and sipping at the other.

"You good?" I asked, and I shocked myself to find that I actually cared if he was okay or not. Earlier today, he could've driven off a cliff, and I'd... maybe I wouldn't have celebrated, but I wouldn't have wasted much energy on mourning. But here he was, doing me a massive favor, and — *wait, don't mechanics charge fees for this kind of thing? Exactly how much is he billing me for this?*

My brows knitted together as my eyes narrowed, and I opened my mouth to say something like, 'This is too good to be true,' or 'What're you getting out of this, you lousy so-and-so,' but he spoke first.

"So at the very least, your tire is shot. The thing has a hole in it the size of a moon crater. I'm not sure about the wheel, but I can get it on a lift first thing in the morning and check it out. I'm about to text one of my guys at the shop to bring the tow truck out here and haul that pretty little thing back to town." He pressed the cold, condensation-speckled bottle to the

back of his neck and let out a relieved sigh. “Oh, and don’t worry about making an insurance claim or nothin’. This one’s on me.”

My eyebrow arched. “Nothing’s free. If you really mean that, I want it in writing before any work is done.”

“Really?” Knox rolled his eyes. “What happened to small-town trust?”

And that little quip *really* soured my mood. “I trusted you once, remember? And you remember how that ended up? *No thanks*. Hell, I’ll even pay for the repairs myself before I let you try to slip one by me, you lousy —”

Huh. Knox’s ears folded back, his whiskers drooped, and his tail wrapped around his waist. Picking at a claw, he almost sounded defeated when he spoke again. “I’ll... I’ll write something up when we get back to the shop. I really want to do this for you, Nick. Please, let me try to do at least one nice fuckin’ thing for you in my lifetime?”

And I just sat there, my mouth hanging wide open. I didn’t even know Knox was capable of contrition, but he seemed to be legitimately sorry. So, I shut my mouth and cleared my throat. “O-okay. Yeah, that’s... that’d be fine.”

With a small nod, he buckled himself in, and in moments, we were back on the highway heading to town. He dropped me off at my folks’ house, and insisted on carrying my bags to the door for me, even though I told him it was unnecessary. “I’ll let you know what I find out about your car, and um... I’ll write something up for you about the repairs. The letter you were talkin’ about.” he said meekly, not meeting my eyes.

A gusty sigh escaped my lips. I’d really been mean as hell to this man, and he’d been nothing but nice to me today. *For some reason*. I still didn’t know what his angle was, but when he started turning to go, I stopped him with a paw on his shoulder. “Look, man, don’t worry about the letter. Clearly, we got some shit to work out, but you look like I drank your last beer two days before payday, and I know I’ve been real mean.” I swallowed hard past the lump that rose in my throat. “You get one, count ‘em *one*, chance here. Do *not* fuck with me again. We’re adults now, and that *will* have consequences.”

And without waiting for a response from the speechless tiger, I hiked up my bags and walked into my parent’s house. God, explaining all this to Mom and Dad was gonna be so weird.

—
Knox
—

I felt light as a feather, walking away from Nick's door. My head was in the clouds the entire way back to the shop, and once I got in, two things brought me crashing back down to Earth.

One, I couldn't expense the repairs on Nick's *supremely* expensive car to the shop. I was gonna have to pay it out of my own pocket.

Two, I... what was it again... aw, hell, I completely forgot the dang oil pan caps! *Shit, Mrs. Wyrdmott!* I dashed to the back office and dialed her number. It took a few rings, but she answered soon enough.

"Hello, Lennox, dear! How are you doing?"

I rolled my eyes and tried not to let the sass creep into my voice. "I thought we agreed on Knox, yeah? And wait, how did you know it was me?"

"Oh, little Lennox. I'm old! How can I be bothered to remember more than one name for a single man?"

"You do it for your granddaughter just fine," I muttered. Two years ago, her grandson had come out as transgender, and Clarissa had immediately gone out with her to buy a whole new wardrobe. To say the old lady was obsessed was an understatement.

"Tabitha's family, dear. She's different," Clarissa said archly, then dissolved into a fit of giggles. "And perhaps I love winding you up."

