



MARCUS LOPÉS

broken
man
broke

BROKEN
MAN
BROKE

Marcus Lopés

Toronto, Canada

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To Myrtle Stewart Gillis

BROKEN
MAN
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Part I

September 1997 – December 1999

New Beginning

SUNDAYS HAD LONG BEEN ORDINARY AND routine, almost melancholic. A day of gimmicky rituals he tried to escape. Like going to church when he didn't really believe. Or the weekly family dinners that he didn't enjoy, but living at home he couldn't escape them. Or ransacking his grandmother's bedroom, while she was still alive, for the bottles of scotch and gin she hid.

This Sunday was anything but ordinary or routine. Certainly not melancholic. This Sunday was about new beginnings, where repressed desires would be allowed to unfurl. This Sunday had the power to transform him and his life.

If he could be daring and bold.

If he could let himself believe in something.

If his mother could let him go.

Scott Davenport, standing on the sidewalk near the back of the silver Range Rover, ran his hand over his shaved head. "Yes, Mama, I'm listening."

"Watch your tone, mister," Margaret Davenport said, and started rummaging through her shopping-bag-size purse. She pulled out a crumpled tissue and dabbed it at her moist eyes. "Promise me you'll call. At least once a week. And don't forget to eat..."

As his mother slipped into her teacher's voice, Scott was already daydreaming about the new world that awaited him. Eighteen or soon-to-be, he was in a new city to which he

would willingly give himself over. Ready to transform from boy to man. All he needed was for his parents to get into their car and drive away. Then he would be on his own at last, and free to do as he pleased. And he had big plans for his freedom. The snapping of fingers brought him out of his dream-state.

“You’re not even listening,” Margaret chided.

“I am —”

“Then what did I say?”

Scott dropped his gaze. *Probably something about Jesus protecting us from the devil. Probably...* He lifted his head. “God, er, Jesus ... that I should let Him —”

“You weren’t listening,” Margaret interrupted. “I don’t want you drinking. You’re here to get an education.”

“Mama —”

“Don’t Mama me.” She stomped her foot. “And be careful. The devil’s going to tempt you at every turn, but I don’t need any more grandchildren yet.” She gasped, her eyes wide open, and covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh, dear...” Her hand fell away. “Just be careful then.” She reached out and drew him into a crushing embrace. “Oh, my baby.”

Scott loosely returned the hug. “I’ll be fine, and I’ll be careful.”

“Find a church.” Margaret blinked magnificently. “There’s got to be a decent Baptist church nearby.”

“We should get on the road,” Terrence Davenport said as he watched the tears roll down his wife’s pumpnickel face. “If you need anything, just call.” He extended his hand to his youngest son, leaned in, and added in a whisper, “And call home. It’ll make my life easier.”

Scott, letting go of his father's hand, fumbled to hang on to the roll of money being slipped to him. He shoved the bills into his jeans pocket. "Thanks, Dad. You know, I'll try to find a part-time job."

"No, you won't." Margaret raised her finger and drew an 'x' in the air. "You focus on getting those A's."

Terrence slunk to the passenger door and opened it. "All right, let's roll."

"Your father will put money into your account every two weeks," Margaret said as she settled into the seat.

Scott grinned.

"Margie!" Terrence unintentionally slammed closed the passenger side door. "Good luck, son." He made his way around to the driver's side and climbed in. "We agreed on once a month!"

Taking a couple of steps backwards as the engine roared, Scott's heart thumped as the car rolled down the narrow street. This wasn't just a dream anymore. It was real. The rush of excitement had him trembling, to the point where he thought his bladder would burst. It didn't. *Go, just go*, was his silent wish when his parents' vehicle stopped at the intersection. Then, as it veered right, his mother stuck her arm out the window. He waved enthusiastically as they disappeared out of sight.

Finally.

Alone.

And free.

The bright September sun toasted his already caramel skin as he walked along Willcocks Street towards New College residence, the place he'd call home for at least the next eight months. The buildings along the route — some built

with large grey stones, others with brown brick, or the newer structures made of steel and glass — were like a puzzle to him. When he came to a construction site, he slowed down and, with an almost child-like wonder, locked his gaze on the metal crane rising towards the heavens. Idle now, tomorrow it would come to life, bring together so many pieces — metal, brick, wood, concrete — to form something whole. He wanted to feel whole, or that he was a part of something. Seeing his reflection staring back at him in the street-level window, he picked up his pace. He didn't recognize himself, convinced that there was a part of him that didn't completely exist.

