

DANGEROUSLY HAPPY

By Varian Krylov

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CHAPTER ONE

I'd known Dario for a few years—three, I think, because I remember he and Christopher were at Clara and Tom's wedding—but we'd never really gotten over the threshold to friendship. We just moved in the same circles, as they say. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that we moved in different but overlapping circles.

His friends were mostly from USC, where he'd studied writing. Most of the others belonged to the realm of penniless bohemians who were always putting on art shows in squats downtown or in the old industrial area that was gentrifying block by block, gradually pushing them north and east and finally squeezing them out altogether. Meanwhile, I was doing my precarious little dance, trying to find the time and energy to hang out with the musicians I'd known in high school, or met in college—from all the bands that we'd started and abandoned before even playing at a party much less landing a real gig—and the people from the day job which, little by little, was consuming my time, my plans for the future, basically my whole life.

The truth is, I'd always been intimidated by him. I could be accused of being shy, anyway, but I think the fact that he was so magnetic, that everyone who found themselves in a room with him seemed to go out of their way to stand or sit close to him, to talk to him, made me feel like a groupie in his presence. Not just because he was one of those exceptionally good-looking guys who got lustful looks just walking down the street or entering a room, and I was envious of his six-foot-three frame, his broad shoulders and chiseled jaw, and the fact that his bone structure was so model-perfect that whether he'd grown his almost-black, wavy hair out to his shoulders or shorn it almost to his scalp, he was the one who looked like the rock star despite the fact that he was the writer and I was the musician.

More than all that, it was how people always seemed to hang on every word of his as if he were Socrates or the Dalai Lama or something, unless the cluster of acolytes in his orbit was bursting into sudden laughter at some witty remark of his—usually profoundly cynical but never sarcastic or unkind—so I felt almost unworthy of talking to him. Which is dumb, because he'd always been friendly enough with me, though sometimes I thought that was just because of Clara.

But then he got the loft on 12th, a huge industrial space that he said he got for cheap because they hadn't updated the interior and it was all raw beams and exposed conduits, but which was probably not really all that much cheaper than was normal for that area. But since he'd recently published a novel that had drawn a lot of hype, my guess is he finally actually had some money. So, more and more often, instead of attempting guerrilla art events in squats, the artists we knew were doing what they called “openings” or “shows” at Dario's loft. Pretty soon there was a kind of collaborative endeavor that we were all pulled into by Dario's gravity and by the increasing centrifugal force of the people in his circle. Almost every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night a different band would play, and two or three artists would show their work that weekend. Paintings, sculptures that were sometimes what I would normally think of as a sculpture—carved out of stone or wood or molded from clay—but which more often were “multimedia” pieces incorporating or completely made out of things like Pepsi bottles or melted vinyl records or old sneakers or what-have-you.

Everyone from the inner circle got in to the weekend shows for free, but the general public had to pay ten dollars, which included two glasses of beer or cheap wine. Pretty soon it was a going enterprise, the artists were selling some of their pieces (not for a lot, of course, but fifty or a hundred, which no one was complaining about) and the money that was cleared after the purchase of the booze and the plastic cups got divided up between the bands that played each night. Dario never kept any of the money for himself, even though every now and then someone would say, “Come on, man, you should take something. You're the one paying the rent on the place,” but Dario said as long as everyone

was pitching in to clean the place up after each night's event, he was happy.

And I guess he was, because after a few weeks Tom told me that Dario had said we could rehearse there on Sundays and Tuesdays if we wanted to (the guys from Painful Friction were rehearsing there on Mondays and Wednesdays, so if we wanted to use the space it would have to be Sundays and Tuesdays). The place was so huge, Dario had even said we could store our gear there. This was the best part of the deal as far as I was concerned, because at that point we hardly ever had a gig anywhere but his place, which meant no more loading the gear into Jamie's van three nights a week for rehearsals and shows. Not exactly the attitude of a "true artist," I realize, but I'm practical that way.