I finally cracked a smile. "Okay, Clarissa. I do actually have some bad news for you."

"Mmhmm?"

Gulping against my nerves, I said, "Yeah, so, there was an accident on the highway out of town —"

"Goodness! Is everyone all right? Were you injured at all? Oh, and... was it anyone we know?"

"Hah, yeah, everyone's fine now, and no, I wasn't hurt. But, er... do you remember Nick Southwell?"

She gasped. "No, little Nicky's back in town? Whatever for? Oh, no, is *he* hurt?!"

I couldn't seem to get comfortable in my seat all of a sudden. "He's fine, ma'am. Said he's here for the class reunion in a couple days. But look, Nick hit a rock in the road, and blew a tire. I picked him up and carried him back here, and in all the fuss I forgot to get your oil cap.

It's too late to drive today, so I'll head out tomorrow morning and get your car fixed up, if that's okay with you."

"Oh, Nicky, Nicky, Nicky. I wonder if he still likes those lavender shortbreads — oh, I'll bake some anyway. I assume he's staying with Richard and Connie?"

It took me a moment to remember that those were Nick's parents. "Oh! Uh, yeah. I dropped him there just before I came back to the shop."

"Good! And did you get to talk with him at all, finally? I know you'd been hung up on that boy for years."

"Well," I hesitated, uncertain if what we'd done was really talking. "I talked. He mostly yelled at me and called me names."

I could practically feel Clarissa nodding through the phone. "Understandable, dear. You spread his private business all over town. Have you at least taken responsibility for that little lapse in judgement?"

"Uh..."

"Good heavens, boy! You get your butt over here right after work, so I can smack you. Then, you're going to meet up with him and say you're sorry!" She made a *tch!* sound, and sighed into the phone. "Men, I swear. What good are you?"

I smiled sheepishly. "Hey, I'll remember you said that next time you can't open your jar of spicy pickles."

Clarissa let out a squawk, and I cracked up, laughing so hard tears ran down my face. She always had a way of calming me down like nobody else. We chatted a little longer, then I hung up the phone and headed back into the shop to get some cars fixed up.

I left a lift open for Nick's car and got it up in the air as soon as it arrived. Marcus, the young stoat fresh out of high school who Clarissa was creeping on, helped me get the wheel off, and inspect it for damage.

"Aw, man," Marcus breathed. "What'd this guy hit?"

"His name is Nick Southwell, and he hit a rock coming into town." I grimaced at the damage. The inside rim of the wheel was bent in on itself; there'd be no saving it. He'd need a whole new wheel, and *that* was gonna need to be delivered by courier, which could take weeks out here in the boonies. Maybe I could go pick it up in one of the bigger cities, and cart it back myself —

Marcus suddenly registered the name I'd given him. "Wait-wait-wait, do you mean *the* Nick Southwell? The infamous gay dude?"

I bristled at Nick being 'infamous'. Biting out my words, they came out sharp and clipped... much sharper than I'd intended. "He's a real person, not some kind of cryptid. And what were you, eight when that happened? How the *hell* do you even know about that? And why do you care?"

The wiry stoat threw his hands up in a placating gesture. "No, no, man, my entire grade was cool with it, don't get me wrong. It's the older set that still thinks LGBT folks are gross and bad. Hell, his story even got me to tell my friends that I was —" he cut off suddenly, staring me down and searching for... I dunno, something, in my eyes. He must've found it, because Marcus grabbed my shoulder and pulled me down to whisper in my ear. "*I'm bi.*"

I stood, blinking. If I had a nickel for every time someone came out to me, I'd have two nickels. It's not a lot, but it's kinda freaky that it happened twice. I didn't know what to say, so I nodded. "Um, thank you. F-for trusting me with that. I promise, your secret's safe with me."

"I know," he said matter-of-factly, which shocked me. Opening my mouth to contradict his opinion of me, he cut me off and said, "Just don't go telling the entire town. That'd be a real dick move." Grinning cheekily, he started disassembling the wheel hub to see if there was any other damage. I stared at him, stunned, and felt my ears tingle with the heat of shame again for what I'd done to Nick all those years ago. I really needed to talk to him again, and properly say how sorry I was...

