

CHAPTER ONE

THIS TIME, HE would get into Ronnie's pants. Nate's heart pump-pump-pumped like an electro-pop beat, and his breath had a desperate rhythm as he followed Ronnie, hand in hand, toward his bedroom. No one else was home. Nate could barely contain himself with the thought of finally getting nasty with Ronnie, not just kissy-kissy like they had been for the past few months. Making out with Ronnie had been fun, for sure, especially since he was the first guy Nate had been with who'd been open to kissing. But Nate was way overdue for more; he knew Ronnie was too, despite his exasperating habit of postponing things with any number of excuses.

"I can't. I'm not ready yet."

"I can't. I have too much homework."

"I can't. I have to watch my little brother."

"I can't. I have to play a donkey in the Christmas pageant at church."

This time, nothing would get in the way.

They glided through the hallway, where Nate noticed for the first time a painting of Jesus with a flaming heart hung on the wall. He slowed down, drawn in by it. In soft, warm colors, Jesus looked incredibly hot, with big, beautiful, dreamy eyes—the kind you could get lost in—and perfectly-shaped, luscious lips in dire need of kissing. They made Nate drool for another of Ronnie's scrumptious kisses, so he stopped and spun him around, squeezing Ronnie tight as they locked lips again.

When they entered the bedroom, which seemed spacious even with a queen-size bed in it, Nate almost kicked a blue PlayStation 4 box near his

feet. Ronnie had gotten a new console for Christmas and earlier challenged him to a game of *Assassin's Creed Rogue* before he left. As Ronnie locked the door and drew the blinds, Nate felt his upper back and shoulders relax where he hadn't realized he'd been tense. It was as if, within this sanctuary, they'd managed to ditch the whole world and block the prying rays of sunlight from invading their privacy.

Although, in the past, Ronnie had seemed conflicted about getting to this point, Nate felt certain it would happen for a couple of reasons. For one thing, Ronnie hadn't bothered to come up with any excuses earlier when they'd talked on the phone. Then later, when they'd made out in Ronnie's family room, Ronnie hadn't held anything back. It was nothing new that Nate could see the rise in Ronnie's jeans and feel his hard-on when they kissed; the fact that he and Mr. Hard-On would soon be introduced *was* new.

The time had come at last.

Of course, had Ronnie put this off any longer, Nate may have given up altogether. Even though he was loath to accept defeat and always up for a worthy challenge, there were limits to everything.

"When do your parents get home?" he said.

"Not for at least another hour."

"Cool." In the dim light, and in passing, Nate admired a new poster of Green Day hung near the window. Before returning his full attention to Ronnie, though, he suppressed a laugh when he spotted One Direction still hanging on another wall.

"What do you wanna listen to?" Ronnie struggled to meet Nate's gaze as Ronnie's dazzling blue eyes—as blue as a Blue Angels' F/A-18 Hornet jet—repeatedly descended to Nate's T-shirt.

Tickled by Ronnie's shyness, Nate approached and stood close to Ronnie, inhaling the creamy coconut scent of his hair. "I don't care," he said. "Whatever."

With eyes downcast, Ronnie stepped around Nate and picked up his phone from the dresser. Nate walked up behind him and, while Ronnie tapped away in his search for tunes, began caressing his slender shoulders, back, and arms. Ronnie slinked away with a soft giggle, slipping over to

his speaker system, where he docked his phone. He appeared ready to press the play button when, instead, he whirled around with his mouth open, on the verge of saying something. But he was startled when he found Nate standing right behind him.

They stood face to face.

Nate grabbed the top of Ronnie's green jeans and undid the metal button. Their eyes locked in expectation. Nate began to pull the zipper down when Ronnie seized his hands.

"Maybe we shouldn't," Ronnie said, hesitantly, a slight grimace clouding his face.

No, you don't. Not this time.

"Just relax," Nate said in his silkiest voice. "Everything's gonna be fine." Freeing himself of Ronnie's grasp, he took Ronnie's arms and placed them at his side. Then he knelt on the carpet in front of Ronnie, whose hard-on, in an apparent frenzied struggle to be liberated, pressed against the denim fabric. Naturally, Nate was majorly hard too. And when he pulled Ronnie's zipper down, it sounded as if it cheered, "Yesss!"

But again, Ronnie, with his brow furrowed in uncertainty, stopped Nate. "No, wait."

"What?"

"Jesus is watching."

Although Nate frowned a bit, he tried not to appear or sound impatient. "No, he's not. He's got better things to do. Just relax."

"He's always watching."

"Yeah, probably TMZ or Syfy."

"No, really. I'm serious."

He is watching, Nathaniel, his mom's voice suddenly piped up in his head. *And so am I. Just wait till you get home. I can't believe—*

With all his might, Nate flung an imaginary door shut on her. He couldn't bear to think of how his family or friends might react if they saw what he was doing.

It took him a moment to collect himself before carrying on. "Do you really believe, with all the crazy people in the world, people dying in wars,

all the corrupt politicians, people starving and homeless, that Jesus cares if we play doctor or not? He's got too much on His plate. So *relax.*"

Ronnie seemed to mull this over for several torturous seconds until, at last, he released Nate's hands.

