

KIND

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“IT’S ONLY temporary.” I repeated my morning mantra as I looked at myself in the mirror. Only until I got my degree and certification. Each day as I said it, I noted how little time remained.

“Two months left this semester, then the spring semester, and you’ll have your MS in athletic training. Then nobody can keep you from your dreams.” I told my face this all this aloud. It was part of the ritual. Actually, it was the only reason I looked in the mirror except to trim my beard. I hate looking at myself, in mirrors or display windows or photographs. It only reminds me how much I’m not my type. When I think of that, the next thought comes automatically: *and I’ll never be anybody’s type.*

What was “it”? Hiding my gayness, of course. I had to. I knew nobody was going to let me touch the bodies of young male college athletes if they knew. I didn’t like going back in the closet, but it was a strategic decision I made when I went back to school. It didn’t take even a week of listening to homophobic comments by the coaches to know I’d made the right decision. I was closer to Prof. Knutsen, who was not only teacher but mentor. He wasn’t a coach; he was the chairman of the physical education department and professor of athletic training. He didn’t act like a coach, but I had to assume he’d be with agree with the coaches. He was the nearest thing I had to a friend here on campus. I could tell he wanted to know me better, but I didn’t dare let him.

I didn’t originally plan to be an athletic trainer—though I admit I’d had coach/jock fantasies ever since I first discovered what that strange stiffness between my legs was all about. My undergrad degree was in vocal music, and I’d earned a teaching certificate. But when I graduated, schools were laying off music teachers. I knew I could keep doing music

without getting paid, but I needed to get paid for something. Athletic departments never seem to get cut. I'm not good enough at any sport to be a coach, but a trainer? Let's just say I've always been good with my hands.

So back to school I went. I was a grad student, so of course I had no money. I lived in the undergraduate athletic dorm, working as an RA and tutor. That got me a tuition waiver and room and board. I had zero privacy, but what did I need privacy for, back in the closet?

I'd worried that it would be hard being around all those fit athletic guys, the kind of man I always fantasize about. Besides, I'm young for a grad student—I went to college when I was only sixteen, so I'm basically the same age as some of the redshirt seniors. I'd also worried about how to establish some kind of authority over guys my age and more than my size. So I kept my distance. In fact, the whole situation reinforced my determination not to let on that I was interested in guys. It was only temporary, after all.

I had never done anything with a jock, even back in college, much less in high school. In fact, when I tried a couple of times in college—not here, back East—I quickly decided that even the hottest athlete wasn't really the kind of guy I could hang out with for more than about a half hour. Nothing to talk about. I know it's weird, but if I can't talk to a guy after we get our rocks off, then it's no good. I guess I'm just not cut out for casual sex. Call me a romantic. Blame it on all the opera I listen to.

Yeah, I get ribbed about that. I started out using headphones to listen, so the jocks wouldn't catch on. I've never considered my taste for opera quite manly, somehow. I quit with the headphones, figuring my musical choices would make me seem older. That's also why I grew a beard. Thank heaven I'm pretty hairy, so it came in looking okay.

Still, I hate being in the closet. Gay guys need role models, and even though I don't let anybody get away with homophobic remarks or hazing or anything—watching for that is my job as an RA, after all—I feel like a traitor. I seem to be a successful traitor, though. I've never yet had anybody come in and ask to talk to me about anything gay.

My mornings are taken up with classes. Then I have office hours for tutoring in the early afternoon until I have to get to the training room. I need to get there by three to set up and do the routine taping and so on. Then I sit in my cubicle and do homework unless somebody gets hurt or needs something. When practice is over, I check out any bumps and bruises, hand out ice packs, patch minor cuts, occasionally do some

massage, and then—the worst part—clean up the discarded tape and other junk the players of whatever team I'm working for at the time have left behind. I can do butterflies for split eyebrows and stuff like that, but I'm not allowed to stitch anybody yet.

This season my assignment was football. I was not all that thrilled. I had hoped for soccer players—they're a lot more interesting and intelligent, if the ones I know from the athletics dorm are any indication. But I probably won't be able to choose in the job market either, so I didn't complain. They're about to start up a pro lacrosse team in this city, I hear, and I did manage to get myself the lax guys—yum!—last spring. And I had hockey before that, which was not only educational but pleasurable. A little too pleasurable, in fact. It's not so easy for me to keep my distance with either hockey or lacrosse.

Besides, getting the football team was an honor that only goes to students who are almost ready to be certified. It's a rough enough sport, and you get serious enough injuries that you need to have plenty of experience and a good range of knowledge to snag the assignment. I demonstrated I had it last spring, with a lax player's particularly nasty broken and dislocated ankle. I also had great success—professionally only, of course—with the star of our hockey team, a couple of months earlier. A fast slap shot hit him squarely on the front of his skate, dislocating all his toes but the littlest one. I managed to get them all back in place swiftly, and with ice and a good strapping job kept the swelling down so he was able to play again—in some pain, true—the very next game. He was a hottie, and I'll admit here and now that I have a huge thing for guys' feet, so I had to do some quick maneuvering to keep him from seeing the tent in my pants. That and the lax players were close calls. Anyway, the coaches were impressed and grateful, as was the player, and after these two jobs I got the reputation of having a knack for dealing with dislocations. So I got the coveted football assignment, much to the annoyance of some classmates to whom I'd earlier confessed how little I cared for the sport or its players.

At least there was no chance I'd find any of the guys I worked on at all attractive. Too big and bulky. Okay, a few—the ones who eat healthy—have impressive physiques, but they're few and far between. Also, they seem to me to have little intellectual curiosity, much less that rebellious streak I find so attractive. It's a game that requires too much mechanical reaction to a situation. Not fluid, like rugby or lax. So, given that I'm not attracted to them, the danger of a repeat of the hockey or lacrosse player near-exposures was slim. All in all, it would be easy to

get through the season without my secret getting out. Or so I thought. For about three more minutes.

I was deep in the third volume of Michel Tremblay's *Chroniques du Plateau Mont-Royal* when all of a sudden I heard the most agonized screams of pain I could recall from my admittedly relatively short career. They were interspersed with some very inventive swearing. I jumped up from my desk and left my cubicle for the main training room. Two burly football players, still covered with mud, were carrying a third between them in a very efficient chair carry. The one they carried was letting out a string of obscenity I could only compare in both strength and color to the juicier bits in Chaucer. Certainly a higher quality of oath than what I would have expected from a football player. He never actually said, "Struth, thou poxy whoreson, canst thou not take more care?" but I figured it was coming any minute. He was still wearing his helmet, so I couldn't tell who he was, and I couldn't guess. I certainly wouldn't have expected such verbal inventiveness from any of the guys who came to me for tutoring and turned out not to know a noun from a verb, much less a dependent from an independent clause.

