

Story of Scars



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THICK, tanned fingers encased in worn black leather gloves curled around the handle of the cane. The cane itself was three feet tall and carved from pure ebony. Despite its glossy sheen, it wasn't a fashion statement or an affectation. If only it were....

Derek Morrison moved slowly down the hallway outside his apartment, ignoring the hideous brown carpeting and peeling beige paint. Sighing, he stopped to stab the button for the elevator, which was just about the only thing that always worked in his new building. In the old one—well, there was no use dwelling on better times.

The dented metal doors parted with a ding, revealing the elevator's only occupant: an elderly woman with curlers still in her hair, a pink robe, and a basket of clothes at her feet. "Going down, dearie?"

"Yes, ma'am." Derek shuffled into the elevator and leaned against the wall; anything that helped take the weight and pressure off his right leg was a good thing. It still burned like hell from physical therapy the day before.

Mrs. Jenkins smiled at him and patted her gray hair, red lips widening in a smile. "What floor?" she asked, one wrinkled finger poised near the row of buttons.

"First, ma'am."

Her finger pressed the button for the first floor. "Such a nice young man," Mrs. Jenkins said. She didn't stare at his leg, even though she was curious about what had happened. Her Henry had been in the Vietnam War, and she knew all about how touchy men got when they thought something was wrong with them.

Derek didn't say anything in response; he hadn't felt much like talking in weeks now—not since his entire way of life had been destroyed because of someone else's rookie mistake. He stared at the metal doors and carefully kept his eyes away from his distorted reflection. Derek didn't need any reminders that he was no longer whole, that everything had changed. The cane was a constant reminder of that.

"And one," Mrs. Jenkins said moments before the number lit up and the doors dinged open. She watched Derek step carefully off the elevator and squashed the worry that welled inside. He was a grown man, and she wasn't his mother. That didn't stop her from saying, "You be safe, young man." She was, after all, the perfect neighbor—even if they didn't live on the same floor.

Glancing back over his shoulder, stubble brushing the comfortable black leather jacket, Derek nodded. "I will, ma'am," he said, even though he was thinking *It's already much too late for that*. He tightened his grip on the cane and began moving forward, pretending he couldn't feel the intermittent stabs of pain burning along his nerve endings. Self-pity wasn't going to get him anywhere.

The glass doors leading out of the secure apartment building were twenty-three steps away; by the time he reached them, he felt like he had run a mile. The comparison made him sigh bitterly, because that was something else he would never be able to do again.

"Damn it, Derek. O'Callaghan's is only three blocks away. You can make it," he muttered to himself.

Derek had moved into this apartment building less than a month ago, when the doctors had finally released him after a much-too-long stay in the hospital; he loathed being caged in, and three months of that had been more than enough. It didn't have any stairs leading into the building, which was why he had chosen it. He had told his friend Jake when they went apartment hunting together, "Stairs and I don't get along anymore."

Jake hadn't laughed, and Derek didn't blame him. It wasn't really all that funny. A woman in a blue sweater was walking her dog—one of those infernally yappy things that

resembled a mop more than a living creature. “Boo, quiet. Don’t bother the cripple.”

A few months ago, she was the type of woman who would have gladly crawled into his bed, and now he was “the cripple.” Derek bit his cheek and kept walking. As much as he would have liked to refute the statement, he couldn’t.

A taxi turned the corner and came up behind Derek. The driver was an obese man with three chins and a massive black mustache. He rolled down the passenger side window and yelled, “Hey, buddy, can I give you a lift?”

Derek shook his head. “No thanks, man.”

“You sure?” the driver asked. “It’s free.”

“I—” Derek stared down the road; the sidewalk was cracked, grass and weeds shooting up through it in places. The block seemed interminably long, and there would be two more after—not to mention traffic lights, people rushing about, and the like. “You sure?” he asked, weighing the pain of hobbling all that way against having to get up after sitting down.

Terry, the taxi driver, nodded. “‘Course I’m sure, buddy. Go ahead, get in.” He gestured to the backseat, mustache quivering as if it were alive.

“Thank you.” Derek shuffled over and opened the back door, grateful that he had his gloves on. The door handle felt vaguely sticky; he didn’t want to imagine why. Solving puzzles and investigating the truth wasn’t his job anymore.

Turning, Derek sat on the backseat. He lifted his left leg inside, put the cane next to him on the seat, and then wrapped his hands around his knee to lift his right leg into the cab. Stinging pain shot through him, as expected. Once his boot-clad foot was on the matted floor, he swung the door shut.

“Where to, buddy?” Terry asked.

“O’Callaghan’s.”

“That’s not far at all. It’ll take me but a minute.”

The inside of the taxi smelled of beer, sweat, and stale perfume; it wasn’t a pleasant combination. The roads were in better condition than the sidewalk, though, and Derek’s minimal nausea didn’t turn into projectile vomiting.

They didn’t hit a single red light along the way, which was better than Derek could’ve hoped for on foot. Less than two minutes later, the cab pulled to the curb. “O’Callaghan’s Pub, buddy. Here you go.”

“Thank you,” Derek said as he opened the door and carefully got to his feet. The sharp, stabbing pain meant it took him longer than the cab ride to get back out of the car. Terry didn’t complain once, though. Derek closed the car door and slapped the top of the cab.

Terry grinned, jowls swinging, and then peeled back into traffic. He violated two traffic laws doing so, but Derek didn’t care. It wasn’t his job to care, not anymore.

Derek tilted his head and stared up at the pub’s sign. It was a dark green with silver lettering, blood dripping from the bottom of each L. He had been a rookie when his first partner, Anderson, brought him here for a beer after work. Anderson said alcohol was the blood of the Irish, hence the sign. Somehow, Derek didn’t think it was that simple.