In the end, it worked out even better than I would have guessed, because we started putting in about twice as many hours rehearsing as we used to. The first couple of nights we started at seven, and after an hour we said we'd call it a night so we wouldn't be taking advantage of Dario's hospitality. But Dario all but held us hostage, teasingly berating us for our slacker attitude about our craft. I don't know how he could concentrate with us playing, half the time interrupting a song midway to discuss how to do a phrase better or to give Jamie shit about straying out of sync with the rest of us, but most of the time Dario would sit in his armchair with his laptop and write. At first I figured he was surfing the web or checking Facebook or something, but every time I happened to walk past to grab a glass of water or take a leak, if I caught a glimpse of his screen it was full of ever-expanding lines of black text on that white background. I guess I've heard of other people, other writers like that. Things are only quiet enough inside their head when it's noise and chaos outside. So in the end we were rehearsing three or four hours two nights a week, and we got to play at least once, sometimes twice each weekend for an ever-expanding crowd.

It felt almost like fame. Usually there'd be a hundred people or more, and half of them were regulars who'd gotten to know us and our music, and they'd dance (even though our stuff isn't what I'd call danceable) and sing along and beg us for their favorites at the close of each set. For reasons I still don't understand and probably never will, Avalyn broke up with me right as things were really getting going, and I guess I was lucky that's when she did it, because suddenly there were plenty of women eager to take my mind off my heartache. I was never as bad as Jamie, who seemed to fuck a different girl every time we played, but I was definitely getting more action than ever before, which took a lot of the sting of humiliation and self-doubt out of Avalyn leaving me.

But weirdly, through all those months of spending three or four nights a week in Dario's loft, we remained pretty much strangers. Well, friendly acquaintances. Polite hellos and goodbyes and small talk. It's not that I felt like he disliked me, even though it definitely seemed like everyone else in the inner circle—all the band members and artists who helped put on the shows at the weekend—had actual conversations with him, laughed with him, and I didn't. We just didn't click, maybe because despite everything I still hadn't gotten over feeling like he was, well, not better than me—of course not—but somehow on a different plane of existence.

So it was beyond awkward when, one Tuesday night I showed up for practice, and the other guys weren't there. I'd even showed up almost half an hour late, like usual, because I never wanted to be stuck in the situation of Dario having to make chit chat with me until the others got there. Because of my job, I was the only one coming from the valley; the others always came together in one car, and they were always perfectly happy to have a beer or smoke out with Dario if I wasn't there by the time they'd gotten the gear set up.

That night, Dario buzzed me up and handed me a beer when I came in. He said, "Hey, Aidan," with his typical trenchant warmth, but he seemed a little odd, somehow. Not anything dramatically different, just ever so slightly ill at ease, which actually *was* dramatically different because he was always so maddeningly self-possessed. But he gave me a smile and clinked his bottle against mine.

"Cheers."

"Cheers." I took a swig, then told him he didn't need to play host—I'd go and practice a new song I'd been working on, because I wanted to let the guys have a listen and maybe add it to our set for

the coming weekend.

He looked surprised. “You didn’t get Tom’s text?”

“What text?” I suddenly knew without even touching my pocket—which I did anyway, a gesture of habit—that I’d left my phone sitting on my desk at work.

His vague disease seeming almost like embarrassment, now. “He said rehearsal’s off for tonight because he has to work late, and Jamie’s van is in the shop.”

“No, sorry, I missed it. I just realized I left my phone at the office. I’ll head out. You can have your place to yourself for one night, for a change.”

He grinned, as if I looked and sounded as awkward as I felt. “I’ve had the place to myself all day. Stay. Practice your song.”

“Actually, I should get home. I almost canceled for tonight anyway because there’s a project I’m behind on at work,” I lied, feeling like the pushy acquaintance who’d invited himself over.

“At least stay and finish your beer,” he said, his smile so easy and so warm that I felt the pull of his gravity first-hand, instead of watching it act on other people, for a change. He sat in his armchair, the faux-leather upholstery already molded in the shape of his body, and I plopped down on the nearest sofa. I think there must have been ten sofas in that place, all decent vintage couches he’d gotten on Craigslist for cheap, but the place was so big and the furniture so well arranged that it didn’t seem weird that there were so many.

