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OLIVER'S
HERO

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Chapter One

Then

It wasn't every day a man got invited to a gangbang.

The offer was in fact a first for Kirk, who'd begun to suspect that gangbangs only occurred in porn. This would hardly be surprising, as porn wasn't known for realism. In all his years of ordering pizza, Kirk had never once been blown by a delivery guy, and his building's plumber had never indicated any desire for naked fun, either.

Apparently not all of these fantasies were strictly fictitious, though, because out of the blue Kirk got a call from his clubbing buddy Joey with the incredible offer.

"Have you met Stu and Oliver?"

"No." Kirk wasn't tight with Joey's whole circle, nor did he feel any particular need to be. He had a good group of friends already. Most of them weren't into clubbing, however, and Kirk got the urge from time to time. That was where Joey came in.

"Well, Stu's had this fantasy where they do a gangbang of Oliver, and Oliver gave the go-ahead. You want in?"

"Hell yes," said Kirk. He'd never received such an offer in his twenty-five years, and probably wouldn't again. Turning it down never even occurred to him.

"I thought you would."

There was a bit of work to be done beforehand, collecting everyone's test results and such, but the big night was scheduled to take place a few weeks later. Joey, whose apartment was spacious if not updated since roughly 1975, offered to host.

By the time the date arrived, Kirk was really worked up. He'd jerked off before leaving his place in the hopes that it would prevent him from embarrassing himself by coming too

quickly once they got started. As he parked on Joey's block, his imagination was working on overdrive, fantasizing about the sexual encounter about to take place.

Joey opened the door, grinning widely. "Hey, man. Stu and Oliver just got here, so now we have everyone. Guys, this is Kirk. Kirk, meet Stu, Pete, and Lucas."

As Joey rattled off names, he pointed to each man in turn. Stu was a strapping bear with giant eyebrows resembling nothing so much as a pair of caterpillars which had given up trying to escape his forehead. Tall, lanky Pete wore his blond hair in a trendy style that tried too hard. Lucas was a beefy black hunk whose t-shirt struggled to contain his impressive biceps. Damn, Kirk would love to get his number.

The star of the show, however, appeared to be missing.

"Ollie's in the bathroom," said Stu. "Fuck, I've been wanting to do this for ages."

"Haven't we all?" asked Pete. "I can't be the only one who's jacked off to a gangbang fantasy."

"Obviously," said Joey. "We're all here, right?"

"Yeah, but this is with my boyfriend," said Stu. "It's different."

Kirk was content to take his word for it.

Lucas nodded. "I imagine it would be different for you, but we're all excited."

Stu was apparently not the patient type. He rapped on the bathroom door with his knuckles. "Ollie?"

After a second, the worn door opened to reveal a cute brunette. He looked to be a few years Kirk's junior, on the slender side with floppy hair brushing his eyebrows and a regal Roman nose. Without making eye contact, he said, "Sorry, I'm just nervous."

"You'll be great," said Stu.

Oliver's eyes flitted among the rest of them briefly before he went back to looking at his feet. He kept pushing his hair off his forehead, the way Kirk's sister Ellie did when she was nervous. "I thought we said three or four."

"Four, plus me makes five. You worry too much, Ollie," Stu said, dismissing the concerns with a slap on his partner's back.

Kirk did not care for Stu's tone, nor the implications of their conversation. Oliver frowned at their five pairs of feet, his shoulders sagging like a man resigned.

"Here." Stu handed over bottle. "I brought you some poppers to help loosen you up."

"I don't know..." Oliver trailed off, looking lost and uncertain.

Kirk had a very bad feeling about the situation, so in his gentlest tone, he asked, "Oliver, do you want to do this?"

"He does. We talked about it already, he's just a little nervous, that's all." Stu said this with a stern glance at his boyfriend.

Kirk wasn't having it, and he sure as hell didn't trust Stu's concept of consent. "I didn't ask you."

"I..." Once again, Oliver failed to finish a sentence.

"Sounds like a no to me," said Lucas. Thank God someone else was being considerate.

Stu crossed his arms and pouted. "Joey, you said they were cool."

"You told me he gave the okay," said Joey. "Did he?"

"Of course he did!"

"Hey, I'm not getting involved in a rape." Pete held up his hands. "You guys figure this out."

"It's not rape if he said we could," insisted Stu.

Kirk ignored the jackass and was pleased to notice Lucas moving to stand between Stu and Oliver. He focused his attention on the man who needed it and asked quietly, "Oliver? Do you want to call this off?"

The poor guy looked at Stu with real fear, then at Lucas in his protective position, and finally Kirk. "Yes," he whispered.

Stu roared, "You fuckers, he's my boyfriend, you have no right!"

Lucas stepped in front of the bastard. "Take him home," he told Kirk. "I've got this."

It was an excellent idea. "Sound good, Oliver?"

The shy nod was all Kirk needed. He gestured to Oliver to go first and followed right behind, with Pete on his heels.

"Shit, man," said Pete, "If I'd known, I never would've come."

"It's fine," replied Oliver a little too automatically.

Pete took off like he was running from the law. Not a very helpful guy, though he at least recognized how coercive Stu had been.

"My car's the blue Honda," Kirk said.

"Thank you."

"Sure thing." A thought occurred, and Kirk frowned. "Do you live with him?"

"Yes." Oliver paused, then said, "I think I need to leave."

"I think it'd be a good idea." He reached out to offer a friendly shoulder pat, but quickly pulled his hand away when Oliver flinched at the touch. Well, fuck. Kirk was no expert, but that reaction couldn't mean anything good.

"My brother's been telling me to leave for a while."

It was good to know Oliver had family he could lean on. When Kirk was very young, his aunt lived with his family for a few months when she left her violent ex, and she later remarked that she'd never have left him if it wasn't for the familial encouragement.

He didn't want to see the guy stay in what was obviously an abusive relationship, especially after the way Stu had exploded back there, so he really hoped Oliver left the bastard. "Should I bring you to your brother's place?"

"Yes, please. He's in the Franklin Arms building, do you know where that is?"

"Yeah, it's a few blocks from my apartment." He unlocked the passenger door for Oliver as fast as possible, spurred on by the raised voices coming from Joey's house.