I put on my most clinical demeanor and asked the two healthy players to put their teammate on the nearest exam table and remove his helmet and pads. Turns out I had never seen this guy before. I would have remembered: he was stunningly handsome, if you like redheads, which I do. He had a splash of faint freckles that made my heart seize. That was true even, or rather especially, when I looked closer and saw that his nose was a little crooked and he had a scar over one eyebrow. Plainly not a player to protect himself, I gathered—if the amount of pain he was in now meant anything, he went all out even in practice. I like that in a man.

I couldn't see exactly where he was hurt at first. He was biting on his jersey, which his buddies had stripped off to remove his pads, and his eyes were closed, no doubt in hopes that would conceal the tears streaming down his cheeks. One of the other players volunteered, "He's fucked up his foot real bad, Doc"—a reply that got him an elbow from the other teammate. He hastily amended his report to, "Sorry, he's injured his foot real bad."

"Badly," I corrected without thinking, adding more pertinently, "Which one?" The patient, whom I still didn't recognize, although the other two looked vaguely familiar, took the jersey out and spoke for the first time, in a voice choked in pain. "Left."

“We tried to take his cleat off, but he wouldn’t even let us touch it,” said the bolder of his teammates.

“Splint,” said my patient, still having a hard time speaking clearly through tightly set jaws. “Arch.” I could almost hear his teeth grinding. “Never. Felt. Pain. Like this,” he added slowly.

“Well, I’m gonna have to get it off now. Probably with shears,” I said as impersonally as I could. I gathered what I needed to stabilize the injury as I spoke. Bones were probably broken, so I got an air cast and told the two companions to bring some ice. Then I asked my patient to tell me exactly what happened.

He was clear and succinct, though it took a while. “Stupid. Doing the ladder. Cleat caught in the dirt. Guy behind me... couldn’t stop... ran into me....”

A shuffling behind me suggested strongly that the shorter of the two who carried him in was that person. His buddy finished the story. “He went over top of his foot and fell sideways. We all heard it—it was sickening—*pop pop pop*, then a loud snap, and he threw up.”

Wordlessly the presumed culprit held out a large barrel of chemical ice packs, looking away from me as if I were going to have him hauled in for assault. Partly to reassure him, partly to keep up a patter to distract his injured teammate from what I was about to do next, I said, “Rough sport. Injuries are part of it.”

“If I’m gonna be hurt, I’d rather it was somehow more heroic than doing the ladder,” replied my patient, showing surprising wryness for a football player at any time, much less when he was in agony. (Okay, I’m telling this story as it happened—now I know it was completely in character.) Then he reached out and held my wrist, seeing I had the shears and was about to cut away his high-top cleat. “No. Take the laces out, loosen my shoe. I can handle the pain.”

I looked directly into his eyes and had to look away again. They were probing, a gorgeous shade of green, full of mental clarity and firmness. This guy meant what he said—no bluster, no arrogance, just determination. I was momentarily rocked back on my heels, almost physically. That look had struck deep into a part of me I hadn’t allowed access to since my undergrad years. I should have known then that I was falling, but I’d never believed in love at first sight. Silly me.

I quickly repaired my professional face before saying “If you say so” and starting to untie the laces on his left shoe. I noticed out of the corner of my eye that he stuffed his jersey in his mouth again. I forced

myself to focus on the knot in his laces and not to look at the pale, smooth, lightly freckled torso, well muscled but not bulky. (Okay, so I have good peripheral vision. Sue me.)

The wet and mud had managed to fuse the knot into an intractable mass. It didn't help that my heart rate seemed to have risen to approximately the same as during the last kick of the triathlon I had run a month earlier. My fingers never shake. Never. It was all I could do to keep from scolding myself. My sudden loss of professionalism would not convey confidence. I was pretty sure of the damage already, and if I was right, this was a more serious injury than I'd had to handle in all my training so far, even the ankle injury to the lax player last spring. As much to restore my own composure as to calm him, I said as casually as I could, "I don't think I've seen you in the athletic dorm before. What's your name?"

"Derek Bradford." He only took the jersey out of his mouth long enough to spit the two words out, then bit down again. My fumbling with the lace was plainly hurting him. The name stirred something, but I couldn't let my mind pursue it right now.

"What position do you play?"

Same drill with the jersey. "Wide receiv—" and he broke off with a groan as I tugged fruitlessly at the knotted lace. His foot was undoubtedly swelling, and the pressure would not only be making the pain worse but endangering his circulation, which I suddenly remembered might already be compromised.

I reached for the shears but reassured Derek, "Just for the laces. They're too wet." I snipped them all the way down, cursing myself inwardly for not doing so right away. Why was I so flustered? I had always impressed my instructors with my calmness under pressure—they had told me so. In fact, I had once overheard Prof. Knutsen tell a colleague, "Rod has ice in his veins. He's definitely a good technician, but I wish I could get him to pay a little more attention to the guys as people." I'd flushed, knowing he was right, and knowing too the reason: it was simply too risky for me to get chummy. I heard the other professor agree, "He's locked up like Fort Knox. Dunno how to get through to him." *Of course I am*, I wanted to say in my defense. *I'm fucking gay, and I know that's the kiss of death for any chance of a job working with athletes' bodies if I don't lock my feelings away.*

While I recalled this exchange, probably red as a beet with the memory, I got the laces out. The two players who'd brought Derek in

were sidling toward the door, unsure whether they should stay and help or return to practice. They had a little sotto-voce argument about it next to the door. *Typical football players—can't do anything unless they're told.* I decided to put them out of their indecision.

“Just one more thing, and then you can go back to practice and report to Coach,” I said briskly, my composure restored by attending to this new issue. “Come over and hold Derek tight while I take the shoe off. It’s gonna hurt like a son of a bitch, and he’ll need your help.” I spent more time giving instruction than necessary. I needed the time to work up enough coldness to cause Derek the unavoidable pain. Part of my brain noted my reluctance to hurt this man, something I hadn’t felt when reducing the hockey player’s dislocated toes. I was *not* falling for him.

The shoe came off with a pop like a cork from a bottle, forcing a deep moan and a lunge from Derek. It was a good thing his teammates were holding him, or he might have fallen off the table. I wasted no time in using the shears to cut away his sock, which was sodden through, fortunately with water from the rain and not with blood. There were no wounds, just a very swollen foot that didn’t look right. I snapped my fingers at the helper nearest me, held out my hand, and said, “Now the ice.”