Now he hoped to unearth that missing part of him. That was why he'd fled to Toronto. He had to stop questioning who he was and search for a way forward. Deciding on a field of study would help him with that, right? Give his life direction? Maybe. Deep down, he knew that what he needed was to just be himself, stop worrying about what others thought. That meant living out some of his secret fantasies. Had his mother sensed that 'darkness' in him? Was that why she didn't want him living off campus? A lot had changed since she'd been to university, yet so much had stayed the same. But the parties, according to news reports, were wilder. New drugs popped up almost weekly. At least in residence there were rules to be followed. Off campus, Scott could do as he pleased. And what she wanted was for him to stay in Ottawa, under her watch. But Scott had to get away and him living in residence was the compromise. As far as his mother was concerned, that was safest for both him and his soul.

Crossing over Spadina Avenue, Scott thought about the emotional goodbye at the car with his mother. He was used to

her sentimental ways, but that hug was different, like it had a certain transformative power. His lips curled into a smile as he turned onto the pathway leading to the entrance of his residence building. *She tried to purge the devil from me, reclaim my soul. Didn't work.* Smirking, he raced inside and sailed up the stairs to the third floor, prying open the heavy metal door. Animated voices assailed him from all sides as he made his way to his room midway down the corridor. Parents carried boxes and suitcases into their children's new homes. Mothers had tears in their eyes. Younger brothers and sisters screamed and laughed as they ran up and down the hall. He ended up stuck behind a tall guy carrying two boxes with a half-full garbage bag balanced on top. The bag fell, and Scott intervened to catch it. "Got it."

The man stopped in front of the door directly across from Scott's room. He made a play for the doorknob but was unable to reach it and looked hopelessly at Scott. "Could you get the door?"

"Sure." Scott took a step forward, pushed the door open wide, and stood off to the side to let the Eddie Cibrian look-alike pass through.

The guy set the boxes down on the floor by the window, then made his way back towards Scott, who was still propping the door open. He took the bag, tossed it on the bed, then extended his hand. "Troy. Thanks for saving the day."

"No worries," Scott said, accepting the firm handshake. "I'm Scott." He covered his ears with both hands at the screaming and laughter booming in the hall. When it subsided, he slipped his hands into his pockets as he and Troy stared intently at each other. "I should go and try to settle in a bit."

Troy ran his hand through his brown hair. “Are you first-year?”

“Yes. I’m thinking about majoring in English or philosophy. Maybe even political science. I’m not really sure yet.”

“Ah ... a thinker.”

“Hardly,” Scott said with a slight edge, catching the hint of condescension in Troy’s eyes. “What about you?”

“Biology major. And afterwards, med school.”

The confidence with which Troy spoke, like he had his life all planned out, made Scott squeamish. Nothing about his own future was clear. “Well, good luck with that.” He backed out of the room, crossed the hall, jammed the key in the lock and pushed down on the door handle in one sweeping movement. More yelling and laughter had his head spinning, and he scrambled to close the door to block out the rowdiness. Looking through the peephole, he saw Troy nodding and smiling at the other students passing through the hall. When it seemed like Troy’s gaze was trained on his door, he backed away. Heat burned in his cheeks, the way it did every time he ogled a *hot* guy on the street and got caught. Was Troy, like Scott, assessing the significance of their exchange? Was it significant?

Scott collapsed on to his bed. Anxiousness replaced his earlier excitement. “This is home?” His eyes roved the tiny room with cement walls, the space cold and lifeless — the way he imagined the cells at some secret government detention centre. Maybe it wouldn’t be that different from his last year at home when his bedroom had become his prison. And, oddly enough, the only place he could be himself. This room was different. Without his photos, plaques and books, it let

him strip away the memories of a childhood he wanted to forget. And maybe it would also be the place that would allow him to become the man he hoped to be.

Suddenly, he could see Troy's tall frame in the doorway and that had him wondering if they'd become friends. Scott never felt like he'd been a friend to anyone, or anyone to him. So, no, he and Troy wouldn't be friends. They'd be the type of neighbours who smiled politely at each other without ever knowing the meaning behind those inquisitive eyes.

