

Phoenix

Harmony Neal

Toby watched Mrs. Ryder's toned arms stick 14 candles in the three-layer chocolate cake without a single jiggle. The moustache streamers and balloons were up, and the guys would be arriving soon. "Toby," said Mrs. Ryder in a hushed voice, "I hate to ask this, and I hate that I didn't think to ask sooner, but has your father given you *the talk*?"

Toby looked down at his hands and plucked at the thin black leather bracelets. "No," he replied in an equally hushed voice, "but I already know how it works. Max told me everything you told him."

Mrs. Ryder nodded. "Well, dear, if you have any questions or concerns, *please*, feel free to ask. You know you're family. Maybe you and Paul should talk later just in case?" She looked up from the cake with crystal blue eyes, full of care and concern. Toby looked from Mrs. Ryder's eyes to her perfectly manicured hands to the cake, then jolted in his seat. "Mrs. Ryder, uh, I think you might have done the candles backwards."

Mrs. Ryder chuckled. "No, sweetheart. It's a little joke, right? Kids want to be adults so fast."

Toby shook his head. "But not 41."

"Perhaps not, dear, but that's a little reminder to appreciate it while you can. You're only young once. And look, I only used 14 candles."

It was true. Toby wanted to cry. He wanted to hug Mrs. Ryder and never let go. He wanted a birthday cake with a 41 on it.

"And, you know, I'm 41 this year and fabulous." She cocked her narrow hip and pretended to flip her hair. Toby didn't have the hots for her, but she took excellent care of herself and was the most successful orthodontist in town. Why she settled for Mr. Ryder, who was nice enough but chubby with thinning hair, was a question Toby couldn't answer. He must've been hot when he was younger. "Max hasn't told me what you plan to do for your birthday. Here, take this." She pulled the spatula from the bowl. Rich, chocolate frosting clung to the silicone blade. Toby held it away from his body. A year ago, he would have mindlessly gone to town on the sugary chocolate, but now he knew better.

"Oh, well, I hadn't really thought about it."

"Do you want a surprise party too?"

Toby cocked his head. “Uh, well, you can’t, I mean, I couldn’t know.”

Mrs. Ryder burst out laughing. “Of course you can’t, dear. I was joking. Besides, you can’t have more than one surprise party a year. But maybe something else? We could have it here, if you like.”

The doorbell rang. Some of the guys had arrived. Toby stood in the kitchen with the spatula in his hand and watched Mrs. Ryder’s feline steps to the front door. Sometimes it seemed like Mr. Ryder got fatter by the day. Toby dropped the spatula back in the mixing bowl before any of the sugar could enter his body by osmosis.

Mr. Ryder texted that he and Max would be home in five minutes. Toby wished his father would take him clothes shopping for his birthday, or ever. Max would have the best birthday: a shopping spree with his dad, then a surprise party. Toby had, of course, been in charge of the guest list. He hadn’t invited any girls because he wanted to give Max a chance to regroup before high school, and he didn’t want any potential future girlfriends to see the guys with cake in their mouths.

Twelve guys twittered around the darkened den in skinny jeans and t-shirts. Some of them should have bought the next size up, their flabby bellies protruding over their waistbands and peeking out from under their shirts. Toby sighed to think Max would look the same. He’d chubbed up a bit over the past year, what with Mr. Ryder’s newfound passion for baking and cheese sauce, but Toby had faith his friend could ditch the weight before high school. They’d started running and lifting and were working on watching what they ate together. If one of them was having too much chips or candy, the other one would say “Phoenix,” their special code.

Anticipation buzzed around the room. Guys jostled, whispering “Shhh” and “Shut up!” while giggling. Toby hoped Max wouldn’t be mad that he hadn’t invited Jacob. Jacob was obese with limp hair and no fashion sense. Toby shivered with disgust. If you were going to be fat, you should dress well or at least embrace your horrible body and offer the world a little fat-guy humor, but no, Jacob wasn’t funny at all and he wore giant jeans that clung to his ham thighs and fluttered around his calves. He wore oversized dark sweatshirts and smiled too much. Max was always asking if Jacob could come along to the mall or the movies, and Toby always had a good reason why not, even if his suggestion that woodwinds shouldn’t mingle with brass was starting to grow thin.

If Max asked, he’d say he forgot Jacob or Jacob couldn’t come. Maybe he’d say he was going to invite him, but then Jacob told him about seeing Mrs. Dunn in a practice room with Claudette’s mom, and at that very second, he knew

Jacob couldn't keep a secret.

The screen door banged. Mr. Ryder had intentionally tripped up the steps as planned. Everyone held their breath. They could hear Max and his dad down the hall, shuffling bags, Max asking why everything was so dark.

Max clunked down the hall. No one breathed as he creaked open the door, "Mom?" he asked, groping for the light switch.

