



KARI GREGG
THE IMPORTANCE
OF BEING DENNY



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Cover by Kari Gregg; cover by Lou Harper

"The Importance of Being Denny" was originally written as a free short story for the Goodreads M/M Romance Group's 2011 Hot Summer Days event. Group members posted pictures with their perv of choice...er...I mean story prompts!...which writers (both published and unpublished) were free to snag to write the stories readers wanted. A M/M Romance group member, Barbara, posted the picture & prompt for which "The Importance of Being Denny" was written. The story posted to the group on July 12, 2011, and will ultimately be included in a free downloadable anthology.

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Kari Gregg lives in the mountains of Wild and Wonderful West Virginia with her Wonderful husband and three very Wild children. Once Kari discovered the fabulous play land of erotic romances at RWA's National Conference in 2009, the die was cast. Finally! A market for the smoking hot stories she loves!

When Kari's not writing, she enjoys reading, coffee, zombie flicks, coffee, naked mud-wrestling (not really), and . . . coffee!

If you would like to catch up with Kari, caffeinate yourself and head on over to <http://www.KariGregg.com>.

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The Importance of Being Denny

Chapter One

Denny retreated a step, shoulders snapping straight as his dark eyes widened behind the screen door. "Mateo."

Matt's lips thinned to a grim smile at the nickname. "Denny." He released the breath he'd been holding since he'd boarded the plane to Columbus in a slow, quiet hiss. "May I come in?"

Denny paled, his healthy summer-kissed skin blanching to pasty white. His mouth opened then shut. His lips parted again, but no sound emerged. Long heartbeats later, he shook his head.

Christ, Matt hated being right all the time. "You look good." He did too, better than Matt had expected in spite of the private investigator's reports. The eyes were the same -- soul-deep black and fringed in a thick blanket of lashes that had so drawn Matt as a teenager. The mop of dark hair hadn't changed either, though Denny wore it shorter now, the loose waves that had once flirted with his shoulders blades gone. Those shoulders were broader now, dense muscle filling out Denny's scrawny frame, but hell, Matt had been leaner then too.

More than ever, Denny looked like Matt's brother rather than his stepbrother. Denny had insisted on growing out his hair in his teens, when they'd both fought most ferociously to distance themselves from each other. Fought about any- and everything. The presumption that, since they looked so much alike, they must be brothers had infuriated them both. Then. It didn't now. Not for Matt, anyway. And with his stepbrother hundreds of miles away, Denny apparently had less motivation for rebellious acts of fuck-you-very-much -- he'd finally cut his hair.

Not that Matt could cast stones.

At least Denny hadn't inked his bicep, though the tribal tat he'd gotten at seventeen to intrigue and annoy his snotty stepbrother had also served as constant, bizarrely comforting reminder of Denny after Matt's dumbfuckery and his mother's cruelty had driven Denny away.

Rather than gulp his stepbrother down in one greedy bite -- or worse, beg Denny to forgive him for being a bastard and a fool -- Matt swept Denny's neat little bungalow with a curious glance. "You've done well for yourself." He meant that too. The rental was so tiny it could fit inside the guest house in the Beverly Hills family compound with room to spare, but the home Denny had created was welcoming in ways the austere luxury of California never had been. Cheerful and warm. Colorful braided rugs dotted the worn floorboards of the front porch. Violently green plants in ceramic pots marched in a line down the porch rail, clearing only to leave the view unobstructed for a swing dangling from the low roof. A hardback book lay open, face down, on the seat. *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Matt smiled at Denny through the grief. He nodded to the book. "Oscar Wilde's still your favorite."

His stepbrother stiffened. Retreated another step from the door. "I-I moved." He lifted a trembling hand before, shuddering, he let it fall. "To th-th-the other side of the country."

Matt winced at the return of his stutter. Shit. Denny had outgrown that at fourteen. "We need to talk."

Denny swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing. His pupils dilated, the black of nerves and fear making the obsidian eyes he'd inherited from his father even darker. "No."

"Yes." Matt's answering nod was slow but resolute. "Anna's coming for you. It's wrong. It's unfair...and there's nothing I can do to stop her. I came to warn you. Let me in, Denny."

His stepbrother shook his head again, a lock of hair dipping to tease his brow. He brushed it away, but his hair immediately sprang back to the sloppy muss Matt remembered so well. "You can't do this." His eyes sheened with tears that tore at Matt like talons. "She can't."

"Anna does whatever the fuck she wants." His mouth curved to a bitter smile. "You know that better than anyone." Except Matt. "Denny -- "

"I said no!" He lurched backward until his shoulders met the wall behind him. His head jerked wildly from side to side. "I left. I let it go. I have a n-n-new life now."

"I know. I'm sorry. I don't want to hurt you." Matt's stomach rolled, sick and sour. "But she wants to. She wants to and she will."

Denny bit his lip. "I left," he said again, voice breaking. When Matt only stared, he pivoted, feet awkward and clumsy. Stumbling, Denny fled farther into his tidy house with the flourishing plants and the cozy porch swing, back into the simple life he'd built. The one Matt had just blown to hell.

Eyes steady, spine straight, Matt reached for the door.

* * *

He focused on a bead of condensation sliding down the glass of lemonade he'd brought out to the sunny front porch when he hadn't been able to take the eerie quiet behind Denny's locked bedroom door anymore. The late July heat broiled him in the jeans and flannel shirt he'd worn to work that morning, the tank beneath sticky with sweat even after he'd draped the shirt over the porch rail. He'd be cooler in the shorts and basic T in the gym bag he'd grabbed from the back of his jeep rather than risk missing his flight by stopping at home to pack, but his feet were leaded cement. Not even his mother's money could force him back into the house to change clothes.

He'd rather bake under the sun.

The drop of water slipped down the glass and melded into the puddle forming beneath.

He ignored the creak of the screen door opening, choosing to concentrate instead on another shimmering droplet forging a slick path down the lemonade he hadn't wanted.

"I'd like you to leave."

Yeah. Matt wanted to get the fuck out of there too.

"Please."

But Matt leaving wouldn't make any difference. "Anna bought the mortgage on this place. She'll evict you as soon as the law allows." He swallowed the tight knot that had lodged in his throat, willed his dread to disappear. "She hasn't finalized buying out the owner of the bookstore you work at yet, but she will so you'll be out of a job too."

Denny's silhouette, hovering by the door, froze. "I don't want the money. She has to know by now that I don't want it."