The rest of the day flew by, and five o'clock hit right as my crew was flagging. Poor Marcus looked like a zombie, shambling around the office in search of the coffee pods. I left the assistant manager in charge of closing up and hustled off to Mrs. Wyrdmott's house. After knocking on the door three times, I was prepared to wait, but it opened almost instantly. "You're just in time," the wrinkled hare announced in a light, sing-song voice. "We're making cookies!"

"What? Oh, no, you're making cookies. You can't expect me to *bake*, I'm a mechanic. You —"

But she grabbed me by the lapels, and with surprising strength, hauled me through the door. "Nuh-uh, buster. No excuses. You're making cookies, and you'll learn today." Nudging the door shut with her foot, she quipped, "Oh, and I hope you're not wearing *that* to see Nicky..."

—
Nick
—

Other than hitting a big-ass rock, getting heatstroke, and being rescued by my real-life villain, I supposed the day had been pretty uneventful. Mom and Dad had said they'd be out at the lake for a couple of days after I got there, which suited me just fine, and so I set myself up in my old room. My folks weren't the 'leave everything as it was, preserve it as a time capsule' people, and I loved them for that. They'd converted my room into a guest room; Mom must've picked the colors, because they'd painted the walls a lovely shade of robin's egg blue with white accents, and the room came complete with mini-fridge, desk, cellphone chargers, and a brand-new queen size memory foam mattress. I hung my clothes in the closet, which was the only thing that hadn't changed, placed my shoes on the shoe rack by the door, and immediately went to get a towel so I could shower.

As I let the warm water sluice over my body, carrying away the sweat and grime, I thought about Knox. I had so many questions, like why he's trying to be nice to me, why he's acting protective of me, or why he thought anything he could do would make a difference, this far gone from high school.

The problem was that to get the answers to those questions, I needed to actually *talk* to the man, and I couldn't stand him. I hated him for what he did to me. He destroyed my reputation. I just... hate him!

Do you? The voice of reason said.

Of course I hate him! I have every right to be pissed as hell for what he did.

You did, once upon a time. But does it still feel like hatred? When you woke up this morning, did you still hate him?

Huh. I guess I didn't hate him when I woke up. I didn't even think about him till he showed up to...

To rescue me.

Shit, I've been an unbelievable dick, haven't I?

I couldn't even call him, because I didn't get his cell phone number. Well, he said he'd be working on my car, so I'd definitely see him again. I finished washing, turned off the shower, and dried off.

Pulling on a loose-fitting pair of gym shorts, I moseyed back down to the kitchen, helping myself to some cold cuts and the weird "high fiber" bread that Mom made Dad eat. 'It's

good for his colon!’ Yeah, and the less time I spend talking about Dad’s colon, the better! *Oh well*, I thought, digging through the crisper for some lettuce. *It’s honestly not that bad. I guess.*

Sandwiches eaten and consumed, I wandered around aimlessly. I could’ve walked into town, but then if Knox stopped by I wouldn’t be able to talk to him, and so it was really for my conscience that I stayed home. Definitely not because I wanted to see his perfectly muscled arms again... don’t judge me! I had eyes in my head; the man was six-foot-four of freaking *beefcake*. I can be mad at him and still think he’s hot.

I’d thought... I’d thought he was interested, way back then. I mean, I’d clearly been wrong, but he used to pull my chair out for me during our study sessions, and he always sat just close enough that our knees touched. He literally carried me like a princess in his arms all the time. And once, I mentioned it was gonna be cold walking home from class, and he’d taken off his hoodie right in the middle of the hall to give it to me so I wouldn’t be cold. For the next three days, he’d come to school with the sniffles, and when I tried to apologize, he just gave me that cocky grin and said, “Hey, no worries, bro. For you, I’d do it again.”

Okay, so the logical part of my brain realized, now, that this had been a flimsy basis to start a relationship on. But we’d been best friends all of sophomore and junior year! And it’s not like there were any ‘gay mentors’ I could ask about this kind of thing. This town’s only had one gay person in its entire history, and it’s me. Deciding a nap was in order, I plunked my ass down on the sofa in the living room, kicked back, and zonked out.

