

Chivalry
By Bradley Lloyd

Seth was flirting with disaster when he picked up his cell phone. He knew that. He knew that, but he did it anyway. He did it the moment he got into his car, before he even turned on the ignition. The green display on the phone read Thursday, March 22, 8:34 PM.

He recognized Kilian's hollow voice after two rings: "Hello?" Only two rings. What did that mean? Eagerness?

"Hey Kilian," Seth said, trying to sound low-key, but thinking he sounded too eager himself.

"Seth, hey. I'm glad you called. I was gonna call you today, but I didn't yet." The wording was almost funny, and Seth clenched his teeth slightly. Sure, Kilian—sure you were going to call. After a pause, Kilian spoke again: "What's going on?"

Seth made an effort to use his casual tones. "Not much. Just got done with class. Was wondering what you were up to tonight."

"I was going to call and ask you the same thing. Are you going out tonight or what?"

"Yeah, I was kinda planning on it, though the boyfriend is out of town—so are a lot of my friends. That's why I'm calling you." The boyfriend is out of town—should he have said that? And why did he say "the boyfriend." Why not say "James?" What did that mean? Why had he said it that way?

"I think I'm going over to Woody's if you want to come." Of course—Woody's. That was Kilian's place.

"Woody's again? 2 for 1 craziness?"

"Yeah, exactly."

"Okay," said Seth, making sure he didn't respond too quickly. "What time are you headed out?"

"I have to drop something off at a friend's, and then I'm free after that."

"So what time do you think?"

"It shouldn't take me too long. Look, since we live so close, do you want to go together?"

Good one, Kilian. Since we live so close, eh?

Seth paused. Give an excuse, or go together? What excuse could he give? Hell, why not go together? “Sure,” he said, “but I just got done with class, and I worked before that. I need to go home and freshen up.” *Freshen up*. Wasn’t that what you said when you go to the bathroom just before you know you’re going to have sex? What movie had he seen that in? Some Cary Grant film, maybe.

“Alright.” Kilian said. “How does an hour sound?”

An hour was not good. “That should be just about perfect.” Shit. He’d really have to hurry if he was going to get home, shower and clean his apartment.

“OK, I’ll see you about 9:30 then,” Kilian said.

“Sounds good.” 9:30? Who in their right mind goes out that early? They’d be drunk by eleven, for sure.

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Seth was examining himself in the mirror for about the seventh time, wearing the black shoes, the blue jeans, and the tight black shirt that he had picked out the day before. The outfit was one of those closet discoveries—a particular arrangement of things that you knew you had, but you’d never discovered how damn good you looked in them before. The pants were the ones that James had given him a couple months before for his birthday. He hadn’t worn them very much, but there had been a silver ring in the pocket that he was wearing on the ring finger of his left hand, as he did every day. The pants were okay, but it was the shirt that definitely made the outfit. It was very well-fitted. No creases anywhere. It accentuated Seth’s chest, flattened his stomach, put a very distinct arch in his back and broadened his shoulders. That’s what a good shirt should do. Plus, the black shoes, the black shirt—they made his features look even darker than they were. A good shirt wasn’t just good for the upper body; a good shirt turned your eyes into penetrating tools. It combined with his dark hair and the short stubble on his face to frame his blue eyes—his best feature—perfectly.

The phone rang. It was lying on the bed. The display read 9:32.

Kilian spoke before Seth even said hello. “Hey. I just came from my friend’s. I have to drop something else off at another place on the way to Woody’s, is that cool?” Kilian talked

loudly, trying to overpower the woman who was belting out a power-diva tune on his car stereo.

“Sure.”

“I’m almost at your place now.”

“OK. Do you want me to meet you outside, or do you want to come in quick for a pre-beer?” Inviting him in already—was that too forward? Maybe he should just say into the phone, “Kilian, how about we don’t play games anymore. How about you just get in here so we can fuck already?” And this time, he’d show Kilian how good he could be. But that was nonsense. He’d purposefully not shaved his chest tonight just so he would have a reminder not to get in over his head, not to do anything stupid.

He wasn’t the kind of guy who would cheat on his boyfriend, nor would James cheat on him. It had been hard when he had dropped James off at the airport early on Sunday morning. Seth had pictured a romantic goodbye, but the crowds of people had made that too uncomfortable. It wasn’t like in the movies. But he had hugged James. They had exchanged *I love you*’s. And just before he had driven away, Seth held up his hand against the car window, his pinky, index finger and thumb extended. A final “I love you.” It was how James had first told Seth he loved him, without really saying it. James was always afraid of being a little too forward—the first one to say it only two weeks after they met. But that was what he liked about James. He was open. Only at the airport, James hadn’t seen the gesture. He probably had his mind on sandy Florida beaches already. That had hurt a little, caused some uncertainty. He couldn’t cheat on James. But this—shit, how far would this go?