Matt's mouth bowed to a tense smile. "It was never about the money."

"It was *always* about the money. You've never had to do without it. You," Denny said, a sneer twisting the still-boyish crags and lines of his face, "didn't have your father's legacy and everything he ever intended stolen from you!"

His stepbrother's glare was so familiar, so intimate to everything they'd had and ever been to each other, Matt's heart warmed even as it shattered. "I've got it, Denny. Your trust fund. It took four years to...It doesn't matter. The point is I can give it back. Every last penny -- with interest."

His stepbrother snorted ripe disgust, shoving a hand through his mussed hair. "I won't return to California, if that's what you're after. I have a life here, a job I'm good at. A home I don't have to share with cockroaches and five roommates."

"And Anna will take it all away from you. Again. She's already set those wheels in motion." Taking a deep breath, Matt pushed to his feet. When he turned to face Denny, his stomach knotted at the bloodshot stare the other man leveled on him. Matt shifted on his feet, glancing away only to focus on the worn, dog-eared book Denny had left on the swing. "You didn't finish your degree."

"I didn't do a lot of things."

Until you.

Denny didn't speak the accusation, but Matt heard it anyway. "You could go back to school," he said, reaching for the book. He traced the spine with his finger. "God, you loved Oscar Wilde. Wouldn't shut up." He smiled at the memory, though he couldn't make himself meet his stepbrother's gaze. "With access to your trust fund, you could finish your BA and go for your masters like you planned."

Denny laughed, a cruel sound that lacked warmth and any genuine amusement.

"You could do anything," Matt tried again, regret sizzling through him like a lightning bolt.

Denny leaned against a long column of the porch, tucking one foot behind the other. Still shaking with that creepy, mirthless laughter. "I want to be left alone. Christ, I changed my name, settled in Ohio...Do I have to move to another planet?"

"No. Just come with me to Oregon. Only for a week," he said in a rush when Denny stiffened. Like hell for just a week. Now that Matt had found him, he'd move heaven and earth to never let the man out of his sight again, but Matt was a prick, not an idiot. No way he could say that without Denny swinging a fist at him. With reason. So he shot Denny a cocky grin instead, because he knew how much that annoyed his stepbrother. "Silver Falls State Park. Come with me to the falls for a few days and I'll give you the money, every cent my mother took from you."

"Are you bribing me?" Denny tipped his head and arched an incredulous eyebrow. "With my own money?"

"Yes." Matt would do whatever it took to get Denny away from Columbus before the carrion feeders Anna had unleashed on his stepbrother showed up. "Anna's people can't be far behind me." He checked his watch. "Our flight's leaving in three hours."

Denny chuckled, this time not quite as cold and hollow. He shook his head. "I'm not a spoiled rich boy any more. I have bills to pay -- "

"Once you have your trust fund -- "

"I don't want the damned money!" Denny's brow furrowed, his stare malignant. "All that money ever gave me was a gold-digging bitch of a stepmother and fifteen years of misery."

"You may not want your trust fund, but you're going to need it. She'll order you fired before the month's out. You can forget about a reference for your next job too." Matt knew all about *that*, which is why his current position required jeans, ratty flannel and hiking boots. Not that he cared. He'd gladly walked away from the business world the day he'd gained control of Denny's money. And the trails of Silver Falls had welcomed him like a long-lost lover. Speaking of which, he tossed the book -- Denny's precious Wilde -- to him, smiling when the other man jolted upright and deftly caught it. "Pack enough casual clothes for a week and anything of sentimental value." Matt hoped his mother wouldn't send asshats to toss the place and destroy Denny's things while he was gone, but... "Seven days and you clear a million plus. That's a lot more than you earn slinging lattes at The Book Nook."

Denny did more than pour coffee -- he'd worked his way up to night manager at the coffee bar inside the bookstore. Who knew the guy had a head for numbers and marketing? Not Matt. The Denny he'd grown up with had been a dreamer, head always stuck in a frigging book. It'd driven Anna insane, but now? Denny's salary was higher than Matt's if you ignored the perks that went with Matt's new career, but extra benefits like living on-site had saved Matt's ass and were about to rescue Denny from Anna-pocalypse too. "There's still a chance for you, Denny. You can have it back. Not the life you had before, but you can make a new one. A life she can't control, that isn't stuffed full of hard-living and barely scraping by. Allen wanted so much more for -- "

"Leave my dad out of this." Denny calmly tucked the book under his arm and stared, unblinking.

The sudden bunch of muscle that tensed his shoulders belied the casual pose, a tell Matt guessed his stepbrother still remained wholly unaware of. Good thing the guy hadn't tried poker to make it through the lean years. Matt blew out a frustrated breath. "Anna respects power and for her, money is power. One week in Oregon in trade for your inheritance and she'll never be able to buy your home out from under you again. And if you finish your degree, go into teaching like you wanted -- "

"I'm not the same boy you knew. My goals and dreams," Denny said, his voice toneless and flat, "have changed."

Matt rolled his eyes. Sure. According to the P.I.'s reports, his stepbrother was saving to buy in as a partner of the bookstore's coffee bar, but that was before Matt's mother had stripped Denny of everything that had ever mattered to him. Once he had his trust fund... "Your dreams, whatever they are, will happen a whole lot faster with a million bucks in your pocket." His glance darted down the road, his pulse racing when a generic blue sedan crept steadily down the street and -- thank God -- *didn't* stop in front of Denny's house. He tracked the car's slow advance to the next intersection out of the corner of his eye. "C'mon, Denny. We need to get moving."

Denny's eyes narrowed. "What are you afraid?"

Nothing.

Everything.

"Missing our plane. I paid an ungodly amount of money for the tickets." It was as good an answer as any.

Denny's muffled snort argued otherwise. "Since when do you care what anything costs?"

"Since two months ago, when Anna cut me off without a dime." He mustered a smile, but knew he must have sucked at it by Denny's flinch. "Can we leave now?"

"Jesus, Matt. Are you..." Denny's shoulders slumped. "Are you all right?"

The questions swirling in his stare was exactly why Matt had hoped to avoid telling Denny anything until they reached Silver Falls, until he had his stepbrother exactly where Matt wanted him -- where he couldn't brush off his irritating younger stepbrother like he had countless times before. Where Denny couldn't easily walk away. "I knew what I was doing and what it would cost. Forget it. I have. Just get your ass into that house and pack a fucking bag."