He slid his body backwards until his back rested against the cool wall. Already sensing the change occurring in him, the anxiousness began to ebb. This was his time to prove to his family, and perhaps more so to himself, that he could stand on his own. Be a man. It was the only way to shed his mother's perception that he was still her baby in need of mothering. Hadn't he proved that already by working two jobs over the summer, earning a good chunk of spending money for the year? Or by being awarded the scholarship that covered his tuition? His parents paying for his residence and meal plan didn't mean, not to him anyway, that he needed to be coddled. He worried that his parents weren't proud of him and, worst of all, that he was still a disappointment. Yet he was the one, not his brothers, who was going to university. He had a plan, too, to get a master's degree. But it didn't seem like enough to please his mother, who focused so much on him being gay — like that was the whole of his identity when there was so much more to him.

After a time of just sitting there, Scott moved off the bed and began to unpack. He plugged in his CD player and hit the 'Play' button. "For the love of God," he groaned as

Mahalia Jackson belted out, ‘As the Saints Go Marching In.’ Somehow his mother had inserted the CD without him knowing, her subtle message understood: Jesus is my help. Let Him be your help. He removed the CD, replaced it with Tracy Chapman’s *New Beginning*, hung up his clothes and made the bed. Afterwards, he taped posters of Martin Luther King Jr., Pierre E. Trudeau and John F. Kennedy Jr. to the walls. *Any surprises in here?* he wondered, opening the box with his dictionaries and notebook. He twitched, picked up the pocket-size version of the *New Testament* and threw it in the waste bin. After arranging the books on the shelves above the desk, he set up his toiletries in the bathroom, thankful that he didn’t have to share. His grades made him eligible for the ‘Quiet Floor’ with all single rooms, and his mother agreed to pay the extra cost. *Can this be home after all?* He’d just unpacked the cleaning supplies when three solid knocks on the door had him staggering towards it. Opening it cautiously, “Oh,” slipped out, then he swallowed hard.

“Interested in grabbing a beer?” Troy asked, placing his hands on each side of the doorframe.

“I’m not old enough yet,” Scott said.

“Then how about grabbing a bite to eat?”

“I’m on the meal plan and the food’s supposed to be good.”

“Let me explain how this works.” Troy scratched the top of his dark full mane. “I’m new here, you’re new here. You helped me out earlier, so that kind of broke the ice between us. I don’t know about you, but I don’t know anyone here yet. So you say, ‘Yes, sounds like fun,’ grab your wallet and keys, and maybe you’ve made a new friend on your first day in residence.”

Scott took a moment to assess the guy standing before him. Something in those hazel eyes instilled equal measures of calm and suspicion. Maybe not suspicion, but a certain hesitancy. He couldn't imagine Troy playing a part, or even willing to for that matter, in one of his secret fantasies. So, what was it that made Scott suspicious? He had no fucking idea. "Sure," was his reluctant reply.

Troy led the way to the stairwell. They barrelled down the three flights of stairs and edged their way through the crowded lobby before emerging outside, squinting at the scorching afternoon sun. Ten minutes later, they were on Bloor Street and ordering drinks at The Soho. Troy handed a twenty-dollar bill to the cashier.

"Thanks," Scott said, moving to collect his latte at the far end of the bar. Then he made his way outside to the small, street-side patio and secured the table being vacated by a grey-haired man. He was nervous. Troy made him nervous, but why? At six-foot-one, he was taller than most people, but Troy towered over him. That made him feel small, insignificant.

"Where are you from?" Troy asked as he fell into the metal chair across from Scott.

"Ottawa. You?"

"Calgary." Troy lifted his paper cup into the air. "Cheers!"

Scott picked up his drink. "Cheers."

"Why'd you choose U of T?" Troy leaned back and stretched out his pale, hairy legs.

Scott tapped his fingers against the lid of his drink. "The scholarship, a chance to live in Toronto ... be away from home and family."

“I get that. I just want to be myself and not have to pretend to be someone else.”

Scott raised an eyebrow. *What does that mean?*

Troy brought himself forward in his chair. “Did you leave anyone behind?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I mean ... were you seeing anyone?”

“Oh! No. It was a clean break.”

“Lucky you.” Troy eased back in his chair. “I thought Derek would follow, but in the end he stayed in Calgary. Wasn’t ready to leave the nest.”