“You must get sick of having us all around all the time,” I said because I couldn’t think of anything better to say.

“Why?”

“Because it would make me crazy, having herds of people invading my place every day.”

He was quiet, but he gave me another warm smile.

“Isn’t it hard to get any work done? I’d think it would take a lot of peace and quiet to write.”

“I get enough peace and quiet to write,” he said. “Too much peace and quiet and my imagination starts to shrivel up.”

“As long as you’re getting something out of the arrangement too, and not sacrificing yourself for our sakes.”

“Sacrifice? Hardly.” Was it just that warm smile of his that made me like him so much in that moment? Despite the fact that he made me feel awkward and immature because, even though I was pretty sure we were the same age, or that the difference was just a year or two which hardly matters once you’re in your twenties, he always seemed so composed. So at ease and sure of himself the way my father’s generation had always seemed, and I felt I never would be. “Want another beer?” he asked.

I’d already emptied the bottle without realizing how fast I was drinking. “Thanks, but I should get going.”

“Okay. But play me your song first.”

“My song?”

“The one you were going to play for the group.”

“It’s just a work in progress. It’s not really ready for a premier.”

“Good. I’ll feel all the more privileged.”

Even though I’m not so great at socializing, I’m not usually shy at all about playing or singing, so I grabbed my guitar and gave it a quick tuning. But as soon as I got going, seeing how intently he was listening and watching me, I got as nervous as I did the first time I played on stage. I didn’t forget the notes or the words, I just felt weirdly exposed. Vulnerable. Maybe it was because the song was more personal than what I usually wrote for the group.

When I finished, after what felt like ten minutes even though the song is less than five minutes long, Dario said, “You really have a beautiful voice,” his tone slightly changed, as if the song had genuinely touched him. “It gets a bit buried under all the instruments, I think, when you all play together. It’s nice to hear you singing like this, no amps, just the delicate—intricate, but delicate—

accompaniment of your one guitar.”

“Thanks.” It felt like a lame reply to such an effusive compliment, but that was all I could come up with.

“It doesn’t seem like your band’s usual style, but it will probably sound different with the whole group playing.”

“No, you’re right. I don’t know if the other guys will want to put it in the set.”

“Ready to branch off on your solo career?”

“Yeah, right.”

“Well, you can’t let a group vote kill your darlings.” The way he was meeting my eyes made me feel strangely exposed, as if he could read my thoughts. “That masochistic act of infanticide is for you, and you alone.”

“I don’t take the music thing that seriously.”

“Yes you do.” He said it with such certainty, like he knew my mind better than I did.

“What are you working on these days?” I asked, honestly more to take the focus off of me than out of genuine interest. I confess I’m not particularly literary.

“A novel. A gruesome tome that will weigh as much as *War and Peace* or *2666*.”

I had no idea what *2666* was. “Do you have anything short I could read?”

“Sure.” He got up, receded into the distance, took something down from one of the shelves that stretched across half the width and up half the height of the loft, then came back from the vanishing point and handed me a book. “It’s for you. I have extras.” It was the novel he’d gotten published.

I was so flattered I found myself asking, didn’t he have anything really short, something I could read right then. I suddenly felt like it would be rude not to reciprocate the attention and praise he’d given my song.

“I don’t usually write short stories,” he said. “I have one thing, but I don’t think you’d like it.”

Instead of asking why not, I said, “Try me.”

“It’s . . . vaguely pornographic. In the most literary sense, of course.”

“I can’t remember ever saying no to porn,” I joked, trying to be cavalier and gloss over what I knew he was getting at, but even as the words came out of my mouth I was regretting them. Or not really regretting, but just feeling that they were false. That I was being fake and putting on a show for him.

He said, “I don’t think my kind of porn is your kind of porn,” which of course he meant as a red flag, as if I hadn’t known all along that he was gay, as if I hadn’t seen him and his boyfriend at half of the parties Avalyn and I had been at that first year I knew him.