Denny's feet planted on the front porch He studied Matt up, down, then up again.

Matt struggled not to fidget under the scrutiny. He knew what he looked like, how he'd dressed for work that morning. Nobody with a brain cell in their head would clear the disease-ridden underbrush he'd marked for removal earlier in the week or collect water samples from the more distant waterfalls in a neatly pressed uniform. Technically, this had been Matt's day off, not that on or off the clock mattered when you had nothing and no one to go home to except four walls and the stack of Oscar Wilde books Matt had read and re-read just to feel closer to Denny. He would've liked his stepbrother to have seen him in uniform, though, instead of grungy threadbare jeans and his oldest flannel shirt. Shit, his boots probably still had a layer of forest sludge on them from the damp spray of the falls.

But Denny didn't say anything. He simply studied him. Like a bug. Or a strange inter-stellar creature that had magically transported to his front porch. He finally nodded. "All right, Mateo. Give me five minutes to throw some clothes together." He jabbed a finger at the swing before tossing the Wilde book back to him. "Here. Stay out of trouble."

Matt hugged the book to his chest and watched Denny's very fine ass retreat back into the house.

Chapter Two

Denny's heart had finally slowed after beating a rapid staccato against his ribcage for the past four hours, six if he counted the pre-flight jitters going through airport security and disembarking in Portland. Damn, he hated flying. Even in the old days, when he'd flown first class instead of coach, Denny had avoided air travel as much as he could.

Matt had remembered.

When their plane boarded, Denny hadn't asked what the capsule his stepbrother had offered was. He simply dry-swallowed it, grateful the pill hadn't been accompanied by a barbed comment or a mocking sneer, but whatever Matt had given him hadn't made much of a dent. He still spent four hours of cross-country flight scared shitless. He'd just been too stoned to do anything about it.

And now he was too exhausted to care.

They'd been driving south for over an hour through the pitch black of night, one endless stretch of road after another. They didn't talk, though Denny supposed that they

should. Why did Matt want to go to a park in Oregon of all places? Why was he driving a battered jeep instead of the ridiculous red Corvette that Anna had given Matt for high school graduation? Why was he worried about the cost of plane tickets?

Denny could guess. Oh lord, he could guess, but unlike Denny, Matt was bisexual. Falling for a woman was as easy for Matt as falling for a man. Matt need only limit family introductions to his female lovers to stay on his mother's good side and as much as Denny had hated the games his stepbrother had played, Matt had seemed content in the closet four years ago. Anna had blamed Denny for what had happened and Denny alone. Even if Denny had argued, Anna wouldn't have believed him. Denny recalled tabloids linking playboy and heir apparent Matt Decker with a Hollywood starlet as little as six months ago, too, so Denny knew his stepbrother had stayed in his closet after Denny's disgrace.

What in the hell had happened? If Mateo had dragged himself out of the closet as Denny suspected...for God's sake, why now?

The jeep lurched over a rut carved in the goat path masquerading as a road, bouncing Denny bonelessly around the cab. "I have the smallest and most remote cabin," Matt said, white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel as he drove farther into this godforsaken armpit of nowhere. "Just a few more minutes."

Denny wanted a bed and to sleep for the next two years. He leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes.

But Matt was true to his word. He pulled the jeep in front of a...Denny's attention blearily focused on the cabin-like structure through the windshield, horrified to his bones at what the jeep's high beams revealed. Good God. He gaped. "I hate camping."

His stepbrother killed the headlights and jerked his keys from the ignition. "Don't be such a pussy." Matt climbed from the jeep. The steady clomp of him stalking to the rear of the vehicle and the rustle of him grabbing their duffel bags from the back momentarily drowned out the annoying buzz of nocturnal insects. Insects. Denny's nose wrinkled. Fucking hell.

Startled, he jumped what felt like ten feet when his door swung wide. Matt smirked, the same cocky grin that had made Denny want to rip his stepbrother's head off throughout their childhood, adolescence and right into adulthood. Immature? Probably. But Denny stubbornly settled into the seat of the jeep.

"C'mon, Denny. The cabin exteriors are *supposed* to look rustic. Easier on the eyes for the tourists if they blend into the background. It's not that bad."

Denny's lips thinned. Aesthetic blending, he could buy. But this? "No power lines, Mateo." And he bet there was no wireless too. "No deal."

Matt leaned in, the earthy scent of him wrapping around Denny like a familiar friend. A friend who stirred Denny's dick and made his mouth water. "The lines are underground. We have lights, stove and refrigerator, all the standard amenities." Matt crowded inside, as though he knew how his smell stirred Denny up. Which, of course, he did. "Your cell won't get a signal out here, though. No Internet, either."

Christ, Denny hated being right all the time. But...the hour had pushed past midnight and Denny's shoulders weighed down with exhaustion from the harrowing flight. He nodded at the shed pretending to be a house. "It doesn't look big enough to hold one bed, forget two."

"It isn't. Big enough for two beds, that is." Matt's hands settled on Denny's bicep, tugged, and because Denny was so tired, he let his stepbrother pull him from the jeep. "The cabin's one room, with a fold-out couch. We'll share."

He would've yanked away. Sharing a bed with Matt again, after everything that had happened between them, after all it had cost, was unthinkable, but Matt had wrapped an arm around Denny to steady him after urging him from the jeep. He remembered -- God, how could he ever forget? -- the press of that hard body against his. Matt's scent, the unique musk that was all-male and all Matt, tickled his nose. Denny could wallow for days in his stepbrother's scent. He'd even snatched one of Mateo's shirts to take with him when Anna had thrown him out. How fucked up was that? He leaned heavily against Matt, though. Just for a second. Just until his head stopped spinning. "What in the hell was in that pill you gave me?" he mumbled.

Had to be the drug. Denny was too smart to let Matt do this to him again.

Wasn't he?

His stepbrother snickered and palmed Denny's nape to pull him deeper into Matt's body, closer, so that Denny's nose nestled into his neck, which only intensified his smell and stiffened Denny's cock, pushed intimately against Matt's hip. Denny blew out a defeated breath. There was no hiding what his stepbrother did to him, how Denny's body responded to Matt's. But attraction -- the screaming arousal that had speared through them both whenever they had forgotten that they'd hated each other as teenagers and a touch went astray or a stare had lingered too long -- had never been their problem.