Runway two right, you're cleared for takeoff.

Wasting no time, Nate pulled Ronnie's jeans down, along with his black-and-white checkered boxers, lifted his gray T-shirt, and went right to work. Soon he felt Ronnie's muscles, completely taut before, intermittently tensing and relaxing. He glanced up to see Ronnie, with his eyes closed and lips parted, adrift in a state of bliss.

Clearly, some guys made you work for it. But this was worth it—totally worth it. Ronnie was way cute. And when he dropped his annoying hang-ups, he was also a lot of fun, so much so that Nate hoped to spend more time with him and get to know him better in the coming months.

They'd initially encountered each other in Mrs. MacLean's photography class the previous year. It was the beginning of their senior year of high school, and on the first day, Nate gravitated toward the desk in front of a guy with curly, light blond hair. As Nate turned around to pass back a handout, he laid eyes on Ronnie and forgot to breathe for several seconds. But when Ronnie looked up and their eyes met, Nate remembered to smile; Ronnie smiled back but promptly averted his gaze. Soon after, though, once Nate broke the ice, they hit it off and started hanging out occasionally after school or on weekends. Before long, Nate couldn't get enough of the soft-spoken boy with the timid demeanor.

Now, as the Christmas and New Year's holidays had come and gone, winter break was skidding to a close. Their time off had flown by like a Porsche 911 GT3 zooming past at 175 mph. In a matter of days, their final semester would begin, and the clock would start ticking down to graduation. After that, their lives would take off as they launched into the big wide world beyond and became full-fledged adults.

Jesus is watching. He's always watching.

Even though Nate had initially dismissed it, Ronnie's conscience-stricken reference to Jesus had now penetrated his defenses, sending a slight, annoying pang of guilt through him. The feeling had been happen-

ing more and more, too, just within the last few months, and always after Ronnie had raised a red flag in the middle of a serious make-out session. Although Nate wasn't Catholic like Ronnie, he'd also been raised and fully indoctrinated into a Sunday-morning-churchgoing home.

So in his current state, kneeling with a Blessed Sacrament of another sort on his tongue, Nate was thrown off when the painting of Jesus popped into his head, wagging a finger and chiding in the voice of Theo James.

Naughty, naughty.

Nate hadn't expected Jesus to have a British accent. It made him smile, though, as much as he could with a mouthful, and reminded him to take his own prior advice to relax. Besides, Jesus really did have more pressing things to deal with. Still, the thought of the Son of God standing around and watching him blow Ronnie unnerved him. How embarrassing would that be? Nate blocked out the painting, reasoning that if he didn't see Jesus, Jesus wouldn't see him.

Ronnie's accelerated breathing and increasingly rigid muscles brought Nate back to reality. Ronnie sputtered a series of unrestrained *ahs* and *ohs* in sync with each spasm, sounding like a villain on *Arrow* being pounded on by the green-hooded vigilante. As his lean stomach muscles contracted, Ronnie's hips jerked forward. Nate held on, taking Ronnie's load while amused by the sudden vocal outburst of this typically quiet guy.

Gazing up at Ronnie's face, however, in that intense, rapturous moment, allowed him to see past all the artificial layers and straight through to Ronnie's true, innermost being. Watching a guy's facial expression at the moment of coming had to be the most awesome sight on earth.

They traded places then—Ronnie playfully coaxing Nate down onto the bed while removing his T-shirt. Nate was pleasantly surprised that Ronnie's timidity had all of a sudden disappeared: There was no longer any hesitation; Ronnie was going for it. Totally.

Nate lay back, half-smiling with his eyes closed and hands clasped behind his head.

G! G-O! Come on Ronnie, let's go! (clap-clap)

Gooooooooo Ronnie!

Through the midst of his ecstasy, Nate's mind drifted back to months earlier. Nate had stolen a kiss from Ronnie, and Ronnie's eyes had darted away as he said, "I've always... I've always thought that... you were really cute." Nate had been flying high when he heard that. He'd never had a guy say that about him. But then again, he never really thought of himself as cute, especially with his big ears, which, at certain angles, made him transform into Dumbo, like his ears might start fluttering at any moment, lifting him off his feet.

"Really?" he said. "You think I'm cute?"

Blushing, Ronnie confessed to loving Nate's wavy, chestnut brown hair, his light brown eyes, and his lean and tall physique. Who would have guessed that being tall would be a turn on for Ronnie?

The thought still boggled Nate's mind, but he wasn't going to question it—especially here, especially now. His whole body started to buzz, the sensation beginning in his crotch, billowing up to the top of his head and down to the tips of his toes. Opening his eyes, he was surprised to see tears streaming down Ronnie's face. But the explosion came then as Ronnie pulled away, letting Nate come on his own stomach and chest as everything else fell away for several seconds of sweet oblivion.

After a moment, while Nate's breathing and heartbeat slowly returned to normal, Ronnie rose and disappeared into the bathroom.

What happened? Why is he crying?