Scott looked down, holding his gaze to his lap. *Oh my God!*

“Don’t worry,” Troy said, “this isn’t a date.”

“Edward went to McGill.” Scott levelled his eyes at Troy. “It wasn’t serious between us. I needed to be farther away than Montréal. Too close to home.”

Troy smirked. “I thought so.”

“But this still isn’t a date,” Scott said with emphasis. “Just two friends out for a coffee together.”

“Now we’re friends?” Troy chuckled. “Philosophy, English, or you mentioned political science?”

“Probably English.”

“What are you going to do with an English degree?”

“Teach, proofread, write.” Scott offered a faint smile. “Not all doctors can write.”

“Ha-ha.”

The afternoon slipped away as they laughed and joked, sharing stories about their families, cautiously revealing their hopes and dreams. They were surprised by how easy it was for them to talk to each other, how unexpectedly they had let

their guards down. They headed back to the university in time to eat before the cafeteria closed. Afterwards, they spent the evening in Troy's room, listening to music and drinking beer while playing Gin Rummy.

Scott glanced at his watch, then his eyes widened. "Is it really two?"

"Yes," Troy confirmed and dealt the next hand.

"I better go." Scott slid off the bed.

"Oh, come on." Troy pointed at the piece of paper next to him. "I'm like twenty points away from finally beating your ass."

"We'll finish the game tomorrow."

"It'll take ten minutes. Less if I've dealt myself a perfect hand."

Scott started for the door. "I'm tired. Goodnight, Troy."

"Scott..." Troy bounced off the bed and cornered him at the door. "Do you ever just..."

"Do I ever just what?"

Troy scratched the back of his head. "Get off with a guy? Just to —"

"Are you..." Scott chuckled. "I don't know if you're drunk or just horny. Either way, it doesn't matter. Today was fun, but —"

"I'm sorry," Troy broke in. "It's been nice talking to someone who gets me. Like I said earlier ... not having to pretend to be someone else."

"You can be *you* with me," Scott insisted. "But hitting on your new best friend is weird."

"New best friend? Huh." Troy's lips spread into a broad smile.

Scott opened the door. “We’ll finish the game tomorrow. And so you know, in my family I’m known as the comeback kid. Be prepared to have your ass kicked.” He stumbled across the hall and, his heart racing, jammed the key in the lock. Pushing the door open, he turned around and his gaze locked on Troy, who’d stepped into the hall. *Okay. He’s pretty damn hot, but we just met. And I think he gets me, too. So, having sex would screw that up. Right? Besides, I want to try to just be his friend.* Scott waved, then rushed into his room and bolted the door. Part of him was tempted to storm back into the hall and into Troy’s arms. What was wrong with a little companionship? Everything. Sex changed everything. The other part of him checked that urge because, really, he didn’t know what he wanted. Except to be himself. But who was that?

Undressing, he glimpsed the *New Testament* in the garbage. “Fuck!” He retrieved it, opened the cover and read the inscription: *Jesus loves you! And so do I! Mama.* He hid it in the desk drawer, climbed into bed and drew in several deep breaths. A startling calm washed over him. Another shift. Despite what he wanted to believe, he wasn’t alone. In such an unexpected way, a new friend had come into his life. That gave him hope for the days ahead ... no matter what life threw at him.

The Secret

TROY HAD JUST PULLED ON HIS UNDERWEAR when there was a knock on his door. “Always so goddamn early.” He moved to the door and opened it wide. “I still have fifteen minutes, Davenport.”

“Whoa!” Scott raised his hand to his eyes. “I’ll wait in my room.”

“Get your ass in here.” Troy grabbed Scott by the arm and pulled him inside. “You can help me decide on what to wear.”

“God, we’ll never make it to the party.”

Troy slipped into the bathroom to finish styling his hair, trying for those carefully styled curtains that only David Beckham could really pull off. He came close, though. He strutted back into the main area of his room, his eyes landing on Scott, who stood by the window. His gaze travelled down Scott’s back to the round bubble butt. He couldn’t help himself, couldn’t stop it. Something about his new best friend always had him hard like a baseball bat. Like now, the outline of what he was packing clearly visible in his white briefs.

Scott spun around and raised an eyebrow. “Are you ever going to get dressed?”