"Relax." Denny shivered at the low timber of his voice, like bottled sex, and even more so at the soft brush he felt skating over the crown of his head. Matt hadn't kissed him. Hell, no, Matt hadn't -- couldn't have -- kissed him. "Let's get you inside."

Like a drunk after a weekend bender, he slumped into Matt's body as his stepbrother guided him from the jeep. Denny barely held himself upright while Matt fumbled the keys and unlocked the cabin. Matt flailed blindly to one side of the door and --

Denny cringed, pushing his face into Matt's throat at the obscene flare of light.

"See?" Matt led him into the cabin's single room. "Told you I had power."

More importantly, his stepbrother had a bed. Or a least a couch that functioned as one and when Denny's knee smacked into it, when he slitted his eyes to find the couch already unfolded, sheets twisted but the sofa bed nonetheless laid out with blankets and pillows, he let go of Matt. Denny tumbled, gratefully if gracelessly, face-down onto the thin mattress. *Oomph*. The air rushed from his lungs in ungentle reminder of the dubious comfort of sleeper sofas, but Denny was too tired, too stoned and too fucking overwhelmed with Matt and everything the man represented to care. His body curled on the sloppy bed, burrowing into the sheets that smelled deliciously of Matt. His eyes drifted shut.

Matt's chuckle followed him into his dreams.

* * *

Into his nightmares.

Anna stared at him across the unbreachable gulf of his father's desk, scarlet-painted lips thinned to a harsh line, lacquered nails tap-tap-tapping on the arms she'd

crossed over her chest. Her dark, dark eyes -- Matt's eyes -- boiled with hate. "Allen spoiled you. I tried to tell him. God knows I did everything I could to make him understand that his coddling would ruin you, but he wouldn't listen." When she glared, Denny fidgeted with the sheet he'd draped around his hips. He shifted on his feet at the door -- the farthest he'd been able to force himself into his father's home office without throwing up. "And I was right. Look at you." Her venomous stare swept up and down him, gaunt features twisted with disgust. She shot to her feet. "Sick. Worthless. As deviant as ever. And Allen dead. Dead!" She shrieked the last, the harsh sound and the ugliness of it stabbing into Denny like a steel pike.

He flinched.

Fumbled the sheet.

Felt Matt's cum slicking the cheeks of his ass.

Oh Christ.

Tears wet his eyes as his stepmother stalked from Dad's desk, but he didn't run. He wished to God he could, that if he ran away maybe the horror would end. His father wouldn't be dead and Dad certainly wouldn't have appointed the stepmother who loathed him as trustee of his inheritance. The money Anna had coolly informed Denny would remain forever locked away unless he ass-end-over-teakettled his life. Immediately. Finally, his stepmother had the leverage to make him toe the line. Her line. Within hours of his father's funeral, she'd determined to get Denny's head out of the clouds for good and with Dad gone, there was no one to stand in her way. Changing his major from British Lit to Business was only the first step, the first demand, in his stepmother's campaign to transform him into the corporate drone she was grooming Matt to be.

Matt. Oh fuck, what had they done? And why? Why now when Denny had invested so many years hating and wanting his stepbrother, all at the same time? A tear slid down Denny's face, a betraying tear, a weakness. He jerked his hand up to dash it away, but he knew his stepmother had seen it by the predatory curve of her scarlet lips. "He's dead. Your father died and left me to deal with the mess he created. Your rot. Your corruption."

Denny's heart pounded like a jackhammer against his ribs. He took a step back in retreat, his spine pushing into the office door, and he would've run then. Oh, yes. He would have run like hell. If his knees hadn't liquefied at Anna's feral excitement, he would've pivoted and sprinted as fast and as far as his feet could carry him. But he couldn't run. He couldn't move. He froze like cornered prey, his pulse a resounding thunder in his ears.

Anna's cold-blooded advance halted inches from where Denny trembled.

Denny tried to swallow, but his mouth had gone bone dry.

No, don't.

Part of him recognized he was dreaming again and no matter how many times he relived this, it was over. The bliss and the horror of that night had marched to its bitter conclusion years ago. The past couldn't hurt him. He rarely thought about California anymore.

But that was during the day.

At night...in the dead of night, when his nightmares reminded him of all he'd lost, Anna still owned him.

Please stop. I can't...Matt!

"I tried, but you've proven there's nothing I can do to salvage you from uselessness and perversion," the dream Anna purred in evil satisfaction, those eyes so like Matt's freezing him with regal hate. "But I won't let you destroy my son."

A low whimper worked from his throat.

Anna lifted her hand.

Oh God. Oh Jesus. Why couldn't he turn away? Why did he just fucking stand there? Waiting for it? When he knew what she'd do, what was coming next, why had he simply let that bitch --

"For Christ's sake, Denny, *wake up!*"

He jolted upright, eyes wide, icy fear jittering through his body like raw electric current. Black eyes -- Matt's -- filled his vision and still caught in the dream, ensnared by it, Denny jerked back. Though Matt's eyes glimmered with concern, Denny scrambled away.

Regardless of the mellow glow of early dawn lighting the cabin, he was unfamiliar with his surroundings. He tumbled off the bed he'd awoken in and crashed to the floor with a dull thud. His heart didn't stop pounding. So he shoved himself away from the threat until his shoulder crashed into a table. Then he screamed and retreated farther still. When his spine kissed the wall, halting escape, Denny froze. Glanced up.

Matt gaped at him from the other side of the sleeper sofa, body ramrod stiff and his face ghostly alabaster. He wore jeans, no shirt and his hair stuck up at odd angles. He raised his hands in shaky appeal. "Denny..."

He swallowed the boulder that had lodged in his throat. "It's okay. I'm all right." Denny rubbed at his heart galloping behind the wall of his chest -- maybe in a few minutes the lie would be true. "Just a nightmare. I get them sometimes."

"Denny...", Matt said again, his voice rough with emotion.

"Don't." He scrubbed a hand over his gritty eyes and exhaled a weary breath.

"Just... Whatever you want to say, don't. I'll be fine in a minute."

Matt maneuvered around the sleeper sofa on wooden legs, skin as pale as rice paper. He lurched to a stop when he reached Denny's side of the couch and stared down the length of the first bed they'd shared since that wonderful-horrible night. "What we did...before. What I did..." He gulped. He shuddered. "Tell me you wanted it too. Tell me it wasn't rape."

"What?" Denny blinked at him. He stiffened, sat up. "What the hell, Mateo? What do you -- "

"Answer the damn question!"