They were driving away before Oliver spoke again. "He really didn't care about me." The tone suggested this was a revelation.

Not knowing how to respond, Kirk settled for the simple truth. "No."

"He always says he's got my best interests at heart."

Kirk's blood started to boil, but he managed to keep his voice almost even. "Didn't look like it back there."

"Thank you for actually looking out for me."

"I'm just doing the right thing, but you're welcome."

He knew abusive jerks messed with their partners' heads. It had been mainly theory before this night, and now he desperately hoped Oliver didn't give Stu a second chance. There was only so much Kirk could do, and he knew that, but Oliver deserved to be treated so much better. Everyone did.

If he'd known the right words, he would've talked more on the ride to Oliver's brother's place, tried to reassure or say something that would ensure Oliver never took Stu back. But he didn't have the words, if they even existed, so he flicked on the radio.

"Is this music okay?"

"Yes," said Oliver. He might well have given the same answer for any song, for all Kirk knew. In the grand scheme of things, listening to the best of the 80s wasn't bound to be anywhere near the guy's biggest problem.

Traffic was light, so they made good time and were soon hitting downtown to Bruce Springsteen.

"I really thought he loved me."

Kirk was way over his head in this conversation. It was apparent to him that Stu was an abusive bastard, but somehow this was news to Oliver.

"You deserve better," he said. "He's a jackass."

They fell into silence again, which was fine by Kirk. He hadn't come up with anything to say, so he went back to letting Bruce fill the conversational void.

Bon Jovi was playing when he pulled up in front of the Franklin Arms. "Is here good?"

"Perfect. Thank you so much. It means a lot."

"You're welcome. Take care of yourself, Oliver."

A brief nod, and Oliver got out of the car. Kirk watched until he went inside before driving away, hoping this would be a turning point for the guy and feeling like he'd seen more of the world's nasty side. God, what kind of abuse would make a guy flinch the minute someone touched his shoulder? It all made Kirk queasy with anger that Stu could get away with... whatever it was he'd done.

It'd been a hell of a night. He'd been in the right place at the right time to help, but all the same, he wasn't so sure about this gangbang business anymore.

Chapter Two

Now

Kirk got to the bar early so he could get a good seat for the show. Ellie, his youngest sister, would be onstage shortly for her first real gig with her band and he knew it would mean a lot that he not only attended, but he'd also arrived in plenty of time to secure a prime location.

The bar tended toward the dive end of the spectrum, as bars went, but he figured the band had to start somewhere. He wanted the best for Ellie, and the band made her really happy. He'd already bought their album on Bandcamp. Twice, actually, the second time under a different name so she thought a complete stranger purchased it.

He took his bottle of beer to a seat and, lacking much else to do, opted for some old-fashioned people-watching until the show started. This pastime had fallen out of fashion with the rise of smartphones, but Kirk had recently decided he wasted too much time on his phone, so he'd deleted most of his apps in an attempt to engage more with the real world.

The crowd was typical for a Friday night at a bar of this caliber, consisting in large part of people letting loose after the workweek. Two guys wearing different MLB shirts were debating the relative merits of their baseball teams just loudly enough for Kirk to catch stats which meant nothing to him. A couple of giggling young women flirted with a small group of guys, most of whom appeared not to quite believe their luck. Another man couldn't keep his hands off his girl's ass.

Among the unknown faces, Kirk's gaze landed on one familiar person. The floppy hair had been replaced by a gelled-up undercut, and the black stud earring was new, but he instantly recognized Oliver anyway.

He'd spent a while wondering about Oliver after the disastrous evening when they met. In the wake of Kirk's horror, Joey had drifted out of his life, which, frankly, hadn't been a terrible loss. The tepid reaction to Stu's obvious abuse, and continued friendship with Stu, ruined any respect Kirk once had for the man. It did unfortunately mean he never had a chance to inquire about Oliver's wellbeing.

His first instinct was to jump up and go to Oliver. On second thought, he stayed put. What if seeing him would be a reminder of a past Oliver would rather forget? Kirk didn't want to dredge up bad memories.

So he didn't make his way over, but he did watch. Oliver looked much better than he had two years ago. He wasn't acting like a scared rabbit anymore, and witnessing it did Kirk's heart good.

Oliver looked around the room while waiting for his drink, and in doing so he spotted Kirk. His eyes widened in recognition, and he smiled.

Maybe not dredging up bad memories, then. Kirk smiled back and raised his bottle. As soon as Oliver's drink was in hand, he headed Kirk's way.

Waiting for his sister to come on stage had just gotten much more interesting.

It figured that when Oliver had given up looking, he finally ran into the man he hoped to find. He'd have recognized that face anywhere, even with the addition of some very becoming

scruff. Maybe to most people the man would be another unremarkable face in the crowd, but to Oliver, he was a personal hero.

In the last two years Oliver had given serious thought to what he'd say to the man who stopped Stu's planned gangbang and drove him to his brother's. He'd never even gotten his knight in a blue Honda's name, but the man had opened his eyes to how horribly Stu treated him, and Oliver could never thank him enough for that.

Now was his chance to try.

He made his way up front and took a seat. "You might not remember me," he began.

Those warm brown eyes took him in with a smile. "I sure do, Oliver."

Well, he'd made an impression, anyway. "I never got your name."

"Kirk."

He held out his hand. "I want to thank you, Kirk. It took a complete stranger treating me better than my boyfriend for me to see how horrible he was, and I don't like to think about where that relationship was headed."

Oliver was no longer the man who'd let Stu treat him so badly. He knew his own worth now. Stu, a master manipulator, had taken advantage of his innocence and deep insecurities, but Oliver would never allow himself to be taken advantage of again. He was stronger these days, even if he was still working with a therapist to deal with Stu's legacy.

Kirk's kindness had been the wakeup call he needed, and he would be eternally grateful for it.

Kirk shook his hand heartily. "I wondered about you. Hope you left that bastard in the dust."

Oliver nodded. "I did."

“Glad to hear it.”

He considered the implications of Kirk’s statement. Hadn’t Stu said the other guys that night were friends? In that case, surely Kirk would’ve known he dumped Stu and refused all pleas for a second chance. Part of Oliver didn’t want to go down that unpleasant road, but the curious part won out. “I thought you were a friend of Stu’s.”

