Don't Look

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Sean could never let his first love go

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The pain was gone. He couldn't believe it. It was such a relief not to feel that mind numbing awful agony any longer. Maybe the doctors were all wrong because something seemed to have made him feel better. Christian opened his eyes, smiling, excited to tell Sean that it was going to be a good day. He knew Sean would be sitting by his side. He hadn't left it in weeks. Not since they had brought him to the hospital the day when he had found out that the latest round of treatments weren't working.

Sean was sitting by his bed, like he always did, but he was crying. Bitter heaving sobs that confused Christian.

"Baby, it's fine. I feel good today." He said the words, but Sean didn't seem to hear. He tried to reach up and wipe away Sean's tears, but he couldn't move his arm. What was happening to him?

"Sean?" He spoke again, but it seemed to fall on deaf ears. Sean had his head in his hands and he was leaned over Christian's pillow with his shoulders shaking violently. He looked like his entire world was crashing around him. Christian longed to comfort him, but he didn't know what was wrong. The tears were interrupted by Sean's hoarse whisper.

"I'll never forget you, Chris. I'll never stop loving you. I don't know how I'm going to live without you."

I'll never forget you? Live without you? What the hell was going on? The room was getting fuzzy, almost blinding in its whiteness. He reached out to Sean again, this time able to move. Instead of soft skin, his hand felt nothing but air. The bright light in the room got stronger, pulling on him like he was attached with a rope. Oh god, was he…?

"No!" He shouted, even though no one could hear. Sean needed him! They needed each other. He couldn't die. But he couldn't stop the pulling either. He was moving further and further away from the sterile little room where he had spent so much time, further from Sean. Then he was outside, drifting up like a forgotten balloon. The ground was moving quickly away. He could tell that this was supposed to be peaceful; a kind of goodbye, but all he felt was panic. He needed to get back. Now.

He needed to go back to Sean.

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Sean shuffled his grocery bags and trudged up the icy stairs to the apartment he and Christian had moved into senior year of college. Right before Christian got sick. It hurt to look at the walls that were covered with pictures they had put up together. It hurt even more to lie in their big soft bed all alone remembering Christian's gentle touch and warm skin. He hated being there, but for some reason couldn't stand to let it go. He guessed it was because the apartment was the last place he had seen Christian really alive.

The freezing windy Monday was ten times worse than most days. Christian would have been twenty-five that day. It was the third birthday that Sean had celebrated alone. Christian died, after months in and out of the hospital, on a cold November morning three weeks before he would have turned twenty-three.

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Sean and Christian met in ninth grade, on the first day of school. He had just moved into town and he'd felt so awkward and geeky walking into the big crowded place where nobody knew him. His first class of the day had been honors English. The teacher was passing out books and he was slouching in his desk, doing his best not to get noticed. Then this gorgeous blonde god of a boy had plopped himself next to him and stuck out his hand. Sean looked around, sure that he had to mean someone else, but the boy had just smiled and grabbed his hand, shaking it. Sean had nearly fallen out of his seat from pure shock.

"I'm Christian. Nobody calls me Chris," He'd announced with a warm smile. Sean laughed…and called him Chris from that very first day.

Turned out Christian was one of those unfairly lucky people who seemed to glide through life with this gold aura surrounding them. He had a million friends, was totally popular, and so incredibly nice and unaffected by his popularity. Sean couldn't believe someone like Christian would even give him the time of day. But he had.

Starting that very first morning, when they realized they had most of their classes together, Christian barely even paid attention to anyone else. Sean had no idea why Christian kept talking to him, sitting next to him in class, scooting closer to him at lunch, when everybody else seemed to want a piece of him. It made no sense but he didn't want to question such an amazing gift. Years later Sean finally

asked him about it and he said he'd taken one look at the adorable little new thing sitting in class, looking so shy and sweet, and had fallen hopelessly in love. It didn't even occur to him that Sean might not want him back. Of course he did. That was just how things worked for Christian.

They kept their relationship quiet in high school but spent every free second together. Sean went to all of Christian's soccer games, Christian never missed a cello recital or an orchestra concert. Christian gave Sean his first real kiss; they lost their virginity to each other on Sean's narrow twin bed on a rainy afternoon when they were sixteen.

When they got to college, it became official. The day they moved into their dorm room freshman year, Christian took Sean's hand and told him he wanted to spend the rest of his life loving him. Sean couldn't have agreed more. With tears springing up in his eyes, he told Christian he would never love anybody else. They laughed and hugged and kissed each other hard. As soon as they saved enough money, they bought each other matching rings and had their own little ceremony over a blueberry scented candle on the floor of their dorm room. Together, they had planned careers, houses they would buy. They figured they would adopt a few children when they were older and live happily ever after. Sean fell asleep every night cocooned in Christian's warm arms and woke up most days unable to believe how lucky he was.

Senior year of college Sean and Christian moved into their first real grown up apartment, a few miles from campus in a nice little complex with a garden in the middle. They decorated with framed photographs and bright colored paintings, bought a big four-poster bed and the softest sheets imaginable, filled the place with pieces of them that made it a home. Things were great. More than great. Sean felt like his life was all set up. He had Christian, which was basically all he needed, his future was stretching out in front of him, and everything was perfect. He decided later that it must be the way of the world to never let anything so perfect last very long.

