

## **Tristan and Cory: First Kiss**

The dark-haired boy sat alone at a picnic table under a big tree. Tristan watched him unpack his lunch as his stomach rumbled in anticipation of his own meager sandwich.

The boy was bigger than Tristan, with sturdy shoulders and a solid body. Maybe Tristan should have been scared of him, but he didn't seem scary. He looked kind of lonely, sitting all by himself. He also had a very big lunch and probably wouldn't miss the chocolate milk he'd unpacked from his Spiderman lunch box.

The boy looked up and frowned, but then glanced back down right away, focusing on his lunch and seeming not to pay attention to anything else.

Maybe he wanted some company despite the way he was trying to ignore Tristan. Something in the quick glance of those dark eyes had seemed more shy than hostile. Anyway, in Tristan's experience, he had to demand what he wanted or go without. Sometimes when he asked his mother what they were having for dinner, she looked at him like she didn't even know who he was.

After taking a deep breath, Tristan marched over to the picnic table. "Are you going to drink that?" He pointed to the chocolate milk.

The boy ignored him. Tristan scowled. Was he invisible? Sometimes he wished that were true, but not at the moment. Today was the first day of first grade and so far it had been a good day. His new teacher seemed nice. He thought he had impressed her already by volunteering to help decorate the bulletin board.

Now it was time for lunch and there was plenty of room at the table under the big tree. And company, if he could only make the boy pay attention to him. He obviously needed someone to eat with too, so why didn't he look up?

Tristan tried again. "Are you deaf? I *said*, can I have your chocolate milk?" Then he added, "Puh-*leeze*," in his most coaxing voice.

That seemed to do it. The boy finally raised his head and looked straight at him. Tristan stared back into those brown eyes, frozen for a second as he saw how big and dark they were. They seemed full of words, but Tristan couldn't read them, even though he could already read better than most kids in his class.

Without speaking, the boy handed over his chocolate milk.

Relieved, Tristan took it and then promptly sat at the table. He put on his biggest smile, the one that sometimes got him food or clothes when being pushy didn't work.

He started chatting as he opened his paper sack. "I'm Tristan. What's your name? I don't get chocolate milk. My mommy didn't pack my lunch today. She's in the hospital with a hurt arm again. Daddy did. All he knows is how to make peanut butter. See, he didn't even put any jelly—"

The boy gazed at him a little longer then began to eat his sandwich. Now that he wasn't being stared at, Tristan took the cap off the chocolate milk and drank it down. So good. He hardly ever got chocolate. This was the yummiest thing he'd had in ages and it went a long way toward filling the empty hole in his belly.

When he'd finished the milk, he took up the one-sided conversation again. He wanted to know the name of his new friend, but the boy didn't answer when he first asked. Maybe he really

was deaf? Tristan repeated his question more loudly. “I *said*, what’s your name? Don’t you talk?”

“Course I talk. I’m Cory.”

“You’re nice, Cory. I like your name.”

Cory stared at him.

Happy to have a name for his friend, Tristan started up again, talking about everything he’d already learned and how the teacher had told him he was smart.

The bell signaling the end of lunch period rang out. Tristan jumped up right away. As he gathered up the trash, his shirtsleeve hitched up to show the dark spot on his arm. Cory pointed, and Tristan quickly tugged his sleeve down to cover the purple mark.

“Does it hurt?” Cory asked. “My momma said there’s a nurse here. Do you wanna go see her?”

“Oh no.” Tristan reassured him. “It doesn’t hurt.”

“You don’t need to be scared,” Cory told him. “My momma’s a nurse. They’re nice.”

“It’s already better. It’ll be all gone by tomorrow.” He started walking back to the old brick school building, and Cory followed him.

“Who’s your teacher?” Tristan asked. “We’re not in the same class. I didn’t see you this morning.”

“Mrs. Roper.”

“Do you like her? I have Mrs. Connolly.” Tristan spoke the name slowly, enunciating every syllable of the difficult-to-pronounce name, wanting to be sure to get it right. “She’s nice, and we’re learning all kinds of fun stuff, but there are some kids I don’t like because they won’t sit still and they made her mad and... Oh, here’s my room. See you at recess!”

When afternoon recess came, Tristan made straight for the picnic table where they'd had lunch. If Cory wanted to be friends, then Tristan wanted to be where Cory could find him. He hoped the boy would come over. Tristan wanted to look into those big dark eyes again to see if he could figure out what Cory was trying to say, since the other boy didn't seem to talk with out-loud words very much.

Cory came over and held out a ball without saying anything, which was fine. What he wanted was obvious. Tristan put a little distance between them and then stuck out his hands.

By the time they'd finished tossing a ball back and forth and then running from one end of the playground to the other, Tristan thought Cory seemed friendlier. He still didn't talk much, but he'd smiled a couple of times. Funny how different he looked when he smiled, as if he was someone else.

When the final bell rang, Tristan went outside to wait for his bus. He hoped to see Cory, but he wasn't in the bus line. Then he spotted him not too far away, in the line of kids waiting for their parents to come pick them up. He waved tentatively and Cory waved back. Cory gave him one of those smiles that seemed to make his dark eyes a little lighter.

When Cory's mother came to pick him up in a big brown car, Cory got in, and then turned to wave at him again through the window. His mother turned to see who Cory was waving at. She had dark hair like Cory, and she smiled at Tristan too. She looked friendly and kind.

Tristan wished he was going home with her instead of back to his own house.

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Tristan pulled his arm away when Cory tried to seize it and pull up his sleeve, then he hid it behind his back, evading Cory as the other boy made another grab for it. He shifted his backpack

to the other arm, being careful not to bang it against his side, and kept walking toward his sixth grade algebra class.

Other kids jostled past them as they hurried to first period. Despite the early hour, bright sunlight beat down on them, heating the once-white concrete walkway leading to the only Middle School in their town.

“Let me see,” Cory demanded.

They were going to be late if Cory didn’t stop fooling around. He knew Cory didn’t care about that, but Tristan hated to be late for class. “It’s nothing.”

“Then let me see.”

They had almost reached the worn brick steps leading up into the school building when Cory grabbed his arm and pulled him around the corner and out of sight of the main walkway.

“Cut it out.” Anger flared, tightening his belly. Why couldn’t Cory leave it alone? Tristan resisted the urge to shove him away.

Then he took a deep breath and let it out with a sigh. Cory wouldn’t drop it. He never did. If there was one thing he’d learned about his best friend, it was that Cory didn’t want much—but when he did, he never gave up until he got it.

He let Cory take his arm and push his sleeve up, revealing the fresh bruises circling his wrist and the distinct imprint of fingers showing purple against his pale skin.

Tristan hated to see that look on Cory’s face. His big dark eyes got even darker and his mouth got all tight. He’d tried to tell Cory that the bruises didn’t hurt. They just looked bad. He knew Cory didn’t believe him.

Cory grabbed the bottom of the long-sleeved T-shirt Tristan wore regardless of the heat. No doubt that had been Cory's first clue that something was wrong. Between the bright early summer day and the unreliable air-conditioning in the old school, short sleeves were a necessity.

Tristan tried to twist away, but Cory was bigger and faster. He had Tristan's threadbare shirt pulled up and was staring at the dark welts on Tristan's ribs with a look on his face that said he wanted to kill somebody. Tristan feared that most of all; that one day, Cory would try to get back at Tristan's dad.

It was one thing for Cory to defend Tristan from the bullies at school, but he was too young to take on Tristan's father. They both were, but that didn't stop Tristan from trying to help his mom when his dad came home drunk and started in on her. What else could he do?

Tristan pulled his shirt from Cory's hands and brushed it down as he tried to reassure him yet again. "Don't worry. Nothing is broken. It doesn't even hurt anymore."

Cory gave him a look that was half disbelief and half disgust. That was his *Do you think I'm an idiot?* look. While Tristan hated that look, he outright feared the rage on Cory's face every time he saw new bruises.

"He's not all bad," Tristan said in an anxious attempt to appease Cory's anger. "Last night, he even helped me with my homework while Mom made dinner." Then Tristan admitted, "Well, he kind of laughed at all the electric wiring I had spread all over the table."

What his father had actually said was, "*My son the geek. No fucking wonder I doubt you're really mine.*" He'd said it as if joking, but Tristan had seen the furious denial on his mother's face. She hadn't said anything and neither had Tristan. Then his father had laughed and smacked Tristan on the back of head—but he'd done it lightly, in affection and not anger. Tristan knew the difference well. Then, to Tristan's amazement, his father had sat down and helped him

sort the wires into the different thicknesses that Tristan would use for his science fair project on conductivity.

He'd been quiet too long. Cory touched his shoulder.

Tristan's smile faded. "Then one of his buddies called and asked him to come down to the bar and watch the game." He hesitated, a little embarrassed at how he'd practically begged his dad not to go. "I told him Mom almost had dinner ready. I told him I needed his help with my project."

Cory just looked at him.

