

# **Advocacy**

**A Post-Season 4.1 Oz AU  
Featuring Tobias Beecher and Christopher Keller**

**Author: Star  
Rating: NC-17**

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Fandom: OZ / A post Season 4.1 AU  
Pairing: Tobias Beecher/Christopher Keller

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## Chapter 1: Advocacy (August 2003)

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"Beecher?"

Grimacing internally, he turned, automatically adopting a carefully blank expression. "McManus."

The two men examined each other in silence for a moment, McManus flashing back on the first pictures he'd seen of Beecher, from his trial... the would-be model prisoner that he'd thrown to the wolves of Em City. Although he was once again dressed like an uptown lawyer, there was no mistaking one version of the man for the other... this Beecher carried himself like a survivor, not a victim. "What are you doing here?"

Beecher adopted what McManus had taken to calling patented inmate expression number two -- a smirk worthy of Oz's own Lord of the Dance, Ryan O'Reilly -- before responding. "Meeting with my latest client."

"Ah, that's right. I'd heard you'd taken up Said's quixotic quest," McManus sneered.

Beecher's eyes narrowed at the mention of his old mentor. After the arguments about the riot lawsuit and his relationship with Keller, it had been difficult to resume their friendship, but Said's support after Gary's murder -- especially during the time he'd been estranged from Chris -- had been unwavering, and he'd been honored to step into the role of prison advocate when the Muslim leader had been murdered shortly before Beecher's third and final parole hearing. 'Asalaam alaikum, my friend,' he thought, then refocused on the present. "Well, since things went so well with Cyril and the others..." He trailed off, catching movement in the private visitation room he was entitled to when providing legal counsel. "Now if you'll excuse me?" Relishing the freedom to not give a fuck whether McManus was done with him or not, he walked into the small gray room, letting a relieved smile appear as the door clicked shut.

"Hey," he said softly to the hawk-nosed man leaning against the table, waiting for him. Chris Keller -- his seducer and betrayer, attacker and victim, sworn enemy and eventual lover -- and now, client.

"Hey," Chris responded, flashing one of the rare unguarded smiles that never failed to melt Toby's heart.

Leaning back against the door, taking in the fresh stitches above Keller's right eye, he sighed. "O'Reilly falling down on the job lately?" Once Beecher had made parole, he'd had a long talk with Ryan about the future and had agreed to make getting Cyril out of Oz and into a secured group home his top priority, provided that Ryan move in with Chris and watch his back.

"Fuck, Tobe, I don't need O'Reilly to babysit my ass."

Toby's smile turned wry as he walked over, tossed his briefcase on the table, then stood in front of a now-glowering Keller. "Actually, your ass happens to be pretty high on the list of parts that Irishman is supposed to be keeping an eye on. From a distance, of course." Reaching up to lightly brush a fingertip over the swollen eyebrow, he continued in a softer, more serious tone. "I know you don't need a babysitter, Chris. I just worry about you. As much as I prayed to get out of here..."

Chris interrupted him harshly. "Don't fuckin' say it. Don't even think it, Toby. You belong out there, with your kids, not in Oz..."

"With you," Toby finished for him.

"Yeah," Chris agreed, looking around at the drab gray walls. "I can't even believe you come back to this fuckin' place."

Toby turned away and wrapped his arms around himself defensively. "I know. I... it isn't easy. Every time I hear those bars close behind me..." He shuddered, then felt Chris's hands land lightly on his shoulders, comforting without trying to confine him or force him into closer contact. Leaning back into the solidly muscled chest, he continued, "but there are people here I can help -- people that no one else cares about helping." Resting his head against Chris's, he whispered, "And I miss you."

"I miss you too, baby." Chris nuzzled Toby's neck for a moment, then reluctantly dropped his hands and stepped back. "So, how \*are\* things going?"

Toby sighed, knowing that as much as he'd love to spend every minute of their time together in Chris's arms, they had work to do, and thinking straight while Chris was touching him wasn't a skill he'd been able to master -- not during their years together in Oz, and certainly not in the months since his parole. Taking a seat at one end of the table, he watched hungrily as Chris settled into his familiar sprawl immediately to his right. It was the everyday things -- watching Chris move, for instance, like a big cat, lazy on the surface, but always ready to pounce -- that he missed the most. No one on the outside, not even the slickest lawyers who thought they were oh-so smooth, moved like that.

"Cyril's doing pretty good. He misses Ryan; I'm trying to see if I can arrange a visit, but I'm afraid of how seeing Oz again might affect him. The kids are doing great. Holly's growing up so fast... Harry too, for that matter. Makes me feel a little old, to be honest." His gentle smile softened the complaint. "As for the rest of the family, well..." he shrugged and Chris nodded his understanding. It was to be expected that the Beecher family had a little trouble accepting that their golden-haired boy had not only fallen in love with one of his attackers, but had also refused to put all that 'prison nonsense' behind him once he'd made parole. "As for your case..." Toby popped open his briefcase and they were soon engrossed in an in-depth study of evidence, trial transcripts and obscure legal precedents. Amidst the paper shuffling, the two men subtly studied each other, looking away just before their eyes could meet time and time again.

For Toby it was a continuation of a habit he'd developed long ago. Driven initially by a heady mixture of suspicion and unwilling lust, then later by a more potent brew of love and hate, 'Keller-watching' had been the focus of his day almost from the moment they'd met, interrupted only by trips to the hole, the hospital, and Chris's brief stint in protective custody. Today he was seeing one of the sides of Keller he loved the most -- the often-hidden intelligence that, despite his carping about the rules, made him a quick study at chess, and had enabled him to ace his GED and eventually take over Toby's old job in Sister Pete's office.

Chris, meanwhile, was for the first time seeing a glimpse of the confident, driven lawyer Toby had been before his addiction had landed him in Oz, and was once again astounded that -- given the freedom to move on -- Toby kept coming back, not just to Oz, but to him. Sometimes he wondered if maybe he wasn't just another of Toby's soft-hearted fuck-ups -- if moving on would be better -- but there wasn't much he could do about it, other than refuse to see him. He'd tried that a couple of times, but memories of the pain in those puppy-dog eyes had drawn him back.

With a sigh, Chris sat back, running a hand restlessly over his close-cropped hair. "Are you sure you're not just wasting your time with this? You'd probably have more luck getting O'Reilly out of here than me."

Toby laughed incredulously. "Hardly, considering all of the felonies he's confessed to committing while \*in\* prison. Besides, I wouldn't trust Ryan to behave himself once he got out." Having learned from Said's lessons with Poet and Kramer, Toby was very careful when choosing his clients, sticking to those with extremely low chances of recidivism. Not only did he sleep with a clearer conscience, but it was also building him a reputation as a trustworthy advocate.

"And you're sure I would?" Chris asked, leaning forward and resting his arms on the table in a defensive posture.

Toby leaned close, meeting Chris's eyes firmly, remembering the grief-crazed days when he'd allowed himself to believe that Chris had arranged to have his children kidnapped and his son murdered. "Not a doubt in my mind." The words 'I swear' were on the tip of his tongue, but he bit them back, his old retort to Chris -- 'Swear. Promise. Take an oath, make a vow. Then go fuck yourself' -- echoing in his ears. They'd both learned the hard way that

actions counted far more than words did in their relationship. He waited silently until Chris nodded, satisfied with the tacit apology, before continuing. "Besides, your public defender was a joke. Eighty-eight years..."

"Toby... I got hopped up on meth, robbed a store, and shot and killed someone."

"Yeah, and I got drunk, got into my car, and drove right over a little girl. And for the record, he started shooting at you first."

"After I robbed him at gunpoint!"

"It was the police's job to fire shots if necessary, not his."

"Not to mention my previous convictions..."

"Which I would have several of, if our fine police officers weren't so well-trained to ignore weaving BMWs..."

Chris suddenly burst out laughing. "You're just as crazy as you ever were, aren't you?"

Toby flashed the off-kilter smile that had bought him breathing room in Oz so many times over the years. "Yeah, but crazy like a fox, ba-bee" he quipped, exaggerating Chris's drawled pronunciation.

Chris shook his head, still chuckling. "I know, I know. All that legal training mixed with the ruthless nature of a hardened ex-con... you're a dangerous man, Beecher." He was still smiling, but his eyes made it clear that he was more than a little serious.

"Takes one to know one, Keller." Toby leaned closer, until they were almost touching. His voice dropped to a husky whisper, and he let some of the heat that Chris always inspired in him show in his eyes. "Besides, I thought you liked your ex-cons hard."

In response, Chris's body and facial expression flowed into the arrogant pose of raw sensuality that served him so well with both women and men, while his eyes reflected the deep need that only Toby got to see. "Toby... you got anything else you want to discuss? Because self-restraint ain't really my strong point with you..."

"Later." As Chris started to move back, Toby realized he hadn't made himself clear. "No... \*talk\* later," he murmured, wrapping one hand around Chris's neck and pulling him into a slow, hot kiss.

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When Toby had first been paroled, it had taken all of his own self-restraint to not throw himself into Chris's arms as soon as he walked into the visitor's room each week. Chris, on the other hand, preferred to keep his distance, in part because he was still leery of showing affection in front of the hacks and other prisoners, but more because he was sure that each week would be Toby's last visit. It wasn't until the end of the hour that Chris would relent, wrapping Toby in his arms and sharing one long, deep kiss before turning and walking out without another word. It had taken over two months of weekly visits and almost daily letters before Chris starting believing that Toby wasn't planning on giving him up.

Breaking the kiss, Chris pulled Toby forward to straddle him, one hand supporting his back while the other settled on his hip, pulling him in tight. He groaned deep in his throat when Toby tucked his legs under the chair and started a slow grind against him.

"Who's the hack?" Toby whispered in his ear.

"What?"

"The hack watching the door."

"Uhhmmmm..." Chris trailed off, already going non-verbal.

"Chris!" Toby hissed.

"Murphy... it's Murphy, okay? It would be a fuck of a lot easier to concentrate if you'd hold still for one second."

Toby smiled, sucking at the sensitive spot under Chris's ear while reaching for his belt. "Good... if you and O'Reilly haven't done anything to piss him off lately, Murphy'll leave us alone."

"Us? Nah... perfect angels," Chris replies, loosening Toby's tie and pushing his suit jacket off his shoulders. "Actually, I think they've made me into an honorary mick... oh Christ, Toby!" With the belt loosened and button undone, Toby hadn't wasted any time sneaking a hand down the front of Chris's pants. "Fuck, baby... that feels \*so\* good... but you're gonna have to let go a second if you wanna lose the jacket." Toby lifted his head and glared at Chris, growling at him like a dog challenged over his favorite bone. Chris smirked and chanced a quick nip at Toby's kiss-swollen lower lip. "Better now than later." He moaned as Toby squeezed, tight enough to take him to the edge of pain.

Releasing Chris with obvious reluctance, Toby leaned back to let the jacket slip off his arms, remembering at the last second to toss it over the back of the other chair rather than letting it fall onto the floor. Chris took advantage of the brief distraction to unbutton Toby's shirt, letting his fingertips roam over lightly furred pecs until they found a rapidly hardening nub.

Toby looked down into eyes gone blue-black with desire, whimpering as Chris gave his nipple a rough pinch, then bent his head to sooth the small ache with his tongue. He fumbled with Chris's zipper for a moment, then felt the hot, hard length of his lover's cock surge into his hand. He gave it a few slow, tight strokes, the kind that quickly had Chris biting his way up to Toby's neck and his own cock twitching in sympathy.

Chris traced the line of Toby's jaw with his tongue while working swiftly to return the favor. It had been months since they'd been able to touch like this, and as he finally fought his way past the layers of cloth in his way, he marveled at how good -- how right -- it felt to touch Toby again. He leaned back slightly and looked down, his breathing changing to harsh rasps as they found a matching rhythm, cocks so close together that their knuckles brushed as they pumped each other in tandem. Looking back up, he found himself trapped like a deer in headlights by the intensity of Toby's hooded stare.

"Chris... oh God, Chris," Toby moaned softly, then fell forward, ravaging his mouth, swallowing Chris's moans almost before they'd left his throat.

The speed of Toby's rocking suddenly increased and with the last flagging bit of his concentration, Chris remembered that they weren't back in their pod, within easy reach of marginally clean clothes to change into. Pulling back from the desperate kiss, he growled, "Toby... get up."

Dazed, Toby obeyed without thinking, and somehow found himself pressed back against the table, Chris's hands gripping his hips, his cock buried deep in Chris's mouth. Biting his lip to keep from crying out and giving them away, he exploded almost instantly.

Catching his breath while Chris lasciviously licked his lips, Toby blinked hard a few times to bring the world back into focus. Chris ran his thumb slowly across Toby's lips, gently wiping away the blood. "Oh baby... if you do get me out of here, the first thing I'm gonna do is take you someplace private so that I can fuck you 'til you scream."

Toby shivered at the combination of love and lust in Chris's voice and had to clear his throat before answering. "Nice motivational tool. I'll have to remember to try that on my assistant," he said, pulling Chris's tank to the side and attaching himself to one peaked nipple.

"What the fuck?" Chris gasped, catching Toby's head and holding him away as he tried to repeat the maneuver on the other side.

Sinking slowly to his knees, Toby looked up at Chris, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "What? You don't want the job?" Running his hands up and down the other man's tense thighs, he leaned forward and flicked his tongue across the leaking head of Chris's still-straining cock.

"You prick," Chris managed as a chuckling Toby swallowed him whole.

Toby settled comfortably onto his knees despite the hard floor and almost choked as a laughed unexpected bubbled up.

"You okay, baby?" Chris asked, gently stroking Toby's hair. Letting his hand temporarily replace his mouth, Toby sat back on his heels and looked up into concerned eyes.

"Yeah. Sorry. I was just thinking that between this," punctuated by a quick squeeze, "pragging and praying, I've spent a hell of a lot of time on my knees in this place."

Chris laughed unsteadily as Toby treated him to a few light, teasing licks and careful nips... deep down they both knew that Toby's dangerous streak turned him on. "Somehow I don't think the good Father would appreciate the comparison... although Sister Pete might."

After a long period of contemplation -- including sessions with both Keller and Beecher with her own therapist in attendance -- Peter Marie had decided to stay with the convent, but her appreciation for the irreverent ironies of life in Oz had been permanently expanded, enough so that she'd ended up with one of Em City's most blatant examples of raw sexuality -- "sex on a stick," her therapist had commented wryly after their first joint session -- holding down the fort in her office.

"Fuck 'em"

"Mmm.... " Chris pretended to consider briefly, then grinned wickedly. "No thanks... I'd rather do you."

"Yeah?" came the pleased murmur, then Toby engulfed him in a slow, hot descent.

"Yeah," Chris agreed faintly, blissfully dazed as Toby's head rose just as slowly.

"Maybe next time," Toby said, then devoted all of his attention to driving Chris out of his mind.

It wasn't long before Toby heard the low noise he'd come to crave -- somewhere between a growl and a purr, it started rumbling out of Chris's chest as he approached the point of no return. Feeling Chris's hands tighten on his wrists, he hummed with pleasure, knowing that they were sure to bruise, leaving him a potent reminder of Chris's touch to help get him through the long week ahead.