Troy saw how, for just a moment, Scott’s eyes had lowered. That had him wanting to whip out his cock right there and start jerking. Was Scott *now* interested? Or was it more that a gay man couldn’t resist looking? He wanted Scott to rush him, pin him down, devour him. His heart’s desire since

they'd met, and it tormented him every night as he lay in bed fantasizing about the things he'd let Scott do to him.

"What about this?" Troy picked up the blue and white checkered shirt.

"Sure," was Scott's emotionless response.

"Or this?" Troy held up a solid navy-blue V-neck T-shirt.

"It's a house party, Troy." Scott checked the time. "It's not like you're off to meet the Queen."

"I want to look good."

"You always look good."

Troy's lips curled into a smile. There it was, what he loved about his best friend. Scott always lifted him up, made him believe he was extraordinary in a world of mediocrity. Yet it still didn't seem like he stood out, not in the way that Scott did. But that wasn't true, and a complete reversal of his days at boarding school. After the first week of classes, students crowded into his dorm room on Wednesday nights to play poker. He'd already received three warnings from the crotchety Residence Advisor and been threatened with expulsion. Walking to class, people shouted "Hello" at him, or stopped to shake his hand or high five him. He *was* the popular kid, or at least one of them, and liked by everyone. And he loved it. But he still searched for a deeper connection, like the kind he had had with Patrick. Longed for someone who could find that special space inside him. Actually, he'd found that, but the person he wanted to inhabit that place didn't notice him. Not in the way he wanted.

Scott pulled out the desk chair and fell into it. "I could use the time to study for next week's midterms, so I'm good not going to this party if you can't decide what to wear."

“This!” Troy picked up the T-shirt and pulled it on. When his head poked through the neck hole, he caught Scott checking him out again. That sent his heart into overdrive. He stepped into his jeans, taking a moment to adjust the bulge still in his underwear, and involuntarily flicked his eyebrows at Scott.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that,” Scott roared. “We had *that* conversation already. If you need to get laid, you better find some silly ass drunk at the party.”

“You want it,” Troy teased, zipping up his jeans. “You know you do.”

“Someone’s feeling better.”

After a short silence, they burst out laughing.

But, really, Troy wanted it. He wanted Scott, now more than ever, since the night when Scott had taken care of him. It was a week ago, but to Troy it was like it had happened yesterday.

He’d heard the knock on the door, but the way his body ached he couldn’t move. That was why he’d left the door unlocked.

“You decent?” Scott asked from the doorway.

“Yes,” Troy croaked.

Scott came into the room. He carried a tray and set it down on the desk. “Are you hungry?”

Troy coughed, phlegm corralling in his mouth, and he spat it into the tissue-filled waste bin by the bed. “Not really.”

“You should eat something.” Scott eased himself on to the edge of the bed and placed the back of his hand to Troy’s forehead. “At least your fever broke.”

“I just ... can’t ... get warm,” Troy stuttered.

“Sit up. I want you to try a little of this soup. It’s chicken noodle. My mom always made it for me when I was sick. And it should be easy on your stomach.” Scott reached for the tray and set it on the bed between them. Then he lifted the bowl and held it close to Troy’s face.

Troy, his hand shaking, moved the large spoon back and forth from his mouth. The whole time his eyes were glued to Scott. They didn’t say anything. Barely six weeks since they’d met, they didn’t have to speak when they were together. The warm soup settled his stomach, but halfway through he set the spoon down.

“No one’s ever done anything like this for me,” Troy said.

“It’s what friends do.” Scott placed the bowl on the tray, which he then returned to the desk. “We look after each other.”

“You could be out ... on a date.”

“With who? Danny Pintauro? The only date I’ve had lately has been with my right hand.”

“T ... M ... I.”

“Like you’re a prude.”

They laughed.

Scott stood. “Can I get you anything else?”

“Do you have to go?” Troy asked, panic rising in his voice. “It’s just ... so lonely. I’m going crazy staring at these walls.” He shifted to his right, making room in his bed for his friend.

Scott scratched his head and, after his mouth went dry, settled into the bed. With his back pressed up against the wall, he snatched off the desk James Joyce’s *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, flipped to the bookmarked page and cranked his head at Troy. “You’ve only read to chapter two? The test’s on Monday.”

“Read some to me.”

“Read to you?” Scott stifled his laugh. “Only because you’re sick. Just don’t fall asleep like you do in class.”

