

“Do you think the reason most cats don’t like water is because they licked themselves clean and when they’re in the water and have to lick all that off they get fur on their tongue?” Quinn set the hammock into a gentle sway with a push of his toes. “It’s kind of like eating the last of the cereal by cutting open the box and the plastic bag so you can pour the milk in it and you don’t have to do any dishes.”

Harley didn’t answer him.

San Francisco stretched out around him, a breathtaking, panoramic view spreading out behind the penthouse balcony’s eight-foot tall clear barriers. He’d initially been fearful of having Harley out there with him until Rafe pointed out not only did the cat *not* jump more than to the top of a bed or a couch, the floors below actually had a larger footprint than the penthouse so there was considerable buffer room in case something went over.

Quinn listened to Rafe’s logic, absorbing everything the bassist told him then nodded when Rafe studied Quinn’s face and made a call to a contractor to install ten-inch, angled-in clear panels on top of the already existing barriers.

An enormous freestanding hammock and frame found its way onto the balcony, positioned carefully under the protective overhang and Quinn had taken to spending the afternoons there, grading papers or reading a book while Harley — who’d never shown the slightest bit of interest in inspecting the balcony’s edge — lazed next to him, curled up into a hollow near his hip.

The threat of rain hung on the horizon in a tapestry of dark gray clouds creeping towards the city and the scent of water clung to the breeze. It was getting slightly chilly, but Quinn was too lazy to turn on the balcony’s heaters or go inside and get a blanket.

“You’re comfortable, right?” He asked the cat, adjusting her sweater so it covered her rounded stomach. Harley stretched, elongating her legs out to a nearly impossible length then she curled back in on herself, rolling over onto her back in a silent demand for a belly rub.

The sweater was his youngest sister’s first serious attempt at knitting. Or at least he thought it was knitting. It could’ve been crochet, but Quinn was unsure about the difference and knew if he began to investigate it, he would end up somewhere in Mongolia studying yak yarn weaving. Ryan chose a velvety soft yarn, but the colors were nearly blinding. He’d accepted it with a wide smile and gave her a very large hug, sincerely grateful for her thoughtfulness and silently glad his cat could only see a limited spectrum.

Harley meowed crossly at him, so Quinn stopped fidgeting with her sweater and ran his fingernails across her mostly naked belly.

“Where’s my girl?” Rafe called out from the apartment. Quinn twisted about, much to Harley’s disgust, and lifted his face up for Rafe to kiss. The touch of their lips was brief but enough for Quinn to get a taste of Rafe’s mouth. “Is that reader of yours loaded with stacks of depressing papers on historical events no one actually read about or are you living it up and reading something for fun?”

Rafe tasted of bitter coffee, sugar, and strong mints. There was a whiff of cigarette smoke on his clothes, the acrid sting catching on the back of Quinn’s throat when he inhaled. He held still while Rafe eased himself into the broad, canvas hammock, carefully arranging Harley between them once Rafe leaned back. The cat traitorously refused to stay between them, opting instead to crawl over onto Rafe’s chest where she could shove her head under his chin.

Quinn waited for Rafe to share his day.

His lover’s eyes were hooded, a little tender, and more than a little broken. There was a bit of dirt under his nails, and Harley took offense at its to natural smell, chewing on Rafe’s fingers when he tried to scratch her head. There was a weight on Rafe, a very familiar one. He’d dragged a demon around for most the day, or at least that’s what Quinn thought. The feel of him was steady, slightly worn out and exhausted from working. Beneath the cigarette smoke was a hint of sweat and the faded aroma of sunshine.

He was patient. Either Rafe would need to talk it out or it would sit there beside him until it went away of its own accord. Either way, Quinn could wait it out.

Rafe's exorcism began five minutes later.

"I saw one of my buddies today. Down at The Sound. I don't know if you remember him. Brad Sutter. He used to play rhythm guitar for... shit, a whole bunch of bands." Rafe played with the collar of Harley's sweater, worrying at the yarn with his fingertips. "He's doing nickel and dime work in the studio now."

Quinn still waited. A long time ago he learned conversations really were a stream of send-and-receive. In most cases, the person sending needed long gaps of quiet to gather their thoughts. Rafe was one of those people. He could ramble and babble and laugh while talking about everything under the sun or nothing at all, but when it came time for him to share, Rafe needed gaps in the noise because his thoughts and emotions were as difficult to herd as drunken cats.