O’Callaghan’s had been his bar of choice for the past decade... and he had never been afraid to go inside it before. However, he hadn’t been able to come in well over a year thanks to an in-depth undercover and infiltration assignment, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to return like this.

The large brass bells tied to the inside of the door jangled, and he stared up into brown eyes. A man held the door open, his hair almost identical in shade to his eyes. A briefcase hung from his left hand, and he tapped his foot impatiently as he stared at Derek. “Well, man, are you coming in or not?”

When it appeared that his good deed for the day was unwanted, he huffed and stalked out. People were so ungrateful these days.

“Stop wallowing, damn it!” Derek berated himself.

Determinedly, Derek stepped forward, the bottom of his cane grinding against the sidewalk. If his hand shook when he reached for the door handle, well, that was because of the pain. Black-gloved fingers hooked through the handle and pulled the door open, sending the bells clinking and clattering.

It hadn’t changed at all, not one bit. The tables were still in the same place, scarred and scuffed from more than one bar fight over the years. The oak chairs and stools were littered about with no semblance of order.

Three pool tables with smooth green felt lined the left half of the room, a rack of pool cues hanging on the wall behind them. The loud smack of balls crashing together echoed through the room, as did raucous laughter. A wad of cash rested on the edge of the table: bets. Already topping three hundred dollars, and it wasn’t even ten yet.

A woman with curly red hair and stiletto heels sat at the end of the bar. Her makeup wasn’t overdone, and she didn’t look sleazy, but that wouldn’t fool anyone. She was a prostitute. No amount of makeup could hide the bleak and desperate look in her eyes.

When she spotted Derek, she flinched. Her lacquered red nails curled around the clutch purse in her possession, and she got to her feet. Terror raced through her, because she couldn’t afford a record—not if she was going to keep food on the table for her kids. She held in her breath as she slid past him, only breathing a sigh of relief when he made no move to stop her.

Derek glanced back at her once and then hobbled a few steps forward. A college kid with wire-rimmed glasses looked up from his laptop, which he had been pecking away at (thesis papers were a major pain), and grinned. “Hey, Detective Morrison!” He shot to his feet, upsetting his chair and attracting the attention of everyone else in the room. “Welcome back! I haven’t seen you here in... say, how long has it been?”

“One year, five months, and twelve days,” said Steven Grange from where he sat leaning back in his chair. He knew others couldn’t understand how he kept it from toppling over, but it was just a simple matter of weight distribution.

“That right, Steve?” Larry Grange chewed on a handful of peanuts. “You sure it’s been that long?”

“Course he is,” Robert, one of the pool players, said. “That’s the night Detective Morrison got the high score at darts. It’s still up on the board.” He pointed at the chalkboard next to the dartboard, which proudly declared Derek was still the reigning champion at O’Callaghan’s.

Clayton, the college kid, stepped away from his table. He smoothed his hands down his pinstriped shirt and then offered one to Derek. “I read in the paper that you got shot.”

The white-hot flash of pain and screaming voices returned as if it had happened yesterday, not just over twelve weeks ago. “Yeah,” Derek said gruffly as he moved his cane to his left hand and shook Clayton’s hand.

“Was it in the leg? Is that why you have a cane, Detective Morrison?” Clayton perused Derek from head to foot. He was skinnier than he had been the last time they talked, but he would bet getting shot was like a crash diet. “You know, it’s kind of dashing. The cane, I mean. I bet it’s great for picking up —”

“It’s Derek.”

Clayton floundered for a moment. Detective Morrison was always nice and never interrupted anyone. “Pardon?”

Derek switched his cane back to his right hand and leaned more of his weight on it. “It’s Derek now.

"I'm not a detective anymore."

"What do you mean you're not a detective anymore?" asked Larry.

"Well he got shot, didn't he?" Steven rolled his eyes at his brother as if he were a child too slow to figure out the obvious. "He'd just mess up the crime scenes hobbling around, wouldn't he?" The moment the words left his mouth, Steven called himself all kinds of an idiot. "Didn't mean that Detective—Derek."

"Sure you did." Derek shrugged and carefully maneuvered around Clayton, who stood stock still in the middle of the entranceway.

Robert glanced up from lining up for his final shot. This game was in the bag, and the money was his; the newbie just didn't know that yet. "It true?" he asked, unable to keep the question to himself. It had never been in the paper, but his sources were damn accurate.

Derek sighed but kept walking toward the stool at the bar with his name on it. "Is what true?"

"That a rookie cop shot you?"

The question bludgeoned him like blunt force trauma; Derek stumbled, barely catching himself with the cane before he tumbled to the floor. He didn't ask where Robert had heard that, because Robert seemed to hear just about everything—damn vendors. He swallowed, throat drier than the Gobi Desert. "Yeah," Derek said, "it's true."

"That stupid, little punk! I oughta—"

"Pop a cap in his ass and see how he—"

"Better've fired the little shit!"

"Got an address, Detective Morrison? I'd be happy to slash his tires and key his car for you."

"Enough!" Every eye in the room shot upward to the landing at the top of the stairs. The door that had previously been closed now stood wide open. The letters on the glass read *Ian O'Callaghan: Owner*. Ian shoved a hand through his reddish-gold hair and narrowed his green eyes at everyone. "Leave Derek alone."

The furor calmed to quiet grumbling but didn't cease altogether. Most of the people who came to O'Callaghan's were lonely, without family, and had adopted the other regulars. Derek Morrison was part of their family, and they wouldn't let something like that slide.