The subtle vibration pushed Chris over the edge, and he came with a celibacy-induced intensity that left him lightheaded, and had Toby swallowing frantically to keep from gagging.

"Fuck..." Chris breathed, shaking his head like a punch-drunk boxer.

"Jesus, Keller... you give up jacking off for Lent or something?" Smug smile met shit-eating grin as Chris refastened his pants, then wrapped his arms around Toby, pulling him in close. Resting with his head on Chris's chest, listening to the slowing heartbeat while Chris lazily caressed the nape of his neck, Toby felt as close to content as he had in months.

In spite of his best intentions, Toby found he had to shift position a few moments later and Chris immediately released him. "Come on. Time to get up." When Toby wordlessly protested with a sullen glare, he added, "Used to it or not, that floor's gotta be hell on your knees... you don't need that shit."

As part of their reconciliation after Gary's murder, they'd spent several sessions with Sister Pete -- ostensibly as part of her victim/offender program, since they couldn't very well call it couples therapy -- learning to recognize and head off the worst of each other's self-destructive tendencies. Now Chris was as determined to help Toby break out of playing the martyr as Toby was to help him believe that he was worth loving, regardless of his past.

"Never thought I'd miss those damn bunks," Toby griped, settling back into his chair and remembering stolen moments in Chris's arms -- times when the harsh reality of life in Oz had faded under the influence of hot, slick skin and the cocoon of love and support they'd somehow woven around each other.

Chris laughed and slid his chair closer, gave a full-body stretch like an oversized feline, then let his leg rest casually against Toby's as he'd done so often while watching TV or playing cards in Em City, a combination of possessiveness and affection that warmed Toby to the core. "Not me. If I never see bunk beds again, it'll be too soon. That place I'm gonna take you..." he paused, checking to see if Toby was following.

"The private place," Toby supplied with a smile.

"Yeah. It's gonna have a huge bed. Oh, and one of those glass-walled porch things, lookin' out over a beach or woods or something like that."

Bemused and intrigued, Toby asked, "A sun porch? Why?"

"Well... ever since I hit Em City, I've had this... thing... about those glass pods. Cuz of the hacks I couldn't do anything about it of course, but..." he trailed off, grinning enticingly. Leaning forward, he pinned a flushed Toby under his intense stare and whispered, "You can picture that, can't you Tobe? Pressed together from head to toe, me deep inside you... each thrust rubbing your slick cock against the cool glass. Of course, knowing how hot you get, it wouldn't be cool for long, would it?"

"Chris..." Toby whispered helplessly as his lover's tall, muscular body shifted back into a nonchalant sprawl.

"Yeah, baby?" he replied, eyes glittering with amusement.

"You're a twisted fuck, you know that?"

"Yeah. But I'm *\*your\** twisted fuck."

Toby thought about that for a moment, then nodded, a slow grin spreading across his face. It was all too true and -- unbelievably enough -- it was somehow exactly right, for both of them.

**Chapter 2: First Visit (January 2003)**

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Toby grimly resisted fidgeting as he waited in the communal visiting room. Between the awkward scene with his mother that morning, the eternity it was taking Chris to arrive, and his paranoia that they wouldn't actually let him walk back out the main gate at the end of the day, he was as tense as hell.

He shook his head, remembering the fiasco at breakfast. He should have been better prepared after a week at home, a week in which his mother had deliberately avoided any mention of Oz, preferring to call it "that place," and quickly changing the subject if he brought it up. Despite that, he'd been shocked when she'd refused to drive him out to the penitentiary, indicating in no uncertain terms that she felt he should just leave all that behind him as quickly as possible, especially "that horrible Keller person" who had obviously "lead him astray." Of course, she'd been even more shocked when he'd responded that she didn't understand "the first fucking thing" about what he and Chris had between them, then walked out to call a cab.

His eyes lit up and he jumped to his feet as the man in question sauntered into the room, but was left standing alone, awkward and confused, as Chris avoided his embrace by slipping quickly into a chair. He sat back down slowly.

"Chris?" One look at the guarded expression was enough to tell him that something had gone very wrong over the past seven days.

Keller's tone was a study in sarcasm. "Well, isn't this a pleasant surprise. I figured it was Angelique dropping in to see me or something."

"Surprise? Chris, I wrote you every day about how I couldn't wait to see you again... why would I not be here?"

Something changed then in Chris's expression... a thaw, followed quickly by anger. It was a simple progression, really: mail...mailroom... "Vern," he growled. "Fuck! Why didn't I think of that?"

"You didn't get anything from me?" Chris shook his head, looking sheepish as Toby continued. "Well, shit. I should've realized.... That Nazi bastard always has known how to play us against each other, why stop now? Don't worry about it... I'll figure something out." As Chris continued to avoid his eyes, Toby tried to ease the tension by joking, "Hey, it could've been worse... you could've refused to see me."

Chris visibly flinched before admitting, "I almost did. It was the O'Reilly brothers that bugged me until I promised to not to just to shut them up."

"I suppose that means Ryan hasn't gotten anything from me about Cyril's case either?"

Chris looked up and flashed a quick grin, "What the hell do you think they were riding me about?"

Toby relaxed as the warmth returned to Chris's eyes and he quipped, "Well, I'd like to believe that \*somebody\* around here actually misses me."

Chris pretended to mull it over, then replied casually, "Well, I think Sister Pete does. She says my typing pretty much sucks compared to yours."

Toby laughed. "I warned her you'd need some practice." He paused for a moment, drinking in the sight of his smiling lover, before adding, "And Chris... don't do that."

"Do what? Christ, Toby, I was joking... you know I miss you..."

"No, not that. I meant about not coming to meet me. Promise me you won't do that. Even if you're mad about something, don't shut me out." Toby had known all along that continuing their relationship once he was paroled wasn't going to be easy -- they'd managed to mistrust and misunderstand each other often enough while in constant close proximity. This legally mandated distance would just make things more complicated, but he was determined to make it work, at least as long as Chris was willing.

Brows drawn together, Chris thought it over carefully before answering. "I'll try."

"Chris..."

"No, Toby. That's the best I can promise, okay? If that's not good enough, then..." he stopped and shrugged, slouching deeper into his chair and crossing his arms across his chest.

When Toby's parole was approved, Chris had refused to discuss the future, responding to Toby's promises of visits and letters with a sad smile, then distracting him with a joke, some gossip, or -- when he could get away with it -- something more physical. Toby suddenly realized that it wasn't that Chris *\*hadn't\** believed him, but that he *\*couldn't\** -- at least not yet. With the radical change in circumstances, Chris was off balance, needing to build new boundaries, push new limits -- to see for himself, in his own way, if Toby's love was still unconditional.

With this new understanding, and having learned that the best attitude to adopt with a defensive Keller was a combination of carnal and casual, Toby leaned back, stretching out his legs and entangling them with Chris's while meeting him shrug for shrug. "Sure thing, Chris. But just know that whether you decide to join me or not, I'll be here. I'm sure the O'Reillys or Hill would be up for a visit if you're not." Seeing relief in Chris's eyes, Toby knew he'd struck just the right balance between "I love you" and "you don't own me," both of which, paradoxically, Chris needed to hear.

With that initial hurdle out of the way, the two men were soon engaged in a spirited conversation, with Chris filling Toby in on the latest backstabblings -- most of which had been figurative rather than literal recently. Meanwhile, Toby amused him with stories of his faux pas trying to readjust to life outside, carefully editing out that morning's incident.

Despite the seductive smiles that came more easily with each passing minute, Chris still kept his distance, only leaning forward over the table when Toby sat back, then pulling away again when Toby leaned in. To forestall the question he saw building in Toby's eyes, he cut his own to the hacks by the door. In response, Toby looked over at the other tables, where inmates and their visitors touched and even embraced casually and comfortably. Looking back, he read Chris's answer in his deep blue eyes: "That ain't us, babe. Not now, and maybe not ever." Forcing a smile, Toby relented and began telling Chris about Cyril's case.

All too soon, a hack was calling Chris's name, letting them know that his hour was up. Chris stood, adopting his customary indolent attitude, but a quick flash of loss in his eyes as he looked down brought Toby up and into his arms before he could move away.

Instinctively his grip tightened, holding Toby as close as possible. Then, as he'd done when Toby took that first step towards forgiving him, he pressed his lips to Toby's cheek and whispered "Kiss me." This time there was no pulling away, no Said-inspired blessing, just a hot mouth sealed to his and a tongue that, like Toby himself, seemed to dominate and surrender simultaneously, dragging Chris in so deep that he knew he'd never completely break free.

When lack of air forced them to separate, he stared at Toby for a moment, then simply turned and walked out of the room. Fleeing both an insane desire to follow Chris back into Oz and the sudden silence of the visiting room, Toby did the same.

**Chapter 3: First Letters (January 2003)**

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Text of a letter addressed to Sister Peter Marie, Oswald State Correctional Facility, with a return address of Hardwick and Turner, Attorneys at Law:

Dear Sister Pete --

It was so good to talk to you on the phone today... maybe next week when I come out to visit Chris, I can take you out to lunch or something, if that wouldn't be too odd. I hope you understand why I can't come in to see you yet... even getting to the visitor's room was harder than I thought it would be. Maybe someday.

Thank you again for offering to do this for us... hopefully this will circumvent that... snag... in the mail room. See... I'm being good... and I'm asking Chris to behave, too.

Say hello to Father Mukada for me...

Tobias

And in the enclosed envelope:

Chris --

With any luck, this letter will actually get to you. Unless things have changed in the past week, even that fuckwad Schillinger doesn't mess with Sister Pete's mail. Be sure to thank her again for this, will you? And be nice about it! Don't be a prick and try to kiss her or anything. This time she's likely to hit you over the head with a lamp or something, and I can't visit you if you're in the hospital.

I'm trying to remember what I wrote in the other letters. Last week was such a blur, what with dealing with my parents and settling in with the kids and starting the paperwork for Cyril. I can't believe that shithead snagged them all. But that doesn't mean you can go back on our agreement. I saw that look in your eye today, so -- just don't, okay? Keeping clear of him worked for both of us for the past two years and I need you to stick with it if I'm going to have any chance of getting you out of there. Remember what Sister Pete says about living well being the best revenge? Well, for now that means staying out of the hole, out of the hospital, and out of McManus's office. As for later -- well, I've been getting all kinds of ideas for when you get out.

And remind Ryan to play it cool for now too. Things are looking good for getting Cyril into that special facility my father checked into, and once he's out of there, I expect Ryan to keep his end of the bargain and move in with you. Not that I wouldn't be helping Cyril anyway, and not like Ryan doesn't know that, but....

Anyway... I need to head to bed. The kids have been running me ragged since I got home. They don't like to let me out of their sight... not that I blame them. Did I tell you that they watch Miss Sally? Harry even has his very own Nooter and Pecky puppets. I nearly busted a gut when I saw that. And, no, that's NOT one of my ideas for when you get out, you sick fuck.

Have I mentioned yet that this bed is way too fucking big for just me? And that I miss you? Remember that, okay? And take care of yourself...

Toby

Text of a letter sent the same day, addressed to Christopher Keller from Tobias Beecher:

Vern --

Sorry to disappoint you. Show's over.

TB

Text of the return letter, sent via Sister Pete's office:

Hey baby --

I must've done something right, because when I thanked Sister Pete, she not only didn't knock me upside the head, she actually offered to let me use the computer to write you back. Okay... the truth is she said no one could actually read my writing -- which I don't think is true, but I'm sure it ain't up to Harvard standards -- and that I could use the typing practice. Do nuns always have to be so fucking honest?

Speaking of Sister Pete -- what the hell did you say to her on the phone? I came in today and she wanted to \*talk\* -- well, shit, when does she \*not\* want to talk? I know it's her job and all, but some days it reminds me of why I got divorced. Anyways, the new deal is that I tell her if I don't hear from you for a while, so let me know if you have to go out of town or something.

Man, Tobe, this spell check shit is a pain in the ass! And fuck that grammer thing -- how the hell do you turn that off?

I wish I could've seen your face when you saw those puppets. It'd be nice to hear you laugh like that too. Not much of that in this place, huh babe? So, if it's not the puppets, what \*are\* those ideas you've been getting? I hope that big bed of yours is in there somewhere. And don't sweat it about Vern. I ain't going near that fuck. Hell, I think he's finally getting used to being ignored -- why screw up a sweet deal like that?

Well... let me see if I can get this printed... it's almost time for dinner, such as it is. I'll let Ryan and Cyril know that I heard from you.

C.

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**Chapter 4: Consequences (February 2003)**

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The Aryan Brotherhood was treading lightly in their hobnail boots, for their illustrious leader -- Vern Schillinger, hate-monger supreme -- was pissed. And this wasn't just his usual level of generalized anger at the deplorable condition of race relations in America. No, this was the specific sort of stomach-churning rage that only his two backstabbing-prags-turned-mutual-but-buddies could inspire.

Vern had been numb with shock when he'd first heard about Beecher's parole. It was inconceivable to him that a prissy, pissy, tightass bootlicker like that would be out on the street while he might very well be trapped in Oz for the rest of his life. Granted, they'd lived in a precariously balanced state of truce for the past couple of years -- only occasionally yanking each other's chains, and never hard enough to do serious damage -- but suddenly To-bi-as was out of reach, and that irritated him. He found himself dwelling on missed opportunities. If only the crazy little rich boy hadn't managed to ally himself with some of the slickest fucks in the place -- between Keller, O'Reilly and Said, he'd become damn near untouchable. If only Hank hadn't dropped off the face of the earth (and probably into some drug-infested alley in Miami) during his post-FBI-release trip -- it had been nice having a connect on the outside that was his own flesh and blood, and the kid had done a good job with Beecher's brats. If only Querns and Adebisi had finished cleaning house in Em City before they'd been taken down -- leave it to the niggers to only do the job halfway before fucking it up. It was enough to make a man ill.

Then things had taken a turn for the better, as letters began showing up in his mailroom... letters from Beecher to Keller and O'Reilly. None for Said, of course -- he'd started resting in whatever it was Muslims considered peace shortly before ole Beech-ball had bounced his way out of Oz, thanks to a murder which -- contrary to expectations -- the Brotherhood had nothing to do with. Nope, that had been just another case of black-on-black violence, like when Said had done pretty much everyone a favor and shanked Adebisi. He'd claimed self-defense, but Vern didn't particularly care about the why's and wherefore's, as long as the end result was one more dead African, 'hyphen American' or not.

Initially reading the letters only managed to make Vern's mood even worse. Not only was Beecher effectively out of reach, but now he was plotting to take away Vern's other favorite toy, Cyril O'Reilly, and eventually maybe even Keller himself, whom Vern had always counted on having a nice long time to fuck with, given his sentence. But then Beecher himself gave Vern the clue on how to blow all those plans to hell... it seemed that "dear Chris" was a little "insecure" about his ex-podmate's continuing affections. Vern laughed out loud as he read the third day's worth of "I miss you" and "I can't wait to see you again," startling the hell out of Robson, who had recently taken to skulking even more than usual in a futile attempt to keep the wrath of Vern from raining down on his head.