Now was Denny's turn to gape. Question? What question? Matt's body, fuller now than when they'd been boys and packed with muscle, vibrated with a kinetic energy Denny couldn't begin to understand. He slowly shook his head. "It wasn't rape." When Matt shoulders sagged in relief, Denny's gut knotted. With anger. And the anger felt good. He glared at his stepbrother. "How could you even ask -- "

"You were yelling my name." Matt laughed, the sound empty and a little crazy. "In your sleep, you were screaming no and telling me to stop."

"I wasn't screaming *at* you." Scowling, Denny pushed to his feet, glad his legs were steady enough to hold him. "I was screaming *for* you."

That just made Matt laugh harder. He bent over, arms loped around his bare stomach and snorted with wild laughter. "Jesus, you fuck with my head more than any..."

Giddy, relieved tears gathered in his eyes when he glanced at Denny again. "I love you too," he said. Then cackled like a braying jackass.

Denny strode to the door, shooting his stepbrother a stare of utter loathing. "You are such a dick."

Denny was still fuming when Matt found him shivering in the surprisingly brisk chill of early morning and sitting on a fallen tree at the trailhead next to the cabin a few minutes later. Furious and embarrassed, he mutely accepted the steaming mug of coffee his stepbrother handed to him, reluctantly impressed at the sweetness when he blew then tasted. Matt had remembered he liked two sugars. Denny was surprised -- and a little alarmed -- that Matt had remembered that. He'd remembered so much.

He was still an asshole, though.

The coffee warmed Denny by slow, steady degrees.

Matt silently perched on the tree, sipping from his own mug. Denny shifted a few unfriendly inches away, even though the cushion of moss on the log squished under his ass. Ignoring that discomfort, he scowled at his shirtless stepbrother and especially at the tat he'd once traced with his tongue. He'd tasted the naked stretch of those shoulders, licked his stepbrother's washboard stomach, bit at Matt's nipples. Matt's skin was so smooth Denny's fingers curled around the coffee mug, the phantom sensation of how silky Matt's chest would feel still lingering on his hands, as though Denny's senses had imprinted on Matt four years ago. Denny squirmed in spite of the damp moss, spread his legs to ease the sudden tightness at his groin. Frowned into his coffee.

The least the man could have done was put some clothes on.

Matt obliviously drank his coffee, gaze distant as he stared at the vibrant green of the surrounding trees. "I should have been there. When Mom hustled you to Da--" he said, then winced, "--Allen's office, I should have gone with you. Defended you."

Birds chirped. Insects buzzed. Animals rustled the underbrush. Denny's attention focused everywhere except on Matt. "You were barely eighteen. Still a kid. We both were. I would've gotten the fuck out of there too, if I could've." He sighed. "I never blamed you for leaving that night."

"Stop making excuses for me." Matt grimaced. "You shouldn't have faced that alone." He squared his shoulders. "I never thought Anna would kick you out, but I still should have stayed. I might have convinced her that it wasn't your fault."

"She wouldn't have believed you." Denny stared into his mug. "You played your Earnest too well. Anna had no clue that the friend you rescued from one scrape after another was actually you. Or that you used that fictional persona to hook up with other guys."

"I got the idea from you." The corner of Matt's mouth curved to form a sad smile. "You and your Oscar Wilde."

"I know." One of the countless things they'd argued about during his last few bitter years in California. "To Anna, you were the golden child, though. Her perfect son. You dated the right girls, played the right sports, shared the same ambitions and dreams." Denny sniffed in disdain. "Then, there was me: the queer boy with his nose forever in a book, who committed the outrageous sin of majoring in British Lit..."

"...who loved reading about Earnest, but hated living with one."

Denny shrugged off old, bitter hurts. "She hated me."

"I lied to you, to her, to everyone. About everything." He frowned. "She had more reason to hate me."

"You'd just graduated from high school while I was twenty-one and a known deviant as far as she was concerned." Denny drank his coffee, the whispery play of leaves in the trees soothing his tattered nerves. "From her perspective, I was a dangerous sexual predator."

"I seduced *you*, Denny."

Denny willed his stomach to unclench. The hand wrapped around his coffee mug trembled.

Matt scowled. "You were a virgin."

Denny smothered a flinch. "In Anna's world, fag isn't just synonymous with pervert. It's also the equivalent of slut." He blew out a short, choppy breath and forced a grin, though it felt rigid. "Maybe she was on to something. I wanted my first time to mean something, but when you touched me..." His body sagged at how readily -- eagerly -- he'd turned to Matt that night. "I didn't put up much of a fight."

"You weren't a slut. I was. And a selfish bastard too." His stepbrother's arm shot out, flinging the dregs of his own coffee away. "You were grieving. Christ, we'd just buried your father."

"You didn't take advantage, Mateo." Though it nearly killed him to confess it, Denny stiffened his spine. "I wanted it. I'd wanted you for a long, long time."

"You think I didn't know that?" Matt arched a sardonic eyebrow. "That I didn't know exactly how to play you to get you into bed?" He huffed out ripe self-disgust. "I poured drinks down you and pushed you for sex because once the funeral was over and you'd returned to college...Anna was such a bitch. You weren't coming back to California." He shuffled his bare feet in the thick carpet of pine needles that blanketed the ground. "I needed to be your first. To make it perfect for you." He winced. "I ruined your life," he whispered.

"*Anna* ruined my life." Denny darted a glance at Matt before swiftly looking away. "In spite of what happened after, I'm glad it was you. My first time could've been awkward, painful, embarrassing, but you were...wonderful." His body heated at just how exceptional that part of the night had been. "I've never regretted that. Never."

Matt's shoulder jerked in swift, sharp denial. "I should've been there for you."

He dared another glance at his stepbrother and frowned at the deep lines grooving both sides of Matt's mouth. "If you'd been in Dad's office with me, the only difference it would've made was that there would have been two on a bus headed out of town that night, two lives destroyed."

Matt glared at him. "But we would've been *together!*"

"Let it go, Mateo." Denny drained the rest of his mug and stood, unbearably weary and heartsick for them both. "I have."

His stepbrother jumped to his feet and grabbed Denny's arm when he turned for the short walk to the cabin. "You loved me once. I was a prick, but you loved me anyway. Don't bother denying it. You would've never let me fuck you otherwise."

Denny pulled. Matt's grip tightened. Denny scowled, beating back the stir of panic. "That was four years ago."

