

Our Dreams Unbound

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Our Dreams Unbound

by [HalfshellVenus](#)

Summary

(pre-series) Lincoln finally comes home again, but will he stay?

Notes

My *Sweet Charity* story for **jasmasson** , set in the same pre-series universe as the shorter [Hope Aloft On The Wind](#). Also for **fanfic100**, this is "Lightening."

Michael doesn't mark the days off on the calendar anymore, the way he used to when he was younger. It's not just that he'd feel silly doing it, but also because he doesn't need to. Lincoln's release date from prison is etched in Michael's head, and it only takes him seconds to calculate exactly how many days away that is.

Right now, there are three days, five hours and 47 minutes left. Give or take bureaucratic delays and random incompetence.

Michael has spent the last two weeks getting ready. He likes to be prepared whatever the occasion, and *this*—Lincoln coming to live with him when they're both adults and there are no issues of guardianship—this is *huge*. Sometimes Michael feels like he's been waiting for it most of his life.

He has a job now, one that pays really well, so Lincoln won't have to support them both on some non-union high-school-dropout salary. Not that Michael blames him—Lincoln missed a lot of school when their mother was dying, with trying to take care of her and still earn enough money so the three of them could eat. After he and Michael got forced into the foster-care system, Lincoln rushed into full-time work. If he made enough to live on, he could leave the Children's Home, and if he pulled down even more he could take Michael with him. Lincoln never stopped trying, and for a couple of years he even made it work—right up until the day he was busted for an impulse B&E that got him convicted and sent off to Fox River Prison.

The dream of the two of them being together never ended, in spite of Lincoln's sentence. It's Michael's turn now to try to make it come true again.

Lincoln has never been to the apartment Michael lives in now. He was already in prison when Michael got his first place right after college, and it was only after a year of steady pay that Michael felt it was safe to upgrade to something better. Michael's been in the new place now for six months.

The apartment is nice—*very* nice, but not too fancy. Michael wants Lincoln to feel comfortable here, after all. So everything's clean and there are a few framed posters on the walls, but nothing seriously yuppie. The stereo's modest, the electronics are basic, and the furniture's nice without being fussy. The living room bookcase is full of Michael's English, engineering and philosophy textbooks, with a few Sci-Fi novels thrown in. He'll buy more books and CDs as time goes on, but he's in no hurry.

Mainly, there isn't so much stuff that the place feels cluttered, and Michael likes it that way. Maybe it's just his temperament, or maybe he's still attuned to the foster-child mentality, where you might have to pack everything you own into a garbage bag on a moment's notice. Either way, the apartment isn't overwhelmingly Michael or not Michael, and he hopes that'll help Lincoln feel like it could be *his* place too.

The apartment has two bedrooms. Michael went back and forth over whether to rent a place with one bedroom or two, knowing that Lincoln would be joining him there someday. Based on how things were before Lincoln went to prison, they would only need one bedroom. But what if Lincoln had changed his mind again about the two of them? They'd been down that road before, and Michael never knew what to expect. The sexual aspect of their relationship was something they'd arrived at sideways, and it was the one thing that truly brought them together when all their differences abraded the understanding between them. Those moments when they were more than brothers—that joining deep below the skin that broke the surface tension when nothing else could—they always seemed like unexplainable perfection to Michael, while Lincoln tended to see them more as some kind of abuse. Michael spent years talking Lincoln down from the ledge of abandoning the extras in their relationship, but it was something he was more than willing to fight for.

Some days, he felt like it was everything.

He still does.

Michael has plans and alternatives and so many unspoken hopes for how things will be when Lincoln comes home. One way or another, the truth is that he's spent half his life just like this, always somehow waiting for Lincoln to come home...

Michael's not a kid anymore, and Lincoln isn't in Juvenile Hall for months that seem like forever. Michael's not a teenager hoping for Lincoln to get the money for his own place and take Michael out of foster care. This time Michael's an adult and Lincoln's been in prison for two whole *years*. No matter how much Michael thought he was prepared to deal with that, he couldn't have been more wrong.

Losing Lincoln was still new, every time it happened.