I have no idea how long I slept for, or if I even did. My brain kept playing out ‘what if’ scenarios in my head, and most of them involved Knox. What if he’d kept his big mouth shut, what if I’d never met him, what if I hadn’t told him in the first place... what if he’d said ‘yes’ and gone to prom with me? Even as just a friend, it would’ve made more sense than bullying me for most of senior year. The only common denominator was that all of my thoughts seemed to revolve around my former friend. I slammed my face into a pillow and let out a wail, and I wasn’t sure if I was mad, depressed, or some mixture of the two. All I know is that when the doorbell rang, the sun was just beginning to set; beautiful pinks and oranges cast a magical glow through the windows.

Rubbing sleep from my eyes, I plodded to the door and opened it wide. “Hello — Knox? What’re you doing here?”

The tiger had a few streaks of flour on his stripy face (odd), but otherwise, he looked surprisingly nice. Pastel yellow polo shirt, khakis, and clean, new sneakers. On closer inspection, it seemed like the khakis were a bit too short, exposing his ankle, and the shirt was somehow too loose for the massive man. He held his paws behind his back, and was

practically vibrating with nervous energy, although his eyes betrayed his exhaustion. Still, he smiled widely, looking down and away somewhere on the porch.

“Hey, Nick,” he said, finally schooling his expression and meeting my eyes. “I just wanted to come by and say, I’m really, *really* sorry for —”

“Stop.” He looked so sad, his whiskers drooping and ears folding flat against his head. I punched him in the shoulder and gave a tentative chuckle. “Don’t look at me like that, man. Against my better judgement, I’ll hear you out, but let’s do that inside, y’know?” I stepped aside and motioned for him to follow. “You can come in.”

His eyes went wide, and I watched him take a step across the threshold like it was going to bite him. Okay, so *this* was kinda cute. I shut and locked the door, then headed back to the couch, quickly picking up pillows that had fallen during my maybe-nap. Guess I must’ve gotten a little sleep after all.

I sat on one end of the sofa, and he took the other, producing a container that had to be from the eighties and setting it on his lap. With a sigh, I mentally braced myself for whatever he was about to say, and then, to help things get started, I said, “Okay, so, this is more comfy, right? Now, what did you want to tell me?”

His tail twitched and quivered behind him, and I could see his fur dampen with sweat on his forehead. “Uh, well... first, these are for you.” He held out the container to me, “As kind of a peace offering. They’re lavender shortbreads; Mrs. Wyrdmott said that they were your favorite? I really hope she’s right, I don’t know how to bake anything else.”

I gave a little gasp and snatched the plastic box from him. Opening it up, the delicate scent of lavender and sweet sugar and vanilla rose to greet me. They looked almost perfect — a good many of them were misshapen or lumpy. I almost questioned Clarissa’s baking prowess, but then something he’d just said gave me pause. “You don’t know how to bake anything else... wait. You baked these?”

“Uh-huh. S’why they’re kinda weird looking, but she said they’d be more, like, special, or something if I made them for you, I dunno.” He rubbed a paw through the fur on the back of his neck and started bouncing his foot up and down. “They’re probably not any good, but yeah, I... I tried.”

Well, we’d see about that. I pulled out one of the lumpy cookies and took a bite. The light floral flavor danced across my tongue, and the sweetness was just perfect as it brought forward the vanilla. The texture was absolutely divine, too, melting away in my mouth with hardly a chance to chew. I couldn’t help but let out a moan as my eyes fluttered shut.

“Wow, Knox, these are delicious! Here, you *have* to try one.” I fished another cookie out and held it out to him.

“Oh, no-no-no, I couldn’t. I made those for you to enjoy.” Still, the tiger was eyeing the dessert in my paw with an undeniable hunger.

I raised an eyebrow at him. “You sayin’ that because you think you’ll take something away from me if you say yes? Or are you saying it because you’d feel guilty sharing my apology cookies? Because neither are true.”

He blinked once, twice, then let out a hearty laugh. “Okay, uh, so maybe it’s both? Sorry, you know this city. Gotta play by the rules.”