“Afraid of staining my snow-white innocence?” I joked, hoping it didn’t sound forced, still masquerading as I don’t know what, overdoing it so he wouldn’t think I was uptight, repressed, or even some kind of homophobic asshole.

“Alright.” This time instead of making the journey cross-country to the bookshelf he picked up the tablet that was on the table next to his armchair, pulled up the file, and handed it to me, now with a slightly coy or mischievous grin instead of his usual affable smile. I started reading. Meanwhile, I heard him get up, then noticed (I don’t think I’ve ever in my life given anything the undivided focus he seemed to give me while I’d sung and played a few minutes earlier) that he was loading a bowl.

“You don’t have to read the whole thing,” he said, then took a hit. It occurred to me (again, I seem to suffer from some mild form of ADHD) that he might actually be almost as nervous about sharing his short story as I’d been playing my solo number for him. He took another hit off the pipe, then he passed it to me, and even though I wanted to act like my attention was as undivided as his had been for my performance, I took a hit, a much bigger hit than I meant to because I was nervous and I’m not a regular smoker like Dario and my bandmates were, telling myself it was the friendly thing to do, but in the back of my mind I knew the truth was I was medicating my nerves.

I started over from the top. It wasn’t pornographic. Not even vaguely. But it was erotic. Not as

in erotica. Just, the language was incredibly sensual, making every image of every interaction between the couple in the story erotic, even when there was nothing sexual going on. And about three pages in, I got the shock of my life because for the first time ever I was finding the idea of two men arousing. Not in some vague, abstract way, but in that immediate, physical way where I knew that if I kept reading, if I didn't make a determined effort to stop it, my dick was going to get hard. And then that thought—fuck, it was like being in junior high again—that thought was like some kind of lever that opened the dam or something, because as soon as it leaked into in my mind, it started to happen, and after a couple of seconds I realized that for the first time in more than a decade no amount of willpower was going to stop it.

Maybe it was the pot, but then I had the thought that maybe that was the best compliment I could pay Dario; a straight guy getting hard reading his homoerotic story had to be better than anything someone could say, at least better than anything I could ever come up with, just because I'm really not good at that kind of thing. And then I thought—again, I think the pot had a lot to do with it—how big of a coward would I be if I stopped reading his story just because I was afraid to let the author see how it affected me? Especially after he'd been so vulnerable with his reaction to my song?

Thinking about it now, I really can't believe I did it. Screw the pot. But I did. I kept reading.

I kept reading, my dick swelling with every paragraph, the arousal getting me hard from some confusing mix of the eroticism of the story, and my self-consciousness about letting it happen with Dario sitting there, watching me. Not watching my crotch, but watching my face as if he was studying a chemical reaction in a microscope, as if he was deciding whether he'd succeeded or failed as an author based on what he saw in my expression.

The moment I finished, the second the story wasn't there to hold that part of my awareness, I panicked because I was embarrassed, not even by the fact that a story about two guys had given me an epic erection, but because I'd gotten hard in front of Dario. I just mean in public, in front of this guy I'd been intimidated by through three years of rather distant socializing, and the first time we hung out just the two of us here I was getting a boner in his living room. I let my arm drop suddenly to my lap, faking a gesture of boredom or exasperation or maybe even disgust, just so I could cover my stiff dick with the tablet so he wouldn't see it.

"That's okay," he said quietly, smiling but not quite masking the disappointment in his voice. "I didn't expect you to like it." Then he stood up and started to walk off to some far corner of the loft. The second he started walking away my embarrassment turned into shame and suddenly the most important thing was not letting him think I'd hated the story.

"It made me feel like I was there," I said, but because I was nervous the words barely came out of my throat. I heard him stop, and a few seconds later the sound of his footsteps as he started walking back toward me.

"What?"

I cleared my throat and said it again.

Then I heard his footsteps again, circling around the couch, and now I could see him, standing there, looking down at me, studying me under the microscope again. Then he sat down, not in his armchair this time, but right next to me on the couch. "How do you mean?" The way he asked it, his voice quiet, his words heavy, somehow, it felt like we were sharing a secret. Or like he was asking for a confession.