They were both pale and obviously in a hurry to get away. I realized I was looking at something I’d been told about: a superstitious fear that somehow injury, like illness, was catching. Prof. Knutsen had given a lecture on it toward the end of the intro course. “One of the most overlooked collateral effects of serious athletic injury, especially in team sports, and more especially in those where there are more players than slots, is that even close buddies sometimes shy away from their injured teammates. It’s almost like the injured player is a jinx. The trainer needs to be aware of the psychological isolation that may result. It can have a negative effect on his healing time.” I certainly knew all about psychological isolation. But I couldn’t do anything about Derek’s without outing myself.

Once I had an ice pack on Derek’s foot, I told his teammates they could go. “What should we tell Coach?” one asked.

“Well, of course we need to have a doctor look at it, and get some X-rays, but given how the injury happened, I strongly suspect a Lisfranc injury. Tell Coach to send the team doctor in.”

A hush fell over the room as soon as the word “Lisfranc” was spoken. It lasted a full minute. Then the two healthy players fled. I looked up at Derek and saw deep worry lines between his fawn-colored eyebrows. But he said nothing. He still had the jersey in his mouth.

“I’m going to take your other shoe and sock off now, so I can get a good comparison. If it is a Lisfranc injury, immediate diagnosis makes a huge difference. Most of the horror stories you’ve heard are the result of thinking it’s a simple sprain, or overlooking the joint damage while treating broken bones because they’re more obvious on X-rays.” This was mostly true—true enough that I had no qualms about stretching the truth. It was more or less a direct quotation from my textbook, anyway. I continued this patter in the most soothing voice I could muster while I took the good shoe and sock off his uninjured foot.

It was a very handsome foot, if slightly bony, well arched, with long toes, the second toe just slightly longer than the big toe, the way I like it. I could see the way the bones at the top of the arch met. I hesitated to touch it for a couple of beats, and when I did, I was furious at myself to realize my cock was stirring in my shorts—baggy, thank God. I forced myself not to notice as I manipulated Derek’s toes and then his midfoot joints and finally the area around the ankle. I asked him to press down against my hand as I provided resistance at the ball of his foot. I couldn’t help noticing that Derek took better care of his feet than some athletes I knew. But then, a wide receiver needs his feet healthy to run. This was a serious injury for an athlete who depends on speed.

Next I gently took his injured right foot by the heel in one hand, supporting his toes with my other. Derek hissed sharply. I asked if he could move his toes. He did, slightly, but gagged and said, more calmly than I would have expected, “Yes. But it really hurts.”

My hard-on was growing, and I forced my mind to clinical details, ticking off the diagnostic points I’d memorized. His forefoot was somewhat to the side in comparison to the line of his shin and ankle, not like his other foot, making a convexity on the medial aspect. Dark bruising already suffused the entire arch on the plantar aspect. “Can you press my hand again?” He tried and retched; I’d seen almost no movement. I wrote all this down on my report sheet. That gave us both time to compose ourselves. “When you move it, where is the worst pain?” I asked.

“On top of my foot, a little in front of my ankle, and all the way across. It feels like two or three knives stabbing down from the highest point of my instep through my foot to my arch and radiating to my toes.”

It was the most naturally and easily he'd been able to speak so far. I thought I detected a tone almost of scientific curiosity. That was a good sign. Better than panic, anyway.

While holding Derek's still-swelling foot as stable as possible, I gently palpated the tarsometatarsal joints of his injured foot. Even a light touch made him stuff the jersey back in his mouth, muffling any cries. I did the same to the good foot and repeated it on the injured one. The joints were definitely disrupted.

"One more test," I said. "This is going to hurt a lot, but I'll do it quick. So you may want to keep biting down." He did so as I pressed upward on the metatarsal head at the base of each toe, starting with his big toe. Even that far down his foot, there was a lot of swelling. I was pretty sure my initial diagnosis was right. I said nothing, though, deciding it was the team doctor's job to break the bad news.

While waiting for him to arrive, I tried to distract Derek with innocuous questions. "I live in the athletic dorm, but I don't recall meeting you before."

"I live at home," he said shortly. "My father teaches English, and my mother teaches French." That spurred my memory: Derek's father was one of the most famous professors here, holding a named chair. He was an international expert in Chaucer and also the Middle English spiritual writers, and his theory about authorship of *The Cloud of Unknowing* had recently been the subject of a symposium on campus. No wonder the name Bradford had sounded familiar.

"I majored in French as an undergrad," I said, "along with music. I think I've met your mother at the weekly French table."

Derek volunteered that he wasn't on scholarship, since he had free tuition anyway as a faculty child. "I'm just a walk-on—well, now a crutch-on, I guess." With that remark, I knew I was in serious trouble. I could fall for a guy with a wit like that if I didn't watch out, even if he was a football player. My mouth was dry. I couldn't think of any more questions.

Fortunately the team doctor arrived soon. I gave him a succinct report, standing over by the door, out of Derek's hearing. Then he more or less repeated the exam I had given, making Derek moan this time, and nodded. "We'll need X-rays, of course, but Rod is almost certainly correct. Looks like a Lisfranc injury." He put the aircast on Rod's foot, adding as he did so, "I commend your observational and diagnostic skills. Even well-qualified physicians often miss this. You've managed

to shorten this young man's recovery by a lot. Let's get him to the emergency room. I'll go tell Coach I'm leaving and meet you there. You can take him, right?" And he left.

This was not good. Derek turned me on—that was bad enough. Now he was turning out to be witty and literate as well, not to mention the son of a faculty member with whom I was on good, if not close, terms. I wanted to flee in the other direction—there were too many cliffs along this path. All my alarm systems were clamoring for me to stay away.

Buy time, I told myself. "I'm going to get some crutches. I'll be right back," I told Derek. I knew exactly where I kept them, of course—I'm orderly when it comes to such matters—but I pretended to have to look, to gain time. I couldn't dream up any excuse to shirk this additional closeness. I brought the crutches out, concentrating on adjusting them to Derek's height. I started to explain how to use them, but Derek knew already. Throughout he maintained a surprising degree of calm, given how much pain he was surely in—especially upright with his foot hanging down—and how serious he surely knew the injury was. Just before he turned toward the door, I noticed him gazing a bit too lingeringly at me, an odd look in his eyes that seemed to have nothing to do with the business at hand. To avoid it, I turned to snag a new cold pack and some elastic bandages. Derek pivoted on the crutches and headed to the door, and I followed. Just as we reached it, he paused for a moment. Over his shoulder, still with the inexplicable look in his eyes, he said, "I'm glad it's you taking care of me, Mr. Benson. I know you'll be kind to me."