Reentering with a wastebasket and a box of Kleenex, Ronnie took a couple of tissues for himself and handed the box to Nate.

"Thanks," Nate said, but Ronnie didn't reply. He simply sat on the edge of the bed, stared at the floor, and wiped the tears from his cheeks. The sight of him in this state broke Nate's heart. He wrapped his arms around Ronnie and kissed his neck. "Why were you crying? That was amazing."

Ronnie remained hunched over. "I don't know. I'm being stupid. I'm sorry."

"You're not stupid"—Nate squeezed Ronnie in his arms—"and you've got no reason to feel guilty. We're not doing anything wrong." He

sounded sure of himself, and he felt it, too, until Theo Jesus sharply responded.

Nothing wrong? I'll be the judge of that.

Unlike what Nate had done with his mom, he wasn't about to slam the door on a hottie like Theo; instead, he concentrated like mad on Ronnie, sensing the warmth of his body and the steady beat of his heart.

Ronnie was silent.

"You liked it," Nate said, "didn't you?"

Ronnie paused. "Yeah." His voice was weak.

"Then why should it be wrong?"

Ronnie continued to stare at the floor.

Nate grabbed Ronnie's chin and aimed Ronnie's face at his. "Hey," he said. "You hearing me?"

Raising his angelic eyes, Ronnie met Nate's gaze and they kissed again. As their kiss lingered, Ronnie's tongue became a wild, flailing serpent inside Nate's mouth, and Nate reciprocated the passion with every flick of his tongue.

But the painting of Jesus reappeared, and His voice resounded this time.

Naugh-ty, naugh-ty.

Abruptly, Nate broke the kiss. He wanted to yank the cable to the monitor in his brain.

Chill out, Jesus.

Ronnie leaned in for more, but Nate pulled back. "I better take off," he said, putting on his T-shirt.

Ronnie's face dropped. "You sure you can't stay a little longer?"

Nate scrunched his own face into what he hoped was a contrite expression. "I can't. I'm sorry."

Thanks, Jesus. Thanks a lot.

"Not even for a game of *Assassin's Creed*?"

"We'll do it next time."

"You could stay for dinner. My parents won't mind. My mom's a really great cook."

"I'm sure she is, but..."

But what?

Ronnie stared at him so hopeful that Nate almost caved, but he needed to escape and clear his head.

“I gotta run an errand before five. Next time. I promise.”

On the way to the front door, they passed the painting of Jesus again, and Nate only glimpsed it out of the corner of his eye. This time, Jesus appeared quietly judgmental, as if He was tsk-tsking him. Nate wished he'd never seen the painting now and that Ronnie had never mentioned Jesus' name. Before, he felt so happy and unencumbered; now the whole notion of his secret relationship with Ronnie being a sin had intruded on him.

They reached the front door and Ronnie stopped before opening it. “I’ll see you,” he said. “Hopefully soon.” He tugged on Nate’s shoulders, pulling him down to eye level.

Nate expected a swift parting kiss. But as was so often the case, once their lips met, whatever the original expectation might have been, it became impossible for their kiss to be anything but super-deliciously long-lasting.

He made the mistake, though, of opening his eyes. From where he stood, he still saw half of Jesus’ face, with one eye peering around the corner at him and Ronnie.

Nate pulled away and reached for the doorknob. Stepping out onto the covered porch, he turned around and, walking slowly backwards, managed a faint smile. “Bye.”

Ronnie stood holding the door, resting his head against the edge of it as he gazed at Nate with satisfaction on his lips but sadness in his eyes. “Bye.”

Nate turned again and walked off, putting on his Wayfarer-style sunglasses to face another sunny SoCal afternoon. Even though there wasn’t a cloud in the sky, he wished he was wearing his hoodie because he felt like pulling it snugly over his head to cover himself.

Creeping into his bright blue, two-door Mini Cooper with a Union Jack graphic on the roof as well as on the mirror covers, he leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and heaved a sigh of relief. Just being away from that

painting made him feel tons better. He sat for a moment, savoring the recollection of Ronnie's delectable kiss on his lips. But Theo Jesus came barging in wearing Birkenstocks and pointing a finger at him.

My Father's watching you.

And so am I, his mom's voice rang out.

Nate's eyes snapped open and he sat up. "We're just having fun!" he said aloud, then peeked around his empty Mini, as if someone might have been eavesdropping.

Messing around—that's all it is. No one's getting hurt. And lots of guys do it. It doesn't mean I'm gay. It's just part of being young. It'll pass.

He started the car and turned on the radio, cranking it up. As Katy Perry's "Hot N Cold" pulsed through him, he focused on the music. He felt the beat; he let Katy's voice lace through him; he thought of Ronnie's touch, the sweetness and tenderness of his lips, his hot breath; and he imagined Ronnie's smooth skin, the hint of a happy trail just under his belly button.

At long last, Jesus was a no show.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Jesus has left the building.

And he took my mom with him, too, thank God.

Party poopers.

In no time, Nate relaxed and, wetting his lips, his happy face reappeared. He took a deep breath in and let it out completely before putting the car in gear and driving off, distracted by the good tune and his good mood.

For now.