“No. I’d never met him before. I was a friend of Joey’s, but we lost touch.” After a swig of beer, Kirk added, “Couldn’t really respect him afterwards.”

It wasn’t news that Stu had lied to him, so Oliver tried to focus on the fact that Kirk continued to be the good man who’d rescued him. Sure, there’d been another decent guy involved who helped keep Stu from escalating to physical violence when Oliver called off the gangbang, but Kirk was the first to actually ask what Oliver wanted. It had been new and revelatory at the time.

Kirk looked at Oliver’s dramatic undercut. “I like the new hairstyle.”

“Thank you.”

Oliver was glad for the dark lighting at the bar, because he blushed easily at compliments, especially compliments from attractive men. Not that he’d been doing much of anything with men, attractive or otherwise, in the last two years.

Stu had been coercive about sex, pushing for acts Oliver wasn’t really interested in and rarely caring if he was in the mood or not. It was an insidious kind of abuse that relied on mental and emotional manipulation. Until Oliver decided not to go through with the gangbang, Stu had never raised a hand or even his voice. He hadn’t needed to, because he worked in subtler ways.

Oliver was now, thanks to time and therapy, able to see the abuse and coercion for what it had been, but the whole experience left him skittish. When it came to sex and dating, he struggled to trust a man enough for anything to happen, thus his two-year dry spell.

Eager to change the subject away from anything vaguely flirtatious, even if just in his own head, he asked, “Are you here for the band?” Staking out the stage early the way he had, it certainly seemed like Kirk was a fan.

Kirk nodded. “My sister’s the drummer, and this is their first gig.”

“That’s exciting for her.”

“I know. I’ve been hearing about it for weeks.”

“I come because Cindy makes the best Moscow mules.” Oliver wasn’t big into the bar scene, but he liked a Moscow mule from time to time, and Cindy was a vodka artist. Plus, it was only two blocks from his apartment.

“I can get beer anywhere,” said Kirk. “My sister’s only going to have one first concert, though.”

Obviously Kirk was a loving brother. Oliver appreciated that trait in a man, not least because he wasn’t sure how he’d ever have managed to rebuild after Stu without his own brother’s support. At present, he was attempting to repay the favor by planning the best bachelor party he could afford. The sibling bond meant a great deal to him, so it made him happy to see others who felt the same way.

“What kind of music do they play?” he asked.

“Feminist punk.”

“I didn’t know that was a thing.” Not that Oliver would ever claim to know a great deal about music.

Kirk leaned in to speak over the noise of a large group entering the bar. “If I’m being honest, punk isn’t my preference. Everything I know about it is because of my sister.”

“You like 80s rock,” Oliver said.

“You remember that?”

He nodded, unwilling to explain how the details of that night were seared into his brain, or how he associated Bruce Springsteen with freedom.

“Yeah, I think music was better back then, before we got all this auto-tuned stuff with crap lyrics. At least Ellie’s band doesn’t use an auto-tuner. What about you? What do you listen to?”

“Instrumental, mostly. I like classical with some newer artists mixed in for variety’s sake.” And sometimes, when he needed the reminder, Bruce Springsteen, though he didn’t feel the urge as often anymore as he had when he first left Stu.

“You don’t have to worry about crap lyrics that way,” said Kirk.

“No.”

Kirk’s phone buzzed, and he pulled it out of his shirt pocket. “My other sister is reminding me to send her video of the show. I’m sure I’ll get at least two more texts saying the same thing.”

“I take it she’s too far away to attend in person?”

“Yeah, she’s doing a semester abroad in Argentina.” Kirk tucked his phone away, shaking his head. “Like I’m going to forget.”

“Should we expect a large contingent of your family to be here?”

“No, just me.”

Kirk had a really nice smile, Oliver decided. It was warm, inviting, and genuine.

“I’m glad we ran into each other, Oliver.”

“So am I.”

It was nothing like he’d imagined the meeting would go. The past didn’t dominate their conversation, and to his great relief, Kirk treated him like a person, not a domestic abuse victim. In fact, Kirk was a nice guy to chat with, quite aside from the hero aspect.

For the first time since Stu, Oliver actually wouldn’t mind if their interactions turned flirtatious. In part this was a factor of time and therapy, but he wouldn’t discount the fact that he knew Kirk, of all men, wouldn’t take advantage of him. If such a thing had been Kirk’s goal, he could’ve done it two years ago.

Oliver was reclaiming another part of his life from Stu and it felt fantastic. He considered for a moment, weighing how far he was willing to go. A date, he concluded. He was willing to go as far as a date, if Kirk was interested.

Maybe nothing would come of it, but the mere fact that he was excited about the prospect of flirting with a man made Oliver very, very happy.

It seemed to Kirk that Oliver was very subtly flirting with him before the show started, and therefore he didn’t pay quite as much attention to Ellie’s band as he otherwise would have. He did take video, as promised, for the rest of the family. His brother wanted to attend in person, but was only two months sober and accordingly didn’t think going into a bar was a good idea. Mom got headaches far too easily. Kirk missed his late dad, who’d have been there for sure. Three years had dulled the ache, but it never went away.

On the other hand, he very much enjoyed chatting with Oliver, and good conversation was one of his must-haves in a man. He hadn't expected the flirting, though he wasn't averse to it by any means. So, while Ellie's band packed up after their set, he turned back to Oliver.

The other man leaned in to whisper, "Don't tell your sister, but I don't think I'm a punk person."

And yet he'd stayed through the entire set. It seemed like an indication of interest, unless he had a severe phobia of appearing rude.

"No problem," said Kirk. "I'm not, either, and Ellie knows it." He was really proud of her all the same.

Oliver fidgeted with his watch for a moment before asking, "Would you be interested in getting coffee sometime?"

His nerves suggested he meant this as a date, and Kirk was on board with that. Evidently, he'd been all wrong about Oliver seeing him as an unpleasant reminder of the past. This was good news, because Oliver was definitely an attractive guy, and he could hold a conversation.

"I'd like that," he said.

Oliver smiled shyly. "Are you free this weekend?"