"I feel like I heard the timbre of Ferdinand's voice. Like I could . . ." I could feel myself blushing as I said it, but suddenly, because I felt on the spot, embarrassed, all the other examples slipped my mind, ". . . smell Jordi's skin."

"Really?" Dario sounded so happy. So happy, I wanted to give him more.

"That moment when they let the tablecloth they're folding slip out of their hands, that moment of suspense, waiting for their fingertips to meet, it's so maddening." I had to stop. I didn't know why saying those things was exacerbating that aching throbbing in my cock.

“Maddening,” he mused. “In a good way? Or a bad way?”

I tried to keep my voice even, to meet his eyes without blushing again. “Well, like I . . . the reader will want it to happen.”

“Want what to happen?”

I couldn’t get my breathing back to normal. “They’ll want them to touch. To . . . be together.” Fuck. That smile. Triumphant as a conquering warrior. A conquering king. Which was strange when I thought about it, because I’d more or less told him something was missing. And strange because I couldn’t tell if that triumphant smile made me feel like I was beside him, doing the conquering, or if it made me feel like one of the vanquished.

“Because I told you it was pornographic and you were expecting sex?” he asked.

“Because they’re in love.” God, he suddenly looked moved. Vulnerable. So much so, it was like holding his beating heart in my hand. “Are you still going to add that part?” I asked, maybe to make him think about something else so he’d stop looking at me that way.

It worked. That vulnerable, searching look melted back into a slightly diminished version of the vanquishing grin. “In this case, I think delayed gratification is ultimately more satisfying,” he said in an intimate tone that made me as uncomfortable as if he’d been sitting there naked. I couldn’t meet his eyes but in my peripheral vision I could see that he was watching my face closely as he said, “You don’t need to be embarrassed.”

“About what?” I immediately regretted asking because I was sure he was going to say, “your hard-on.”

“About liking the story. Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.”

“I’m not embarrassed,” I said, obviously lying.

“No?”

“Of course not.”

“That’s good,” he said, his magnetic confidence suddenly back in his voice. Then he touched my wrist. Never in my life have I felt such a sudden, physical jolt of panic, because I knew the next thing he was going to do, and, still staring kind of down and in front of me, trying to escape that probing look of his, I let him do it. With no force at all, almost as if it were me doing it instead of him, he pulled my wrist toward him, so the tablet wasn’t hiding my hard-on anymore. And as soon as he did it I realized he’d known the whole time that I was hard, and his little comment about me not liking the story, him getting up and walking away had been his way of letting me get away without confessing what the story had done to me. He’d given me a pass, and I’d squandered it.

“You know,” he said, his voice lower and softer now, “my book got a rave review from the *New York Times*. But I like this review better.”

I was nervous. I babbled, “You should actually be really proud, because thinking about two guys has never had an effect like this on me before. Not even close.”

“No?”

“No.” I forced myself to finally look at him, and I tried to give him a smile, you know, just to make the whole thing less weird, with me avoiding his eyes. God, the way his big, dark eyes were fixed on me, I could hardly breathe.

“There’s never been . . . some small experiment? A kiss, maybe?”

The question shocked me. I mean, that literal, physical response where your blood pressure feels like it bottoms out. Except my cock felt like it was at about two hundred PSI. “No,” I said, and it came out weak and warbly instead of like the stern warning I meant it to be. But then when he started to lean in, instead of pushing him away or getting up, I just waited. Waited for him to lean in the rest of the way. When he took the tablet out of my hand and set it on the coffee table, though, that weird moment of surrender ruptured. “I should go,” I said.

“I want you to stay.”

I blushed. I mean, I felt my face go hotter than I can remember it ever being before.

“Do you want to stay, Aidan?”

“I don’t know.” I’ve never been so confused in my life.

“This is a first for me, too,” he said in that soft low voice I’d never heard before that night.

“What’s a first?” I asked, feeling like every word was a little life preserver holding me above the thrashing waves of panic drowning me.

“I’ve never hit on a straight guy before.” I had to turn away from that earnest, searching gaze of his. After a few more seconds he said, “I’d like to touch you. But I don’t want to scare you.”