This last time—because they were more to each other than just brothers by then—was the hardest of all. Michael would edge across the emptiness of the bed he once shared with Lincoln, searching all night long for what was missing. During the day, he found himself staring down a paperweight, a glass of orange juice, the person riding the El in front of him, while his thoughts churned restlessly over the unanswerable question of *why* Lincoln had done it, just when things had finally gotten good.

He visited Lincoln on the weekends, the route by El and bus from the city down to Joliet and over to the prison a worn tread in his memories of the last two years. Once there, he and Lincoln had only the sweet agony of the public visiting booth, where they could see and hear but never touch, never kiss, never *cling*. All they had were words, when what they wanted instead was the intimacy of hand on hand and skin on skin and the certainty of those moments when words were unnecessary.

Michael still remembers the last kiss they shared, on an April morning after the remaining snow had finally melted over the weekend. Michael was leaving for work, and Lincoln was still in bed, up too late the night before even with the work-week coming. Michael stopped by the bedroom and found Lincoln awake enough to say goodbye to. The kiss was soft but not lingering, a swift farewell with a promise for later. Lincoln was too tired to return it in full, or so Michael thought at the time.

But what happened between that morning and the call from jail that evening said otherwise, marking the beginning of another detour through the broken-down life that Michael had honestly believed Lincoln had left behind.

In the last two years, Michael has revisited that day—and the weeks before it—so many times that he's finally sick of analyzing it. The truth is that he doesn't know what set Lincoln off down that road again. He doesn't know, he doesn't *understand*, and he wishes to god he did. At least that way there'd be half a chance of making sure those slip-ups didn't happen again.

But he doesn't want to think about that right now, not for a minute. Focus on the positive, instead: Lincoln's coming home, and they'll have the chance to start things over. That's the only thing that matters right now.

~*~

Michael usually doesn't mind not owning a car. He lives in Chicago, after all—no-one drives if they can help it, and parking's a total bitch.

The morning of Lincoln's release, though, Michael kicks himself over that decision again and again. He has nothing but El routes and buses to help bring Lincoln home, and who *does* have a car is Veronica.

That is so not how he wanted this to play out.

He keeps his resentment in check on the way to Joliet, guarding it with distracted smiles and conversation. All too often the topic shifts as Veronica takes hold of it and breathlessly unwinds it, drifting into all of her hopes and longings and regrets. Bad enough that Michael won't be alone with Lincoln for even a second during the long trip home, but listening to Veronica say all the things he feels and having to pretend they're not the definition of his very breath is almost too much for Michael to bear.

They wait for Lincoln in front of the prison, where the sun swelters down with the warning of a hot, humid day. Michael shades his eyes against the glare, afraid to stop looking in case Lincoln suddenly appears and thinks Michael is focused on anything but the thrill of seeing him again.

An off-duty guard leaves the building and other personnel arrive while the minutes tick by with the slowness of unanswered prayers. Finally, a man steps out of the doorway, and Michael's heart stutters in his chest at the unmistakable outline of his brother.

Michael doesn't run—he won't embarrass Lincoln that way—but he can't just stand there either. He starts walking toward Lincoln, halving the distance between them with sharp strides until he can finally throw his arms around his brother and breathe in the delicious heat of Lincoln's neck.

"God, I've missed you," Michael chokes out—knowing that he's said it before, and that it was on his face every time he came to visit. He still can't hold it in.

"Me too," Lincoln says hoarsely, and Michael feels the quick press of Lincoln's lips just below his ear, smoldering in secret away from the eyes of the world.

Veronica is there suddenly, joining their embrace, and just for a second it's all right, like an echo of better times when the three of them were a team against the pitfalls of their own childhoods. Those were some of the good moments, and god knows Michael spent years trying to force them to the forefront of his memories in an effort to let the bad parts slip underneath and fade away.

Michael lets the feeling sink in for a few seconds, then finally straightens up and smooths the front of Lincoln's shirt. "Let's get out of here," he says.

The three of them walk arm-in-arm as they head to Veronica's car.