Tristan swallowed hard. "And I thought," he whispered as he felt an unexpected sting in his eyes, "I thought for a second that he might stay—that we might actually all eat dinner together and have a quiet night."

He tried to turn away, but Cory reached out and brushed warm fingers at the wetness under Tristan's eye. Tristan leaned into the hand lingering on his cheek, absorbing the strength and comfort of his friend.

After a moment he blinked and gave Cory a smile. "You always make me feel better." Cory dropped his hand and returned the smile, but there was an odd flush to his cheeks and his fingers shook a little. He looked like he might be getting a fever. "Are you okay?"

Cory's smile faded. "I know you want to think things will get better. They won't."

Tristan gasped at the unexpected shock of Cory's harsh words. "You don't know that."

"I do. We should tell."

"No. Remember what happened last time? When the hospital decided Mom was being abused, and reported it to the social workers?"

Cory nodded unhappily.

“They almost took me away.”

Cory’s dark eyes got all shiny. He looked down at the ground so his face would be hidden by waves of black hair.

“You won’t tell anyone, will you? I like this school. I don’t want to go.” Tristan reached out and brushed the thick hair away so he could see Cory’s eyes. “I don’t know what I’d do without you. You’re my best friend ever.”

Cory peered up at him through his long black lashes. “They might not.”

“We can’t take that chance.”

“Then you need to stop.”

Tristan was used to following his best friend’s thought processes. He could fill in the gaps with the words Cory sometimes found too difficult to say. “What am I supposed to do? Stay in my room while that asshole beats the crap out of my mom?”

“Yes.”

Tristan sucked in his breath. “You can’t expect me to do that.”

“You’re too little.”

“I can’t sit there and listen to him smack her around. I need to do something.”

“You take care of her. After.”

“After,” he said bitterly. “I change the bandages and help when she has a splint on her arm and bring her soup. It’s not enough.” He bit his lip, thinking. “If we tell someone at the school, they’ll take me away from both of them and I could end up anywhere. But if she leaves him, I can go with her and we can stay in town. I’ll talk to her.”

Cory didn't say anything. He didn't have to. He'd given Tristan a printout with the address of a battered women's shelter a couple of months earlier. Tristan had given it to his mother and then stood by in helpless frustration while she wordlessly ran it down the disposal.

"I know, but I have to try again." He pushed past Cory. "Come on. We're already late. You're supposed to start that computer class today. Aren't you excited?"

"Uh-huh." Cory followed him. "Tris. After school?"

Tristan brightened at the thought of going to Cory's house. Cory's mom was nice to him and always made a big dinner. Sometimes she gave him stuff: clothes and food, even books. Cory had told him not to tell his mom or dad about the gifts, so he didn't.

He nodded happily. "Yes. Mom said it was okay. Dad won't even notice."

They went their separate ways to class, but met for lunch as they always did, outside at a picnic table in the shade of an ancient live oak. Tristan told Cory all about his new algebra teacher and how he might be able to take a test and move into a more advanced math class.

Cory stared at him admiringly and Tristan felt a kind of pride that no one else ever made him feel.

"You're so smart." The dark-haired boy picked up his sandwich.

"You're smart too. Just in a different way than me. Remember how you took your mother's computer apart and then put it back together again?"

Cory's cheeks darkened. "It didn't work right."

"No, but that's when your mom realized you liked computers and bought you that book on how they work. After you read it, you put it back together right. I wouldn't have been able to do that. I don't know anything about the inside of a computer."

Cory looked pleased at that. Pride welled in Tristan's chest again; pride at the way he could make Cory happy.

But he was still a little hungry, and dinner at Cory's house was hours away. There hadn't been much at home to pack for lunch except a few crackers and some peanut butter. Tristan never had any money to go to the cafeteria and his mom hadn't gotten around to doing the free lunch program application yet. He'd have to fill it out himself again and then get her to sign it. "Are you going to eat that apple?"

Cory gave it to him.

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The B-52s blasted from the boom box on Cory's dresser. Despite being stuffed full of Mrs. Russo's chicken and spaghetti, Tristan bounced around the bedroom, dancing the way he imagined a Rock Lobster would dance and making the usually solemn Cory laugh. Cory watched him from his place on the floor, where he sat cross-legged, surrounded by piles of old cassettes he'd been trying to sort into some kind of order.

The song ended and Tristan flung himself on the bed, panting. "What's next?" he managed to gasp.

"If you want to dance, I'll put on Madonna."

"Oh yeah, Material Girl. *Totally*, man."

Cory grinned at the thought of Tristan trying to dance like Madonna as he hunted through his collection. Well, his mother's collection, but Cory had been in love with the cassettes from his mother's college days since he'd discovered them in a dusty old box in a corner of the

garage. Tristan had been duly impressed when Cory had salvaged the old Walkman he'd found in the box along with the cassettes and somehow rigged it to his iPod speakers.

Tristan rolled onto his side, then propped his head up on his hand and smiled down at Cory. "You were born too late."

Cory nodded in agreement.

"I could see you with your hair all spiked up, slam-dancing in some club."

Cory nodded again, smiling.

"Or maybe wearing one of those Michael Jackson jackets. Or parachute pants."

Tristan laughed at the mock horror on Cory's face.

A knock on the bedroom door interrupted them. Between the closed door and the music, Tristan hadn't heard anyone climb the stairs. He rolled off the bed and stood, straightening his clothes and trying to make himself presentable while Cory jumped up and opened the door for his mother.

A streak of orange ran past her legs and jumped on the bed, letting out a wailing complaint. Tristan reached down to scratch the cat's head, mollifying her. "Sorry, Ginger, did we lock you out? I didn't think cats liked loud music."

"They don't, but they hate a closed door even more." The little laugh lines around Mrs. Russo's dark eyes deepened when she smiled at them. She carried a couple of sodas and a plate of cookies. "I thought you guys might want some dessert. It sounds like you're having a lot of fun up here."

Cory took the cans. "Tris was acting silly. Dancing."

“Was I making too much noise?” Tristan’s chest tightened as anxiety made his heart race. He couldn’t bear it if Cory’s mom ever got mad at him and stopped letting him come over. She’d always been nice to him...but still...he couldn’t take that chance. “I’m sorry. I’ll be quiet.”

“No, Tristan honey, that’s not what I meant. I’m happy to hear you both laughing.”

“Oh. Okay.” He smiled at her.

She nodded, and then grinned as she spotted the cassettes. “Guess it’s a good thing I never got around to having a garage sale. Not that anyone would have bought those old tapes anyway.” Her gaze fell on the rumpled bed and her smile disappeared.

“I’ll straighten it up,” Tristan said. “I was resting for a minute after dancing.”

“Don’t be silly. It’s fine.” She pulled him in for a quick hug, the comforting kind his own mother never gave him. She felt warm and soft and smelled of spaghetti sauce and baby powder. She whispered into his ear, “I’m happy you’re here. I love it when you make him laugh.” She landed a quick peck on his cheek.

He blinked at her in surprise, but before he had a chance to answer, she turned to head downstairs. Then she paused as she glanced back at Cory. “Oh, and you can leave the door open now.”

Cory looked doubtful. “The music is so loud. Do you want us to stop playing it?”

“It’s not that loud down in the kitchen. Anyway, I like those songs, so leave the door open, okay?”

“Okay,” Cory agreed. But he had that little line between his eyebrows that showed up whenever Tristan tried to help him with his geometry homework and he just didn’t get it. Tristan understood how he felt. Mrs. Russo had never asked them to leave the door open before, and

she'd sure had a funny look on her face when she'd looked around the room and spotted the messy bed. He didn't think Cory had noticed and it probably didn't mean anything.

“Want to play Nintendo?” he asked Cory. “I'm worn out from dancing anyway.”

They spent the next hour playing games and eating cookies until Tristan thought he might be a little sick from all the sugar. The cat curled up against Tristan's side and promptly fell asleep.

Tristan would have liked to have a cat of his own to keep him company, or maybe a little dog, but knew better than to ask his parents. Besides, he didn't even want to think how his dad would treat a pet when he got in one of his moods. So he contented himself with petting Ginger whenever he visited Cory. He liked to press his face right against her fur and close his eyes until he couldn't hear anything but the loud rumble of her purr. The sound always made him smile, and when he opened his eyes, sometimes he would find Cory staring at him with a funny expression on his face and a shine in his dark eyes. Then he would feel a little self-conscious. He wasn't sure why, and the feeling passed quickly. After all, he could be himself with Cory. Wasn't that what a best friend was for?

Night had fallen by the time Mrs. Russo called up the stairs that it was time to go. Tristan didn't look forward to going home, but he couldn't stay over on a school night. With any luck, the evening would be quiet. Sometimes his dad stopped for a drink on the way home on a weeknight, but he didn't stay too late and usually went right to bed when he got home. Friday nights were the worst. He liked to go to the bar with the guys from work on Friday nights. He came home late, and angry. Always angry about something.