// Insecure? // Vern thought. // Hell, if there's anything left of the Keller \*I\* knew, full-blown paranoia is more like it. And O'Reilly's even worse. A couple more days of 'no news' sounds like damn fine 'good news' to me. //

The next day he carefully watched the men in question as he wrapped up his regularly scheduled mail run to Emerald City. Yep -- all the signs were there -- the carefully camouflaged hopeful glance fading to an unfocused glare, a sarcastic smirk tightening in anger as two dark heads tipped towards each other to exchange heated whispers, and -- best of all -- Keller's abrupt departure for the gym, alone. Vern waited until he'd pushed the mailcart into the hallway before breaking into a wide smile. Not only would a continued silence undoubtedly break up his two ex-prags, but it also looked as if it would effectively render whatever agreements Beecher and Keller had made with the O'Reilly brothers null and void as well. Things were certainly looking up.

The rest of the week came and went, with Vern diligently pocketing all of Beecher's correspondence and gleefully watching each day as Keller's mailtime scowl grew more pronounced and his distance from the O'Reillys increased. Vern's mood improved to the point that he'd begun reading choice passages aloud to Robeson in the evenings just before lights out, and one night he even found himself almost good-naturedly explaining his plan to his dimwitted companion. Well, as good-natured as a man can be, sitting on the crapper in a crowded cellblock.

"It's very simple, James. Keller doesn't get letters, he gets pissed at Beecher. O'Reilly doesn't get letters, he gets pissed at Beecher \*and\* Keller. Eventually Beecher gives up, and both Keller and our little sweetpea Cyril stay right where we want them."

"But what about tomorrow? It's visiting day."

Vern sniffed dismissively. "Shit. As pissed off as Keller looks, the only way he'd go within twenty yards of that visiting room is to beat the little blond bitch into the ground, and since he can't, he won't."

Robson's brow furrowed in thought as he worked through the details, then -- as the hacks called lights out -- his face split in a malevolent grin.

Two days after visiting day, yet another letter for Keller showed up, but this one was much thinner, as if Beecher was running out of things to say. Vern couldn't wait until his shift ended to check up on his handiwork and approached the nearest hack, asking for and receiving permission to visit the head. Almost humming, he slit the flap of the envelope and unfolded the single sheet of paper inside, then stared dumbfounded at his own name and six little words: "Sorry to disappoint you. Show's over." Crumpling the paper in his fist, Vern stalked back to the mailroom, resolving once again to leave subtle manipulations to pussies like O'Reilly and Beecher and stick to what he was best at -- straightforward mindfucks and no-nonsense violence.

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Toby's eyes narrowed as he looked up and saw Ryan O'Reilly walking into the visiting room instead of Chris. "Oh, fuck. Now what's wrong? I \*know\* you started getting mail...." he grumbled, slumping into his chair.

Ryan looked down at him and frowned. "Nice to see you too, Beecher," he muttered sarcastically.

"Sorry Ryan. I \*am\* glad to see you. Where's Cyril?"

Ryan grimaced and dropped into the seat across from him. "In the hospital."

"Shit. What happened? How is he?"

"Oh, he's fine. He's mostly just keeping an eye on Keller at this point."

Toby sat bolt upright, almost coming out of his chair. "What?!"

"Settle down, Beech. Sister Pete was gonna call you, but it just happened this morning, so she figured you'd already be on your way...."

"\*What\* happened, O'Reilly?!" Toby growled.

"What do you think, \*Beecher\*? Schillinger didn't take kindly to you trying to spring Cyril, or your little 'love note.'"

"Fuck." Toby sank back down, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes. // When the hell will I learn? Everything was fine, but I just couldn't resist one more fucking dig at that bastard. //

"Beech. Hey -- he'll be okay, man. Luckily Cyril was on his way to the gym to meet him. You know how protective he can be, and when he gets those fists going.... Fuck, he's like the old Cyril again." Ryan flashed him a gleaming smile as he lifted his head.

"So... what's the damage this time?" Toby asked wearily.

"Cyril's got a few stitches. He'll prob'ly end up with a scar like mine," Ryan replied, rubbing a thumb along the side of his chin. "As for K-boy...."

Toby's heart clenched as Ryan paused. "What?" he choked out.

"The doc says he'll be fine, but he's got a concussion and hasn't woken up yet. Cyril says he took a pretty solid hit to the head from one of the weights, but you know how thick his skull is -- it's almost as bad as yours."

Both men looked up as Father Ray Mukada hurried into the room, black robes swirling behind him. He nodded briefly to Toby, letting thin, nicotine-stained fingers come to rest on his shoulder, then turned to his companion. "Ryan, the doctors want you to help escort Cyril back to Emerald City. He's been sedated and you'll need to keep an eye on him for a while."

"Sedated? Why? He was fine...."

"He was there when Chris went into convulsions...." As Toby tried to stand, Father Ray pressed down hard on his shoulder. "Sit, Tobias. Ryan, go on."

"Ryan - wait," Toby called, his keen lawyer's mind rising above both his disbarment and his guilt-ridden worry for a moment. "Be sure they document Cyril's reaction... it's more proof that he doesn't belong here."

Ryan stared at him with an honest look of surprise for a moment before shooting him a tight-lipped smile. "He'll be okay, Tobe," he repeated gently, then headed out the door at his usual frenetic pace.

Toby watched Ryan go with anguished eyes, a bitter laugh spilling out as he realized the irony of his situation. When Chris had been shot, he'd been trapped in Oz; now he was free to go anywhere he wanted, except the one place he needed to be. He looked up at the priest, jaw tightening as he took in the full formal vestments, locking away the words he was afraid to say.

Father Ray smoothed his free hand over the splash of purple draped around his neck, then met Toby's eyes. "He's stable now, Tobias." Pausing, he squeezed Toby's shoulder hard, making sure that sank in before continuing. "But they did have me administer last rites earlier, just as a precaution."

"Christ."

"Once we know who did this...."

"I already know, Father. So do you. That's the problem... we always \*know\*, we just can't \*prove\* anything. That fucking bastard." Toby took a deep breath, then quipped, "Well, at least Chris has a damn good excuse for standing me up." He sighed. "You'd think I'd seen enough of that place for a lifetime, but.... There's no way you can get me in to see him, is there?"

"Not legally, no," Father Ray replied sadly.

"Dammit. Next time I see him, he's signing that paperwork. Power of attorney, living will... whatever it takes. Hell, I'll even get one of those free ordinations if I have to. No offense, Father."

"None taken." Ray was too pleased at the rationality of Toby's reaction to be offended by much at that point. He'd seen Beecher spiral down into rage and insanity too many times. "I should get back soon... do you want to wait here for a while?"

"Yes. No. Even if he wakes up later today, I.. look... just be sure he knows I was here, okay? And give him this. Tell him it's his turn to wear it, but I'll want it back next week, so he better be well enough to visit by then." Toby stood and pulled Chris's Saint Dismas medallion over his head, holding it out in a hand that only trembled slightly. Sister Pete had given it back to Chris when they'd started counseling, and they'd taken to sharing it as a tangible symbol of what they were both working towards.

"Are you sure you're okay to drive?"

Toby sniffed, almost sounding amused. "Oh, don't worry, Father. I'm still cabbing it. The department of motor vehicles is only slightly more forgiving than the bar... it'll be a while yet before I get my license back."

"And the bar?"

"Not likely. A very slim chance in the far future." He shrugged. "But this advocacy work is a step in the right direction. At least I can still do research and help draft the documents, even if I can't present them to a judge. So, uh... you get back there and give him that, okay? You or Sister Pete will give me a call as soon as you know anything?"

"Of course." Toby nodded gratefully and turned to leave. "Tobias... it's a good thing... what you're doing for Cyril."

Toby turned his head and gave Father Ray a twisted smile. "Yeah, well... you know what they say in Oz, Father -- no good deed goes unpunished."

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**Chapter 5: Recovery (February 2003)**

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Tobias Beecher was dragged reluctantly towards wakefulness by an annoying chirping sound and drowsily pulled a pillow over his head to block it out. Although he'd excused himself early the evening before -- mostly to avoid needlessly snapping at his parents -- he'd tossed and turned most of the night, and what little sleep he'd gotten was plagued by nightmares. The last one, at dawn, had been the worst. The sensation of plunging a knife into Chris's back was so real, he'd awoken with an anguished shout, certain he'd find his hands bathed in fresh blood.

He was no stranger to nightmares -- from the moment he'd killed Kathy Rockwell, his subconscious had been fed a steady diet of ammunition to use against him. But over the past two years, the edge had been taken off the worst of them by the comforting presence of Chris in the bunk below, or closer, when Murphy had night duty. They'd bought a certain amount of good will with both McManus and his lead hack by helping them catch Howell in the act of forcing herself on Ryan O'Reilly. Watching her march off in handcuffs had briefly improved everyone's morale, and Murphy was willing to turn a blind eye as long as they were quiet, discrete, and were back in separate bunks by the time the next shift came on duty.

At the thought of Chris, his fogged brain snapped to attention and he dove out of bed, searching frantically for the source of the noise. Snatching the cordless phone from its cozy nest under the bed, he pressed 'receive,' abruptly cutting off the answering machine's outgoing message.

"Hello?" It came out a croak, evidence of his rough night.

"Tobias?"

Clearing his throat, he tried again. "Yeah, Sister Pete, it's me. Sorry about that. What's the news?"

"I'm sorry I woke you." Toby didn't bother making the usual, and inevitably untruthful, polite disclaimers. He and Sister Peter Marie had moved well beyond such social niceties years ago. "Can you hold on for a second?" Without waiting for a response, she was gone, leaving him twisting in the wind, fervently trying to convince himself she wasn't avoiding his question -- reminding himself that Sister Pete never pulled any punches with bad news.

"Toby?"

A bit worn and slightly tight with pain, it was still a voice he would recognize anywhere. "Chris!"

"Shh, baby. Not so loud. I got a headache you wouldn't believe."

"Sorry." The meaning of that last nightmare -- and the fact that his inability to just let things lie with Schillinger had almost cost Chris his life -- came crashing down on Toby on the heels of the initial wave of relief. "Oh, God. Chris, I'm so sorry," he said softly, his voice catching in his throat.

"It's okay, Toby." Chris's voice was deep and gentle, intended to sooth, but bouncing ineffectually off the walls of Toby's near-hysteria.

"No, it's not! This is all my fault..."

"I know." The quick agreement stopped Toby in his tracks.

"Oh." Of course Chris knew. If Ryan knew, that meant Cyril knew, which meant that whoever Vern had sent to do his dirty work had been quite clear about his reasons before.... "Are you really okay? Ryan said you took a weight to the head, like Keenan."

Chris gave a derisive snort. "Not quite like Keenan, thanks to Cyril. It's like I told ya before... they stab me, they shoot me, I ain't going down. This is just somethin' new."

"Well, I see that, unlike your skull, your ego escaped intact. I, on the other hand, still feel like shit for putting you both in Schillinger's line of fire again."

"Yeah, well... you're just lucky I'm too tired to be pissed," Chris retorted in a mock growl, and was rewarded with a short bark of laughter from the phone and a poorly disguised chuckle from the nun at his bedside. Ever since Sister Pete had suggested 'vigorous physical exercise' to them as an anger management technique during a counseling session -- causing Chris to leer, Toby to bare his teeth in a feral grin, and Pete to blush like a schoolgirl at her unintended innuendo -- it had turned into a joke between the three of them.

"Ow! Shit, Sister, do they teach that ear thing at nun school or somethin'?"

"Of course, but not until our final year. It's only for the most recalcitrant of sinners."

Chris laughed, then groaned. "Oh man... don't make me laugh. That fuc... that hurts."

"I warned you not to dick around with her about that," Toby quipped, his own smile evident in his voice. If Sister Pete was joking, Chris must be well on his way to recovery.

"Fuck you. Ow! Well, at least ya don't gotta worry about Vern for much longer."

Toby's heart skipped a beat. "What? Why? Did you... is Ryan...?"

"Nah, nothin' like that. But a little birdy in black told Glynn to keep an eye on him and they caught him trying to dump some of your letters. So now the feds are interested. And guess who got the case?"

"Not that prick from the kidnapping?!"

"Yep. And after that fuck-up with Hank, he's out for blood -- a federal conviction with a nice long stay in a federal prison."

"Fuck."

"Mm-hmmm. Oh shit, here comes the doc. Talk to my torturer while I get poked at, okay?"

"Oh baby... can I watch?"

A low growl was the only response before Toby heard the phone being carried away from the bedside.

"Sister Pete?"

"Yes, I'm here." Toby could hear the remnants of humor in her voice.

"How is he? Really?"

She paused before replying, weighing her words carefully, fully aware that Chris would be listening around whatever checks the doctor was performing. "Pretty much like he sounds, actually. He still needs to rest, but hates being in the hospital as much as ever. He should be back on his feet in a few days and back at work in less than a week."

"Thank God for thick skulls, huh?"

Sister Pete laughed, which caused Chris to glare at her suspiciously. "In this circumstance, I'll have to agree with you, Tobias."

"And what about Schillinger? I'm almost afraid to hope..."

"Oh, it's true, alright. He got caught red-handed. And based on what Tim told me after the staff meeting this morning, he was quite upset about it."

"Yeah?" Toby's tone was leading.

Barely restraining another laugh, she replied, "I believe his words were 'I haven't seen that particular mottled shade of red on Vern since Carrie Schillinger was stupid enough to show up with that mulato baby she tried to pass off as Hank's.'" She paused, guiltily enjoying the muffled snorts of laughter coming from the phone, knowing that technically it was wrong to be rejoicing in someone's else's misfortune, but patently unable to fault the man at the other end of the line. He'd come a long way toward dealing with Schillinger in a way that kept the battle from escalating again, but there were some things that could be neither forgotten nor forgiven, except by God.

"Goddamn it... Sister Pete!"

Chris's call caught Toby's attention as well as her own and his laughter cut off abruptly. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, as far as I can tell. I think the doctor just gave him a shot so he'll sleep and he wants to say goodbye first."

// Oh, God. // Toby thought anxiously, all too aware of what an uninhibited Chris was capable of. "You, ah, may want to give him a little privacy." He heard Sister Pete chuckling as she handed over the phone.

"Hey, Toby."

"Hey." // So far, so good. //

"Jus' wanted to hear your voice again before I fell asleep. I miss that, ya know?"

"Yeah. Me too." // That wasn't so bad. Actually, it was kinda sweet. He must be pretty doped up. //

"Ya know what else I miss?"

// Oh oh. //

"The way you smell. Our pod don't smell like you no more, baby. Bring me one o' your t-shirts or somethin' next time, huh?"

Caught somewhere between laughing and crying, he replied, "Sure thing, Chris. Now give the phone back to Sister Pete and get some sleep, alright?"

"K. Oh, hey... almos' forgot... damn drugs... love you."

"Love you, too." // Shit... this is going to be a \*long\* week. //

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**Chapter 6: Reconciliation (February 2003)**

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A smile still curving her lips, Sister Peter Marie slipped out of the infirmary and made her way to Emerald City, shadowed unobtrusively by one of Sean Murphy's finest. Beyond being a (fairly) good Catholic boy, Murphy was genuinely fond of Oz's resident nun and actively discouraged her from wandering through any inmate-accessible areas without an escort.