“Apparently, I just break ‘em by existing. I *want* you to have this cookie. You worked hard on these, and I want you to know what they taste like. And honestly?” I waved the confection under his nose. “These are *just* as good as Mrs. Wyrdmott’s. Seriously, you’ve got to have one.”

His eyebrows shot up. “As good as — huh. That’s a high bar to clear. You know she’s the only reason anyone goes to the bake sales around here.” Knox took the proffered pastry and sniffed it gingerly, then took a bite. He grunted in surprised satisfaction and spoke around a mouthful of cookie. “Ow my gawb.” Then he swallowed and grinned at me. “Those are freaking delicious! I can’t believe I made those.”

That grin was infectious, I had to admit, and I smiled back. “You did a good job, bud.” We both froze. I hadn’t called him bud since the day after he’d outed me. Not since we’d been friends... I let out a weak laugh. “S-sorry. I didn’t mean to — I mean, it’s not — ugh. Just pretend I didn’t say that. I know we’re not friends anymore, I promise. I just slipped up.”

Instead of making him look at ease, instead he looked dejected. He cleared his throat, and said, “I, uh... I actually didn’t mind it...” I blinked in surprise, and before I could think of something to say, he continued, “But! I know there’s stuff we gotta talk about first, so here I go.”

Knox took a deep breath and blew it out through his nose before speaking. “So, I know that outing you was a pathetic, awful thing to do. It wasn’t my story to tell. Just, that day when you came out to me, I was so confused. I was feeling a lot of things, and I couldn’t deal because, man, we were just kids back then. So I ran home, and I sat on it for a while till my mom asked what was wrong, and I just... blurted it out to her. I don’t know what I was thinking, but I swear I’d take it back. If I’d known she was gonna start calling the phone tree, I wouldn’t have —”

“Stop.” I held up my hand, my breathing fast and shallow, and a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. “Stop. Are you telling me that all this time, you only told *one* person?” Knox opened his mouth, but I cut him off. “Yes or no answers, Knox. This is important.

“Well, er... yes? But it was still my fault that —”

“*Shut up!*” I roared, causing the tiger to flinch. “And you just let them all pin the whole thing on you? Why?!”

“B-because, like I was going to say, it was my fault. I shouldn’t have told her.”

I leveled a sharp look at him, the kind I used when I was cross-examining witnesses. “So how many people did you, yourself, tell that I was gay?”

He blinked rapidly a few times. “Well, I guess, technically, only one?”

I sank back down into the couch — I hadn’t even realized I was standing. “You *massive* idiot.” Jumping back to my feet, startling Knox, I paced over to the liquor cabinet. “I need whiskey. You want a whiskey?”

—
Knox
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“I need whiskey. You want a whiskey?” I watched him walk over to a cabinet full of bottles of amber and clear liquid. Nick sashayed when he walked, his petite hips swaying in rhythm to his steps. I heard him clear his throat, and say, “Hey, my eyes are up here.”

I snapped my eyes up to meet his gaze and saw mischief twinkling there. “Oh! Uh, s-sorry. Didn’t mean to stare. You, um, you walk funny.”

He grimaced, and I felt panic flood my stomach. “N-no! I didn’t mean that, you just walk a particular way, and it’s kinda noticeable and...” I buried my face in my hands. “Fuck me. Make mine a double.”

Nick chuckled, satisfied with that. He pulled out two rocks glasses and filled them both with whiskey. He brought them back, handing one to me. I gratefully took it and drank mine in a single gulp. The resulting burn was unlike anything I’d ever experienced in my life, and I sputtered and gasped in an attempt to quell the burn of the hellfire I’d just swallowed. When I finished coughing and heaving like a dry fish, I wiped the tears from my eyes and looked at Nick. He’d raised one eyebrow and was giving me a shit-eating grin. “What the hell was that?” I said, a hint of a growl sneaking into my voice.

“*That* was a 25-year-old scotch.” He smirked and took a sip. “I bought it for my Dad as a Christmas present last year, but he never drinks it. Says it’s too fancy.”