"I'm busy tomorrow morning, but any time after 1:00 works for me." That ought to give him enough time to get his mom's new computer set up. She could've managed herself with help from Google, but Kirk could do it in half the time, and he didn't mind lending his mom a hand.

"May I have your number?" asked Oliver, grabbing his phone from his jacket.

"Sure." Kirk accepted the phone and added his number. Oliver then sent him a text which simply read, *Oliver Harlow*.

"Now you have mine, too. I'll call tomorrow, if that's okay."

“I’ll look forward to it,” said Kirk.

And look forward to it he did. In fact, the following morning he checked his phone one too many times and earned himself a gentle maternal ribbing in the process. When Oliver did call, he was quick to agree that they could have coffee the next morning.

He showed up to the coffee shop in his nicest casual clothes and found Oliver waiting for him outside, looking good in skinny jeans and a green button-down shirt.

“Hi,” said Oliver.

“Hi yourself.”

Oliver stuck his hands in his pockets, looking a touch nervous. “You know, I don’t actually drink coffee, but this place has good smoothies.”

“I’m a coffee drinker,” said Kirk. “I might try a smoothie, though, since I’ve already had my morning java.”

“Not one of those people who chugs it all day?”

Kirk shook his head. “I’d be up all night if I did that. One cup with breakfast is usually good for me, unless it’s the day before a court day.”

“Court day?” asked Oliver, leading the way inside.

“I’m a paralegal, and a midmorning pick-me-up is sometimes in order when my boss is stressing before a big case.”

“I don’t think I’d do well in a job with so much pressure,” said Oliver. “It’s why I like medical records. I get to contribute to something meaningful, without stressing out.”

Kirk enjoyed his job because he assisted in making sure people’s intellectual property was respected, and anyway, he liked a challenge to keep him on his toes. “It’s worth the occasional bouts of stress.”

“Better you than me.”

They paused the discussion to order smoothies. Oliver paid, then turned back to Kirk while they waited, slightly more relaxed than before. “I had one of your sister’s songs stuck on repeat in my head for hours yesterday.”

“She’ll be thrilled to hear it.”

Oliver scrunched up his nose in polite unhappiness. “It wasn’t even the song I almost liked.”

Kirk had to chuckle. “Almost?”

“The chorus had good lyrics about sexual objectification, though the screeching guitar was a bit...”

“Obnoxious?”

“I was going to say in-your-face, but since you said it, yes, obnoxious.”

Kirk loved his sister. He didn’t love all of her music, as much as he supported it for Ellie’s sake. “No need to pretend on my account. She’s my little sister and I cheer for her, but I only listen because it’s Ellie.”

“I get that. I only drink wine at my brother’s because he ferments it himself.”

“Wine is overrated,” said Kirk, who would rather a beer or a gin and tonic any day.

“I think so, though I’ve liked his hard cider. It’s his hobby, and I’m glad he enjoys it, but if I’m being honest, I’d rather just eat strawberries than have them crushed up and turned into wine. So I can relate, more or less, to how you support your sister’s music without personally loving it.”

“I like strawberries better in shortcake form.” Great, now he’d gone and made himself crave strawberry shortcake.

Oliver accepted their smoothies from a barista and handing Kirk's over. "They're great in smoothies, too."

Kirk's was mango pineapple. The first sip justified Oliver's praise for the drinks at this coffee shop. "You're right about the smoothies here. Really good."

"I'm glad you like it. We're in luck, the comfy chairs are free."

Kirk took the opportunity to admire the view from behind as Oliver walked over to plush chairs which were, indeed, very comfortable, though sadly sitting meant no more ass appreciation. Oh, well. If the date was fun, he might in due time get more chances to take in Oliver's fine body.

"So tell me, are you one of those people who orders the same thing every time, or do you like to mix it up?"

Oliver raised his eyebrows in surprise at Kirk's date question. He liked it because it wasn't a boring inquiry everyone trotted out, and could, with the right guy, lead to interesting conversation.

"It depends on my mood. Sometimes I just want a tried and true favorite, if it's been a tough day, but I'll be adventurous when I'm feeling good. What about you?"

"I say life's too short not to take chances." Kirk was not anyone's definition of risk-averse.

"I suppose, but to play devil's advocate here, you could also argue that life is too short to end up with food and drink you don't enjoy."

Impressed, Kirk took a moment to sip his smoothie before he countered. "On the other hand, you might find a new favorite if you step out of your comfort zone at least some of the time."

“Life is an unending parade of potential risks,” said Oliver. “You could find a new favorite, or you could end up with the worst smoothie you’ve ever tasted. My personal risk tolerance varies from day to day.”

“An unending parade of potential risks, huh? That’s a pretty good description, if not the kind you see on motivational posters.”

“I’m not trying to motivate anyone. Besides, those posters are cheesy.”

“They really are. It’s great to say reach for the stars and all, but what good would that actually do me? I never understood why we have a saying that encourages people to go after something they could never actually achieve. Go for your dreams, okay, but reach for the stars? Nobody can grab a star, and anyway stars would incinerate a person, so, yeah. Seems like a weird choice of words.”

“I’d never stopped to think about the incineration angle,” said Oliver. “That is a bit disturbing. It puts middle school classroom décor in a whole new light.”

It might have been an unusual first date discussion topic, but Kirk was enjoying himself immensely. He did so appreciate a good conversationalist.

The date was a rousing success in Oliver’s book, and he very much wanted another. Talking while sharing flirtatious looks was wonderfully exciting, and he realized how much he’d missed it.

He also wanted to find a partner, someone to share his life with, but he wasn’t going to make any assumptions about the future. He’d made the mistake of rushing into a relationship with Stu and, having been bitten so severely, Oliver was very, very shy about hurrying a romance along.

No, the only way to proceed was one day and one step at a time. This first date was enjoyable, and he'd like another, but Oliver wasn't planning any further ahead than considering a couple of potential date options.

Of course, he first needed to find out if Kirk would be interested. He suspected the answer would be yes, as Kirk appeared to be having a good time, and he surely hadn't been in any hurry to leave. In fact, he'd moved the conversation to a new topic: pool.

"You've really never played pool?" asked Kirk, incredulous.

"I really haven't."