When she reached the quad, the low murmur of conversation paused for a moment, then resumed with a slightly more animated buzz. Although she no longer avoided the cellblock as she had during those dark days when she'd contemplated leaving the convent, her visits were still infrequent, and therefore provided fresh grist for the rumor mill. Standing watch over his charges from the guard station, Murphy noted her entrance. She gave him a brief nod, then headed for the O'Reilly's pod.

Inside, Ryan was practicing a sleight of hand trick with Cyril's ever-present rubber ball, much to his younger brother's obvious amazement and delight. Sister Pete stood and watched for a moment, thinking how easy it was some days -- especially days like today -- to forget the degree of violence the men under her care were capable of. But perhaps it all balanced out, since most people certainly didn't realize they were capable of this -- kindness and love, brotherly and otherwise -- as well. Lord knew she'd had her doubts on more than one occasion. Stepping forward, she knocked on the doorframe. Slanting a grin in her direction, Ryan used her arrival as a diversion to make the ball 'disappear' into Cyril's own pocket before stepping back in a tacit invitation for her to join them.

"Sister!" Cyril bounced up out of his chair like an eager puppy, overjoyed to see one of the only people in Oz who never got upset with him, no matter how confused or scared he got.

"Hello Cyril. Ryan."

"Sister. What brings you down into the trenches? Surely nothing I've done...." Ryan prompted, shooting her an innocent look that almost worked. Sister Pete knew he was quite capable of lying to her -- he certainly had in the past... about Gloria, about Cyril, and most likely about Office Howell as well -- but Ryan's saving grace, at least as far as she was concerned, was that he was just Catholic enough to feel guilty about it, and eventually it showed.

Making a mental note to check up on the activities of Ryan's favorite pawns, she replied, "Not this time. I just wanted to let you both know that Chris woke up this morning and seems to be on the mend."

"Hey, that's great news. Didja call Beech yet?"

Clearing her throat to disguise a chuckle, she nodded. "Yes. Actually, I called from the infirmary, so they got a chance to speak briefly." Ryan's grin grew into a knowing smirk.

"Does that mean that Chris is coming home soon?" Cyril asked, shifting his weight anxiously from foot to foot. He knew everyone said it was a good thing Toby was gone, but he missed him and was worried about more of his friends disappearing. People disappeared a lot in Oz.

"He should be back in Emerald City within a few days, Cyril."

"Good." With that problem solved, he turned back to his brother. "Ryan, what did you do with my ball?"

His smile ratcheting down a few notches, Ryan replied, "Check your pocket, little brother."

Doing so, Cyril's face split in a wide grin. "Whoa! That's neat magic, Ryan. Oh, Miss Sally's coming on. Bye, Sister." With that, Cyril headed for his favorite chair in front of the television monitors, leaving Ryan sighing in his wake.

"He don't belong here," he breathed, almost too softly to hear.

"Now that Tobias is working on it, I'm hopeful that the right people will become aware of that."

"Yeah, well... I better start keeping up my end of the bargain or Cyril'll lose his appeal before it's even filed."

"Your end...? Ryan, regardless of what happens with Chris, I'm sure Tobias will do his best to get Cyril moved to a more appropriate facility."

"If you say so, Sister." He took a deep breath, donned his usual game face, then headed out to join his brother, Hill, Rebadow and Busmalis in the quad, leaving Sister Pete once again pondering the nature of the man who was slowly but surely making the transition from inmate and patient to friend.

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During her years at Oz -- a post she'd requested shortly after taking final vows to her order -- she'd rarely had a problem maintaining a professional distance from the inmates. In her dual role as spiritual and secular counselor, she was subjected to both the worst details of their crimes and the often horrific circumstances that had warped their minds, hearts and souls. It was a combination which had kept her fairly well balanced between compassion and analysis, at least until the day Tim McManus offered her one of his new Emerald City guinea pigs as an assistant.

And so Tobias Beecher had entered her life. An alcoholic ex-lawyer, his file read, but beyond the black and white of the page -- out where life was lived in full technicolor -- he'd turned out to be far more intriguing and complex: an unwitting drama queen armed with puppy dog eyes, a razor-sharp mind, and the uncanny ability to vacillate wildly from addiction to madness, revenge to redemption, all without quite losing his ability to hope... or to love.

Hope and love, two things that were continuously in short supply within the walls of Oz, and which led Tobias, seemingly inevitably, into the arms of Chris Keller, who was never quite what he seemed. No longer a prag, but certainly no Schillinger; not just a lover, nor just a betrayer; not a 'fag', but unashamedly and openly in pursuit of his sometime podmate; a master manipulator who'd been willing to use any tool at his disposal -- including her -- to win back what he'd lost, but also a man who honestly desired from both God and man the unconditional love he'd been taught he didn't deserve.

Her therapist had called her response an 'occupational hazard' and assured her that it wasn't an uncommon occurrence -- she'd seen for herself how devoted Ray had been to poor Miguel -- but for a long time, almost too long, she'd been unable to consider forgiveness, either for herself or for the two men who'd gotten so far under her skin. At first she'd been too angry and ashamed... Chris's "hell hath no fury" comment had hit far too close to home for comfort. Later -- refusing help -- she'd allowed herself to wallow in hurt and confusion until she'd been on the verge of nervous breakdown.

Planning to leave the convent, refusing to visit Chris after the shooting, avoiding Tobias when he'd needed her most, and publicly turning a known addict away from group -- those certainly hadn't been the actions of the person (woman, nun \*or\* psychologist) she wanted to be. So, after her hysterical outburst at one of the staff meetings during Querns' blessedly short tenure -- in hindsight, screaming at the two unit managers about their "petty little egos" and accusing them of only caring about themselves had been a spectacular example of the pot calling the kettle black -- she'd taken Ray's advice and made an appointment with Tim's new therapist. If nothing else, she'd figured that anyone who could take McManus from the broken man singing "Camptown Races" at Officer Howard's funeral to someone who could successfully keep Unit B in line during yet another bout of racial unrest was worth meeting.

She'd learned a lot about herself during those early sessions, including the unique combination of timing and shared circumstance which had allowed Tobias and Chris to get to her as no other inmates had. To varying degrees, and despite their individual coping mechanisms -- be it religion, sex, or the ever-popular addiction of the week -- they'd all been fighting the same three-headed demon of self-loathing, guilt and unresolved longing. For Chris and Tobias it seemed to be a long-term condition of questionable origin, only recently centered around each other, but for her, it dated back to her husband's murder. Before that she'd been a relatively well-adjusted psychologist; afterwards, she'd belatedly realized, it had been survivor's guilt as much as an honest vocation that landed her at the convent doors.

The information she'd gotten from William Giles -- the details of Leonard's death -- had briefly and brutally reawakened those feelings for her, but rather than dealing with them, she'd tucked them neatly away between the pages of her bible. And there they had gleefully festered until Chris, with his patented combination of deception and truth, had cracked her wide open. And by the time she'd reassembled the pieces -- with a lot of help from both God and her therapist, and a final push from Cyril O'Reilly -- Tobias and Chris were no longer speaking to her... or to each other.

Startled by a loud beeping noise, Sister Pete looked up and realized that as she'd been thinking, she'd unconsciously made her way from the O'Reilly's pod to the computer room. Cringing at the memory of her well-intentioned yet hideously self-centered speech, she ran her fingers over the desk that had briefly held Chris's St. Dismas medallion. She vividly recalled the warmth of the metal against her fingers as she'd picked it up and, galvanized by the look of emptiness in Chris's eyes, hurried back to her office and reached for the phone. It had become painfully obvious she and Chris needed to talk, but even more so that they couldn't do it alone -- she just wasn't ready yet. And -- to be honest -- she'd been curious to see how her own counselor would handle one of Emerald City's most potent forces of nature.

Thankfully, Oz's new unofficial staff psychologist (rumor had it that Sean Murphy had been seen at her office as well) had handled Chris astoundingly well. She managed to keep him focused on the session while casually deflecting his attempts at seduction with a sarcastic wit that reminded them both of the third side of their triangle, who -- at Chris's request -- soon joined them. Not that the woman had been completely unaffected. Sister Pete chuckled softly as she remembered the woman's almost cheerful agreement when Tobias had called Chris "walking bucket of pheromones," while his newly reinstated podmate lounged nearby, smiling ingenuously, his no longer empty eyes glowing with pleasure. Once she'd figured out it was that -- the lay-therapist's ability to simply accept his allure without treating it like a mortal sin -- which made the difference, they'd been able to make some real progress.

It hadn't been easy -- rebuilding shattered trust never was -- but over time she felt as if they'd each granted and received absolution of a sort, and that she'd been allowed to get to know them. Perhaps not very well by normal standards, but certainly enough to allow Tobias to train Chris as his replacement and to give honest recommendations for release at all three of Tobias' parole hearings... and more than enough to share in the mixed joy and sorrow of his eventual release. Nevertheless, Ryan's belief that Cyril's transfer depended on Chris's continued well being left her wondering how well she really knew Tobias.

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**Chapter 7: Kids (May 2003)**

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Toby brushed his fingers through his daughter's long blond hair, distracting her from nervously tugging at a loose thread in the hem of her dress. She looked up at him with wide, frightened eyes and he immediately knelt, wrapping one arm around her while holding Harry close in the other. "What is it, sweetheart?" he asked softly. She'd been visiting him in that very room not so long ago, and although the staff tried to make it as comfortable as possible, there was still an underlying sense of being in a "bad place," as Cyril would say.

"They aren't going to make you stay again, are they, daddy?" she whispered, tears threatening. Picking up on his sister's distress, Harry whimpered and buried his face in Toby's neck.

"No. No, sweetie. Never again. I promise." Hugging them tight, Toby debated just picking up both children and leaving. Maybe it was too soon... Holly had spent over half her life with her father in prison, seeing him for only a few hours a week at the most, and sometimes not at all for months at a time. It was no wonder she was afraid of a repeat disappearance, especially after losing her mother and Gary. For Harry, things were simpler -- the only family he'd known until the last year or so had been his grandparents and Holly; Toby had avoided exposing his youngest to Oz until he was sure he was on his way out.

He was about to stand and walk them out when he remembered what Holly's therapist had said about babying her, and how important it was for her to feel like she had some control over her life. "Holly... listen to me. Now, I know that this can be a scary place, so I want you to understand that anytime you want, we can just get up and leave -- all three of us. That goes for you too, Harry. Okay?"

"But what about your friend? Won't he be sad?" Holly asked, while Harry pouted, more afraid of missing an adventure than of his father disappearing.

"He'd understand. He wouldn't want either of you to be sad." On that issue, Toby trusted Chris implicitly; he'd always understood about the kids. Even during those first few months, when isolating him from his family would've been a logical extension of 'Operation Toby,' Chris had encouraged him to start seeing his children. And he'd been there for Toby in every way he could during the aftermath of Hank and Vern's reunion, which had made the eventual accusations of Chris's alleged involvement even more devastating -- for both of them. Holly looked thoughtfully from the door to her father and brother, considering his offer as his mind drifted back to an incident shortly after they'd convinced McManus to let Chris move back in.

He'd stomped into their pod after a visit with his mother -- her first since he'd dropped that little bombshell about Chris while defending him to the FBI -- complaining loudly that the least McManus could do was equip the fishbowls they had to live in with slammable doors. Chris had raised an eyebrow, then wisely stayed silent, leaning casually against the wall and following Toby with his eyes as he paced, ranting about his mother caring more about what people would think than about Holly. He'd reluctantly given in when his parents refused to send Gary and Holly for counseling after they'd found Gen, but not this time. God only knew what she'd been through -- what she'd had to witness. He wasn't going to let his little girl go through life any more damaged than she already was. Besides, how stupid did his mother think he was? It was obvious she was just trying to punish him in her patented passive-aggressive, mother-tested-and-approved way for opening her eyes to what life in Oz was really like -- what had been done to him and what he'd done in turn, and with whom.

As he'd begun to wind down, the maniacal gleam of "Crazy Beech" fading from his eyes, he'd turned to find Chris standing directly in his path. He caught a glimpse of a tight, angry jaw before strong arms closed around him and a low, rough voice whispered heartfelt yet casually obscene words of support in his ear, a combination that comforted him just by being so inherently Chris Keller. He'd eventually won that battle, and now earned his reward all over again when Holly gave him a determined look, saying "We can stay. Harry and I want to meet him."

Meanwhile, in another part of Oz....

Chris followed the rookie CO down the long corridor to the children's visiting room as if he were out for a leisurely stroll, a pace he'd settled on to satisfy his simultaneous desire to rush ahead and to hang back. There was the same background thrum of anticipation that accompanied every visiting day since Toby had made parole, but right then he also felt like he had butterflies the size of Buicks in his gut.

// Shit. Kids. \*Toby's\* kids. How did I let him talk me into this? Fuck. Well, maybe if I mostly stay still and be quiet it won't be so bad. // He'd known for months that this day would eventually come. Toby had been talking about him meeting the kids ever since the time he'd been so hot to get Holly in to see a shrink and his mother had given him a ration of shit about it. // All I did was tell him what he already knew -- that it was his decision, not his parents'. That he shouldn't back down if he knew he was right, cuz Holly was counting on him to know that kinda shit. That if he could knock a fuck like Vern down a few pegs and keep a prick like me in line, he sure as hell could handle his folks, or at least do an end-run around good ole mom if he had to. Then suddenly he's looking at me like I'm some kinda fuckin' hero or something -- starts talking about wanting me to meet Holly and Harry. Hell, \*he\* hadn't even seen Harry yet, except in pictures. //