Kind? From a football player? An odd phrase, and I should have heard what he was saying beneath it. I missed the future tense too. I must have been thrown by the "Mister." I would have expected "Rod." What made him so formal and shy all of a sudden?

Driving him to the hospital for X-rays turned out to be just as awkward as I had feared. His big, muscular body next to me in the passenger seat took up almost more psychic space than physical. I got him seated and helped him prop up his foot, obviously hurting even worse by now, on the dashboard of my VW bug, which would have been uncomfortable for him even without an injury. As it was, his knee was almost touching his chin. For all the swelling and incipient bruising, I could still recognize the beauty of his long toes. That and his sheer physical nearness distracted me as I drove. I mentally scolded myself. *Not only is he in every way not your type, but he's fucking straight. Get a*

grip. Derek was my type, though. He was a redhead. He had beautiful toes. He was not in any way bulky, and definitely capable of conversation.

It took longer than it should have. There was heavy construction around the emergency room entrance. I tried to navigate it as smoothly as I could, but a VW's ride isn't tops at the best of times, and once when a rear tire went *kerchunk* off the edge of the broken pavement, I heard a suppressed groan, almost a growl, right next to (and well above) my ear. I glanced over quickly: his eyes were shut with tears leaking out, and his jaw was working so hard, I feared for his tooth enamel.

It was the tears that ruined me. I admit it: I'm a sucker for tough guys crying. I nearly wrecked the car as I concentrated on choking back my own tears. This beautiful—yes, at that moment I admitted to myself for the first time that he was beautiful—man, so self-contained, so invulnerable, was in pain. He needed care. He needed tenderness. He needed... *not* me, I told myself, blinking away my own wetness of eye. (Yes, I confess: I suddenly cut my eyes sideways to make sure his were still closed and he couldn't see my reaction.)

I've fallen hard for straight guys before. I know how stupid it is. You'll never be more than buddies. If he senses your true feelings, you won't even be that, which is like a knife in the gut. I've worked hard to learn detachment. I willed myself not to say anything, not to reach over and put my hand on his knee, which anyway was practically touching my shoulder. We were almost at the ER entrance, and Derek would be in somebody else's care and out of my life for good.

I had a little pang when I thought that. Fortunately it didn't last. Unfortunately, though, this struggle with myself caused me to stop paying attention to the pothole-ridden entrance, marked by traffic cones, and down we went again, harder this time. Derek screamed and retched and shoved his fist into his mouth to keep from vomiting from the pain. He didn't complain, though. Like a proper, straight football player, he displayed no weakness, no vulnerability, no need, not even any sense of my being so near him. He, at least, was indifferent.

Or maybe he was angry but had too much self-respect to let it show. Yes, that must be it. He had nothing but contempt for me. Probably he guessed I was gay. Maybe there was speculation in the dorm or on the teams. At the least I'm sure I would have been suspect: a real man didn't display the kind of caring, nurturing, healing qualities that came with my job, no matter how hard I tried to keep things cold and professional. Who knew? They might even be calling me "jock sniffer"

behind my back. Pathetic. Was that what he thought of me? Was that the word going through his mind right now? Pathetic?

We were pulling up to the entrance. I had to clear my throat twice when I tried to tell him I'd find a wheelchair and help him out of the car. "Sorry about how cramped it is—I hope your legs haven't gone numb."

I was actually startled to hear him reply—the first words out of his mouth the whole ride. "A little numbness would be a blessing right now." He tried to smile, and I let myself chuckle. It was a way of breaking the spell he had on me. I needed to break it, or I was doomed.

I fetched a wheelchair and set it up so he could shift into it, but he just sat there, his broken foot still resting on the dashboard. I looked at him and realized he wasn't sure how to untangle himself from the too-small seat, much less get out of the car and into the chair without putting any weight on his injured foot. It was up to me. I knew the drill, and I'd practiced it. But the thought of putting my hands on that muscular body made me cringe. I froze. Well, most of me froze. A very inconvenient heat was growing in my crotch.

That did it. If I didn't get this over with, I'd be so turned on he'd see, maybe even feel, my hard-on. That would be the worst kind of giveaway, not to mention proving how desperate I was for a man. It could even mean the end of my career at this university. The fear got me moving. I deftly shifted him into the chair, and the crisis was past.

Then came the real kicker. As I wheeled him in toward the admitting desk, he cleared his throat and said, as tentatively as a frightened six-year-old, "Will you wait with me? I'm... I'm sure it's going to be a while, and my foot hurts bad. I mean, I *really* bad. I need somebody to help take my mind off it." I could have sworn he'd been about to say *I'm scared*. He had reason to be. This kind of injury could be the end of his football-playing days.

I should have said yes right away. It was the responsible thing to do, the compassionate thing, and for that matter, the professional thing. What if they wanted to ask me questions? Instead, I was speechless. He just looked at me, pleading with his eyes. I had to look away. My mind raced to frame an excuse, any excuse. I couldn't. I mumbled something about parking the car and told him I'd return, but I knew I wouldn't. I fled.

I had never lied to a patient. I felt awful. But I was just too damned besotted. Why him? Why me? What was wrong with me? I put my head down on the steering wheel and took deep breaths. I had been repressing

my desire for men for months now. Even when I went home for holidays, I forced sex and need out of my mind, not to hide anything from my family—they had always been totally supportive of their gay son—but because I knew if I let down my guard, it would be too difficult to rebuild my defenses when I got back to school. That must be why this least likely of men had suddenly knocked me so far off-kilter. Maybe it was just because he was unlikely, because I never cared for football players, so I had let my guard down just long enough. He sure hadn't encouraged me. (That final little-boy plea replayed itself in my memory. I shut it off, quick.)

I could at least call his parents. They'd be here quickly, and they'd do him more good than I could. I called the university switchboard on my cell, got the numbers, and started with his mother's office. She was there. I identified myself, explained about Derek, and said I'd wait till they got there. I did wait—in my car in the lot. It could only have been five minutes before I saw Mme Bradford (as I know her, not that she's French) striding into the emergency entrance. I made my getaway.

THE NEXT day, Prof. Knutsen called me into his office. He told me my diagnosis had been correct and showed me a copy of the X-rays. Little did he know they were as good as porn for me. "Classic Lisfranc fracture-dislocation," he said. "First three metatarsals fractured, the second and third in two places, and complete dislocation of the medial and middle cuneiforms." He pointed to the film and discussed the findings, ending with, "You've done this young man a very good turn." He paused and took off his reading glasses. "The ER physician did wonder why you didn't stay long enough to answer his questions, however."

I mumbled something about being distracted by trying to get hold of his parents. I did not add, "And I was scared shitless he'd think I was coming on to him." Much less did I admit, even to myself, that I feared I really would come on to him.