It started around Thanksgiving that year with a stomachache and a tiredness that Christian just couldn't seem to shake. He barely touched the beautiful thanksgiving dinner his mother made, which given his life long love affair with food was almost unheard of. He figured he had a cold or something because nothing looked good. The temperature had dropped pretty quickly that year, they all reasoned.

When they'd gotten back to campus, Christian seemed to be getting better for a while, but then the bruising started. He would wake up with strange purple marks on his legs and arms. Sean was getting really scared, but Christian insisted it was just a bad diet or lack of iron. When it got to the point that he had huge bruises all over his body, and he could barely make it up the apartment stairs, Sean finally insisted he go to the doctor. He could see the concern in the doctor's face when they discussed the symptoms.

Round after round of tests proved the doctor's worst fears to be right. Leukemia. Advanced and aggressive. Sean was terrified. How could his big strong boyfriend have cancer? He seemed so invincible. The doctors were convinced that with his youth and relative strength he had a fighting chance of beating the disease. The day he died, Sean wanted to kill them all for letting him hope. It was so unfair. He'd managed to find the one person he wanted to love forever and he was gone.

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Sean pulled his groceries from the bag lethargically. He didn't really care what he ate anymore. He'd gotten much thinner in the past two years, but couldn't really bring himself to worry about it. He realized that someday he'd have to go on with his life. He knew he couldn't just stay like this forever but everything seemed so *pointless* without Christian. Honestly, if he knew for sure that he believed in heaven and seeing people again on the other side, he would have ended it already. Been with Christian wherever it was that people who loved each other ended up forever. Some days he felt like ending it anyway. Oblivion would be better than this constant grief.

The last thing he pulled from the grocery bag was a box containing a single red velvet cupcake, big with fluffy cream cheese frosting. Christian's favorite. Every year since he had turned sixteen, Christian and Sean would share a red velvet cupcake exactly like this one, giggling and kissing the cream cheese frosting off each other's lips while Sean wished him a happy birthday. Every year Christian had said the same thing. '*Of course it's happy, baby. I'm with you.*'

Now, all alone in the apartment covered with their pictures, filled with things they had collected together, Sean lit the single candle on his cupcake. He couldn't help crying, even though he felt kind of stupid still being so sad after all this time.

"Happy birthday, Chris. I'll always love you," He whispered before he blew the candle out with a long sigh.

Sometimes he felt a presence, like Christian must be watching. Today he felt nothing but a dark sadness that seemed to be consuming him little by little every single day that he had to get up and survive alone. He usually ate the cupcake, in memory rather than actual desire for food. This time he couldn't. The thought of swallowing made him want to throw up. He went to toss the cupcake in the trash, but couldn't bring himself to do that either. So he just left it sitting on the counter sad and alone, candle blown out and dead. Just like him.

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“I can’t stand it anymore, you have to let me help him!” Christian shouted. It wasn’t a new argument. They’d had it many times before.

“I should have never agreed to let you watch him in the first place. You aren’t supposed to guard over someone you knew on earth. The reason for that rule has become excruciatingly clear to me.” The dry and somewhat sarcastic voice of the elder made Christian want to scream.

“I’m afraid for him. He’s so skinny, and I haven’t seen him smile in months. You told me he’d get better with time! Where’s the improvement?” Christian thought of the day before. He’d watched Sean blow out the candle on a cupcake and wish him happy birthday. It had broken his heart to hear Sean say he loved him and not to be able to go to him, to tell him that he still watched over him every day. That he would love and protect him for the rest of his life like he’d always promised.

“He can’t see you! You know that. The rules are unbendable.”

“So, he can’t see me? Is that all? What if I go to him, but never let him see me?”

“Christian,” the tired voice started. The same argument over and over had gotten annoying about a year and a half ago. “Yes, that’s the actual *letter* of the law, but you know you can’t go back. Why do you keep fighting this? You don’t belong there anymore. You belong here.”

“I belong with Sean and he needs me. Please. See what you can do.” Gabriel shook his head. No, it wasn’t *the* Gabriel. Not too surprisingly it was a common name up there. Christian had refused to change his.

“I’ll ask, but don’t expect any miracles.” Christian would have cried if he were still able. When he spoke his voice was quiet and resigned.

“Can’t you see a miracle is exactly what he needs?” He returned his gaze to Sean, so sad and alone. His heart ached and he knew that, permission or not, he wasn’t going to be able to wait much longer before he tried to help him.

Christian’s miracle came only a few days later. He was watching an early winter snow fall on the sleepy little apartment complex where he had spent his days happily planning a life with the man he loved. He had considered a thousand times breaking all the rules that were so set in stone, or cloud, or whatever they had up there to write on. He had to go back to earth, to try and do *something* to end Sean’s pain. What would be his punishment? Could it possibly be any worse than sitting motionless, watching Sean self-destruct and unable to stop it? Christian sighed tiredly. He couldn’t stand much more of this. It was then he realized someone was coming. He felt Gabriel’s presence long before he

could see him.

“Hey, Gabe,” He said in a quiet voice, knowing the elder could hear him. The angel winced.

“How many times have I told you not to call me that, *Chris*?” Christian got the point. No one was allowed to call him Chris but Sean.

“Sorry. So you have any news, or are you just here to bother me.” He got a tentative smile.

“I have news. I want you to know I don’t like this at all and I think that the possibility for disaster is endless, but they have agreed to your request.” Christian looked shocked for a second then he jumped up and pumped his fist in the air. The gesture was so silly, so non-angelic, that Gabriel had to laugh.