He wondered if this was another experience people with more normal upbringings all shared. Oliver and his brother had been raised by an elderly great-aunt, which in practice meant that from the time he was ten and Andrew was twelve, they raised themselves. There had been nobody to teach them how to play pool.

Kirk asked, "Would you like to come out with me and try it?"

That answered the question of his interest. Oliver was very pleased. "You don't mind teaching me?"

"Of course not. It'll be fun."

"That sounds good, then."

"How's Friday night work for you?"

"I'm free," said Oliver. He'd been free every Friday night for the past two years.

"I'll pick you up if you give me your address."

Oliver rattled off the street number and nearby landmarks while thinking to himself that it was slightly more intimidating to be picked up for a date than to meet for coffee. Still, Kirk had

proven himself trustworthy two years ago, and anyway, Oliver had Uber on his phone from before he got his car, and he wasn't afraid to use the app if needed.

"There's a great Thai place near the pool hall where we can grab dinner first," said Kirk.

"I like Thai as long as I can get it mild." Spicy food and Oliver did not go well together. He was fond of his taste buds and wasn't looking to burn them off, which seemed to be the end goal of some restaurants' heavy-handed use of hot peppers.

"This place is good. My sister Grace doesn't like spicy food and she can eat there. I like the medium curries, myself."

He could keep them, as Oliver would stick with mild.

"Pick you up at 6:30?" asked Kirk.

"I'll be ready."

"Great." Kirk smiled, setting off butterflies in Oliver's stomach. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Me too."

Oliver would admit to himself that he was more than a touch nervous, but not so fearful as to create second thoughts. He'd learned to savor each small victory as he recovered from Stu's abuse, and this was a significant one, so he was accordingly very excited and proud that he was putting himself out there in the dating world once more.

He was ready for dating to be fun again.

Chapter Three

The great thing about teaching Oliver to play pool was how many opportunities it afforded Kirk to get nice and close. Though Kirk hadn't planned for it, this way was more fun than a regular pool date would have been.

Oliver wasn't hitting hard enough, in part because he wasn't scoping out a good shot. This would take practice, but Kirk could offer some pointers.

He stood behind Oliver, who was just an inch or so shorter, and moved the man's hands into position. The proximity meant he smelled Oliver's faint cologne, a light citrusy scent with hints of cinnamon that Kirk, who'd been accused of pickiness when it came to colognes, quite liked. He appreciated a man with good taste in cologne, so there was another thing for the list of Oliver's strong points.

"Here," he said when Oliver had a good grip on the cue. "Take your time lining up a good shot before you actually take it. You don't have to jab the cue right away. It's not a race."

"Please don't tell me I'm supposed to be taking geometry into account," said Oliver.

Kirk thought that was the least of his concerns at the moment. "Don't worry about that. You need to learn how to line up your shots and figure out the appropriate amount of force."

"Maybe not using enough force is my strategy."

"Sure, if you're trying to hustle with the old scam about being a bad player, but we're not betting, so why would you bother?"

Oliver hit harder this time, and the cue ball sent the twelve ball careening off. Not into a pocket, but it was an improvement over his previous tepid strikes. When all movement stopped, he said, "Don't handicap yourself on my account. I'd rather lose by a landslide than be patronized."

“Got it.” Kirk wasn’t throwing the game, though admittedly he wasn’t worrying too much about doing his best. He used his turn to sink the one ball, then broke up a small cluster which had gathered.

“You’re *sure* you’re trying?” asked Oliver. Obviously, he was dead serious about not being patronized.

“I did that for a reason. The stripes and solids were mixed together, so I couldn’t hit my balls without the risk of scoring for you.”

“Makes sense.” Oliver considered the table. “I think I’ll try for the yellow ball.”

“It’s your clearest shot.”

“That almost sounds like I know what I’m doing.” After a shot which failed to get his target anywhere near a pocket, he added, “Maybe I spoke too soon.”

“Can I show you something?”

Oliver nodded, and Kirk once again came to stand right behind him. Teaching pool was delightfully sensual. He could hear Oliver’s breathing increase slightly with their proximity, to say nothing of his own predictable response.

Oliver had a trio of freckles under his left ear that almost looked like an arrow pointing to his earlobe. It was cute, and also begged the question of whether or not he liked having his ears nibbled on.

But Kirk was supposed to be giving him a suggestion to improve his pool game, so he focused. “Put your hand down like this, and your fingers here. Now you can balance the cue like so, see? It’ll help you hit the ball in the middle, instead of up top where you don’t get a solid smack.”

“Okay,” said Oliver. “I clearly need all the help I can get.”

Kirk reluctantly moved away. “Nobody does well at first. I sent the cue ball clean off the table twice during my first game. That tends to happen when you hit the ball really low and too hard. It hops.”

“Just the opposite of what I’ve been doing.”

“It takes practice,” said Kirk.

“Show me how it’s done?”

Of course, because he was trying to impress a guy, Kirk didn’t manage to sink a ball. Thwarted, he had to admit, “I could stand some improvement myself.”

Oliver had a dimple when he chuckled. “It was closer than I’m getting.”

Three turns later, Oliver sunk his first ball, to his great delight. “Yes!” He cheered so loudly a couple heads turned their way. Triumph was a good look on him.

“Now you’re getting the hang of it.” Good as that was, Kirk liked having opportunities to get up close and personal handed to him so easily, so from his perspective, there was a lot to be said in favor of Oliver being clueless about pool.

“I had fun tonight,” Kirk said when he put his car in park outside Oliver’s building.

Oliver had enjoyed their second date immensely. Another victory, and it felt so good. For a while, he’d worried that Stu had permanently ruined his ability to go out with guys, but now he knew otherwise. His therapist called dates with Kirk a major milestone, and it was a relief to take back another part of his life.

“Me too. I didn’t plan this, you know. I only meant to thank you for being my hero that night.”

“The best things in life aren’t planned.” In a more serious tone, Kirk continued, “I’m glad, though. I want this to be about now.”

Oliver thought he understood. His therapist had cautioned him against viewing Kirk as anything other than a man he liked, so as not to build an impossible standard, and the warning made perfect sense. If he and Kirk were going to have anything healthy together – and he wasn’t counting on that, seeing how he was still going one step at a time, but it was an intriguing possibility – it had to be based on the present, not the past.