“Actually, on second thought, just meet me outside,” Seth said.

“All right, see you in a second.”

Seth stuck the phone in his pocket, and put his jacket on. He looked in the full-length mirror one more time, just to make sure the jacket was working with the outfit. He flicked off the bedroom light, went to the kitchen, and took a sip from his nearly full glass of merlot. So much for the image of sophistication that went with a glass of red wine. Why did he even bother to clean the apartment if Kilian wasn’t coming in?

He grabbed the smoking stick of incense from the incense holder on the kitchen counter, and extinguished it under the faucet. One more sip of wine, a check of his pockets to make sure

he had everything, and he was out the door, locking it securely behind him.

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Kilian's car was pulling up to the apartment complex when Seth walked outside. The gold four-door luxury car did a U-turn in the road in front of him, and stopped at the curb right before him. Seth appreciated the curb-side service.

"Hey. How's it going?" Kilian said as Seth got in the car.

"Pretty good. You?" Seth said, consciously casual yet again.

"Good."

Kilian was wearing a gray sweater and black pants. A nice sweater—it rose a bit at his chest. Seth remembered that chest, the feel of it, the way the hair had been trimmed very short. It had even been tanned, and that was back in October—or was it early November? Kilian was slender, and had the kind of chest Seth went for. Not too much muscle, but flat and toned. Sort of like James.

"You're lookin' good," Seth ventured, always quick with the complements. That's one of the things that probably made him endearing to most people, even people like Kilian. "I like your new hair-cut, too. Not too short. Very trendy."

Kilian looked at him and smiled. Blue eyes. White teeth. "Thanks. It's funny, because I have to stop at my hair dresser's on the way, and I didn't get it cut with him this time."

"Uh-oh. That's awkward." But typical of Kilian's odd hijinks, Seth thought. Some might even call it drama, but Seth was amused.

"What do you want to listen to?" Kilian asked.

"Ah. Have you been having fun with Napster again today?"

Kilian laughed. By the time the Jackson Five had finished a second tune, they were at their destination—though Seth wasn't quite sure where that was. It was just a middle class house in a not-great but not-terrible neighborhood.

"I just have to run in real quick," Kilian said. Was Seth just supposed to wait in the car?

There was a moment of awkwardness, before Seth decided he'd just ask. "Okay. Cool. Do you want me to wait here, or should I come in with you?"

"No, you can come in if you want."

He got out of the car, and followed Kilian to the shabby-ish porch of the house. A blonde boy in his early twenties, close to their age, answered the door. He had shaggy hair and thick glasses—a very cool look, Seth thought. Kilian certainly had some stylish friends.

The stranger invited them in, and Kilian introduced him.

“Seth, this is Garret. Garret, Seth.” He shook Garret’s hand.

“Come on in,” said Garret. “Have a seat.”

The home had hardwood floors and some very cool retro furniture. This was his kind of place, Seth thought. He sucked in slightly, trying to impress, even though he had no clue if the guy—Garret—was gay.

Kilian pulled a bag of pot out of his pocket. Of course. Just like Kilian to take Seth on a drug deal, and not even tell him. It was probably stuff Kilian’s roommates had grown. Garret sat down in a chair, Kilian on a love seat. Seth was going to sit on the remaining chair nearest the door, but it was occupied by a large white cat, so he stood awkwardly.

“Oh, awesome,” Garret said. “Finally.” He handed Kilian a wad of cash. “Do you guys want to try some?”

“Sure,” said Kilian. So was this Kilian’s plan? Bring Seth to a place where he could smoke him up again, get him high, just like the last time things had occurred between them? Fuck that.

Seth stared at the white cat in the chair. The cat returned his stare, meowed, and hopped down. Things were not going to get out of control this time. He sat down in the vacated chair.

“None for me, thanks” Seth said calmly.

“Are you sure?” Garret asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“I’ll have his, then,” Kilian laughed. He was continually stoned, but was looking rather bright-eyed at the moment.

Garret packed the bud into a glass pipe, and lit a flame to the weed. The familiar, pungent aroma penetrated Seth’s nostrils.

Kilian and Garret made small talk about Kilian’s hair, their voices taking on the familiar, hollow tones of people getting high. Seth just watched. He wasn’t even uncomfortable, really. He

wasn't even mad. Why wasn't he mad? Maybe it no longer surprised him. Maybe, after last time, Kilian couldn't surprise him anymore. Funny, but Seth found it all kind of amusing.