“Wait before you go running, er, flying off. There are rules.” Christian looked impatient.

“I’m listening,” he said, looking like he was doing anything but.

“He can’t see you. That’s rule number one. Don’t break it. They are letting you go help him, but a human can’t see an angel. Ever. If he sees your face, you will have to return here, and you won’t be allowed to look over him any longer.”

“Can I touch him?” Gabriel colored slightly.

“Yes, and he will be able to hear you but you’ll sound different than you used to. Obviously you can only go to him at night, and you are under no circumstances to tell him what or who you really are.”

“Then he’ll think I’m some crazy person sneaking into his apartment!”

“And if you told him you were his guardian angel, he would think you were completely sane?” Christian laughed quietly, imagining Sean’s reaction to that one. “Listen, you’ll just have to convince him some other way. You know we have options. Just don’t let him see you. Rules are rules for a reason. You’re already getting to break about a hundred of them. I wouldn’t complain.”

“So he can’t see me, and I obviously can’t tell him I’m an angel, and I can’t even tell him I’m Christian. What if he guesses?”

“Then no rules have been broken.”

“This is stupid.” Gabriel raised his eyebrows at him. “Not that stupid!” Christian amended. He was getting what he had wanted for so long. It wasn’t exactly the *way* he wanted things to be, but he’d take it.

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Sean was laying in bed trying to force sleep on himself. It was so hard sleeping in this bed. Still. He would’ve thought after two years he’d be used to the coldness of sleeping alone, but he wasn’t. He had almost caved a few times, bringing home someone he barely knew just to feel the warmth of another person, but he hadn’t been able to. He had never even *kissed* anyone other than Christian. Not a real kiss, anyway. It would feel like cheating. Sean grumbled and rolled over onto Christian’s still cold side of the bed. He turned to face the doorway and nearly screamed.

There was a shadowy man, tall and broad shouldered, standing in the usually empty doorway. Sean reached for Christian’s baseball bat, which he had started leaving by the bedside a few months earlier when there had been a neighborhood prowler. He would have swung at stranger but for a quietly worded request.

“*Wait*.” The man held out his hand, palm up. It was a peaceful gesture. What the hell? Sean was confused. There was a robber in his house asking him not get violent?

“I don’t have anything valuable,” he told the man, his voice shaking. He was irritated with himself for sounding so scared. The figure chuckled. There was something so familiar about that low laugh but Sean couldn’t place it.

“I’m not a robber,” He said still laughing.

“Are you some kind of weird psycho? Kill me, then. I don’t care.” *I’d almost welcome it*, he thought. Sean felt a blinding flash of pain coming from his doorway.

“I’m not here to hurt you. I only want to help.” His voice sounded shaky too, like the stranger was trying not to cry. “Here. Touch my hand. You’ll know then.” Despite himself, Sean couldn’t help trusting the mysterious figure in the doorway. He reached out and brushed his hand against the offered fingers.

The feelings that rushed through him at that simple touch were indescribable. Peace, love, a deep sadness, the need to fix that sadness. He felt it all at once, so strong it would have knocked him over had he been standing.

“Who are you?” This time he spoke in awe, not in fear.

“I can’t tell you. All I can say is I’m here to help. You’ve been so sad. I just want you to be happy again.” Sean’s head dropped forward. He wished that were possible.

“I can’t be happy. The man I was going to spend my whole life with is dead. Gone. I’m barely surviving without him.” The figure trembled at his words.

“Will you at least let me try?” He reached out and brushed his fingers along Sean’s bare shoulder. At his touch that sense of peace returned, along with hope and…desire? He jerked back. This was insane! He must have finally lost it completely. The mysterious stranger reached forward again, returning the contact.

Maybe it was the touch of a warm hand, or the unbelievable feelings rushing through him, but Sean nodded. He didn’t know what he was doing, but for the first time in two long years, he felt like he could take a full breath without bursting into tears. Maybe it felt so good he didn’t care if he was crazy.

“What should I call you?” Sean asked. The man had sat down next to him on the bed. He was running his fingers through Sean’s hair softly, like you would if you were putting a child to sleep. Sean knew he should be terrified, calling the police, checking himself into the closest loony bin. All he felt was…happy. He didn’t understand, but it was such a relief he couldn’t let it go.

“I don’t know. I hadn’t thought of a name.” The man’s answer was kind of strange, but somehow made sense. “What do you think would fit?” He answered without thinking.

“It’s hard. You don’t even seem like a person. More like an angel or something.” He heard a low chuckle. The vibration shook the hand that was resting in his hair.

“You can’t call me that,” the chuckling voice said. “How bout, hmmm, Max?”

“Max?” Sean smiled a little and nodded. “In a weird way, it fits.”

Then the newly named Max crawled under the covers and pulled Sean close, cuddling him up to his perfectly muscled chest. Sean couldn’t believe how good it felt. Almost like being with Christian again. Not wrong at all. He felt a little guilty about liking it so much, but figured he was due a little peace. Sean breathed in, and smelled the fresh wet scent of rain clouds and spring mornings, unusual but pleasant. Then he surprised himself by yawning, feeling his eyes grow heavy and tired. They should be tired he guessed. He hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep in nearly two years.