If the higher-ups hadn't done their damndest to keep his real name out of the newspaper until a detective from another precinct got the information Derek had been closing in on, he knew that most of the men in the pub would've flooded his hospital room en masse. Only they would've brought licorice and hamburgers instead of flowers and balloons.

Derek understood why the Chief of Police had made that decision, though. In his line of work, anonymity was everything. If his real name and occupation appeared in the morning paper, other officers would've been in danger. The ringleaders would've gotten twitchy and overly suspicious, as always happened in such cases.

The true story—featuring his real identity—had made headlines about a week after he finally escaped from the hospital.

The guys at O'Callaghan's were accustomed to his random absences, but this past one had been the longest, and he hadn't come home whole.

Ian stared down at Derek, who moved as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders (or as if he had lost a job he loved, Ian thought), and closed his office door. He strode down the staircase and wended his way through the tables before sliding behind the bar. "I've got this one, Patrick," he said to his bartender. "You take care of the others."

Derek tore his eyes away from the woman four stools down who was smoking an illegal cigar.

Two years ago he would have been obligated to report it, but now he didn't care; if she wanted to kill herself, that was her decision.

Ian had fewer freckles than Derek remembered, but then, it was early March, so Ian couldn't have been spending as much time outdoors as he normally did. For the first time, he let himself admire them and the man who owned them. Ian took good care of himself, and it showed: flat stomach, muscled arms, white teeth. "Hey."

"Hey." Ian clapped his left shoulder and then turned and rummaged behind the counter. He set a small, closed bag of pretzels on the counter. "That'll tide you over while I get some food for you." He didn't give Derek a chance to object before walking through swinging doors and into the kitchen.

"Still the same old Ian," Derek said as he tore open the bag of pretzels. He hooked the handle of his cane around one of the bars on the stool and then peeled off his gloves and stuffed them in his jacket pocket. His shoulders hunched as he used his thumbnail to flick the grains of salt onto the bartop.

Derek might have first come here because of his old partner, but that wasn't why he had kept coming back. Ian, even back in his early twenties after he inherited the bar from his old man, was vibrant and attractive. Being seen with a man wouldn't have done Derek any favors, though, so he had stuck to the side of his sexuality that preferred female company.

The first year or so, Ian had shown some interest in him, but that had tapered off and then died once Derek never returned it. Now that he could, well... he doubted that Ian O'Callaghan would be interested in bedding a cripple. Men and women would and did grovel for a chance to grace his sheets—all of them whole and beautiful.

A glass landed before him, and Derek flinched, pissed that he had gotten so distracted; he might not be a cop anymore, but he should've been aware that someone was so close to him. It took a moment to process the contents of the clear glass. "Water?" He raised a sardonic eyebrow at Ian.

"What, you think I'm going to give you booze when you're recovering from a gunshot wound? Antibiotics and liquor don't mix, my friend, and I won't be responsible for finishing the rookie's mistake." His lips stretched in a mulish line. He had never been one to dance around the truth, and he wasn't going to start now. Derek didn't need anyone else to coddle him; he needed someone to treat him like nothing was different, even though everything had changed.

Ignoring the loudly indrawn breaths that sounded behind him following Ian's words, Derek smiled grudgingly and popped a pretzel into his mouth. He crunched it, smirking when Ian twitched.

"Don't I get a thank you?" asked Ian as he crossed his arms over his chest. When the businessman at the nearest table opened his mouth, clearly prepared to chew Ian out for his tone and words, Ian narrowed his eyes on the man until it snapped shut. He knew what Derek needed better than a random stranger did.

Derek tossed another pretzel in his mouth and talked around it. "Thank you so much for the free water, Ian. I'm deeply grateful." Sarcasm dripped off the words and puddled on the bartop. "Who said the water was free?"

Startled, Derek blinked, and then his lips curled into a smile and he laughed. He laughed until he started choking on the pretzel pieces and had to chug half the glass of water. Ian had said the same thing the first day they met, almost convincing Derek's rookie self that O'Callaghan's charged one dollar for every glass of water.

"Your menu." Derek pointed to the chalkboard, where water was listed as "Free" in red chalk under the word "Beverages."

Grinning, Ian leaned his elbows on the bar and rested his chin in his hand. "Yeah, so? I seem to

remember you got more than one free beer over the years, and the menu contradicts that too.”

Derek leaned against the stool’s back, arms spread wide and cheeks dimpling with his grin. “What can I say, the owner of this place seems to like me.” Ian’s eyes flashed with desire for just a moment before it was snuffed out.

“That so?” Ian asked. It was true, of course, but he had long since learned that Derek couldn’t return his feelings. Policemen didn’t look too kindly on their fellow officers who liked fucking and getting fucked by other men. Months of light flirting with no response had taught him to keep his hands and words to himself, no matter where his thoughts trolled.

“Yeah, that’s so.”

“Well, all right then.”

Derek floundered for words, but nothing came out. Ian hadn’t refuted his statement, which meant he still had a chance; he couldn’t believe Ian was still interested after such a long wait. Derek wasn’t ugly, but over a decade on the force hadn’t been kind to him. He had more than his share of scars, and none of them were pretty. Luckily, his face was unmarred; otherwise, he would have had to give up the undercover work years ago. Then again, he wouldn’t have gotten shot if he hadn’t been undercover as a drug dealer.

“Regular cops get shot too,” he muttered.

“What was that?” asked Ian.

“Where’s my food?”