Two minutes later they left, Kilian now certainly relaxed and talking freely. The Jackson Five started up again as Kilian maneuvered the car out into the street. Funny how Kilian could drive when he was high. Seth would never get behind the wheel stoned. Why was it that all of the trendy people in this city smoked pot? There were certainly much cooler drugs. Drugs that made you feel good without messing up your mind, making you feel stupid. Paranoid.

"So, this is your new job, Kilian, eh?" Seth joked, smiling.

"No." Kilian laughed. "This is just something for my roommates. I actually went on an interview today. That's why I'm dressed like this."

"I love your look. Very sharp." And by sharp, he meant hot. "How did it go?"

"Good, but it's sales, and I've never sold a fucking thing in my life, you know? It sounds like I can have the job if I want it. So much for my degree in film." There was a long pause. "Oh, and get this. My boss would be younger than me. He's twenty-one. It's an internet start-up business. Metrofoods-dot-com. I'd be selling space to restaurants."

"Sounds interesting."

"Yeah, but I don't know."

Seth gave a sympathetic laugh. "One reason I'm glad I'm in grad school is that it prolongs the real world. Anyway, could you still collect unemployment? How official is this job?"

"It's totally legit. We'll see. I go in for role-playing tomorrow." Kilian laughed. "That sounds so kinky." Kilian could be funny when he was high. Very free-flowing. Like now. He wasn't a bad guy. He seemed like it sometimes, but really he wasn't.

"It's kind of cool your boss is young," Seth said. "I take it he wouldn't care if you smoked up on the job?"

Kilian laughed again. "Yeah. Though I was really good today. I didn't smoke at all before my interview."

Seth laughed more loudly than before. "Good for you, Kilian," he said. He realized that he laughed mostly because he felt suddenly awkward. All this talk about drugs was making him

slightly uncomfortable. Perhaps he should make some sort of apology or excuse for his sobriety.

“I wish I could enjoy pot like you,” Seth said. Funny how he could turn a vice into a compliment. “I just don’t get it. I don’t have good experiences when I’m on it.” Yeah. Bad experiences. That’s something Kilian should know about.

“Seriously, I wish I didn’t smoke so much. I want a reason to quit. Maybe if I met the right guy or something.” Kilian lit a cigarette.

“I won’t do pot, but I will have one of those,” he said, gesturing to Kilian’s pack of Parliaments. Kilian handed them over with a lighter. Seth lit one and opened the window a crack. It was cold out. He took a drag on the cigarette. It felt good. He hadn’t smoked in nearly two months. He flicked the cigarette ash out the window and put his left hand on the armrest—or at least, where there should have been an armrest. Without looking, he’d instead nearly put his hand right on Kilian’s. Oh hell. That would have been awkward. Did Kilian see? “Brr,” Seth said, covering the gesture and closing his arms around his thin jacket.

“Here, let me turn this up for you,” said Kilian, leaning over and turning on the heat full blast. What would Kilian call that? Chivalry? That was the word Kilian had used to describe Seth and his no sex rule, the one Kilian had discovered when he took him home for a night of drunken, high, awkward fumblings. Fumblings. Not sex. That was the last time Seth had smoked pot.

Silence. Seth needed to fill it. “How is Star?” he asked.

“She’s good. We’re gonna be roommates.”

“Really? That’s awesome. I didn’t know you were moving out.”

“Yeah. Well. My roommates think I’m a bitch.”

“Really?”

“Well—we worked it out, but I’m still going to move out.”

“How do you feel about living with your best friend?”

“I think it’ll be great. We get along so well.”

“Right. But you know, sometimes they say that friends don’t make good roommates.”

“I think we’ll be fine.”

“Yeah. She was really cool. You should bring her out sometime. I haven’t seen her since

the night you and I first met.” She *was* really cool. That’s why Seth had trusted her. Trusted her when she took him aside and asked him if he was the type of person that went out to the bars just looking to hook-up. Because, she said, Kilian wasn’t like that at all. Kilian had been hurt by that in the past, she had said. Seth had thought it was impressive how she protected Kilian. She made quite the impression. And, Seth had believed her. Now he knew better. He knew how Kilian really was. Did she know? Had she just been saying that? Or did Kilian hide things even from his own best friend?

“And how is Ted?” Seth asked, after another moment of silence.

“Oh.” Kilian laughed. “Ted. I don’t know. I haven’t really talked to him in a week.”

“You don’t know, eh? What do you mean you don’t know? Are you lacking closure?”

Kilian smiled. “Well, he saw me out last Saturday, and he was like, touching me and rubbing my back and stuff, and I just kind of avoided him. Then he called me on Monday but I wasn’t around. Well, I was but I didn’t answer. He left a message and I was like, should I call? And so I called him on Wednesday and chatted for a few minutes. He was like, ‘When can I see you again?’ and I was like, ‘I don’t know. I’m really busy looking for a job and stuff.’”