~*~

Thank god Veronica only took the morning off and not the whole day, because by the time they reach Michael's apartment, he's edgy as hell to have Lincoln all to himself. He got desperate enough during the ride back to ask Veronica to stop for a restroom break at a gas station. As soon as the car stopped, he tugged on Lincoln's sleeve and urged him to come along. Lincoln stumbled out of the car after Michael, both of them moving as casually as they could over to the outbuilding, only to dive on each other as soon as they got inside and locked the door. Lincoln tasted every inch of Michael's mouth and neck while his fingers worked their way under Michael's shirt. Michael cupped the front of Lincoln's pants and sucked luxuriantly on a spot close enough to his collarbone that any marks he left behind would be hidden by Lincoln's clothes. They didn't dare do more, with Veronica waiting for them, but it was enough to make the rest of the trip almost bearable.

Now they're back at Michael's place and Veronica is finally gone, leaving Michael and Lincoln free to make up for two years of lost time. They kiss their way to the bedroom, tumbling down together onto the bedspread and undressing each other between bursts of distraction from sound and scent and skin. Lincoln settles between Michael's legs and teases him to the brink before slicking the two of them up and sliding in, and the sheer feel of it—nothing like Michael's fingers or the heartless emptiness of molded plastic—collapses the past into the present so quickly that Michael's head spins all the way to the fractured ecstasy of their finish.

Afterwards, he lies with Lincoln as the overhead fan cools the sweat on their skin. The simple perfection of being together, languid and content, is something Michael hopes to seal inside his memory where it will never be sacrificed or forgotten.

~*~

The alarm sounds all too soon the next morning, heralding a return to the routine of another work-week. It isn't that he and Lincoln stayed up particularly late last night—quite the opposite. After letting Lincoln get the lay of the apartment and decide where to settle in, they'd watched a Cubs' game on TV and ordered in Chinese food for dinner before a few heated glances during a TV commercial had led them to try out the welcoming contours of

Michael's sofa. But now it's morning, and after waiting so long to wake up in Lincoln's arms again, Michael simply isn't ready to give that up.

"We'd better get up," Lincoln mumbles next to him, his hands stroking lazily over Michael's back.

"You can sleep in if you want," Michael offers, his lips brushing Lincoln's neck as he speaks.

Lincoln chuckles. "I've been getting up at this hour for the past two years—I'm more than used to it by now. C'mon—I'll get the shower going."

"Oh yeah?" Michael grins, his thoughts already detouring in the direction of that suggestion.

"I'll make it worth your while," Lincoln murmurs, and Michael practically leaps out of bed to start the coffee.

"Meet you there."

After fumbling hastily with the coffee machine, Michael struggles to use the toilet around the erection brought on by Lincoln's promise. He finally finishes and cracks open the shower curtain, nearly moaning at the sight of his brother's wet, muscled body.

Under the flow and feel of cascading water and the slickness of soap, Michael remembers all the other times they were together like this. Something comes to rest inside him as Lincoln caresses and coaxes him into letting go of words and anything resembling regret.

Breakfast winds up being a travel mug of coffee and a bagel to eat on the El, but it doesn't matter. Michael couldn't be happier.

~*~

By noon, Michael has called Lincoln twice. "I keep wanting to hear your voice, and I can't get over the fact that there's nothing standing in the way—I don't have to wait for visiting hours just to talk to you anymore."

"It's okay." Lincoln sounds bemused. "I don't mind. I'm just watching TV anyway, and reeling from the concept of having access to a fridge again. We're out of milk now, though. Is there a store nearby?"

"Three blocks up, on Touhy," Michael answers. "I've got a ten or twenty in the kitchen drawer under the phone."

"Found it. I'll probably go for a walk later, check out the neighborhood and pick up the milk on the way back."

"Okay. See you at home," Michael says, the phrase curling around inside him like a secret.

"I'll be here."

Michael can hear Lincoln's smile, and realizes that he'd forgotten how wonderful that felt.

The El ride home smells like a sweatbox, people packed in so tightly over the first seven stops that it's hard to breathe. Michael's so giddy that he barely notices—it's just another passing detail in a day that was already too long. He struggled to concentrate at work, but the blueprints for a hydroelectric project in Iowa blurred before his eyes. Instead, his thoughts kept turning to Lincoln—in the shower, in his bed, in all the places they had yet try—as he watched the clock creep through the minutes standing in his way.