“Go to sleep, Sean,” Max whispered, pulling him closer and tucking the covers around his shoulders. He meant to ask how the man knew his name but he didn’t have the energy to say the words. Instead he just closed his eyes and fell asleep.

He woke the next morning, more awake and rested than he had been in a long time. He couldn’t believe how easily he’d slept through the night. No nightmares about beeping lights and hospitals, just the easy darkness that he used to take for granted. He reached over to thank Max, or whatever his real name was, but found an empty pillow. Well, not quite empty. In the place of Max’s comforting arms was a note, and sitting on the bedside table a blueberry muffin and a steaming peppermint latte. Sean smiled and opened the note.

Sean-

I’ll be back tonight. Have a good day! I hope you like blueberry.

-Max

Sean had been hoping for a glimpse of his mysterious angel. It was how he’d already started to think of him. He knew it was nuts. He didn’t believe in angels. He *couldn’t* believe. If angels existed, how could they have let Christian die? He did feel better though; even now that Max was gone. The muffin and the coffee actually looked good. He couldn’t remember the last time food seemed interesting.

He ate most of the muffin and drank the coffee appreciatively. It had been his favorite before. Then, with a little hidden smile, he got dressed and headed for work. He didn’t really like his job, but it paid well and he’d been using most of his salary to help Christian’s parents pay the part of the hospital bills that insurance didn’t cover. They protested, but he kept sending the money anyway. They’d treated him like their son too. His own mother was sweet but flaky. She’d always been more like a friend than anything else. It seemed fair to help out the only parents he’d ever really known.

Sitting on the bus to work, he caught himself smiling again. It was strange how a smile kind of hovered on his face. He thought of how Christian had always told him that his smile was beautiful, how it lit up his face. Sean was a little surprised. Even the memory of Christian didn’t make him as sad as usual today.

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Christian couldn’t hold back his grin. He was happier than he’d been in a long time. Since before the

specter of his disease had ruined every waking moment. He didn't like not being able to tell Sean who he was but he hoped that if he left enough hints Sean would figure it out soon enough. It had felt so amazingly good to hold him again. Like coming home from war or something. He'd almost shuddered at the feel of Sean's slender body curled up next to his, but he held it in. He was afraid of scaring Sean away and he needed more than anything to make him happy.

He hummed to himself as he waited through the interminable day for darkness to fall so he could go back to earth. He planned to buy a box of Sean's favorite candy for the next morning, soft caramels with a creamy center. He'd always loved watching Sean eat them. The orgasmic look he always got on his face would have been funny if it wasn't sexy as hell. Christian felt kind of dumb, going into the stores with a hood over his face like the evil emperor or something, but the rule applied for everyone. No one could see him, not just Sean. *Oh well*, he thought. Let them stare. It was worth it to watch the small smile dawn on his favorite face. He hoped soon that the smile would be bigger.

When it was finally dark enough, Christian nearly bolted, so excited to see Sean that nothing else mattered. He had to remember caution when he finally reached Sean's apartment. The bedroom light was still on. Sean must be waiting up. He tapped on the door.

"Sean, it's me, Max." The name felt funny in his mouth, but he knew it was necessary.

"Come in!" He sounded happy, excited.

"You have to turn the light off first. I can't show you myself."

"Why?" Sean was obviously taken aback.

"Let's just say it's a rule. I can't help you anymore if you see me."

Christian could almost feel the wave skepticism through the wood of the bedroom door. He needed to touch Sean again, make him feel how sincere he was.

"Sean, please? Turn the light off." Sean must have decided to trust him yet again because soon the room fell into darkness.

"You can come in now," was his hesitant answer. Christian grinned and opened the door, bounding into Sean's room- their room actually- like a puppy.

"Thank you for trusting me. I know I must sound crazy. I just couldn't stand it anymore, watching you hurt day after day." He reached out and brushed Sean across the cheek, his fingers lingering.

Sean shuddered visibly at the pleasure of his touch and leaned his face into Christian's hand. He'd always done that, like a cat being stroked. Sometimes, Christian almost expected him to start purring. He wanted so desperately to push Sean into the bed and cover him with his body, to kiss him and love him until he cried with pleasure instead of pain. But he knew he had a role to play, so he sat gently next to Sean and kept his touches light.

"How was work today?" He asked. Sean sputtered for a second, laughing.

"You're asking me about work?" It must have been strange for such an odd creature to ask a mundane question like that.

"Yeah, I guess. Well, how was it?"

"Better, actually. Thanks for the coffee by the way."

"Of course." Sean sat quietly for a minute, thinking.

"So let me get this straight. You can't tell me who you are, or let me see you."

"Yeah, that's about it."

"But if I guessed, could you tell me I was right?"

"Yeah, that's not actually doing anything wrong." Sean thought quietly again.

"So you know when I said you seemed kind of like an angel?" He cringed, obviously thinking he sounded like a nut job. Christian tried to send encouraging thoughts through his touch. "Well, are you?" Sean almost whispered the question.

"Close enough," Christian answered, afraid to say too much.

"And your name isn't Max, obviously, but you can't tell me what it is even if I've already guessed what you are?"

"Yep. Kinda stupid, but I have to follow the rules." Sean chuckled lightly, the closest thing to a sincere laugh that Christian had heard in two long years.

"So, not Max, what do you do all day?"