“It is,” he said honestly. Their shared past did make him feel better, because he knew Kirk wasn’t looking to take advantage of him, but that alone wasn’t why Oliver wanted to spend time with the man. He genuinely enjoyed Kirk’s company, and there was plenty of mutual attraction, if they way Kirk had been looking at him all night was any indication. The chemistry made for a thrilling evening, even if it had distracted him somewhat from his pool lessons. It was hard to focus on the game when he had an attractive guy standing right behind him and guiding his hands.

He wanted to see Kirk again, and had an idea what they might do. “There’s a street fair happening a few blocks over tomorrow. Would you like to come check it out with me?”

As soon as the words were out, he wondered if a date the very next day was too soon. He didn’t have a lot of dating experience to draw on. Nothing to be done about it now, though.

In the event, Kirk smiled, so Oliver guessed he hadn’t committed some dating faux pas. “Sounds great.”

“Do you mind coming here?” He could pick Kirk up, but it seemed silly when the street fair was in his neighborhood.

“Not at all. What time should I get here?”

“About noon, if that works. There’s going to be a lot of food, so you should probably arrive hungry.”

“Easy enough. The food is usually the best part of a street fair.”

“It was great last year. I hope the fried dough vendor comes back tomorrow.”

Kirk leaned in closer. Oliver deduced, from his limited experience, that his date was hoping for a goodnight kiss, and he was in agreement, so he mirrored Kirk’s movement. Yes, they were definitely going to kiss. Just before he closed his eyes, he saw a soft smile on the other man’s face which pleased him. He made Kirk happy, just being himself. It was a great feeling.

Kirk smelled of woody cologne with a hint of Thai curry. His lips were smooth, in contrast to the scruff on his chin which raked across Oliver’s skin, leaving it pleasantly sensitized as they kissed gently. There was nothing demanding in the kiss, just simple enjoyment.

When they parted, Kirk smiled again. “Night, Oliver. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Tomorrow couldn’t come soon enough for Oliver.

The fair food was delicious, to be sure, but for Kirk it was barely of interest, which was always a sign that a date was going really well. When food was the best part of a date, it meant he wasn’t too into the guy. This was not a problem with Oliver.

Having found the fried dough, Oliver purchased one for each of them. He then loaded his up with powdered sugar. Kirk put on less sugar and a touch of cinnamon. When he looked up from his snack, Oliver had a perfect circle of powdered sugar on the tip of his nose. Kirk must’ve made an amused face at the sight, because Oliver gave him a quizzical look through a mouthful of fried dough.

“Sugar on your nose,” he explained.

Oliver blushed and swiped at it. After swallowing, he asked, “Did I get it all?”

Kirk decided to take this the flirty route. “May I?” When Oliver nodded, he brushed off the rest of the errant sugar, which was a lot of fun. “There.”

“Thank you,” said Oliver, looking suitably pleased with the contact.

“No problem.” An excuse to touch Oliver was a grand thing in Kirk’s book, and he wasn’t picky about how serendipity served up the opportunity.

They munched on fried dough for a minute. It really was good, and having less sugar than Oliver, he managed to eat his more neatly. The breeze deposited a cloud of sugar on Oliver’s shirt.

“I never learn,” he said. “Every time I have fried dough, I say I’ll put less sugar next time so it’s easier to eat, but I don’t have it often enough to remember until I’ve made a mess again.”

“That’s what washing machines are for,” said Kirk.

“Priceless things. When people talk about wonders of the modern world, they mean architectural achievements, but give me household appliances any day. While I’m sure the Taj Mahal is beautiful and grandiose, it means nothing to me the way a washer and refrigerator do.”

Kirk nodded. “Speaking from personal experience, if you ever go back to the old-fashioned way, you appreciate this stuff even more.”

“I’m happy to say I’ve never slaved over an antique washboard.”

“Me neither, but I’m thinking about stoves. My dad was into camping, and every summer we’d take a family trip. Cooking over an open fire is tough. I like being able to control the heat of my stove so I don’t burn food.” Camping wasn’t for him for a long list of reasons, including the food preparation challenges.

“I think I’d miss indoor plumbing more,” said Oliver.

“That, too. There’s nothing I like about camping, except day hikes.” He’d still have gone again in a heartbeat if it meant his dad was around.

“I’ve never been.”

“You’re not missing much.” He hadn’t even gotten into the being devoured by mosquitoes angle.

Oliver licked sugar off his lips before taking another bite of fried dough. Kirk would’ve preferred to remove the sweet dust for him. “I’m inclined to take your word for it.”

They stopped to watch a living statue posing for silly photos with festival-goers. “Speaking of washing machines,” said Kirk, “I bet that guy needs a heavy duty one with all the paint on his clothes.”

“Was anyone stupid enough to cover their clothes in paint before the invention of washing machines?”

“I don’t know, but I never got the impression that rich people cared about making more work for their servants.”

“Nothing’s changed, then, aside from the technology,” said Oliver. “My brother’s a waiter at a fancy restaurant, and you wouldn’t believe the stories he has about people with more money than common courtesy.”

“I’ve had a couple cases where we went up against jackasses who thought that throwing enough money around would get IP law on their side.” Winning those cases for a client was extra satisfying.

“IP?” asked Oliver.

“Intellectual property. That’s the kind of legal work I do.”

“I hope you won those cases.”

“We did,” said Kirk.

He liked his job as much as anyone who occasionally wanted to sleep in on a Thursday morning, and it allowed him to feel that he was contributing something useful to society, but right now he had more interesting topics to consider. For instance, the way Oliver’s tongue slipped out again to mop up the last remnants of powdered sugar, and how he smiled shyly when he caught Kirk watching.

All things considered, Kirk decided food could play a bigger role in date enjoyment besides its mere consumption, and he had a new appreciation for powdered sugar.

Chapter Four

The late afternoon found them hanging out in Oliver’s kitchen, nibbling on assorted flavors of fudge they’d picked out at the fair. Between them, they’d purchased six different kinds, so they sliced off very thin pieces to try just a small sample of each.