“Yeah. Fancy.” I muttered, setting my glass down on the table. Everything swayed a little, and I swayed with it. “*Whoa*. What proof is that?”

“180,” he said nonchalantly, and took a sip of his whiskey. “It’s definitely meant for sipping.” He looked like he was thinking for a moment, then leaned over the couch and held his glass out to me. “Here. I’m sorry, I should’ve warned you. I, well... I guess I thought it would be funny. Try a couple sips of mine, and if you like it, I’ll get you another glass.”

I side-eyed the cut crystal glass. “You sure? This fancy stuff’d be wasted on me.”

Nick just swirled the glass around some more. “You never know till you try it!”

Gingerly, I took the glass and lifted it to my lips, pulling in a small sip of the liquor. Then I swallowed, giving an appreciative grunt. “That’s actually not bad. Tastes like oak and vanilla, I think?”

Nick’s eyes brightened, and he smiled widely, giving an enthusiastic nod. “Yeah! I’m impressed; Dad didn’t like it ‘cause all he tasted was the burn. Would you like another glass?”

“Sure, thanks. Might make this next bit easier.” Nick went and refilled my glass, and I took another sip. It really was tasty stuff. “*Hoo...* okay. So, what difference does it make who told who that you were gay? It was still my fault to begin with.”

Nick stared at me for a full minute, his expression entirely unreadable. Then he sighed and slugged back the rest of his scotch. The only sign he had done so was the light grimace on his face. Twerp.

“Well,” he said, “It’s a matter of who to be angry at. I’ve been so, so mad at you, for a decade now, and not just for outing me. You were my *best friend*, Knox, and —” Nick looked away quickly, but I didn’t miss how his eyes had gone glassy or how his voice started trembling. “Knox, it hurt, okay? And I don’t mean physically, either. You really fucked me up. And when I saw you this afternoon, I thought, ‘Damn I must be cursed’. Could’ve sworn you’d’ve got out of town to play football, not stick around this ghost town. But through it all, I just assumed that what I was told was accurate, because *you* never disputed it.”

Nick stopped talking long enough to go pour himself a shot of something clear, down it, and bring the bottle to the coffee table before sitting back down. “That’s vodka. The cheap stuff. Good for getting shitfaced.” He scrubbed his face with his free paw, continuing, “Ugh. What I’m trying to get at here is that I’ve got a conundrum. On the one hand, I could be mad at

you for being the reason I got outed to the whole town overnight. But! On the other, I just have a confused kid who didn't know how to handle a confession like that, and told the one adult he should've been able to trust."

He shifted closer to me to grab the vodka and pour himself another shot, though he didn't drink it right away. Frankly, I was getting a little worried. "Hey, uh, Nick? You're goin' through that stuff awful fast; it's only been like, what, ten minutes? You might wanna slow down."

"Thirty minutes. And why? You've been in my house before; you know I just gotta make it down the hall and the second door on the left. Not like I need to drive. Besides, you've never seen me drink. It takes a *lot* to get me drunk. Like, a hell of a lot." He downed his second shot in five minutes, then set his glass down. He was staring at the floor instead of looking at me like he had been. Then, out of nowhere, he blurted out, "Why did you bully me back in high school?"

I swirled the remaining shot-and-a-half of whiskey in my glass, watching the amber liquid swirl around. Then I downed it, coughing less this time, and poured myself some of the vodka, and downed that too. The room swayed, and I felt warm under my shirt as my muscles relaxed. *I wonder if he'd mind if I took it off. He's not wearing one...* Then I realized I hadn't actually answered his question. "Well, I know it's a total cop-out, but... everyone else was doing it. It was survival. If I hadn't done it, people would've thought I was gay too, and that would've been a nightmare for me. My reputation would've tanked, I might've lost my scholarship, my place on the football team, my Mom's part of my tuition..." I heaved a gusty sigh. "I'm so, so fuckin' sorry for that, dude. Can't say it enough." Then, my voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "I'm... sorry." I said it with a fervor I'd never used before in my life, not even when I said "I do" to Katie. And all I could do was pray he saw the sincerity in my eyes and heard it in my voice.