"Don't worry, you'll remember next time. You should go visit him. He's asked for you. He's still in the hospital, by the way, and I think he's had very few teammates come by—at least from what Coach has not said," Prof. Knutsen added with the tone of dry disapproval I had sometimes heard him use before, when referring to the football coaching staff. He must have seen hesitation in my face. "It's important. Do it

today.” Then, as I opened my mouth— “I’ll find somebody to cover for your football shift this afternoon. You’re not indispensable yet, you know. You still have plenty to learn.” He gazed at me for a long moment, almost as if he expected another excuse. Then he swiveled his desk chair away from me. I was dismissed.

Outside the office door, my hands started shaking. I had a sick, panicky nausea. I couldn’t go see him. I couldn’t. Didn’t Prof. Knutsen realize that? *No*, I said to myself calmly, *why should he? He can’t know you’re queer for a member of the football team, and your patient to boot.* He’d be disgusted. *Worse, if you don’t go, he may guess.* Lesser of two evils. He would know whether I went or not, that was certain. He’d check; he was thorough. *Just get it over with*, I told myself, as sternly as I could manage.

ASIDE FROM his parents and three or four teammates who only stayed five minutes, nobody had visited Derek. As predicted, he was disappointed and bored, and despite the painkillers, hurting and scared. I apologized for not coming back in to wait for him. “I saw your mother going in and figured she’d be better company,” I ended lamely. He looked at me long and hard, saying nothing. Had she told him the call had come from me? Did he know I was lying like a rug? He changed the subject.

“Mr. Benson,” he began.

I stopped him with an upraised hand. “I’m probably exactly the same age as you,” I said. “Mister is silly. Call me Rod.”

“Okay.” He paused, then said, “Rod.” He seemed to be savoring the name. He paused again, gazing at me, then pulled himself together. “Rod—” He paused again, but almost imperceptibly. “—I’m going to need help when they release me. I usually bicycle from home to class, but it’s not that close to campus, and I don’t think I can crutch that far. My parents’ schedules and mine don’t match very well either. I know it’s way too much to ask, but since you live in the dorm, right there on campus... well, I’ll just ask, and you can say no. Can I stay with you till I can walk again? Please?”

I was speechless. This was the last thing I expected. He must have been afraid I was going to say no—and for all I know, I would have, although I have to say my mind hadn’t even moved to formulate an

answer either way—because he said again, “Please? I hope I haven’t crossed a line or something, but you just seem so... kind.”

Kind, again! How could Derek know exactly what word I would never be able to resist? Where had it come from? Not from the other football players, I was sure. How would they know? Even the ones I tutored hardly seemed to notice me.

Kind. That did it. I was a goner. “Yes, of course.” I managed to choke out the words. “But I think you’re giving me too much credit. I doubt anybody has ever called me kind before.”

“My mother says it about you all the time. Like you said, she knows you from La Table Française every Thursday. You don’t talk much, she says, but what you say is always... well, kind. Gentle. ‘Not what you’d expect from somebody in the athletic department,’ she says. My parents really don’t get why I play football,” he added, a touch sadly. “My father especially.”

That did it. Derek I might have resisted. Mme Bradford, never.

They let Derek out two days later. At first he had a huge soft cast on his foot, the hard cast going on once the swelling was down. We moved him into my apartment, where after a lot of Alphonse-and-Gaston business I installed him in my bed—“It’s a medical decision, not kindness,” I said sternly—while I slept on the couch. It was fine for me: I’m shorter than average, and Derek is the opposite. I brought him his homework for the first week or so, while he stayed enthroned in bed with his injured foot propped on a pile of pillows I’d scrounged from housekeeping. I served his meals in bed, which gave me a surprising amount of joy. As we ate, we learned more about each other, including Derek’s interest in literature and theater and spirituality. He stayed nearly a month, and I managed, by dint of the proverbial cold showers, not to climb into my bed next to him. Once, when I sat there next to him, I could have sworn he reached for my hand and started to hold it, then pulled back. That must have been my imagination, though. I’m sure he didn’t intend to court me, but he captured my heart anyway. I was a prisoner. I didn’t want to be free. Still, I knew that on his side, I was just being “kind.”

Between exercises for his upper body and thighs, homework, and some late-night shoot-the-shit sessions, we discovered a common interest in theater. He hadn’t spent much time listening to opera, but he loved Gilbert and Sullivan, as I did, especially *Iolanthe*, which had always moved me for its depiction of people who don’t fit in. He admitted he

loved it too, “Especially the line, ‘We are fairies down to the *feet!*’” Derek intoned it in an imitation of a plummy contralto—the line is delivered by the Queen of the Fairies. We listened to it several times and watched my DVD of *Rent* more than once.

I was surprised, a little, when he asked me to go with him the first time he tried crutching to class. It went against his usual independence—but then, he had seemed to come to need me in some way I couldn’t grasp. He was straight, after all; I was sure of that much. I carried his books in one hand, my briefcase in the other. We were in a corridor of the building where we both had a morning class, laughing over something one of us had just said about *Patience*, when we nearly knocked over Prof. Knutsen as we turned a corner. I instinctively put my hand on Derek’s lower back to steady him on his crutches. Prof. Knutsen saw the gesture, raised his eyebrows, and stepped aside gallantly. He said, “Sorry to interrupt whatever’s going on here,” and gave us a peculiar grin before waving us on.

MME AND Prof. Bradford insisted I join them for Thanksgiving. I looked forward to meeting Derek’s father. I had attended a couple sessions of the symposium on *The Cloud of Unknowing*, in which I had long had an interest—as did Derek, to my surprise. But then, I was learning the apple hadn’t fallen far from the tree—except that he had taken Japanese instead of French “so I wouldn’t have my mother for my teacher.” He would move back home that day—they were putting a walking cast on and had given Derek clearance to ride a bicycle. It would help him rebuild his weakened leg muscles. I should have been relieved, but I wasn’t.

After dinner, the Bradfords politely offered to let Derek and me watch the football game on television. I was resigned to doing that much for Derek. He suggested we do it in his room, since his parents weren’t the least bit interested. I agreed, not quite realizing that being in Derek’s bedroom at home would be much more intimate than being in my apartment, if only because his room was up under the eaves of the one-and-a-half-story arts and crafts bungalow, reached by a narrow, steep flight of steps. It was cramped even for one—had it been a maid’s room? When we got there, though, Derek made no move to turn on the television. We sat there awkwardly for a few minutes. Derek looked uncharacteristically morose. Finally, to break the silence, I said, more or

less at random, “You must be glad to be back at home in your own space again.” He only made a vague, noncommittal sound and looked even less happy. “I hope those steps aren’t too much for you on crutches. You get the walking cast tomorrow, right?” Still silence. I looked over at him, somewhat at a loss for what to say next. Why had he brought me up here, of all places? I’d have thought the living room, with chaperones, would have been more comfortable for him. Maybe that was exactly what he was thinking and regretted his suggestion.