When he'd resisted, pointing out that he wasn't exactly the type of guy most people would want to expose impressionable young children to, Toby had started getting frustrated and angry again, which -- in a moment of pure asshole on his part -- invariably turned Chris on. He knew it was cliché, but Toby really \*was\* hot when he got angry. Not the crazy, shank-someone type of anger, but like then, when he was defending someone he loved. There was something about the smell of his body, the fire in his eyes, the way his teeth flashed in an almost-snarl -- it reminded him of how Toby was in bed, which probably wasn't the best thing to be thinking of on the way to meet his kids. // Shit. //

~~~

Toby stood as the door opened, smile widening as the figure of the slim, young CO was replaced by a taller, more muscular form. With one hand resting on Holly's shoulder and the other smoothing Harry's curls, he greedily drank in the welcome sight of his lover, clad in familiar low-slung gray pants, comfortably broken-in boots, and the brand new -- and deliciously snug -- dark blue tank Toby had brought on his last visit. He congratulated himself on money well spent as he took in the effect that shade had on Chris's eyes. Chris took a couple of steps into the room and the door closed behind him.

"New hack?" Toby asked, trying to ease the tension he could sense behind Chris's poker-face expression.

"Yeah," came the reply, in a wary, neutral tone.

"How is he?" Among hacks as well as prisoners, there were two basic types of new arrivals -- those who came in gung-ho, ready to bust heads and make a name for themselves, and those who had no idea what they'd gotten themselves into. The former, the Metzger/Howell type, you avoided as much as possible; the latter, like Clayton, you manipulated until they wised up or quit. Chris shrugged and let a small smile ghost across his lips, indicating the second type. Toby could read Chris's thoughts in the twist of his lips and heat of his eyes -- this was the sort of hack who could be cajoled into giving an inmate extra time for a visit, especially if there were children involved.

Feeling a tug on his sleeve, Toby reluctantly tore his eyes away from Chris's smoldering gaze. Glancing downward, his lips quirked at the sight of his son holding his arms up, wordlessly asking to be held. // Between Chris and the kids, I'm completely owned. // he thought wryly, lifting Harry into his arms with a mock groan and cherishing the happy giggles his action produced in the child.

Sneaking a glance at Chris, then down at Holly, he bit his lip nervously as child and felon sized each other up. Chris finally gave another small smile and came closer, bemused by the unexpected sight of Toby's intense look of concentration duplicated on his little girl's face. // Yeah, she's a tough one alright. // he thought, saddened and more than a little angry. // Forged in the same Schillinger-shaped crucible as her father. // As he reached the trio, he looked back up, letting the warmth in Toby's eyes push back the stone-cold hatred thoughts of Vern engendered.

"Harry, Holly, this is Christopher Keller," Toby said, looking at each of them in turn. They were all silent and still for a moment, then Harry reached out and ran his fingers over Chris's tattoo, seemingly fascinated by the design.

"Chris-to-fa?" Harry asked, looking questioningly from Chris to Toby and back again.

Before Chris or Toby could respond, Holly piped up. "No, Harry. That's 'Mr. Keller,'" jiggling the sneaker-clad foot dangling in front of her for emphasis.

Toby's grin grew wider as Chris's look changed from bemused to flustered. It was rather endearing actually, having his hardass lover completely undone by his children. Frowning slightly, Chris studied the tiny fingers resting on his arm for a moment, then lifted his own hand to catch hold of them. For a split second, Toby remembered those hands on him, breaking him -- his bones, his heart, his soul. Then the moment passed; that was a different Chris. This Chris would never hurt his children, this Chris touched him with love -- and this Chris apparently had a soft spot for bold little boys. He smirked as Chris gently captured Harry's small hand in his own. Shooting Toby a glance, Chris turned on the Keller charm, flashing Holly a charming grin and lightly tapping Harry on the nose before whispering conspiratorially, "Actually, that's 'Uncle Chris' to you." Toby just shook his head. Nothing ever flustered Chris for long.

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**Chapter 8: Carol (June 2003 – February 2004)**

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June 2003

Scene: The hallway between the front desk and the visiting area in Oz. Toby walks in, intently reading a sheaf of legal papers.

Meanwhile, a woman is walking out, looking back over her shoulder wistfully. They bump into each other...

"Oh, God! I'm sorry..."

"No, it was my fault..."

They help each other pick up various items -- her coat, his papers.

"I've seen you here before, haven't I?"

"Yes. I'm here just about every week."

"Are you visiting your husband?"

"No, my brother. How about you? Are you visiting your brother too?"

Toby blushes. "Uhm... no. Closer to husband, I suppose."

"Oh!" The woman fumbles with her coat, blushing in turn. "I'm sorry... I didn't mean to..."

"No, that's fine. I mean, you always seem to be leaving as I arrive... you had no way of knowing."

"He... um, he's a lucky man to have someone so devoted. Have you been together long?"

Toby laughed ruefully. "I suppose that depends on who's counting. Out here, you'd say a little over three years, on and off, but in Oz, time seems to run in dog years."

"So he hasn't been in long?"

"Going on five years, actually."

"Oh... so... you met *after* he started serving his sentence?"

"We met while we were *both* doing time."

"You?! But you..." She stops, clapping a hand over her mouth.

"Don't look like a criminal?" Toby smiles.

"Well, yes. I'm sorry. You must think I'm an idiot. I should know better, what with my own brother in here. I suppose after a blunder like that an introduction is mandatory. Carol Goldberg."

"I doubt Miss Manners has actually covered this situation, but... Tobias Beecher. Is your brother new? I don't recognize the name. Unless that's your married name..."

"No, I'm single, much to my mother's chagrin. Isaac started a ten-year sentence right after the new year, but we're hoping he'll make his parole after three years. He's never been in trouble with the law before."

"That explains why I never heard of him... I was paroled in early January. What cellblock is he in?"

"A. Why?"

"That's good. The Aryan Brotherhood doesn't bother with A much. If he can steer clear of them, it'll be a lot safer for him." Carol looks concerned. "Listen, Chris is on his way, so I need to get in there, but I have a friend on the staff, Sister Peter Marie, I could ask her to check up on him, if you like."

"A nun?"

"Yeah, but she's also the prison psychologist. Chris works in her office... it wouldn't hurt for him to meet Isaac either. He's a good man to have watching your back."

"I.. I'm not sure."

"I understand. Look... take my card. Gimme a call if you change your mind. Or if you wanna talk. I know how hard it is to have someone you love in here."

Several days later, the phone rings at the Beecher residence:

"Hello?"

"Yes... I.. uhm... I'm trying to reach Tobias Beecher."

"Speaking."

"Oh. This is Carol. Goldberg. We met at Oswald... uhm, Oz."

"Yes, Miss Goldberg, I remember. What can I do for you?"

"Please, call me Carol. First I want to apologize again for my behavior last week..."

"That's really not necessary..."

"And I wanted to know if the offer's still open. For your friends to help my brother?"

"What's happened?"

"The prison just called. Isaac is in the hospital getting a broken arm set. I think it was those Aryans you mentioned, but he's saying he didn't see who it was. How can you not see who's breaking your arm?!"

Toby lips shift into a rueful grin as he remembers a long-ago conversation with Tim McManus. "The human mind has the wonderful ability to erase the unpleasant parts of life."

"What?"

"Nothing. Sorry. Look - trust me - it's better if he stays quiet about this right now. The best thing is to get him someplace a little safer. You said he's a first-time offender, right?"

"Yes."

"That'll help. What did he do?"

"Why?"

"Because I need to know before I make any calls. Certain crimes -- well, you're not safe anywhere except solitary."

"Like what?"

"Child molestation, mostly. Certain rapes..."

"Oh God, no! Nothing like that!"

"Then what?"

"Vehicular manslaughter. He was high on speed and caused a fatal accident with his motorcycle."

Toby laughs helplessly as Carol waits in shocked silence.

"I'm sorry, Carol. I don't mean to laugh. It just that... well, my old teacher would probably say that Allah arranged for us to meet last week."

"Why? Wait... \*you're\* Muslim?"

"Sort of. It's a long story. But believe me when I say that I understand your brother's situation. Is he willing to get help for his addiction?"

"I think so. God, I hope so. I mean, shouldn't killing someone qualify as bottoming out?"

Thinking back on his own first year in Oz, Toby shrugs. "Depends on the person. But if he's willing to go to group, I think I can help. Or rather, Sister Pete can."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to ask her to meet with him, and then -- if she thinks he's qualified -- she'll ask the warden to transfer him to Em City."

"Em City?"

"Emerald City. Otherwise known as cell block 5. It's a special unit in Oz. In exchange for a marginally better environment, you agree to follow some extra rules... exercise regularly, attend classes, go to drug and alcohol counseling, maybe even pursue an education."

"Is that where you lived?"

"Mostly. After the riot, Em City was closed for several months, so we were all stuck in GenPop."

"Riot!"

"Long story." Toby smiles mischievously.

"You seem to have a lot of those."

The smile fades. "Too many."

"I'm sorry."

"Hey, not your fault. I should give Sister Pete a call, though. Maybe she can catch him in the infirmary."

"Thank you, Mr. Beecher."

"Toby."

"Toby, then. Well... I guess I'll see you later this week. Maybe I could buy you a cup of coffee? I think I'd like to take you up on your other offer as well, if that's okay. I think I need someone to talk to."

### August 2003

"So that Nazi putz actually got to see Cyril's release?" Carol asked, looking incredulously from Toby to Sister Pete. They'd told her quite a few stories about Oz over the past two months -- coffee, pie and conversation (or 'knoshing and kveching' as it would be called in her family) at the end of visiting day had become somewhat of a tradition between the three of them -- and precious few of those had an ending that would pass for happy. Toby's parole, of course, and -- depending on your point of view -- perhaps Miguel Alvarez's escape, but she'd grown used to every story with the name Schillinger attached being more horrific than the last.

"Well, he wasn't exactly 'released'..." Toby temporized.

Carol waved his comment aside, having grown used to Toby's habit of downplaying his good deeds while taking full credit for everything bad that had happened to or around him. "Pete?"

Laying a gentle hand on Toby's arm, Sister Pete compromised. "Cyril wasn't released outright. The courts wouldn't go that far because Cyril \*does\* understand that what he did was wrong, but he is much better off in his new facility." Smiling at the memory, she continued, "And yes, it's absolutely true. It was an unexpected miracle that Vern was being transferred to the federal penitentiary at the same time Cyril was leaving Oz."

Toby glanced sideways at Sister Pete. "Unexpected miracle.' Yeah, like me being allowed to help escort Cyril so that he wouldn't totally freak out when he realized Ryan wasn't coming with him. Those always seem to happen when you, Father Ray, and Glynn put your heads together." Looking back at Carol, he couldn't stop an almost maniacal grin from appearing. "I'll never forget the look on his face. I wish I'd had a camera... Chris and Ryan would've loved it!"

Carol shook her head in wonder. With all the stories she'd heard, she still didn't quite understand how Toby had come out of his years in Oz as anything other than completely defeated and bitter. Judging by the look in his eye whenever Chris's name came up, she was damn sure the intense and thoroughly imposing man she'd met briefly in the visitor's room was a large part of the reason. To be honest, he'd scared her a little, but in some way that was comforting; it would take a scary man to keep Isaac safe, even in Emerald City.

Glancing up as the bell on the door sounded, she recognized the teary-eyed yet pretty young blond entering the coffee shop. "Oh look... there's Agamemnon's friend from the Miss Sally show. Should we ask her to join us? She looks like she could use a friendly shoulder or three."

"Certainly. I'll go ask her." Sister Pete replied, then stood and walked over to the young woman, speaking to her in low tones and gesturing to their table. As the younger woman nodded gratefully and they walked over, Toby looked thoughtful.

"Carol... I just got a crazy idea...."

### The next visiting day:

"Toby, what the fuck do I know about psychology and support groups and shit like that?"

Toby stared at Chris dumbfounded for a moment, then burst out laughing. Luckily they were virtually alone in the visiting room -- apparently most people had found something better to do with a muggy summer afternoon -- but that didn't stop Chris's eyebrows from diving down into a distinctly unamused line over his rapidly darkening eyes.

Toby's hand, which had been resting casually on Chris's thigh under the table, squeezed reflexively. Chris looking pissed wasn't much different from Chris looking horny and Toby was suddenly glad they'd taken to sitting on either side of the corner of a table rather than across from one another. It had taken a lot of patience on Toby's part, but Chris was slowly acclimating to being together in public, or at least as much public as he was likely to see for at least several more months.

Letting his hand creep up slowly, Toby replied, "Baby... most shrinks would give their right nut to know half of what you do about how to read people and get them to respond."

Mollified both by the compliment and Toby's actions, Chris relaxed, a sly smile spreading across his face. "Yeah?"

Noting that the last of the other visitors were filing out, Toby leaned closer, giving Chris a sultry, sulky look before nuzzling at the soft skin under his ear. "Yeah," he whispered. "So... you'll help?"

"Mmmhmmmm..." Chris responded, no longer caring exactly what he was agreeing to.

Chuckling, Toby nipped Chris sharply, then sat back before he could react with more than a twitch. "Great. All you have to do is talk to the other guys who have regular visitors. Sister Pete is helping Carol and I with everything else. We figured that since we felt so much better having someone to talk to who understood, maybe other inmates' families would feel the same way."

"Families?" Chris asked, his amusement at hearing the term applied to he and Toby's relationship temporarily overriding his annoyance at Toby's mercurial mood swing.

"Yeah. I'm sure you remember a little matter of some paperwork you signed right after Schillinger's last stunt?" Toby tried valiantly not to laugh as Chris squirmed uncomfortably. Frustrated by not being able to visit Chris in the infirmary, Toby had shown up on the next visiting day with a large manila envelope, which he'd tossed down in front of Chris even before saying hello. And if the power of attorney and other paperwork hadn't been bad enough -- "What, are we fucking married now?" Chris had commented almost angrily while signing them, to which Toby had replied, "Well, you did say you married 'em before you fucked 'em, mister old-fashioned, so it's actually pretty fucking overdue, don't ya think?" -- the t-shirt had been the cliché. Chris had stared at it uncomprehendingly for a moment, then got as close as Toby had even seen him to outright embarrassment as he realized that the phone conversation he'd thought he'd dreamed had actually happened, and in front of Sister Pete.

Taking pity on Chris, Toby shifted his hand again, giving him a much better reason to squirm. // It really is amazing what you can get away with as long as you're discrete // he mused, deftly working on Chris's zipper while contemplating all the 'discrete' places they were going to have to visit once Chris got released.

### January 1, 2004

Toby woke to a pounding headache and a nauseous feeling that had once been familiar, but that he hadn't felt in years -- not since right after Chris had been released from his first trip to the hole, just before their little 'appointment' with Vern and Metzger in the gym.

// Shit! // he thought. // Five years of sobriety shot to hell. And for what? //

He thought back into the haze the previous day had become, dimly remembering the phone call from his father telling him that their appeal of Chris's case had been rejected. Between that, a fifth of bourbon, and the first in what was suddenly shaping up to be a long line of New Year's Eves without Chris, he'd been in desperate need of a sympathetic ear. He remembered making a phone call, hailing a cab, then taking it to....

Forcing one eye open, he looked in dismay at the woman sleeping next to him. // Carol's. Happy fucking New Year. // He rolled out of bed, barely making it to the bathroom before getting sick, wondering what the hell he was going to say to Chris.

~~~

Several hours later, after a handful of aspirin, a long, painful conversation with Carol -- who apparently was pretty disgusted with her own alcohol-induced behavior and was seriously considering going to AA herself at this point -- and a cab ride home, a freshly showered Toby sat staring at the telephone. He wasn't sure if Sister Pete would be in on New Year's Day, but he honestly didn't know who else to call. His sponsor had been understanding and said all the right things about starting over and taking it one day at a time, but the man had no idea what Chris was capable of when he felt betrayed. Shuddering as he remembered Shemin and Mondo Brown, he reached for the phone and dialed.

"Sister Peter Marie's office."

// Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Chris. I'm \*so\* not ready for this. //

He had the receiver halfway back to the cradle when he heard it. "Toby?"

Somehow, with that weird sixth sense he seemed to possess when it came to trouble, Chris knew it was him. Grimacing, he moved the phone back to his ear. "Hey."

"Hey yourself. What's wrong, baby?"

// Everything. // "What makes you think something's wrong?"

"How about because you only call Sister Pete when it's really good news or really bad news and this don't feel like good news."

"Yeah. I.. uhm..." // Where to start? Let's go for the simplest one first. // "I got drunk last night."

"Ah shit, Toby. What happened?"