“Do you think he got the hint?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what I want.”

“What about Dan?”

“Dan said he’d stop by tonight at Woody’s, but I don’t know about him either.”

“How many times have you guys fucked?”

“Twice.” That’s one more time than Seth got—though technically, he and Kilian hadn’t really fucked.

“Dan seems like a nice guy to me,” Seth said, though he wasn’t sure why he was encouraging any relationship. Maybe he was just playing devil’s advocate. “And you’re right. He was out Saturday without his shirt on, and he does have a nice, tight little body.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know.”

“You don’t have to know, Kilian.”

“But I feel bad. I mean, I was going to tell Ted something. Like, my ex came back into town, and I don’t think I’m over him yet. Maybe I’ll use that one on Dan. But I’ve used that a

lot.”

That asshole. Seth couldn't help smiling. “Yeah, Kilian, you used that one on me . . .”

Kilian grinned, but looked slightly guilty. “Whoops. I can only use it so many times, you know? I don't know. I just don't want to be mean.”

“Do you think you're being nice by keeping these guys wondering what's up? Why not just be straight with them? So to speak, anyway.”

“I just don't think I'd really like to date either of them right now.”

“That's understandable. Why don't you tell them that?”

“And give what excuse?”

Seth laughed again. “That is your excuse, Kilian. Dan does seem like a nice guy, though. Does he let you smoke up?”

“Yeah. I smoked a bowl at his house the other day.”

“Well, that's a plus.”

Kilian frowned. “He's nice, but is he dateable? I have to give him his DVDs back. I should do that tonight, and then he doesn't have an excuse to come over. I just don't want to be mean.” How many times had Kilian said that phrase? Three times? Four?

“Dan gets it, I think,” Seth said, a little shortly. “He doesn't care about commitment, so you don't have to be afraid. Wasn't he looking for a random hook-up when you met him online? I don't think you have to worry about hurting him. He's happy with the decisions he's made. Or, at least it seems to me like he has the self-confidence to not care and move on with things, either way.” Kind of like himself. Though he did care, once. He'd be fooling himself if he said he didn't. Fuck, he'd even made a silly fantasy where he and Kilian would go walking on the trail by his grandmother's house, outside of the city. Walking in the woods, to the railroad bridge, where the moon would be full, and they'd share a first kiss. At his spot. Instead, he had let himself be lured back to Kilian's apartment at bar close under the guise of getting high, only to end up sharing cotton-mouthed blow jobs on Kilian's bed. He had been so fucking naive.

“And How's James?” Kilian asked.

Finally, the name was spoken. Seth sighed. He could see James in his mind. It wasn't the features so much as the stare. James had this way of looking at Seth. It was like James could see

into Seth's eyes, see expressions in them, and words. "He's good. He called me last night. He's having a really good time in Florida."

"Do you miss him?"

"I think so. I don't know whether to be happy or sad. Yeah, I miss him. He was excited about going, though, and he's having a good time."

"And you didn't want to go with?"

"Well, even if I could afford it, I guess I'd rather go somewhere other than Florida. I mean, sitting on the beach getting a tan isn't my style. It's nice, but I guess I'd rather spend my money on other things, you know?"

"Yeah. Agreed."

"His parents have a condo there, though, so . . . I don't know. It would be cheap."

Kilian flicked his cigarette out the window, took out his pipe, packed some bud in it, and smoked up. Right there in the car. Christ, that was ballsy. Inconsiderate. So why wasn't Seth mad? It was all just so . . . amusing. He might not be on vacation, but Kilian was giving him a strange little adventure, nonetheless.

Seth smiled. "Even though I don't like pot, I do want to get high and look at stereocards. Using my stereopticon stoned would be so cool. You'll have to smoke me up in my apartment sometime." Shit, he hoped that wasn't an invitation for tonight. Not tonight. He couldn't get high. He wanted to stay in control. And anyway, he had to work in the morning. "Stereocards are one of the few activities I might enjoy high, I think." He emphasized the *few* so that it would add a little closure to the discussion.

Kilian laughed. "I enjoy a lot of activities high."

"I know you do."

"I love to give blowjobs when I'm high. I don't know. Maybe you don't remember."

Shit. He couldn't believe Kilian was bringing this up.

"Yeah," Seth said. "I remember. I wasn't that high." He smiled, nervous but relieved to give an excuse for why he hadn't been good enough that night. "I don't know. I just don't get it. My mouth gets all dry. Making out. Everything. It's just all . . . slimy. I need saliva. Pot is not conducive to good sex for me. It's certainly not my best work."