“Honestly? I watch you. That’s kind of my job description.” He could feel the surprise resonate through Sean’s body. He liked that new addition to the familiarity of their closeness. Being able to feel Sean’s feelings. Christian suppressed a naughty chuckle at the thought of the possibilities. He could feel Sean’s feelings. He could make Sean feel his. Hmmm….

“Have you always?” *Wait, what were they talking about?* Oh yeah, him watching Sean.

“Um, no.” He tried to think of a quick explanation. “You didn’t, uh, need me…before.”

“And now I do?”

“Yeah. I’ve been with you since Christian left.”

Sean was quiet for a long time after that. They had shifted in the bed so Christian was holding him like he had the night before. He slowly sifted his fingers through Sean’s dark shiny hair. He’s always loved the rich chocolaty color. Sean’s quiet voice, breaking the warm silence, surprised him.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course you can.” He kept petting Sean’s head, his neck, everywhere he could touch. It was addictive.

“Do you know what happened to Christian?” Christian froze. Oh, lord. How was he going to answer that?

“Christian is happy now. He’s in a good place.” All true. It sounded like the usual trite crap, but he *was* happy and in the best place possible. He was pleased with himself.

“Really? You’re not just saying that?”

“I Promise.” He brushed Sean’s forehead, so he could feel the sincerity.

“That’s a neat trick,” Sean whispered, smiling.

“What?”

“The way you’re showing me your feelings with your touch.” Christian smiled in the dark.

“One of the tools of the trade. How else would you know I wasn’t a psychopath?”

“True,” Sean agreed. He shifted, wiggling closer into Christian’s arms. “Max?” It took Christian a second to remember that Max was him.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for being here.”

“I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”

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It had been weeks since the last time Sean slept alone. Every day he seemed to feel better, almost like he was the person he’d been before. He couldn’t quite let go of the guilt he felt for being happy. It wasn’t like he was *really* moving on he tried to rationalize. Max wasn’t his boyfriend or anything. He was just there to help. Eventually he’d probably have to go help someone else. The thing was, whenever Sean thought of Max leaving, he’d get that same black hole panicky feeling that he always got when he thought of years stretching out in front of him without Christian. He wondered if he would ever really be okay.

Every day he woke to little gifts, notes, things that would hold him over until he could feel the peacefulness of Max’s touch again. He felt kind of like a junkie. Like he needed Max to stay happy and he was barely surviving between each fix. He thought of the note he’d woken up to that morning, along with a coffee and a new paperback from one of his favorite mystery writers.

Morning Sean!

Can’t wait to hold you again tonight. Here’s a book to read when you’re bored on the bus. I think you’ll love this author. I did. See you later!

-Max

It was the first time that Max had ever mentioned the fact that he used to be human-and not too long ago at that judging by the author he liked. Sean wondered what kind of person Max had been. They never really talked about him very much. In fact, he usually steered any conversations they had away from what he was thinking. Sean wondered about that. Was that another rule? Was Max not allowed to say who he’d been when he was alive? Probably.

All those rules. The not looking one was driving Sean nuts. He'd felt Max's warm muscular chest behind him night after night, heard his honey soft voice, reveled in the pleasant chills that rushed all over his body every time Max touched him. Honestly, he tried not to think about it, but his angel was kind of sexy. If only he could see what he looked like. Sean shook his head. Not going to break that rule. He didn't want Max to have to leave.

He was riding home from work, new book in his hands, but he was thinking more than anything. He had felt so uncomfortable the few times he'd tried to meet a guy, and here he was looking forward to spending another night in bed with a man he'd never even seen. True, they hadn't actually done anything other than sleep and talk, but he was so comfortable with him. Even though he was an angel or "close enough" to one, Sean wouldn't have predicted him feeling so familiar so quickly. Comforting, yes but not *comfortable*. Like they'd been around each other for years. Plus there were all the little gifts, coffee the way he liked, his favorite candy, a book he'd meant to buy weeks before. They were the kind of things that could only come from someone who really knew him. Max must have paid attention…unless?

Sean didn't even want to think it. It was deranged. Impossible. Just because he seemed to know so much about him, didn't mean he'd known him before. Did it? Sean had felt love coming from Max's touch lots of times when he was holding him. He'd assumed it was some sort of celestial love, or whatever it is they feel. What if it wasn't? What if Max had known him before? What if the love was real? It would be the fantasy he'd never even dared to have. Could Max actually be Christian back in his arms? And if he guessed, then they weren't breaking any rules, so there was no harm in asking! Sean started to grin, but his grin faded as quickly as it had come. What if Max *wasn't* Christian? He wouldn't want to hurt him by hoping he was someone else.

Sean thought about his dilemma. He laughed to himself at the idea of trying to explain his problem to anyone. '*See, I have this guardian angel that sleeps with me at night, but I'm trying to decide if he's really my dead boyfriend…'* It sounded certifiable. It probably was. But what if it wasn't?

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It was New Year's Eve. Midnight was an hour or two away but Sean was in bed, wrapped up in his angel's warm arms exactly where he wanted to be. He smiled and cuddled himself even closer into the strong embrace he had grown to love.

He'd become more and more convinced every day that the angel was Christian but never sure enough to ask straight out. He finally had a plan but he had to catch him off guard. He had to wait until he was sleepy enough to respond from instinct rather than thought. Sean waited, biding his time until he could feel muscles relaxing and breathing become regular and deep. Finally, he could tell his

angel was mostly asleep. It was time.