Snorting, Ian let Derek have his lie. Prying too much in a public place wouldn’t do Derek any good. Ian might trust most of the regulars to keep their mouths shut, but he certainly didn’t trust everyone that came to his pub; he would have had to be an idiot to do that, and Ian was not an idiot. “I’ll go check.” He rapped his knuckles on the bar and then turned and walked away.

Unlike most business owners, he wasn’t wearing a fancy suit with a tie. Ian wore a green T-shirt with his pub’s logo beneath an unbuttoned white shirt. Dark blue jeans encased his legs and proved that his ass was just as fit as the rest of him. Derek had certainly noticed before, but now he could actually *look*.

The massive mirror above the bar reflected the room behind Derek, proving that the prickling sensation on his back and neck wasn’t his imagination. Larry, Steven, and several others kept glancing up from their conversations to stare at him.

Steven grinned sheepishly when their eyes met in the mirror. “So, you up for a game of darts?”

Larry smacked him—hard. “He’s hurt. If you beat him it won’t count.”

“I know that, damn it!” He wasn’t trying to cheat; he was trying to help. His brother should know him better than that. “Just ’cause his leg’s messed up, doesn’t mean his arms don’t work.”

A grin stole its way across Derek’s face. He was finally starting to feel normal again, not handicapped. The guys at O’Callaghan’s weren’t going to treat him with kid gloves; they already knew that life sucked and shit happened. He shouldn’t have waited so long before coming back, shouldn’t have been afraid. The atmosphere of acceptance—it was what he had needed for weeks now.

“Not tonight, Steve. Maybe in a few weeks, all right?”

Steven nodded and smirked at his brother, feeling vindicated. “Sure thing, Detec—Derek. I’ll wait as long as it takes.” Hopefully that would give Derek something to look forward to.

Clayton’s head popped up from behind the laptop screen, finger poised over the keys. “Hey, guys, what’s the word I’m looking for?”

Derek snorted into his water; yes, it was the same as before. That reassured him on more than one

level, and he felt more secure. “I don’t know, what does it mean?”

“Oh, right!” Clayton flushed. He always forgot that part, every single time. When he got lost in his work, he would forget other people didn’t know what he was doing or where he was or what he was thinking. “People who think they have every new disease they hear about.”

“Hypochondriac!” Robert yelled, causing his opponent to scratch the cue ball. He smirked and fished it out of the pocket, ignoring the man’s cries of foul play.

Clayton’s head dropped, fingers clacking across the keys, and Derek knew they had lost him for another half hour or so. The kid was always absorbed in his schoolwork and seemed to change majors as often as women changed their shoes. Things changed, though, and a year and a half was a long time when it came to schooling. He must’ve picked a major by now.

Ian ambled out of the kitchen, a plate in one hand. He set it down before Derek. It held a mountain of French fries and a large cheese-steak sandwich. “Pre-med,” Ian said just as Derek stuffed a fry in his mouth.

“Whuh?”

“Clayton picked pre-med. You missed his twenty-first birthday too. It got pretty rowdy in here.” It had been one hell of a night, ending in a bar fight when some pretentious dick decided to harass the birthday boy. Ian hadn’t appreciated that and had gladly let some of the boys show the man the door... face-first.

“Would’ve preferred to be here.”

His last undercover assignment hadn’t been a pretty one—nothing good came of drug cases. For example, a rookie cop with twitchy hands who should’ve damn well waited for backup. Derek hadn’t expected the bullet that shredded his right hip as he attempted to vault the chain-link fence to keep his cover. Everyone knew cops said, “Stop or I’ll shoot,” but they weren’t supposed to actually shoot anyone who wasn’t extremely dangerous or threatening them.

“Figured as much.” Ian nudged the plate closer to Derek and bit the inside of his cheek as Derek bit into the sandwich, his eyes closing and throat making blissful sounds that taunted Ian’s cock. He was familiar with the sound and had wondered more than once if Derek would make the same noise while sucking him.

“Mmm, I want to kiss your cook.”

Bitterness slapped Ian across the face. “Right, I’ll just go get her for—”

Derek’s hand shot forward and grasped his wrist. The sudden movement pulled at his leg, and Derek felt his blood drain from his face as he dropped the sandwich back on the plate. “Joking, Ian. I was joking,” he rasped as knives stabbed all along his right side.

The clamor of the pub quieted to murmuring as Ian gently tugged his wrist free and walked around the bar. “You got something you can take?” Damn, this was his fault; he should’ve known it was a joke, but he’d been too wrapped up in the possibilities to see that.

“Jacket pocket.” When Ian stepped behind him, Derek barely kept his muscles from tensing. He always chose this end of the bar for a reason: the mirror would let him know if anyone was coming, and it allowed easy access to cover—the bar itself. Ian’s shadow blocked most of the mirror, and that made Derek nervous.

He should have shifted his leg back into a comfortable position right away, but he hadn’t been sure if that would cause his pain levels to rocket so high that he passed out. This pain was nothing compared to how much he would hurt if he fell off the stool and crashed into hardwood flooring.

Not to mention, no one would ever let him live it down— that was what family meant. Five years from now, he didn’t want to hear the story about “that time Derek fainted like a virgin who got kissed

for the first time.”

Ian’s hand dove into Derek’s left jacket pocket and removed the orange bottle of pain relievers; then he hurried back around the bar. As soon as he did, Derek relaxed a little bit, and Ian knew why; that was why he had done his best to move as quickly and efficiently as he could. He read the little label and twisted the lid off, dumping two small white pills into his hand. “Open wide!”

Derek would’ve rolled his eyes at the order if he hadn’t hurt so much. He stuck out his tongue and caught the two pills Ian dropped on it, and then flipped his tongue and tossed them down his throat. He accepted the glass of water with a hand that only shook slightly and drank the rest of it.