“You can’t go wrong with peanut butter,” said Oliver. “It’s classic.”

“Not particularly exciting, though.”

“That’s what the pineapple upside down cake is for.” As he spoke, Oliver cut them each a sliver of that flavor.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had pineapple fudge before.”

“Me neither.”

Kirk accepted his fudge with the eagerness of a new adventure. It was good, a pleasant mix of sweet and tart with hints of cream. “Nice,” he said. “I’m glad there aren’t any chunks of pineapple. I like my fudge smooth.”

“It’s pretty good,” agreed Oliver. “I’m not getting the cake part as much, but that’s fine. The pineapple is what matters.”

Kirk took the knife to his chocolate covered cherry fudge and managed to cut more or less evenly, which was something of an accomplishment for him. Instead of handing the fudge over normally, he held it up to Oliver’s mouth and, after a beat, Oliver allowed himself to be fed.

He’d swear there was a little jolt of energy when his fingers brushed Oliver’s lower lip, and he abandoned the fudge altogether in favor of going in for a kiss. He got the fudge flavor anyway, but it wasn’t that important, not compared to the way Oliver reached behind his neck and pulled him in.

A number of rapid heartbeats later, the kiss moved into full-on making out, with Kirk sliding his hand around Oliver’s back to get closer. There was nothing hurried about their actions, just exploration as they got to know how their mouths fit together, which seemed to be very well indeed, especially once they found exactly the right angle.

He could feel Oliver’s fingers tighten against his neck, the pressure of their noses, and the sensual glide of tongue on tongue. Since Kirk had been admiring Oliver’s tongue earlier, he was especially happy to have personal experience with the nimble organ now.

In the back of his mind, he suspected that chocolate cherry fudge would forever be associated with making out, and he was perfectly content with this. While the fudge was good, the kissing was way more fun.

The longer they kissed, the more interest his dick took in the proceedings. Kirk wasn’t at all certain they’d get to a point involving nakedness and orgasms, which was fine. Sex was a hell of a lot of fun, but he was old enough to appreciate that sometimes it was worth waiting for.

Anticipation was sexy, if done right. All the same, automatic physiological responses being what they were, a certain amount of redirected blood flow was to be expected.

Thin chinos didn't do much to hide burgeoning erections, as Oliver noticed when they stopped for breath. "Someone's getting into it," he said.

"I can't help it," Kirk replied. "You have that effect on me."

The comment was intended to be sexy, but instead of replying in kind, or responding at all, Oliver froze and got a weird look about him. His eyes were on Kirk, but it was more like he was staring through Kirk to something else. His jaw clenched. In fact, all his muscles tensed up, as though he was waiting for something awful to happen. Everything about him shut down in a way Kirk had never seen.

It was the fastest boner-killer of Kirk's life.

Well, shit. What did I do, and how do I fix it?

Oliver had instantly gone from having a great time to being panic-stricken, and he only managed to stay upright by leaning against his counter. Meanwhile, his heart tried to set a new record for beats per minute.

Unlike the commonly held misconception that when terrified, a person has two options, fight or flight, there was in fact a third F verb on the table: freeze. When any attempt at escape was bound to be futile, and he knew full well he couldn't win in a fight because he'd learned that lesson courtesy of his middle school bullies, freezing was instinctive. If only he could fade away and be invisible, he might be safe.

It never worked.

Not again. This is supposed to be over.

“Oliver?”

It wasn't Stu's voice, so he tried to focus on the man in front of him. Kirk stood there, looking concerned and not at all like he was about to push Oliver to his knees. Stu always did that, reached out and pressed on his shoulders to signal it was time for Oliver to suck him off.

It was a flashback, then. Bad timing, but really, was there ever a good time for one? He breathed in as deeply and evenly as he could, the way he'd practiced over and over. It helped, though not as quickly as he'd have liked.

His therapist had warned him that dating was bound to bring up new triggers, though he hadn't anticipated this particular one. He hated that Stu still had so much influence over his life. It was so fucking unfair that even now, two years later, he couldn't be entirely free, and he wasn't sure if he ever would be. There was truly no justice in the universe, because Stu got to go on living his life unburdened while Oliver had to carry all the pain, agony, and PTSD from his ex's actions.

And what man was going to sign on for that? Oliver wouldn't blame Kirk for deciding he was too damaged. Maybe Stu had ruined him, after all.

“Oliver? Can I do something to help?”

He shook his head. There was nothing Kirk or anyone else could do to erase the emotional scars he carried.

“I don't know what I did, but I'm sorry,” Kirk continued. His contrition wasn't warranted, as he hadn't done anything wrong. It did help remind Oliver that he wasn't dealing with Stu anymore.

“Not your fault,” he said when he found his voice.

Kirk looked unconvinced. “I did something you didn't like.”

“It’s me. I’m fucked up, okay? I thought I could do this, but I obviously can’t.”

“Is this about him?”

Oliver nodded. “PTSD. Because it wasn’t enough to suffer when I was with him. Oh no, it’s the misery that keeps on giving.”

In the beginning, when he first left Stu, he thought he could reclaim his old life. It had been charmingly naïve of him. Removing his abusive boyfriend from his life had taken care of the immediate problem, but the imprint of trauma went far deeper and was thus much harder to root out.

“What did I do that reminded you?” asked Kirk. “So I know not to do it again.”

Oliver assumed he misheard. He was certain that displaying how terribly damaged he was would make him an unappealing prospect. Maybe he had no business dating at all, as much as he liked Kirk. Was it unfair to expect a man to put up with his issues?

“Again?” he echoed.

“Well, yeah,” said Kirk. “I’d rather not upset you if it can be avoided.”

This suggestion of future interactions came as quite a shock. “But... you mean you’re still... interested?”

“Yes.”

Kirk’s willingness to keep seeing each other surprised him, and he needed to make certain the other man knew what he was getting himself into. “I doubt that will be the last episode.”

“It’d help if you told me what set it off,” said Kirk, and though Oliver hated to get into it, the point was reasonable.

Opening up the wound was scary, and it took him a minute to gather his courage and find the words. “You told me you couldn’t help your response to me. That... that was a prelude to a blowjob, whether I wanted to give one or not.”