Cory's dad had died a long time ago and Cory didn't really remember him. Sometimes Tristan thought Cory was lucky not to have a dad, but he would never tell him so. Cory's mom

worked as a nurse in a doctor's office and sometimes she told him stories about unusual cases. Cory got bored while they were talking but Tristan found her stories interesting. She even let him use her stethoscope to listen to his own heartbeat and to Cory's.

He had to be careful around her. She just thought Tristan's family was poor. He didn't want her to see the bruises. If she found out, Tristan was sure she would have the social workers take him away.

Cory rode with him in the car as Mrs. Russo drove Tristan home. He'd been embarrassed the first time she'd given him a ride. Weeds surrounded his little house and paint peeled from the siding. Cory and his mom lived by themselves in a nice house. Tristan knew it wasn't a mansion or anything, but it was better than his, even though the neighborhoods were only a couple of miles apart. But then, nothing was very far from anything else in their little country town. He'd walked to Cory's house many times, although sometimes they met in the nearby woods to explore the streambeds and build elaborate forts out of fallen branches.

Tristan frowned as they pulled up and he realized his dad's car wasn't in the driveway. He should have been home by now. Was he still at the bar? If so, things might be bad when he got home.

He thanked Mrs. Russo and squeezed Cory's arm, then went into the house. His mother hadn't even turned the lights on yet. She was sitting on the couch in the dark. He flipped the switch.

Blinking in the sudden light, she straightened and put her glass of wine on the end table. Tristan wondered how many glasses she'd had so far. She said she needed a glass at night to help her sleep, but Tristan thought she probably had more than one.

She smiled at him a little fuzzily. “Hi, honey. I didn’t realize it was so late. Do you want something for dinner?”

“No. I went over to Cory’s for dinner already. Remember? You said it was okay for me to go.”

“Oh sure. It was nice of Mrs. Russo to have you over.”

“She said you can come over sometime too, if you want.” He passed along the offer Mrs. Russo had already made a dozen times, even though he knew his mother would only give that absent nod. “Where’s Dad?”

She shrugged.

He sat on the couch next to her. They hardly ever talked about it. When he tried, she would smile and tell him to go to his room and do his homework. But thinking of how upset Cory had been when he’d seen Tristan’s bruises gave him courage—or maybe he was growing up.

Hesitantly, he said, “Mom... It’s only Wednesday. He never used to stay out like this on a weeknight. It’s getting worse.”

“What’s getting worse, honey?”

His breath caught in his chest. How could she not understand what he was talking about? “The drinking. You know what’s going to happen later tonight.”

She frowned. “He works all day at the garage. Sometimes he needs to go out and relax.”

“I’m talking about what’s going to happen when he comes home.”

“He gets a little upset with me sometimes. I’m not a good housekeeper, but I cleaned today, and I even went to the store and got him some beer, so I’m sure it will be fine.”

Tristan didn't want to make the suggestion. He hated the thought of being taken away from his home, but even more than that, he hated the thought of his mom getting more broken ribs, more bruises. "Mom, if he starts in on you tonight, will you call that social worker? She said she would help."

"You don't need to worry." Her gaze wandered to some point over his shoulder and she smiled vaguely. Did she see him at all? "Now why don't you go to your room and do your homework?"

Tristan stared at her for a long moment. His throat closed at the sudden sinking realization that nothing would ever change. Eyes blinking in an effort to keep her from seeing the water pooling in them, he gave his mother a quick hug before going to his room.

He sat at the folding table that served him as a desk. The only other piece of furniture in the room was a narrow bed, surrounded by books and clothing scattered on the floor. Once, he'd tried to cover the dingy walls with a couple of posters pulled from magazines, but when he'd come home from school one day, they'd been gone. He hadn't asked about it and no one had told him why.

Eager to take refuge in the maze of calculations, Tristan opened his math book and searched for the most complex problem he could find. Focusing intently on schoolwork occupied his mind and left little room for the anxiety that often threatened to burn a hole in his stomach.

It didn't stop him from hearing the door slam, or the yelling that started soon after. At the sudden crash of furniture, he jumped to his feet and hurried to the door.

He stopped with his hand still on the doorknob. Slowly, he released the handle and backed away.

As he stood in the middle of the small, barren space, he looked around thoughtfully. Apparently he was going to be spending a lot more time in this room.

He would need more books.

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They sat cross-legged in the woods, facing each other with their knees touching, while Tristan told him about the physics final he'd taken that Friday and speculated on his grade. A warm breeze rustled through the branches of the pines and stirred the undergrowth.

Cory was glad they only had a week of tenth grade left. His mother had agreed to let him get a job this summer. He would save his money and someday when they graduated, he and Tristan could get an apartment together so Tristan wouldn't have to live at home any more.

But he should tell Tristan about the job, since they wouldn't be able to spend as much time together as they usually did. Anyway, Tristan liked to know where Cory was. He got upset if he couldn't find him.

When Tristan paused to take a breath, Cory cleared his throat.

Tristan looked at him enquiringly. "What is it?"

"I'm almost fifteen."

"I know. Your birthday is Saturday. Are we going to have cake?" Tristan always came over for Cory's birthday. Cory's mom made Cory's favorite dinner of cheeseburgers and homemade fries and they had an ice cream cake and watched movies.

Cory nodded.

"Just us? Your mom wants you to invite other guys from school. Is there anyone you want to ask? Or I'll ask for you, if you want."

Cory shrugged and didn't bother to answer. He was too quiet to make many friends. Tristan had more. He talked to everyone. Cory had seen how people gravitated to his friend when he gave them that bright, friendly smile.

Instead, he told Tristan, "When school is out, I'm going to work at Ferguson's Electronics, over near the mall."

Tristan looked astonished. "You are? You didn't tell me you were applying for a job."

Cory shrugged again. He hadn't really thought he'd get it, but his teacher was a friend of old man Ferguson and had given Cory a good recommendation. The mom and pop operation sold and repaired all sorts of electronics, but often had to send the complex computer repair jobs out of town. Cory hoped he could learn enough to do more of the repairs for them in the store.

Tristan frowned. "Well, I wish you had told me. I was thinking of applying at the Rad Clothes store. I went in once but I wasn't old enough then. They said I should come back when I was older, because they thought I'd be a good salesman."

Cory was already shaking his head.

"What do you mean, no? If you can get a job, so can I." Tristan's eyes flashed. "Do you think I can't do it?"

Cory gazed back at him mildly. He was used to Tristan's quick bursts of anger. They came and went like the brief but severe thunderstorms that rolled straight over Florida and then out to sea, leaving as swiftly as they came. "You have volunteer hours to do for the scholarship application, and science camp later in the summer."

"I can volunteer in the mornings at your mom's clinic and work at night. And I don't have money for science camp. I don't need to go anyway."

“Science camp is important. They won’t charge much. Maybe nothing. They base it on your grades and your family’s income. You also need to start studying for the SAT.”

“I want to work. I need my own money.”

“I’ll have money.”

“You’re always giving me stuff. You even gave me your MP3 player.”

“You know why.” He didn’t say it, but they both knew Tristan needed the music player more than Cory did. He needed it to drown out the sound of his parents arguing so he wouldn’t hear the noises that made him want to rush out and interfere. And it had worked; he hadn’t gotten any bruises since he and Cory had decided that Tristan would stay in his room and study and not come out, no matter what he heard.

Tristan wasn’t ready to give up. “What about a car? Your mom can’t keep taking me to the library.”

That answer was obvious. “I’ll get a car, as soon as I get my license. Or maybe a motorcycle first, one big enough for both of us. They’re cheaper and my uncle knows about them. He said he’d help me.”

For someone so smart, Tristan could be awfully stubborn. Tristan opened his mouth again, but Cory interrupted him—something he rarely did. “Tris. No.”

Tristan snapped his mouth shut in astonishment.

“Do you still want to be a doctor?” Cory asked.

Tristan nodded, his eyes wide at the firm tone that Cory never took with him.

“Then your job is to study so you can get a scholarship. I’ll work and save money for when we can get an apartment. Okay?”

For once, Tristan seemed at a loss for words. “Okay.”

Cory relaxed. They were quiet for a moment, but with Tristan, no silence ever went unfulfilled for long. The brief burst of anger forgotten, he started picking out the movies they would watch for Cory's birthday and debating the merits of chocolate fudge versus chocolate chip ice cream cake. That there would be chocolate involved in some form was never up for debate.

Cory listened, smiling, as his gaze wandered over Tristan's hair, his sparkling blue eyes, and eventually settled on the pretty, constantly moving mouth.

"I hope you don't have to work so much that we can't come out here this summer," Tristan said. "I like being out here with you. Just you and me. It's so quiet." He cocked his head as he listened to the soft sounds of the woods. An occasional bird warbled from the high branches of the pine tree. Small creatures rustled in the nearby brush. "I mean, when I'm not talking, it's quiet." Tristan wrinkled his nose and grinned.