Tugging the glass from Derek’s hand, Ian turned and filled it back up with water. He set it and the bottle of medicine on the bar. Once the color started returning to Derek’s cheeks, he pointed at the plate. “You have to take those with food. The bottle says so.”

Instead of grumbling or complaining about being babied, Derek dutifully picked up a fry and bit into it. It took a few minutes, but the pain-induced nausea passed. “I’m starving.” He eased his right leg into a more comfortable position and then picked up the sandwich, stuffing almost half of it into his mouth in his haste.

The noise level rose again, but not as high as before, and Derek hated that he was ruining the evening for other people. Then again, they weren’t complaining, so it couldn’t be all bad. “Taste all right?” asked Ian, wishing he could hear those delicious sounds of approval again.

Derek nodded. “’S good. Real good.” It didn’t take him long to finish it and the fries on his plate. He estimated that he had used a little over half a bottle of the ketchup Ian had fetched from the kitchen for him. It was time, then, to test a theory. Derek slid one of his salt-covered fingers into his mouth and sucked on it, nothing overtly sensual, just someone licking his fingers clean.

Lust lit Ian’s eyes from the inside before vanishing. So even like this—damaged and crippled—even after all these years, Ian still wanted him.

He glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner; it was about the only thing in the pub that ever looked brand new, even though it was an antique. It had been in Ian’s family for years, and he took very good care of it, never forgetting to wind or polish it. It was ten to eleven. He should head back to the apartment; he didn’t want to be out on the streets too late. Derek knew he was much easier to incapacitate now than he had been since his early teens.

Derek’s fingers curled around the pill bottle, and he pushed it back into his pocket. He withdrew his gloves from the other one and tugged them on, eyes never leaving the scarred bar-top. “So... coffee?”

The building tension unraveled at the question, and Ian could barely restrain his laughter. Derek hated coffee, and he wouldn’t eat donuts either. He had said years ago that he didn’t want to be a walking stereotype. Apparently more had changed than he thought. “Sure, I could go for some coffee. Just give me a few minutes.”

Nodding, relieved that Ian hadn’t laughed in his face, Derek unhooked his cane from around the stool and twirled it between his hands. He vaguely heard Ian ordering the bartender, Patrick, to make sure everything was locked up when he closed. Then Ian stood before him, short hair sticking up. “I’ll grab my jacket and then we can go.”

Ian made a conscious effort not to run up the stairs, no matter how excited he was, because that would just remind Derek of everything he had lost. Ian O’Callaghan had been a lot of things to a lot of people, but he had never been a heartless bastard to anyone who mattered to him. He sure as hell wasn’t going to start now.

“Finally going to resolve that UST?” Robert called as he counted his winnings for the night. Just

over five hundred in all—not a bad haul. “You’ve been dancing around each other since I first started coming here four years ago.”

“That’s nothing!” Larry smirked and folded his arms over his chest. “Steve and I have been coming here eight years now, and they’ve been eye-fucking that whole time.”

Derek groaned. “This isn’t a competition, guys, and it’s really none of your business. We’re just going for coffee.”

“Uh huh.” Clayton closed the lid of his laptop and slid it into its bag. Not even he was naïve enough to fall for that. “*Coffee*, right.”

Steven balanced his chair on the back two legs as he tossed peanuts into the air and caught them in his mouth; he didn’t miss a single one. “A lubricant latte with a side of condoms coming right up.”

The businessman looked offended, and the woman smoking the illegal cigar looked bored, but everyone else in the pub burst into laughter. Not even Derek could keep from chuckling.

Brown jacket around his shoulders, Ian leaned against the railing of the upper floor and smirked down at everyone. “You think of that all by yourself, Stevie? How long did that take you? Eight years?”

Rocking forward, slamming the feet of the chair on the floor, Steven cocked an eyebrow. “Finally managed to finagle yourself into the detective’s bed. How long did that take you? A decade?” he mocked, giving as good as he got.

“Touché.” Ian grudgingly conceded the point, but only because he would rather be *drinking coffee* than belaboring points with Steven. “Don’t trash my bar while I’m gone, idiots, or there won’t be beer for a month.”

As the patrons groaned and booed, Ian strode down the stairs and over to the bar, where Derek was easing onto his feet. Pain lined his face, bracketing his mouth, but his eyes were alight with humor. “You lost a battle of wits to Steve.”

“No, I conceded, there’s a difference.”

“Uh huh.” Rolling his eyes, Derek nodded and waved with his left hand as multiple people bid him goodnight.

“I expect to see you around more often, detective or not,” Robert said. “We need someone to keep Steve’s ego under control. You’re the only one who can pummel him at darts. And the kid needs help with his words.”

That, Derek knew, was man-speak for: *We missed you*.

Grinning through the pain, Derek said, “I’ll see what I can do, yeah? Someone’s got to keep you all from destroying the pub and getting arrested.” *Missed you all too*. The bells clattered against the door as Ian opened it, drowning out the resounding protests that such a situation had only happened once, damn it.

Derek stopped outside; the pavement here was, thankfully, in better condition. It wasn’t so much of a jigsaw mess. It was dark out, the streetlights so bright that not a single star shone in the sky. It was a little nippy, but nowhere near as bad as it had been months ago. The snow had all melted a month back.

“So,” Ian said, “yours or mine?” Ian lived a few miles away, but he always came on his motorcycle, and he didn’t think that would be good for Derek’s leg. The vibrations alone would be sheer agony. Still, he wasn’t the sort to be presumptuous.