"Damn it, will you listen to me?" Matt said, yanking Denny around to face him when Denny tried to tear away. "You don't want to believe me, but I *have* changed."

Denny glared, pointedly, at Matt's fingers digging into his arms. "Not that much." Matt's teeth gritted. "Jesus, you're as sanctimonious and snotty as ever."

"And you're still as self-absorbed." He flashed a smile full of teeth. "I don't care if you've changed, Matt. I have a life now, one that doesn't include California, your mother -- or you."

His stepbrother shook him. Hard. "She's going to rip your life apart."

"Then she rips it apart!" Fed up with his bullshit, Denny finally jerked away. Fury mushroomed inside him, old anger and even older hurts. "God knows it wouldn't be the first time she's destroyed me. But I lived through it. I found a good job, a house I could make a home of. I was doing fine until *you* showed up. And you probably thought you were riding to the rescue." Denny rolled his eyes. "Well, you know what, Mateo? You're wrong. I'm not as weak or helpless as you apparently think I am." He shoved Matt's shoulder and because it felt good, he pushed again. "I don't." Poke. "Need." Jab. "You."

"I never believed you were weak. You're the strongest man I know." Matt's teeth gritted. "But everyone needs help sometimes. Will it fucking kill you to accept it from me? You're days away from being served with an eviction notice and your job -- damn it, stop pushing me!"

"Make me." Malicious satisfaction coiled in Denny's belly when he got in Matt's face and his stepbrother had to tilt his jaw up two inches to look at him. Their chests rubbed. Their breaths mingled. Nobody infuriated him like Matt did. Nobody turned him on like his stepbrother did either. Denny resisted the urge to grind his aching dick into Matt's groin in search of relief.

"You're an annoying shit. Always have been. Always will be." Matt dropped his coffee mug to the ground with a distant clunk. He lifted that hand, now unencumbered, but he didn't shove Denny back as repayment in kind. Instead, he curved it around Denny's neck, fingers tunneling into his hair. The heavy weight of his stepbrother palming his nape was as good as a brand, made Denny feel safe for the first time since he'd left California and at the same time shaky and vulnerable. He wanted to lean into that touch. He wanted to run like hell.

"God, I missed you," Matt murmured, dark eyes glittering with arousal.

Denny shivered, fear and need waging war inside him. "You've had four years to get over missing me."

"Shut up." Matt kissed him quiet, until Denny knew his stepbrother must feel him trembling. Matt's lips were soft, lightly brushing Denny's mouth as though they had all the time in the world. Maybe they did. Denny's mug dangled then fell from his fingertips to join Matt's in the pine needles below. So Denny could touch Matt too, as much as he wanted. His hands lit on his stepbrother's lean hips. Denny whimpered against Matt's mouth as the memory of warm skin met the reality that was Matt. His Mateo.

"I *was not* too young," his stepbrother said urgently when his mouth lifted. Matt's grip lowered, fingers digging into Denny's sides just above the waistline of his jeans to swing Denny around.

Denny's heart hammered. "You were only fifteen the first time you wanted to --."

"I was old enough and smart enough to know how good we'd be together."

Denny shook his head. "You were jailbait."

His stepbrother's chest pushed into Denny's forcing him a step in retreat, then another. "Jailbait, my ass," Matt said on a husky rumble that stiffened Denny's cock.

"No, it was *my* ass." Denny stumbled blindly backward, letting Matt guide him, trusting his stepbrother to not let him fall. His butt and shoulders kissed the hard, unforgiving surface of rocks jutting from an exposed slope. His breath caught at Matt's possessive stare. "No one before or since has been as determined to top me as you were at fifteen."

"I knew what I wanted. Still do." He leaned forward and ran his tongue along the column of Denny's throat. Denny's head spun dizzily. When he angled his jaw to give Matt better access to his throat, Matt chuckled. "You want it too. Me. Inside you."

Was he really doing this? "I learned to live without what I want. It's called growing up," he said, though he didn't move away. Couldn't. Nobody could wind him up like Matt did. No one else's touch had ever made the world and all its worries fade away. "We shouldn't," he tried again, but if anything, Denny pressed closer.

Matt flashed a sexy smile. "Convincing Anna to sign your trust fund over to me took four years. Four years in the closet to get back everything I cost you, when all I could think of was how you felt wrapped around my dick, the sounds you made when I fucked you. What I would do to you when I finally had you beneath me again." Matt nipped his earlobe and laughed when Denny moaned. "Trust me, we should. And we will."

Denny's heart thudded, fingers clenching and splaying on Matt's hips. Wanting to draw him in, tight against his body. Afraid to. "Don't I get a say about this?"

"Four years of missing you, of waiting and wanting you." Matt opened his mouth over Denny's neck and sucked the sensitive skin below his ear, wringing a panting cry from him. "No, Denny. You don't get a say anymore." His fingers curled inside the belt loops of Denny's jeans and tugged, lining up to press the hard ridge of his dick against Denny's aching cock. "You are going to let me do wonderful, dirty things to you."

"Oh God," he gasped, chest heaving. He pushed his hips forward, rubbing against Matt.

His stepbrother skated his lips from Denny's ear to his mouth, licking and biting as though Denny were a particularly tasty treat. "Open for me."

Denny opened.

And shuddered when Matt's tongue slipped inside to stroke and tease him. In the span of a heartbeat, he melted. The scent of Matt's skin and the hard silky warmth of him pressing into the cradle of Denny's hips lit up all the fires in Denny. His fingers dove into his stepbrother's dark hair, pulling him so close their teeth mashed together and the kiss transformed from brute hunger to an act of war. "More, more, more," Denny groaned when Matt's mouth lifted.

Matt stared at him, breath ragged, eyes glittering. "Christ, you make me crazy."

Chapter Three

"Fuck me, Mateo."

When Denny smiled, lips swollen and rosy from his kiss, Matt's heartbeat trebled. His hands shook. His pulse roared in this head. He accepted his doom -- belatedly but with good grace. "You are of the devil," he said, cutting off his stepbrother's sly, breathless laughter by laying claim to that wicked mouth again. Only Denny did this to

him. Only Denny could blind him with lust after just one taste. One whimper. One delicious shiver.

If Matt didn't get inside him, soon, he'd lose his fucking mind.