"My father called. Your appeal was rejected." Chris was silent and Toby could picture him trying to master his disappointment and anger. "But I'm not giving up." // Not even if you never want to see me again. // "This just means it'll take a little longer than I'd hoped."

"Mmm-hmm." Chris sounded painfully noncommittal. "And..."

"And, what?"

"Tobe, I know you. Don't try to bullshit me."

Toby sighed and steeled himself as well as he could. "And I slept with Carol."

"What?" Even without being completely sure of the admission, Chris's voice had dipped into dark and dangerous territory.

Cringing, Toby repeated himself. "I slept with Carol. Chris... I was drunk... we were both drunk... I'm so...." In the middle of his apology, the line went dead.

~~~

To Chris's credit, he hadn't destroyed too much of Peter Marie's office before the hacks arrived to drag him off to face McManus. Putting the phone through the computer screen was pretty much the worst of it, and he'd been careful to leave her personal effects intact, but someone was going to have a hell of a time reassembling those files, once they replaced the cabinet, of course.

~~~

After sending a silently insolent Keller to the hole, McManus wearily rubbed his eyes. He'd gotten spoiled, he realized, after the third year in a row of fairly good behavior from Keller. Not that he'd been Em City's only problem child, but the past year -- with Beecher and Cyril gone, the elder O'Reilly and Keller rooming together peaceably, and everyone's favorite Nazi fuck transferred to the federal pen -- things had been almost quiet, at least in comparison to the chaos Querns had left in his wake. Reaching for an antacid with one hand and the phone with the other, he sighed deeply. Sister Pete had no idea what triggered the outburst and Keller wasn't talking, so that left only one person who might be able to explain.

~~~

"Hello?"

"Beecher, it's Tim McManus."

"I figured I'd be hearing from you. What's he done? He didn't hurt anybody, did he?"

"Thankfully, no. He trashed Sister Pete's office pretty badly, but other than that.... What I need to know is why."

"He didn't tell you?"

"He hasn't said a word. Literally. Look... I know how hard you've been working on his case and believe me, I've noticed the change in his behavior. I hate to stick him in Ad Seg any longer than necessary, but if he won't talk...."

"His appeal was rejected." // And that's all \*you\* need to know. //

"Oh shit. Beecher, I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well... I'll just have to keep working on it, I guess."

"Yeah. Okay. Well, in that case, I think you only have to worry about missing one visiting day. Given the circumstances, I'm sure Glynn will agree to reduce his Ad Seg time. Hey, maybe you could bring the kids along again next time -- that might cheer him up."

Toby was impressed. Under any other circumstances, McManus's suggestion would've been remarkably insightful -- especially considering the man who'd been running Em City when Toby had first arrived -- but McManus, like all of them, had changed. Unfortunately, in this case it only served to remind him that not only did he have to explain to Holly and Harry that Chris wouldn't be getting out anytime soon, but that they might not be visiting him again for a while. If ever.

"Yeah. We'll see."

#### February 2004

Turned away for the fourth consecutive week, Toby was getting desperate. Visiting with his former cellblock-mates was all well and good, but it didn't seem to be getting him any closer to the man he really needed to see. He looked again toward the door that Augustus Hill had just wheeled back through -- the door that lead \*into\* Oz -- and sighed deeply. It was now or never, he realized, then walked over to the guard and requested an escort to Sister Pete's office.

With his heart pounding and stomach churning, Toby concentrated on taking slow, deep breaths as he followed his escort down the hallway he hadn't walked in over a year and had fervently prayed to never see again. He jumped back slightly as Sister Pete opened her door abruptly, worry etched on her face.

"Tobias... come inside." Taking his arm and nodding a dismissal to the guard, she led him inside and closed the door. "Now sit, before you fall down."

Toby looked around slowly, taking in the room that on many occasions had been his only respite from hell, at least until Chris had come along and made everything both infinitely better and infinitely worse. He sank down instinctively into the chair by the computer, shivering helplessly as the echo of Chris's warmth enveloped him. He looked up at Sister Pete with wide eyes as she brought him a cup of coffee.

"He left about ten minutes ago, if that's what you're wondering."

Toby nodded, then grimaced at his first sip of the bitter brew. "Ugh. Did he make this?"

She peered down into her own cup, considering. "Is it that bad?" She shrugged. "I honestly don't notice anymore. Yes, he did, by the way. Sorry if that throws a wrench into your plans for domestic bliss."

"Sister Pete..." he trailed off, looking thoroughly miserable.

"I thought that might make you get to the point. I can't see you running that particular gauntlet just to pass time with an old nun and drink lousy coffee."

Toby couldn't stop his lips from quirking for a moment; Sister Pete's bluntness had only increased over time. Claspng the cup tightly, he confessed, "He won't see me and I have no idea how to get him to forgive me this time. I need to know what's going on and no one -- not Augustus, not Agamemnon, not even Ryan -- will tell me anything. And then today Isaac refused to see Carol. I can't help but think it's related somehow."

"It is. Tobias... Chris has been asking Tim McManus to move him in with Isaac..."

"What?!"

Raising a hand, she quieted him. "Now wait. Tim's no fool. He doesn't know exactly what's gone on since you asked me to keep that between us, but -- other than New Year's day -- Chris has been a model prisoner since he and Ryan started sharing a pod and Tim's in no hurry to make any changes." Toby settled back in relief. "However, yesterday Isaac went to him with the same request. Chris hasn't said anything to me about it, of course, but..."

"He's seducing him."

"I think so, yes."

Toby sniffed scornfully. "Think? Sister, it's Chris. That's what he does." // If you're lucky enough to live, that is. //

"If you'd let me tell Tim what happened between you and Carol, I'm sure..." Toby groaned, put the cup down and rubbed at his eyes with the heels of his palms. Suddenly he froze and looked up, a spark of hope gleaming in his eyes. "Tobias... what is it?"

"I think I have an idea. If you're willing to help and it means he'll cut us some slack, you can tell McManus anything you want."

"I can try. What are you planning to do?"

"Give Chris something I haven't been able to in a long time -- unconditional surrender."

~~~

Three days later, Chris followed Sean Murphy down the hall, grinning smugly. Isaac had been all over him in the laundry room that morning and, whether McManus let them share a pod or not, he knew he could start fucking the other man any time he wanted. Savagely clamping down on the little voice that complained that's all it would be -- fucking -- he ambled into the counseling room for his weekly session with his boss.

"Morning, Sister..." He stopped part way through his greeting as his eyes found and locked onto the man standing behind Sister Pete. Time seemed to slow as Toby raised his head, boldly meeting his eyes.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he growled as Murphy, already tense, moved closer and Sister Pete raised her hand. Only when it touched his chest did he realize he'd unconsciously moved forward. He flashed on the last time he'd been this angry-- this hurt, the damned little voice prompted him -- and Querns's comment about touching "in love or war." Right now, given a choice, Chris wasn't sure which he would choose. Part of him wanted to beat Toby into a bloody pulp, while another -- the part that couldn't help noticing the dark circles under his eyes or the way his rumpled t-shirt and sweats hung on him -- wanted to pull him close and never let go.

"Chris...." He flicked his eyes down to Sister Pete, then took a small step back. "Thank you. Tobias?"

"Yes, Sister?"

"Everything's arranged. Are you sure...?"

Toby waited until Chris looked back up at him before answering. "Yes. Either way, we need this."

Chris stood dumbstruck as both Sister Pete and the more hesitant CO headed for the door, leaving nothing but an arm's distance of space between he and Toby.

"Beecher," Murphy said, looking back as Sister Pete opened the door. Expecting an argument, Toby glanced over, only to be met by the indulgent grin usually reserved for favored Irishmen like O'Reilly. "Good luck."

As the door clicked shut, Toby stepped back, revealing a wrestling mat where the couch usually sat.

"What's this?" Chris asked, too curious to maintain the stoic silence he'd originally opted for.

Toby shrugged and looked down, his nerve breaking now that they were alone. "Wanna wrestle?" he asked softly, stepping back again, onto the mat.

Chris's pulse sped up as memories of other wrestling matches with Toby sped through his mind, and his hands clenched into fists as the remembered feel of bones breaking flooded through them. Even after all the sessions with Sister Pete, both individually and together -- after all the hours of talking, fighting and fucking, slowly working their way from separation toward intimacy -- this was the one thing they hadn't been able to overcome. Sure, they'd spent time in the gym together -- working out, playing deliberately foul-ridden one-on-one basketball, even sparring occasionally with the O'Reilly brothers -- but not wrestling. Realizing the gift he was being offered, he stepped forward.

"Toby..." At the sound of Chris's voice, Toby trembled with a combination of fear and desire and, without saying a word, lowered himself into the classic bottom-man position.

// If we were wolves, he'd be on his back offering me his throat // Chris thought as, equally silent, he flowed effortlessly into his own position -- above, behind and enveloping Toby. Dazed by Toby's willing submission to whatever he needed to dish out, Chris didn't move for a moment -- relishing the feel of the familiar body under his, the smell of nervous sweat, the tickle of baby-fine hair against his cheek -- then deliberately launched into a move that Toby had long ago learned to counter. For a few precious seconds they were pressed together from shoulder to knee, then Toby was twisting loose, grappling for a hold while frantically searching Chris's face for clues. Grabbing Toby by the wrist, Chris pulled him forward, off balance. Using his left leg to sweep Toby's legs out from under

him, he simultaneously pushed forward on his right leg, using his shoulder against Toby's chest to topple them both to the ground. As soon as Toby's back hit the mat, he bucked up wildly, panic evident in his rough breathing and frantically pounding heart, but Chris grimly stayed with him, not trying for a pin as much as just hanging on.

Slowly Toby's struggles ceased and he lay still, panting, with Chris wrapped around and draped over him. He had no idea what, if anything, he should say. He'd offered himself up for punishment, for forgiveness, for whatever Chris wanted, and still didn't have a clue where he stood.

"Toby," said a deep voice from somewhere around chest level.

"Yeah?"

"You shouldn't have come back."

Closing his eyes against the prickle of tears, Toby clenched his fists in frustration. It hadn't been enough, and now he was out of options. His eyes popped back open in surprise as he felt the rough scratch of stubble against his neck, strong teeth gripping his throat and a low growl vibrating its way out of Chris's chest. He gasped as the teeth released him and Chris licked a hot, wet path up to his ear, then whispered, "But I'm glad you did."

It was only when Chris leaned back -- propping himself up on one arm while keeping Toby pinned with the rest of his body -- that he dared to move, and even then it was only to turn his head and drink in the deep blue eyes and smug grin he'd been sure he'd lost. "Chris... I'm sor..."

Silencing Toby with the simple efficiency of kissing him breathless, Chris couldn't help but chuckle at the resulting dazed expression.

Toby gazed up at him uncomprehendingly. "You're in an awfully good mood for someone who looked like he wanted me dead a little while ago."

"You still don't get it, do ya? Toby, if I'd wanted you dead, ever, you'd be dead. What I want... what I've always wanted... is you... all of you. What you did today..." Chris shrugged as well as he could in his current position, "Well, it just proves to me that you're not holding back anymore. Even after finding someone on the outside..."

"I didn't 'find someone on the outside'... it was a mistake, Chris. A bad one. Both Carol and I realized that right away, and it's one that'll never happen again."

"Better not," Chris replied, lowering his head and growling at Toby's throat again before sucking hard on a portion of the soft skin.

Shifting restlessly, Toby groaned in response, then quipped, "Marking your territory?" as Chris lifted his head again.

Running a possessive hand down the length of Toby's side, then back up under the t-shirt, Chris replied, "Fuck yeah. Speaking of... how long we got this room?"

His breath catching as a jolt of heat shot from his nipple to his groin, Toby nevertheless managed a wolfish smile of his own as he pulled Chris down for another kiss. "The whole hour..."

"Fuck yeah...."

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**Chapter 9: Domesticity (June 2004)**

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Chris -

I found it! I can't wait to show you the pictures!! Of all the fucking times to have to miss visiting day. Damn, I'm gonna miss you, but this prison reform conference.... Well, I was going to say it's important, but nothing's more important to me than you and the kids. I still need to be gone though, so there you have it. I guess that's one of the pros of not being an actual lawyer anymore... fewer business trips.

Anyway... back to happier news. I found the perfect place. Imade the offer yesterday and the agent promised to call me as soon as she knows anything. It's got four bedrooms -- ours has an en suite bathroom with this decadent sunken tub that I can't help picturing you in. Seeing you all slick and wet has always done something major....

Sorry babe. Some nosy fucking old bag was looking down her nose at me. Hehe. It always freaks my dad out when 'Crazy Beech' pays a visit, but it was worth it. That'll teach her to read over people's shoulders at the airport. Where was I?

The other upstairs bedroom would make a great office, and then the kids can have the two rooms downstairs. And the basement is already finished as a rec room, so what would you say to setting up some weights, throwing down a few mats and working out together at home? I know I got a few ideas when you used to spot for me. Especially since that first time you wore those ratty old shorts of yours and straddled the bench. Bastard. You could've warned me you were going commando! I damned near dropped the fucking bar on my head.

Oh, and the garage has plenty of room for a couple of cars AND a bike. You did wanna get a bike again, right? I've never been on one -- yeah, I know, prissy little rich kid, right? Fuck you, too -- and I'd love to have you take me for a ride. Hell, now that I'm legally mobile again, maybe I'll get a license for it myself -- taking you for a ride sounds just about as good. Hmmm. With or without the bike, actually.

And on that note, I'd better wrap this up. The plane's starting to board and I want to drop this in the mail before my row is called.