Damn. That was an apology if ever there was one. Why didn't he just say, "Hey, Kilian. That night we screwed around. I know it sucked. I can do better. I will do better, next time."

Despite Seth's initial intentions, he'd been cool about the whole affair when it had taken place five months ago. No dating. Fine. He let Kilian know that he got it. He even made the offer of going home with Kilian the following week after it had all happened, only Kilian had turned him down. That was the biggest blow. Kilian might as well have said, "Sorry Seth, you sucked last week, and you aren't worth my time anymore." Even then, Seth had played it smart. Maintained sporadic casual contact, but not too much, not so that it could be misconstrued. And then, a few weeks ago, when Kilian was high at Seth's apartment on a very infrequent visit, just as he was leaving, just before one of his perfectly timed exits, he had said it. "I really screwed up with you."

They pulled up to Woody's. Seth pulled his phone out of his pocket. It was 10:04. "Remind me that I'm leaving my phone in your car," Seth said, wanting to keep the unencumbered fit of his jeans. "I don't want to forget it."

"You mean just in case you hook up with one of your random tricks?"

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Woody's was not as full as it had been last week, when Seth had come to the bar for the first time. Only then he had come with James, and Kilian was on his first date with Dan. The old, drunk man in the big, red shirt wasn't there either. Big Red, Kilian had called him. Big Red had seriously been hitting on Kilian, challenging him and a partner to a game of pool. Dan didn't play pool, so Seth had been Kilian's partner instead. Kilian was in top form, making fun of the old guy who was too drunk to realize it. One witty, ambiguously debasing quip after another. Kilian was good at that. Putting people down. With words. With actions. So who would he put down tonight?

They walked on the wooden floor past wooden tables to the back of the bar and the pool tables, where a group of twenty-somethings were working on a pitcher. Two guys in particular stood out. Good clothes. Good hair. Kilian certainly did have trendy friends. Kilian introduced them, before turning to Seth.

"So, what do you want?" Kilian asked.

“I don’t know.” Seth started to pull out his wallet, but Kilian put his hand on his arm, stopping him.

“That’s OK. I got it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah I’m sure. That unemployment check comes every Tuesday.” Kilian smiled. He had a perfect smile. Dazzling, even. Though “dazzling” didn’t seem a proper descriptor for a smile when said smile was in a smoke-filled saloon like Woody’s.

“I don’t know, it’s two for one. Get me whatever you’re getting,” Seth said.

Kilian stared at him, smiling. Okay, sure—it was dazzling.

“Miller Lite?” Seth offered, and Kilian walked off to get him his drink. Yes, chivalrous.

Once again, they played pool, and he was partnered up with Kilian. Interesting how that was always assumed. He made small talk with Kilian’s friends, even though he kept forgetting their names. But no matter. He was comfortable in situations like this. He could play social butterfly. Especially when he looked as good as he did.

Pool gave him plenty of opportunity to stretch across the table, too—though Seth had to admit the game wasn’t really his thing. He was more of the sit-down-at-a-table-and-talk person, actually. He wasn’t great at pool, but who was once they started getting drunk? Besides, pool gave them something to do, an excuse to not really talk about anything in particular and fill the spaces of conversations with passing remarks such as “It’s your turn,” and “Are we stripes or solids?”

The good thing about meeting people at a bar is that after a few drinks, the awkwardness goes away, even if you still don’t know the people around you, and you keep forgetting their names. You can crack jokes and be casual, without having to give two shits about them. It was funny. This whole thing was funny. Seth was completely amused by this whole situation.

It was about 11:30 when Dan stopped by. He brought a group of friends, all of them quickly introduced and their names immediately forgotten. But Dan was smiling, and certainly remembered Seth from last week. After hugging Kilian, he came up to Seth and hugged him as well. Dan even asked where James was.

“Do you want those DVDs back?” was one of the first things Kilian said to Dan. “I have

them in my car.” They walked out of the bar.

Seth was having a good time, but Kilian wasn’t as on-the-ball as he had been the week before. He wondered why. No Big Red for him to make fun of? Or was he simply playing it cool in front of his friends, who hadn’t been here last week? Or, and perhaps Seth was just being grandiose in thinking this, was it because James had been here last week? Was Kilian at his edgy best because Seth had brought his boyfriend along, and Kilian was jealous? Making sharp quips and smiling because it was all he could do to take the edge off? Maybe it was indeed grandiose. Or maybe not. There was a moment last week when they were playing pool, safely out of earshot of James and Dan, when Kilian had grabbed his arm and said, laughingly, “I say we let James and Dan go home together, and you can come home with me.” How to respond to that? A joke? Seth had laughed. No response. Just laughing.

Kilian and Dan walked back into the bar, rejoining the group.