“Happy New Year,” Sean whispered. The way he always had. Happy New Year, happy birthday, happy valentines day…the answer was always the same.

“Of course it’s happy, baby. I’m with you.” It was a sleepy whispered response, straight from the habit of years and exactly what Sean had hoped to hear. It worked! Heart pounding harder than he’d ever believed possible, he bolted up in bed, ready to laugh and cry at the same time.

“Oh my god, Chris. It *is* you!” Sean threw himself at the muscular chest and wrapped his arms around it. Christian laughed, realizing what Sean had done.

“I’ve been waiting for you to figure it out. It took you long enough.” Christian ruffled Sean’s hair. The twinge of guilt Sean had been feeling the past few weeks dissolved instantly. The only feeling left was one of complete *rightness*. It really was him! The wounds of the past two years that had been slowly healing suddenly disappeared. He dropped little kisses all over Christian’s face. The tears and laughter that had been threatening came all at once. They held each other for a long time, shaking with emotion.

“How did you do this?” He finally whispered. Christian smiled and brushed a hand along Sean’s cheek.

“I can’t give you all the details, but you know how I am when I want something. I needed to come back to you.” Sean laughed. Christian always got his way eventually.

“It must have killed you all those days when I didn’t realize who you were. I think it was always in the back of my mind…” He trailed off, feeling dumb.

“It did! I was to the point of going insane. I mean you got the first part so quickly.”

“I guess I hoped, and I did feel it, but I couldn’t believe it was true and I didn’t want to hurt your feelings if you weren’t Christian.” They both kind of laughed at that. Christian swept a tender thumb along Sean’s jaw. He trembled at the sweetness of the touch. “How long can you stay?” Sean was in awe of how lucky he was. He had his love back. They may not be able to have a regular day-to-day life, but he was back. It didn’t matter what the circumstances were.

“As far as I know, I’m here indefinitely. As long as I can convince my, uh, superiors that you still need me.”

“Of course I still need you. I’ll always need you.”

“Then I’ll always be here.” Sean felt his eyes fill with tears and he squeezed as hard as he could. He ran his hands over Christian’s strong back and memorized his collarbone with seeking lips.

“I love you,” Sean whispered. He held his breath. He’d said it so many times in the past two years without ever getting an answer. It wouldn’t seem real until he did.

“I love you too, baby.” Christian lifted his chin with a gentle finger and leaned over to brush their lips together. The touch felt so wonderfully familiar that Sean wondered how he could have ever not known it was him. He responded from memory, deepening the kiss, tangling his tongue in Christian’s sweet mouth. God, it felt so good.

All of a sudden he couldn’t be close enough. This was *Christian* here in his bed. Even though he could feel it with every fiber of his being it still seemed so impossible. Sean broke away from their kiss and trailed little tasting bites down the side of Christian’s neck. Christian moaned and tipped his head back, giving him more room. Sean took advantage of every inch, kissing and licking everywhere he could reach.

“I’ve missed this so much,” Christian breathed. Sean’s pulse quickened, raging in his cheeks. He tasted Christian’s skin again and again. It was different, with the smell of storm clouds and spring rain, but warm and familiar at the same time. “Sean, baby, I need to touch you. These past weeks have been killing me.” Sean groaned out loud and nodded. He lay back on the bed and nearly trembled when he felt the weight of Christian’s body covering him.

He felt impatient hands tugging at his pajama bottoms and he lifted his hips, suddenly dying to get them off. He pushed at the waist of Christian’s pants too, wanting to feel every inch of his skin. When they were finally naked, Sean wiggled his legs out from under Christian, and wrapped them around muscular hips. Christian gave Sean one last kiss then began to work his way down. He licked and bit at Sean’s nipples until he was arching his back and moving his head from side to side. Sean grabbed at his shoulders, panting and crying out his name. It had been painful before to say his name out loud. Now it felt amazing. He loved saying ‘Christian’ and getting sexy moans in response rather than silence.

If he’d been even a little unsure if the man loving him so thoroughly was Christian, all his doubts would have been removed in the next second. He felt gentle lips move down his body until the soft curls he’d been clutching disappeared under the covers. The first touch of Christian’s soft wet tongue licking up the underside of his throbbing shaft nearly made him come. It was everything he remembered: sweet, sexy, loving. The moist heat of that perfect mouth surrounding him gave him

chills. It literally felt like home. Like a long lost memory of what used to be.

“God, Chris. I love you so much,” He choked out, barely able to form words with his mouth. He felt the pulsing of his release threaten to take over. “Wait, babe,” He panted. He tugged on Christian’s shoulders until he crawled back up to kiss Sean on the mouth. “It’s been forever so I’m kinda sensitive. I didn’t want to come without you.” Christian trembled then gave Sean a growly bite on the neck.

“I want to play with you. I’ve wanted to since the second I touched you all those weeks ago.” Sean moaned impatiently.

“Next time, okay?” He tugged on Christian’s hair. “I just need you inside of me. I’ve been so empty.”

“Don’t you want me to get you more ready?” Christian brushed concerned fingers across Sean’s face.

“No. I want you now.” He reached into his night table and found a bottle of lube he used when he needed release. Opening it, Sean poured some into his palm. He wrapped his hand around Christian’s hard length, spreading around the slick lube. Christian trembled and laid his forehead on Sean’s shoulder. Sean got a bit of a jolt when he realized he could feel the way Christian was feeling. Could feel the love and excitement and the warmth of fingers surrounding his throbbing erection. “Oh my God,” He whispered and spread his legs again, pulling Christian between them.