Halfway through the journey home, Michael forces himself to think about something else, something that won't lead to embarrassment when the crowd thins away. The weekend's coming up... he wonders whether Lincoln will want to go out to the lake? Or maybe he'll hunt up some of his old friends instead.

Michael worries about that—when Lincoln's with his friends, it tends to lead to the kinds of decisions that end with Lincoln in trouble. It's not fair to blame other people for that, because it's always Lincoln who makes the final choice, but Michael can't deny the history. He just hopes Lincoln has learned his lesson by now.

The El finally arrives at his stop, and Michael gets off. It's three blocks to his apartment from there, and Michael covers them more quickly than in the worst rainstorm, all his thoughts centered on Lincoln. A surprising smell greets him when he unlocks the door, something so delicious that his stomach growls in response. He follows it to the balcony.

"Hey," Lincoln says, transferring a couple of steaks from the hibachi to a plate. "You're just in time."

The food looks and smells incredible, and Lincoln's wearing cutoffs and a tight t-shirt in a way that brings back tons of adolescent fantasies. Michael goes through mental whiplash for a stunned second before recovering enough to kiss Lincoln and take the plate from him. "I forgot I had these in the freezer," he manages.

"Oh yeah—I found them at breakfast, and put them out here to thaw. Thank god you had charcoal in the closet, 'cause broiling just doesn't cut it."

Michael breaks out of his daze and stumbles off to change out of his suit. Then they sit down to a mouthwatering meal of steak and salad. "How was the walk?" Michael asks, spearing a tomato slice with his fork.

"Found a park over on Rockwell, but you probably already know it."

"Sure—I loop around it sometimes, when I go running," Michael says. "I always wish it was bigger."

"How long is all that construction on California Avenue going to last?"

"God only knows. It could take all summer—I thought they were just doing resurfacing at first, but now it looks like some kind of sewer project. And you know the city..."

"Yeah. They'll be lucky to finish before snow season starts up again." Lincoln swallows the last of his iced-tea. "I moved a few things into the spare bedroom today, just for show."

Michael's stomach suddenly tightens. "Like what?"

"Couple of books, the picture of us and Mom, and I hung up some clothes in the closet. Wouldn't fool a detective or anything, but it's enough."

"So you're—"

"Not moving in there for real, no. Unless you want me to." Lincoln looks uncertain, just like Michael feels. They're always uncomfortable talking about this part of their relationship—the fact that they're both men, the fact that they're brothers—and it's always easier to just live it instead of analyze it... so long as they're on the same page. Awkward conversations like this are what it takes to be certain.

"*God* no," Michael follows up hastily, "I've waited two years to have you with me, and I'm not giving that up for anything. Not now, not ever—you know that, Lincoln."

"I know," Lincoln says softly. "But a lot can change in two years, and you have your own life now."

"My life is *you*—start to finish, inside and out. Everything else is just the journey."

Lincoln's hand closes over Michael's and pulls him close, and just like that, dinner is over.

Lying in bed that night, wrapped in the perfect comfort of Lincoln's arms, Michael thinks back to when all of this started. For him, the feelings were there clear back when he was ten. Mom was sick then, and Lincoln hardly ever seemed to be home. He was always off running errands or bagging groceries to supplement the little money they still had coming in, and Michael couldn't shake the terrible thought that he was losing both of them. Too many of his days turned into tiptoeing around the apartment while his mother tried to sleep, and his nights stretched out bowstring tense until Lincoln finally returned to their shared room and slipped into bed behind him. Only then could Michael finally relax.

He began to long for Lincoln's presence, for his touch, and somewhere along the way those feelings became less about comfort and more about capturing and keeping the heat that rose up within him at the slightest amount of physical contact.

When their mother died, Michael and Lincoln were sent to the Children's Home. They clung to each other in that soulless environment, but they couldn't escape the wheels of the system. Michael was sent to a foster home. While he was gone, Lincoln's pent-up frustration and anger got the better of him, and he wound going to Juvie for a senseless assault charge. Michael first placement ended when his abusive foster-father was killed, but his second placement was better.

It didn't matter. Without Lincoln, it would never feel like home.

Was that where things took a sharp, irreversible turn? Being separated from Lincoln when Michael needed him most—was that what transformed Lincoln into the unattainable object of Michael's obsessive focus?