As they all yelled, "Surprise!" Toby registered the "o" of Max's lips, the way his belly popped up and back, then the smile. Max beamed. Toby spread his arms for the embrace he was about to receive, but Max first flung himself at his mother, then at the guys who stood between Mrs. Ryder and Toby. Four hugs later, it was Toby's turn. He'd already let his arms drop and stiffen at his sides. Max threw his arms around Toby's neck, blubbering, "This was you, wasn't it? Mom and Dad couldn't have done this without you!"

Toby cracked his clenched teeth, "Of course. Happy birthday."

After the hugging was done, Max showed the guys his new outfits, pausing with a pair of distressed jeans in his hands to have the guys admire his new wrist cuff. The guys oohed and aahed, but Toby couldn't believe Max had gotten a thick woven band with flames running around it.

"Look, Tobe, don't you love it?"

"Didn't they have leather strips?"

"Well, of course, silly, but it's my birthday, and I wanted something really cool."

In a few months they'd be on their way to high school, and Max had no idea what cool was. He huddled with the other guys around him, pulling out shorts and tops, his plain brown hair in need of product, his scraggly eyebrows begging to be trimmed. Toby was trying to help him, but there was only so much he could do if Max wouldn't get on board and start paying attention.

Max declared he'd saved the best for last and reached into a bag to pull out something pale yellow covered in tentacles. The other guys swooned that it was awesome, perfect, they were so jealous.

Toby raised his eyebrows. "Is that new underwear?"

Max laughed. "Don't be silly. It's a swimsuit. I never get one when they first hit the racks. By the time it's hot enough to swim, all the good suits are gone. This year, I got there first." Max stood and held the trunks to his body. Toby could see it now, the smooth white bulge of Max's belly hanging over that maize cloth, the octopuses' little red eyes begging people to turn and look. At the rate Max was going, by summer he'd have a sizeable pot belly. Toby stretched a tight smile across his face.

“Okay guys,” Mrs. Ryder appeared in the doorway, “Seats at the dining room table.” They filed out, and Toby followed, then snaked through so he could sit next to Max without worrying the other guys would crowd him out. Max sat at the head. The other guys put on bowties and fake mustaches. As if on a cue Toby missed, the guys began singing happy birthday right as Mrs. Ryder reappeared with the three-layered cake. Toby came in a line late. He reached out for Max’s hand when he noticed Max’s shining eyes tracking the cake’s approach.

Mrs. Ryder sat the cake down as the song finished. Max squeezed Toby’s hand, then let go. Toby hoped he was wishing he could be thin again, and if he was feeling generous, that he also wished Toby would stay thin too, and maybe that they both could get six-packs by the end of summer. Toby waited for Max to say something about the 41, but he blew out the candles with one giant breath. Everyone cheered while Mrs. Ryder plucked the candles from the cake and Max cut a giant slice for himself. Toby pinched his leg under the table.

“Of course, you’re next Toby. How big of a slice to do you want?” Max positioned the blade past a huge wedge of cake.

“Oh no, not that much, just a small piece for me. I had a late dinner.”

Max moved the blade over an inch, leaving a good four inches of cake.

“Oh no! Half that. Less.”

Max pushed the blade through, plopping the monstrous piece of cake onto Toby’s plate and handing it to him. Toby tried to smile as he put the poison in the middle of his placemat. That was 800 calories, easy. Max kept cutting and passing until everyone had half a day’s worth of calories in front of them. Mr. Ryder appeared with a bucket and scoop and started plopping down huge balls of vanilla ice cream, his arm fat jiggling with each motion. When he approached, Toby instinctively covered his plate with his hands. “None for me please.”

“Toby, it’s a celebration. You can have some.”

“No!” He wailed, then caught himself, “I mean, I don’t care for ice cream.”

Mr. Ryder frowned. “Since when? I seem to recall a little boy who loved ice cream.”

“It’s just that I think I might be lactose intolerant is all.”

Mr. Ryder clucked his teeth and shook his head, causing his double chin to sway. “That is too bad, Toby. I’m so sorry.”

The other guys attacked their cake with wild abandon. Toby watched their round cheeks as they chewed, their pink tongues that popped out to lick fat lips glistening in chocolate and ice cream. Disgusting. It was all disgusting. He could see them all a year from now, no longer pudgy, but fat. He looked down at his waist, the tiny bulge that poked out if he didn’t sit up straight. No, no

way, not him. He sat up tall, embracing his height and posture. He was the thinnest one in the room, and he was going to stay that way until he became the most ripped one in the room.

“Toby,” Max laughed, “You’re not eating your cake!”

Toby tried to fix him with a look, but Max was too busy digging in. He pinched Max under the table, hard this time.

“Ow! What?”

Toby whispered, “Phoenix!”