“Mine, if that’s all right.” Derek scratched at his cheek, short nails catching in the five o’clock shadow. Give it three days and he would look like a lumberjack; his damned beard always grew in quickly, despite his best efforts.

“Lead the way.”

Derek turned to his left and started walking; it was slow going, obviously, but Ian didn't once complain. The first block passed in silence, but then they got stuck at a blinking stoplight. Derek clenched the cane tightly as he stepped off the curb and hobbled into the street, missing the days when he could run across without having to worry about getting hit.

"Are you sure"—Derek swallowed, eyes locked on the road; the lines needed to be repainted—"that you want to...?"

Ian reached over and twined his right hand around Derek's left. "That I want to be with you? That's what you were going to say, right?"

Derek nodded jerkily.

"You do realize that I've been waiting over ten years for you, right? I was prepared to wait longer." Ian sighed, unable to tear his eyes away from Derek's pursed lips and furrowed brow. It didn't take long for the expected question to come.

"Why?"

"Because I see something in you—me—us." Ian squeezed his hand and patiently waited for Derek to step onto the sidewalk as they finished crossing the street.

Derek glanced over at Ian's ruffled hair and fantasized about making it even messier in just a while. "And what's that?"

Ian stopped walking, face highlighted by the headlights of a passing car. "You really want to know?"

"Course I do," said Derek as he leaned his weight on the cane and stopped to catch his breath. He was starting to appreciate that earlier taxi ride more with each step he took on the uneven cement.

Green eyes locked on hazel ones. "Potential. I see potential." There was something alive and writhing between them, always had been, and he had wanted to explore it since the first time he saw the rookie cop with the wide smile and dimpled cheeks. That need hadn't changed over the years.

"Potential, huh?" Derek stared down at their tangled fingers and started walking again. His arm and leg were starting to cramp, something the physical therapist had warned him about. Pushing himself too hard would only result in a setback. "That's your reason?"

Ian eyed Derek's pinched expression. "That's my reason."

"Works for me," Derek muttered. He couldn't disagree with it, after all. He had felt the same thing more than once over the years, even after Ian had stopped flirting with him and ceased copping an occasional feel. The last block felt like it was a million miles long as Derek dragged himself forward. He needed a distraction to get his mind off it. Anything!

"Course, I've always wondered what regulation handcuffs feel like. I bet they're sturdy," said Ian, fighting to keep a frown off his face. This was all kinds of *not good*. Sweat ran from Derek's short black hair, and his breathing was labored.

A short bark of laughter escaped Derek. "They are that. They're also good for rubbing your wrists raw; I don't recommend it." Almost there. Almost there.

"Well then, we'll just have to get the furry kind if we ever want to play with some."

Derek untangled their fingers and shoved his hand in his jean pocket, pulling out his keys. He fitted one into the lock of the building's door and hauled it open, leaning his head against the cool glass for a moment. "Come on." He gestured inside the building.

Ian crossed the threshold and fought not to assist Derek inside. Derek was a determined man, but not too prideful; if he really needed help, he wasn't above asking for it. That didn't make watching him suffer any easier, though.

"Elevator's this way." Twenty-three hobbling steps later,

Derek stabbed the up arrow. Now that they were inside and he was leaning against the wall, his

breath slowed slightly. He no longer sounded like someone on the verge of an asthma attack. The doors clanked open, and they stepped inside the empty car.

“Which floor?” asked Ian, fingers poised near the buttons as Derek propped himself against the wall. “Fourth.”

Ian poked the button and the doors closed. The little lights above the doors glowed with each new floor they reached. Finally, the four lit up and the doors dinged open. It wouldn't be long now before Derek could get off his feet and rest.

“Almost there,” Derek whispered, unaware that Ian heard it and the relief in his voice. “I'm 405. It's the third door on the right.”

Swiping the keys from Derek's palm, Ian stalked down the hallway and unlocked the door. It stuck a bit, but he got it open mere moments before Derek shuffled up behind him. “Home sweet home,” Derek said mockingly as he stepped into his apartment and beckoned Ian inside.

It wasn't anywhere near as nice as his old place, but it wasn't a dump, and the building was safe—well, as safe as any apartment building could be. It was fairly large, with a good-sized kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom. His furniture was nice, a definite upgrade from the secondhand rubbish he had owned in his college days. He had a flat-screen TV and a massive leather couch. His place would never grace an interior design magazine, but it was his.

Derek sat and pulled off his boots, wincing as the action pulled at his heel, and then peeled off his gloves and jacket. He threw them over the back of an armchair. “Make yourself comfortable. I'll just be a minute.” He headed to the bathroom.

Ian tossed his jacket over the same chair and then pulled off his shoes, dropping them onto the floor near the door. The carpet, though an atrocious shade of green, was plush and appeared clean. He snooped around for a moment, pleased when he found what he was looking for. He scooped it off the coffee table just as Derek walked out of the bathroom.

“Well, drop your pants. That knot isn't going to take care of itself,” Ian said.

Derek glanced at the floor, fingers white around the handle of his cane. “It's not that—”

Sighing, Ian padded over to Derek. “Are you turning down a free massage? Because, really, I thought you were smarter than that.”

“If you give me a massage, does that mean we can't have sex?” Derek retorted, teeth gritting. “Because I have to admit, I'd rather have sex if I only get one or the other.”

“So you can pass out from pain instead of pleasure? I don't think so.” Ian shook his head and prodded Derek toward the bedroom. “Massage tonight, sex tomorrow.” As soon as the words left his mouth, he realized how utterly presumptuous they were. “Assuming you didn't mind me crashing here...?”