Dan was smiling. Every time he saw Dan, Dan was smiling. “I have to go,” Dan said.

Had something happened? “Already?”

“Yeah. It’s my friend’s birthday, and we’re taking him out.”

“Oh. That’s cool,” Seth said. “I hope you guys have a good time.”

“Yeah, Seth. Thanks. It was really nice seeing you again.”

“Yeah, you too.”

“Say hi to James for me. I’m sure I’ll see you guys around.”

“Definitely.”

If something had happened, Dan was putting up a good front. Likely, though, nothing happened. Kilian wasn’t the type to lay it on the line. At least, not until months afterwards. Dan was OK. Even if Kilian and Dan were just hooking up, Dan was still—well—chivalrous. The week before, when Big Red had been getting a little too brazen in his flirtations with Kilian, Kilian had turned to Seth and said, “Help me!” Or he had mouthed it, anyway. Seth hadn’t heard the words, but maybe Big Red had. Seth hadn’t known quite what to do, so he just kept playing pool. Was this some ruse, just so he’d have a chance to step in and show Kilian some loving, fake that he was his boyfriend? Rescue him, so to speak, so that any affectionate action on his part would be excusable under the circumstances? What could James say to Seth if Seth was only

helping out his friend? “Help me,” Kilian had mouthed again. And Dan had seen it. He saw it, and walked right up to Kilian and kissed him. Chivalry. Dan had rescued two people.

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It was only midnight, and Seth was pleasantly drunk. Everyone had left. He and Kilian were the last to leave. But nothing was being said. Funny, but he was comfortable with silence now. What did that mean?

“Well, should we head out?” Kilian asked finally.

Shit. He could play the affable past fling, he could laugh off hidden innuendoes, he could play the social butterfly. But now he had no role. So what now?

“Yeah, I suppose.” Seth said. “What time is it?” he asked, knowing full well what time it was.

“12:05.”

“Man, it’s early. I could go home and go to bed right now and still get eight hours sleep.” Shit. That’s right, Seth. Tell him you aren’t ready for bed yet.

On the way out, one of the older men at the bar smiled at them, a guy with gray hair who was obviously drunk and aiming too high. “Thanks for coming to Woody’s,” he said. “Come back again some time. You boys have a good night.”

Kilian said nothing. He wasn’t the type that would speak to someone like that, unless he could make fun of him somehow. Seth, though, replied to the stranger. “Thanks. You have a good night, too.” He was polite to old guys. Of course, inebriated old men had no chance with him, but that didn’t mean he had to be rude. Besides, it was flattering, really. An ego trip.

On the drive home, all was silence for several minutes except for the Jackson Five. Kilian took out his pipe again. “Sure you don’t want some?” Kilian asked.

“No. I would, but I have to work tomorrow. At Nine. I do an eleven hour day tomorrow. A long one. And I hate residuals when I’m working. I screw up on people’s orders.” And seriously, do you think I’d fall for the same trick twice, you ignorant bastard?

But shit. The time was coming to make a decision. He had a few minutes left, maybe. Invite him in, or not? Seth was a nice guy. It was his hospitable obligation to offer, wasn’t it? It didn’t mean anything. It meant only that he was being nice. Polite. It’s something that he did for

everyone. It was a common line. “Do you want to come in for anything?” Could he say that?

“When do you have to be up?” Seth asked.

“Ten o’clock.”

“For your role playing?”

“No, for my morning hit before *The Price is Right*.” They both laughed. “My role playing is in the afternoon. Role playing. That cracks me up.” Kilian had a fit of stifled laughter.

They turned onto Seth’s street. Shit, shit, shit. This was it. What would he say? If he waited until he was dropped off in front of the building before he invited Kilian in, he’d have an out. There was no parking there. There was usually no parking through to the end of the street. Kilian would probably go home, just because he’d be past all of the parking. Maybe.

Fuck it. Fuck him. “So, do you want to come in for anything?” Anything? Maybe he should be more specific. “A beer. Look at stereocards?”

So he’d done it, after all. How stupid was he? If James were doing this in Florida—and the thought had crossed Seth’s mind on more than one occasion this week—Seth would kill him. Oh, who was he kidding? Hell, he’d probably just cry. And then what?

“Um, sure, I can do that,” said Kilian, sounding surprisingly casual. He pulled into an empty parking spot before the building. Seth grabbed his phone from under the seat. It was 12:16. Pretty early for a random trick. Or a not so random one.

Seth got out of the car and got out his keys. If James ever cheated on him, Seth would leave him. Cheating showed a complete and utter lack of respect for the other person. Especially with him and James, since they didn’t have protected sex. He had made James wait, and get an HIV test with him before he’d have sex with him. Cheating would mean bringing someone else into their bed. It would mean endangering the other person.