He shifted to suck up a mark on Denny's neck, sliding a hand between the press of his stepbrother's body and his own. Awkward fingers plucked at the button of Denny's jeans. He groaned when Denny's hips bucked against him, but that didn't stop him from yanking the zipper down, pushing his hand inside.

"Matt," Denny whined, voice raw and needy.

Just the way Matt liked him.

"Stop," his stepbrother said, "I'll come."

Matt palmed Denny's dick. "No." Matt had heard the quiet whimpering noises that tore from his stepbrother's throat once before. Four years ago. He remembered what those sounds meant and his balls tightened in anticipation. "You won't come -- " He drew Denny's dick out of his jeans and dropped to his knees like a stone. " -- until you're in my mouth."

With that preamble, Matt swallowed him down.

Denny screamed. His body bent, stomach curling. His fingers clawed into Matt's hair, scraping his scalp.

Matt had never been a fan of sucking cock until Denny. He'd done it countless times. He liked blowjobs as much as the next guy and since he wasn't an asshole, he returned the favor more often than not since he'd never enjoyed bottoming. But he liked Denny's flavor, musk and sweat, the salty tang of Denny's pre-cum as Matt's tongue worked him over. He loved Denny's smell, balmy in spite of the long plane trip with no shower before falling into bed last night. He especially liked the feel of Denny's cock against his tongue, Denny's breathy sobs when Matt hollowed his cheeks and dove down the length until his lips buried in Denny's pubic bush. He adored Denny's convulsive shivers when Matt bobbed up and down.

He could lick and love on Denny all day.

His stepbrother wheezed his name. His dick pulsed. Within seconds, Denny spurted gobs of cum that Matt greedily gulped.

Well, Matt would suck Denny all day if his stepbrother ever stopped getting so excited that he shot within moments of Matt sinking to his knees. He savored Denny's cum, though, the sweet flavor of him, pride inflating his chest that he could bring his stepbrother to that knife's point of pleasure so effortlessly. As though Denny's body had been attuned to his.

When he'd licked Denny's dick clean, he pulled off with a rude pop.

Denny stared, eyes dazed and vague with spent lust.

Matt grinned and tugged at his stepbrother's boxers and jeans, stripping both down his legs and off his bare feet. "Hold onto me," he said when Denny tipped to one side and almost over-balanced. Not that Matt would mind fucking him on the blanket of pine needles with the sun shining through the leaves of the taller trees in the canopy over head, but he wanted more than desperate mindless rutting in the dirt for their first time since California. Matt wanted him in bed. But mostly he wanted Denny naked. His stepbrother obediently dug his fingers into the meat of Matt's shoulder to stay upright while Matt worked his jeans off, though, which was good. With only Denny's shirt left, Matt vaulted upright and jerked the T-shirt away too.

When he emerged from the flurry of cotton, Denny watched Matt toss the shirt aside. Then blinked at him, bewildered with his orgasm and crushingly sexy. Matt gathered him into his arms, against his chest and took his still gasping mouth.

Fuck, he tasted good.

Matt grabbed the rounded globes of Denny's butt with both hands and rubbed his crotch against Denny's nakedness, smiling at his stepbrother's sharply indrawn hiss. Matt kissed him, tongue sweeping the inside his pretty mouth. "Feel good?" he asked, grinding his dick into Denny's.

His stepbrother shot up onto his toes, wincing at the soft denim's assault on his sensitive cock. "I don't know," he moaned.

"Want me to stop?" He squeezed Denny's sweet ass and kissed him again. Matt would never get enough of his mouth. Or his ass. He traced Denny's crack with one finger. "Yes? No?"

Denny shuddered, pushing back against Matt's exploring touch. His mouth slammed over Matt's, awkward but so eager. "Mateo," he said against Matt's lips.

He smiled at the pet name Denny had given to him once fifteen year-old Matt had begun the relentless pursuit of his then eighteen year-old stepbrother. "Tell me what you want." He tapped Denny's hole with the tip of his finger. "Tell me what you want and I promise I'll give it to you."

"You." Denny squirmed against his hand, "It's always been you."

Oh, that deserved a kiss. Matt abandoned Denny's ass to lope his arms around Denny's waist, Matt's lips a soft glide over Denny's. "In the cabin," he said when the kiss ended. He released Denny and gave him a gentle nudge.

Denny nodded. He turned. Spine straight, he stumbled more than walked the short distance to the front door, his ass so damn enticing Matt's mouth watered. Stare never leaving Denny's butt, he bent to snatch his stepbrother's clothes from the ground before following.

When he pushed through the door of the cabin, Denny stood at the foot of the sofa bed, fidgeting. "Maybe this..."

Matt didn't give him a chance to finish the thought. He stalked to Denny, dropped his stepbrother's clothes to the floor and fisted a hand in Denny's dark hair to yank his head back. His lips covered Denny's, eating away the whispery groan that worked from the man's throat the moment Matt touched him. In spite of Denny's sudden burst of nerves, there was no hesitation in the tongue Denny speared into Matt's mouth. Denny angled his body to fit against Matt's, fingernails digging into Matt's bare arms to pull him in.

God, Matt loved it that he could push Denny beyond the uncertainty. Matt nipped at his lips then slid his mouth along the line of his jaw, rough with morning stubble, so un-Denny-like but endlessly arousing. He grinned against the column of his stepbrother's throat when his unerring fingers dove for Denny's crack and his stepbrother spread his legs to give him better access to his hole. "You want my fingers in your ass, Denny?"

When Matt traced his ring with the tip of his finger, Denny gasped. "Stop teasing me, you prick."

Matt laughed. Pushed just the tip inside, stomach clenching at Denny's tight heat. "You like to be teased." He pulled out, then back in -- to the first knuckle. Again and again. Denny's back bowed at the stingy fucking. "Almost as much as I like playing with

you." He withdrew his finger from his stepbrother's ass. Satisfied at Denny's frustrated growl, Matt sucked up a mark on the man's neck. Denny writhed against him, dick twitching and already stirring to life between his stepbrother's legs. "On the bed."

Matt retrieved lube and a condom from an end table drawer while Denny scrambled to comply. Matt tossed the lube on the mattress next to his stepbrother, who trembled, black eyes glittering with equal parts anxiety and arousal. Matt tugged at the snap of his jeans, just watching him: ass high, fists planted in the tangle of blankets, shoulders tense. Denny's head hung low as he blew out sharp breaths between kiss-swollen lips. The possibility of that mouth sucking and slurping on his dick before the day was through made his balls ache, but ignoring the discomfort, Matt shoved his jeans down his hips and kicked free.