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Nick
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Was Knox... crying? Shit.

Well, okay, he wasn't like, sobbing or anything. But he definitely had a tear rolling down his cheek from his squinted-up eye, and he was shaking. I supposed that meant he was contrite again, and that meant I had the chance to be the bigger man. Metaphorically, anyway, because even sitting, he was twice my size, maybe more. And it hurt me to see such a big, strong man crying in front of me.

I set my glass down and dithered for a moment, wondering what to do. Then he sniffled, and I felt my eyes stinging as well. Handing him a tissue (and surreptitiously taking one for

myself), I let out a big breath that I hadn't realized I was holding. "Knox," I said, "it'll be okay. I forgive you."

The tiger's glistening eyes went wide, and his mouth dropped open a bit. "R-Really? Just like that? You forgive me?"

I raised a paw. "Now, hold on. I said I *forgive* you. I don't trust you; not yet. But..." I couldn't tell you why, but I scooted closer to him so I could place my hand on Knox's knee. Was it my imagination, or did he shiver at my touch? *Must be the alcohol. And it is kinda chilly in here. Shit, I stopped mid-sentence!* "Uh, but! But, I will give you a chance — *one* chance — to earn that trust back. So, y'know, don't go broadcasting my secrets to the town again, and — *whoa there!*"

He suddenly swept me up into a bone-crushing embrace. And *now* Knox was full-on sobbing. He must've been drunker than I thought, I guess. But he squeezed me and kept saying "I'm sorry" over and over again while I did my best to breathe and make comforting *shush-shush* sounds. Eventually, his arms relaxed, but they didn't let me go. It came as a shock when I felt him nuzzle his head in the top of my own — a comfort gesture he hadn't done with me since junior year, when his dad died. I felt the gentle drip of tears onto me as they rolled off his cheeks, and then...

Oh my *God*, the man was purring.

The deep rumble in his chest hit me first, before I even heard it, and I couldn't keep myself back anymore. I nestled against him, feeling his warm body against my cold one — shit, I never put a shirt on, did I? — and resting my head against Knox's bricklike chest. I could smell the rose-scented shampoo he'd used, and beneath that was his scent, of leather and musk and a hint of gasoline. We sat there in silence for a while, before the tiger came out with a whisper made gravelly by his continued purring.

"I missed my friend. I missed *you*, Nick," he slurred, rubbing his head against the top of mine again. "This shit's been on my mind for ten fuckin' years, and I *missed* you. I didn't think I'd ever see you again, didn't think I'd ever get to tell you I was so, so wrong. D'you really, *really* forgive me?"

I chuckled. "Yeah, man. *Bud*. I forgive you. Like I said, I don't really *trust* you, but I forgive you. At least we can work on it now, yeah?" I don't know whether I was drunker than I thought, or what possessed me, but I tilted my head up and pressed a chaste peck on Knox's cheek. I immediately regretted it. *Shit, he's straight! And the son of the biggest homophobe in town! What the hell am I doing?!* "Uh, uh... S-shit," I stammered, "I'm so sorry, Knox, I don't know what came over me. Can we just forget — *mmph!*"

Knox moved his massive paws to either side of my head and planted a hard, crushing kiss on my lips. He tasted like alcohol, and spice, and the sweet vanilla of the cookies he'd made for me. I froze, completely uncertain of what I should do, before I surrendered and melted into his kiss, wrapping my arms around his neck.

It was both the hottest and the most confusing thing that had ever happened to me.

We lingered like that for a minute or so. Then Knox pulled back, pressing his fingers to his lips. "Wow" he breathed.

I let out a nervous chuckle. "Yeah. *Wow*."

"That was —" and that's all he got out before his whole body heaved, and he clapped a paw to his mouth.

"Oh shi- bathroom, bathroom!" I cried, panicking.

Alas, it was too late.

The straight boy who just kissed me barfed all over himself, the rug, and me, then passed out, his head leaning heavily on my shoulder.

I sat in stunned silence, unable to move, unable to *think*. Then, I sighed, and started doing the only thing I could.

"C'mon, bud. Let's get you cleaned up."

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To Be Continued...
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