And James was so emotional, he wouldn’t be able to lie about it. He couldn’t hide anything behind those eyes of his. James would be the type of person who, if he did cheat, would have to tell Seth about it. James was very honest that way.

On the other hand, James loved Seth a hell of a lot. Almost selfishly. James wouldn’t do or say anything if it meant losing Seth. James said all the time that Seth was the best thing to ever happen to him. So, if James did cheat, maybe he wouldn’t say anything to Seth, after all.

Seth unlocked the door to his building, and held it open for Kilian. James probably wouldn't cheat. He had been through his slut stage. And there was no doubting the feeling behind James's eyes when he'd say "I love you." And Seth—he was not the cheating type, either. Even if he did have doubts about his relationship with James, he would at least end it before he let anything else happen. That was the right thing to do. And besides, it was only natural to have doubts, wasn't it? Sure he had doubts. But then—there were also those moments when he'd look at James and all those doubts would disappear. If he did cheat, and he wanted to stay with James, he would never say anything. That would be his mistake to bear. His guilty secret. Why hurt the other person just to unburden yourself? It would be selfish. Wouldn't it?

He walked down the hall, and unlocked his apartment. Good thing he had cleaned it, after all. He had even made the bed, which was only a twin bed. When James slept over, Seth usually pulled out the sleeper bed in the vintage couch. When Kilian had first seen his apartment about a month ago, the only words of criticism he had were, "You need a bigger bed." Yes, that was certainly true. Why hadn't he gotten one?

Seth flipped the light switch. "Do you want a beer or something?"

"Hmmm. I don't know. What are you having?"

He gestured to the glass of wine, which was still sitting on the counter. "I was enjoying that when you got here."

"Fancy," Kilian said. "Yeah, a beer would be fine." Seth walked to the fridge, grabbed a Miller Lite, twisted the top off, and handed the bottle to Kilian. The kitchen led directly to the living room area, separated only by a counter.

"Have a seat," he said to Kilian. Kilian sat on the 50s green vinyl couch that was the center of his living room, leaving plenty of space for Seth to join him. Very smooth.

Seth walked over to the small stereo on the floor. He selected something random, and realized he was bending over, right in front of Kilian's eyes.

"I have a shirt just like that," said Kilian. "Only it's not a v-neck. I don't wear it though. I don't think I can pull it off like you can."

Was that a come-on, or a compliment? He had been waiting all night for someone to say something about that shirt. Seth was always free with his compliments. Why couldn't others be

as well?

The music was playing—a fairly mellow selection—as Seth stood up and turned around. Kilian had moved all the way over to one side of the couch, and the space next to him seemed absolutely gaping.

“You can pull the shirt off, Kilian,” Seth said, before realizing it sounded like he was giving Kilian permission. Christ, that’s not what he meant. He quickly tried to cover. “You don’t give yourself enough credit. You have a very nice body.” Kilian had the perfect body, really. All those months ago, that had been Seth’s one consolation. Kilian had been the hottest guy he’d ever slept with. That’s why, even though it wasn’t his style, he would have slept with Kilian again in a second if Kilian had wanted him again. That, and he wanted to erase the memory of the first time. The memory of thinking he could just get high with Kilian and have a good time, just being loose and talking. The memory of walking up the stairs to Kilian’s bedroom as time stood still, realizing that he was way too fucking high. The memory of thinking he’d just sit in a chair and talk, so nothing would happen, but then discovering that there was no chair to sit in, only a bed to lie on. The memory of his wanting to get the hell out of there, to just drive home, but realizing he was far too drunk and far too high. The memory of him asking Kilian, as they lay naked in bed, “So, I bet you do this with all the guys, don’t you?” And Kilian saying, almost laughing, “Look. I’m young. I just got out of a relationship.”

Time moves slowly when you’re high. Time moves even more slowly when you know you’ve been played, you can’t fall asleep, and the digital clock glows red every minute until morning finally arrives.

But fuck Kilian. Seth had stood his ground in some respects. They didn’t have sex. Not technically. And he had met James, who was Kilian’s equal in hotness. So it was all good, right?

Seth grabbed his glass of wine from the counter. Kilian’s bedroom hadn’t had a chair, but Seth’s apartment did. It was brown and green, a piece from the late sixties. He sat in the chair, which was pretty far from where Kilian was sitting.

“I cannot fill out a shirt like that,” Kilian said.

Kilian had been with a lot of people. Fucked them, up the ass, in the head. It seemed strange that he would have a self-image problem. Sad, really. Kilian did look good. Seth felt like

telling him, “Well, that’s the way I like you.”

Kilian stood up. “Do you mind if I smoke?” he asked.