Cory loved that about him—Tristan's ability to laugh at himself. The fact that Tristan could laugh at all, considering his home life, was still something Cory marveled at every now and then. Not to mention how adorable he looked when he wrinkled his nose like that. Cory steered away from that thought.

He wondered if it was too quiet. Did Tristan ever get tired of him not talking much? Did he want somebody he could have a conversation with? One day, Tristan might meet somebody as smart as himself, someone he could talk to about math and science and all the stuff Tristan found interesting. Would he get tired of Cory then?

Cory said hesitantly, "Tris..."

Tristan smiled at him encouragingly. "What is it? You can tell me."

"Do you... Does it bother you...that I don't talk to you a lot? I mean, about school and stuff?"

“Of course not. If you talked as much as I do, then who would listen to me?”

Of course, someone who talked as much as Tristan would need a friend who liked to listen more than talk. That made sense. Cory nodded, pleased at the elegant solution.

He went back to looking at Tristan’s pretty eyes, and then let his gaze fall to Tristan’s full lips. He wondered what they would taste like.

Tristan leaned his face closer to Cory’s. “Anyway, you do talk to me, all the time.”

“I do?”

Tristan nodded. “With your big brown eyes and the expressions on your face. I know what you’re thinking.” Tristan smiled a little smugly. “I know what you’re thinking right now.”

Cory face warmed at the thought that Tristan might really know what was going through his mind. He must not, or he’d be mad. Wouldn’t he?

Tristan said in a low voice, “You want to kiss me, don’t you?”

Blushing furiously now, Cory stared down at his clenched hands.

“Cory? Do you want to kiss me?”

The breathless, shaky tone of Tristan’s voice made him look up. The blue eyes were staring at him, shining with excitement. Not mad at all.

“Yes,” Cory breathed. “Oh yes.”

He slid one hand behind Tristan’s neck to hold him steady, and then pressed his lips against Tristan’s. His mouth was as sweet and soft as Cory had known it would be. As sweet as when Cory had kissed Tristan the very first time, when they were seven years old on the playground, before the teachers had told them boys didn’t kiss boys and made them stop.

He kissed Tristan a long time, pausing sometimes for breath and then starting right back. When he finally drew away, Tristan was breathing hard, his fair skin flushed and his eyes as wide as they had ever been.

“Did you like it?” Cory asked shyly.

“Oh. Oh, Cory. Yes. Where did you learn that? How come you’re so good at it?” He frowned suddenly, his eyes darkening. “You haven’t been kissing somebody else, have you?”

“No, I promise! I only want to kiss you. I’ve wanted to kiss you for such a long time. I watch when the kids at school kiss each other, and I’ve seen it on TV. I wanted to learn how, so that if you ever let me, I could do it right.”

Tristan stared at him in amazement. “You’re always planning ahead, aren’t you?”

“You’re so pretty, Tris. Prettiest boy I ever saw.”

“Then you should kiss me again.”

\* \* \*

Tristan settled the headphones into his ears and cranked up the volume, but he didn’t think Coldplay was going to do it this time. He searched his songs for something with an even heavier bass, something he could crank up loud enough to block out the increasingly strident voices penetrating the closed bedroom door. But the crash of a lamp being thrown against the wall had him pulling off the headphones and heading toward the door. The lamp throwing only happened when things got really bad.

He stopped with his hand on the knob. Cory had told him not to leave his room when his parents were fighting, and that had kept him mostly safe for more than four years. But Tristan was almost seventeen now. He was nearly grown. True, he still wasn’t very big. He had the small

bones of his mother. But he figured he wasn't going to get much bigger. How long was he supposed to hide in his room?

Maybe he should call Cory. He padded on bare feet back to his desk. The A/C was broken again and the night felt warm and humid. The little bit of breeze from the open window barely stirred the threadbare curtains framing the dirty glass. His T-shirt and shorts stuck to him, but he was used to the heat.

He retrieved the pay-as-you-go phone that Cory had given him so they could talk to each other on those nights when Tristan couldn't manage to slip out of the window to jump on the back of Cory's old motorcycle. Neither of them had enough privacy in their own rooms to do the things they liked to do together. Cory thought if his mom found out what they were doing, she would be upset. She might even stop them from seeing each other. And if Tristan's dad ever found out... Tristan shuddered at the thought.

But in only one more year, they would be eighteen. Then no one could tell them what to do or stop them from being together. He loved Cory and he knew that Cory loved him, no matter if that was the way things were supposed to be.

Tristan struggled not to show how he felt, but Cory said they had to be careful until they were eighteen. Tristan didn't think that was fair when he saw the girls and boys hanging all over each other at school. Cory told him to be patient, so Tristan tried to keep his hands to himself when they were in public, even though some of the things Cory had learned to do to him from his internet research drove him crazy and made him want more, more, more.

After carrying his phone to the bedroom door, he pressed his ear against the wood and listened. His dad was yelling something at his mom about her screwing around. Like she had been with another man. Tristan had heard the same accusations many times in the last few years.

Tristan wished it were true—that she would meet someone who would make her happy. Obviously it wasn't. She hardly ever went out. Where would she meet anyone? Tristan had broken the noninterference rule by trying to reasonably point out this fact to his dad a year or so ago, and had gotten a black eye for his efforts while his mother looked on silently.

Now he contemplated breaking the rule again. He held the phone tightly, his hand growing slippery with sweat as the voices grew louder. Even his mother's voice was raised, and she never yelled.

Cory's voice was husky with sleep when he answered the phone. "Tris? Something wrong?"

Tristan hadn't realized it was so late. He'd been caught up in a particularly thorny chemistry problem. His dad usually got home by midnight, but it was almost two in the morning.

The escalated tone of the argument, the unusually late hour...tonight felt different, and it made him uneasy. He kept his voice low. "They're really loud tonight. He thinks she's been cheating on him, but I know she hasn't. I should—"

"No." Cory sounded wide awake now. "Remember what happened last time."

"I'm older now. I can't let him do this anymore." He reached for the knob again.

"Don't go out there." Cory sounded scared. "Tristan, please."

Reluctantly, Tristan started to head back toward the small table that served him as a desk. He was about to tell Cory he wouldn't leave the room when a sudden loud bang made him jump and he almost dropped the phone.

Another sharp crack echoed through the house. His heart seemed to still and then sped up until it hammered in his ears. He could hear nothing as the shock of realization stabbed him like a knife through his stomach.

Then he heard Cory yelling faintly from the phone, begging him to talk, to tell him what had happened. He tried to answer, but no sound would come out. His breath froze in his chest as he struggled to accept the reality of that noise. A gunshot. What else could it be?

Dread stilled his hand for another heartbeat, and then a surge of adrenaline hit him. He jerked open the door with one shaking hand, still clutching the phone in the other. He ran out. Maybe he wasn't too late. Maybe she was still alive.

She wasn't. She lay on her back on the kitchen floor, blood flowing from her chest to pool around her. Her eyes stared up at the ceiling.

His chest, his limbs, his whole body felt weighted down with lead as he watched the bright red blood seep into the cracks in the worn linoleum.

His father stood over her, the gun still in his hand and a triumphant gleam in his eyes. "That'll teach you to fuck around on me."

A burning metallic odor overlaid the pungent smell of whiskey and sweat. Tristan could hardly breathe.

His father spotted him and waved the gun around in the air. "There's the little worm. Go back to your cave, boy. Now!" He turned back to the body and gave it a kick, almost falling over from the effort. "Guys down at the bar laughed at me for having a wife who spread it around every chance she got. Showed 'em, didn't I?"

Tristan screamed. The rage and helplessness he'd felt all his life shot through him in a burst of electric energy, freeing him from his paralysis. He ran at his father, unheeding of the gun.

His father swatted him away like an annoying fly. "This ain't your business. Get back to your room."

The phone flew from Tristan's hand as he crashed against the wall. For a moment the world went black as his head slammed hard enough to make the world spin. He pushed off the wall and ran at his father again, rage and pain blurring his vision.

Tristan got in one good shove, slamming his father against the kitchen counter. The man roared in agony as the sharp edge dug into his back. He dropped the gun, but before Tristan could grab it from the floor, his father smashed a fist into the side of Tristan's chest so hard he felt something give deep inside. Before he had time to catch his breath, another fist slammed into his arm, knocking him into the wall. An unnatural cracking noise snapped through the room as bright pain lanced from his shoulder to the tips of his fingers.

Warm blood trickled down from a cut over his eyes, mingling with sweat and tears. Blinded, he stumbled back as he tried to wipe his eyes with his good hand. His broken arm—he was sure it was broken—dangled uselessly.

He managed to clear his vision in time to see his father raise the gun and point it at him. Rage gave way to fear and all he could think about was getting away. He raced for the door, cradling his injured arm. The gun went off. The bullet hit the wall near him, showering him with bits of drywall.

He struggled with the dead bolt on the front door, awkward in his pain and haste. He got it open and ran outside as another shot rang out. The bullet smashed the glass in the window by the door. Small shards sliced into his arms and the side of his face.