As Scott started to read, Troy listened to the deep, at times chromatic, voice that cast a spell over him. Without thinking about it, he lowered his head onto Scott’s shoulder and left it there. Scott didn’t seem to mind. Then Troy drifted off to a dream world where he and Scott were in love and eager to give themselves over to each other in bed. The pillow crashing into his face broke his reverie.

“Where’d you go?” Scott asked, starting for the door.

“Nowhere.” Troy tossed the pillow on the bed, then crossed quickly to the desk as the heat flared in his cheeks. No way he’d let Scott see how his face transformed into a tomato. He picked up the bottle of Eternity for Men and sprayed. “Ready.”

“You’re a horrible liar.” Scott opened the door. “And don’t be surprised if I’m gone by eleven.”

“Sure.” Troy pulled the door closed and locked it. “I bet you’ll score tonight.” *And if you do, let it be with me.*

“Ha-ha.”

Troy lingered a moment, letting Scott go ahead of him. One more time, he trained his gaze at Scott’s ass, and there was that spontaneous boner again. Was it just a crush or was it something more than that?

No, it wasn’t just a crush. Yet he didn’t have the courage to do the thing he wanted to most: make a play for Scott.

He couldn’t risk the cost ... at least not yet.

“I’M GOING TO CALL IT A NIGHT,” SCOTT SAID.

“What?” Troy glanced at his watch. It was ten minutes to one. “Already?”

“Not really my scene.” Scott took a step forward, but Troy’s hand on his shoulder pulled him back.

Three hours after they’d arrived, Scott was ready to escape the crowded house on Croft Street, located a few blocks west of campus. For the past hour, longer than that, he hadn’t talked to anyone. He stood alone in the living room, wedged between a black milk crate serving as a makeshift end table and the rickety IKEA bookcase. The walls vibrated to the thumping music. The air had a bluish tint from the cigarette and pot smoke spiralling above the crowd. He coughed every time he couldn’t sidestep a big whiff of the smoke that rushed into his lungs. The stench had his stomach spinning faster than the teacups he always rode with his mother at the county fair. Occasionally, a screech or high-pitched laugh thundered over the music, dominating where many conversations colliding in the air could not. People, moving from one room to the next, squeezed in front of him, sometimes bumping into him and almost spilling his drink. They never said a word, barely looked at him. Like he didn’t exist.

Scott was at the party only because Troy had coaxed him into it. The host, a muscled redhead named Evan Lorde, was one of Troy’s poker buddies and had walked off before Troy could introduce them. No wonder Scott, at times, thought he was Troy’s sidekick. In superhero terms, Troy was Batman and Scott was Robin. No one ever wanted to play with Robin. Troy was the one everyone flocked to while Scott, by the end of the second week of classes, had garnered a reputation for being a loner. Or was that loser? No one understood the pressure on him to succeed, what he had to prove — not necessar-

ily to his parents but to himself. And while he'd never admit it to his mother, he shared her point of view: he was there to get an education, not party it up, and dedicated himself to the cause.

"I don't know anyone here besides you." Scott, looking coolly at Troy, shouted to be heard. "These are your friends, and it's not like I'll be missed."

"People, guys, want to get to know you." Troy took a swig of his beer. "You have to, I don't know, look interested and put yourself out there more. You may not realize it, but I get that you want to do well and that's why you study twenty-four-seven. News flash! There's a bold, new world outside of the library. C'mon, have a little fun." He leaned into Scott's ear. "Wallflowers don't get laid."

Scott placed his hand to Troy's chest and shoved a little harder than he had intended.

Troy, trying to hang on to his beer, tumbled backwards and crashed into the guy behind him.

"Jesus!" was the deep, guttural bark that cut through the air. The blond spun around, his eyes on fire and glued to Scott.

Scott held the gaze, and something inexplicable about those deep-set arctic blue eyes with their dramatic eyebrows made him swoon over the otherwise average-looking dude before him. He recovered quickly as the guy's angry glare softened. In that moment, he couldn't hear the thumping music or the raucous conversations swirling about him. His full attention was on the blond, who was wiping his beer-covered hands on his jeans. Their gazes locked again. Scott's imagination ramped up, him and that guy swept away in a dark room. Somewhere they couldn't see each other as they played out his secret fantasies.

“I pushed him.” Scott swallowed hard. “It’s my fault. I’ll buy you a new shirt if —”

“What about me?” Troy asked, pointing to the dark spot on his thigh.