He didn't need Rafe to tell him about his relationship with Brad Sutter. He didn't recognize the name but many of Rafe's alleged friends from those days were people he couldn't be around anymore. In a lot of ways, Quinn hurt for his lover. Having to erase others from your life was always difficult, especially when your memories of them were hazy and numb so you're left wondering if you'd been closer than you remembered.

Or at least that's what Quinn thought.

"Brad used to be really good," Rafe started, his gaze drifting off towards the horizon and the incoming storm. "I heard him play today and all I could think was that could be me fumbling through chords and losing my place in the music. He showed up for the gig stoned out of his mind, and the kids who'd hired him... they deserved a hell of a lot better than what he brought to the table.

"When he saw me come into The Sound, first thing he said once; Oh, take a look at Mister Rock Star over here! Slumming with the rest of us." Rafe bit at his lower lip, his nostrils flaring. "I was *never* like that. I never once rubbed someone's nose into shit. Fuck, I went as high up as I could and fell down just as hard. I know how shitty it feels. I wouldn't do that to a guy."

"No, you wouldn't," Quinn slid in, the silence needing a small pebble to create a ripple in the emotions Rafe swam in. It would anchor him, at least enough for him to feel there was solid ground beneath his feet. "So what happened?"

"I left it off like he was teasing but you know how people sound when they're trying to joke but they kinda really mean the shitty things they're saying?" He glanced at Quinn, grinning as he said it. "Sorry, I know you have a problem with that. I think that's what I love about you is I know you don't play those kind of games. The crappy plastic fake chatter pisses me off but it's a game we have to play a lot of the time. I mean, I stood there in front of those kids who knew who I was and were excited to see me but at the same time I had to swallow all of the fucking shit Brad shoved into my mouth."

Another stretch of silence and Quinn placed his hand over Rafe's, joining him in Harley's adulation.

"I went to give him a hug goodbye when it was time for me to go and..." Rafe took a long breath, hitching it into his chest. "There's a smell on people's skin when they do coke. I don't know if you have to be a hard-core user but it gives off this... It's kind of like how eating the white pith from a grapefruit would smell if taste was an odor. Do you know what I mean?"

"You're talking to the person who spent five minutes describing how purple tasted to you."

"Yeah, you understand," Rafe murmured. He leaned over, resting his head on Quinn's shoulder. "I could taste the high in the air around him and I wanted to skin him open and crawl into his body because I wanted a hit so fucking bad. Not for long but it's kind of like this moment where it's all I can think about."

“So, it’s kind of like an emotionally evocative phantom limb sensation?” Quinn mused. He leaned to the heat of Rafe’s body against his, the warmth building up between them in more ways than one. “There is a word that I can’t remember so it’s going to bother me until I do but it’s an irrational overwhelming emotion to passively die when a person is in a certain situation. Something like there’s a train coming and it would be pretty easy to fall down in front of it. The person doesn’t really want to commit suicide or even die but the brain grabs at that dark thought and chases it down to where it lives.”

“Yeah, *exactly* like that.” Rafe chuckled. “So instead, I went to a meeting then drove up to your parents’ house and weeded the fuck out of the vegetable garden in the back. Which reminds me, I owe your dad a few tomato plants because they kinda look like weeds for a moment and then they looked like pot so I thought maybe someone planted them as a joke because why wouldn’t you plant pot plants in a police captain’s garden? So I pulled them out.”

“We could just blame the dog. He periodically goes into the garden and pulls things out indiscriminately.” Quinn made a mental note to either concoct a story or purchase plants. “So then you came home?”

“Right after I bundled everything up into the greens bin and paid your sister Ryan forty bucks to say she’d seen nothing if your parents ask. You know, Riley and Kiki were a fuck of a lot cheaper to bribe than your younger siblings. It’s like with each batch, they get more greedy and cunning.” He shook his head. “So, I worked past the stupid need to wreck my brain and came home to be with you. Because I love you. And you being here with me is a damned good incentive to keep clean. I never ever want to come home to you smelling like Brad, acting like Brad. I love you too much for that.”

“I’m glad to be here.” Quinn stole another kiss and whispered, “What do you think about taking the cat inside, feeding her and maybe we find someplace flat and soft to work off the rest of your energy?”

“Are you trying to seduce me, Doctor Morgan?” Rafe’s grin was wicked and sexy. “Because I’m not that kind of boy.”

“Grab the cat, Rafe,” Quinn growled, gathering up his things. “And you’ve been that kind of boy for as long as I’ve known you.”