Then he was running, pounding down the street heedless of his bare feet and the jolts of pain radiating from his arm. Every harsh, gasping breath sent fire through his chest and side. He barely heard the faint wailing of sirens in the distance as he ran with a single-minded determination to reach the one place he'd ever felt safe.

\* \* \*

His shouting woke his mother. She stood blinking in the doorway of his bedroom, dark hair mussed. She pulled the robe tighter around her shoulders. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Cory still held the phone to his ear. Only silence on the other end. He let it drop. “It’s Tristan. I think he’s hurt.” He stammered out the words. “I heard—I heard—”

“What?” She looked alarmed now. “Tell me what happened. What did you hear?”

“Yelling. His parents yelling at each other. And then gunshots. So loud. I think they were gunshots. The phone went dead.”

He started for the stairs. “I’m going over there. I need to see.”

“No, you are not,” she snapped. “Not if there’s a gun.”

“But Tris…”

“I’m calling the police. They’ll check.”

She brushed passed him, heading for the land line in the kitchen. He followed in time to see her dial 911, then listened in a daze as she told the police what she knew and asked them to drive by Tristan’s house.

As she hung up, he hovered by the front door, eyeing his mother’s car keys. She didn’t understand. She didn’t know. If anything had happened to Tris, Cory would…would… He didn’t know what he would do.

She stared at him, her eyes wide with fear.

“I’ll be careful,” he promised as he picked up the keys. He’d go crazy if he had to wait around for the police to call. Better to take the car than his motorcycle, in case he had to get Tristan—in case he was hurt.

He drove toward Tristan's house. If the police were there, he'd go in and find out what had happened. If they weren't there yet, he'd call them again. Then what? Knock on the front door? Peer in a window? He didn't know. He just had to see Tristan.

He didn't have to decide. He'd barely made it a couple of blocks down the narrow residential street when he spotted someone running alongside the road, coming toward him. He slowed. Tristan. There was no mistaking the blond curls and the slim build.

Cory pulled over and jumped out of the car. Blood on Tristan's face gleamed black in the dim streetlights. His face twisted in pain and tears streamed down his cheeks as he gasped for breath, clutching his arm to his chest.

Cory wanted to pull him close, but was afraid to touch him. "Tristan," he whispered. "Oh God, Tris..."

Tristan pressed into him, trying to get closer. Cory wrapped his arms around him gingerly. "You're okay now." He murmured reassuring nonsense words. "You'll be all right."

"She's dead." Tristan sobbed against his shirt. "He went crazy. She's dead."

Cory felt the shock of that go right through him. "I'm so sorry, baby." And he was sorry, but he also couldn't help feeling relieved and grateful that Tristan had gotten away. "Come on, get in the car. Momma will want to see you."

Tristan tried to say something else, but he was crying so hard Cory could barely understand him.

"Come on," Cory said. "Get in the car. Let's go home." Cory wanted to pull him toward the car, but where to touch him? He seemed to be hurt everywhere. All Cory could do was urge him around to the passenger side and open the door with one hand while drawing him forward.

“They’ll take me away now for sure,” Tristan finally managed to get out. “What will happen?”

Cory stroked his hair gently. “It doesn’t matter. Please, baby, get in the car now.”

“What?” Tristan drew back to stare at him in shock. They had lived for years in fear—fear that the social workers would take him away. Fear that their parents would discover the things they did together. Fear of never seeing each other again. “How can you say that?”

“We’re almost seventeen,” Cory pointed out patiently, knowing that Tristan was in shock and not able to reason it out for himself. “If they take you away, it will only be for a year, and I can drive now. I can visit you.”

Tristan seemed confused and Cory thought he might have a concussion. He pressed him into the car and Tristan settled into the seat with a dazed look on his face.

Cory’s mother opened the door before they’d finished pulling into the driveway. She helped him get Tristan inside and they sat on the couch next to each other while she called emergency again.

Cory slipped an arm gently behind Tristan’s back but didn’t pull on him. Tristan laid his head on Cory’s shoulder. His face was a mess of blood and tears.

“I’m going to get you a washcloth.”

“No. Don’t leave me.”

Cory grabbed a handful of tissues from the box on the coffee table and cleaned Tristan’s face carefully. He got off most the blood. The beautiful blue eyes were now reddened and the pupils seemed far too large. Anxiety twisted Cory’s stomach into knots. Tristan must have a concussion, and a broken arm, and who knew what else. Even his breathing still sounded ragged. He tried to stay calm for Tristan’s sake.

Tristan had stopped crying and sat staring at nothing. “I tried to stop him. I was too late.”

“It’s not your fault.” He pushed Tristan’s hair out of his eyes, smoothing it away from the bloody scratches. Tristan sought his lips and Cory returned the kiss, trying to make it gentle and comforting. After the kiss ended, he had to wipe away the tears now spilling from his own eyes and blurring his vision.

“I should have gone out there earlier,” Tristan mumbled against Cory’s shoulder.

*Thank God you didn’t. You’d be dead too.* He bit his lip to keep from saying it.

They kissed again while Cory cradled him. When he lifted his head, he saw his mother standing in the doorway to the kitchen. He didn’t know how long she’d been there, but he guessed it didn’t matter. She’d seen enough, judging by the way her face had closed up tight, like it did when she was angry.

“His mother is dead,” he told her. “His father shot her.” He tried to explain why he had to be there for Tristan right now—why comforting him was more important than trying to hide something she probably already knew anyway.

Shock and sympathy quickly replaced the anger. “Christ.” She looked down, but he could still see the sudden welling of tears in her eyes. “The ambulance will be here in a minute.”

“I’m going to the hospital with him.”

At some point, she had managed to change into jeans and a blouse. She nodded. “We’ll both go. I’ll drive.”

She crouched in front of Tristan. “Look at me, honey.” He stared up at her. “I think you have a concussion, and I see your arm is hurt. Where else does it hurt?”

Cory let his mother’s soothing voice wash over him as she asked her questions. Tristan answered haltingly. His eyes kept drifting closed. Tristan looked so tired after all he’d been

through. Cory wanted to ask his mother if Tristan couldn't just rest for a minute, then realized she might be trying to keep Tristan talking because of the concussion. That sent a new stab of worry through him. What if he had injuries inside even more severe than the ones they could see?

They heard the siren approaching. His mother opened the door as the paramedics came up the drive.

Cory didn't let go of Tristan until he had to. Even then, Tristan stared at him. "Don't go."

"I'm right here. But you have to let them look at you."

One of the men talked to his mother while the other examined Tristan. After splinting his arm, they helped him onto the stretcher. Tristan had been subdued during the examination, answering the questions as briefly as possible, while Cory hovered nearby.

Now as he lay on the stretcher, Tristan became agitated. He called out for Cory, reaching with his good arm and dragging the IV from the back of his hand.

Cory took his hand. "I'm here."

"Don't leave me."

"We'll be right behind you in the car."

"Promise?"

When had he ever had to promise to be there for Tristan? It had always been taken for granted by both of them. At least, that's what he'd thought. Tristan must really be confused.

He bent over Tristan, ignoring the impatient urging of the paramedics to get out of the way, and brushed his fingers over Tristan's hot, damp cheek. Did he have a fever? "Haven't I always been here for you?"

"Yes," he whispered.

“Then don’t be stupid.”

Tristan shivered a little as if he felt cold despite his hot skin. Cory drew the blanket over him and then stepped away.

But when they got to the hospital, they wouldn’t let him in to see Tristan, no matter how he pleaded. Would Tristan think he hadn’t showed up? Would he think Cory didn’t care?

He waited while his mother talked to the emergency room nurses. When she returned, he asked again, “Can I see him?”

“They’re treating him now. He might have to have surgery on that arm.”

She must have seen the panic in his eyes at that statement. “They’re taking good care of him,” she assured him. “But we’re not his family. They’re not supposed to tell us any details about his condition.”

“He doesn’t have anyone else. His father…” A sudden fear hit him. “Will his father come after him?”

She shook her head. “They said his father was arrested. As soon as Tristan wakes up, the police want to talk to him. They’ll want to talk to us too.”

Cory relaxed a little at that. Tristan’s father would go to jail for a long time. He might even get the death penalty. He’d never be able to hurt anyone again.

They sat on the little plastic chairs in the waiting room. Exhaustion crept over Cory as the adrenalin drained away. The icy air conditioning chilled his skin now that he’d stopped moving around and settled down to wait. A baby cried. People came and went. Sometimes voices got loud. He felt tired and uncomfortable, but he wasn’t going anywhere until they let him see Tristan.

His mother crossed her arms and stared at him. He knew that look. It was the *explain yourself, young man* look. She'd used to actually say those words, but she no longer needed to. They both knew what that look meant.

He took a deep breath and met her eyes. There was no more hiding his feelings for Tristan. This would be difficult, but he knew his mother. She would eventually accept it.

He kept it simple, as he always did. "I love him, Momma."