“It’s just beer,” the guy said, his voice gruff, his eyes still on Scott.

Troy raised an eyebrow and then, without saying another word, slunk away.

“I’m Anthony.”

“Scott.”

They shook hands.

“Is this how you always pick up guys?” Anthony grinned. “Spill a drink on them so they have to take off their clothes?”

Scott’s mouth hung open. “No. It was an accident.”

“Sure it was.” Anthony flashed a coy smile, then drained his beer. “So...”

“I’m about to head out,” Scott said, forcing the words that seemed contrary to his will. He wanted to shore up his sexual experience with men but didn’t seem to have the nerve. “Sorry about —”

“If you’re sorry ... buy me breakfast.”

Scott’s heart raced. “What?”

“In the morning, you can buy me breakfast.” Anthony flicked his eyebrows. “There’s a diner down the street from my apartment.”

Scott’s cock twitched and he looked down. This was exactly what he wanted even though he knew it was wrong. Maybe not ‘wrong,’ but misguided. He’d only been with Edward and didn’t want to come off as a novice. But he was. Did he have the courage to go home with a stranger?

“You’re cute.”

Scott raised his head.

Anthony took a step forward. “Can I kiss you?”

“Right here?”

“Why not?”

Before he could say anything else, Scott’s body went rigid as the weight of Anthony’s tongue crushed his. He kept his eyes open, surveying the crowd to see if anyone was watching, as he savoured Anthony’s bitter taste. This wasn’t like him. And he didn’t want to be the guy everyone later whispered about for getting hot and heavy with a stranger. The kiss gained momentum, a longing so deeply buried in him surging with the force of a tsunami. Scott finally closed his eyes and just then Anthony pulled away.

“I take it we have a deal ... about breakfast?”

Scott chewed the inside of his lip. “Sure.”

“We should go then.” Anthony reached for Scott’s hand. “It’s going to be a long night.”

They edged their way through the crowd and, near the front door, Anthony stopped to chat with a friend. Scott waited patiently, his eyes roving the hallway. His gaze latched on to Troy, who towered in the kitchen doorway and threw him a sneering smile. *What’s that about?* But the thought was broken when the pressure on his hand increased, and he smiled as Anthony led him away.

The blaring music fell away as the door closed behind them. Still holding hands as they walked down the street and stealing sidelong glances of each other, Scott’s heart cartwheeled wildly in his chest. He knew nothing about Anthony. Not his last name, where he was from, or if he was a student.

But why, then, did he believe — even if he couldn't explain it — that this was the guy who would change his life?

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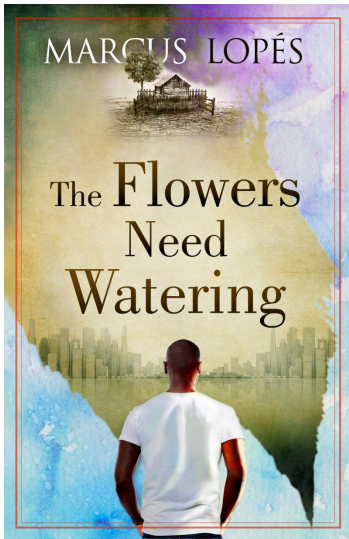
About the Author



MARCUS LOPÉS is the author of *The Visit*, *Everything He Thought He Knew*, *The Flowers Need Watering*, and, most recently, *Beyond the Veil*. An avid runner, blogger and actualizer of dreams, he lives in Toronto. For more information, you can visit his website at marcuslopes.ca.

The Flowers Need Watering

CHOICES. Sometimes they come back to haunt you...



Mateo isn't big on family. The proof? He hasn't spoken to his parents in nine years. But he's not alone, or necessarily bitter or angry. He builds a family with his totally hot, slightly obsessive boyfriend, and his feisty sister, along with her even-tempered husband and their precocious son. Life is perfect. Mostly.

Liam, wrecked by regret, looks for any reason to leave New York City. Because it's missing the key ingredient to his recipe for happiness. Using his mother's illness as cover, he packs up his life and returns home. But nothing stays the same forever.

After years apart, a call in the middle of the night brings Mateo and Liam face-to-face. Then, over the course of seven days, they must navigate their complicated, years-long attraction that leaves their lives hanging in the balance And shows just how damaged they are...