After almost more silence than I could bear, he said, so quietly I could hardly hear, “Can I come back to stay with you?”

I said nothing. He looked away, as if embarrassed to have shown vulnerability. But the tension in his back and shoulders seemed somehow expectant, as if a lot hung on my saying yes or no.

Finally I cleared my throat and said, in as casual a tone as I could muster, “Is it the stairs?”

He didn’t turn. He didn’t move. After a full two minutes, I guessed, I saw a very imperceptible shake of the head. Another pause, and then faintly, shyly for his big muscular body, he answered, “No. Not that. I... I like it there.” Another, longer pause. “With you.”

Danger! Danger! went the alarm in my head. “Danger” meaning “exposure.” No. I was misinterpreting what he said, because I wanted it to mean something else. And even if it meant what I wanted it so much to mean, it was impossible. He was a student. I was—well, a student, but still, somebody in a position of authority. Or was I? I wasn’t his RA; I wasn’t his tutor; I wasn’t even his medical caregiver anymore. Well, I couldn’t sort that tangle out. It didn’t matter. It was just... dangerous.

Fear made me businesslike. Probably he was just experiencing a sudden lapse of confidence in his ability to be independent again. Probably some part of him was getting accustomed to being a patient and having his needs taken care of. No doubt the prospect of walking again was frightening. He had been told to expect a return of the pain for the first four or five days, at least.

I not only could refuse him, I should refuse him, for his own good, not for my selfish reasons. I was his trainer; his medical and psychological well-being were paramount. There was no personal significance to what he had said. There couldn’t be. He wasn’t like me.

I forced myself to be brisk. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Derek. It’ll just hold you back in your recovery. Even those stairs are part of

your rehab. You need to be thinking ahead, not letting fear of the pain get you down....”

He interrupted me with surprising bitterness. “The pain?” he said. “You think I’m afraid of pain? Physical pain is nothing to me. I’ve had plenty of that in my life. I’m in a fuckload of pain right this minute, and I’m sure I’ll have plenty more before I get old. You don’t understand anything. Nothing. For you, pain is something you only know from books.” He nearly spat the last words. He turned away.

I had never heard such contempt from him, not toward me, not toward anybody. I had been right after all, and I hated myself for it.

I stood and politely but firmly bade good-bye to his back, told him I’d make my farewells to his parents, and left. The Bradfords seemed mildly surprised but not particularly curious about my departure; at any rate they accepted whatever excuse I made up. Mme Bradford said something about seeing me next Thursday at French table, and I made a noncommittal answer. I could never go there again. I had to separate myself completely from Derek Bradford and everybody around him. Suddenly I felt a stab of ice: what if he told his parents, or football teammates, or his coach, that I had come on to him? He had seemed angry enough at me to do it. Well, all I could do was behave as if nothing had come between us, but avoid him. I had never met him before his injury; I could manage not to see him ever again.

I was shaking by the time I got to my car. I have no idea how I drove back to campus without an accident. Fortunately the holiday meant empty streets. I let myself into my apartment, headed directly for the bathroom, turned on the tap, and splashed cold water over my head. Then I vomited.

I AVOIDED Derek and his family until Christmas break. I hadn’t planned to go home for the holidays, but when I called my mother to tell her I’d changed my mind, she was as happy as I was glad to be away from the university. I was restless at home, though, so I cut the visit short and came back to a deserted campus. More than ever, I wanted to be left alone to earn my degree and leave. I went back to my ritual, “It’s only temporary,” every morning.

I didn’t even tell anybody I was on campus, although I did go to the weight room a few times and swam a few times. I had no invitations to New Year’s Eve parties. I was glad. There would only be straight

people there anyway, and I couldn't deal with straight people right then. I decided to go whole hog and have a wildly gay, if solitary, celebration to greet a new year I hoped would end this misery—a misery I pretended only came from having to be in the closet, not from missing Derek or knowing he didn't miss me. I dug out my DVD of the original French *La Cage Aux Folles*—so much better than the American adaptation—made some popcorn, and settled in for some laughs.

It was maybe fifteen minutes before midnight when the film ended, and I went to the kitchen to pull out my bottle of good cognac, which I only drink on special occasions and to greet the New Year. I have a lovely liqueur glass that was my grandmother's, an art deco treasure, and I poured a finger of the dark amber liquid. Just then my phone rang. My mother, no doubt.

I didn't even check to see who it was from. My single "Yes?" was greeted by a torrent of slurred drunken words from a voice I didn't recognize. I was about to sign off when I suddenly realized it was Derek.

It took me some time to get sense out of his tirade. Derek was abusing me in the most cutting, hate-filled terms I had ever had thrown at me. I was too stunned even to stop listening; I just stood there with the phone at my ear. As I got more accustomed to the voice on the other end of the line, so different from Derek's usual measured, ironic tone and yet so decidedly nobody else's, I realized this wasn't just the hate speech of a homophobe. It was worse: it was telling me the truth. Jack Nicholson's voice came into my mind unbidden: "You can't handle the truth." And I couldn't.

I can't now remember his exact words, although I remember pretty much everything else Derek ever said to me, but the gist was that I was a heartless prick with ice water in my veins. The son of the Chaucer scholar put it much more inventively than that, which made me think of how I had first heard that voice swearing like the Wife of Bath in pain and anger at his broken and dislocated foot. I had toyed with his emotions; I was a liar and a fake; I only pretended to care for him to make myself look good to Prof. Knutsen so I'd get a good job recommendation; I was a menace to any sports team or university that hired me; I didn't give a fuck about any other person except myself; I had seen him in pain, terrible pain, and more than that, I had seen him at his weakest and most frightened, worried he'd never walk again without pain, much less play football, but I hadn't given a flying fuck. I was no better than the rest of the team and the coach who had abandoned him

once he was injured and out of action. There was more too. After a while, I could hear Derek crying. I hung up.

I poured two more fingers of brandy into the antique glass, downed them instead of sipping, filled it again, and downed that. My hands were shaking at the amount of hatred just thrown at me. No. Even then I knew my hands were shaking because everything Derek had said was true, and I deserved to be forced to hear it. I lifted the glass to drain the last little bit of brandy. It fell to the floor and shattered.

FOUR DAYS later, I went to Prof. Knutsen's office for our regular start-of-season conference. I was eager to find out what team I'd be working with that semester. I wanted to put football behind me. I wasn't prepared for what I heard.