"I know you do, honey. Like a brother. Like a best friend. That's what I thought. Or maybe that's what I told myself. But...it's more than that?" Her voice sounded so small and uncertain, as if even she wasn't sure what her proper reaction should be.

"He *is* my best friend. But he's my boyfriend too. I never want to be with anyone else."

"What about...a girl?"

"No. I'm sorry. I don't want a girl. I only want Tristan."

She sighed. "I suppose I knew that. Boys your age should be dating. I'd hoped you were sneaking off to the woods to be with some girl, but you weren't, were you? You were with Tristan."

He nodded, feeling both miserable for causing her pain and relieved to have it out in the open.

She looked like she was about to start crying again. He cleared his throat. "Are you... Are you disappointed in me?"

"Disappointed, yes. Disappointed in you? Never."

He must have looked as puzzled as he felt.

"It won't be easy for you and Tristan. People can be very cruel to anyone they don't understand."

“I know about that. I watch the news. I see how some of the kids at school act.”

“I would have chosen an easier life for you. And, I admit, I wanted to see you married. You’re my only child. I wanted grandkids.”

“We could still have them,” Cory said doubtfully. “Adopt or something.” He’d never thought about it. He didn’t have any particular urge to have kids. Maybe he would when he was older.

She clasped his hand tightly. “I love you. I always will, no matter what.”

He squeezed back, unable to get any more words out past the lump in his throat.

\* \* \*

Everything hurt. Tristan didn’t think there was a square inch on his whole body that didn’t throb with some kind of pain—sharp like a needle, or burning as if on fire. A roaring ache or maybe a low throbbing. Arguably, his head hurt the worst as it boomed in time to his pulse.

Although the nausea might have the pain beat. Tristan really hated that sick feeling. He kept his eyes closed and tried not to move. No, maybe it would be better with his eyes open. If he had something to focus on, would that keep the dizziness from being so overwhelming?

Then a sudden hope made him open his eyes. But his room was quiet. No Cory. When he tried to call out, only a small rasping noise escaped his throat. He spotted a plastic cup of water on the bedside table, but couldn’t reach it with his good arm. And every time he moved, his broken arm went up in flames.

Tristan had spent enough time in hospitals to know the nurse would have placed the call button within easy reach. He groped until he bumped into it and then pressed. Soon a smiling nurse appeared at his bedside.

“There you are,” she said. “Awake at last. My name is Margaret and I’ll be taking care of you today. I know it’s a silly question, but I have to ask. How are you feeling?”

He rolled his eyes and she laughed. “Okay. Here. Drink some water. Your throat’s probably a little sore from the intubation during the surgery.”

He widened his eyes.

“For the arm,” she explained. “Dr. Malik had to make sure the bones were properly aligned.”

She held the straw to his lips. The cool water sliding down his raw throat both stung and tasted like heaven.

She set the cup back on the table. “I’ll let the doctor know you’re awake. She’ll want to take a quick look at you before we give you anything else for the pain. Pain medicine and concussions don’t mix too well.”

Before she could leave, he whispered, “Cory.”

“Excuse me?”

“Cory. My friend. He came with me.” Maybe he’d gone home. If there had been surgery, then Tristan had been out for a long time and his mother might have insisted he get some sleep.

“Ah. The dark-haired boy in the waiting room.”

“He’s still here?” Tristan struggled to sit up.

“Whoa, lie back down. We told him it would be hours before you could see anyone, but he won’t leave. You’re not supposed to have visitors yet.”

“Please. Just for a minute. I need to see him.” If he yelled loud enough, would Cory hear him? But how could he call for Cory with this hoarse excuse of a voice, and how far was the

waiting room? He strained his neck trying to look around the nurse and out the door to the hall. Unable to see much, he started to swing his legs over the side of the bed.

“Stop, Tristan.” The nurse spoke firmly. “That’s not a good idea.”

“Please,” he said again as he tried to blink back tears.

Margaret hesitated. “I’ll make you a deal. You stay still until Dr. Malik checks you out. She’s making rounds now, so it won’t be long. If she says you’re okay, then I’ll bring you some pain medicine and your friend can see you for a minute. Deal?”

He nodded, and then quickly regretted it as his head gave an extra throb. Perhaps lying still until he got his pain medicine was a good idea after all.

But instead of leaving, Margaret lingered for a moment. She wanted to say something. He smiled at her encouragingly—the same smile he gave Cory when Cory wanted to tell him something, but couldn’t quite get the words out.

Margaret seemed to relax a little in response to the smile. She touched his good arm gently. “Tristan... After the doctor clears you for visitors, we’re supposed to call the police. They want to talk to you.”

His smile faded as he stared at her. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Of course you didn’t. No one thinks you did. They just want to know what happened when you got hurt. That’s all.” She looked at him searchingly, trying to see...what? He didn’t know. When he didn’t say anything else, she patted his arm again and withdrew.

Tristan stared up at the ceiling as he listened to Margaret pad away on her quiet white shoes. Late afternoon sun streamed through the partially closed blinds, lighting the dust motes as they danced in the air. Low voices echoed softly down the hall outside his door. The sound of footsteps, some slow and some hurried. The beeping of machinery and the squeak of wheels.

But hard as he listened, he couldn't hear the one voice that mattered most to him in the world. The only voice left that mattered at all, now that his mother... The memory came crashing in with a force that made him gasp in shock. His face grew warm as sweat popped out on his forehead and prickled under his arms.

The loud bang of the gun. The blood pooling around his mother's body. The faded blue eyes which had once gazed at him with distant affection staring sightlessly at the ceiling. He wanted to deny it, to hold out some hope that he had been mistaken and that the paramedics had gotten there in time to save her. But the memory of those open, staring eyes was too clear. He feared he would see them in his nightmares for the rest of his life.

Closing his eyes, Tristan struggled to breathe as recalled the pain of his father breaking his ribs, his arm—and trying to kill him? Would his father really have done that? He lifted his unbroken arm, careful not to pull on the IV tubes trailing from the back of his hand. Shivering, he touched the bandages on his cheekbone as he recalled the spray of glass from the window shattered by a bullet meant for him.

“Don't worry. The cuts are shallow. You'll still be the cutest boy in school.” A young woman in a white coat entered the room. She sat on the side of his bed without hesitation and took his hand in hers. “Or maybe that's not what you were thinking?”

Dark eyes smiled into his. She radiated warmth and reassurance. “I'm Dr. Malik.” She squeezed his fingers gently. “I know you've been through a terrible time. We're going to take care of you. You need to concentrate on getting well for now.”

She had a light, cultured accent that he found soothing. He stared down at the contrast of her dark fingers against his pale skin. Tentatively, he returned the press of fingers, grateful for her sympathy. But that sympathy was his undoing and the tears he'd struggled against spilled

down his cheeks. Rage and grief were tangled together, along with the guilt of not acting in time. He looked away, blinking furiously, but he didn't want to let go of her hand long enough to wipe at his eyes.

She reached for the box of tissues and he was forced to disengage so he could take them from her. He didn't look at her as he scrubbed his face.

"It's okay, you know. With what you've been through, I'd be a lot more worried if you *weren't* crying." She squeezed his good arm. "Don't try to fight it. You cry when you need to. Or yell, scream, whatever. Keep in mind that eventually, you'll feel better. I know you don't believe me now, and you don't know me, so why should you trust me? Just remember what I said—it *will* get better."

"But I don't...I don't want to forget...her. Or what he did to her." His chest hurt as anger made his breath come fast. "I *won't* forget."

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh, you won't forget. I never said that. Only that the pain will gradually lessen."

He knew she wasn't talking about the physical pain. Lying back against the pillow, he stayed still while she examined him and made notes, answering her questions automatically.

When she finished, she reached forward and brushed the hair from his forehead. She studied him for a moment. "The next few days are going to be hard. The police are waiting to take your statement. We had to call them as soon as you woke up. Then there will be a social worker and the hospital psychologist. All kinds of people will visit and you won't want to see any of them because you feel like crap."

That drew a reluctant smile from him.

She went on. “So if you want any of them to leave—if you’re not ready to talk to them—just say so, okay? I’m your doctor, so at least while you’re here, I get to say who can visit you and when.”

He felt like crying again, then realized if she had the final say on his other visitors, she could let Cory in to see him even after visiting hours. He looked at her hopefully. “Then can Cory come in? It would help a lot if he could be with me.”

“The nurse said you had a friend in the waiting room. He can come in when you’re done talking to the police. But then I’m going to give you something for the pain, so Cory has to promise to let you rest if you get sleepy.”

“He will. He always takes care of me.”

“Is there anyone else? We haven’t found any relatives to call.”

Tristan shook his head. He didn’t know anything about his father’s relatives. There was a picture on a shelf in the living room of his mother as a young girl with her arm around another girl with the same blue eyes. But he had never met his aunt and had never even heard his mother talk to her on the phone.

“Will you tell Cory he can come in soon?” Tristan asked. “I know he’s going crazy with waiting. Will you make sure he knows I’m okay?”