- Toby

~~~

Chris caught a glimpse of dark blue uniform out of the corner of his eye, but didn't bother lifting his gaze from the chessboard. He hadn't been up to anything lately and he sure as hell wasn't expecting any visitors, not with Toby out of town.

"Keller."

"Officer Mineo." Sounding bored, he didn't even bother to glance up at the elderly hack.

"You got a visitor."

"Yeah? Who?"

Mineo briefly consulted his clipboard. "Says 'Beecher' here."

"No shit," Chris drawled, unable to contain a smug smile as he looked over at his chess opponent and stood. "Guess he flew back early. Don't fuck with the board while I'm gone, O'Reilly."

"Like I need to," Ryan replied, giving him a sly wink before going back to studying the game. "Tell him to bring me some new fucking magazines, huh?"

"Yeah, yeah." Chris sauntered from the quad, trying to decide how much to tease Toby for leaving the conference early. His thoughts were rudely interrupted when Mineo lead him past the contact visit room and ushered him toward the plexiglass booths instead.

Peering into the room, he didn't see any sign of Toby. In fact, the only visitor was an older woman fidgeting nervously with her purse. "What the fuck?"

"You going in or not?"

Hearing their voices, the woman looked up and Chris instantly recognized the cold blue stare -- he'd certainly gotten it often enough from Toby. Glancing at the CO, he was met with a particularly nasty smile.

"What's the matter, Keller? Not the Beecher you were expecting?"

Mineo always had been a dick about him and Toby, Chris mused, offering an equally nasty and far more intimidating smile in return before striding nonchalantly into the room. He waited until the woman, who had gone a shade paler at his approach, picked up her receiver before taking a seat. Giving her his most charming grin, he lifted the phone and waited.

"Mr. Keller," she said coldly, making his name into an insult.

"Mrs. Beecher," he replied cautiously. She didn't look much different from the housewives he'd run scams on in the past, but that tone and those eyes -- it wasn't hard to tell what side of the family Toby got his "hardassed bitch" gene from.

"I don't know if he's told you yet or not, but Tobias has made an offer on a house."

He kept his face impassive, but smiled inwardly. Toby had been looking for the right place for a long time, wanting desperately to get himself and the kids out from under his parents' roof.

"And against everyone's best advice, he's continuing to spend most of his time and money getting you out of here. I'm just glad the childrens' college money is tied up in a trust fund...."

"Toby would never...."

"\*Tobias\* would never have done a lot of things, Mr. Keller. Before he met you, that is. Now, I just don't know. But I do know he intends for you to live in that house. With \*my\* grandchildren. Now I don't know you, Mr. Keller, but I know your type."

Chris eyes narrowed as he tried to rein in his temper. "My type?"

"Yes. What I'm proposing is a business arrangement. You agree to stay away from my family once you're paroled - - and I honestly believe Tobias is both stubborn enough and good enough to manage it, or I would never have come here -- and I give you a cashier's check on the day you're released. Enough to give you a fresh start someplace far away. California, perhaps, or Las Vegas."

Wanting to laugh, Chris settled for a snort of disbelief. "And why would I want to do that?"

"Surely even you must realize that your presence in my grandchildren's lives would be... counterproductive, to say the least."

"My presence.... This coming from the woman who didn't bother to teach her grandchildren about not accepting rides from strangers?"

Watching her jaw tighten even further and pain flash in her eyes, his lips curled into the same nasty smile he'd given Mineo. After watching Toby heap guilt on himself day after day for Gary's murder and seeing for himself how

Holly still jumped at shadows, it felt good to finally toss some of his anger back at one half of the couple they'd been entrusted to. Damn good.

"Be that as it may... if you actually do care at all for my son, you'll consider my offer carefully, because if you don't accept.... Well, I believe most family court judges would feel much more comfortable placing the children with Harrison and I than in a household with two convicted felons involved in an illicit affair."

"You wouldn't fuckin' do that to Toby...." Chris growled.

"Ah, but it's not up to me, Mr. Keller. It's up to you."

"You fucking cunt! It's no wonder Toby ended up a goddamn drunk with a cold-hearted bitch like you for a mother!" Chris launched himself at the plexiglass, fingers scrambling, eager to wrap themselves around her aristocratic throat. Victoria Beecher dropped the phone and jumped back, uttering a short, piercing scream. Without hesitation, Mineo was on him, club swinging.

Later, alone in the dark silence of an Ad Seg cell, Chris lay awake all night, thinking about her threat and wondering how his life had gotten so fucking complicated.

~~~

Chris --

Yeah, it's me again already. I'm trying to figure out if flying has always been this mind-numbingly boring or if airborne restlessness is just another fringe benefit of sobriety. Of course, it might have more to do with what I'd rather be doing than with the flight or a lack of alcohol. Right about now, sitting in one of those cheap-ass plastic chairs and breathing in the overly recycled air of Oz would sure as hell beat doing just about the same damn thing at 30,000 feet. And I'd have better scenery.

Fuck, sometimes (most of the time, to be honest) all it takes is one look at (or from) you and all I can think about is finding some way -- any way -- to get you the hell out of there. To get you away from pods and hacks and restricted visiting hours and sick Nazi fucks (speaking of, I wonder how Vern's enjoying his federal accommodations?) and all the other crazy-ass motherfuckers who'd just as soon shank you as look at you. Of course, I'm not the only one you have that effect on. Shit, wasn't Bonnie still married to that truck driver the last time she visited you? Not to mention Kitty, and Angelique, and Sister Pete. Oh, and Isaac, and god only knows how many others whose names even \*you\* probably don't remember. And the fucked part is -- even knowing all that -- it still works. Cuz whatever "it" is, baby, you got it in spades. Hell, maybe it's that that 'Scorpio' thing Carol teases me about. I know you think it's all bullshit, but some of that stuff in that book she got me for my birthday is pretty fucking accurate. And not just the crap you liked about Scorpio's having "a magnetic gaze and an aura of smouldering sexuality." (Yeah, like I really needed a book to tell me that). I mean, not that I'm trying to lay blame on being born a Pisces or anything, but you gotta admit that "easily lost in a fantasy world if alcohol, drugs or self-destructive sex" sounds a little too familiar.

Yeah, if you couldn't tell, I actually have the damn book with me. I figured if nothing else it would be something to amuse myself with on the plane. Speaking of -- it never came up before because I didn't do a whole lot of thinking about flying in Oz, but -- did you ever? "Amuse" yourself on a plane, I mean. You know, or join the 'Mile High' club? I can certainly imagine you leaving a trail of charmed-stupid stewardesses in your wake.

Shit. Now I really need a drink. That said, I'm actually kinda glad my father's along on this trip to keep an eye on me. Of course he denies that's why but... I sure as hell can't blame him. The timing really sucks. Tomorrow it'll be six fucking years since you walked into Oz, or into Em City, at least, and I'll be a couple of hundred miles away. I better make some damn good contacts at this conference, because I sure as fuck want you with me and the kids before number seven rolls around, house or no house.

- Toby

~~~

Two days later Chris was back in EmCity with one thought foremost in his mind -- there was no way Toby was gonna lose those kids. The question was, how? His first step toward a solution was his podmate, who nodded thoughtfully as he explained the situation after they'd been locked down for the night. When he was done, Ryan was quiet for a few minutes, then asked, "I suppose having her whacked is out of the question?"

Chris shot him a disgusted look. "Jesus, O'Reilly! That's the best advice you got? Whack Toby's mother? Thanks a lot. Fuck, I don't know. Maybe I should just do what she says." At Ryan's startled look, he continued. "I don't mean take the money or anything, but... disappear, ya know? It's not like I know shit about raising kids, and I've never really held down an honest job, other than what I do in here for Sister Pete...."

"That's it!"

"What?"

"Sister Pete. Tell her what that bitch said. You know she'll have some good ideas. She's fucking diabolical with shit like that. Well, for a nun."

~~~

"Chris! I'm glad to have you back so soon," the nun in question greeted him enthusiastically when he showed up for work the next morning.

"Hey, Sister," Chris replied, frowning in confusion at her exuberance. It's not like he'd been gone that long, but then again, she'd certainly heard about his unexpected visitor and no doubt intended to hound him to 'talk about it.' Well, today was her lucky day, because that's exactly what he had in mind.

Not even bothering to turn on the computer, Chris pulled his chair over to the side of her desk, propped his arm on a clear spot and rested his chin in his palm. "Sister Pete? You got a minute? I need some advice."

Surprised, pleased and concerned all at once, she nodded. He told the story as calmly as possibly, trying not to let his anger get the better of him again, but by the time he'd gotten to "... and that's how I ended up in the hole again," it seemed to have infected his boss instead. Standing abruptly, she paced furiously, fingers flying over her rosary beads. After a few moments, she forced herself to sit and take a deep breath.

"So, what should I do?" Chris asked impatiently as she remained silent.

"I can't tell you that, Chris."

"Fuck...." He started to stand.

Resting her hand on his arm, she stopped him. "But I will tell you what \*I'd\* do, after you tell me what you've come up with. Deal?"

Chris glared at her suspiciously for a moment, then shrugged. "Yeah, okay. I, um... I figured I might just, ya know, kinda disappear. \*If\* I get out, that is."

"Mmm-hmm. Why?"

"Why?! Shit, Sister, weren't you listening? I can't let Toby lose his kids. Especially not cuz of me."

"And you think he would?"

"Two ex-cons living together against a rich old lawyer and his high-society wife? Hell, yeah!"

"And you think Tobias's father would go along with that?"

Chris shrugged. "I... don't know. Maybe. I'm pretty sure she's the one wearing the pants in that family."

"And what about the children themselves? Harry's still a little young, but Holly's certainly getting old enough to speak for herself in court. Do you think she'd willingly leave her father? Not to mention that she seems pretty fond of you as well."

Chris couldn't help smiling as he remembered the kids' last visit. Claiming it wasn't fair he'd missed Christmas, Holly had proudly presented him with both a homemade card and a new shirt in Toby's favorite shade of blue, one she'd picked out herself. It was a size too small, but he'd put it on anyway. It wasn't like Toby minded. Actually, it was probably his idea in the first place.

He sighed. "Willingly? No. But... ah, hell... what would you do?"

"I'd tell Tobias exactly what his mother said."

"What? No. No fucking way."

"Chris, do you love Tobias?"

"Sister..." He started to stand again. If she still had to ask that...

"Okay. Point taken." She waited until Chris stopped scowling before moving on to the harder question. "Do you trust him?"

Chris automatically opened his mouth to answer yes, then stopped, thinking back over all they'd done to each other... with each other... for each other. Remembering their years together in Oz -- days and nights filled with friendship and lust, betrayal and surrender, love and hate... marked by broken bones and stab wounds, measured in painful separations and unlikely reunions. And then the past year and a half, when it would have been so easy for Toby to just walk away... how he'd refused to let go, even after what had happened with Carol, not knowing if he'd ever be forgiven.

"Yeah, I do."

"Then tell him. Trust him enough to let him make his own decisions. He's earned that, don't you think?" She was silent for a moment, then continued more briskly. "Alright then. How about you make us a pot of that sludge you call coffee and we get started. You'd be surprised how much can pile up in only two days..."

~~~

Chris --

This'll probably be short because I'm exhausted -- it's been a hell of a long week -- but I didn't get a chance to write while we were at the conference and I can't wait any longer to share the good news with you... I got the house! Mother won't be pleased -- she's gotten used to having us all under one roof -- but my father is being very supportive. He knows I need to get back out on my own two feet again (or, I guess for the first time actually, since I let Gen take care of so many things before), plus he knows what kind of hell life would be if I tried to move you into their place. I'm not sure who'd bitch louder, you or my mother. Or Holly, for that matter. You should hear her and Mother go at it when your name comes up. Maybe I should let her present your next appeal -- she'd make a hell of a lawyer.

Oh... and to top that off, I had dinner the past two nights with Claudia Samuels, our prospective lieutenant governor, and she's even more willing to discuss early release programs than Governor Case. With the old lieutenant governor on the way out, the administration should be far more receptive after the September elections. If Case wins, that is. Last election was a cake walk, what with Glynn dropping out right after Devlin's shooting.

Which brings me to the bad news. Hey, it's me -- there had to be some, right? It turns out I may have to be out of town a bit during the next few months. Since prison reform is a major part of their platform and my speech went over so well this week, Ms. Samuels and Governor Case have asked me to help with the campaign -- kind of as an Emerald City success story or some crap like that. Shit. Leave it to the fucking spin doctors; they're almost as good at bullshitting people as you and Ryan.

Damn. I can barely keep my eyes open. At least I'll be able to see you if a couple of days -- it feels like it's been a fucking month instead of a week and a half. I sure as hell hope you've been keeping out of trouble....

- Toby

~~~

"Beecher... Beecher. Oh, yes. You're scheduled for a legal consultation with Christopher Keller. Hold on a moment and I'll find someone to escort you."

// Legal consultation? // Toby stared at the new hack at the front desk in confusion. He hadn't requested.... Peering over the counter as she half-turned away to answer the phone, he caught a glimpse of the words "legal aide" and the initials "PMR" next to his name in the daily log book and silently thanked Sister Pete for arranging yet another of her 'unexpected miracles.'

"Actually," he said, winking slyly, then deftly lifting the visitor badge from the young woman's lax grip, "I know the way. If that's alright with you?" Shooting her a brilliant smile, he clipped the badge to his shirt and headed for the door, pausing only briefly to wait for her hesitant consent before stepping over the metal threshold and into the corridor beyond.

Toby's smile faded quickly when he entered the meeting room and found Chris hunched forward over his knees, sucking nervously on a cigarette. The only other time he'd seen Chris smoking had been his first night back after the shooting -- the night he'd talked about going to hell and had turned to Toby for comfort for the first time. In fact, everything about Chris reminded Toby of that night, especially the desolation in the midnight blue eyes that rose slowly to meet his. And, like that night, Toby was drawn forward, instinctively trying to sooth, or at least share, the pain.

"Chris?"

His mouth twisting into something only vaguely resembling a grin, Chris stood and pulled Toby into his arms, the cigarette falling forgotten to the floor as sweat-chilled hands sought the comfort of warm skin and baby-fine hair. Burying his face in Toby's neck, he took a deep, shuddering breath, then consciously forced himself to loosen his grip as he exhaled.

Toby shivered at the sensation and belatedly wrapped an arm around Chris's waist, preventing him from stepping away. Running his other hand soothingly over close-cropped hair, he pressed his lips to Chris's cheek and whispered, "I'm not letting go, so you might as well tell me what's going on."

"Aw, fuck, Toby..." Chris groaned, reaching into his back pocket. Leaning back as far as the arm around his waist would allow, he pressed the single folded sheet of paper into Toby's free hand. "Here...."

Toby sniffed, then flipped open the paper and began to read, tightening his grip on Chris's waist at the same time. Like all of Chris's letters, it was short and to the point:

Toby -

I can't tell you how good it feels to know that you found a place for you and the kids, and that you want me there, but I need you to know the truth. What the FBI said about me -- it's true. It didn't go down exactly like they said -- it sure as fuck wasn't rape and it was more like a little rough trade than torture, at least at the beginning -- but I did kill those men, and would've kept on killing if I hadn't ended up in Oz. Hell, I guess I did anyway, right? But you already know about them.

I love you, Toby, and Holly and Harry too. More than I ever thought I could. It's like you said -- nothing's more important to me than you and the kids, which is why I had to tell you. I can't let anyone get in the way of you and them making a better life together, Tobe, not even me. So I guess what I'm saying is... it's time to let go, baby.

-- C.

Without looking away from the hastily scribbled note, Toby very quietly and calmly said, "No."

"What?" Chris whispered. Toby turned his head, capturing Chris with his gaze, the heat in his eyes a sharp contrast to the coolness of his tone.

"I said, 'no'." When Chris opened his mouth to protest, Toby pulled him forward, kissing him with such passion and desperation that when he finally pulled back, all Chris could do in response was stare at him, slackjawed. "When are you going to learn, Keller? You. Don't. Give. Me. Orders. Now what the \*fuck\* is this really about?"

"Toby... I... "

"Because I told you before that I didn't want to know. It just... fuck... it just isn't that important, ya know? Maybe it should be... maybe it means that \*I'm\* going to hell, but... I can't find it in myself to care all that much, Chris. I know better than anyone who you were, and more importantly, who you are now. And it's not like I have a lot of room to cast stones, even if I wanted to."

Chris stared intently into Toby's eyes for a long moment, then shook his head sadly. "You don't understand...."

"What, Chris?" Toby's voice dropped to a whisper. "How it feels to kill someone? Not by accident or at a distance, but up close and personal? You know better."

"But... your kids. Shit, Toby. \*They\* need you a hell of a lot more than I do. Your time and your money."