A moving story of love, forgiveness and, ultimately, family – what it is and isn't, and how it shapes us before we even begin to figure out who we are.

[Read Now](#)

Everything He Thought He Knew

RULE #1: First Names Only. . .



Malachi knows he's broken the rules, *his* rules, as he stares into the dreamy eyes of the totally hot, totally naked guy standing before him. All because he let his best friend drag him to a bar. And, really, it's not a big deal. But it is.

Because Malachi already did the 'love thing,' and got burned. His life is still a train wreck. At home. At work. Everywhere. No matter what he does, nothing puts it back on the rails. And no way he's going to fall for a sweet-talking, out-of-town visitor.

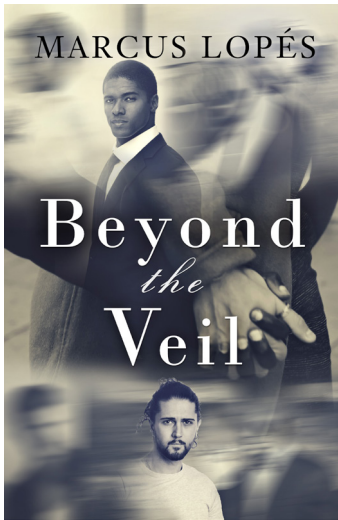
Besides, a one-night stand isn't a prelude to love. It's sex for sex. Uncomplicated and anonymous. One time. No repeats. So, Malachi gets the heartthrob out of his condo. Fast. When he's alone, his heart shudders at his colossal mistake – and he still doesn't grasp its magnitude. That, maybe, he just shut the door on a second chance at love. . .

Everything He Thought He Knew is a story about the ways everything is and isn't: Life isn't always fair or easy, sometimes we jump into love blind and with a half-full heart, and happily ever after isn't guaranteed to everyone.

[Read Now](#)

Beyond the Veil

NOTHING is always exactly what it seems. . .



Sam Williams is a born-again virgin and done with dating. No more falling for smooth-talking pretty boys. No more heartbreak. That makes him an uptight workaholic. And not even his quirky sister's pestering can tempt him back into the dating game. But when he's guilted into checking on her kitten while she's away, Sam lands right in the line of fire of her latest roommate.

Damaged. It's the third highest-ranking word used to describe Jason Moore. A guy who doesn't shave. Doesn't change his clothes. And, most days, drinks until he passes out. To the few people who know him, his self-destruction is spectacular. And it's not that he can't pull himself out of the downward spiral as much as he's not sure he wants to.

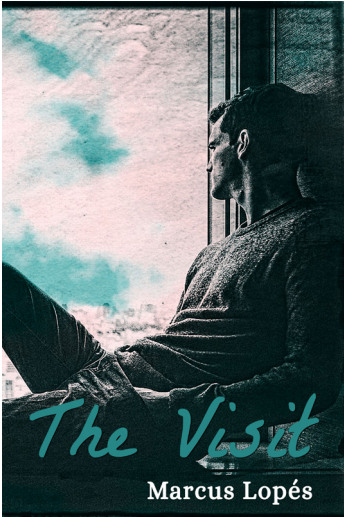
When Sam and Jason meet, it's like a hurricane of chaos slams into their carefully curated lives. As the levees of distrust and suspicion ebb, both men realize they're in need of a little tenderness. And if they can outrun the demons from their past, they might just find in each other the one thing they've always wanted...

***Beyond the Veil* is a story of obsession, love, and self-acceptance, reminding us that not everything is what it seems – and that we have the power to change our destiny.**

[Read Now](#)

The Visit: A Short Story

VISITING hours are over. . .



Trevor and Oliver are the ideal ‘married’ couple. The kind that owns the house featured at the local home show. Or buys the latest and trendiest gadgets as soon as they hit the market. And still acts, four years after their first date, like sex-hungry newlyweds. Life is perfect. At least from the outside.

Phyllis is done with ‘for better or for worse.’ Worse is staying in a marriage where every day is the same. So, she leaves, only to discover that her kids aren’t willing to take her in. Except one. But her visit quickly ignites the embers of prejudice and resentment long simmering underneath the surface, with consequences no one sees coming. . .

***The Visit* is a story about family and love, and finding the courage to stand up for what you believe.**

BONUS: Also included is “The App,” a best friends to lovers short story that will make you laugh out loud.

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