I almost said something like, “that’s ridiculous. Why would I be scared?” But I was scared. Terrified, even though rationally I knew that whatever was happening between us, whatever might happen, it was fine. He was sitting there, looking at me, trying to read my expression or waiting for me to say no. Or yes. Finally I said, “I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know?” he asked with a guru-like serenity, his voice making me feel safe, almost like a caress.

“I think that if you touch me, I won’t want it anymore.” A cowardly way of confessing. Yes, I did want it, even though I was shaking and I felt like I couldn’t breathe. But also true, because I was half convinced that the second he touched me my hard-on would wither.

But he said, “Then I’m going to touch you. I’m going to touch you until you tell me to stop.”

Slowly—it felt like I saw it coming minutes before it actually happened—he laid his hand on my thigh. Half way between my knee and my erection. And that was the second huge shock of the night, because instead of going limp my dick got even harder. And, as he’d said, when I didn’t tell him not to, he kept touching me.

He touched me in a way I’d never been touched before, not by Avalyn, not by any of my high school or college girlfriends or any of the girls I hooked up with on weekends at the loft. He didn’t just do everything slowly and gently. He was touching me so carefully it felt almost tentative, but at the same time with the same easy assurance that was so profoundly part of his way of being and his unusual magnetism. First his hand moving lightly over my trousers, then my alarm and my breathless, aching need went through the roof as his fingers worked the button of my fly open. I heard that unmistakable zipper sound and saw my fly open in a V above his descending fingers. He slipped his hand inside, over my shorts, and I was really trembling as if it were my first time getting felt up, as if just being touched so gently were overwhelming, which it was. He hadn’t kissed me yet but he was nuzzling against my cheek, the warmth of his skin and his soft hair comforting me against that devastating, strange pleasure.

His free hand combed into my hair, cradling my head while he went on fondling me, his hand down my trousers. Then he slipped his fingers through the fly of my shorts, and it was his warm soft skin against my skin, not even really stroking, just caressing. Suddenly the pleasure just swallowed me whole, and I whispered two or three times, quickly, mortified, “Stop, stop,” but it was already too late and the sudden spasm hit. Seizing, spurting, fuck, it was really happening. Another cock-wringing contraction. I’d really let him stroke me off, I was really unloading into his hand, still caressing, oh God, impossible, another gushing expulsion.

Then everything seemed to slow down until it was almost like time stopped, and I was aware of how he cradled my head between the palm of his hand and his cheek, almost like an embrace, and how he sighed, as if the pleasure wringing my body were his pleasure, how his fingers encircled me, gently squeezing me and how that boosted the intensity of it all just when I thought it must be almost over and it felt like the waves would never stop rising over me, me quivering and shuddering and curling in on myself with the spasms.

I was about to apologize, or mumble some excuse, but Dario said, “Be still.” The encircling embrace of his fingers slowly loosened around my unbearably hyper-sensitized cock, then gradually released me, which almost drove a cry of discomfort mingled with . . . I guess sadness that that perfect act had come to an end, and I looked at his hand, covered in my semen. Actually, it was just three of his

fingers, the index, middle and ring fingers, that were glistening and gooey. Looking over at me with a playful grin and a stare that pinned me down and made my heart give one heavy thump, he put those three fingers deep in his mouth and sucked them clean. Fuck. Even though I'd just come, an unexpected wave of arousal washed over me at the sight of him doing that.

After that he sat there looking at me for a few seconds, and somehow I wasn't too embarrassed to meet that earnest gaze. I don't know what he read in my expression—I'm pretty sure I was sitting there half composing an excuse to flee, and half hoping he'd start undressing me—but he gave me a serene smile and said, very quietly, very intimately, in what echoes in my memory as a seductive tone completely incongruous with his words, "Now I think you should go."

Totally taken aback I said, "Aren't you even going to kiss me?" I'd tried to make it a joke, but it came out sounding as disappointed as I felt.

"God, yes," he said, the words like a pensive, hopeful sigh. "If you want me to. But not tonight."