Michael visited Lincoln at Juvie a couple of times, when his foster parents would let him. He could only look, never touch, during those visits and that just made him want it even more. Lincoln was undeniably handsome by then, and Michael was thirteen and a mass of nerve-endings and hormones. It was a dangerous combination.

Lincoln's sentence lasted eighteen-months, and then he went to work down at the docks, where his muscles were an asset and his past could be overlooked. After six months of steady behavior and income, he was granted probationary custody of Michael. They reunited on May second, which Michael still celebrates as a kind of anniversary even now.

Coming home to Lincoln's new place was one of the most exciting things that ever happened to Michael. Anticipation swirled through his stomach for days, leaving him giddy and unfocused in a way that was wonderful and totally new. Michael said goodbye to his foster family—they'd been kind, even if they never fully understood him—and Social Services delivered him to Lincoln's apartment.

Michael still remembers the look on Lincoln's face when he opened the door, as if Michael were the most amazing and precious gift he'd ever been given. They hugged each other fiercely, ribs creaking under the onslaught, and it was long time before Michael could finally make himself let go.

Lincoln offered Michael the couch that first night, but Michael had slept apart from him for more than two years already and he'd had enough of it. There, with the warmth of Lincoln next to him and then finally wrapped around him, Michael slept like the dead for the first time since before their mother had gotten sick.

It was weeks later that Michael woke one night to the blue haze of moonlight filling the room. It shone on Lincoln's sleeping face, on the broad planes of his chest, and the sight made Michael's skin ache with need. Leaning in, he touched his lips to Lincoln's with a softness that was lighter than air. It was nothing like kissing Judy Lawrence on a third-grade dare, and hardly anything like Billy Showalter's surprise attack in the Children's Home laundry room (which he insisted Michael had been asking for since he got there, and aftermath tingled enough that Michael wondered if Billy was right). *This* kiss remained tame for only two seconds before Michael found himself pushing in harder, chasing the feel of his brother's lips, the taste of his mouth. When Lincoln responded through layers of sleep, tonguing into Michael and pressing against him, Michael's breath caught in a hitch of ecstasy and he climaxed against the mattress.

Lincoln stirred then, becoming more awake. *Michael*, he said, his voice sounding stunned, *what the hell do you think you're doing?*

What I've always wanted to do, Michael answered in a rare moment of boldness. He traced Lincoln's mouth with his thumb, and followed with his lips when Lincoln didn't pull back.

We shouldn't—we can't—Lincoln protested weakly, but Michael's hand was already stroking him to hardness with the kind of fierce concentration and skill that not even Lincoln could withstand. Michael sucked on Lincoln's tongue, mimicking the movement of his hand, and when Lincoln gasped and spilled out between them Michael groaned in satisfaction.

Lincoln panted under Michael's hand, struggling to gain his breath again. *Why—*

Shhhhh, Michael answered, guiding Lincoln's hand over to his own fully restored erection. Lincoln hesitated, but Michael swept a finger through the wetness on Lincoln's stomach and then held Lincoln's gaze while slowly licking the taste from it. Lincoln made a sound like surrender and curled his hand around Michael, pulling and twisting in earnest as Michael closed his eyes and shamelessly put on a show. When Michael came, shuddering and moaning, Lincoln pulled him close and kissed him wildly, teeth grazing the swell of Michael's lips.

How long? Lincoln whispered afterward, when both of them were quiet.

Years and years—seems like forever. It's not sudden and it's not some kind of phase, believe me, Michael said.

But this is—

Wrong? Says who? Michael said vehemently. *Being with you is the only thing I ever wanted, and other people's ideas of what's right have pretty much sucked so far.*

Can't argue with that, Lincoln commented dryly. He rubbed slow circles into Michael's shoulder as the moon disappeared over the rooftop and the night continued on.

That was the last time they discussed it, other than a handful of moments over the next few days when Lincoln's doubts resurfaced. Michael never wavered, and after a while Lincoln stopped asking. It was what it was, and it was no-one else's business.