“I love you, baby,” Christian whispered as he guided himself to Sean’s tight entrance. Then he pushed slowly until he was buried to the hilt. The perfect mix of pain and indescribable pleasure made Sean cry out loud. He dropped his head back onto the pillow and wrapped his legs around Christian’s waist. It was exactly how he remembered. Better even because while he’d never taken Christian for granted he’d assumed they would always be together. Knowing the horror of losing him made this painfully sweet moment all the more beautiful.

Christian began the slow slick slide in and out of Sean’s body. He angled his hips so he hit Sean every time in the spot that made him see stars. The soft skin of Christian’s stomach caressed his aching shaft, making the pleasure that much more unbearable. Sean convulsed and tightened his grip. Christian cradled Sean’s hips with one arm, and wrapped the other around his shoulders, cupping his head and bringing him close for a kiss. Sean gasped out loud and moaned loudly. He could still feel them both! The heat and tightness that Christian was reveling in and the unbelievable fullness he was feeling combined to make a pleasure so intense he could barely withstand it.

“Can you feel it?” He choked out, hoping Christian was experiencing the same incredible bliss.

“Yeah…oh *God*,” Christian replied, his face twisting in ecstasy when he brushed up against Sean’s prostate again. “I can’t believe how amazing this feels,” he breathed. Sean couldn’t even reply. He was too far gone.

He wanted it to last forever. He could barely last three more strokes. The trembling current of his release curled through him like a fiery whip. He squeezed his eyes shut and cried out, arching his back up into Christian as wave after wave of bliss swept over him. He barely heard Christian give a hoarse shout, then collapse on top of him in a sweaty heap.

It seemed like forever before he could breathe again, let alone talk. He wrapped his sweaty body around Christian, never wanting to let him go.

“I don’t even know what to say,” he whispered. Christian chuckled tiredly.

“Me either,” he answered. He slipped off of Sean and draped his arm around him possessively. It was another gesture that seemed so familiar that Sean couldn’t believe he’d missed it before. “Go to sleep, baby,” Christian mumbled. He’d always been able to fall asleep at the drop of a hat.

Sean tried to sleep, but it was so hard. He was still spinning from the night’s revelations and Christian’s amazing lovemaking. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to concentrate on calming things but he was just too excited. So he did what he had been doing for months before: lay in the dark and stare at the ceiling unable to sleep. The only difference now was that he couldn’t keep the grin off of his face.

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Christian awoke to the sound of something crashing onto the floor. When he opened his eyes a horrified and guilty looking Sean was looming above him and the lamp was on. A water glass was broken all over the hard wood floor and the puddle was spreading more every second. It took Christian a second to realize what was happening. When he did, every muscle in his body froze with terror. Sean was looking at him!

“Sean, turn the light off!” he shouted hoping it wouldn’t be too late. The room immediately plunged into darkness. “What were you thinking?” He groaned. He could feel Sean trembling.

“I just wanted to see your face,” He mumbled. Christian could hear the tears threatening. “I’ve been missing it for so long and I thought since I already knew who you were…”

“No, baby. The rules are still there. A human can’t look at an angel ever. *Shit*,” He swore quietly. “Maybe no one noticed.” He hoped, but he doubted that was possible. They noticed everything. Then Christian felt a tug. That same feeling he’d felt in the hospital room two years before. That was it. They wanted him to come back. He wanted to scream at the sky.

“Sean,” he whispered hoarsely, reaching out in the dark to touch his cheek. “They saw. I’m being called back.” Christian felt his heart rip in two. Sean cried out and squeezed him convulsively. He understood completely. He couldn’t stand the idea of letting go. He felt Sean’s wet tears running down his chest.

“Chris, no! Tell them I’m sorry. Tell them I’m an idiot and it won’t happen again. Beg…*plead*. I can’t lose you a second time. I’ll die.” He hugged Sean tight, battling against the pulling sensation that was getting stronger by the second. He was going to fight this. One night of pure happiness wasn’t enough. Neither one of them could survive without the other. Not really, anyway.

In the end it was just too strong. He was pulled out of Sean’s arms. Sean collapsed on his bed sobbing relentlessly. Christian wanted nothing more than to go to him, hold him, and tell him that everything would be all right.

“I love you, Sean,” He said quickly, knowing he would be gone in moments. “I’ll be back. I’m going to convince them to let me come back. I promise.” Sean lifted his head. Christian could see the silver tracks of his tears reflected in the moonlight.

“I love you too, Christian,” He whispered in return. “Please come back. *Please*.”

And then Christian was gone. Up in the sky being drawn inexorably back towards the heavens. He felt that same panic he’d felt before, that feeling of needing to be with Sean no matter what. He was going to fix this. They had to let him.

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It had been ten miserable days. Days when the darkness that had pushed at the edges of him for the past two years finally reached out and swallowed him whole. How could he have been so stupid? Was one beautiful glance of the man he loved worth all this pain? Sean wished he could take it back. He wished he could go back to that night and suppress that crazy rush of curiosity that had led him to turn on the lamp. He’d figured he would only do it for a second and no one would ever know. He just wanted to see if Christian still looked the same.