To my dismay, after I hung up on him, Derek decided to call Prof. Knutsen to complain about my coldness, my lack of concern, and my utter neglect of him just as he needed my help with rehab when he got off crutches. An explanation was owed, and now.

"I have always said, even when you're not around, that you have a startling talent for diagnosis and for finding effective *physical*—" Prof. Knutsen paused and looked directly into my eyes. "—treatment of players' injuries. But I have always been concerned about your... detachment. I believe I have mentioned this to you before. An awareness of an injured athlete's psychological needs is as much part of this art, for it is an art, as purely physical awareness and technical skill. You have never really been able to show me that you can acquire that psychological insight, or even have an interest in doing so. Mr. Bradford's complaint merely confirmed my fears. I now have serious doubts whether you are really qualified to become an athletic trainer. It didn't matter to me when I brought you into the program that you hadn't played any team or competitive sports yourself. I thought I saw in you a quick intelligence that would make up for that. Now I don't know what to think. Can you offer me any insight?"

I wasn't sure at first whether this was a rhetorical question or a real one. As I sat, trying to figure out what to say or do, he just kept his noncommittal gaze leveled at me, until I decided he did want an answer. I felt sick to my stomach. I knew exactly why I'd behaved the way I did, not only with Derek but in general. But how could I tell him? It would

mean the end. I'd be washed out of the program before the clock ticked off five more minutes.

To my surprise, when he next spoke, Prof. Knutsen's tone was almost tender and slightly sorrowful. "I want you to succeed. You do know that, don't you?"

Then, with a sensation like a too-rapid elevator ascent, I realized if I didn't explain, I was washed out anyway. Hiding wouldn't help me. All my careful planning suddenly crumbled like a wall with rotten mortar. I sat, not sure what I could do to save myself.

Suddenly the long-pent-up anger rose in me. I was going to be gone in a few minutes anyway; I could at least recover some dignity by being honest about who I was. I assumed it meant I would be out of the program, but there were other programs. If I said nothing and left him thinking I was some kind of robot, he would see me as a danger to my athletes, and it really would be the end. I forced myself to sit silent a half minute longer, ordering my thoughts and calming myself so my anger wouldn't be plain.

"Sir, I can only say it's a matter of survival." He raised his eyebrows—I think I had surprised him, which I already knew wasn't easy. "You see, sir, I'm gay. I didn't tell you, because I knew you would think I was only studying athletic training to get my hands on hot men. I had to go back in the closet, but it was worth it to me to be in this program. The longer I studied and practiced, the more worth it to me it became. I love this work, more than I expected. But you can see that in order to keep rumors away, I have to be as controlled and detached as I can manage. If that comes off as cold and unfeeling, I'm sorry. I just don't see any other way. Now that I've told you, I probably should resign from the program."

He didn't reply for a long while. Later I came to realize this was a mark of his respect for me, a way of showing he took my words seriously. For now, I just congratulated myself that I hadn't let my anger show, or my fear.

When he finally broke his silence, it was to go in a different direction from the one I expected. He made no comment on my keeping this from him. Instead he said, "Now we're getting somewhere. You do know, after all, what it is to be hurting and afraid to speak. That is what Derek is going through too. Athletes don't want their coaches to find out they're scared of not being able to play, or at least of losing some vital speed or flexibility that will harm their futures. That's a bond you can

use in your work. You don't have to tell them anything about yourself to let them know you understand. As long as you are aware of that bond with your patients, you'll be a better therapist. Besides—" Here he paused, passed his large strong hand over his face, and let the silence grow for at least a full minute. When he took his hand away, he was looking into the distance as if remembering something from his past. He took up the sentence. "Besides, you and these athletes are a new generation. Probably they won't care whether you're gay or not. Probably some of them are, although they'd never let on to me, any more than you did, not that I haven't wondered since I saw you with Derek that day. Certainly plenty have family or friends who are. My point is this: unless you can be yourself, you will be too distant to help anybody with the hardest part of being an injured athlete. Young bodies are fit and resilient; they heal quickly. Their minds are a different story. Their emotions can still frighten them. I'll think a bit more about which team will best teach you how to deal with that. Technical skills you have, in abundance. This is all you have left to learn. And it will require you to be free inside yourself. And with Derek. He wouldn't have called me if he weren't hurting from your rejection. He cares for you, and you know it, don't you?"

I started to say something, to thank him at least, but he cut me off. "In the meantime, here's your first assignment. Go to Derek Bradford, explain to him what you just told me, and apologize." He must have seen that I blanched and was about to open my mouth to protest. He held up a hand. "That's not a request, it's an assignment, and I will ask Derek to grade you on it. You have forty-eight hours."

I just stood there. This was worse than being thrown out of the program. I couldn't even make a move toward leaving. He didn't turn away. He gazed at me. Again there was something almost fatherly in his eyes. After more silence, he added in a very quiet voice, "You love him, don't you? You should tell him that. He wants to hear it." He swiveled his chair away from me. Loosed from his gaze, I fled.

I took almost all my forty-eight hours to figure out what to say and how and where to say it. I ignored the part about telling Derek I loved him. I didn't love him, and even if I did, I couldn't tell him, because there was no way he felt the same. I decided on the pretext of bringing Mme Bradford a small *gâteau des Rois* on Epiphany. I found it calmed me to make the cake. I used most of the rest of the cognac in it. The last of it went directly down my gullet.

I was lucky; Mme Bradford answered the door, and I gave her my cheeriest “Bonne Année!” as I held out the plate. “*Gâteau des Rois*,” I added to cover my embarrassment. If Madame was surprised, she was too Gallic to offer anything but a cordial welcome. She invited me in for tea, and I followed her into the kitchen. We chatted in French about our respective holidays while she made the tea and brought out the remains of a *bûche de Noël*. She set out two teacups and silver spoons, two plates and forks, turned to see how the tea was progressing, then surprised me by crying loudly, “Derek! *Viens ici! Il est venu enfin, comme j’ai prévue!*” A muffled voice responded. She shouted again, in English, “Just come down.” Then she left me alone. I heard an uneven clump on the back stairs: Derek in his walking cast.

He stopped when he saw me, two or three steps from the bottom. Heat spread through my face. Embarrassment, I told myself. Now, looking back, I’ll acknowledge that I was also noticing, not for the first time but for the fullest time, how intensely handsome Derek is. I know it’s a cliché, but he seemed to have a nimbus—which I quickly realized may have had something to do with the light coming through the small stained-glass window on the landing above him.