Max shoveled more cake dripping ice cream into his mouth.

“Phoenix, Max, Phoenix!”

Max stopped, finally hearing. Toby sighed in relief. Max turned to face his smiling friend. “Toby, it’s my *birthday*. I can have *cake* on my *birthday*.” He’d already devoured half the giant slice. He returned to the other half.

Toby took a bite of his cake to not seem rude. It was delicious. Mrs. Ryder knew how to bake. There was no way her cake came out of a box. Another bite wouldn’t hurt. He glanced at Max who was watching him and smiling, seeming to nod his head, yes, yes, that’s it!

A few minutes later, Mo asked, “Is it time for presents?”

Mr. Ryder paused with his forkful of cake halfway to his mouth. “Sure, why not?”

Chairs scraped back from the table as the guys trooped back to the den. Toby regarded the crumbs on his plate. How had it happened? Max grabbed his arm and squeezed, “Tobe, thank you! This is so great. I can’t believe you, Mom, and Dad set this up for me.”

Toby tried to smile, but he thought he might puke. Max furrowed his untamed eyebrows, “What’s wrong? You’re not having fun?”

“Oh no, of course I am. Of course. I just, I need to pee.”

Max scooped out his chair and all but skipped into the den. Toby stared at his plate, the smears of frosting, the wet shiny globs of cake. He made his way to the downstairs bathroom and closed the door right before the tears came. He looked at himself in the mirror, holding his bulging belly in his hands. No way, he hadn’t done it. How had he eaten that entire piece of cake?

The toilet seemed to whisper it could help him out, but he told himself no. He wasn’t going to be one of those guys with acrid breath and enamel peeling off his teeth. He had a nice smile and intended to keep it. No, he had to pull himself together and learn from his mistakes. He’d have to run extra miles tomorrow, maybe eight extra. He’d have to run until he collapsed. If he puked up his breakfast from running, so be it, but he wasn’t about to intentionally

ram his fingers down his throat.

He washed away the tears with cool water.

In the den, the guys crowded around Max on the couch. He was opening a large heavy box wrapped in metallic blue and silver paper.

“Twilight! All of them! Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Max hugged Jesse around the neck. The other guys oohed and aahed over the boxed collection of books. Toby set himself up at the gift table so he could select what to hand Max next. Jackson got him sheet music for clarinet. Nelson got him a three pack of Polo Ralph Lauren boxer briefs in Christmas colors, on clearance, probably, since it was spring. Mo brought an Art of Shaving set that included a lather brush. The other guys started screaming “Facials! Facials!” Toby couldn’t wait to get his hands on that kit. He looked at his Robert Graham bag on the back of the table, the black and white bowler hat over a down-pointing hand logo. He’d saved every extra dollar he could squeeze out of his dad for that gift. It was going to be the best one, of course, since he was Max’s best friend and had been for seven years.

Toby could just imagine if Jacob was there. He’d probably give Max a diary with a dinosaur on the front. Jackson’s sheet music was lame enough. At least some of the other guys had taste. The ones without taste were mostly smart enough to offer gift cards to A&F or the iTunes store.

At last, all the gifts and cards had been opened, save one, the best one. Toby grinned and clutched the bag with both hands. “This is from me!”

The guys squealed over the thought of something from Robert Graham. If they thought it was some cheap t-shirt or clearance rack leftover, they were mistaken. Max took a breath then began gently pulling back the tissue paper. He paused, reached in slowly, then slowly, slowly pulled out the shirt.

“Oh my god!” screamed Jackson.

“No way!” echoed Mo.

The other guys talked over each other. *Max! Oh my god, Max! Really?*

Max slowly unfolded the Kaleidoscope print, then stood and held the shirt in front of him.

Toby let the reactions wash over him as he kept his eyes locked on Max’s amazed and grateful face. *Oh my god, Toby is like the best friend in the whole world! I’m inviting Toby to all of my parties, for sure. Is it real? Oh my god, is that real Robert Graham? Try it on! Oh my god, put it on!*

They’d seen the shirt in *GQ* and had died with envy. It was the essence of sexy maverick cool. “Come on, Max, let’s get it on so we can see how it looks. Back in a minute, guys.” Toby took a stunned Max by the hand and led him upstairs.

He closed the door behind them. Max twirled around in front of his mirror. “How on earth did you get this? It’s too much!”

“No, it’s exactly the right thing. Put it on!” Toby remembered the feel of the shirt sliding over his arms, buttoning up the front. It was too big for him, of course, but he’d felt like a model strutting back and forth in his room. He’d undone the top few buttons and cinched the waist in the back for a better-looking fit.

Max shoved his arms in the sleeves. The shirt stuck halfway on. “Toby, help!”

“Hold still! Don’t tear it!”