Because in Stu’s worldview, Oliver getting him turned on meant Oliver had to get him off, and if he hadn’t wanted to give a blowjob, he shouldn’t have done whatever it was that Stu blamed his erection on. Sometimes, that was as simple as bending over to get vegetables from the crisper.

“Fuck,” said Kirk. “I would never do that. Consent really isn’t a difficult concept.”

“You’d think.”

Oliver had tried refusing a few times, and all that ever got him was a multiday saga of manipulation until he apologized for being such a terrible boyfriend. One time, he’d even agreed to let Stu film sex as a peace offering, and while his face wasn’t visible, that video was no doubt on the internet somewhere, being jerked off to by guys who didn’t know how coerced it all had been.

“I hate that he still messes up my life,” Oliver said. “It is what it is, though. I’m better than I was, but I’m still screwed up, and I’ll understand if you don’t want to keep seeing me.”

“I’m not running away. I don’t know where we’ll go, but I’d like to find out. How about you?”

Oliver could hardly believe his ears. “Me, too.”

“Is it okay to hug you?”

He stepped forward into Kirk’s embrace. Maybe in the end Kirk would decide he couldn’t handle Oliver’s PTSD, or they could not work for a hundred other prosaic reasons, but for the moment it was enough to know that his trauma hadn’t rendered him automatically

undatable. The knowledge felt like hope, and he stored it away in his heart for strength against future challenges.

Hindsight being twenty-twenty, Kirk ought to have expected Oliver's past to rear its head at some point. He felt absolutely awful about sending Oliver into a PTSD episode, even if he rationally understood he hadn't done anything wrong. It still hurt to know his words caused Oliver to freeze up.

And how heartbreaking was it that Oliver believed his trauma automatically disqualified him as a dating prospect? He was more than a PTSD diagnosis. He was a good conversationalist and a cute guy with whom Kirk was having a lot of fun, and absolutely someone Kirk wanted to keep seeing.

No, Kirk had never been the type to cut and run at the first sign of a complication, and he wasn't about to start now. It wasn't like he was making a lifetime commitment, but a fourth date was desirable, for sure. As well as a fifth and a sixth, for that matter.

He trailed Oliver to the couch. "The adrenaline crash after a flashback can be rough," explained Oliver, looking a bit worse for wear.

Kirk felt very unequipped to deal with the situation he'd inadvertently created. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No magic fix, unfortunately." Oliver gave him a trepidatious look, as though he half expected Kirk to change his mind and run for the hills any minute now.

Lacking an insightful response but sure he had to say something, Kirk went with the first topic which came to mind. "Do you like barbecue? My friend has been waxing poetic about the ribs at the new barbecue place on Seventeenth Street."

It wasn't going to win him Emotionally Astute Comment of the Year, but it worked, because Oliver smiled. "That sounds good," he said. "I can't remember the last time I had barbecue brisket."

"Next Saturday for lunch? My friend said they sometimes start to run out by dinner."

"Sounds like they need to make more, but yes, lunch is good. Maybe we could get in some more pool practice?"

"That'd be fun," said Kirk, who intended to find lots of excuses to offer very close, personal tutoring.

"So you know," Oliver paused and looked away before he managed to make something nearing eye contact. "Blowjobs aren't entirely off the table. I'm reclaiming my life. The process takes longer than I'd like, but I am doing it, and that most definitely includes sex."

This was good news because, while Kirk didn't insist on sex immediately, he wasn't signing up for celibacy. In fact, the thought hadn't even occurred to him.

"Good thing," he said. "I like sex. I don't mean it has to be right now, but, you know, eventually. Think I'll leave that ball in your court, though." God knew he didn't want to set off another flashback.

"Thank you. I really appreciate how well you're handling all this."

"I like you." And when someone decent liked another person, they treated that person with kindness and respect. Kirk didn't think he'd done anything particularly worthy of praise, but then again, Oliver's last relationship had been horrifically short on kindness and respect, so he wasn't used to receiving either.

Oliver smiled. "I'm glad, since I think you're pretty great, too."

Anyone would like to hear such a sentiment, and Kirk was no exception. He didn't know much about this PTSD business – okay, he didn't know anything about it – but he knew chemistry, attraction, and the excitement of promising dates, and he recognized all three here, so he wanted to keep exploring the connection he felt with Oliver. It wasn't every day he met a man with whom talking about nothing in particular was so much fun, and he wasn't about to give it up when they'd barely started.

When Oliver moved in closer, Kirk realized kissing was still an option at present. He hadn't known how soon after a flashback he might be kissable, so this was encouraging.

It was a soft kiss, the complete opposite of their earlier making out but no less enjoyable. There was a different kind of intimacy in it because Oliver had shared his vulnerability, and Kirk vowed that he would never, ever give the other man a reason to regret it.

If Kirk had made any indication of intent to exploit Oliver's weakness, Oliver would have shown him the door, but that didn't happen. *Because he's a good man*, thought Oliver. *This is how it's supposed to be.*

It was great to sit on the couch and kiss, especially knowing that Kirk was neither scared off by nor looking to take advantage of his PTSD. There was nothing heated about their contact, and that was nice, too. It was good to be wanted for more than his body.

The problem with trauma was, by nature, its inescapability. There was no way to run from demons he carried inside himself, and Oliver had given up trying. He could only face them and vanquish them, one at a time, until they stayed firmly in his past where they couldn't intrude on the present any longer. At least, he hoped to eventually reach such a state. Right now the demons still made appearances, if not as often as they had two years or even six months ago.

He hadn't shut down for long, this time. Just a few minutes after the flashback he was able to enjoy a leisurely series of kisses, and that was huge. The normalcy was what he'd been working towards for the past two years.

When Kirk smiled at him, his face mere inches away, Oliver asked, "Have I told you how good you look with facial hair?"

"I have to shave for court days, but I'm glad you like it. The full beard isn't my thing, but I like to think the scruff makes me ruggedly sexy."

He wasn't so sure about rugged, but sexy fit the bill. "It's hot."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," said Kirk as he leaned in for another kiss.

Oliver felt more tension leave his body. He was recovering from a flashback in record time, and Kirk wanted to keep seeing him. Those demons didn't seem so insurmountable anymore.

The End