I opened my mouth to speak my prepared piece, then closed it. All I could do was look at him. I opened my mouth once more, but he clumped down the last steps, stood before me—still a head taller, even on equal ground—and said, “Don’t say anything.”

He fell silent as well. Then, “Prof. Knutsen told me to expect you.”
“Here I am.”

“He also told me to call him if you didn’t come by the end of today.”

“He gave me a deadline. I... I would have been too ashamed to come, actually.”

“Ashamed? What for?”

“I treated you badly at Thanksgiving.”

“No, you treated me honestly.” He put his finger on my lips. “Don’t say anything. When Prof. Knutsen said you were coming, I was angry. I tried to figure out how to tell you off for disappearing. You were the only one who never disappeared. Did you know Coach only called once to see how I was doing? He’s never come to see me. When I run into teammates, they say something banal and hurry away. I guess they think a broken foot is catching. But you never did, until Thanksgiving. I didn’t get it at first. It seemed so sudden. When I thought about it,

though, how could you know? I was getting my walking cast, so it would be natural you'd think your job was over, even that you shouldn't coddle me anymore.... No"—again he stopped me from replying—"it was the kick in the pants I needed. It made me think about my future in football too. I realized I was so frightened about whether I'd play again, and when I faced that fear, I realized it didn't matter if I didn't. I'm a senior, after all. I wouldn't have played again anyway, probably. It's not like I'm going pro. So I'm grateful, even though it took me a while to get there."

I forced myself to say the only part of my prepared speech I could still remember. "Can you forgive me?"

"No," he said, and my face must have shown my pain. He explained, "You haven't done anything wrong."

"I have. I was cold and unfeeling. Even if it turned out all right, I handled it all wrong. That's what Prof. Knutsen sent me here to tell you. He was disappointed in me. Still is, I guess," I added more faintly.

"I'm not," Derek said. "It hurt at first, but that's the other thing I realized later. You didn't have full information, and that's because I never told you something you had a right to know." He paused and licked his lips, looked aside momentarily, then drew himself up tall. "I fell in love with you. When I was staying with you. Maybe even when you were examining me. Like I said, you were—are—so... kind. I never got that from my teammates. I guess they could sense I was different from them." He saw me start to speak and mistook it for protest. "Let me finish. I prepared all this when I knew you were coming over." He took a deep breath. "I realize you're straight. I don't know if you guessed I'm gay. If you did, you behaved like a perfect gentleman, just as I'd expect. I don't know if you'd have let me stay if you knew, but I guess I figure you aren't the kind of person to be prejudiced...." He trailed off. I thought he had more to say but just couldn't make himself say it.

"You're wrong," I put in, then saw from the hurt in his eyes that he'd misunderstood. "Wrong about me, I mean. I'm gay too. I didn't guess about you. I was afraid you'd think I was going to take unfair advantage. You... you're very handsome." Then all I didn't dare say before about my fear of exposure came pouring out, how I had decided I had to be in the closet to get my degree, how difficult it was being around him and being tender to him without outing myself. I ran out of things to say and just stood there for a long moment. Then, "I was very... happy... taking care of you."

Derek seemed to need a minute or two to take that in. Then he gave a wry grin and said, “Well, I still need you to. I hear all physical therapists are sadists. Only you can get me through that.”

We looked at each other, neither willing to say more, both knowing there was more to say. Derek, as usual, found words first. “One more thing. I didn’t get to give you your Christmas present. Wait here.” He clumped back up the steps—I could see it still hurt him to put weight on his broken foot—and was gone for a good five minutes. Had he hidden it because it was too painful to know I would never get it? He returned holding one hand behind his back, then brought out a small flat package. “It’s a play. I remembered we talked about both liking Greek tragedy and opera once. This one seemed appropriate. Go ahead, open it. It’s Three Kings’ Day.”

“I don’t have anything. Except the cake I brought.”

As if on cue—was she listening?—Mme Bradford called, “The tea’s getting cold!”

Derek smiled. “I guess we’d better go have some cake, then. Besides, my foot’s really starting to hurt a lot. I can’t really stand on it for too long yet.”

At the white enamel kitchen table, Madame poured, but refused to cut my cake. “Finish the *bûche* instead,” she instructed us and left us alone. We each sipped tea, but I couldn’t think of eating anything. I felt faintly nauseated. I noticed Derek ate nothing either. Pain or nerves?

Finally he nodded at the package lying by my elbow. “Open it,” he said again.

I did. Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*. The tragedy of an Achaean hero at Troy, wounded in the foot and abandoned by his comrades on a desert island. Derek knew his dramatic literature, all right.

“I’ve never read this one,” I said, “but I’ve heard of it.”

“Read it. You’ll understand.”

I gazed at Derek, almost faint with his beauty. I tried to speak, couldn’t, cleared my throat, and said, “I do have a present for you, I think. I hope you like it.”

Derek looked puzzled. I was suddenly paralyzed by fear. *Now or never.*

I stood, leaned across the table, and kissed Derek on the cheek. He didn’t move or speak. It was too late to take it back. For some silly reason, a cheery snatch of music from Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Iolanthe*

shot into my head. I suppressed it. “I love you, Derek. That’s why I was afraid. That’s why I left.”

Such a low, small voice from so large a body. “Me?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the first time anybody ever said that, besides my parents,” he said, as if to nobody in particular. “And I’m twenty-two years old.”

I turned away. It was hopeless. I’d gone too far. Again.

“Where are you going?” he said, now in his normal voice. He reached across the table, turned me around, and kissed me on the mouth.

When we eventually parted, I was astonished to hear Derek sing, in a quavery tenor, “In for a penny, in for a pound/’Tis love that makes the world go round.” *Iolanthe*.

“‘Faint heart never won fair... wide receiver’?” I sang back, mauling the meter.

Derek grinned and called, “*Maman! C’est tout fait, j’habite chez Rod à partir de ce soir, comme vous avez dit.*”

“I understood that,” I said. “I’ll need to change the sheets if you’re going to be sleeping in my bed tonight.”

“She knew it all along, you realize. Also that it would work out just fine.”

“*Oui, Madame, c’est ça!*” I called.

“*Donc*, M Benson, I’ll expect you to start coming to French table again,” she called back. “And you’ll join us for dinner tonight, and we’ll cut your king cake. And both of you will have Sunday dinner here every week without fail.” It was her blessing.

“I never knew you could sing,” I said.

“I’m going to have to sign up for lessons. I already changed my major to theater. My father is so happy. But I’ll have to stay an extra year. ‘Well, we can afford one year of college for you, I guess,’ he said. I’ll never be an opera singer, wrong voice for it. But maybe musicals?”

OH, AND the team I was assigned to for the spring? Fencing. Psychos, every one of them.

Need author bio.