“Of course.” Unlike the quiet nurse’s shoes, Dr. Malik clicked away on high heels. But this time Tristan had only a moment to listen to the sounds from the hallway before a heavy set man in a suit came in and introduced himself as Detective Wright.

By now, Tristan could hardly keep his eyes open, even though the pain wouldn’t have let him sleep even if he had been alone.

Wright took the seat by Tristan's bed. "We have a pretty good idea what happened already, so this shouldn't take long. But we need to get a statement as soon as possible, before you start forgetting the details."

He told him same thing he had told the doctor. "I'll never forget."

"No. I don't suppose you will."

Guided by the detective's questions, Tristan told him everything that had happened. Regardless of his determination to preserve every detail firmly in his memory, some of it was a blur. The fighting. The pain. The loud bang of the gun. Everything had happened so fast and he had been screaming at his father, his father yelling at him.

His throat grew dry and Wright helped him with a drink of water. When they were done, Tristan had tears running down his face again, only this time he was too lost in the painful memories to be embarrassed when the detective handed him the box of tissues.

As the man closed his notebook and stood to leave, Tristan stopped him. "What about my father? Is he in jail?"

"Yes." Wright paused as if he weren't sure how Tristan would react to that news. Did he think Tristan would be sorry his father had gone to jail, just because they were related? If only he knew how many times Tristan had wished the man weren't his father—had dreamed his real father would show up one day and take him away. Now he knew that had been the wishful thinking of a child. But he still hated the fact that he shared blood with a murderer.

Tristan's voice came out hard and angry. "Will he stay there? He damn well better stay there or—" Tristan stopped short of adding the rest of it—*or I'll make him wish he had*. Probably not a good idea to make death threats in front of the police, even if the man was nodding in agreement.

“Yes. He’ll stay there for a long time. There’s plenty of physical evidence and there are witnesses at the bar who overheard him making threats.” He hesitated. “And there’s the history of abuse—the hospital admissions and social work reports.” For a moment, the detective looked tired and a little bewildered. “Tristan... Why? Why didn’t she—”

He didn’t finish, but Tristan knew what he was asking. “I don’t know. I wish I did. I tried to get her to leave him.” He rubbed his eyes. They felt raw and painful from so much crying. “If only I had tried harder. I should have made her go.”

Guilt stabbed through his gut again as he made himself recall his mother’s still, pale form lying on the kitchen floor in the middle of a pool of blood. The least he could do for her was to remember every detail, both of her life and her death. Or maybe that memory was his punishment for not doing more to protect her—a punishment he deserved.

“You couldn’t force her.” The detective said something else but Tristan couldn’t keep his eyes open any longer. Exhaustion overtook him despite the pain and his eyes closed.

Sometime during his restless nightmares, a warm, comforting hand took his, rousing him slightly so the nurse could give him pills and water. Even without opening his eyes, he knew it wasn’t the nurse’s fingers entwined with his. He squeezed weakly. “Don’t let go.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

A brush of lips against his and Tristan sighed as he fell back into darkness.

\* \* \*

Cory sat cross-legged on his bed, leaning forward to carefully cut the bright green Christmas paper into a neat square just big enough to wrap the little box holding the earrings for his mother. Ginger burrowed under the roll and swatted at the red bow, knocking the tape to the floor.

“You’re not helping, girl.” He untangled his legs so he could reach over the side and pick up the tape. Straightening, he paused to scratch the top of her head. He wanted to get this finished while his mother was still at work, but he moved slowly, feeling a little sad to think this would be his last Christmas at home. Well, not really the last. Of course he and Tristan would come home for Christmas from wherever Tristan got into college next year, but it wouldn’t be the same. They would come home as visitors.

He looked around his bedroom. Would his mother turn it into a study? A sewing room? There were three bedrooms in the house, so if she did something with his room, did that mean she would finally let him and Tristan sleep in the same bedroom when they visited instead of having Tristan stay in the guest room, as he had for the last year? That hadn’t stopped them from sneaking into each other’s rooms, but he thought they had been discreet about it. At least, his mother had pretended not to know anything about their nocturnal wanderings.

Maybe without him there, she would find someone special. He hoped so, but it didn’t prevent him from worrying about moving away and leaving her alone.

“Cory!”

Feet pounded on the stairs and Cory jumped in alarm, spilling wrapping paper, scissors and ribbon onto the floor. The cat squalled her protest at the sudden noise and leaped up to glare at the door.

Tristan yelled for him again. “Cory, are you home? I got it.”

Cory opened his bedroom door just in time to keep an out-of-breath Tristan from slamming into it. Instead, Tristan slammed into him and knocked his breath out with a huge hug. The cat brushed his leg heading for the stairs as soon as the door opened.

Cory took a deep breath as his heart slowed from its near panic attack.

Oblivious, Tristan backed away and held up a letter. "University of Florida." He was so excited he could barely form full sentences. "A scholarship for Arts and Science majors to UF. On top of the National Merit Scholarship, this should cover four years of tuition, plus some for living expenses." Tristan waved the paper around in the air, and then stopped as he looked at Cory expectantly.

Cory started to nod agreeably while he recovered his breath. Then the enormity of what Tristan had said hit him. "You did it."

He pulled a laughing Tristan into his arms and practically lifted him off the floor as he turned him around and plastered him against the wall. Tristan was still laughing as Cory took his mouth in a fast, hard kiss. Cory tightened his grip, burying his face against Tristan's hair while Tristan danced in his arms. A laughing, excited Tristan squirming against him was Cory's idea of heaven. Almost heaven. It would really be heaven if they were naked.

Cory let go just enough to twist his fingers through Tristan's curls and tilt his head back to look at the flushed, excited face. "I knew you could do it."

"And you know I would never have done it without you. You and your mother." Tristan's eyes got a little wet and he tried to pull out of Cory's arms. "I can't wait to tell her."

Cory held him tight long enough to land another quick kiss, and then he let him go. "Gainesville. She'll be happy."

Tristan threw himself down on the bed. "It's only an hour and a half away. She was afraid we'd end up in Miami or even out of state."

"Miami." Cory managed to convey his opinion about that potential move in a single word.

“I know,” Tristan agreed. “Me either. It’s pretty there, and it would be kind of exciting to be in a big city but damn, the traffic. And the rent seemed so expensive.”

Tristan had carefully saved the little money he’d gotten from the sale of his parents’ house. His one extravagance had been the ten year old Toyota they’d driven all over Florida looking at colleges.

“Of course, I’ll only be pre-med and I may not even end up going to medical school there, but at least I can get my volunteer hours at the teaching hospital, and there are medical lectures all the time that are open to anybody. And the library.” Tristan’s eyes practically rolled back in his head as his voice became reverent. “Oh my God, there’s a whole library for the health sciences and I can use it anytime I want to.”

Cory grinned.

“You’re laughing at me.” Tristan grabbed his hand. With a sharp tug, he pulled until Cory lost his balance and tumbled on top of him.

“Your face looks like it does when I’m about to make you come.”

“Oh, that’s funny.” He dropped the letter so he could dig his fingers into Cory’s ribs. Cory twisted away from him to sit on the edge of the bed, and then leaned forward to pick up the letter from its landing place on the carpet.

He stood and paced the length of the room, reading as he walked. When he reached the bedroom wall, he stopped with his back to Tristan and stared blankly down at the paper while he thought about how to say what he wanted to say.

This wasn’t the first time the thought had occurred to him. But as much as they had talked about it, moving away had seemed some vague goal for the far distant future. Next year. Always next year. Suddenly, it was now. He had to find a way to say what he’d been thinking for

some time, even if it killed him to do it. Desperately, he hoped Tristan wouldn't take him up on the offer he was about to make, but he had to try.

Cory's chest ached. He took a deep breath to steady himself. He would be strong for Tristan and do what was best for him. Just as he always had.

Tristan stood. His smile had vanished and tension showed in the set of his shoulders. "What's wrong?"

Cory held up the letter and read it again, a little more carefully this time. "It says dorm housing will be paid for, but if you live off-campus, you'll only get a small living allowance."

"Yes. I know you're going to work, but the allowance will help with the rent. It would be good if we didn't have to dip into our savings for the living expenses, wouldn't it? I can get a part-time job too."

"No," Cory answered automatically. "You have to keep good grades so you don't lose your scholarship."

"You always say that. Maybe I can work at the hospital. I could make some money *and* it would look good on the medical school application. How does that sound?"

"But if you lived in the dorm, your expenses would all be paid."

Tristan explained with exaggerated patience. "The dorm is only for students who are going to school full-time. You couldn't live there."

"I know that." Was Tristan being deliberately thick? Why did he have to make this more difficult than it needed to be? "But if you stayed in a dorm, you'd meet other students like you. Students who—" He cursed silently as his voice broke a little. He cleared his throat. "Students who can study with you and help you and... and..." *Dammit*. He turned away.