Denny was his every fantasy come true. Always had been. Always would be.

He settled one knee on the sofa bed, the thin mattress dipping under his weight, and lightly fondled his stepbrother's ass. "You look so hot waiting for my cock."

Denny shot a glare over his shoulder. "Do you have to be such a -- "

His eyes crossed when Matt reached around him to stroke his stiffening dick. Denny moaned.

"That wasn't an insult. Just an observation. There's nothing sexier than you on your hands and knees, shaking with how much you want me." Matt kissed his shoulder. The memory of his stepbrother gasping, shivering, and eager to be fucked had been the only thing that had gotten Matt through his dark days with Anna after Denny was gone. "I've dreamed of you like this, every day, for four damn years."

"Then why didn't you -- "

"Come after you? I had to find you first." Matt reluctantly relinquished Denny's hardening dick to reach for the condom. He tore the package open and rolled latex down his dick. "Losing you opened my eyes too. I cost you everything and what did I have to offer you in return? Nothing."

"*You* aren't nothing." Denny bit his lip. "I only ever wanted you. Surely, you know that by now."

"I knew." Matt scowled, snagging the lube from the mussed sheets. He thumbed the end of the tube open with a quiet snick. "If I'd found you right away, you would've gotten me all right -- and a lifetime's worth of my mother harassment." He slicked his fingers. "I swore being with me would never hurt you again. So I waited until I could return your inheritance, until I was worthy of you. But I waited too long." His touch smoothed the bumps of Denny's spine while his oily fingers returned to Denny's ass. "Anna got to you before the money could protect you."

He pushed at Denny's hole.

Denny quivered, grunted, then his ass swallowed Matt's finger, sucked it right in.

Matt groaned as Denny tossed his hips back to take Matt deep. "Jesus, that's pretty."

"You promised to give me what I want."

"Anything," Matt said, vowing it in his heart and in his head as he had every day for the past four years. This time, he made the promise to Denny too. "Whatever you want, whatever you need, I'll give it."

Denny stared over his shoulder, dark eyes sensuous. Enthralling. "Less talking. More fucking."

Matt's balls tightened. His heart pounded. His lips curved in a wicked grin. "Yes, sir," he said, sliding his finger in and out of his stepbrother's ass in a slow, easy glide. He crooked his finger --

Denny whimpered, his spine arching.

Matt smiled. "There it is."

Denny shook through a whole-body shudder as Matt began working his prostate, over and over, finger pumping and hitting his gland every time. "Oh God."

Arousal burst inside Matt like a supernova. Sweat dotted his brow. Denny thrust his hips, meeting Matt's impaling finger and when Matt added another to stretch Denny to take his cock, Denny simply moaned, bucking faster into Matt's hand. Denny's dick swayed in happy abandon, hard and jutting toward the sheets from his groin. In spite of the orgasm outside when Matt had sucked him, Matt knew Denny could come from this. Just this. And quickly. He'd never known anyone who responded to bottoming as eagerly and wantonly as Denny did. "You going to come before I get inside you?" he asked, chest heaving, transfixed by how sexy the man was taking a third finger into his hole.

"Yes, if you don't hurry the hell up," Denny panted, teeth gritting. "Fuck me, Mateo. I need you to -- "

Matt ripped his fingers free, his world narrowing to sharp focus as he lined up behind Denny's sweet ass. His fingers gripped Denny's hips, holding him still. Groaning out feral lust, he pushed forward.

Oh Christ.

Denny cried out.

His ass greedily sucked Matt's dick in.

Matt lost what little was left of his mind. All that remained was need: the tight heat enveloping his dick, the tingling in his balls as he pulled out and Denny's whimpers when he pushed back in. Matt covered him, chest to spine, so he could tongue Denny's bared nape, taste him while his hips pistoned. He loved the urgent clamp of Denny's ass on his cock at each thrust. Couldn't get enough of Denny's shivers or his delighted sobs as he fought toward his own orgasm. "Please, Mateo," his stepbrother said, voice low and breathless. "Harder. Fuck me harder."

Head spinning, pulse sounding a deafening drumbeat in his ears, Matt complied. His hips snapped, the clutch of Denny's body a drug to him. So addicting. So necessary. "God, I love your ass. Love the sounds you make when you take me inside." He picked up the pace, spiking his cock into Denny so fiercely he felt the familiar sizzle of his orgasm building at the base of his spine.

Denny stiffened beneath him. Shouted out his dazed lust. His ass clenched on Matt's thrusting cock --

Matt's world exploded.

* * *

He lay lax and spent on the sofa bed. Denny sprawled across his chest. His idle fingers traced the sweat that slicked Denny's shoulder blades. Denny sighed and curled into him, redolent and naked and so very Matt's. "What now?" Denny asked then kissed Matt's chest. "You must have a plan. You always have a plan."

"My plan is to love you for as long as you'll let me." Matt bent to brush his mouth over the crown of his head. "That's been my one and only plan since I was fifteen."

"That's not a plan. That's a mission statement." His stepbrother arched an eyebrow at him. "Or really boring porn."

Matt laughed. "I think it sounds like a romance novel." He winked. "With porn."

Denny bit his lip. "Seriously, Matt. How are we going to make this work?"

"I don't know." Matt blew out a long breath. He squeezed Denny tight. "But we have the rest of our lives and a million plus in your trust fund to figure it out."

"There is that." Denny chuckled. "At least you aren't pretending to be Earnest anymore. You're out of the closet. I don't have to act like I don't love you or hide how I feel anymore. The important thing," he said, "is you're finally free to be who you really are."

"No. The important thing is we're together." Matt tipped his chin up with one finger. Kissed him. "Because the most important thing, Denny, is that you never stopped being you."

THE END

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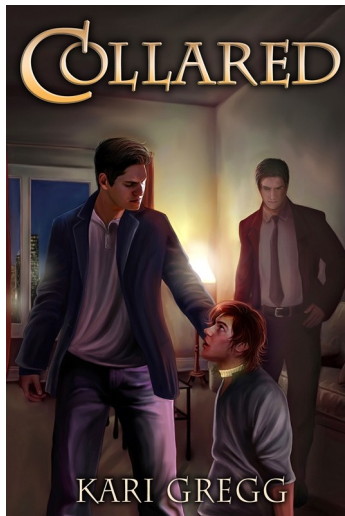
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