Derek snorted and dragged himself into his bedroom, fingers fiddling with his pants as he got them unhooked and shoved them down his legs. He carefully stepped out of them and then eased down onto the bed, pain spiking with each shift of his right leg. Fuck, that hurt! “A massage and sex? Have you seen me, Ian? I feel like I've won the fucking lotto. Things like this don't happen to—”

“Loyal men who do the right thing and care about other people? I've got to say that I disagree with you there,” said Ian as he dropped his pants and white button-down shirt on the floor. There, now they were even: boxers and T-shirts only.

“I'm not—I'm just a—”

“And so help me, if you call yourself a cripple I will dump this in your hair. False modesty isn't attractive.” Ian unscrewed the lid on the bottle of massage oil and poured a healthy amount into his hands. He rubbed his rough palms together until it heated and then set to work on Derek's right leg; it

would have to be worse than the arm.

The sound that erupted from Derek's throat was somewhere between a groan of utter delight and the cry a cat makes as it's skinned alive. He couldn't remember the last time that something felt so damn good and hurt so fucking much all at once. The juxtaposition sent his head spinning as Ian's fingers delved into his muscles and worked at unknotting the cramps.

"Easy, easy," Ian murmured as he pressed against the muscles and worked them loose. Once he finished with the leg, he moved to Derek's arm. His hands started to ache, but he didn't stop the massage. How could he when Derek was whimpering beneath him? It was a thousand fantasies come to life, even if they weren't naked yet.

Inevitably, Derek fell asleep, and soft snoring drifted up into Ian's ears. Feeling more than satisfied, Ian clambered off the bed and headed for the bathroom. After taking care of business, he locked the front door (which he should've done earlier, idiot), and then flicked off the hall light before returning to the bedroom.

Ian unfolded the large comforter at the end of the bed and covered Derek before joining him beneath it. This wasn't anything like he had imagined it would be; they hadn't fucked in the bathroom at O'Callaghan's or done it on his desk or any of the various and sundry other fantasies he had invented over the years... but he didn't regret it.

Reality always trumped fantasy on account of it being real.

Derek's stubble tickled his lips when Ian pressed a goodnight kiss to it. The beard would have to go soon; Ian wasn't fond of scraping burns on his skin. But it was more than all right for now. Yawning, his head dropped to the pillow beside Derek's. He had waited ten years—a couple more hours wouldn't kill him.

THE smell of food woke Derek around nine the next morning. He yawned widely and stretched, leg only aching a little. Ian's miracle massage from the night before had made a huge difference; he hadn't felt this good waking up since he had been on the good drugs at the hospital.

Derek scratched his face; the beard really needed to go. He got out of bed, hand fumbling for his cane as the remnants of sleep faded away. It didn't take long to make his way to the bathroom and take care of business. Though, admittedly, shaving was a pain. Once his teeth and hair were brushed, he hobbled out to the kitchen.

Ian hummed softly as he tapped his fingers against the countertop. His right hand held a spatula and he was near the stove, a large skillet full of omelets before him. Two plates rested on the counter, bacon and toast already on them.

Chuckling, Derek said, "You can stay every night if you're going to cook in the morning."

After jumping a bit at the sudden noise, Ian glanced over and smiled. "I didn't hear you leave the bathroom." Derek's smooth face sent tingles down his spine; he wanted to nip the newly revealed skin.

"That's because I'm a ninja."

Ian snorted. "Well, I hope ninjas like bacon and eggs." "Oh, we most certainly do."

Derek claimed a seat at the small dining room table just as Ian slid the omelets from the skillet and onto the plates. "What'd you put in those?"

"Eggs," said Ian cheekily. He turned off the stove and carried both plates over. Then he opened the fridge and pulled out two already poured glasses of orange juice and put them on the table, which had already been set. Most people might have been annoyed at him taking over their kitchen, but Derek had said that he could make himself at home.

"Uh huh." Derek poked the omelet with his fork, but it looked pretty basic: eggs, cheese, turkey,

green pepper, and onion. "What, no tomato?" he teased.

"I don't want anything that looks like blood in my eggs," Ian said around his mouthful of toast.

Derek couldn't disagree with a statement worded like that. He devoured the food, grateful that he wouldn't have to eat cold cereal once again. Standing around and cooking breakfast took too much out of him; he had learned that the hard way not long after he had been released from the hospital.

Once they finished, Ian took all the dishes and put them in the sink. When he turned on the hot water, Derek blinked in disbelief. "Seriously? You're going to do the dishes?"

Craning his neck, Ian winked over his shoulder. "I want to get invited back, don't I?"

Derek got to his feet and sighed heavily. "All right. You stay—do dishes—I'll just go masturbate and pretend that you would rather fuck me than do household chores." Ian dropped the plate in his hand into the soapy water. "Don't mind the noise, all right? I'll try to keep it down."

With very controlled movements, Ian reached forward and turned off the water, green eyes locked on the popping bubbles. His fingers gripped the edge of the sink until they turned white. "I'm having trouble resisting the urge to tackle you to the floor," he ground out huskily. "If I were you, I'd get my ass in bed."

Gulping, Derek nodded. "I can do that." He returned to his bedroom and removed both his T-shirt and boxers before lying down on the bed. He had just stretched his arms over his head when Ian walked into the room.

"Oh fuck." Ian tore his own clothes off and threw them on the floor before stalking to the bed and climbing on it. His eyes travelled down white skin that had lost its tan. Derek's ribs were slightly prominent, and he wasn't anywhere near as muscled as he used to be, but Ian didn't care. The packaging hadn't enraptured him—the personality had.