He had. The same and yet more beautiful than ever. His skin had glowed, almost well…*angelic* in the

soft light of the lamp. His hair was shiny and curled against the face that Sean had loved for so many years. It *was* him. Sean had wanted so much to lean over and touch that long familiar face, but he knew he didn't dare. He just sat in silence, still unable to believe his good luck. He was reaching over to turn off the lamp when the unthinkable had happened. That damned glass of water. He'd forgotten all about it.

Now it was over. Any crazy chance of happiness he'd had with Christian was gone and it was his fault. Christian had promised he'd come back, that he'd fight for them, but what could he do? How many times could two people bend the unbendable rules of heaven and get away with it?

Sean trudged up his stairs, barely able to face another night in the bed that had grown even colder since Christian had left it again. It was late. He'd put in another long day at work. Anything to try and keep his mind off of what had happened. It was almost like Christian had died all over again. Like going back to the first weeks he'd spent alone with the hurt slicing through him slowly like a dull grinding blade. He would do anything to get rid of the pain. Anything. He'd done more than just consider it.

He was so lost in his black thoughts that he didn't notice the shadowy figure waiting for him on his bed, didn't even notice the icy draft coming from the opened door to his deck. It took him until he threw his coat on the chair and pulled his tie and sweater off to see what was in front of him. In two seconds he went from blackest despair to pure joy.

"Christian! How? Did they?" He couldn't even spit out a whole question. Christian simply reached out his arms and pulled Sean close. He could feel the love and joy at their touch. But there was something else. He could feel that all wasn't lost but there was something Christian didn't want to tell him. "What is it? Are you allowed to stay?" Christian lifted his head.

"No. You saw me on earth and that rule can't be broken. I can never stay with you here again." Sean's heart ripped open in an instant but he could see that Christian wasn't completely shattered like he was. There was more.

"You bargained with them, didn't you?" He should have known that Christian would somehow get what they wanted. He could sense that Christian didn't want to tell him the rest. "What is it?"

"Oh god, Sean. I can't ask you to do it."

"Christian. I'll do anything to be with you. I can't be without you." Christian took a deep breath.

"Sean, they say the only way we can be together is if you come with me," He hesitated, not wanting

to finish. Sean kissed him to encourage him, hope flooding through him. “You’d have to die, baby,” He whispered. “ I can’t ask that.” Sean wrapped his arms tighter around Christian. He didn’t even hesitate.

“Yes. Anything.”

“No! You’re so young. You have your whole life!”

“What the hell is that without you? I’m going.”

“Are you sure?” Christian’s voice was shaky. Sean gripped his face in the dark. He didn’t know if he could purposely project his feelings, but he needed Christian to feel that he had no regrets.

“I’m sure. I don’t want to live without you for another second.” Christian sighed.

“It has to be now.” Sean felt a moment of fear, and then a heady sense of peace enveloped him.

“I’m ready. What do we need to do?”

“Just lay down. I’ll do it.”

He lay down and was wrapped in Christian’s warm arms. The sense of peace grew until it was shimmering through him like the proverbial white light. He felt warmth and a sense of lightness, and all through it the steady pressure of Christian’s body surrounding him, reassuring him. There was a moment of complete blackness then Christian was in front of him, holding out his hand. Sean could see him as plain as day, surrounded by a glowing light in the darkness of the room.

“It’s over, baby. Let’s go,” He said, and smiled a huge smile. Sean reached out and laced their fingers together. He looked back to see himself, lying still and silent on the bed behind him. He didn’t even feel a moment of sadness for the life he was leaving. This was exactly where he was supposed to be. With his angel. With Christian.

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Kate Sullivan came back from her night shift at the hospital, shivering in the icy snow that was falling thickly from the sky. She looked up and noticed that the sliding door was open to one of her neighbors’ apartments. It was Sean’s place. That sweet, sad kid that she’d exchanged a few pleasantries with since she moved in a year ago. She’d always wondered what had happened to make him so unhappy. He was cute, and he seemed to have a good job and a nice future. She found

herself worrying about him from time to time, and would have gone over to check on him if he'd given her the slightest hint that he wanted a friend.

She was more than worried now. The wide open door felt like a sign that something was dreadfully wrong. Kate dropped her bags by her front door, and walked a few steps to Sean's apartment. She knocked on the door hesitantly, then turned the handle when nobody answered. She was a little surprised that it turned easily. Heart pounding, she made her way shivering into the icy apartment. She almost didn't want to look, but felt like she had to do something.

There was nothing at first. Just a neat apartment, more decorated and homey than she would have expected for someone who seemed so depressed. She noticed pictures on the wall, of Sean and a pretty blonde boy. They looked so cute together. She wondered if he was the cause of all Sean's pain. She headed towards the bedroom, meaning to shut the sliding door if nothing else. Sean wouldn't want to come home to a frozen wet bed.

When she turned the corner, she nearly fell to the ground. Sean was there, laying in his bed, cold and bluish. His hair was frozen, his hands resting on his unmoving chest. She panicked for a second before years of training surfaced. Kate made her way to the bed and gingerly felt for a pulse, even though she knew already that it was unnecessary. He was gone. She felt tears well up in her eyes for this boy that she hardly knew. Then she took a long look at his face. He didn't seem scared or even sad anymore. That look of abject despair that she had been so familiar with had disappeared. It almost looked like he was smiling. Later, when she described the scene to her other neighbors, she would say that he almost seemed…well, happy.

And she would be right. Finally he was.