“No. Not at all. I’ll join you. Just open the window.”

Kilian stood up and turned his back to Seth, facing the far wall while he opened the window. Seth watched Kilian move. Kilian wasn’t buff exactly, but that made him Seth’s type. He was always well dressed, his clothes fit well, not too loose or overly tight. As Kilian removed the security rods from the window, Seth saw the body beneath the clothes, beneath the gray sweater and the black pants. Even his ass was perfect. He could still remember the way it looked, the way it felt, the way Kilian had moved under his touch. Kilian would have been a good fuck, he was sure of it, if he had let Kilian have his way that night.

The window was open, but Seth was a bit too drunk to feel the chill. Not that drunk, though. He still had his wits about him. He finished the last of the wine in his glass, and went behind the counter to pour another.

“So, how are things with you and James?” Kilian asked, lighting a cigarette.

“They’re good. He treats me really well.”

“That’s cool.”

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t know where it’s going yet, but I’m enjoying it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean . . . I don’t know. I mean, I don’t know how it’ll turn out yet, I guess.” He returned to his seat in the chair. Kilian was standing in the middle of the room, the smoke from his cigarette trailing toward the open window.

“You don’t think it will last?” Kilian walked over to Seth, handed him a lit cigarette, and sat down on the arm of the couch closest to the chair. Shit. Was he moving in for the kill? How would he make his move?

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t say that. Well, maybe I would. Seth thinks it will last. He’s very gung-ho about it. I guess I’m just more realistic about things.” He was more realistic, perhaps—but that’s what he liked about James. He wore his heart right behind his eyes, eyes that were clear, that blatantly showed love and emotion. Seth stood up, and grabbed an ashtray from on top of the TV. It was supposed to be only for decoration, but it could serve a practical

purpose, too. He set it on the floor between the couch and the chair. Really, there was nowhere else to go, so Seth sat back in the chair again.

“Why don’t you think it will last?”

“I don’t know that it won’t. I just don’t know what I need yet. He treats me so well. We have a lot of mutual respect and kindness. That’s really awesome. But I don’t know if we have a lot in common. I mean, we do have a lot in common. I don’t know if we have enough in common. I don’t know. It’s only been a few months, you know?”

There was a long moment of silence. Seth didn’t look at Kilian. Instead, he kept talking. “I don’t know. With James . . . it’s not like, well, like you and me. You and I can talk about general things. We’re educated. We both have similar interests. We like movies, we like hanging out, we have an eerily similar past. When James and I talk, it’s about how his day at work went. James and I tell stories. We don’t talk about things.”

“And you want more?”

“I don’t know yet. He treats me so well. And we *do* have things in common. I guess I have my doubts, but I can’t predict the future.” Doubts. His future. But these moments that were to follow, here, tonight, in his apartment, on his turf, these would determine his future, too. How could he decide now?

Kilian put his cigarette in the ashtray, and pulled the pipe out of his pants pocket. “Are you sure you don’t want some?” he asked.

Was pot Kilian’s only means of seduction? Seth wasn’t going to be that easy. “No. I mean, I want to. I’d love to look at my stereocards, but like I said, another time. I have to work tomorrow.”

Kilian got out his lighter, and took a hit from the pipe before standing up and walking to the counter where he laid the pipe and lighter down. Seth had a picture on a nearby lamp stand. Kilian picked it up.

“That’s me and my friend Jodi. Best friend, actually. She’s like my Star, I guess you could say.”

Kilian seemed to study the picture. Seth continued, “It’s really not the best picture of her. At least, she doesn’t think so. But it’s a good picture of me. Pretty egotistical, eh?”

“You have an awesome smile. Do you bleach your teeth?”

“I forgot about your thing for teeth,” Seth said, laughing. “I did bleach them once, but that was a long time ago.”

“They’re like, blinding white.” That was quite likely the highest compliment Kilian could give. It made Seth suddenly aware of his smile, and he couldn’t stop. Kilian was watching.

“You too, you know. You have an awesome smile,” he offered.

“Nah. It’s kind of yellow-white.” Kilian stepped closer to the chair.

“Hardly. What’s with the low self-esteem, Kilian?”

Kilian leaned in, putting his hands on both arms of the chair, encircling him. Seth was in a chair this time, and he was still trapped. He wasn’t high, but he could feel his heart pounding in his chest, just like that night.

“So, Seth . . .” Kilian said, smiling. White teeth. Blue eyes. He had that hollow quality in his voice. Hollow and a little low and raspy. Pretty sexy, actually. He was leaning in, ever slightly closer, as though in slow motion, lowering himself, coming even closer, before he paused in his movements to ask his question, because of course he would ask first. “Would it be a terrible thing if I tried to kiss you?”