"Money?! Jesus fucking Christ!" His shock turning rapidly to anger, Toby hit on a possible reason for Chris's sudden change of heart. "Are you sure this isn't just you punking out? Because if you want out, baby, you can have it. Ill still make sure you get out of this place... no one's going to fucking force you to live with me. But money? Shit, ever since the riot lawsuit was finally settled last year, money's been the least of my worries."

"Oh fuck. I forgot all about that. But your mother...." Realizing his slip, Chris quickly shut his mouth and tightened his own grip, pulling Toby back in close in an attempt to distract him.

Raising an eyebrow, Toby asked, "My mother? What the hell does she have to do with this?"

Looking down and speaking in a husky whisper, Chris replied, "She gave me some shit about you spending the kids' money trying to get me out of here."

"What? When?!"

"She... uh... paid me a visit. While you were gone."

"But she h..." Toby caught himself and stopped a second too late.

"Hates this place and everything in it, especially me?" Chris finished for him, a wry grin starting to appear.

"Yeah," Toby agreed, then leaned in and rewarded the small smile with a gentle kiss while wrapping both arms around Chris's waist. "I almost hate to ask, but what else did she have to say?"

His face falling again, Chris mumbled something unintelligible.

"Chris..."

Mumbling slightly more coherently, he reluctantly replied, "She said that if I moved in with you, she'd take your kids, Toby. I can't let her do that...."

"She won't."

"But...."

"She won't! First of all, my father would never go along with it."

// Score one for Sister Pete // Chris thought, feeling hope swell inside him.

"Second of all, she's bluffing. Trust me... I know her." Toby paused, caught in a twisted deja vu, remembering his stance and all too temporary defense of Chris -- 'I know Chris, Mother' -- years before. "But most importantly, \*no one's\* taking my kids because they're \*mine\*... and so the fuck are you. You think you can fucking remember that this time?" he finished with a growl.

Tilting his head slightly, Chris's eyes darted from side to side, taking in every detail of Toby's expression. Finally he nodded. "Yeah, I think I can." As Toby's glare continued unabated, he cautiously added, "So... we okay?"

"Us? Yeah. But I think I'll be sending the kids out to a movie with my father tonight. It's time for Mother and I to have a little chat. Then she can explain to him why the kids and I will be living in a hotel until escrow closes."

Smiling at Toby's vehemence, he asked, "Did I ever tell you how sexy you are when you're pissed, Beecher?"

"Yeah, Keller, you have, but feel free to tell me again -- or better yet, show me."

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**Chapter 10: Election (November 2004)**

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Tuesday:

Chris --

Well, it's finally election night. Maybe life can get back to normal again now. Christ, I miss you -- Friday can't get here soon enough. These last three weeks have been hell, what with traveling all over the state, even on visiting days. At least I got to call you last week. Please, please tell me you were actually alone for that. Man, if the pundits only knew -- phone sex on the governor's dime. You really are a sick fuck. Of course, so am I, so I guess it's a damn good thing we ended up together.

This race has been so close -- everyone's as tense tonight as Poet during a tit shakedown. The papers say Governor Case is "cautiously optimistic." I guess that's one way of putting it. Looks more like "pacing and praying" from where I sit. Which is about fifteen feet from him in the governor's mansion, if you can believe that. And how ironic is it that -- being a felon -- I couldn't even vote for the man. And then they wonder why prison reform candidates have such a hard time getting elected! Shit....

I honestly don't know whether me going on the campaign trail with them was a good thing or a bad thing. There are plenty of people out there who \*really\* don't appreciate me telling the truth about prison conditions. Or all the crooked, careless and just plain cruel judges, for that matter. Speaking of... that cunt Lima sure has been kissing \*my\* ass lately....

Oh shit -- somebody just turned up the news... this could be it.

Ok... it's later now. Much later. The sun's coming up and I'm just about to head home. I feel completely wiped out and thoroughly dazed -- kinda like after our first New Year's Eve together. But don't worry... the governor's having someone drive me.

Yep, he's still the governor, as I'm sure you'll have heard by the time you get this. He won. Or should I say "we" won? Get this -- the motherfucker offered me a job! Damn, even writing it down doesn't make it seem real. Turns out he and Claudia were impressed with some of my ideas and want me on staff as one of their correctional system advisors. And even better -- guess who the other advisor's going to be. Glynn. Leo fucking Glynn. Pretty weird considering he ran on the opposing ticket four years ago, but Case has this bipartisan thing going on and he figures we're perfect bookends -- liberal and conservative, black and white, ex-warden and ex-con. What the hell -- it might just work. Stranger things have happened. If anyone should know that, it's us, right baby?

Well, our new lieutenant governor says she can get this out to Oz later this morning if I finish it up right now, so... take care of yourself and I'll see you soon, okay?

Love,  
Toby

Wednesday:

Idly scratching his stomach, Chris Keller wandered across the quad to the television screens, joining the small group of Miss Sally viewers killing time before her show by watching the evening news. He nodded to Ryan, then settled into the chair next to him. Slinging a set of headphones around his neck, he slouched down, crossed his arms across his chest and closed his eyes, trusting his podmate to let him know if anything interesting came up.

He hadn't slept well the night before -- Toby's excitement about the election had infected him as well -- but he'd gotten the good word about Case right after morning count so dozing through the news seemed like a damn fine idea. Chris was just slipping under when the lanky Irishman nudged his leg.

"What is it, O'Reilly?" he asked blearily.

"Check it out, man. Beecher's on television."

"What?" His eyes popping open, Chris caught a quick glimpse of Toby standing behind the newly re-elected Governor Case at a press conference. He pulled up the headphones in time to hear the governor's closing remarks.

"... people of this state have made it clear that they support prison reform and prisoner rehabilitation, and tomorrow I'll be announcing some very important and rather unique additions to my staff whom I believe will facilitate our efforts in that direction. And that's all I have to say on the matter for today, ladies and gentleman. Thank you for your time."

Stepping back, the governor allowed a talking head to take over and reiterate that any further questions would have to wait until the following day. On his way offstage, Case paused for a moment to speak with Toby and both men were caught in a quick close-up, smiling and laughing together. Chris couldn't help but smile in return, seeing his baby on screen, looking sharp as hell in his best suit.

It had been nearly a month since Toby had been able to visit, and although letters were nice and the phone call had been pretty damn fantastic -- especially once Sister Pete had stepped out for a staff meeting -- he was seriously looking forward to Friday.

The camera cut back to the studio and Chris abruptly refocused on the accompanying commentary. "Rumor has it that Tobias Beecher, a legal advocate who is both an ex-lawyer and an ex-convict, is among the new staff being considered by Governor Case. Several years ago Mr. Beecher delivered key testimony in a landmark 'cruel and unusual punishment' case in which inmates of Oswald Correctional Facility successfully sued the state for \$45 million. Certainly a unique, if controversial, choice. And now for the local weather...."

A ragged cheer broke out and Chris felt his stomach twist in a bizarre combination of pride and paranoia. He caught snatches of conversation -- "Man, with Beech steppin' up, shit might actually change around here." "Controversial? Damn, they don't know the half of it. What about the time he and Keller...." "Hey, does biting off Robson's dick count as community service now that he's a public servant?" -- as he stood and walked silently back to his pod. Ryan watched him go, then casually made his way toward McManus' office.

If Chris was surprised to find a package from Toby waiting on his bunk after evening count -- one that normally wouldn't have shown up until the next day's afternoon mailrun -- he didn't show it. No more so than Ryan did when the new issue of Hustler mysteriously appeared under his pillow during his morning shower the following day, limiting himself to a solitary sarcastic comment about the porn fairy paying him a visit.

#### Thursday:

"Morning, Sister," Chris purred as he ambled into the office and headed for the computer desk.

Sister Pete looked up from her ever-present paperwork, momentarily taken aback by Chris's tone. "Good morning, Chris. You certainly seem cheerful today."

Chris paused, frowning momentarily as if processing a foreign concept, then smiled almost shyly. "Yeah... I guess I am. Say, didja see Toby on tv last night?"

"Yes, actually, I did. Not the live broadcast, but..."

"He looked good, didn't he?"

Hiding a smile behind her coffee mug, she agreed, then asked, "So... he's coming to visit tomorrow?"

"Yeah. That's what he wrote anyway. I got a package from him yesterday... a letter from election night and a new CD." He held up the jewel case and gestured at the headphones plugged into the computer. "Do ya mind?"

"As long as it's not something I need to leave the room for," she couldn't resist teasing.

"Aw, man. We said we were sorry...." Chris groaned, thinking that having his boss find the log file of an x-rated online chat between him and Toby on her computer wouldn't have been nearly as bad if she didn't also happen to be a nun with a twisted sense of humor.

Sister Pete laughed and waved Chris back toward the computer as her intercom began buzzing. "Go ahead," she said, then picked up the receiver while Chris slipped on the headphones and started on the previous afternoon's paperwork.

"Hello? Yes, certainly. Now would be fine."

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A few minutes later, with Chris fully engrossed in a combination of music and data entry, Sister Pete glanced up and smiled at the figure standing in the doorway of her office. Toby held his finger to his lips as he entered, ensuring the duplicitous nun's continued silence as he snuck up behind Chris. He watched the muscles across Chris's shoulders flex sinuously as he reached over and flipped to the next page, then let his fingers brush lightly over the short, dark hair.

Chris instantly spun around, a lifetime of protective instincts launching him halfway to his feet before he'd completed the turn. Finding himself unexpectedly face to face with Toby, he froze. Before Chris could recover, Toby gently pushed the headphones off his ears, brushed their lips together in a chaste kiss, and softly murmured "Hi, baby. Miss me?"

"Toby?" Chris whispered, still dazed. Toby's grin grew wider and his eyes narrowed in a mixture of impudence and hunger as Chris recovered and his demeanor turned predatory. Startling Chris always included an element of danger, but over time Toby had learned that the rewards were usually well worth the risk.

For his part, Chris -- either oblivious to or uncaring of Sister Pete's presence -- literally dove into Toby, fusing their lips together and swallowing the other man's low moan as their tongues battled, frantically reconquering familiar, long-denied territory. Chris's hands slipped under the suit jacket, possessively exploring the planes of Toby's chest and back before dropping lower, curving around Toby's ass and pulling him in tight, almost lifting him until they were melded together from head to toe.

A chuckle disguised as a cough followed by a more amused than shocked, "Gentleman?" made the two men pull apart as quickly as they'd fallen together, the sudden shock of remembering where they were and who they were with acting like a bucket of cold water.

"Sorry, Sister Pete," Chris mumbled, taking a small step back, more embarrassed over openly broadcasting his emotions than his actions. Despite that, he found himself unable to look away from the sky blue eyes shining into his, or to resist reaching out and running his fingers through Toby's hair. The fact the Toby leaned into the caress like a cat before offering his own slightly breathless apology relieved him somewhat, but couldn't completely remove the sting from Sister Pete's next comment.

"Tobias, I'm sure I don't have to remind you that wherever the governor and his appointees go, camera crews eventually follow."

Toby grimaced in annoyance as Chris broke both physical and eye contact, his face losing all expression as he moved away. Catching into a muscular forearm before he could get very far, Toby spoke over his shoulder toward Sister Pete without taking his eyes off Chris.

"You're right, Pete." Chris's head shot up and Toby was momentarily silenced by the hurt evident in the laser-like stare, then continued. "And although the governor knows all about my relationship with Chris, that's probably way more of a show than he'd appreciate seeing on the evening news -- at least on my first day." He smirked and pulled Chris closer. "Luckily the press'll be busy giving the new warden the third degree for a little while longer."

"And that would be...?" Sister Pete asked.

"Ah, Glynn and I's first joint recommendation. Case is thrilled we managed to make one so quickly." As both members of his audience raised impatient eyebrows, he laughed and relented. "McManus, of course. Glynn and I have both had our problems with the man, but overall we figure he's the only one really qualified to take on the likes of you two. And we've recommended that Sean Murphy step up permanently as the new unit director of Em City. If McManus decides to keep his new job, that is. When I left they were already grilling him and the governor about extending the Emerald City program to other state prisons."

"Really? This I've got to see. Assuming I can trust you two to behave yourselves while I'm gone?"

Chris rested his chin on Toby's shoulder and gave Sister Pete an innocent smile. "Scout's honor, Sister," he promised.

"As if you were ever.... Tobias?"

Toby shrugged, nearly dislodging Chris, then said, "I'll do my best."

"And I'll knock before I come back in." She left then, carefully closing the door behind her, briefly wondering exactly how to phrase this incident during her next confession.

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As the door swung shut, Chris backed towards Sister Pete's desk, pulling Toby along with him.

"So, you really told the governor about us?" he asked softly, slipping up onto the edge of the desk and spreading his legs before letting his hands come to rest on Toby's waist, his thumbs tracing and retracing the sensitive path from hipbone to ribcage.

"Of course. He was a bit surprised initially -- after all, the first time we met I was in the hole after that little incident with Robson," Toby replied, gently massaging Chris's neck and shoulders.

"Mmmm. Feels good, baby." Chris rolled his head back and closed his eyes, enjoying Toby's light touch. "Still, I can't imagine that bit of news went over very well with your new boss."

Toby shrugged. "It's better he hears it from me now than getting broadsided with it later at some press conference." Toby tightened his grip until Chris rolled his head forward and opened his eyes. "Look, you're a part of my life, no matter what Case or anyone else thinks about it. I wouldn't have accepted his offer if it came with those kind of conditions..."

"Hey... it's alright. I know." Chris stopped Toby's nascent rant by leaning in and delivering a short, thorough kiss. "I finally get it, okay?"

Toby looked into Chris's eyes for a long moment, finding a peace he'd never seen there before. "What happened?"

Chris sniffed and shrugged. "Nothing, really. I got your letter and.... Fuck, Toby, I don't know. Something just clicked, alright? I still don't get why, but I do know that whenever I get out of here, you'll be there." Shifting uncomfortably, Chris quickly changed the subject. "So, this new job... it gonna mean a lot of traveling?"

"Not on Fridays," Toby quipped, provoking a chuckle. "No, seriously. I plan to do a lot of online networking with the advocates and other ACLU types from the other prisons while I concentrate on Oz. And for when I do have to go, well... at least the kids love the new nanny I found."

"Hmph."

"Chris... she's fine. I told you, Dad had Swannie check her out and I had Pancamo's friends do the same. No ties of any kind to the Brotherhood or anyone like them, ever. Now, are we gonna talk business the whole time Sister Pete's gone or...."

"Why, Toby," Chris replied with a grin, "I thought we promised to behave," then proceeded to use Toby's beltloops to pull him into closer contact.

"Not exactly. I said I'd do my best." He leaned forward, letting their lips almost touch before asking, "and you weren't ever really a scout, were you?"

"Nope," Chris whispered, his warm breath sending a frisson of desire down Toby's spine.

"Well, there you go then," Toby replied, settling into Chris's eager embrace, gladly repaying him with interest for his earlier greeting.

By the time Sister Pete returned, Chris was back at the computer with Toby leaning over his shoulder, ostensibly teaching him how to adjust the CD settings. Neither man showed any sign of what had undoubtedly occurred in her absence other than the nearly identical sated smiles that greeted her arrival.

<< END OF ADVOCACY. CONTINUED IN RELEASE >>