Michael felt so betrayed a month later when a girl named Lisa came around to tell Lincoln she was pregnant. Funny how he'd never thought to ask what Lincoln was up to those first six months out of Juvie, and there it was suddenly, staring him in the face. He should have expected it, knowing how things always went with Lincoln and girls. Veronica Donovan practically hung on Lincoln's every word before Mom died and Social Services came, and there were others, always others, winding through. But Michael had been so caught up in the thrill of finally having what he wanted that he'd forgotten.

He could have cried in relief when Lisa said she didn't want to marry Lincoln. She just needed him to be a father to the baby and help out with expenses. Hell, if all she wanted was *money* then Michael would get a part-time job himself, if he had to—anything to stay with Lincoln and to make sure Lincoln stayed with him.

He told Lincoln as much, as soon as she left and again that night in bed. *We'll see*, Lincoln said, his touch absented-minded and soothing all at once. *If it comes to that*, he added, kissing Michael's forehead and pulling him close, and that was all the answer Michael really needed.

He remembers that night like it was yesterday, and the way Lincoln quieted the anxieties and fears with the right words and the tenderness of his touch.

All these years since, it's as if Michael's been searching for a way to get back to that place with Lincoln—*this* place, the one they're in right now, where the night is calm and the future unthreatening, and where Lincoln holds him like he's the only thing that matters.

~*~

Michael is a little more prepared for the alarm clock the next morning, and Lincoln a little less so. Still, Lincoln's up and in the kitchen when Michael gets out of the shower. Lincoln leans against the counter drinking a cup of coffee, and he's got Michael's travel mug out sitting next to a paper bag.

"Breakfast," Lincoln says, both an explanation and a plan.

The way he and Michael blend together like this—sharp-edged differences folding into alignment until they're forgotten, like interlocking teeth on the gears of a well-balanced machine—is impossibly perfect. Michael has missed that—both the feeling and the fact of being half of that incredible something *more* that only happens with Lincoln.

"Thought of everything, didn't you?" he says.

"Oh, yeah."

Lincoln puts the coffee down as Michael comes closer, then reaches over and whips off the towel. "C'mere," he says, pulling Michael in and kissing him slowly. He runs his hands down Michael's sides and across his back, slinking down to heft Michael's ass. "Up," he says, in a command laced with promise.

Michael hops up onto the counter, and Lincoln smooths his hands over Michael's thighs and around to the back before leaning over and slowly swallowing him down.

The sensation is so good, so uncontrollable, that it makes Michael's head swim until it thunks into the cabinet behind him. His eyes are already closed, the world weaving around him as he grips the counter and just tries to hang on.

"Right here," Lincoln whispers in Michael's ear, "right here on this table, where we'll remember every time we step into the kitchen."

Then Lincoln lowers him back onto the table and kisses his way down, unzipping Michael's pants with impossibly steady hands. Michael moans and twists under Lincoln's touch, under lips that tease and tantalize him while fingers slowly spread him open. The table shifts and rocks, the slightest bit unsteady, and Michael's head leans over the edge and moves in and out of dizziness as Lincoln rides him toward something so perfect that it doesn't even have a name...

Lincoln works Michael open there on the counter, just like that afternoon so many years ago back in their old apartment. It's moments like this where Michael can pretend that nothing's

ever really changed, that all the time between then and now was nothing more than a bad dream just waiting to be forgotten.

He comes with Lincoln's name on his lips and visions of their ever-after future behind his eyes.

"Full day today?" Lincoln asks afterwards.

"Yeah, 'fraid so. I'll be back around the same time as yesterday."

"That's okay." Lincoln cleans them both up and follows Michael to the bedroom, where Michael puts on a suit like this is any other morning. "I'll be here," Lincoln adds, and he gives Michael the kind of look that inspires thoughts of playing hooky in the bedroom all day instead of working.

"You're trying to make sure I don't get anything done today, aren't you?" Michael teases him.

"No." Lincoln chuckles softly, kissing Michael's neck. "I'm just making sure you'll look forward to coming home..."

Michael half-jogs to the El and still barely makes it. That rushed feeling seems to set the tone for the rest of the day, despite Lincoln's fantastic and memorable sendoff.

Michael spills coffee on his design for a strip-mall in Indiana and spends the next two hours frantically re-sketching it, instead of working on something he can bill for. Then one of the partners calls down to have him research the soil structure and load-capacity from a two-year-old survey of a dirt lot in De Kalb. He has to hunt *that* down, and then grind through the equations on someone else's data, a situation he never fully trusts.