As Derek returned the favor, eyeing Ian from head to toe, he smothered the regrets that they hadn't done this before. At the time, he had made the best decision. Now, he would finally get to sate their curiosity and see if Ian was right, if they had potential.

Ian swirled his finger around a circular mark on the top of Derek's left foot. "Where did you get this?"

Derek blinked, but answered, "Dropped a burning stick on my foot while camping when I was nine." Ian kissed it. His hands trailed up a slightly hairy leg to a curved scar along Derek's calf. "And this?" "Stepped on a wire coat hanger when I was thirteen; it shot up and cut me."

A raised patch of skin on his knee was examined next. "And this?"

"Bike accident when I was a kid. I crashed into our mailbox. Took my mother an hour to pick out the splinters," said Derek. He gazed down at Ian's bent head with awe. No one had ever asked about the scars before, and he knew many people saw them as imperfections.

Ian couldn't tear his eyes away from the various scars; each one told a story about Derek, about where he had been and what he had done. Each mark was a story that he didn't know, something he hadn't learned in their ten years as acquaintances. He wanted—no, *needed*—to know everything.

A straight line down Derek's left forearm. "Ex-girlfriend with a nail file." Diagonal, puckered skin on his ribcage. "Perp with a knife my third year on the force." Jagged mark on his right arm. "Compound fracture when I fell down a slope while skiing in college."

Finally, the only bit of marred skin Ian hadn't kissed was the mass of red and purple, ridged skin on his right hip. It looked all wrong, stretched too far, with smaller marks around it—surely the stitches. "This?" whispered Ian.

"Gunshot wound that cost me the job I love." Derek feathered his hands through Ian's hair as warm breath shot over his right hip. Ian's lips were so close to his arousal, and he hadn't been with

anyone in much too long. The anticipation was becoming unbearable.

He reached over and pulled open the drawer of his nightstand, scrabbling through it. His fist emerged victoriously, condoms and lubricant clutched tightly. Derek dropped them on the sheets beside him and grinned as he grasped Ian's chin in his other hand. "How about you mosey on up here and get started on that sex I seem to remember you promising me last night?"

Ian smirked from underneath his eyelashes as he crawled up the bed. "I've already gotten started, genius." He kissed Derek, their lips and tongues brushing as they savored their first kiss. It had been a long time coming, and neither was in a hurry to rush it. When Ian finally pulled back, he rolled Derek onto his left side and then eased a fluffy pillow down to support his right leg and prop it off to the side. "This work?"

Derek wiggled a bit, settling himself more comfortably, ignoring the hairs on the back of his neck that rose as Ian's breath ghosted across it. Ian was someone he could trust at his back; he didn't doubt that in the least. "Yeah, that's good." He felt somewhat vulnerable like this, but he certainly wasn't going to complain.

Opening the cap of the lubricant, Ian poured some on his fingers. Like the massage oil the night before, he warmed it up before pressing his questing fingers between the globes of Derek's ass. He smeared the liquid around the puckered opening before easing one finger inside. "Have you...?"

Flushing, Derek couldn't bear to look over his shoulder as he clenched around the intrusion. "Not since college."

Ian moaned and leaned his head against Derek's shoulder. "I'm so fucking lucky," he murmured as he pressed the finger deeper inside. As he stretched and prepared Derek, adding more fingers as necessary, he couldn't help but be grateful for that answer. He wasn't sure how he would've reacted if Derek had claimed occasional one-night stands with men. Ian would've likely been pissed Derek hadn't come to him for that; he would've been more than happy to fill those needs.

The ache in Derek's ass grew, as did the overwhelming feeling of emptiness. He had almost forgotten how much he loved this. Women were great, really, but men were fantastic. At least one good thing had come of being shot: he wouldn't have to deny himself anymore.

"You going to stick that cock in me sometime today?" "You ready for it?"

"Have been for a while now."

"Well, all right, then."

Ian fumbled with the condom wrapper after he removed

his fingers from the warmth. He hadn't felt this jittery about sex in a while, but then, he hadn't wanted anyone this much since he was a horny teenager and food gave him boners. He finally got the condom rolled over his cock. He jacked the remaining lube over the condom and then guided his erection toward Derek's twitching hole.

The pressure of a cock pushing inside him was distantly familiar, so much so that it felt new. It slid in a little at a time, fighting against his tight grip. "So fucking good," Derek moaned, sweat soaking into his hair.

Humming his agreement, Ian seated himself fully. He didn't have to wait long before Derek nodded his head; once Ian saw that slight movement, he withdrew partway and then pushed back in. Ever mindful of Derek's injury, Ian kept his strokes long and smooth. He rolled his hips languidly, easing in and out as if he were the tortoise and long and slow would win the climax.

Ian's teeth sank into Derek's shoulder, stopping just shy of drawing blood as he jerked Derek off with his right hand. The tightness was becoming almost painful, and he knew he wouldn't last long.

They came as quietly as they had joined, expressing their pleasure in whispers and low groans.

Semen shot across Derek's chest and onto the sheets, and Ian flooded the condom. He reluctantly withdrew from the heat and took care of the condom.

Yawning, he padded into the bathroom and wetted a washcloth before returning to the bedroom. As he mopped up the mess, he felt contentment settle within him. That had been easily worth the wait. Derek reached up and rubbed the bite mark on his shoulder. "What was that for?"

"An addition to the story of your life, of course," said Ian, feeling more than satisfied with himself.

Derek didn't need to ask for clarification. Even when it faded, even if the potential between them vanished, even if Ian someday decided he didn't want to be with a cripple... Derek would never forget the mark left on him or the story it told.

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