Toby worked the shirt carefully over Max’s back until it was on his slightly hunched shoulders. “It’s not going to fit,” Max whispered, “Oh my god, it’s not going to fit.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s Tailored Fit! It’s supposed to be tight.”

Max pulled at the sides to try to button it.

“Hold still and suck in your gut.” Toby got the first few buttons through their respective holes, “I said suck it in!” He got the other buttons done. “There, see, it fits!”

Max turned to the mirror. The shirt was trying to pull itself apart around his belly, the fabric gapping and showing pale skin. “I look awful!”

“No, no, you look fine.” He looked awful. “You just need to lose like five pounds and it will fit perfectly. Designer lines run small. I should have gotten a Large. I mean, I knew you’d pudged out a little in the past few months, but—” Toby stopped himself. Max was crying.

“When did I get fat?”

“You’re not fat. You’re just,” he couldn’t find the words, “See, this is why we have to stick together, help each other. This is why I don’t want you hanging around with that fatass Jacob.”

“Toby! I can’t believe you said that.”

“You know it’s true. He’s huge! And I read that obesity is an epidemic, and that if you have fat friends, you get fat too. That’s science. So look, you’re not fat, not even close, but now it’s time for us to be more careful, to make sure we don’t blow up like Jacob and your dad.”

“My dad? Did you just insult my dad?” Max undid the buttons on his shirt.

“I, Max, I didn’t mean it. You know I love your dad. He’s like an extra dad to me too.”

Max tried to get the shirt off, but he couldn’t get it down his flaccid biceps. “Help me get this horrible thing off.”

“The other guys are waiting. They’re dying to see.”

Max's eyebrows shot up. "You want me to go down looking like this?"

"Uh, I guess not. We'll just tell them it looked too good, and you're saving it for a special occasion, for the first day of school!"

Max wiped his face with the back of his hand.

"Look, we'll tell them that, then you can lose the weight this summer."

"Yeah," Max muttered, "Sure. Help me get this off."

Downstairs, Mrs. Ryder stood at the door while the guys whispered in a corner. Toby cleared the last step and saw a sight he couldn't believe he'd missed from the stairs: Jacob, eyes red-rimmed, clutching a sleeping bag to his giant belly, looking the perfect picture of shame, his mom talking to Max's mom. Toby tried to block Max's view with his body, tried to come up with an excuse to rush Max back upstairs, so he wouldn't see.

Max shoved past Toby. "Jacob! You made it! I'm so glad you're here!" He hugged Jacob, who smiled. The moms smiled. The other guys smiled. Toby scurried back up the stairs to Max's room and threw himself onto Max's royal blue bed. He waited for ten minutes, expecting Max to show up to see what was wrong. After twenty minutes, he got up and moped around Max's room, examining Max's possessions in a way he hadn't bothered to in years. Max had a weakness for dinosaurs, which appeared over and over in the form of window appliques, stuffed animals, and plastic figurines, as if announcing to the world "room belonging to a little boy." The sounds of laughter filtered up from downstairs. Toby waited. He sat on Max's bed and stared at the corkboard over the desk, covered with dozens of pictures, most of them of him and Max together, young boys building sandcastles at the beach, fourth graders with sticky red and blue popsicle smiles at the pool, sexy Johnny Depp pirates at Halloween. He heard footsteps on the stairwell and kept his back to the door, wondering if he could work up a few tears.

"Toby?"

The voice didn't belong to Max. Toby didn't turn his head.

"Max said you could tell me where to find his skincare kit. We're doing facials."

Toby pointed a finger at Max's dresser without looking at Nelson. Betrayed again. Nelson picked the T-Rex case off the dresser and turned back to the door, pausing. "Don't you want to come for facials?"

Toby shrugged, not caring if Nelson was looking at him or not, was feeling sorry for him or glad. Nelson left. Toby closed his eyes, knowing he was being a little mean about Jacob, but it was for Max's own good. Fourteen was when Max needed to listen to Toby more, not less. He considered making Max pick:

him or Jacob, once and for all. He looked at the corkboard of pictures, zeroed in on the one from last Christmas, the two of them wearing matching candy cane pajamas and sipping hot cocoa with marshmallows. Making Max choose on his birthday seemed mean. There had to be a different way. There was always another way. Toby smiled.

He hopped out of bed, skipping down the stairs to the kitchen where he could see Mr. Ryder in the dining room, placing small bites of cake into his trembling mouth. Toby lifted the lid from the cake, cut a thick slice and plopped it onto a party plate. If Max didn't want to be a team, then it'd have to be every man for himself. With five plates of cake balanced in his arms, he made his way to the room of guys with pre-shave oil and shaving foam on their cheeks, keeping his smile plastered in place by imagining all of them wiping out an entire cake in one night, all of them too fat and ugly for high school girls, no one rising from the ashes of middle school but Toby.

“Who wants seconds?”

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