Tristan grabbed his shoulder and jerked him around to face him. “What are you saying?” His voice rose. “What the hell are you trying to say?”

Cory pulled away. He stared Tristan in the eye. “You don’t need me. You should be around other students.”

“I plan to hang out with other students,” Tristan snapped. “I don’t need to live in a Goddammed dorm to make friends.”

Cory struggled to remain calm in the face of Tristan’s mounting fury. “It might be best if I didn’t go with you.”

“Are you saying you don’t *want* to go?” Tristan shouted. He looked as angry as Cory had ever seen him.

“No, I—” That wasn’t what he meant at all. “I don’t want to hold you back. I understand if—”

“Don’t you dare!” Tristan shoved him in the chest hard enough to slam him into the wall, knocking the breath from him. “Don’t you *dare* back out on me.”

Cory bent double, clutching his chest as he struggled for breath. Through the roaring in his ears, he heard Tristan yelling at him. “We’ve been planning this for so long. It’s everything we worked for!”

Too late, Cory threw up his hands in attempt to ward off another blow. A shove against his shoulder brought him to his knees. He pressed back against the wall. “Tristan,” he gasped. “Stop.” Tears blinded him and he raised his hands again in defense. “Please, baby, stop.” When the next blow didn’t come, he quickly wiped his eyes and looked up.

Tristan stared down at him, his eyes wide in horror. “Cory—God, Cory, I—I’m so…” An expression of pure anguish replaced the rage. He sank to his knees beside Cory. “Are you hurt? Did I hurt you?” he asked frantically. “Oh God, I can’t believe I…”

Cory rubbed at the soreness in his chest. “You didn’t hurt me.” His breathing evened out. “I was more surprised than anything.”

Tristan covered his face with his hands to hide the tears that had started pouring down his face. “I’m so sorry.” His shoulders shook as he sobbed into his hands.

Cory pulled him close until Tristan’s head rested against his bruised chest. After Tristan had calmed a little, Cory said, “It’s my fault. I didn’t mean to make you so upset.”

“No,” Tristan mumbled against his chest. “There’s no excuse for what I did. No matter what. No excuse.” He pulled away and rubbed his eyes wearily. “It’s not your fault if you don’t love me enough to come with me.”

Cory stared at him. “Don’t love you? How can you say that?”

Tristan looked back at him through reddened eyes. “You don’t want to be with me. What else am I supposed to think?”

“Of course I love you. I only wanted what was best for you.”

“You asshole.” Tristan jumped to his feet. Sparks of anger reignited in his eyes, but this time the anger was mixed with exasperation. “I feel like beating you up all over again for putting me through that.”

Cory rose more slowly. “I’m sorry.”

“Just say you’ll go with me.”

Cory nodded.

“And swear you’ll never scare me like that again.”

“Okay.”

“Jesus.” Tristan rubbed his face again. “I know you want what’s best for me, but when will you believe that *you’re* what’s best for me? I need you, more than I need a scholarship and more than I need to be a doctor. More than anything.” He reached for the hem of Cory’s T-shirt and started to pull it up. “Let me see. Did I bruise you?”

Cory caught his hands. Tristan’s hands still shook, and they felt cold. Cory wrapped them in both of his and raised them to his lips. “I’m fine.” He kissed them in apology. What had seemed like a good idea at the time—a noble sacrifice, even—had turned out to be one of his dumber ideas. Maybe the dumbest ever.

“Don’t. I don’t deserve it.” New tears welled in Tristan’s eyes at the display of tenderness. “I can’t believe I pushed you like that.”

“Don’t cry anymore.” Cory let go with one hand so he could brush at the tears on Tristan’s face. “We’re both idiots, but everything is okay now.”

He waited until Tristan nodded. Then he gave him a gentle kiss. When they broke, he looked into Tristan’s face. Dark shadows showed prominently under the too-bright eyes.

Tristan had been working hard; studying, researching colleges, and filling out dozens of applications for college admissions, scholarships, and grants. He’d been on edge, waiting for news of a scholarship. Then, finally, the letter today. Tristan had been so happy, and Cory had destroyed that joy with a few words.

Cory sighed. *This is why I don’t talk much.*

They were both drained by the fight and Cory’s knees felt wobbly as the adrenaline left him. He tugged Tristan toward the bed. They collapsed and his arms went around Tristan automatically as Tristan rolled to his stomach, laying half on him as his head burrowed into the

little dip between Cory's shoulder and clavicle that seemed made just for him. Even though they rarely got to spend a whole night in the same bed, the position had always felt like the most natural thing in the world when they did get time to lie quietly together.

Cory stroked Tristan's hair soothingly as they let the tension drain away. He was glad to hear Tristan's breathing become slow and even. He didn't think he'd fallen asleep, but at least he was resting.

Staring down at his fingers as they twisted through Tristan's soft curls, Cory felt a new ache in his chest that had nothing to do with any physical bruises. He'd thought he loved Tristan before, but now that seemed like a schoolboy crush. This feeling was more than physical desire and the simple enjoyment of spending time with someone who was his best friend as well as his lover. Those feelings now mixed with an almost overwhelming sense of responsibility. *I can make him happy. I can make him sad.* The thought was both amazing and frightening. But Tristan had given him that power. Cory wouldn't be able to provoke such strong emotions, if Tristan didn't love him so much.

Tristan had chosen him a long time ago, at a picnic table under an old oak tree. God only knew why, but he had.

That realization went a long way to settle the self-doubt Cory had been carrying for years. His arms tightened as he gazed down at Tristan and felt his love strengthen just that little bit more. If he and Tristan were going to be together for many years to come, Cory would make sure they were good years.

"Never again," he whispered.

Tristan lifted head to look into his eyes. Tears still glittered on his eyelashes.

"Never again," Cory repeated. "I love you. I won't leave you."

The sun came out in the blue eyes. “I love you too.” Tristan met his lips with a sigh as the last vestige of his anxiety seemed to vanish.

Cory deepened the kiss as he tried to convey with his actions all the emotions for which words seemed inadequate. He stroked Tristan’s back and then cupped his pert, round ass and rubbed it. Tristan groaned into his mouth. God, Cory loved that sound and the way Tristan pressed against him like he needed him more than anything in the world.

Heat flared and pooled in his groin. Opening his legs, he pulled Tristan on top of himself so he could trap him between raised thighs and thrust upward against Tristan’s growing bulge. He was reaching for Tristan’s zipper when he heard the door downstairs open and the familiar clatter of his mother’s keys landing on the hall table. He let out a groan of his own, one of pure frustration.

Tristan pulled away from him. “Another six months. Then we’ll have our own place.”

Cory tugged him back for a moment to whisper into his ear, “I’m gonna pound your ass every night. You won’t be able to sit through class.”

That startled an embarrassed snicker out of Tristan. “Jeez, Cory.” But the flush in his face and the heat in his eyes said Tristan didn’t mind the thought at all, even if he found it a bit disconcerting to hear Cory say it out loud.

“Are you guys up there?” His mother called up the stairs. “What do you want for dinner?”

Tristan took off down the stairs. Cory followed more slowly but arrived in time to see Tristan fling his arms around Cory’s mother. “Gainesville,” Tristan said. “We’re going to Gainesville. Together.” He looked at Cory as if still needing reassurance despite Cory’s promise. Cory nodded.

“You got the scholarship? That’s terrific.” Cory’s mother hugged Tristan. “I’m so proud of you.”

Tristan stepped back, looking a little self-conscious. “I couldn’t have done it without you. If you hadn’t let me stay here after—after what happened…” He stopped, and then pulled her close again. “Thank you.”

When he released her, there were tears in her eyes and Cory had to swallow the lump in his throat.

“I can’t believe you’re both leaving me.” She ruffled Tristan’s hair as if he were still five years old. “Take care of my baby.”

“*Momma.*” Cory’s face turned warm.

“He’s the one who always takes care of me. You know that.” Tristan was grinning at Cory’s discomfort, but there seemed to be a little uncertainty in his voice. Frowning, Cory opened his mouth to correct him, but his mother answered first.

“I know you think that,” she said. “But you take care of him too.” Tristan started to shake his head, but she continued. “Do you think I didn’t hear you up in his room tutoring him so he could pass his last English class?”

“He could have done it on his own,” Tristan said. “He just doesn’t want to sit down and do the work.”

“Boring,” Cory groused.

Cory’s mother persisted. “And do you think I don’t know the only reason he joined the AV club was because you encouraged him to do it?”

“True, and he enjoys it, doesn’t he? Even made some friends.”

Cory glared at them, but before he could think of anything snarky to say, his mother decided to embarrass him even further, if such a thing was possible. She opened her arms wide and announced, “Group hug.”

“Jeez.” Even though he felt far too old to be hugging his mother, Cory didn’t really have any objection, if it made her happy. But he rolled his eyes and grumbled anyway as they pulled him in, because that was the reaction they expected.

Anyway, it made Tristan laugh, and that was all Cory wanted.

THE END