Lincoln calls around three. "Busier today?"

"You have no idea. It's like living at the edge of a tornado in here."

"In that case, I'll have a beer waiting when you get home. Hang in there."

Michael barely gets out a goodbye before the other line starts ringing. Emergency meeting in the boardroom on a bid rejection from the Springfield City Council. By the time they finish re-strategizing, it's five-fifteen. Michael packs up in record speed and heads off to the El platform, his desk chair still spinning slowly in his wake.

As the El winds its way along, he wonders how Lincoln's day went and realizes he's grateful that his own was so hectic. At least he didn't hang on every passing minute that separated him from his brother, unlike yesterday and the whole last couple of weeks. The feeling of constantly waiting is something Michael both intimately knows and utterly hates.

The heat is less oppressive than yesterday. Michael strolls the three blocks to his apartment, enjoying the liveliness of the city on days like this when it hums along without being demanding. Today is like a throwback to spring instead of summer-- spring, when everything feels new and anything's still possible in those bright pure days before the hot weather comes to burn the hope right out of the sky.

The apartment's empty, but there's a note on the table: "Up on the roof." That sounds surprisingly appealing, given the day Michael's had. He dumps off his briefcase and jacket, and goes back through the front door to head upstairs and see what Lincoln's up to.

When he opens the roof door, he finds Lincoln sitting in a fold-out deck chair with another one parked next to him, just waiting. Lincoln's got a cold beer in his hand, and there's one for Michael too. Michael can practically taste it.

"I see you've found the perfect way to enjoy the good life," Michael says, the weariness of the day suddenly leaving him in a rush. There's a soft breeze blowing and he and Lincoln are together again, and this is most of what he ever wanted from life anyway.

Lincoln turns toward him with a welcoming smile, shading his eyes with one hand as he pulls Michael into the chair next to him with the other. He looks so relaxed and happy—so unusual for him—that Michael's breath catches in his throat.

"Now it's perfect," Lincoln says. The warmth in his eyes is all for Michael, surrounding and holding him close like he's something astonishing, something to be cherished.

Michael leans toward Lincoln until their shoulders are touching, his heart lifting when Lincoln loops an arm around him and pulls Michael's head down against his neck. This is the place Michael belongs, and he hopes he'll be lucky enough to never lose it again.

"I've been making plans today," Lincoln rumbles against him. "I'll look for work tomorrow—even got some ideas already. Probably have something going in a week or two, and we can settle into a nice routine. See if either of us has learned anything about cooking, and by that I mean *you*." Lincoln pats Michael's shoulder for emphasis. "I pretty much stalled out wherever we left off."

The corner of Michael's mouth quirks up in remembrance. "Things in cans."

"And frozen foods, and stuff you can fry or grill... I can probably do better than *that* by now. We used to get a cooking magazines in the joint—talked about roasting and sautéing, some of the basics. I can definitely give it a shot."

Michael chews on his lip for a moment, working up the courage to ask what's really on his mind. "So you're planning on staying, then? With me? At least for awhile?"

Lincoln pulls back slightly, his eyes focused intently on his brother. "That was *always* the plan, Michael, back since forever. Just because I've screwed it up a couple of times doesn't change how I feel. I'm sorry if I ever made you doubt that, because there was never a question of where I really wanted to be. It was always with you."

The stinging in Michael's eyes is from pollution or the wind, nothing more. He squeezes them shut against it and tries to breathe calmly, as if he never dreaded hearing anything different. Lincoln leans in and kisses him, his hand cupping Michael's face and stroking it in reassurance.

"All right," Michael finally says, when he's able to speak and know his voice will sound steady. The words are for everything—for Lincoln's plan, for the message behind them, and for the possibilities spreading out in front of them in a journey that begins with hope.

Michael edges closer to his brother, resting his head on Lincoln's shoulder again and breathing in the sense of this new beginning. He takes in the open sky and its blue promise, as the air swirls slowly across his skin in this simple rooftop haven.

The rest of the world waits in the distance—a future waiting to happen—as the sounds of the city rise all around them.

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